

LOVING

AND TEACHING OTHERS TO LOVE

THE FORMATION OF AFFECTIVITY IN PRIESTLY LIFE

Francisco Insa & Dale Parker (eds.)



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Teaching Others to Love
The Formation of Affectivity in Priestly Life

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What do we need priests for? We need them, quite simply, because we need God.

[...] the priest's task is to teach people to love. To love love and to teach them to love. For, indeed, we must learn it. After all, love does not consist only in the first great moment of being swept away. Love consists precisely in the patience of accepting one another, of becoming ever close to one another from within. It consists in the fidelity of putting up with one another; it consists in walking together. Love, like the Gospel, is not sugar water, not comfortable, but, rather, a great challenge, and, for this very reason, the purification and transformation and healing of our life, which leads us into the big picture.

Teaching and learning love. This is the real task of someone who speaks about God. And this is what we need most, for if we do not become loving in the right way, we separate ourselves from God and from ourselves, and life becomes dark and pointless.

J. RATZINGER, Homily on the occasion of the Fortieth Priestly Jubilee of Monsignor Franz Niegel (Unterwossen, 1994), in J. RATZINGER/BENEDICT XVI, Teaching and Learning the Love of God. Being a Priest Today, Ignatius Press, San Francisco (CA) 2017, pp. 315.317-318.

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WANTING TO BE LOVED. THE ADVENTURE OF LOVING

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Paul O'Callaghan*

1. WANTING TO BE LOVED

Everybody wants to be loved. Being appreciated and esteemed by others makes all the difference: it fills our life with pleasure, peace, happiness, good spirits, energy, well-being, focus. Being loved by someone else encounters a deep resonance in the human heart. When we are loved we see ourselves as affirmed, appreciated, dignified, respected. Being loved gives us a consolidated identity. However, not everyone is actually prepared to love, to love in a meaningful, sacrificed, persevering and generous way. All of us want to be loved... but not everyone is prepared to give love to others! And this is where the problems start. Because if people begin to love less, or to give up loving entirely because they are not loved in return, they will feel less loved, let down, disappointed, and therefore less prepared to correspond to what they have received. It's a kind of vicious circle in which those who don't receive the love they expect end up loving less and less.

For the Christian believer, of course, love of neighbor is not an optional extra. It is simply essential to life itself. It is a commandment that our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ gave us. Without loving others we cannot say we love God (cf. 1 Jn 4:20). In fact the person who does not love, who does not give himself or herself, generously, will never truly love God, because as St. John says, "God is

* Priest. Professor of Theological Anthropology at the Pontificia Università della Santa Croce (Rome).

love" (1 Jn 4:8.16). People who do not know how to love will never get onto God's wavelength: they will have no real connection with God, no 'chemistry' with him, we might say. But there is a problem here: if love does not 'take off' in the life of a person, he or she will enter sooner or later into a vicious circle marked by individualism, isolation and sadness. In a sense the one who does not love ends up dying, at least in part: they become like zombies, absent, dazed, stunned, confused.

2. SOME DIFFICULTIES

The Stoic philosophers, who flourished during the three centuries before Christ, positively encouraged people not to love, and, as a result, not to be loved. They realized something we are all aware of: love often produces tedium and suffering, especially when it is rejected. And since humans want to be happy, the Stoics say, they shouldn't go around the place looking for suffering... quite the contrary! Hence it is better not to love, and not to seek love. Passions of all kinds should be eliminated from our lives. This is what the Stoics referred to with the term *apatheia*, indifference towards other people and the world at large, which should mark our existence.

However, loving other people is not the same thing as pure donation, unadorned generosity. Whoever loves wants to receive from the loved person, to be recognized, appreciated, loved in return. He or she *wants to be loved*. Even God seeks the loving response of humans as he creates and saves them. In the Latin language there is a word for this... *redamare*; it means not to love, *amare*, but to return love, to give love back. It would be impossible for humans to live, to enjoy life, without being loved in return, without receiving, without being recognized and appreciated. That is the way we are made: we receive more than we give. Christians, who know they are created by God, know this perfectly.

Things get complicated however when people are not prepared to respect the times and dynamics of love, and try to be recognized and loved right away, without waiting at all. They seek out an immediate gratification for their affective 'investment,' they want to be loved. For this all too natural reason the desire to be loved and recognized by others needs to be educated and disciplined. If people attempt to receive a greater gratification... sooner or later they will see how their relationships with others will deteriorate and fail. They will lose their capacity to love those in need, those who are incapable of responding right away, or those who simply do not want to respond. And sooner or later they will stop loving the rest, even those who love them. At best they will hold on to the friendships they themselves have wanted and designed; yet they will be easily offended; they will become incapable of giving themselves; as a result they may well become unhappy and incapable of fidelity; and of course they will blame everyone else (except themselves) for their misfortune.

If this were to happen to a Christian it would be particularly painful. If they became incapable of loving others with maturity and perseverance, without continually receiving gratifications which only little children and the sick can legitimately expect, they will lose salt and light in their lives (cf. Mt 5:13-14), they will no longer be capable of making the generous and patient love of God visible, the love that God places in their heart through the infused virtue of charity. They will love certain people, people they find it easy to get on well with, and will reward them promptly for their efforts. At times the Biblical episodes which speak of the bad treatment Jesus promised his disciples – for example when he spoke of turning the other cheek (cf. Mt 5:39 – would easily be interpreted as signs of weakness, of scarce human fortitude. But in real terms they are a sign of fortitude in people who are able to put up with suffering, misunderstandings, pain and sorrow. "The Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I shall want", says the Psalm (23:1). Christians need to have a thick skin, every so often at least.

3. THE KEY TO LOVING

From the above we can see that the key to loving other people successfully lies in our capacity to negotiate the dynamics of immediate gratification properly, and, more specifically, in knowing how to defer gratification. In the 1960s Prof. Walter Mischel from Stanford University in the United States undertook an experiment which came to be very well known, 'the experiment of the marshmallows'. He gave these soft, gummy sweets to a group of four-year-olds. They took one right away, and if they were able to wait twenty minutes before taking another one which they had just in front of them, they would be rewarded with two. The dilemma was not easy for the little ones: either they took the second marshmallow right away, or they waited anxiously in the hope of getting more. Many of them managed to wait, others did not.

Professor Mischel followed the children for many years afterwards. And he found that those who had been able to wait at the tender age of four years, learned to wait later on in their lives and enjoyed life more: with better remunerated work, more stable marriages, more friends and interests, less problems with alcohol, drugs and sexuality. Of course this should not come as a surprise: people who know how to give themselves without seeking deserved gratification will be able to manage their lives more successfully, investing their talents and energies intelligently, in the hope of obtaining greater rewards.

However, those who did not know how to defer the gratification that corresponds to their actions ended up having problems and difficulties in many areas of their lives, especially what refers to sensibility, the passions, the emotions. They were easily drawn by the capriciousness of their inclinations and desires, which come and go, arise and disappear, intensify and diminish. They were not truly free, even though they may have had the passing sensation of being so, but were more or less enslaved and even addicted. They were unhappy, or better, happy every so often, in an ephemeral way. The fact is that they find little in the line of deep and

lasting satisfaction in their lives. And it is almost inevitable in such circumstances that they sought narcissistic and unsupportive 'compensations' of all kinds: sexual, substance abuse, maltreatment of other persons, etc.

4. THE DYNAMICS OF DELAYED GRATIFICATION

And the question is this: how can we ensure that people 'invest' their lives generously, intelligently and stably in the lives of other people, learning to love sincerely and faithfully? Even if they have the (passing) impression that they are "wasting their sweetness on the desert air,"¹ as the poet Thomas Gray said, what is the secret of loving and being loved? It is common to say 'forgive and forget.' But it might be better to say: 'give and forget', which means that we should give generously and forget (to some degree at least) that we have done so. This is generosity, magnanimity that does not attempt to dictate times and seasons, ways and means. St. John of the Cross puts it like this in a letter of his: "where there is no love, put love and you will obtain love."² Those who do not count the cost of loving too much, those who give themselves without calculating down to the last detail, those who are not consumed by the immediate wish for being loved but determine their actions by the real needs of others, will be rewarded above and beyond their wildest dreams. But this will happen *in God's good time*, when God wants and as God wants. We have to let the reins of love go, we need to stop calculating the effects of our actions, break out of the consequentialist mold. God is ultimately the one who rewards, even though he does so often through the mediation of other persons. This is the *adventure of loving*.

¹ TH. GRAY, *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, Peter Pauper Press, White Plains (NY) 1950.

² SAINT JOHN OF THE CROSS, *Letter July 6, 1591*.

Two texts of Sacred Scripture describe this dynamic masterfully. The first may be found in Psalm 126:5-6 which speaks of the sower who goes out to sow. The sower is told: "may those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy." And then: "He that goes forth weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bring his sheaves with him." The sower suffers and weeps experiencing the fatigue of spreading the seed. He does not see the fruit, the result. Rather, he patiently awaits it. The seed dies, it no longer seems to exist. It seems to disappear into the earth. And the months go by, the rains come down, the cold and the heat alternate. The seeds hidden under the dense, hard, dark earth begin to sprout, to seek out the light. Bit by bit the sown field comes alive, and a sheen of greenery appears, that speaks of hope. The sower thinks this may be just a figment of his imagination. But it becomes surer and surer by the day. And then comes the fruit, mature, nourishing, abundant... And then, after waiting for months on end, the sower, who had wept and suffered, sings with all his might, laughs, is filled with joy at the abundance of the harvest, shares his joy with others. That is the life, the adventure, of the one who loves and knows how to wait, without certainty, without security... but enjoying this love more than anybody else.

The other text represents a promise the Lord has made: "everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life" (Mt 19:29). It is the same message that we found in Psalm 126: the one who loves in a sacrificed way will receive a great reward from God, in this life and in the next. The 'hundredfold' comes up again in a text from Luke's gospel that speaks, like the Psalm, of the harvest: "A sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell along the path, and was trodden under foot, and the birds of the air devoured it [...] And some fell into good soil and grew, and yielded a hundredfold" (Lk 8:5.8).

In fact the entire moral message of the New Testament is focused on the future promise which rewards the present struggle of

the disciples of Christ. "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied" (Mt 5:4-6). All the beatitudes give expression to the effort, the present pain, lived by humans who dream in hope about the future reward. We can see that Scripture does its best to promote what nowadays we call *the dynamics of delayed gratification*.

5. TEACHING OTHERS TO ENJOY THE ADVENTURE OF LOVE

But what can people do to acquire this habit of loving in a disinterested fashion? How can we educate people to enjoy the adventure of loving? The following six suggestions may be made.

First, the importance we give to prayer, and perseverance at prayer. God gives his grace when he wishes, and with it he gives us an extraordinary capacity to love in a divine way, called 'charity.' But God requires of us the effort to pray, mentally and vocally, even though we may have the impression of wasting our time and that our petition is in vain. Because at prayer it is a question of discovering not only the closeness and consolation and light of God, but also his otherness, his distance... the need therefore to abandon ourselves in him with faith, without enjoying the security we obtain from the senses, touch, hearing and sight... At prayer we learn to renounce control over our situation and our life. We discover we are in God's hands, paternal and strong hands, but not our own hands.

In the *second* place, we need to be convinced in the light of faith that everything, absolutely everything we have at our disposal, has been received from God. Talents and capacities, both of nature and grace, are entirely the result of divine donation, for which we should thank our Creator profusely. Even though we may have received them through or on account of other people in different moments of our lives, even though we have made them our own, even

though they are fully at our disposal... they all come originally from God. To recognize that is not just elegance, it is realism. Thus when we offer other people what we have ourselves, when we love generously, it makes no sense to self-congratulate ourselves for our apparent magnanimity. Rather it is God's love which fills us with his gifts and moves us, even obliges us, to love, to give generously, without counting the cost, without feeling sad when we are not recognized and thanked.

When the Lord begins to prepare the disciples for their mission, sending them out two by two, according to Matthew's gospel, chapter 10, it looks as if he is taking things away from them instead of giving them things to give. It seems as if he is putting obstacles instead of aids. "Take no gold, nor silver, nor copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor a staff; for the laborer deserves his food" (Mt 10:9-10). But in an expression that goes to the heart of the Christian Gospel, Jesus says: "You received without paying, give without paying" (Mt 10:8): 'You received freely, give freely.' They had received all they had as a pure gift of God... and so they should give it all without objections or attachments or calculations of any kind, without thinking they were doing a favor to God or man. The same attitude may be found elsewhere in the Gospel when we read "when you have done all that is commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty'" (Lk 17:10). On many occasions the simplicity and spontaneity with which believers love others, forgiving, caring, protecting, defending, speaking well of them... will bring the latter to recognize in them something special and invisible, something they like and identify with in a special way, perhaps something divine, driven by a generosity that is not easy to explain, perhaps what St. Paul calls "the aroma of Christ" (2 Cor 1:15). Maybe in that way we can understand Jesus's enigmatic exhortation: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Mt 5:16). Seeing the good works of Christians, lived with generosity

and often with discretion, other people perceive something further, something going beyond the ordinary power of humans and they say: 'this is of God', 'give glory to your Father who is in heaven'. St. Augustine observed with his customary incisiveness that "whoever does not give [to others] is ungrateful to the One who has filled him with gifts."³

Christian believers are convinced that the possibility of giving themselves generously to others is in fact *a great privilege* which God has made possible in their lives. Objectively speaking, our act of self-giving is none other than an act of reception, because we give to others what God has given us in the first place... but besides God has given us all that *for them*. We can think of the Gospel scene of the man whose lands had given an abundant harvest (cf. Lk 12:16-20). And he retains all of it for himself, without sharing anything, closing his heart to those in need: "I have nowhere to store my crops," he complains. "I will do this: I will pull down my barns." And then he adds: "I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, be merry.'" The good things we have at our disposal through effort or good fortune are not ours, but God's, and are destined in any case for others. In that sense the Christian loves, and gives himself, with a grateful heart, with a Eucharistic spirit, happy to enrich others even though he does not see the results, content that he is "laying up [...] treasures in heaven" (Mt 6:20), sure of his faith in the words of the Lord: "your Father who sees in secret will reward you" (Mt 6:6).

The *third* suggestion: forgiveness. One of the highest manifestations of Christian life lies in our capacity to pardon others their faults and sins, especially when they affect or damage us. God, who is rich in mercy, forgives human beings who, though mere creatures, dare to raise their hand against their Creator. God could crush sinners, he could wipe them off the face of the earth. It might

³ SAINT AUGUSTINE, *Sermon 260*, 2.

seem to be the most just thing to do, the most appropriate reaction. On several occasions in the Old Testament it seems as if he is about to visit punishment on wayward sinners. But he does not do so. He does not condemn the repentant sinner. He forgives him and does so with all his heart, giving the sinner his own life, to the point of making him his own son, his own child by grace, and offering the eternal inheritance. 'God forgives all and he forgives always,' says Pope Francis. Witnessing the way God forgives his wayward children moves us, in spite of the desire for vengeance that easily arises in the human heart, to forgive others, and to forgive them with all our heart, as much as "seventy times seven" (Mt 18:22). In the absence that inner disposition, Jesus reminds us, God may well deny us his forgiveness: "And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against any one; so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses" (Mk 11:25).

This effort to forgive, to forget, to disregard the faults of others, whatever they do, at least to avoid exaggerating them... shapes the human heart in a special way, making it grow, giving it a special capacity for loving. Through forgiveness self-love, which often grows disproportionately, is re-dimensioned, reordered, put in its place. Our self-love takes on a proper measure... and we end up loving people, even those who have offended us, with a love that may even be greater than the natural love we have for ourselves. To forgive is not a sign of weakness... quite the contrary. Firstly because the Christian believes that God is the one who will reward (or chastise) the good (or bad) actions of others... and has no intention of taking God's place in such an important matter. And second because one needs a great degree of self-control in order to avoid that our desire for vengeance can twist our judgement and end up damaging the other person more than the harm they inflicted.

In the *fourth* place, ascetical life. It makes sense for us to treat ourselves with firmness, even with a certain harshness, we might say with *intolerance* (not towards others, of course, but towards our own capriciousness). This will arise naturally in eating, drinking,

sleeping, in relation to entertainment, comfort, sight... Ascetical life is made up principally of small things, though repeated and frequent, which form and shape the human character day in, day out, consolidating the virtues, reinforcing the will. In this way the upsets that could diminish or embitter love, upsets sometimes occasioned by deferred gratification, do not influence us excessively in our decisions, do not twist our judgement, do not take away our freedom, do not paralyze our capacity for loving. Mother Theresa of Calcutta spoke of her own experience: "I discovered the paradox, which is that if you love until it hurts you, it stops hurting, because all that is left is love." Whoever loves is capable of suffering, of enduring difficulties, and especially of suffering for other people, so that they do not have to suffer as much as they do. Before being led off to his death on the Cross Jesus said to his captors in the presence of his disciples: "I told you that I am he; so, if you seek me, let these men go" (Jn 18:8).

The *fifth* suggestion: what had just been said of the ascetical life may be applied in particular to the virtue of chastity, the virtue that regulates the sexual appetite, thus making people capable of loving truly, not seeking out immediate sensual gratification, prepared to wait, to respect the times and seasons of love. It is interesting to note that the atheistic philosopher Max Horkheim, of the Frankfurt School, said how he agreed with the encyclical of St. Paul VI *Humanae vitae* (1968) which insisted on the Christian teaching on the illicitness of artificial contraception. In an interview given in 1970 he was asked: "Is the pill not a sign of progress, keeping in mind the third world, the problem of over-population?" And he replied: "My duty is to remind people of the price they must pay for this 'progress.' The price is the acceleration of *the loss of nostalgia*, and eventually the death of love." And Horkheimer continued: "*Love is based on nostalgia*, on the nostalgia of the person loved. The

sexual dimension is present. The greater the nostalgia of union with the loved person, the greater the love becomes."⁴

This is where the dilemma lies. Those who do not live chastity are in a hurry to enjoy the gratification that should be involved in human love. And they end up being unable to love. True love, on the contrary, knows a lot about waiting, nostalgia, patience, long periods of time, yearnings, sighs. The person who gives in to the immediate sensual satisfaction that normally accompanies human love ends up knowing very little about love. Their heart stays small, enslaved, narcissistic, unimaginative. And even worse than that: they often end up objectifying the person they pretend to love, and never really get to know them. This dynamic may be found in all kinds of sexual moral wrongdoing: pornography, prostitution, masturbation, fornication, adultery, homosexual encounters, the use of contraceptives... Each one of them tends to exclude the love of the *person*, converting him or her into an object in the service of one's own gratification, through egoistic instrumentalization, as if the person was an inanimate object.

It is always the same dynamic, the same impatient incapacity to wait, to respect the times of love, to accept the rhythms of the human body, of matter, of life. Maybe for this reason there is something vaguely Gnostic about faults against chastity, something that goes against matter, time, the body, that denies the resurrection of the flesh. As Tertullian said about the Gnostics, "nobody lives as much according to the flesh than those who deny the resurrection of the flesh."⁵ The Roman poet Sextus said: "absence makes the heart grow fond"; others say 'patience makes the heart grow fonder'. In other words, the absence of the loved person, nostalgia, separation, makes love grow. The person who knows how to wait, to hope, to respect the rhythms of their own body and that of

⁴ M. HORKHEIMER, *Die Sehnsucht nach dem ganz Anderen*, Fursche-Verlag, Hamburg 1970, pp. 61ff.

⁵ TERTULLIAN, *De resurrectione*, XI, 1.

others, will, in all probability, learn to love. Those who give in immediately to seeking gratification will empty their heart, becoming embittered, lost, homeless, incapable of loving.

Sixth and final suggestion. We just said that 'the person who knows how to wait... will learn how to love'. It may also happen that people just wait and hope endlessly, and perhaps never encounter a reward for their love. Those who love want to be loved in return, they always expect their reward, whenever it comes. And if they have to wait too long, if they do not manage to produce any reaction in other people, perhaps they lose all hope of ever being loved. For them the path of negation, of sacrifice, of renunciation may not necessarily be a path of self-realization. Self-denial and deferred gratification may in fact produce a bitter, egoistic loneliness. It is true that God is faithful to his promise of rewarding those who work disinterestedly in his service. But we should also think of the need for there to be people in the midst of society who simply love, who love those who are not easy to love, those whom we tend to 'discard,' as Pope Francis says: the old, unborn children, the sick, the poor, the ugly, addicts, prisoners, those who live a disorderly life, those who never give thanks... But this perhaps requires a special calling on God's part, for people in whom he infuses a special love, that is gratuitous, towards the whole of humanity. Dante Alighieri spoke in his *Paradise* of "the love that moves the sun and all the stars."⁶ When all is said and done, God *is* that love. But those who have been taught by God to love in a divine way will also 'move the sun and all the stars', filling the lives of others with a greater love. This is just another stage in the *adventure of love* that never ends.

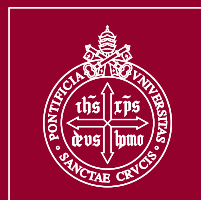
⁶ DANTE, *The Divine Comedy*, Canto XXXIII, 145.

The faith reaches the peripheries of the world by the attraction of love. That's why Pope Francis has recommended that we all embark on a "revolution of tenderness". Priests have a special role in this revolution, by loving and teaching others to love. They do so by the virtue of chastity, "a sign of purity in relationships and in the gift of self", as the new *Ratio* on the priestly formation (no. 21) has put it.

In February 2018, the Center for Priestly Formation (Pontificia Università della Santa Croce, Rome) organized the Fifth Study Week for Seminary Formation Staff, with the topic of *Teaching and Learning to Love: Human Affectivity and Christian Chastity*. Priests from 17 different countries attended the congress, sharing experiences from a variety of disciplines on forming the emotional life or affectivity of seminarians.

This book brings together some of the presentations given during the Study Week. It will be a great tool for any seminary formation staff and will help their seminarians to love God and men with ever purer hearts. That's how they'll become priests able to teach others to grow in this love.

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