

Love: Divine and Defined
(From the Quinquagesima Epistle)
The Book of Common Prayer, p. 122

1 Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. 2 And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. 3 And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing. 4 Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, 5 Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; 6 Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; 7 Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. 8 Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. 9 For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. 10 But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. 11 When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. 12 For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. 13 And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.

In the very last, and very difficult, days of my life before I came to Christ, I was reading various religious texts, hoping to find “the answer”. One of these was a compilation of sayings from all over the world, and a particular passage was absolutely riveting. It stood out from all the others, for reasons I couldn’t express, and it was attributed to an author completely unknown to me: “Saul of Tarsus”. When I began studying the Bible in earnest, just a few months later, as a new believer, I realized that this inclusion was from Holy Scripture itself, the famous chapter that is today’s Epistle. And then I understood why it was so remarkable: it is indeed a divinely inspired text.

The topic of this chapter in 1 Corinthians is, of course, *charity*, or “agape”, in the Greek, normally rendered “love” in modern English. As we scrutinize this term as St. Paul (formerly, “Saul”) uses it, we will quickly see that there is far, far more to “love” as it is defined here than in the thousands of references to it made in songs, literature, art, or theatre. The vast majority of these refer to a strong emotional feeling that consumes body and mind. When love is equated with “romance”, it fills our minds with those delightful images associated with that most wonderful of occurrences that can grace the lives of men and women. Yesterday, St. Valentine’s Day, gave abundant witness to that.

But Scripture is pressing through to something deeper than even the beauty of human love. It far exceeds the realm of feeling, and obligates us to redefine “love” in terms of intention. True love is a matter of the will, a will aided by divine power, in its scope exceeding human limitations so completely that its source is unmistakably supernatural. Furthermore, for the Christian, it is a way of life. It is to characterize his every relationship. It is to be maintained whether or not there are accompanying emotions. It is most clearly demonstrated in the life of our Lord, and expressed in its absolute form by His death upon the Cross for us sinners. This

should provide for us a very principal Lenten meditation, and perhaps this why it is included among today's readings.

The Apostle's definition of love is excellently crafted. It leaves no room for uncertainty. He uses certain emphatic, and even dramatic, means of making his point. First, he confronts us with what we would all agree are among the most noble of human endeavors. Devoid of love, however, they are useless. He then explains both what love is, and what it isn't, surely the most effective way to define any concept.

You will see that this text draws forth many confessions from me. But perhaps it will do the same from you, as well.

Taken within its scriptural context (1 Corinthians 12 and 14), we see that this chapter is part of a discussion of divinely given spiritual gifts. We do well to remember here that the dwellers of Corinth held themselves in high esteem. As Greeks, they proudly revered knowledge and wisdom as among the chief virtues, reaffirmed in all aspects of their culture. They were also a highly ambitious and zealous people. But St. Paul was addressing *Christians*, who were enjoined to add Spirit-given graces to the practice of every other virtue. The Corinthian Church excelled in many respects, including the use of spiritual gifts, but they must now learn about a missing ingredient in their Christian lives, one absolutely crucial to the functioning of every other grace, and inclusive of all of them.

"So if you boast of the ability to speak *with the tongues of men and angels*, a miraculous gift," says St. Paul, "and even if you enjoy startling and stunning amounts of supernatural *prophecy, knowledge, and faith*, if these extraordinary possessions are not graced with love, they are *nothing*." Devalued to zero! And what could be greater and more laudable examples of self-sacrifice than *bestowing all my goods to feed the poor, and giving my body to be burned*? Who would possibly fault me? But without love, they *profiteth me nothing*. These are very strong statements, and must have been especially jarring to a people who extolled such heroic acts.

Then follow sixteen short statements of what love is, and what it is not. *Charity suffereth long, and is kind*. As a culture, we are not used to *suffering long* for anything, whether it's a computer to boot up, or for our browser to access a web site; our turn to get a cup of coffee at the drive-up window; or for loved ones to make up their minds about something. But allow me to say that *long* means...LONG. It may mean a lifetime of hoping and waiting for the conversion of our children and grandchildren, and, the Lord knows, it may require even longer. It may mean patience in praying for a rebellious, God-hating nation, and quelling our anger as best we can in order to pray better. This kind of attitude speaks loads to a world which is used to seeing religious people fly off the handle, pick up their protest signs, and form a new political advocacy group. If Christians add even *kindness* to such patience, they will be showing love, indeed.

Then come three more qualifiers: *charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up*. Oh, what a struggle I have with envy! One always has one's eyes on what others possess, whether of talent, or position, or influence, or success. And suddenly my own station in life looks meagre and paltry. But if I'm not envying, then I'm doing the opposite: boasting, parading

my gifts and accomplishments, in order to make myself look good and others bad. But love refuses to allow itself such luxuries, because they are invariably at the expense of others. Do you see how the practice of love is causing us to grow smaller and smaller, as it were, and allowing others the opportunity to grow larger? It is a blessed work, indeed.

Love *doth not behave itself unseemly* [unbecomingly], *seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked*. Love is orderly, and always appropriately expressed. It is, in fact, . . . lovely! Its focus, again, is others, and in its determination to see this matter of loving carried completely through to the end, it refuses to be hindered by provocation. This is especially hard when one can see the express train coming round the bend that's heading right for loved ones, or friends, or even a nation, who will neither heed nor listen. In our efforts to stave off disaster, we must do our best not to be incited by the very ones we are trying to save. In doing so, we will vastly increase the chances of being effective agents for change.

To the above are added: *thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth*. I find the first of these the hardest. I always rush to conclude the worst about others' motives. Instead of putting the best possible spin on their actions, I assume the opposite. But I think Scripture is saying that I must ladle out the benefit of the doubt in copious quantities! I've got to strive to pronounce innocent, until proven otherwise. This, after all, is the grace that I would hope for from others. This doesn't mean that I should suspend discernment or judgment about that which I can obviously conclude is wrong. But I must weigh each case carefully, taking every possible factor into account regarding the actions of others, before —and not without love— allowing myself to draw conclusions. And if I am going to affirm the *truth*, and reject *iniquity*, I'm going to have to know the difference between them. And although the world pushes its definitions of such things into my face, I must turn instead to Holy Scripture: the Last Word, indeed.

The Apostle summarizes with what is almost a final charge. Love *beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Charity never faileth*. Such a calling drives us heavenward to seek a means to fulfill it. This is my mission with my wife, my family, my friends, my community, everyone, in all places, at all times. Do you see Christ on the Cross, living all of these things out in the most graphic of fashions? Here we have moved beyond the realm of warm and fuzzy feelings, to a steel-jawed, rock-hard determination to love as He loved. This means riding out the matter with loved ones to the very end. It is that level of complete commitment that alone certifies whether we have, in truth, in every instance to which life calls us, truly loved.

The closing verses of the chapter are intended especially to cure the Corinthian Christians, and the Church at large, of pride of accomplishment. St. Paul is saying in effect that they are preoccupied with the exercise of gifts that are merely and only a means to an end: their spiritual maturity. They have become enamored of those means, which are temporary, instead of focusing upon the goal, which is permanent. He anticipates that process of maturation to be completed at the coming of Christ: *For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known*. It is humiliating, isn't it, to

be told that one is *childish, speaking as a child, understanding as a child, thinking as a child*? As outstanding as they were, *in every thing enriched by the Lord, in all utterance, and in all knowledge*, as he had said of them in the introduction to his letter (1:5), they were severely stunted in other areas of development.

A famous line ends this Epistle, one that even many in the unbelieving world can quote: *And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity*. Until the very end of time, *now*, in this day, in this life, and even into eternity, there are only three abiding qualities. They will abide after the last TV show has gone off the air, the last war is fought, all the days of human history are ended, and all the noise of earth has subsided into silence. They are the greatest of virtues, the only ones to complete the race to the finish line.

But it is love that is *the greatest*. It is also the very hardest for us to achieve. But since doing so requires constant dependency upon God, it is not only the greatest. It is the best.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.