



Boston Catholic Journal



NIHIL NISI IESUM

Dedicated to Mary, Mother of God

Salus Animarum Suprema Lex Esto (Canon Law 175)

The Salvation of Souls is the Supreme Law in the Church

“Bless those who curse you”



Loving Our Enemies

How is this possible?

Christ does not *ask* us to bless those who curse us, or to love our enemies.

In strikingly clear terms, he *commands* us to:

“Love your enemies, do good to them that hate you. Bless them that curse you, and pray for them that calumniate you. And to him that strikes thee on the one cheek, offer also the other. And him that takes away from you your cloak, forbid not to take your coat also. Give to everyone that asks of you, and of him that takes away your goods, ask them not again.” (St. Luke 6.27-30)

This is not an option for a Christian, it is the Lord’s *express will* and desire that we should do so. But how ...?

There are, of course, people that we do not feel drawn to — people, in fact, whom we do not like at all, and some whom we even dislike intensely. It is, in fact, the case that there are people whom we utterly abhor (not *hate* ... which is something quite different, and which has, with no equivocation whatever, no place in the heart of a Christian). Some people simply are insufferable, intolerable. And yes ... some people are even virtually consumed with evil ... but Christ still bids us to love them!

“What,” you ask, “is this madness? How can I *love* whom I do not even *like*, and may even abhor?”

That, really, is the question at hand. How is it possible for us to love not only those we do not like, but even those who curse us, *vitriolically hate us* and wish us ... and if they could, would do us great evil?

How profoundly we misunderstand love ... Indeed, many never come to understand the true nature of love at all. How many marriages end in divorce because “the flame of love” has apparently been extinguished? How many “beautiful romances” have ended in disillusionment, ennui? When tragedy mars our beauty or encroaching age robs us of our youth, how often the “love” that had once accompanied it simply ceases.

This terrible misunderstanding takes a toll on us that few of us recognize. We have invested our *entire concept* of love in merely *one* aspect of love alone: what is immediate and sensory. Love is reduced to, and then totally invested in, our emotions. Period. If the “feeling” is gone, then the “love” has gone with it. If our senses, our emotional experiences, are no longer stimulated by the other, we speak of the love “withering.” We can no longer “feel” it. It no longer “excites” us. We then reason that the love has ceased. And in a sense, it has. It has ceased to be sensuous. *One* facet of that multifaceted gem has been occluded.

The problem, however, is that it is precisely this facet of the jewel, and *this facet alone*, into which we have peered — and the surface light that had dazzled us and in which we found our *own* reflection — is no longer refracted off the stone. We have looked *at* the stone ... but not *into* it! We have seen, as it were been blinded by, fixated upon, the *surface* light ... without ever pressing the lens of our own love

to the *other* facets that reveal another and very different world within, a world of extraordinary complexity and breath-taking beauty! It is, in short, the difference between holding a diamond at arm's length and admiring its beauty... and placing one's eye to the diamond, where, in crystalline light, we stand in awe of the deep beauty within that surpasses in every measure the superficial beauty we see from afar. It is the difference between peering *at* the beauty of another— and peering *into* the beauty of another.

To carry this analogy further, we may say that the bringing of the diamond to the eye is an act of the *will* ... not an instinctive response to some emotional or sensuous impulse. We approach it with *purpose*, rather than colliding with it serendipitously. It is a conscious attempt to penetrate, rather than to reflect upon, the deep mystery sequestered within it; to go beyond the appearances, however magnificent, to deeper and vastly more expansive realities ... realities that ultimately touch upon the very image of God.

This is the most apposite metaphor for the true nature of love.

What is Love ... after all?

To begin with, it is crucial to understand that love is not *simply a feeling* ... but is preeminently an *act of the will*.

In essence, *to love* is to have the other person's total welfare at heart: it is to *will* them every good in all things, and evil in none.

Pause for a moment and think of someone you genuinely love.

There is affection in that love, yes? But how does your love for that person *express itself, manifest itself*, apart from the affection that is uniquely experienced toward that individual? When we think upon it, we soon find that *affective* expressions of love, expressions simply involving our *emotions*, are only one part of our *expression* of our love for them.

If our love is our *affection only* ... if it is solely a matter of *feelings* and *emotions* ... we would then have to say that *any* overwhelming "feeling" (even animosity and rage) is equally, if far differently, an emotive expression *compelling us* ... much as "affective" love does. Clearly, such an understanding of love — love understood as *impulsive* — is not freely given (a volitional act, an act of the will) but is *compelled* by concupiscence seeking selfish satisfaction. It is much more invested in "me" than "her."

Love of this sort can only be understood in terms of a pathology. It is not what we understand when we entertain the notion of love.

The point is that Christ does not command us to have an *emotion* or a *feeling* toward a person. He cannot. Love of this sort cannot be commanded. It is simply the case, and for too many reasons to enumerate, that we dislike some individuals and find others intolerable. If we look at the matter carefully, we find that while we can *constrain* our emotions, we cannot *compel* them.

We can constrain our anger, but we cannot spontaneously invoke it. We can no sooner be commanded to anger than to affective love. However, everything else apart from what is *affective*, that is, apart from what pertains to *feelings* or *emotions*, *can* in fact be commanded ... *and is* ... by Christ Himself!

Once we remove the *affective* element of love (understood as a palpable “feeling,” as something “felt” and expressed in purely emotional terms) everything *else* that pertains to loving another person *is*, in fact, subject to our will.

We can *will* to do good to others, even while we cannot *will* to experience affection for them. It *is* within our power to say and to do everything that genuine love entails — everything by which we coherently understand one person as loving another — even if we do not have an *emotional* investment in that person!

Stated plainly: To love another is to *will* them *every* good, and *no* evil. This statement is nothing new, but in twelve words succinctly describes all that is authentic in love.

Yes, we can love those who vex us terribly and who would even bring us to injury.

Yes, we *can* love whom we dislike! The love of which Christ speaks, the love He *commands*, has nothing whatever to do with sensory gratification or emotional fulfillment. This unique affective dimension of love *spontaneously* arises between two people *in addition to* their obligation to love one another in ways not pertaining to, or expressive of, emotional attachment.

Understood in these terms, it is not the case of one love being superior to another. It is that *affective* love possesses a *spontaneous* dimension beyond the same *obligations* of love incumbent upon all of us. It fulfils the precepts within this one individual — and then exceeds them in the way of superabundance through an emotional investment that spontaneously emerges between two individuals in a way that does not characterize, but also does not diminish, their love for all others.

Once we understand this, we realize that we are not called, still less compelled, to *intimacy* with others at large. That is absurd.

Much of the *touching and feeling* that occurs with disturbing frequency at *Mass* is very likely the result of a confusion between love and intimacy. We tend to equate the one with the other, and when, with good reason, we feel uncomfortable with the intimate gestures of others with whom we are not on intimate terms, more often than not we wrongly reproach ourselves, rather than this mistaken conflation of love *and* intimacy being forced upon us. It is essentially the difference between love as charity and love as intimacy. God does not command us to be *intimate* with our neighbors. Right?

To bless others, *genuinely* asking God — *ex corde* — to bestow on them favor, mercy, and goodness, is an act of reciprocal beneficence, for in blessing our enemies, those who hate us, do us harm, and wish us evil, we bring upon *ourselves* an unspeakable blessing also:

“Love your enemies: do good to them that hate you: and pray for them that persecute and calumniate you: That you may be the children of your Father Who is in Heaven.” (St. Matthew 5.44)

Bless friend and enemy alike; it is no more than our duty. For the very One Who commanded us to love our enemies bids us, in so doing, to know ourselves — which to know, is to arrive at humility:

*“When you shall have done all these things that are commanded you, say:
We are unprofitable servants; we have done that which we ought to do.”* (St.
Luke 17.10)

Geoffrey K. Mondello
Editor
Boston Catholic Journal



Copyright © 2004 - 2023 Boston Catholic Journal. All rights reserved.