



Boston Catholic Journal



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DEDICATED TO MARY, MOTHER OF GOD

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The Sum of All Things: A Divine Equation

To love our enemies ... those who hate us ... is, according to Jesus Christ, one of the most binding obligations of a Christian. It is even largely definitive of a Christian (or at least ought to be). Christ bids us to do this; indeed, He commands us to do this. In a word, it is His will for the way that we lead our lives.

We cannot do this of ourselves apart from Actual Grace ¹. In our sinfulness we instinctively rebel against these “absurd counsels” that fly in face of the world. Indeed, if ever there was a formula for extinction, this is the prototype — notwithstanding the fact that it has endured for over 2000 years and multiplied into all continents.

Nevertheless, a malicious inner protest arises — something very much akin to the ancient Lex Talionis, the clamor for revenge and reparation that has been the scourge of mankind — which demands “justice,” a penalty in measure (and if possible, beyond measure) to be exacted from the offender. We do not wish to forgive those who hate us, who do us evil, harm. Indeed, we would visit the same evil upon them! And greater still!

How easily our resentment is stirred when the unjust and manifestly sinful wound us or others with apparent impunity. We lust for revenge.

Our obligation, however, as followers of Jesus Christ, is not to exact justice. That is God’s. He alone is their Judge; He alone sees their heart — and ours. And how much is hidden from us! Christ knows this. That is why He tells us not to judge, but to do something in which we are far more competent: to love.

Loving our enemies is decidedly less easy than summarily judging them, but — unlike our judgment — it is always good. What is more, it constrains us from calling judgment down upon ourselves. No ... our task is more demanding still: it calls us to love those who hate us and do good to those who abuse us.

This love that Christ talks about is always — and often mysteriously — redemptive. We may or may never see the consequences, but it is precisely this, love in the face of animosity, that has won souls for Christ a thousand times over, and it has, countless times, brought others to repentance and sorrow.

It is not simply easy, but almost irresistible, to love those who love and admire us, for it is a magnification of ourselves, it is the “self” reflected in the love of others. To love those who hate us, who wish us ill, on the other hand, is the abnegation of

the self — for the good of the other; in other words, it requires a good deal more from us than the satisfaction we would derive from any tribute and requires absolutely nothing whatever in the way of compensation, in return, from the other. We do not anticipate that our love will be requited — much less the good we do, acknowledged.

Revenge is calculated. And precisely because it is calculated it is an imposter of justice which renders to each his due. It adds, subtracts — multiplies and divides! It measures and metes out, keeping a careful ledger of debits and credits, and esteems its mathematics, and the product of its equations, “justice.”

It is unquestionably the way of the world ... but it is not the way of Christ.

Do the Math:

They hate us and do us ill.

We love them and do them good.

It is a very simple, if different, equation.

We do no math, but still arrive at a sum — and it always exceeds what enters into the equation ... for the sum is God.

To love others indiscriminately, to do good with no hope of recompense ... this is of grace, not numbers; it can no more be quantified than God, from Whom it comes. Left to our own meager resources we cannot attain to it. It is greater than us and therefore calls us to be greater than ourselves. It calls us, in the end, to be the image of God — in which, not coincidentally, we were, after all, created. In this sense it is

being true to our truest selves. It is liberating because it frees us from inherent human limitations.

“The Life of Faith is the untiring pursuit of God through all that Disguises and Disfigures Him”

So writes Father Jean-Pierre de Caussade in his magnificent Abandonment to Divine Providence, one of the greatest spiritual classics ever written. It is one of the most concise descriptions of the nature of faith.

God — however well disguised — dwells within that person who hates us, and because this is so, they are not only to be loved despite their evil disposition, but they are to be seen as the occasion of our sanctification, of our being more than ourselves, of being, very really, sons and daughters of God. Our greatest enemies are unwittingly our greatest blessings and surest means to God.

It does not matter that they do not know this.

You do. And God does.

¹ “Actual Grace” is a supernatural help of God which enlightens our mind and strengthens our will to do good and to avoid evil” (The Baltimore Catechism) It is the assistance of God in any given situation in which we are confronted with the choice between good and evil, sin and sanctity. God gives us Actual Grace — the cognitive ability to distinguish between what is genuinely good and apparent goods that are actually evil, and at the same time the strength of will to resist the temptation of evil and to choose what is good. The assistance of Actual Grace is given by God (many times in a day) as needed, and ceases when the temptation passes. That is to say, unlike Sanctifying Grace which is a sharing in the life of God Himself, it is transient.

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