

God Who is Love, and Prayer

With a series of articles, the author leads us along the fascinating journey of the “choice of God,” beginning with the discovery of his love.

BY FR. PASCAL FORESI

A DAZZLING DISCOVERY LIES AT THE ORIGINS of that new spirituality with which the Holy Spirit, through Chiara Lubich and the Focolare Movement, has gifted our time. It is the discovery of a God who, because he is love, loves each one with an infinite, personal love. Chiara repeated this constantly to her first companions as she did to all those she met: “God loves you immensely. God loves us immensely.”

I remember being deeply struck by these words, aware of the fundamental importance and newness of their message for me. Nevertheless, looking back now, I ask myself, “How much was I really aware of it? How much did I really understand the importance of it?”

Our understanding of God and the way God acts is often tied to our own perspectives; it is constrained by our limited thinking, and is expressed through our particular thought categories. In fact, it can happen that, aware of our imperfections and of our unworthiness of the love of God, we transfer, in a certain way, this perception we have onto God and end up by believing that he cannot love us or, at most, can only love us partially. In reality it is not so. God always loves us infinitely and his love is close to us and supports us in every moment of our journey through life.

If we wish to delineate the characteristics of the love of God through images, the first that comes to mind is a familiar image in Sacred Scripture, one that is present in many spiritual works: God loves us as a bridegroom loves his bride. He, like

the one who is hopelessly in love, loves beyond the merits themselves of the person loved. He loves to such an extent that he sees that everything in her is beautiful, positive and understandable, and what is not perfect is nevertheless overlooked and compensated for by love.

There is yet another image, one that is just as efficacious, that speaks of God’s love for us. It is the image of a mother who, whatever the situation in which her child finds himself or herself, be it even the most sorrowful and reprehensible, is always there ready to welcome the child back, forgiving everything. This is the inextinguishable, essential element of maternal love. It is the love which Saint Monica showed for her son, Saint Augustine. And yet, Monica’s love pales in comparison to the love of God.

The Gospel reveals it to us in touching and, at times, mysterious passages. The love of God is exemplified in the love of a distraught father who goes out to meet his lost son (see Lk 15:11-32), that leaves the ninety-nine sheep in order to go in search of the one who has gone astray (see Lk 15:4-7), that invites us to pardon our neighbor “seventy times seven” just as God pardons us without limit (see Mt 18:21-22). And there is more: it is the love of the Father who goes so far as to send his Son—who is himself God, one of the Trinity—to assume our human nature and to die for us. Christ, a man like us, redeems us from sin and so leads us into the heavenly banquet of his kingdom. The moment we grasp the reality of so great a love, even if only for an instant, everything changes: the life that is given to us, the world around us and every circumstance of

our life, whether happy or sad. Everything becomes a personal gift of God who wants us to be holy as he is holy (see 1 Pt 1:16). This is the foundation of all Christian life: this love of God for each one of us and our duty to respond by giving ourselves to God in a total way.

A response of love

How can we respond? What is the essence of our answer to God's love?

First of all, we should take into account that the love of God for us is so great that it transforms in God the one who allows him or herself to be totally seized by it. Through it the return of humankind to God becomes, in a certain way, the return of God to himself. This is the highest and truest moment of that which we call prayer. In reality we are accustomed to using this term to indicate the many expressions of prayer, from the prayer of petition to mental prayer, from liturgical prayer to sacramental prayer. They are different ways of expression that help us enter into a relationship with God or to express its intimate reality. These kinds of prayer, nevertheless, never completely coincide with union with God.

Between prayer and formal prayers there is in fact a substantial difference that I will try to illustrate starting with the most unconscious form of prayer.

When at night we raise our eyes to contemplate the starry sky, we see a universe of immense beauty that enchants and amazes us in its silent obedience to a law, the law of life and harmony that established it at the beginning and in every moment sustains it, a law that in and of itself bears witness to the Creator. This is also true of the plants and of the flowers that "know" when to open and to blossom, when to bear fruit and to die. A profound relationship, therefore, binds all created life to God, a relationship that—I dare say—is profound prayer because, just by their very existence, they unconsciously recognize him and, following him, "declare the glory of God" (Ps 19:2).

But this hidden prayer also finds expression—and the highest one because it is conscious and free—in human beings. It is the prayer that arises when, even before entering into "conversation" with God, we recognize him as the Father who has

created us and sustains us in our existence and in that of the whole universe. The relationship with God then stands out as the foundation which is both indispensable and healing, a relationship that the human person is called to establish day by day with God or to ask it of him. Some masters of the spiritual life suggest this as an original exegesis of the invocation of the Our Father, "Give us this day our daily bread."

Next month we will look at the different ways in which such a relationship can be developed.

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