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Love

The two great commandments both speak of love, and for Evelyn, they are inseparable because what lies at the heart of the Eucharistic life is an interweaving of adoring and compassionate love. We don't have the option of loving God and failing to love those around us; if we want to be lovers of God, we must give ourselves to the entire world.[1] But Evelyn reminds us that our love is often disordered: we love the wrong things (displaying pride and greed), we love too much (lust and gluttony), or we love too little (sloth and envy). Even when we *believe* our hearts are truly set on God, spiritual pride and spiritual envy lie in wait for us![2] So we need to pray about our blind spots, for self-love can manifest itself in many subtle forms.

It is in loving others that we practise our love for God, doing our best to reflect God's Love and Grace (deficient though we may often feel in understanding and courage). And in loving others, we learn to love ourselves, for we are one community, all bound together. It's often said that love is more easily caught that taught, and Evelyn speaks of our churches needing to be full of the germs of love.[3] She frequently quotes these words from St John of the Cross: 'When the evening of this life comes, you will judged on love.'[4]

> The old mystics always insist that love and humility are sisters. As we learn about love, we seem to get smaller and smaller and the wonder of God to get greater and greater. The more we realise the fact of this love pouring out from the heart of God to draw all things . . . the deeper grows the love which is demanded of us in return.[5]

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God's eye is on those who respect Him, the ones who are looking for His love. He's ready to come to their rescue in bad times; in lean times He keeps body and soul together . . . Love us, God, with all You've got – that's what we're depending on. (Psalm 33.18–19, 22, MSG)

Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen . . . Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister. (1 John 4.20–21, NIV)

If I speak God's Word with power, revealing all His mysteries . . . but I don't love, I'm nothing.
(1 Corinthians 13.2, MSG)

*No really good work of any kind is ever really done unless it's done in love. St Teresa said the object of this life is to love, work and suffer. The suffering must be accepted in peace, and this can't happen unless both are rooted and grounded in love – a Love ceaselessly present with us, moulding us, inviting us to grow up into greater love. The only real cure for sin lies in an ever more vivid realisation of God's Love. This purifies at the root. All other devices merely deal with results. Only those who have love, or strive after love, have any part in God whatever, or any capacity for serving Him.

Pure love gives and never demands. It's courageous, humble, constant, not worn out with labours, not daunted with difficulties, bravely sticking things out when tired, disheartened and worried. If we give ourselves to God's Purposes, we'll develop such depths of devoted, peaceful love as passes beyond the need of being fed by mere feeling – the chocolate creams of the Christian life. Don't make the mistake of thinking, if you sometimes feel cold and dead, that you don't know how to love.

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Be one among the sheepdogs employed by the Good Shepherd. A good sheepdog goes on with its job quite steadily, takes no notice of bad weather, rough ground or comfort – seldom coming back to be stroked. Yet its faithfulness to and intimate understanding with its master is one of the loveliest things. Now and then it just looks at the Shepherd. When the time comes for rest, they are generally found together. Let this be the model of our love.

Real love is homely and gentle. Stupidity, weakness and disappointing narrowness are things we must sometimes bear from those we work among, but God bears them from us the whole time! How often Grace and Love reach us, despite our narrow ideas of Him, our cowardice and refusals. Just think of His wonderful, loving kindness, never despising or refusing any vessel in which we try to catch and hand on the Living Water. After that, can we dare to be critical or impatient with the smallness, weakness and absurdity of those to whom we're sent? Love teaches us that it's above all by admiration and generosity of spirit that we shall help and win them. That vivid consciousness that God is present to us in people's souls – the fallen, degraded, irresponsible, indifferent, bigoted, helpless people who wear us out because they simply won't be helped – God is with them as well as with us. His unguessed, moulding influence is working in, on and all around every soul in ways beyond our conceiving, with apparent results that sometimes puzzle us. If we love and desire to give ourselves to Him, we are bound to give ourselves also to the whole world. God cannot lodge in a narrow heart, and our hearts are as great as our love.

*Envy – failure to delight in the well-being of others – is apt to emerge suddenly from its lair when the bun we had set our hearts on falls to another's share. Jealousy is one of the worst toxins produced by self-love. We've got to love our neighbours as ourselves. 'What is a person but their thoughts and their loves?' These reveal our very selves. The envious outlook is one of the most elusive: it

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twists, wriggles and often assumes what it thinks an impenetrable disguise. The only way to mortify a sin is to develop the opposite quality. The opposite number of Envy? Brotherly and sisterly love, selfless delight in others' well-being.

In the marvellous symphony of Christ's life, no note is more often struck than a wide, delighted recognition of the best in everyone, from John the Baptist's spiritual greatness to the Magdalen's spirit of love. Children, sinners, very ordinary, stupid people – those with riches He'd like to get rid of because He sees they fill up space where He should be – on all that, our Lord pours out His Love and interest. If we dare to ask for communion with Him, we must get very tiny and try to share that point of view; attune our will to His selfless, unfaltering, loving kindness.

Only the merciful, wide-spreading, self-oblivious love we share with Christ – the love that still radiates from the Cross – will keep us quite secure. The critical glance, rigorous demand for perfection and superior attitude don't enter into God's view of us. 'As a Father pities His children' (Psalm 103.13, NKJV) – what hope and insight into the Divine point of view. We don't know what's in humanity, yet we presume to judge, discount others' little successes, italicise their faults. Yet one thing's certain if we take the Christian viewpoint: we and our neighbours are bound together in God, made significant only by God, utterly dependent on Him, both parts of the organism in which His Spirit dwells, and on which His Creative Love is ever at work. The realisation of this common possession of God, this common abiding of all our souls in Him, rebukes the contemptuous, envious judgment, shifting life's emphasis from self to God.

God enfolds humanity, and God is revealed in humanity. He may reveal Himself to us in moments of insight, in spiritual communion, but He *does* reveal Himself in our fellow humans. St Francis found Him when he embraced the leper. Brotherly and sisterly love is the appointed school in which we are to learn Divine Love. 'For whoever

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does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen' (1 John 4.20, NIV). 'The way to My Divinity is through My humanity,' and 'My humanity' unites itself in love with the failures, needs and distresses of humanity and comes to us *there*.

Do we recognise with awe the costly demands on our compassion and service, as opportunities for communion with Christ? Can we see and serve Christ in the person we like least – the person who's got what we want, puts us in the shade, has wounded our love and aroused our bitterness, whose misfortunes seem richly deserved? Or, can those things separate us from the Charity of Christ? If so, whatever our best moments may seem, we haven't entered into the heart of the Eucharistic life – for that is a communion with God and all souls in Him. It's the lovely interweaving of two movements, adoring love and compassionate love, and we can't divorce them without tearing to bits the very fabric of the sacrificial life.

'Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy' (Matthew 5.7, KJV). We make our tiny gift of love and mercy to God in His children – worthy or unworthy – and He makes us the unimaginable gift of the ultimate mercy, Himself. Brotherly and sisterly love, the wide-spreading, enlarging spirit of kindliness, is God's appointed preparation of our nature for Divine Love.

For discussion

- If our thoughts and our loves reveal who we are, what have you learned about yourself? How can God and His Purposes become more central in your thoughts than thoughts about yourself?
- Who are you envious of, and why? Ask God to help you love this person generously and sacrificially and delight in their well-being.
- How is your love for God expressed through your love of others? When does it feel most difficult to love others?

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Prayer

Lord, teach me to love! There are so many times when I haven't loved my family, friends and colleagues as I ought – let alone my enemies – and I need Your help. May my frozen heart be warmed by Your Divine fire. Pour into my soul Your patience, kindness and compassion, and let Your love work in and through me, to Your glory, in Jesus' name, Amen.

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