



If it is true that the entire drama of human life can be reduced to the single question, “Who am I?”(1), then the answer to that question looms large. How can we discover the mystery of our own identity, the meaning and purpose of our existence in these few, fleeting years of earthly life?

Saint John Paul II responds with words that will echo through the ages: “Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it” (*Redemptor Hominis*, 10).

The quest for love is what spurs us on continually in life. Saint John Paul II powerfully affirms, “Love is therefore the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being” (*Familiaris Consortio*, 11). Pope Benedict XVI reiterates this fundamental truth: “Human nature, in its deepest essence, consists in loving. Ultimately, a single task is entrusted to every human being: to learn to like and to love, sincerely, authentically and freely.”²

In light of this response to that most basic of queries, “Who am I?” a second question urgently ensues: “What is love?” If the key to our very existence consists of loving — of encountering, experiencing, and making love our own — we surely need to discover the essence, the inmost core of love. Would it not be the greatest of tragedies to come to the end of our lives, thinking we had spent our days in love, only to have the veil removed and realize we had fallen for a counterfeit of true love?

What then is love? What constitutes that mysterious reality, “the principal energy that moves the human soul”? ³

In this earthly life there is one form of love that is the *princeps analogatum* for all other loves. It enables us to catch a glimpse of the depths of love, the inner truth of love, the transcendent greatness of love. It is precisely the love between man and woman, between husband and wife. So true is this fact that God himself opens Sacred Scripture with the love between our first parents in the book of Genesis and

closes all of Scripture in Revelation with the marriage of the Lamb.

But the questions do not end here. Does human love between man and woman consist of that natural, sexual attraction that is so easily enkindled? Have we arrived here to the inner core of love? This natural attraction lays the foundation for a relationship of love, but it is too centered on sexual values, as well as too fleeting, to constitute love in its deepest essence.

At a higher level within the sphere of the person, we arrive to love as an emotion. Sentimental love, the experience of falling in love, has been the subject of literature since the first written words have been recorded. Yet even this lofty sentiment — in which the man can appear to be a knight in shining armor and she a damsel in distress, waiting to be rescued — cannot constitute the inner core of love. Once again, emotions are too fleeting to support love, which, if it is authentic, seeks to last a lifetime.

There is also a hidden danger in sentimental love. A person risks falling in love with the romantic, idealized vision of the beloved, rather than with the actual person himself, with all of his qualities, but also his foibles and failings as well. When the romanticized bubble hiding the reality of the other person bursts, as it inevitably does, disillusion or even hatred can set in.

So where must we turn to discover authentic love between man and woman? We must raise our sights higher: to the level of the person as a spiritual reality, endowed with intellect and will. Only on the level of the person as such is it possible to love truly and authentically. Why? Because, “What is most essential to love is affirmation of the value of the person: this is the basis on which the will of the loving subject strives for the true good of the beloved person, the entire and perfect good, the absolute good, which is identical with happiness.”⁴

Here we have discovered the inner core of love. Authentic love consists not so much in *receiving* from the beloved as it does in *giving* to the one who is loved. Love in its inner essence is a *gift*. Saint John Paul II emphatically affirms this fundamental truth in his theology of the body:

“One can say that, created by Love, that is, endowed in their being with masculinity and femininity, both are “naked,” [our first parents] because they are *free with the very freedom of the gift*. This freedom lies exactly at the basis of the spousal meaning of the body. The human body, with its sex—its masculinity and femininity—seen in the very mystery of creation, is not only a source of fruitfulness and of procreation, as in the whole natural order, but contains ‘from the beginning’ the ‘spousal’ attribute, that is, *the power to express love: precisely that love in which the human person becomes a gift* and—through this gift—fulfills the very meaning of his being and existence” (TOB 15, 1).

So if love is a gift of our whole person, both body and spirit, how do we grow in the

capacity to make that gift with greater freedom — resulting in greater joy? There are two ways. First, we must live the virtue of *chastity*. For we cannot give what does not belong to us, and it is precisely through chastity that we possess ourselves in order to make a gift of ourselves in love. Secondly, we must be willing to suffer. The gift of our entire self to another without seeking recompense is always costly.

In *Salvi ci Doloris* Saint John Paul II sings a hymn to the transforming power of human suffering in our lives: “Down through the centuries and generations it has been seen that in suffering there is concealed a particular power that draws a person interiorly close to Christ, a special grace. To this grace many saints, such as St. Francis of Assisi, St. Ignatius of Loyola and others, owe their profound conversion. A result of such a conversion is not only that the individual discovers the salvific meaning of suffering, but above all that he becomes a completely new person. He discovers a new dimension, as it were, of his entire life and vocation” (*SD*, 26).

Christ’s self-emptying in his Incarnation is the supreme example of complete and radical self- giving. It has the inner power to enable each of us to make a gift of ourselves in love.

1. See “El roble y la or,” by Alejandro Páez.
2. General audience of 2 December, 2009; referring to William of Saint-Thierry, *De Natura et dignitate amoris*. See “The Giver,” by Monique Villen.
3. Benedict XVI, General audience of December 2, 2009.
4. Karol Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1981), 183.