

Love Demands a Loving Response

Daily Gospel / Liturgical Cycle A

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John 21:15-19

After Jesus had revealed himself to his disciples and eaten breakfast with them, he said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." He then said to him a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was distressed that he had said to him a third time, "Do you love me?" and he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. Amen, amen, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to dress yourself and go where you wanted; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." He said this signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God. And when he had said this, he said to him, "Follow me."

Introductory Prayer: Lord, I believe in you and all that you have revealed for our salvation. I hope in you because of your overflowing mercy. Every single act of yours on this earth demonstrated your love for us. Your ascent into heaven before the eyes of the Apostles inspires my hope of one day joining you there. I love you and wish you to be the center of my life.

Petition: Lord, help me to respond with love to your self-giving love.

1. "Do You Love Me?" The moment for which Christ has been preparing ever since his Resurrection has arrived. He is alone with Peter. Their last encounter before Jesus' death was that sad occasion when Christ looked at Peter, forgiving him after his threefold denial. Now Christ takes Peter a little apart from the others and gives him the opportunity to affirm a threefold pledge of his love. The one, supreme condition for Christ to renew Peter's commission to tend his sheep is Peter's love for his Master. Love is the one, supreme condition for each of us who aspires to be an apostle. Peter's love has been purified by his betrayal of Christ during the Passion: It has been chastened and humbled. Now Peter entrusts everything -- even his love -- into Christ's hands: "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Do my failures enable me to love Christ more, with greater trust?

2. "Can Love Be Commanded?" Pope-Emeritus Benedict XVI posed a provocative question in his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est* (God is Love). How can Christ demand love from us in order for us to be his followers, his apostles? In other words, "Love cannot be commanded; it is ultimately a feeling that is either there or not, nor can it be produced by the will" (no. 16). The response to this apparent quandary is twofold. In the first place, love can be commanded because it has first been given. "God does not demand of us a feeling which we ourselves are incapable of producing. He loves us, he makes us see and experience his love, and since he has 'loved us first,' love can also blossom as a response within us" (no. 17). In the second place[BBMW1], "it is clearly revealed that love is not merely a sentiment. Sentiments come and go. A sentiment can be a marvelous first spark, but it is not the fullness of love" (no. 17).

3. "Love in Its Most Radical Form" What, then, is the essence of love, that love which Christ first gave to us and which he in turn demands of us as his followers? "It is characteristic of a mature love that it calls into play all man's potentialities; it engages the whole man, so to speak. Contact with the visible manifestations of God's love can awaken within us a feeling of joy born of the experience of being loved. But this encounter also engages our will and our intellect. Acknowledgment of the living God is one path towards love, and the 'yes' of our will to his will unites our intellect, will and sentiments in the all-embracing act of love" (*Deus Caritas Est*, no. 17). As Pope Saint John Paul the Great has phrased it so many times, true love is the gift of one's entire self.

Conversation with Christ: Thank you, Lord, for helping me to see, through Pope Saint John Paul the Great and Pope-Emeritus Benedict XVI, the meaning of authentic love. Thank you for your limitless love for me. Your love is the standard to which my own poor love must rise.

Resolution: I will give myself to Christ today in acts of love that embrace my whole person: intellect, will and sentiments.