

FATHER REGINALD MARTIN, O.P., DIRECTOR

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THE WONDER OF REVERSALS

One of the old, classic hymns to the Blessed Virgin begins by addressing Mary, "Taking that great 'Ave,' once by Gabriel spoken, Eva's name reversing, be of grace our token." Who can say what inspired the poet to see the connection between Gabriel's "Ave," and the name of our First Parent, "Eva," Eve? But once we begin to ponder the reversal of the two words, a world of reversals reveals itself, with Mary in its center.

In the beginning, in the Garden, an angel of darkness tempted Eve to say "no" to God's simple command that she and her help-mate shun the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. To punish them, God drove them from Eden before they could approach the Tree of Life. Countless generations later, an angel of light approached Mary and asked if she were willing to reverse the tragedy that had taken place so long ago. She said "yes" and by giving birth to a New Adam, set into motion a series of events that led the way to a new Tree of Life, the cross.

We may not think of the cross as we decorate our Christmas trees, but those trees are a sign of the tree that led to such unhappiness at the beginning of time. The glass balls we hang on our Christmas trees are a reminder of the fruit that Adam and Eve found so delightful to look at. Mary is unique in our human race, but every one of us who has ever decorated a Christmas tree has taken part – consciously or not – in Mary's ministry of reversal, turning the tree and fruit of human shame into a sign of hope and everlasting life.

By the time we approach the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, on February 11, our Christmas trees have been consigned to their fate, and our feast day decorations have been laid aside. Our liturgy has abandoned the white vestments that marked the solemnity of the Christmas season, and we have returned to what is called "ordinary" time. But we have not said good-bye to Mary or to her all-important "yes" that brings us such great joy at Christmas. The day before we begin the first of our novenas to honor Mary as Our Lady of Lourdes, we celebrate the Feast of the Presentation of



OUR LADY OF LOURDES
Silhouette by Sister Mary Jean Dorcy, O.P.

the Lord, and we find Mary once again quietly saying "yes" by bringing her child to Jerusalem, "according to the law of the Lord...." (Lk.22).

Humility is the virtue by which we acknowledge God as the source of everything we have and everything we are. Its opposite, the sin of Pride, is taking excessive pleasure in doing something good. We may occasionally have difficulty discerning the difference, but, as usual, Mary shows us the way. Her claim that "henceforth all generations will call me blessed" would be nothing more than an empty boast, were these words not immediately followed by another reversal – her acknowledging, "He who is mighty has done great things for me." We have every right to rejoice in the talents, skills, beauty and strength God has given us, so long as we recall they are God's gifts. That recollection allowed Mary, who knew all ages would call her blessed, to surrender to the liturgical law of her time and offer the prescribed sacrifice in thanksgiving for the birth of her son.

This is the Mary who guides us through the days of our February novenas. We begin these days with the
(Continued on page 4)

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THEOLOGY FOR THE LAITY

The Theological Virtues, Charity

By Father Reginald Martin, O.P.

THE VOCABULARY OF LOVE

One *Concordance* to the Bible directs us to the word “love” more than two hundred times. The word “loved” (and other derivatives) occurs another two or three hundred times. Our vocabulary pays tribute to “love letters,” “love nests,” “love poems,” and “love stories,” evidence that love is an important element in our human life.

The dictionary defines “love” as “a profoundly tender, passionate affection for another person...as for a parent, child, or friend.” We might expect a similar definition for “charity,” which is – or ought to be – a synonym for “love,” but the dictionary defines “charity” in these rather chilly terms: “generous actions or donations to aid the poor, ill, or helpless...something given to a person in need.”

Scholars, no doubt, can explain how our common idea of charity came to be so, apparently, separated from our notion of love, but we may be grateful that the Church’s theology has always maintained the unity of the two. Our *Catechism* teaches, “*Charity is the theological virtue by which we love God above all things, for His own sake, and our neighbor as ourselves for the love of God*” (1822).

In our earlier reflections we have discussed the nature of Faith and Hope, understanding them as the habitual dispositions by which we believe in God, embrace His word, and look forward to everlasting life in His kingdom. We shall now see how Charity draws us closer to God – and closer to one another – while at the same time giving life to the other virtues.

CHARITY AND A NEW LIFE OF VIRTUE

In St. John’s gospel, Jesus tells His disciples He is giving them a “new” commandment, “*that you love one another as I have loved you*” (Jn 15:12). The evangelist has earlier told us that Jesus loved His disciples “*to the end*” (Jn 13:1). When He offers His life on the cross, He demonstrates both the “newness” of His commandment, and the extent of the love He expects in return for His love of us.

This commandment is new because it describes a different relation between God and creation than we encounter in the Old Testament. To be sure, the Old Testament tells us Abraham was called a friend of God, and Moses “*spoke with God face to face, as a man speaks to a friend*” (Ex 33:11). But these are the only times the Old Testament writers employ the notion of friendship to describe relations between God and a human being. Moses and Abraham are extraordinary individuals, who

share exceptional encounters with God. Their relations with God are by no means the common experience of our ancestors under the Old Law.

CHARITY IN HUMAN FORM: THE INCARNATION

The Incarnation changes the relationship between God and mankind. Early Christian writers said that the Incarnation was a greater event than the creation because in the beginning God simply called things into existence that had not “been” before. When God took on our flesh, however, He raised up to His own level the matter He had created, an act, our liturgy tells us, that gave our mortality immortal value. Jesus describes this changed relationship when He tells His disciples, “*I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father*” (Jn 15.15).

We may be tempted to discount the gift Jesus describes here. After all, every day we tell one another things we have heard from others. But in the First Century world, the exchange of confidences – and especially confidences between superiors and their subjects – was no small matter. When the crowds want to get Pilate’s attention on Good Friday, they threaten him by saying, “*If you release this man, you are no friend of Caesar.*” To be invited to listen, and to be listened to, is a mark of supreme favor.

THE EQUALITY OF LOVE

The benevolence that creates an equality and invites intimacy between individuals who would otherwise have little or nothing in common is what distinguishes Charity from other forms of attraction. St. Thomas Aquinas wrote,

... not every love has the character of friendship, but that love which is together with benevolence, when...we love someone so as to wish good to him...Yet neither does well-wishing suffice for friendship, for a certain mutual love is requisite, since friendship is between friend and friend: and thus well-wishing is founded on some kind of communication (II-II, 23.1).

These words are certainly encouraging when we consider God’s immense kindness, and especially His everlasting life, the sharing of which is the purpose of His love for us. They may be harder to grasp as we strive to apply them to our love for God. How, we might ask, can we wish any good to God, who is the source of all goodness? Obviously, this cannot be a

matter of providing God with something He lacks, for He lacks nothing. However, we can – and do – express benevolence toward God in our prayers, when we say, for example, *“Hallowed be Thy name,”* and *“Thy will be done.”* Likewise, in the *Gloria* of the Mass we say, *“we give you thanks, we praise you for your glory.”* One of the prefaces for weekday Masses says, *“...our desire to thank you is itself your gift. Our prayer of thanksgiving adds nothing to your greatness, but makes us grow in your grace....”* In other words, we manifest charity toward God when we thank Him for being God.

A FUNDAMENTAL PRECEPT

One of the maxims by which Catholics live teaches that *“the Church believes as it prays.”* Thus, if we want to know what we believe about something, a good place to begin our study is to examine our prayer. The Mass preface we considered above is an excellent example. It says, *“...our desire to thank you is itself your gift.”* These words are unequivocal: Charity is not something we possess innately, but rather something we receive from God. St. John writes, in the first of his letters, *“In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that He loved us...we love because He first loved us”* (1 Jn. 4:10, 19).

God’s love for us is absolutely fundamental; it gives us the ability to love Him in return, and it is the source of our capacity to love the world God has created. After God Himself, the first thing we are invited to love is ourselves. At first glance, this may seem quite selfish, but we must remember that God commands us to love our neighbor as ourselves (Lev. 19:18). St. Thomas Aquinas quotes Aristotle, who identified love for ourselves as the benchmark by which we love others, when he observed, *“...the origin of friendly relations with other lies in our relation to ourselves.”* St. Thomas then remarks

...we may speak of Charity...as denoting man’s friendship with God...and, consequently with the things of God, among which...is man himself... Hence, among these other things which he loves out of Charity because they pertain to God, he loves also himself out of Charity (II-II, 25.4).

Common sense will tell us the difference between the self-love we manifest when we seek only to gratify some personal whim, and the benevolent, respectful love with which we regard ourselves as God’s creatures, chosen for everlasting life in His kingdom.

Our love for God impels us to love others, and at some point this forces us to face the challenge Christ lays down when He says, *“Love your enemies”* (Matt 5:44). Here St. Thomas comes to our rescue by reminding us that while we cannot exclude our enemies from the general love we are commanded to show our neighbor, we may have little personal affection for someone we dislike. Nevertheless, we must appropriately love what is good in such a person, namely, his humanity and worth as one of God’s creatures. Likewise, we must be ready to include our enemies in the prayers we offer for everyone, and in the assistance we offer – generally – to those in need.

THE ORDER OF LOVE

St. Thomas was not only a very practical theologian; he demonstrated a very shrewd understanding of human nature. He recognized the challenge implicit in Christ’s command, and taught that laying aside the animosity we may feel toward another individual is the *perfection* of Charity (II-II, 25.9), something we achieve only over time, and as we grow in God’s love. *“For since man loves his neighbor...for God’s sake, the more he loves God, the more does he put enmity aside and show love to his neighbor”* (*Ibid.*).

All this suggests – rightly – that there is an order in Charity. We love God first, then we love ourselves. We love others, and this must include our enemies. When considering whether we ought to love one neighbor more than another, or which neighbor we ought to love more, St. Thomas wisely taught,

One’s obligation to love a person is proportionate to the gravity of the sin one commits in acting against that love. Now it is a more grievous sin to act against certain neighbors [e.g., our parents]... Therefore, we ought to love some neighbors more than others (II-II, 26:6).

Our Charity extends, in varying degrees, to all those with whom we hope to share God’s everlasting life, but it includes even irrational creatures, to the extent that we acknowledge their usefulness, see them as signs of God’s goodness, and – this will come as good news to pet-owners – wish for their preservation.

SINS AGAINST CHARITY

Because Charity moves us to love, sins against Charity are obviously those that turn us away from love. These include hatred, envy, discord, war, sloth and scandal. These last two deserve some attention because their theological character is far different – and far more serious – than the sense in which we usually understand them.

We commonly define sloth as laziness, or a tendency to procrastinate, but these are the results of sloth, which, St. Thomas taught, is a being cold when we ought to be ardent, and slow when we ought to be quick. In Dante’s *Purgatory*, the souls of the slothful are urged by the example of the Blessed Virgin, who *“went with haste”* to share the Good News of the Incarnation. They cry out, *“Swift, swift, lest time be lost by little love.”*

Scandal is a word we see almost every day. It appears regularly in the newspaper, and it is a standard feature of the tabloids available at grocery stores. We usually think of scandal as sexual misconduct, financial impropriety, or the sort of misbehavior celebrities embrace in order to attract attention. To an extent, this is true, and our theology defines scandal as *“something less rightly said or done that occasions spiritual downfall”* (II-II 43.1).

What makes scandal so serious is the latter part of this definition, something that causes spiritual downfall. The word “scandal” comes from the Greek word that means “stumbling against something,” and Jesus says that the penalty for acting as such a stumbling-block

is particularly severe. *“Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were put around his neck and he were thrown into the sea”* (Mk. 9:43).

THE DEMAND AND REWARD OF LOVE

Charity obliges us to love one another, and to pray for one another’s salvation. Scandal, strictly understood, is a deliberate choice to lead another into sin and, therefore, away from eternal life. St. Thomas wrote, *“...as theft and murder are special kinds of sin, on account of their denoting the intention of doing a special injury to one’s neighbor; so too scandal is a special sin, because thereby a man intends a special harm...”* (II-II, 43.3).

Each of us is familiar with St. Paul’s remark, *“So faith, hope, and charity abide, these three. But the greatest of these is charity”* (1 Cor. 13:13). St. Thomas explains this by observing that the theological virtues are greater than the moral virtues (which we will consider in future reflections) because the object they seek is God, the Supreme Good. He adds that Charity enjoys preeminence among the theological virtues because Faith and Hope seek God as the source of something we desire, namely, truth and everlasting life. Charity, on the other hand, seeks God for His own sake, and asks nothing more than – in St. Augustine’s words – *“to rest”* in God.

This is, unquestionably, a great deal to grasp. The *Catechism* simplifies the matter by teaching that Charity *“articulates and orders [the other virtues] among themselves”* (1827), and St. Thomas takes an example from everyday existence to explain the action of Charity, *“...since a mother is one who conceives within herself and by another, Charity is called the mother of the other virtues, because by commanding them, it conceives [their] acts....”* (II-II, 23.8).

The *Catechism* continues, *“Charity upholds and purifies our human ability to love, and raises it to the supernatural perfection of divine love”* (1827). ■

WONDER OF REVERSALS *(Continued from page 1)*

image of Mary submitting humbly to the law of Moses; the days culminate in our celebrating Mary as Our Lady of Lourdes – another wonderful reversal, in which we acclaim the humble mother in Jerusalem as *“our life, our sweetness, and our hope.”*

When I was a student, one of my Dominican brothers told me he had accompanied his young nephew, who was quite ill, to Lourdes. “Was he healed?” I asked. “No,” my companion replied, “but I was. I was filled with anger and doubt. I came away at peace, and here I am.” Such a transforming reversal is a common experience of those who make the journey to Lourdes. Another of my Dominican brothers, a very holy priest, said, “I went to Lourdes as a tourist; I left as a pilgrim.” These days of our novenas offer us an immense opportunity to turn ourselves around, to re-order our values, and reconsider our priorities and goals.

Healing is one of the promises of Lourdes, and none can doubt that Lourdes is a sanctuary erected to celebrate

God’s powerful intervention into our weak human lives. The days of our novenas are a time to ask God for physical health – for ourselves, or for loved ones – and they are also a time to ask Mary to help us re-form our lives along the lines of her splendid example.

Toward the middle of the last century a Dominican preached a series of sermons at a novena to honor Our Lady of Lourdes. He spoke of the reversals Mary accomplished, by saying “yes” when our First Parents said “no.” But he went further, and brought those reversals vividly to life in our day. “Will she lift from us our troubles?” he asked

It does not matter. Who cares? She will do something finer. She will make us carry our troubles. She will give us a princely spirit. We can defy whatever may come...Dare you ask that she would stoop to your weakness? Shall you not ask rather that she lift you to her strength? Dare you? Surely you dare...He gave her to you. She will understand you. She is good.

Each of us at the Rosary Center prays that the days of the novenas to Our Lady of Lourdes will bring healing, peace, strength and consolation to all our friends. If we wish, we may imagine ourselves among the pilgrims at Lourdes who take part every night in a candlelight procession, singing *“Ave, Ave Maria.”* But wherever we find ourselves, let us remember that Mary stands by us, leading us always, by her quiet example, to the arms of her Son, whose arms are outstretched for us, and always in love.

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