

April 8, 1986

Our discussion so far has reminded me of the occasion about a year and a half ago when my parents celebrated their Fiftieth Wedding Anniversary. My sisters and brother and I gave them a big, fancy, catered party to which we invited all my uncles and aunts and many cousins and friends.

I was acting as master of ceremonies at this affair, and at the appropriate point I was presenting to my parents a gift I had made for them. It was a calligraphed rendition of the well-known passage from the First Letter of John: "God is love: and one who dwells in love dwells in God, and God dwells in her, or him." It was one of my better calligraphic efforts, rendered in Latin in medieval-style script, decorated with 22 carat gold illumination work, and framed by a professional woodworking craftsman.

Two of my father's brothers are priests, and one of them is inclined to get a little tipsy. As I began my presentation the tipsy one seemed to have a little trouble believing his eyes when he saw the gift, and he got up, lurched over to me in his black suit and clerical collar, took the framed document out of my hands, interrupting my presentation, looked at it, and asked somewhat incredulously: "Where did you get this?", almost as if to suggest I had stolen it from the Vatican or from Montecassino. "I made it," I said. Although seemingly not entirely convinced, my uncle nevertheless turned to the gathered throng, and continuing the interruption of my presentation, held up the plaque and said: "This is the essence of our faith!" But he then went on to give a somewhat garbled little sermonette about how the love that was spoken of in the passage was not the love we thought it was, and he tried to distinguish between divine love and human love in some way.

I remember having heard this distinction at some earlier stage of my catechistical tutelage, usually based upon an analysis of various Latin and Greek words which, although having different meanings and connotations in the original languages, are nevertheless uniformly translated as "love" in English. This discussion always seemed somewhat over my head when I heard it, and now that I feel more prepared to understand the analysis, whether or not I am prepared to agree with it, I have intended to look it up again and get it more clearly fixed in mind.

There are two aspects of the love we speak about in ordinary life which are significant. One aspect is the fact that it is an emotion, rather than a practice, an emotion we experience as very deep, occurring at a causal level of our being beyond the reach or the ministrations of our mere reason or common sense, and over which, consequently, we seem to have very little control. Is not the concept of a weak or manageable love a kind of contradiction in terms, at least as we use terms in ordinary life?

The second aspect of the every day life kind of love is that in some peculiar way it involves the nature and the needs of the one who loves as well as the object of the love. To love someone is usually to need them in some way, to need something from them, to be dependent in some manner. The agenda of the relationship, whether it be the relationship of lovers, spouses, or parents and children, usually involves a complex web or mutual dependencies and desires, a certain kind of bargaining or exchange. Somehow, it seems much easier to like someone than to love someone. If we like someone we can, in a somewhat casual way, see their needs and meet them to the extent appropriate, with a reasonable degree of impartiality. When we love someone our own needs enter the picture and are apt to cloud up the transaction.

In contrast, the love that is spoken of in scripture is not of the sort that picks you up in its grip and overwhelms you. No one that I have ever heard of has gone into fits of emotion loving his or her enemies. This love is more a practice than a feeling or emotion, at least at first.

Moreover, in the scriptural kind of love personal wants and needs are laid aside, and the one who loves becomes a kind of servant, erasing his own agenda, demanding and wanting nothing.

How do we cultivate within ourselves the scriptural kind of love? The first step is intellectual--it is to develop the capacity for enough impartiality to see what a truly loving action is in a given situation. Without this capacity to see the Truth of the situations we are in, nothing more can happen.

The second step is, when one knows what love requires, simply to do it, whether or not we are moved by great emotions. Each thing we do in some way moulds our nature and our being. By acting habitually in a certain way we gradually become what we have been acting. In my own experience, which is admittedly small and limited, I have noticed that if in some small respect I begin practicing the doing of the right thing, after a while I want to do it that way, and do not particularly need to think about it or rationalize it.

Great spirits like Mother Theresa or Mohandas Gandhi have achieved this transformation in a total way, on a grand scale, so to speak, rather than marginally or fitfully. Their lives speak eloquently of the transforming power of right practice.