

THIS TREMENDOUS LOVER

NO MATTER what we do, unless we do it in the love of God, it profits us nothing. God wants our love, He will be satisfied with nothing else. That is what He principally looks for in our works. The things we do or achieve are not of primary value to God, for He can create them by a mere thought; or with just as much ease He can raise up other free agents to do what we do. But the love of our hearts is something unique, something no one else can give Him. True, He could create other hearts to love Him, but once He has created us and given us free will, the love of our particular heart is something unique and in a way irreplaceable. In any case, it is not for His own sake that He wants our love, but because He desires to make us happy with Him forever, and He can only do that if we are in love with Him.

It might seem that that is something beyond our power or choice. One speaks in human relationship of "falling in love"; it is not, as it were, something deliberate, something that can be done at will. That peculiar acquiring of a new and special interest in another person, and the development of a new power to love that person, which raises the whole level of the life of a man or woman and opens the door to the highest form of human happiness, seems to be something fortuitous, an accident, a stroke of luck. Whether that be so or not, there is a very close analogy between the human and the divine, which we intend to stress in this book. But there is one important difference in regard to the love of God. There, instead of speaking of a soul falling in love, it would be nearer the truth if one spoke of love falling into the soul. For God gives us the love with which we are to love Him; more than that, He gives us the gift of wisdom, by which we acquire a taste and a relish for God and for His friendship and His ways. Both the love and the wisdom come from God; this will help us to understand the otherwise seemingly harsh treatment of the guest who, in the Gospel parable, came to the wedding-feast, without the ceremonial garment. Unless one realizes that such garments were provided by the host, one will not understand the host's resentment at the guest's refusal to avail of his

kindness, and one will completely miss the parallel with the man who comes to the service of God without love in his heart. For if there is one gift that is to be had for the asking—and there are many—it is the gift of love for God.

There is only one source of true happiness in this life or in the next, and that is to love and to be loved. Knowledge that does not lead to love is worse than vain and sterile. It is of course quite true that love expresses itself in many ways, and it is true that its reality can be questioned if it does not seek expression in some way; but for all that, it is love, and love alone, that matters. St. Paul and all the saints knew that; our Lady knew that; our Lord knows that, and God Himself knows it and tells it to us in the Scripture. "I have loved thee with an everlasting love" (Jer. xxxi, 3). "My son, give me thy heart" (Prov. xxiii, 26). "Love is the culmination of the law" (Rom. xiii, 10).

But when we examine the Scriptures, we notice that God does not confine His commandment of love to love for Himself; He insists that we must also love our neighbor, and it soon appears that He speaks as if the two loves were inseparable, and, in fact, one and the same. We read such texts as "Thou shalt love thy neighbor for God" (Cf. Luke x, 28); "All the other commandments are comprised on one word: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Cf. Rom. xiii, 9); and the final exhortation of our Lord to His disciples was His own commandment to "love one another as I have loved you" (John xv, 12). This insistence on fraternal love and its identification with divine love becomes obvious if we remember the principles that govern the membership of the Mystical Body.

The organs of a human body are mutually dependent and operate for the benefit of each other and thereby for the good of the whole organism. Foreign matter lodged in the organism is distinguished from that in the living union with the whole, by its failure to interact beneficially with the rest of the system. It is at best a nuisance. If we then do not interact beneficially with the rest of the members of Christ's body, our title to living membership is immediately compromised. And we cannot distinguish completely between Christ and His members; we cannot love Christ without being willing to love the whole Christ—Head and members. What we do to our fellow members is done to Him—for they are His Body. We have His own word for it: "Amen, Amen, I say to you, as long as you did it to one of these my least brethren—you did it to me" (Cf. Matt. xxv, 40). It is

Christ whom we serve, or injure, in the person of our neighbor.

But if our fraternal charity is to be Christian, its prime motive must be the love of Christ. That is why theologians do not distinguish essentially a double precept of charity, one for God, and one for our neighbor; they only recognize one, the love of God. And that is why St. John writes:

"If any man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar. For he that loveth not his brother whom he seeth, how can he love God, whom he seeth not. . . . If we love one another, God abideth in us, and his charity is perfected in us. In this we know that we abide in him and he in us: because he hath given us of his spirit" (I John iv, 12, 13, 20). "Let us love one another, for charity is of God. And every one that loveth, is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not, knoweth not God, for God is charity" (I John iv, 7, 8).

Volumes could be written on these texts. One thing is clear: that to abide in God, one must love one's neighbor; fraternal charity is a necessary manifestation of love of God, which does not exist without it. In the practical part of this book we shall discuss the working of fraternal charity. Let it be noted here that charity does not compel us to *like* people, but to *love* them. And love is an act of the will wishing one well. Further what passes for fraternal charity is often not really Christian. Modern civilization is full of a humanitarianism which is not Christian charity, for its motive is not the love of God. It may be a love of man, though it is more often a love of management. Whatever be its motive, unless it be derived from the love of God, *it profiteth nothing*. It is on this point that many Catholics—even many Catholic religious—make a fatal mistake that renders much of their works for their neighbor sterile and unprofitable; for their motives are human. To them can be applied that threefold warning of our Lord: "Amen, I say unto you, they have received their reward" (Cf. Matt. vi, 2). Still we must not be too general in our condemnation, for when a man works according to what he believes to be his duty, God will not fail to have compassion on him, and will give him the grace to rectify his outlook. But for a healthy Christian life, all a man's work must be done with God, for God, and in God; the love of God is at once its source, its end, and its principal value.

For the whole spiritual life is a love affair with God, and if that expression has associations that are out of place here, it is because of the abuse of it, not because of its proper use. As we

shall see, God Himself uses human love to teach us the secrets of divine love. The love of God for us is shown forth in the Life and Passion and Death of our Lord. Our return is the influence of love for God in our own life, and that is especially shown by our fraternal charity. God not only gives us the power to love Him, He also gives us the opportunity of exercising that power. God is completely self-sufficient, and as we can add nothing to Him, our love at times seems hopeless and helpless. But God has so identified Himself with the needs of our neighbor, that what we do to others for God's sake, is done to God Himself.

The love of God, then, and the love of our neighbor are one and the same virtue. This virtue is the effect of our incorporation in Christ, but it is also the means of fulfilling the law of our life in Christ. It is God who works in us both to love and to do the works of love. These works are many; and for their performance God has given us other virtues called the moral virtues, which depend upon the four cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude. These we need to regulate all our actions, to be honest with our neighbor, to control our lower appetites, and to overcome our weakness and fear, so that all actions which we perform may belong to the life of the Body of Christ.

In addition to these virtues, and to the seven gifts of the Holy Ghost, our life in Christ needs a continual series of helps called actual graces, by which we are moved to do good, and we are sustained in all our actions. We cannot begin a single good act without the help of God. "Without me, you can do nothing," said our Lord (John xv, 5). But God is our Father, and He does not fail His children, and Christ is the Head of His Body and as the Church teaches: "He constantly pours forth His grace (virtutem) upon those who have been justified, as the head exercises its influence on the members and the vine on its branches; and this grace ever precedes, accompanies, and follows their good actions" (Council of Trent, Sess. vi, cap. xvi). There is, so to speak, a complete nervous system in the Mystical Body, which controls the actions of all its members, and without that vital initiation and guidance, they are paralyzed. The working of actual grace is of great importance in the spiritual life, but to examine the virtues or the different graces in greater detail here, would make the treatment too theoretical, and would put us in danger of losing sight of the main outline of the Christian life, which is lived through Christ, with Christ, and in Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, for the glory of the Eternal God.

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The above passage has been selected from an excellent book of principles and practice in Christian living centered around the reality of the Mystical Body of Christ—*This Tremendous Lover*, by M. Eugene Boylan, O.Cist.R. This brief excerpt is printed with the kind permission of the publishers—copyright 1947 by The Newman Bookshop, Westminster, Maryland.