

LOVE WITHOUT MEASURE

CHRYSOSTOM O'BRIEN, O.P.



ON OCCASIONAL GLANCE into the unclouded mirror of childhood's simplicity is often rewarded with a clear cut vision into the heart of man. The child's simple, open reactions to his childhood experiences fashion a finely detailed miniature of man's inner self. An example of this is found in the young boy recently punished by his father. For a short time that seems endless the boy sits uncomfortably, afraid even to look at his father, in an agony of suspense. Separation, estrangement from his best friend, his dad, fills his heart with gloom. Then suddenly, the sound running through him like an electric shock, he hears his father's voice. It is filled with kindness; in a second the youngster flings himself into the warm clasp of his father's arms and the tears that come feel good, for they spring from the realization of his father's love for him. After that his little world seems very bright, for he knows that he is loved.

At Christmas time in the hearts of men of good will there is warmth; on their countenances a sparkling smile. Whether we walk along the voiceless cloisters of a Trappist-monastery, or step into the sanctuary of a Christian home, ringing with children's laughter, an atmosphere of joy prevails. In the hearts of men there is a gladness that makes the whole world seem to be a bright pageant. We can look back to the child's heart, exultant in the restoration of his father's love, for an explanation of this. Somehow at Christmas, consciously or unconsciously, men recapture the suspense of the long years of exile, when the human race, fallen slaves to sin, lay captive behind the ugly barrier flung up between man and God, his loving Father. Recaptured, too, is the thrill of joy that filled the hearts of certain poor shepherds when, following out the directions of the angel, they went over to Bethlehem. For as men gaze upon the divine simplicity of Christ's Nativity, they see in it the beginning of reconciliation with their Heavenly Father. And their hearts throb with joy, a joy that is rooted in the realization that they are loved by God, the Greatest Lover, and loved with the greatest love.

GOD LOVED US

Love is one of those intangibles that eludes the fingers of the mind seeking to tie it into the neat package of a verbal description. True love, the love that so ennobles human life with shining heroism and self-sacrifice, is the heartfelt wish of a good for the one loved. But it does not stop there; in utter selflessness it tries to do something towards achieving that good. Such a love is not unworthy even of God. In fact Divine Love is the perfection of this benevolent love; for when God wills someone a good, by the very fact of His willing it, this good is realized. By no means, then, is it a mere figure of speech to refer to God as "the Greatest Lover." He Whose will is the cause of every good in the entire universe, whether it be the awesome majesty of the seas or the bright innocence of a child's smile; Who does not fall in love with things because they are good, but Whose love makes them good—He certainly is in the most real sense the Greatest Lover.

Since to love is to will someone a good, and since God's love causes the good which He wills, the greater the good received from God, the greater is the love God has shown. Man, then, reigning at the very pinnacle of all visible creation, just a little less than the angels, God has loved profusely. So much is true even considering the merely natural gifts bestowed upon man. Face to face with the fact of the Incarnation of the Son of God, however, we are at a loss to calculate the breath-taking lengths to which God has gone in His love for men. Saint Thomas Aquinas, ever sober and restrained in his choice of words, can still find but one word descriptive—and this in only a negative way—of this love. He calls it *immense*, using the word in its literal meaning—"without measure." How indeed can we measure this love, when it has given to us God's Only Begotten Son; when it made such a gift, not to devoted friends, but to wretchedly unworthy enemies? To consider in some detail, nevertheless, the condition of the beneficiary of God's love and the inestimable value of His Gift, though it will never reveal the fulness of the Divine Love, will at least dazzle us even by the limited view it gives of Divine Love's immensity.

WHEN WE WERE DEAD IN SINS

"But God (Who is rich in mercy) for His exceeding charity wherewith He loved us, even when we were dead in sins, has quickened us together in Christ (by Whose grace you are saved"

(Eph. II, 4-5). Among men there is awe, reverence in the face of the heroic sacrifice of a mother for her children; selfless devotion of a soldier on the battlefield towards a fellow combatant elicits the plaudits of the whole nation. And this is as it should be. Most of us, however, are at a complete loss either to comprehend or to explain a love that is showered upon one who in the past has shown naught but ingratitude and contempt; who has acted as an enemy. After Adam, man in the very strictest sense was God's enemy. The head of the human race, resplendent in the array of grace, virtue, knowledge, freedom from pain and death, with which God's love had adorned him, deliberately rejected God by sinning. Of all the creatures of the visible world, it was the noblest, the one whom God had most exalted, that rebelled against Him. Adam did it; his children were frequent and faithful imitators.

Sin's violation of Divine Justice could not be repaired by any man-made indemnities, for the debt was so much bigger than man; it was infinite. In simple justice God could have exacted the punishment due to sin—eternal damnation for all the sons of Adam. Instead He chose the line of love and mercy. Man, his enemy, besmirched with the mark of rebellion against Him, God embraced with an unfathomable love. "God so loved the world as to give His Only Begotten Son: that whosoever believeth in Him may not perish, but may have life everlasting" (John, III, 16). Saint John Chrysostom thus explains these words: "For by the expression 'so loved' and that other 'the world,' He shows the great strength of His love. Large and infinite was the interval between the two: He the Immortal, Who is without beginning, the Infinite Majesty; they (the world) but dust and ashes, full of ten thousand sins, who, ungrateful, have at all times offended Him; and these He 'loved.'"¹

THE GREATEST GIFT

To us who are so far removed from the days when man was no longer God's friend, it is perhaps difficult to appreciate what it was like to be the accursed enemy of Divine Justice. What must penetrate directly to our hearts, however, warming them with the realization of God's love, is the magnificence of the Gift which He gave. "Love's proof is love's deeds," says Saint Gregory the Great. "God so loved the world as to give His Only Begotten

¹ Homily on John, *loc. cit.*

Son." Christ, the Word made flesh, is the Incarnate proof of God's love for men.

In the Most Blessed Trinity there is but one Son, so precious to the Father that from the love between Father and Son there proceeds the Third Divine Person, the Holy Spirit. The intense devotion of parents towards an only child is but the faintest shadow of the Father's love for His only Begotten Son. Yet it is this Son, His most priceless possession, that the Father bestows upon man. Such unstinting generosity is proof positive of God's love for us. Even granted that in His goodness God wished to save His enemy, man, He could have done it by a limitless number of ways. To show us that His love would stop at nothing, He sent His Only Begotten Son.

As we ponder over the gift that God's love bestowed upon us, we are staggered by the import of the truth that it was His Only Begotten Son. When we say that God gave His Only Begotten Son we are saying that what was given was the Eternal Word, God with the Father, equal to Him in all things. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God: and the Word was God. . . . And the Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us" (John I, 1, 14). The consequences of this are the very heart of Christianity. First of all, human nature was raised from its misery to personal union with Divinity in the Person of the Son of God. As a result human nature has a new Head; in place of Adam, whom God had made a glorious chieftain, but who descended to become the father of a race of slaves, we now have Christ, the brightness of the glory of the Father and the figure of His substance. "By whom he hath given us most great and precious promises, that by these you may be made partakers of the Divine nature" (II Petr. I, 4). Because Christ, our Head, has personally united our nature to Himself, there has been opened to us, His members, a share in His Divine Nature. As the head is so vital a source of life to the body, so Christ is to us the source of that sharing in the Divine Life which is grace. In Him, the Son of God, is the plenitude of all grace—"we have seen Him, full of grace and truth"; from Him all His members receive grace, which, since He is God, He has the power to cause—"and of His fulness we have all received." "Behold what manner of charity the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called and should be, the sons of God" (I John III, 1).

Because it was His own Divine Son that God gave us, moreover, the human race has been adorned with that glory which is

Mary, the Mother of God. Try as we might we never could have made preparations befitting the coming of the Son of God. The Love which bestowed Him also saw to the preparations—"Love has been its own architect." Since His Son was to become man, to be born of woman, God fashioned in unsurpassed beauty Mary, Immaculate Maiden and Mother of God. Ours then is the glory of having one of our race who, by reason of her rôle as Mother of God, is more resplendent in grace than all the choirs of angels taken together. Aptly the Church applies these words to Mary: "Thou art the exaltation of Jerusalem, thou art the great glory of Israel, thou art the great rejoicing of our nation" (Judith XV, 10; XIII, 23).

In addition, the pure heart of Mary, the first to thrill at the abundance of God's love for men, was filled with a share in that love. She who was so intimately associated with the coming of Christ, is no less intimately associated in the purpose of that coming, the salvation of men. She who is the mother of Christ, Our Head, is also the mother of us, His members. Thus the same Love that exalted her to be the Mother of God, has made her the Mother of men.

Fully to portray the consequences of God's Love in giving us His Only Begotten Son would be to elaborate upon all the mysteries of the Faith, for Christ is the centrepiece of the whole Divine Plan. A mere summary, however, of what His dwelling among us means to us will add further emphasis to the magnitude of the Divine Love in the Incarnation. Because they were the actions of a Divine Person, every deed of Christ was of infinite value. The merits which He thus won have made possible to us a life patterned after the example He set. Because He is the Son of God, He is the unswerving Way, the Infallible Truth, the Immortal Life. Who follow Him walk not in darkness. We who once groped blindly in the darkness sin had cast upon our minds, have seen the Light of the world. What is more, our crippled wills can be made straight, our weakness cured, by Him Who is the Divine Physician. He is, above all, our Champion, for by His Cross He offered an infinite sacrifice to atone for the infinite debt of man's sins, thus assuring to all whom the power of that Cross touches, final victory, the victory of the "Resurrection and the Life."

As the final consequence of God's giving His own Son, we may mention Christ's own final gift, the Holy Eucharist. Only because Christ is the Son of God could He have conferred so tre-

mendous a gift, for to institute the Blessed Sacrament was an act of Divine Power. Often have the Fathers of the Church referred to the Holy Eucharist as the continuation and multiplication of the Incarnation, the prolongation of Christ's abode among us. Under the appearances of bread and wine, the Incarnate Word, though He ascended to the Father, yet remains with us, Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity. Thus ever close to us, He Who is our Head, the Source of our life, has made possible our constant communication in the inestimable blessings of the Incarnation.

CONCLUSION

"All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of Our God: sing joyfully to God all the earth. . . . A sanctified day hath shone upon us: come ye gentiles and adore the Lord, for this day a great light hath descended upon the earth" (Ps. 97). On Christmas day the hearts of men of good will sing out with joy in the light that has descended upon the earth, the light of God's love for men. Vanished is the pall of gloom spread by the sense of being God's enemy. Dispelled by Christ's birth, this gloom has been replaced by the joyous assurance of God's love for men. Never can the joy of Christmas become empty or hollow, for the treasures of Christ Whom God's love has given us, are inexhaustible. Each time we again gaze upon Christ, the Joy of Christmas, the Pledge of God's love for us, we must exclaim with increasing awe that such love has indeed been immense, without measure. "God so loved the world as to give His Only Begotten Son!"