

# **A Third Postscript on Love**

**Is a woman being selfish when  
she wants to be loved by a man?**

***by Thomas R. Heath, O.P.***

Frequently a different insight on a very old subject strikes when answering mail. A letter came recently full of agonizing questions about Christian love. I immediately scribbled out an emergency answer, so to speak, but when I had finished I knew that I had just begun to see the problem. I added a postscript. Then, after a while, I added another. This essay, then, is really a third attempt.

The letter came from a young woman, idealistic and unselfish, but with a delicacy of conscience that borders on the scrupulous. Some time ago, after two years of serious study and prayer, she became a Catholic, a decision and commitment she still regards as the most solemn of her life. Since then she has been working in various jobs, but not altogether happy with herself or with life. Because of an almost ruthless desire for a complete authenticity before God she has been plagued with doubts and anxieties, and has sought help from professional men. But the men of the natural science of healing do not always see her problem. Through it all she has been writing to me and I have been offering whatever light and strength I can find.

In this letter she said that she had been to see *Dr. Zhivago* and her reaction had been, to her, shocking. "I don't think I've been so

affected by a movie before. Both the intense sorrow and difficulty of life, and its great joy—the belief in love and beauty that sustain man's spirit after all. After this, the desire to be appreciated, cherished, protected became very strong." For the first time she admits to looking at young men in a different light. Not now endeavoring to discover what they needed to help them to live, but "How good it would be if they were concerned about me." Later she came to the hard realization that such an attitude towards others could never be right, admitting however, that in a child it can be understood and recognized as an area where growth and development must take place. "I honestly think I am still a child as far as emotional life goes, still possessive in love and very insecure. I must somehow grow towards the unselfishness demanded by Christian love. How? By a firm act of the will to love unselfishly? Is that demanding too much of human nature?"

She sees, then, an absolute dichotomy between the love-of-giving we call Christian love, and the desire for affection and security she calls child-love. And the commitment she had made to Christ suddenly looms up as impossible to keep. She is no longer able to meet Christ anywhere, cannot seek Him as a friend. Life which for her is meaningless without God has now become intolerable with Him. A further question arises. "Can a Christian ever be depressed, discouraged, intensely dislike (if not hate) himself and existence?"

The letter has much more to say and to ask but I believe I have put down the essential problems: first, Christian love is unselfish. But her whole being is yearning for affection and love which is selfish. She cannot then be a good Christian. Second: Christ, her friend, now looms in the form of a demanding God. His presence is no longer comforting but frightening. She is depressed, full of self-hatred, almost despair. She very much feels out of God's favor.

### **My Reply**

The answer I scribbled immediately explained that her idea of Christian love was simply wrong. The motion picture touched not the selfish child but the woman, and more deeply, the Christian in her. No one of us is self-sufficient, no one of us is God. We do really need a protector, a giver of love and security. She had experienced the beauty of this in the picture; it had come to her in a feminine

mode, to be sure, but it was so deeply affecting because it was saying something profoundly more.

"Teach us to pray. Thus shall you pray: 'Our Father.'" *Abba*. The word was used by small children for their father, its nearest English equivalent is Dad or Daddy. You shall regard God, says Christ, in the way children regard their fathers. The experience of the motion picture contained a direct revelation about herself as a person needing protection and love, about the possibility and beauty of receiving that from another human being; but finally, I thought, an implicit revelation of God Who alone could give it perfectly. I welcomed her to the human race.

Nor was it unchristian to look at young men as an entrance, possibly, to the human experience of being loved and cared for. A man *needs* someone to look after; why then could not her love be expressed by wanting to be looked after? That was my answer.

My first postscript was a text from St. James' Epistle: "Make no mistake about this my dear brothers; it is all that is good, everything that is perfect which is given to us from above; it comes down from the Father of all light; with Him there is no such thing as alteration, no shadow of change. By His own choice He made us children by the message of the truth so that we could be a sort of first-fruits of all that He has created" (1:16).

After sleeping on my answer however I saw I had really missed the heart of her problem. She would certainly agree that Christian love, when turned toward God, could not be all *that* unselfish. No creature, no being whose very existence is dependent on God could ever love God as though that existence were not dependent on God. She would see that. She would not think it was wrong or selfish to accept herself as a child of *God*, her Father. But Christian love in her letter was rather the love directed to her fellowman. That love had to be unselfish and she believed her *Zhivago* experience had revealed how selfish she really was. Her deepest desire was not to love others but to be loved by others.

I reflected on the last allusion in my letter, that a man needs someone to look after, so it would be right to love him by accepting his love. Somewhere in that example I thought I could find a better answer to her problem. My second postscript explained that our dependence was not only on God but on each other. For her to want to play the role, the exclusive role, of having others dependent on her

was inhuman and, of course, unchristian. The deepest love we can show some people, for example, the Negro in our society, is to be dependent on him, to convince him that we really need him. The love for the Negro in America (even in the liberal Christian community) has been too much in the other, the "giving" direction; we feel we do not need him but still we will help him. This, I thought, was true of interpersonal relations too. So my second postscript ended with the only quotation from Scripture I could think of that illustrated this love. "The eye cannot say to the hand, I do not need you. Nor can the head say to the feet, I do not need you" (I Cor. 12:21).

### **The Third Postscript**

If the eye and the hand were persons, how would they say they loved each other? One thing is clear, neither would say: I don't need you. That would be absurd. Their love affair would begin, let us say, by the eye asking the hand for the pair of glasses on the table. When the hand brings the glasses to the eye, the eye is grateful. Eye may admire the flexibility of the hand, even begin to see perfections in the hand which are not related directly to helping the eye. In turn, the hand might ask a favor of the eye: Look and see if I can reach the gloves on the top shelf of the closet. Their love would bloom because of mutual dependence and perhaps each would come eventually to admire the other for reasons other than this dependence.

The Christian love for fellowman, on the other hand, has been presented in the past as a total giving of self to neighbor with no thought of receiving from him. "When I was hungry you fed me. Whatsoever you did to these, my least brethren, you did to me." We never identify with the least brethren. As a matter of fact, we are shocked and ashamed to find out *we can be* least brethren.

But this insight, that we need others, has been growing in our world. I see it today in the young people who enter religious life; and I see it in the newly married. In religious life the "old" spirituality was based on love as giving. We oldsters regarded recreation, for example, as a time when we chatted briefly with the first one we met in the common room, exchanged comments on the weather, and so on. But all the time we had a vague sense of uneasiness about the work we had left to do. We had to get back to writing our books, preparing sermons, or classes, counseling in the parlors. Love was giving, and that was all it was.

The young men today are talking "community." The recreation room is where they want to unload their worries and anxieties, to be strengthened by a deep sense of family and friendship. We oldsters are afraid of friendship, the youngsters will not do without it. They insist their way to God is based on friendship with others. And if they cannot find true friendship in a community, they leave it. When we point out that St. Thomas defines love as "willing good to another," they answer that he defines charity as friendship, which implies a *mutuality* in willing good. It is not all one way.

The emphasis in marriage has been the begetting of children. Now we are clearly coming to understand more fully that other dimension, the dimension of friendship, of the need the husband has for the wife, the wife for the husband even before, and long after, children appear. The wife cannot say to the husband: I have no need of you.

We oldsters have thought the most heroic kind of charity was a life—like Vincent de Paul's—of intense giving. The youngsters are looking for other saints, exemplified in men like Thomas More perhaps, who not only give themselves, but who enjoy the world, and depend deeply on family and friends for their happiness.

In other words, the old notion of fraternal charity is not sufficient for them. It must be developed and refined to include the idea of needing another. We should not think it against charity to need another's protection and love but rather we should accept that need as a way of growing in charity.

The hand and the eye (again, assuming they were persons) probably would come to their deepest insight if they together realized, not the fact of mutual dependence, nor even the fact of certain independent perfections in each other, but rather the fact that they both together serve *another* person. The hand, after all, is not directly serving the eye but the person looking through the eye. The eye is not directly helping the hand but the person reaching with the hand. It is *that* person who wants to see and to touch. I admit, of course, that it sounds absurd to postulate, on the one hand, that the eye is a person and then, in the next breath, to postulate another person looking through that person.

But is it so foolish after all? "Just as a human body, though it is made up of many parts, is a single unit, because all these parts, though many, make one body, so it is with Christ" (I Cor. 12:12). Looking through the eye, reaching through the hand is the same human person. So, looking through one member of the Body of

Christ, reaching through another member, is Christ. Charity is perfect then, neither when I help another member of the Body nor when I accept, in humility, help from another member. It is perfect when I realize that, whether helping or being helped, I am serving Christ.

The difficulty expressed in the letter was first: Christian love is unselfish. But if one's whole being is yearning for affection, he is selfish. The light I have now come to is that the yearning for another's affection can be put into the Christian context of the Mystical Body of Christ as one member's need for another. And the humble acknowledgement of that need is a way of serving Christ, or of allowing Him to serve through one of His members.

The second difficulty was that Christ stands as an accusing judge of selfishness, thereby nourishing in one's heart feelings of self-hatred and despair. Christ is here misconstrued as the one who forever demands us to give of our bounty to others. If we have no bounty, too bad for us. But that is not Christ. He is just as much behind the eye that sees poorly as the hand that gives the glasses. If I am the eye needing the hand, I must not feel that Christ is not asking through me. He *is* asking through me. Christ asks not only for me to give of my bounty when I have it but to ask of another's bounty when I do not have it. In that case it is Christ, the asker. Our concept of charity has excluded that aspect of love. Christ tells me not only to give but to receive.

A further thought is this: the whole Christ is realized in the community. And the perfection of a community, even the heavenly community, the communion of saints, is realized not when everyone is giving, but when everyone is giving *and* receiving. There are great philosophical reasons for the rightness of this, but the deepest reason is theological and is hidden in the Godhead, in that mystery that states in its baldest terms that the Son proceeds from the Father, that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.

A final question. Have I made too great a theological noise about a simple emotional problem of a young woman? Should not I have said simply, yes, you are still emotionally a child, your best answer is to "grow up" emotionally? No, I do not think so. If she were to try to grow up emotionally with the idea she had of perfect love, she would be driven to further self-hatred and despair. For no man is an island. No man is a pure giver. No man is an exclusive lover. That is to say, no man is God. And even God, for the accomplishment of His work, willed to need man.