

# THE LOVE THE FATHER HAS GIVEN US

By EDWARD MALATESTA

EVERY TIME we Christians pause to reflect on the mystery of love as revealed to us in the scriptures and present in our everyday lives, we encounter anew in faith the God who is the centre of our being and all those persons near and far who form the concentric circles of our relationships. Reflection on our experience of loving and being loved is always old and always new. Always old because discerning faith perceives the mystery of love as the key to understanding our past. Always new because the events of each succeeding day reveal new proofs of how God and others love us while offering us new challenges to reach out in return to love others and the Lord. The two greatest commandments must be to love,<sup>1</sup> for love is the origin, substance, meaning and goal of life. Love is the unifying factor of all the scattered elements that make up every individual life and the collective life of all of us in society.

## *God is Agape*

The First Letter of St John can be called the 'Canticle of Canticles of the New Testament' for it is a poem about communion with God and with each other in faith and love.<sup>2</sup> This epistle calls God Light, Just and Love (1 Jn 1,5; 2,29; 4,8.16). He is Light for us because he teaches us the way to life. He is Just for us because he frees us from sin and makes us holy. He is Love for us because he draws us into communion with himself and with each other, and enables us in our love for others to mediate such communion to them (1 Jn 1,1-4).

The Father sent his only Son into the world to be the most eloquent sign of the love of divinity for humanity (Jn 3,16), to be the meeting place of time and eternity. And the Father continues to send his Son. Everyday is Christmas, everyday is Good Friday, everyday is Easter, for the episodes of the life of Jesus lived out once and for all during his earthly history remain present in him forever in his risen glory through the Holy Spirit. That is why contemplation of the gospels brings us into contact with the risen Jesus on whose heart

remain imprinted forever the dispositions of each episode of his life, with the Father who sent him to us out of love, with the Holy Spirit whose inspirations give us the saving knowledge of the words we read and whose power transforms us into the image of the Jesus we contemplate.<sup>3</sup> If love is the 'form of all virtues', love is what motivates every page of the gospel. Our daily contact with the scriptures develops in us that mind which is ours in Christ Jesus fashioning us to be, as Jesus was and is, humble servants of love (Phil 2,5).

### *Agape and gratitude*

The most natural place to learn something about the mystery of love is in the home, in the family relationships that mutually join parents and children. Those children are indeed fortunate who are not only called the children of their parents but in reality experience themselves treated as such because their lives are enveloped by the loving care of mother and father. Similarly, those to whom God has given the life of faith, freely and not because of any merit on their part, can come one day to the realization of the infinite and gratuitous love the Father has shown us in allowing us not only *to be called* his children, but *to be* his children in a very real way, namely, by sharing his own life and so having a unique, personal intimate relationship with the one who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. We can call him 'Abba, Father!' just as Jesus did (Mk 14,36; Rom 8,15; Gal 4,6). With a cry of wonder and admiration implying gratitude, John invites us to contemplate with him this mystery of God's love for us. A real understanding of this one verse of the epistle, as of other especially profound passages of the scriptures, can be compared to the enlightenment experience of the buddhist tradition. It is allowing the reality into which we are plunged to lay hold of us, make its claim on us, and shed its light into all our powers. So our thinking, willing and acting are all radically changed, enabling us to live in greater harmony with the will of God who holds the entire universe in his hands and 'in everything works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose' (Rom 8,28).

Just as those who live profoundly the relation of child to parents carry in themselves a permanent gratitude to their parents for the gift of life, so those who have been given to see in faith the dignity of being a child of God, strive to live in that attitude of permanent gratitude to which the liturgy invites us: 'It is right and fitting always and everywhere to give you thanks'. With great spiritual

insight the desert fathers taught that one of the ways to cultivate continual prayer and a continual awareness of God's presence in our life, as far as this is possible, is to live in a constant state of gratitude, contemplating all things as God's gifts and so 'remembering' the giver of them all. Ignatius Loyola in his spiritual exercise 'Contemplation for obtaining divine love' (which means the grace of living a reciprocal relationship of love with the Lord), proposes that we consider all things as gifts of God in which he is present and working for our good, and to consider God as the source from whom all blessings flow. Such contemplation of the proofs of God's love to us is surely most apt to dispose us to receive the gift of making out of love a complete gift of ourselves to the Lord. The most basic gift of God to us is that we are his children. Would that we could share something of John's appreciation for this wonder!

We might indeed ask ourselves how much our religious consciousness is penetrated by the realization of being God's own child. Does the eternal destiny which is promised to us truly influence the greater and smaller decisions of my life? I am always impressed by the loving gentleness characteristic of Chinese parents when they carry their small children. Taiwan is predominantly a land of children and youth, and so there are countless opportunities to observe this trait. I am led to ask if I really believe that God's tenderness towards me is infinitely greater than that of the most loving human parents towards their children. How I would like to have towards our heavenly Father something of the peaceful confidence of the child asleep in the crowded bus, whether 'papoose style' on the back of the parent or in their arms! 'I will lie down in peace and sleep comes at once, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety' (Ps 4,8).

### *Agape is from God*

Not only does the love which makes us God's children come from God himself, but the love which we receive from other persons and the love we offer to them come from the same God who is Love. 'Beloved let us love one another, for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God' (1 Jn 4,7). God is one, and so true love is one. The loving relationships between human persons therefore reflect the love which is God himself because such relationships can only share in the infinite love with which God enfolds each of his children. Here again, a deep insight into this mystery can suffice to motivate and transform a life.

If all love comes from God, then at the heart of our contemplation

and action should be an ever more docile readiness to be led by the Holy Spirit to grow in love for the Lord and for others. Whatever is lacking in our love can be provided to us if we but draw close, in confident prayer, to the inexhaustible, ever accessible source of all love and with joy draw water from the wells of salvation (Isai 12,3; Jn 7,37-39; 19,30-37).

The best way to dispose ourselves to receive the gift of God, to be ready to welcome into our heart whatever is 'of God', is to live in the awareness of what it means to be God's creation. To be his handiwork means to be totally related to him. All that is good within us from the first moment of conception has been, is now, and always will be held in existence by God's loving desire to give us life. The act of creation, the state of being created are, according to St Thomas Aquinas, relations; the relation of the one making to that which is made; the relation of the handiwork to the maker. Whatever life-experiences help us to realize our frailty and littleness: sickness, approaching death, loss, disappointment, mistakes, limitations, our sins . . . all help us to know in our flesh and spirit our radical need for the Lord and his gifts, to appreciate that all that is good is 'of God'. Our Lord Jesus Christ, from the moment he became flesh in Mary until he breathed forth his Spirit on the cross, in the mystery of his person expressed the most total humility. His *kenosis*, the outpouring of himself, was total receptivity to divinity so that his humanity was filled with the fulness of divinity, was of God in the unique union which is the oneness of the eternal Word with human nature. Jesus continues to symbolize, to render present and to mediate divinity to us, so that we too may be one with God in the way proper to adopted daughters and sons, and thus we reveal in our lives something of the mystery of the love which is of God, pointing to Jesus and to the Father.

### *Agape and Mission*

The revelation of the Father as Love given to us in Christ must be mediated to the world through the witness of christian communities and of individual Christians. Contemporary events demonstrate all too clearly the urgency of such witness. Indeed the pressing need for bread, truth, justice, love and peace experienced by the vast majority of our brothers and sisters with whom we share life on this planet and for whom we are responsible should powerfully stimulate every Christian to witness to love. Real atheism is only possible where the light of love has burnt out. Because God is Love, our

primary concern should be to be like stars in the night offering light, warmth and direction to everyone who meets us.

Announcing the good news of Jesus Christ in those parts of the world where the gospel has not yet been proclaimed can be seen as witnessing to love. Looked at in this light no Christian should hesitate to see the opportuneness, indeed necessity, of such witness. We should not be ashamed of the words 'mission' and 'missionary' if we understand, use and explain these terms in relation to being sent by the risen Jesus to be witnesses by action and word to the Father's love for all people; to be the humble collaborators of those who strive to give new expression to the christian faith according to the genius of their own culture; to be the servants of those working to develop in justice and peace the resources of their country.

Personally, I consider it a privilege and a joy — a very precious and unmerited grace — to be witness to the God who is Love and to the two commandments of love among the chinese people, whose five thousand year history and refined culture make of them one of the most promising recipients of the Word of God. As these people cross the threshold of the decision to modernize, to industrialize and to join the ranks of 'developed', technological societies, they begin to encounter the difficulties only too well known in other parts of the world: weakening of marriage and family ties, juvenile delinquency, drugs, violence and consumerism. It seems to me that christian love can provide a unique means to preserve and give new expression to the positive traditional values of chinese culture in the necessary process of material progress.

What an exhilarating challenge it is to present the life of Jesus, the beatitudes, the Lord's prayer, the christian meaning of love to a class of chinese university students who have freely chosen to study our sacred scriptures. The Chinese, like good people everywhere, are searching for ways to preserve in changing circumstances the value of each individual person, to maintain mutual respect and honour, and to raise a family with the prospect of a life that is truly human.

All of us who bear Christ's name have the mission to be bearers of his message of love, to believers and non-believers alike, according to our way and condition of life and the grace which the Lord gives us.

*Agape in the christian community and family*

'By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another' (Jn 13,35). Our lives will point to Jesus,

revealer of love, and to God who is Love, to the degree that our individual and collective presence to society — in religious communities, parishes, various movements — are characterized by a mutual love in our relationships with each other. Nothing is more basic to Christianity, nothing more clearly expressive of the Lord's will for us, and yet we must admit we so often fall short of this ideal. The contemporary Catholic Church manifests so many divisions within its membership, which the misuse of mass-media by Catholics themselves only reinforces. The defence of truth, which many claim justifies their bitterness towards fellow Catholics, is an illusion. Never does the God of all truth use hatred to reveal himself or to defend his revelation. To act in a way contrary to the clear new commandment of the Lord in the name of defending the truth is to be a countersign of the revelation we claim to champion. Revelation is of a piece. Jesus manifested the truth by his being even more than by his words. Our communities will effectively manifest the truth of love only to the degree that they truly love.

Once again we can look to the family as providing the best environment in which to learn about love. The love proper to the christian community should first be manifested and taught in the 'little church' which the christian family is meant to be.

In his recent apostolic exhortation on the family, Pope John Paul II presents clearly and forcefully the human and christian vocation to love:

God created man in his own image and likeness: calling him to existence *through love*, he called him at the same time *for love* . . . Love is therefore the fundamental vocation of every human being.<sup>4</sup>

Looking at it in such a way as to reach its very roots, we must say that the essence and role of the family are in the final analysis specified by love. Hence the family has *the mission to guard, reveal and communicate love*, and this is a living reflection of and a real sharing in God's love for humanity and the love of Christ the Lord for the Church his bride.<sup>5</sup>

In some parts of the world, the very existence of the family labours under severe difficulties. Widespread divorce and remarriage, marital infidelity, rejection of the elderly, the single parent family, divisions between parents and children, lack of respect, discipline and a spirit of sacrifice on the part of the young: all of these problems strike at the very root of the family as the first school of love. We can only hope that the 1981 synod on the family proves as successful in

assisting family life as the 1971 synod on justice was in raising catholic consciousness regarding social problems and in inspiring imaginative, generous efforts to resolve them.

Surely one of the major concerns in all our ministries should be to assist families to be reflectors of the God who is Love. The family can have no more sublime goal. Parents who strive against such strong odds to reach this goal merit the admiration, encouragement and support of the entire christian community. Religious and priests whose lifestyle is outside the day to day stresses and strains of ordinary family life, often need to make a special effort to be close to families, to understand them and to serve them in their spiritual journey not only as individuals but precisely as families.

### *Agape and sharing*

The love that the Father has shown us by making us his children is a sharing with us of what he is and has. In the same section of the First Letter of John which points out this gift, the author tells us: 'By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us . . .' (1 Jn 3,16a). Christ too gave the greatest proof of his love by sharing without reserve his very self, finally giving his life so that we might have the life of children of the Father. In this context the author then tells us: ' . . . and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But if any one has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?' (1 Jn 3,16-18).

The Father has shared with us, Christ has shared with us, we should share with each other: this is love. No Christian would dispute the truth and coherence of these affirmations. The problem is in practice what to share, with whom, and to what degree. The disconcerting fact is that the majority of those who are Christians, in name at least, live in the more wealthy, 'developed' nations whose official policies still do not favour devoting a full one per cent of their gross national product to aiding the developing countries. Some Christians, as individuals, or in small groups, are very generous in sharing even to the point of real sacrifice. A few are even willing to devote a year or more of their lives to unremunerated service in various parts of the world. But the fact remains that Christians as a group, or the nations where they are a majority of the population, fail to give that outstanding sign of love which, according to their proclamations about their God, their founder, and themselves, others expect to see manifested in their lives. And so we are still in

need of John's exhortation: 'Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth' (1 Jn 3,18).

### *Believing in Agape*

Faith and love, while treated separately in the first two parts of 1 John,<sup>6</sup> are treated in light of each other in the letter's third section,<sup>7</sup> and in such a way that faith is shown to be root of christian *agape*. Christians will love with the love which is of God and which manifests God in so far as they truly believe that God is Love and the source of all love. We love in the Lord's name and as witnesses to his love in so far as we, in faith, recognize and receive his love for us. Joyful obedience to God's will witnesses to faith in the love which is present in every detail of our lives. We will treat ourselves and others as God's beloved children in so far as we believe he is a loving Father. The contemplation of God's Word spoken of above, implies the living faith that scripture is indeed God's Word, trust in the efficacy of this Word, and the disposition to be led in the Spirit by that Word to do whatever the Lord asks of us. We manifest belief in God's love for us to the degree that we allow that love to be the guiding principle of our life. 'So we know and believe the love God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him' (1 Jn 4,16).

### *Agape to the end*

The story of God's love for us is an eternal story for he has always loved us and will always love us. Jesus reveals the eternity of God's love by coming into the world because sent by the Father's love (Jn 3,16) and by loving perfectly, to the end, his own who were in the world (Jn 13,1). Christians, because they are aware in faith of being loved with an eternal love, seek to respond to and mediate this love by living and manifesting permanency in the commitments of love. For this reason the Church sets so much store in the permanency of marriage vows: they manifest the permanent love between Christ and his Church. For this reason the Church expects religious and priests to be faithful to their lifetime commitments for they, especially by their celibacy, point to the fulness of love which we are called to enjoy in the Father's eternal home.

Love by its very nature is permanent. Infatuations come and go, but the love which comes from God and conforms us to his will has to do with ongoing communion with him and with others. At a time when fidelity and stability are so rare, and yet so ardently longed for,



Christians can contribute, by their way of loving, an answer to the deepest longings of each human heart: 'And the world passes away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides for ever' (1 Jn 2,17).

The permanency in loving commitments during our life on earth prepares the definitive permanency in love which shall be ours when the Lord Jesus comes to take us to himself to be where he is and as he is (Jn 14,3; 17,24). One day it will be given to us to contemplate face to face the risen Lord Jesus, the perfect icon of the Father, and so in and through Jesus to know face to face the Father who is Love. Then our vocation to love will have reached its final stage. Having arrived at the goal for which we were created, we shall be further purified and transformed so as to realize our full capacity of also being icons of Love. According to some of the deepest thinkers of the christian tradition, this process of transformation may continue through all eternity 'from glory to glory' because of the transcendent nature of the human spirit and the inexhaustible goodness of God.<sup>8</sup> As John puts it: 'Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is' (1 Jn 3,3).

We all long for a deeper fidelity to our christian vocation and so for a larger measure of love and joy in our life. At the same time we should long to see Love witnessed to and shared with ever wider circles of brothers and sisters, especially those whose lives are loveless. The world awaits our song. May our whole being sing out at all times and in all places: 'See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are' (1 Jn 3,3).

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Mk 12,28-34; Mt 22,34-40; Lk 10,25-28.

<sup>2</sup> Cf Malatesta, Edward: 'Covenant and Indwelling', in *The Way* (January, 1977), pp 23-32.

<sup>3</sup> Cf Stanley, David: 'Contemplation of Jesus's earthly history and christian living', in *Jesus in Gethsemane* (New York, 1980), pp 11-55, and Queral, Antonio: 'Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit', in *The Spirit of God in Christian Life*, ed. E. Malatesta (New York, 1977), pp 119-34.

<sup>4</sup> John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio*, 11, regarding the role of the christian family in the modern world.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Jn 1,5 - 2,17; 2,18-28; and 2,29 - 3,27; 4,1-6.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Jn 4,7-21; 5,1-12.

<sup>8</sup> Cf the notion of *epektasis* in the theology of St Gregory of Nyssa, *Vita Moysis*, PG 44, 404.