

AFFECTIVITY AND THE EUCHARIST

Timothy Radcliffe

IN ENGLISH, 'AFFECTIVITY' implies not just our capacity to love, but how we love, as emotional, bodily, passionate and sexual beings. It is as these beings—sometimes a little messed up—that we have to learn to love. In Christianity we talk a lot about love. Sometimes this love sounds a little abstract, unearthly. But we must love as the people that we are, sexual, filled with desires, strong emotions, and the need to touch and be close to each other.

It is strange that we are not good at talking about this, because Christianity is the most bodily of all religions. We believe that God made these bodies and said that they are very good. God became bodily among us, a human being like us. Jesus gave us the sacrament of his body, and promised the resurrection of our bodies. And so we should be at home in our bodily, passionate natures and at ease talking about affectivity. Otherwise we will have nothing to say about the God who is love. But often when the Church talks about this, people are unconvinced. It does not have much authority when it comes to sex! Maybe God became incarnate in Jesus Christ, but we are still learning to be incarnate in our own bodies. We need to come down to earth.

I wish to talk about the Last Supper and sexuality. That may sound a bit strange. But think about it for a moment. The central words of the Last Supper are *This is my body, and I give it to you*. The Eucharist, like sex, centres on the gift of the body. This is very hard for our society to understand because we tend to see our bodies as objects that we own.¹ But the Last Supper points back to an older and wiser tradition. The body is not just a possession. It is me. It is my being as a gift from my parents, from their parents before them, and ultimately from God. So when Jesus says *This is my body and I give it to you*, he is not disposing of a possession. He is passing on the gift that he is. His being is a gift from the Father which he transmits to us.

¹ See Timothy Radcliffe, *What Is the Point of Being a Christian?* (London: Burns and Oates, 2005), 95.

Sexual intercourse is called to be a living out of such self-gift. Here I am, and I give myself to you, all that I am, now and for ever. So, the Eucharist helps us to understand what it means for us to be sexual beings, and our sexuality helps us to understand the Eucharist. Christian sexual ethics is usually seen as being restrictive compared with contemporary mores. The Church tells you what you are not allowed to do! But actually the basis of Christian sexual ethics is that of learning how to give and receive gifts.

The Last Supper was a moment of unavoidable crisis in Jesus' love of the disciples. In his journey from birth to resurrection, this was the moment through which he had to pass. It was the moment when everything exploded. He was sold by one of his friends; the rock, Peter, was about to deny him; and the other disciples would run away. As usual, it was the women who remained calm and with him until the end. At the Last Supper Jesus did not run away from this crisis. He grasped it with both hands. He took hold of the betrayal, the failure of love, and made it into a moment of gift. *I give myself to you. You will give me to the Romans to be killed. You will hand me over to death. But I make this a moment of gift, now and for ever.*

Becoming mature people who love means that we will encounter these unavoidable crises, when the world may seem to come to pieces. This happens very dramatically when we are teenagers, and it may happen all through our lives, whether we get married, or become religious or priests. Often people have such a crisis five or six years after they make a commitment in marriage or priestly ordination. We must face these crises. For most of us, this does not happen just once. We may pass through various crises of affectivity during our lives. I certainly have, and who knows what is around the corner? But we have to grasp them, as Jesus did at the Last Supper, with courage and trust. If we do, then we shall slowly step into the real world of our flesh and blood.

God sends us the loves and the friendships that are part of our journey towards God, who is the fullness of love. We await whom God sends, and when and how. But when that person comes, then we must dare to grasp the moment, as Jesus did at the Last Supper. Jesus could have escaped out of the back door and run away. He could have rejected the disciples and had nothing more to do with them. But no. He grasped the moment in faith, and it is important for us to do likewise.

I remember a few years after ordination I fell very much in love with someone. For the first time, here was a person whom I would happily

have married, and who would happily have married me. Here was the moment of choice. I had made solemn profession sincerely. I loved my Dominican brothers and sisters. I loved the mission of the Order. But when I made profession I had a little bubble of fantasy in my head: *I wonder what it would be like to be married.*

At that moment I had to accept the choice that I had made at solemn profession. Or better, I had to accept the choice that God had made for me, that this was the life to which God called me. It was a painful moment, but it was also a time of happiness. I was happy because I did love this person, and we are still very close friends. It was also a moment of happiness, because I was being liberated from the fantasy that I had kept alive at solemn profession. I was coming slowly down to earth. My heart and mind were having to become incarnate in the person that I am, with the life that God has chosen for me, in this flesh and blood. The crisis brought me down to earth.

Opening ourselves to love is very dangerous. We will probably get hurt. The Last Supper is the story of the risk of loving. That is why Jesus died: because he loved. And it is particularly perilous if we are priests or religious. We will awaken deep and confusing desires and passions. We may be in danger of ruining our vocation or living a double life.



The Last Supper, by Jacob Jordaens, 1654–1655

We will need grace if we are to negotiate the perils. But not to open ourselves to love is even more dangerous. It is deadly.² The desire and passions contain deep truths about who we are and what we need. Just suppressing them will either make us spiritually dead—or else one day we will go bang. We have to educate our desires, open their eyes to what they really want, liberate them from small pleasures. We need to desire more deeply and clearly.

When we do, then we shall have to learn how to be chaste. There are two fantasies in which desire can trap us. One is the temptation to think that the another person is everything, all that we seek, the solution to all our longings. This is infatuation. The other is to fail properly to see the other's person's humanity at all, to make him or her just meat for the eating. This is lust.³ These illusions are not so different as they might at first seem: they are mirror images of each other. But chastity is living in the real world, seeing the other as she or he is and myself as I am—neither divine nor merely a hunk of flesh. We are both children of God.

We have histories. We have made vows and promises. The other has commitments, perhaps to a partner or a spouse. We as priests or religious have given ourselves to our Orders and dioceses. It is as we are, engaged and bound up with other commitments, that we can learn to love with open hearts and open eyes. This is hard because we increasingly inhabit a world of virtual reality, where we can live inside fantasies as if they are real. Our culture finds it hard to distinguish between fantasy and reality. But chastity is the pain of discovering reality. How can we come down to earth?⁴

It is hard to imagine a more down-to-earth celebration of love than the Last Supper. There is nothing romantic about it all. Jesus tells the disciples plainly that this is the end, that one of them has betrayed him, that Peter will deny him, that the rest will all run away. This is no lovey-dovey dinner in a candlelit trattoria. This is realism in the extreme. A eucharistic love faces us fairly and squarely with the messiness of love, with its failures and its ultimate victory.

When we celebrate the Eucharist we remember that the blood of Christ is shed for 'you and for all'. At its deepest, the mystery of love is both particular and universal. If our love is just particular, then it risks

² See Radcliffe, *What Is the Point of Being a Christian?* 96.

³ See Radcliffe, *What Is the Point of Being a Christian?* 97, 99 and 100 following.

⁴ See Radcliffe, *What Is the Point of Being a Christian?* 98.

becoming introverted and suffocating. If it is just a vague universal love of all humanity, then it risks becoming empty and meaningless. The temptation for a couple might be to have a love that is intense but enclosed and exclusive. It is often only saved from destructiveness by the arrival of a third person, the child, which expands their love. The temptation of celibates might be towards a love that is just universal, a vague warm love of all humanity.

The first stage of chastity is coming down to earth. I will very quickly mention two others. The second step, briefly, is to open up our loves, so that they do not remain private little worlds to which we retreat. Jesus' love is shown when he takes the bread and breaks it so that it can be shared. When we discover love we must not keep it in a little private cupboard for our solitary delight, like a secret bottle of whisky. We must open it up for others to share and to enjoy. We must share our loves with our friends and our friends with those whom we love. In this way the particular love becomes expansive and reaches out to universality.

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For what are we searching in all this? What drives us in our infatuations? I can only speak personally. I would say that what has often been behind my occasional emotional turbulence has been the desire for *intimacy*. It is the longing to be utterly one, to dissolve the boundaries between oneself and another person, to become lost in another person, to find pure and total communion. More than sexual passion, I think that it is intimacy that most human beings seek. If we are to live through crises of affectivity, then we have to come to terms with our need for intimacy.

Our society is built around the myth of sex as the culmination of all intimacy. It is this moment of tenderness and complete physical union that brings total intimacy and utter communion. Many people do not have that intimacy, because they are not married, or because their marriages are not happy, or because they are religious or priests. And we can feel excluded unfairly from what is our deepest need. That seems unjust! How can God exclude me from this deep desire?

I think that every human being, married or single, religious or lay, has to come to terms with the limits of intimacy that we may know now. The dream of total communion is a myth, which leads some religious to wish that they were married, and some married people to wish that they were married to someone else. True, happy intimacy is only possible if we accept its limitations. We may project on to married

couples an utter and beautiful intimacy that is not possible but is the reflection of our dreams. No person can indeed offer us that totality of fulfilment that we desire. That alone is found in God. To quote Jean Vanier, 'Loneliness is part of being human, because there is nothing in existence that can completely fulfil the needs of the human heart'.⁵

For those who are married, a wonderful intimacy is possible, once, as Rilke says, it is accepted that we are the guardians of the solitude of the other person.⁶ And for those of us who are single or who are celibate, we can discover also a profoundly beautiful intimacy with others. Intimacy comes from the Latin *intimare*, which means to be in touch with what is innermost in another person. As a religious, my vow of chastity makes it possible for me to be incredibly intimate with other people. Because I have no secret agenda, and my love should not be devouring or possessive, then I can draw extremely close to the centre of people's lives.

So many of the sad cases of sexual abuse of minors have come from priests or religious who were unable to cope with adult relationships with equals. They could only seek relationships in which they had the power and the control. They had to remain invulnerable themselves. At the Last Supper Jesus takes bread and gives it to the disciples, saying 'This is my body which is given for you'. He hands himself over. Instead of taking control of them, he hands himself to them to do with what they like. And we know what they will do. This is the immense vulnerability of true love.

Every society lives by stories. Our society has its standard stories. Often they are romantic stories. Boy meets girl (or sometimes boy meets boy), they fall in love and live happily ever after. This is a good story that often happens in real life. But if we think that it is the only possible story, then we shall live with possibilities that are too small. Our imaginations need to be nourished by other stories that tell of ways of living and loving. We need to open up for the young the vast diversity of ways in which we may find meaning and love. This is why the lives of the saints were so important. They showed that there were different ways of loving heroically—as married or single, as religious or lay. I was very moved by the autobiography of Nelson Mandela, *The Long Road to*

⁵ Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human* (Toronto: Anansi, 1998), 7.

⁶ See Rainer Maria Rilke to Emanuel von Bodman, 17 August 1901, in *Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke: 1892–1910*, translated by Jane Bannard Greene and M. D. Herter Norton (New York: W. W. Norton, 1945), 57: 'a good marriage is that in which each appoints the other guardian of his solitude, and shows him this confidence, the greatest in his power to bestow'.

Freedom. He was a man who gave his whole life to the cause of justice and the overthrow of apartheid, and that meant that he did not have the sort of married life often for which he longed, as he languished for years in prison.

Enough! I must stop now, after a last thought. Learning to love is a dangerous matter. We do not know where it will lead us. We will find our lives turned upside down. We will surely get hurt sometimes. It would be easier to have hearts of stone than hearts of flesh, but then we would be dead! If we are dead, then we cannot talk about the God of life. But how do we dare live through this dying and rising?

At every Eucharist, we remember that Jesus poured out his blood for the forgiveness of sins. This does not mean that he had to placate an angry God. It does not even mean *just* that if we fail, then we can go to confess our sins and be forgiven. It means that and much more. It means that in all our struggles to become people who are alive and loving, God is with us. God's grace is with us in the moments of failure and muddle, to raise us to our feet again. Just as on Easter Sunday God made Good Friday a day of blessing, so we may be confident that all our attempts to love will be fruitful. And so we have no need to be afraid! We can set out on this unknown adventure, confident and with courage.

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