

Charity Toward Our Neighbor¹

St. Peter Julian Eymard to the Servants of the Blessed Sacrament,
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My Sisters, let us meditate on charity toward our neighbor. Our Lord Jesus Christ said to his disciples: ***By this love you have for one another, everyone will know that you are my disciples.*** (cf. Jn 13:35) Notice that the characteristic he mentions does not seem to be one of the most important. He could have said: They will recognize you as my disciples if you love me, if you possess my virtues, my spirit. However, he sets all virtues aside and gives as proof (of discipleship) charity toward our neighbor. He could have mentioned the love of God, but he subordinates that love to love of neighbor. Why is he giving fraternal charity as a proof of love of God? Let us reflect on this.

First, take note that since original sin man does not love his fellowman. He is no longer lovable or worthy of respect. Self-love, the result of original sin, has made man selfish, and therefore, he doesn't love other humans. If someone is opposed to him, naturally, they will become enemies. What does Jesus Christ do? He removes self-love and replaces it with love for our neighbor, and makes it the heart of all virtues.

First, there is obedience when I love my neighbor. Our Lord says in St. John: *I give you a new commandment, love one another.* (cf. Jn 13:34) This is the explicit commandment of our Lord, putting it on the same level as the love for God: *If you love your fellow men you have carried out your obligations (the law and the prophets). All the commandments are summed up in this single command: You must love your neighbor as yourself,* (cf. Rm 13:8) says St. Paul. *If anyone does not love his brother,* says St. John (cf. 1 Jn 4:20), *how can he love God?*

Charity **includes obedience and also humility.** By self-abnegation one makes an act of humility, because the law of charity is to esteem our neighbor (cf. Ph 2:3). We should not have an exaggerated self-esteem, but rather look humbly on ourselves since we are sinful. However let us see only the good in our neighbor, not what is wrong. Let us give him first place, for this is humility. What if he is a sinner? Of course, sin is despicable, but what is he as a human being? He is the image of God, his living image, the object of his patience, his kindness and his mercy. God loves him as a human being, calls him to conversion, to penance and, by that very act, calls him to celestial glory. Therefore I should love him. His sin is different. I should hate it, even as God hates it.

What other element can we find in charity? **Mortification!** Let us give proof of charity by the sacrifice of the heart, of its antipathies. My Sisters, this is a continual and perfect sacrifice. That's why all the virtues are included in charity. Love one another. Love God above all things and your neighbor as yourself. This is everything. (cf. Mt 22:37-40) I should be concerned only with charity.

What are the conditions for genuine charity? They are the same as for the love of God. You should love him with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength (cf. Mk 12:30), within proper limits. Love must extend to every neighbor, all persons. There are degrees, relationships of charity, or with our family. General love includes all persons, while particular love exists for parents. Love for the Society, like yours, is for a spiritual relationship. There is a greater charity for your confessor, as spiritual father. As you can see, there are degrees.

¹ Number 222. *La charité envers le prochain.*

We should esteem our neighbor; every human being has a good side. The greater he is, the greater should be our esteem for him. We esteem the sinner because of the grace he has received. Although now straying, we should love the grace of God within him. Can we then love a sinner? Of course, since he can become a great saint, a greater saint than we are. Who would not have despised St. Paul, the man who was persecuting the Christians? Saint Augustine was a great sinner. We should esteem our neighbor in God's grace. When we notice somebody who loves God a lot, we should esteem him in proportion to the good within him. The priesthood is what is greatest on earth. Our esteem should be proportioned. A Christian virgin is what is the purest on earth. We should esteem her more than any other who is not a virgin. We esteem a person because of her grace. Someone destined to become the spouse of a king is esteemed because of that future grace. If I esteem my neighbor, what will happen? All small hatreds and antipathies will be cut short. There is Adam within us; leave it alone, it is miserable enough. There is the sinner within us. Charity does not go that far; [simply] cover it with a veil. If you approach charity in that way, it will be perfect and free. You will love your neighbor not only because of his exterior gifts, but for what he has received, what he has now, and what can become God-like within him. You will love him with all your mind.

You should love your neighbor with all your heart, without any antipathy. In God, love is positive. In the commandments, love of neighbor is expressed negatively in order to get rid of all that is wrong in our affections and motivations. The love of the heart desires only spiritual and temporal well-being. Love is the inclination of our heart for the advantage of our neighbor. The one who has only charity of the mind has nothing.

How is charity of the heart manifested? Fulfill duties with affection, not dryly and lifelessly (cf. 1 Cor 13:4-7). In responsibility towards others, we seek the well-being of the neighbor as for ourselves (cf. Mt 7:12). This affection is internal, but subordinate to the love of God that it complements. The prophet says: *How good, how delightful it is for all to live together like brothers!* (cf. Ps 132:1) Having one heart and one soul (cf. Acts 4:32). There is nothing more delightful than a group of persons having one heart, one soul, one compassion. This love must be genuine (cf. 2 Cor 6:6). By its nature, love must do what is good for the well-being of the person. In the world, people love selfishly, egotistically. In religious life, love tends to please God. This alone is true charity, concerned with the spiritual wealth of our neighbor, and even his temporal well-being if need be.

We should love our neighbor **with all our will**. We must not be satisfied with feelings; our love must be effective. Charity is not in words, but in the heart. St. John says: *My children, our love is not to be just words or mere talk, but something real and active otherwise it is a lie.* (cf. 1 Jn 3:18)

How should we love our neighbor? We should be always ready to serve him (cf. Gal 5:13) within the limits of our duties and by obedience. Here there are different levels. If you ask, What about me? You should know yourself and measure your love of neighbor according to your love for yourself. You are the measure, but God is the goal. There are two types of good involved, the natural and the spiritual. It is said that charity begins at home. That's true. But when both needs are present, if my neighbor needs my charity, I should sacrifice the temporal for him. If there is a spiritual need, I should submit to it, because the spiritual takes precedence. I will explain this some day. In practice, we should serve our neighbor for his spiritual welfare, and temporal welfare, if necessary.

Essentially charity must be affectionate (cf. Rm 12:10), practiced joyfully (cf. 2 Cor 9:7) because love is active. In this way, there will be no more ill manners. Charity is not something merely to be dispensed with, but a royal virtue. We must rejoice to replace a small action with a greater one. When we do a good deed, it should be with delight, so that the grace will be complete, like God. My Sisters, love one another

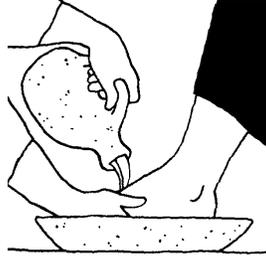
as Jesus Christ loves you (cf. Jn 13:15,34). Certainly all his actions were gracious, lovable, and full of sweetness. In this, our Lord should be our guide.

What does it mean to love the neighbor with all one's strength. For the Society itself, it is not enough to love the neighbor with the heart; often that love should be accompanied by a public charity. When we render service to our neighbor, if needed, we do not consider whether they are weak or timid. If one is attacked, we defend him; if he is hungry, we give him food (cf. Jms 2:15-16). We must defend the reputation of our neighbor, and even more, his virtue. That's charity! If we truly loved our neighbor both internally and publicly, we would not commit so many sins. We would live in charity. God would be within us, and our charity would be kind and gracious. Evidently we must love our neighbor with all our strength. Sometimes, we must use all our strength, for example, when someone is sick, we get tired and even become exhausted. However, this person is ill and I am not. So work for the community is worth more than work for oneself, it is more profitable. There is greater merit when we work for all the others.

Theology teaches that charity must not center directly on a person (cf. Col 3:23) for the sake of a reward, or out of sympathy because this person is attractive. That would alter the meaning of the commandment of love of neighbor. We must love them as children whom God sends us, as servants carrying out an order and whom we then send back to their master, as poor persons whom we serve because God sends them to us. **Always preserve freedom in your charity.** The moment a person is more charitable for one than for another, the ray of light bends toward the earth. This is wrong, and an assault against charity. It twists a tree that was rising toward the sky; always keep your freedom. Struggle against antipathy, for it is no longer charity, but human nature at work. The fruit of charity must be freedom of mind as well as freedom of heart.

My Sisters, this meditation includes many things; nevertheless, it is fundamental. We often spoke to you about the love of God, but love of neighbor is its complement. Saint John said in the fourth chapter of his first letter: *Whoever loves his brother loves God* (cf. 1 Jn 4:12). Love each other well; this will be the sign that you are true Servants of the Blessed Sacrament. Love your sisters in order to lead them towards our Lord. Be devoutly jealous of their advancement. You are fully aware of your own weaknesses, your nothingness. It is well for you to say, I can do nothing, I am bad and miserable. My sisters are more generous. By sanctifying them through charity, helping them to acquire virtues, showing concern for their perfection, you yourselves grow in perfection. If one of your sisters has a fault, help her get rid of it. If she does not know something, teach her. She will honor our Lord and become his spouse. You are teaching her to grow perfect. You will act as a mother educating her daughter, as a sister dressing up her younger sister for a royal covenant. Your charity will be perfect, doing what is right. It will be clear that you are living with our Lord, and that you belong to his court of love.

I know that you love one another. There is unity in your house; so much the better. Without love, you would not be true Servants of the Blessed Sacrament. Let your charity grow. The more you grow in perfection, the greater should be your charity, for the two go together. Your charity should be greater toward the one having more faults, that she may be loved more. Let the weaker one be supported more. Know that you will grow in perfection through the charity of others. Then you will act as St. John says: ***Anyone who lives in love lives in God*** (cf. 1 Jn 4:16), and you will not be mistaken.



Point for reflection:

In this conference, St. Peter Julian offers some means to go beyond antipathies [prejudices], and to make charity supernatural and evangelical. What are these means?