

The Essence of Love Is Suffering¹

St. Peter Julian Eymard to the Servants of the Blessed Sacrament
Paris, Sunday, April 22, 1860

[..]

I ask this question: what is the essence of love? How do we know that we love God? And how does God perfect this love? This is a good question: what is the essence of the love of God on earth? The answer is this: suffering – by suffering we unite ourselves to God, and God perfects his love in us through suffering. I must explain this well.

The essence of love is suffering. Without suffering there is no true love – we cannot say that we love God if we don't suffer. What is divine love, or even natural love? Love is giving. Love gives and gives itself – when it gives forever, perpetually, then it is truly divine love. Now, to give what we have, is to divest ourselves – when we give an affection, we divest our soul. To give our body, is to crucify it.

It costs more to give than to receive. To receive is fine – it calls for gratitude. **To give is to divest oneself.** That is why God gives his heaven as reward; that is why our Lord said these beautiful words: *Give and gifts will be given to you; a good measure, packed together, shaken down, and overflowing, will be poured into your lap* (cf. Lk 6:38). And elsewhere: *he will receive a hundred times more* (Mk 10:30). Whoever loves much gives much; whoever loves little gives little. How do we recognize a friend? If he gives assistance or money, if he accompanies on a perilous journey, if he gives his freedom and everything else, you will say: See how he loved me; he was not afraid to trouble himself. How does a mother know that her child loves her? When she gives him candy or an apple, and then she asks him to return it to her – if the child says “No”, then self-love predominates: he does not love his mother. He prefers his apple, his candy, and his toys.

We recognize love in the gift: God could require sacrifice, but he leaves that to our free will. In the struggle between good and evil, there is the law and sin. But with love, we are left to our freedom. If you want, this freedom to give, that is love. A domestic helper gives more than if he gave money; true, he gives himself for money, but he gives his liberty – he is like a child of the family: a child gives out of filial love; a wife serves her husband – she gives him everything; she divests herself even of her name that she loses. There is nothing like someone who loves God. Love consists in giving and giving itself – you can do this only through sacrifice. [...]

Why is the gift always a sacrifice? Because of original sin, we are tempted to love ourselves more than God. Unfortunately, when we offend him, it is because there is something that we love in the sin – that's what we call the old self. When we love God, we must deny ourselves – it is this sacrifice that shows that our love is great and perfect. Here we see that the essence of love is necessarily in sacrifice.

Now, why does the Good Lord put the perfection of love in sacrifice? There are two very good reasons: the first is that sacrifice is an expiation, and secondly, it is the perfection of love. You will understand.

General rule: man lives for pleasure. That is an old proverb among pagans and repeated by St. Augustine. There is one thing that attracts man: pleasure. In the glory of heaven, there is great spiritual

¹ Number 208. *L'essence de l'amour est la souffrance.*

and intellectual pleasure: we want to go. The miser has joy in saying: I have something – likewise, a glutton. There is always pleasure: that’s what makes a criminal. Even in revenge, anger, and hatred there is a pleasure – diabolical, true – but the joy of taking revenge.

What does the Good Lord do? He says: You are going to love me more than pleasure. If it is a forbidden pleasure, God says: You will love me more than this pleasure. That’s the first degree of love. If we return to God after several years, God says: Now, you are loving me, but the devil has an advantage: you have been loving me for a year, but before that, there were two years, ten years – he has the advantage of numbers: he has been counting; I must also count. I will have you pass through the same situations; I will put you back on the battlefield, so that I can tell the devil: You had a hundred victories, but I have more – and he puts us back in those occasions so that we can repair our losses. From this, we understand that when love is crucifying, God is putting us back on the cross, so that he can tell the devil: I have more victories than you.

This thought is consoling, and they say: You are paying your debts; you are blotting out your defects – in a sense the Good Lord is rejuvenating you. You cannot relive the past, but the Good Lord finds a way for you to return there – as a result there are moments of sterility and trials. Why? So that divine love might triumph over the love of sin. A temptation is worth more than a consolation – the struggle doubles the victory. The Good Lord never puts us in trials without giving us the grace along with it. This is our faith. That is how rehabilitation takes place.

The second thought is much more beautiful: Why does the Good Lord put perfection in suffering? Why? Because it is the only proof of pure love – if love does not suffer, it is not pure. We are so sinful, so drawn to seek our own interest, even in the things of God, that, in order for the Good Lord to keep us in the state of purity of intention, purity of love, he has to leave us a crown of thorns, so that we will not pay attention to our own interest. [...]

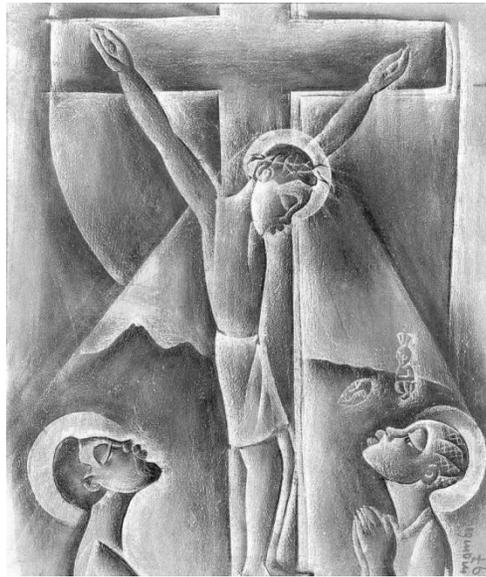
There is another thought that seems veiled to you, since it is very spiritual; however, it can be noticed. Besides the love of the servant out of self-interest, and the love of the child out of filial affection, there is another one, even greater: that of union. How shall I say it? Nuptial union. The sacred Scriptures say: *I will espouse you; I will espouse the soul that has left everything for me* (cf. Is 54:5). It is the most intimate union, the most perfect, the most liberating, and the most divine. The Holy Scriptures, the Song of Songs, the book of Revelation present it as a spiritual marriage, as described by some saints, like St. Catherine, St. Rose, and St. Juliana.

This union comes about through a mysterious suffering. Something mysterious occurs in the person who cannot describe what is happening: it is like purgatory and paradise at the same time. The person suffers, and cannot express it: she suffers in her mind, in her will, in her heart. There is desire – the body causes much suffering. It is attached to the earth by a chain. It suffers much; this is the work of detachment. The Good Lord does with this person what we do with a ball: the further we throw it, the longer is the ricochet that it makes to return. It is like water under pressure that shoots higher due to the pressure. The more that we desire, the stronger and more violent becomes the desire. God prepares the person to see its poverty and its defects – he unites it to himself through its suffering. Internally, there is the same light, the same experience of beautiful love, but they are always mixed with suffering. That is its dowry, its purification – like gold, it passes through seven degrees of refining (cf. Ps 11:7).

While purifying itself, the person suffers. It is the purgatory of love that detaches her from all her imperfections. This is mixed with consolations, like the two sides of a scale – one rises, while the other lowers. She loves this suffering and desires it. Why? There is a good reason: do you understand the suffering of love? How shall I explain it? When she can no longer speak, can no longer find the right words, when love is greater than her thoughts and her heart, it is her grace, it is her suffering – it must be

greater than her capacity to think and greater than the power of words. She finds comfort through her suffering and speaks to God in a divine language. This is the final expression of love.

Look at our Lord in the Garden of Olives. He could hardly speak: his suffering was increasing with his love. Words were not enough: then the agony began and the blood started to flow. On the cross, our Lord spoke only a few words: his love was so great that there were no words to express it. This was the most beautiful flower, the most beautiful fruit of his love. [...]



Points for reflection:

Notice the scripture passages and the images used in this teaching. Notice especially the call to holiness. What point strikes you?