

The Three Degrees of Love¹

St. Peter Julian Eymard to the Servants of the Blessed Sacrament
Paris, Friday, October 22, 1858

What do we mean by the spirit of love? The word spirit means more than love. Love has three degrees:

[First], an isolated act of love. This is a particular love, a natural attraction toward a person.

The second degree, a preferential love. This is a dominating, sovereign love beyond all others, a love that triumphs over everything. It presupposes a battle, because we cannot dominate what we did not fight for; but it is not yet the end of our life. To have the spirit of a thing is to be one with it. A spirit is the life and goal of all our thoughts and actions. Do everything for our Lord. It is possible to have the virtue of love without its spirit. Acts of love are not yet the spirit of love. When the battle is over and the habitual thought of love reigns, this is the soul of life and true love. Our Lord says: *whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I live in him.* [Jn 6:56] Love produces unity of life, then the soul experiences the same union as our Lord with his heavenly Father.

The third degree of love is the devotedness of love, when the will is naturally drawn, without effort. This is no longer the work of virtue; **it is the spirit of love,** the power of love. One at this degree no longer lives in self but in God. That love disposes the soul to great things, sacrifices, a love for sufferings, humiliations and even martyrdom. This is the way the saints loved. This is the most beautiful of all states. There may still be suffering, but the love for God is – I will not say dominant, because where there is domination, there is a struggle – but it is sovereign. The soul looks at suffering as an exercise, a requirement of its love.

The *Imitation* says: Love is a great thing, a great gift that alone lightens what is heavy, including all the inequalities of life. Its burden is not heavy; all bitterness becomes pleasant and sweet. Saint Paul had that power of love when he said: *Nothing therefore can come between us and the love of Christ, even if we are troubled or worried, or being persecuted, or lacking food or clothes, or being threatened or even attacked. For I am certain of this: neither death nor life, no angel, no prince, nothing that exists, nothing still to come, not any power, or height or depth, or any created thing, can ever come between us and the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus our Lord.* (cf. Rm 8:35-39) He proved it in his life; after enumerating so many trials, he proclaims: ... *What is all that compared to the love of our Lord.* (cf. Rm 8:39; Eph 3:18-19)

Love never says, Enough. Do not limit yourself to humility, charity and penance. Strive for one thing only; to have the spirit of love. This is your virtue, your attraction. How can this spirit of love be recognized? **The spirit of love has two traits:**

1° A natural and effortless thought for what is loved. The object of our love is our Lord in the Holy Eucharist. This is a sure sign that we have that spirit of love; the more it is actual, the more it is perfect.

2° When the soul thinks more about our Lord than about herself. This spirit is all-engrossing. It is impossible to have two such spirits because there would be a battle, a struggle. A child who loves its mother cannot think of anything except its mother; everything relates to her. My Sisters, it is not easy to have that spirit of love. How do we obtain it? Through prayer and practice. To succeed you should

¹ Number 85. Trois degrés d'amour

apply yourself to do everything out of love for our Lord. When we want to make a bonfire, we collect all that can burn. Gather all your small acts of love, plenty of them; they will be as sparks gathered together for a flame. When blazing coals are scattered, they will go out soon, similarly, isolated actions would never become a fire of love. We need to put them together to form a flame. A dominant thought of love can be reached in two weeks, by courageous persons. It is possible even in one week, but only when on retreat.

My Sisters, how unfortunate to learn these things so late in life, to have spent most of our time serving God through indirect means instead of out of love! Confessors don't guide in that way; they work on virtues, but don't emphasize sovereign love. If guided in that way from childhood, led along that path, what great progress people would make! How generous and great they would become! When they are asked to work laboriously on different practices or means, they progress slowly or not at all. They are not in touch with their own spirit. My dear Sisters, take courage. Work in order to have this spirit of love; it will be your happiness.



Point for reflection:

The spirit of love should reach this point: to think more about our Lord than to think about self. What means are proposed by the Founder to reach that point?