



Theology Corner

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Theological Reflections by Paul Chutikorn - Director of Faith Formation

“The Theological Virtues – Charity”

We come now to the last, or as St. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 13:13, the *greatest* of the three theological virtues – Love. Now there is so much to say about love as this virtue serves as the perfection of the other virtues. But I would like to categorize the virtue of charity in two groups: the love of God and the love of neighbor. According to the order of charity, we should begin with love of God from which all true love is founded. Why? Because God **is** love (1 John 4:8). Love is the perfection of our faith, as we primarily and most fundamentally take what we believe, and truly reach out to the very object of our faith, which is God himself.

We tend to look at love in a specific order because when we prioritize God as the very object of our love, then everything else (love of self/love of neighbor) will follow. How do we love God? Can we do this on our own? Certainly not! As I have been saying over the course of the past month, the reason why we refer to these three virtues as “theological” are because these virtues are not *natural* to us. Remember, when we speak of faith as a theological virtue, we are referring to God’s invitation into an understanding of himself. Hope as a theological virtue, involves God’s invitation that flows from faith so as to provide us with the grace to endure hardships in light of our very purpose and destination of which we must remain fixated on. The virtue of love involves an actual *friendship* with God that is a response by which we reciprocate the love that God has for us.

Why does God love us? Does he love us only when we are morally good? No! He loves us unconditionally. The reason for this is because God doesn’t love us because *we* are good, but rather, because *he* is good. All of creation is “ontologically” good, which is just a fancy way of saying that we are good by our very existence since our existence is caused by God himself who is goodness itself. We know that God didn’t need us since he is absolute perfection. In other words, creating us didn’t make him better in some way. Because of this fact, we know that his act of creation is free and out of pure love instead of out of any necessity. He freely gives himself to us by creating us, but on an even deeper level, he freely gives himself to us through grace so that we can attain him in complete happiness beholding God face to face in the beatific vision. This grace that he offers us is an invitation into an authentic friendship with God. He gives his whole self to us and allows us to give our whole selves to him in order to truly participate in his divine nature as a love between Creator and creature. This is all made possible because the Holy Spirit lives in us allowing God’s love to operate through us. After all, the Holy Spirit as the Third Person of the Most Holy Trinity is the intrinsic love between the internal relations of the Father and the Son. So, this love, inasmuch as it resides in us by our participation with God through the power of the Holy Spirit, configures us to reflect the divine love through the virtue of charity.

Now, how does this relate to love of ourselves and love of neighbor? Mark 12:31 tells us to “Love your neighbor as yourself.” We see here that the foundation of loving neighbor is loving ourselves. At first glance, this seems like we are prioritizing our love of others based on a selfish love of ourselves. But this couldn’t be farther from the truth. Catholic teaching throughout history has been consistent on the fact that we must order charity in an order of priority: love of God, for the good of our soul, love of neighbor, and love of the good of the body. I have already explained the love of God, so understanding the love that we must have for God, the love of our soul flows from this love of God because we want nothing more than to join our souls to God in pure love. It is then through this deep love to be joined to God, that we seek to will the good of another according to the way God loves his creation. When we truly will the good of another, we begin to see our neighbor as a creature of God who is in need of love and care, as well as a person whom God is calling to himself. It is only when we look at our neighbor in this light, that the spiritual and corporal works of mercy will pour forth as a response to our love of God – loving people not for what they do for us, but as images of God in themselves.