

Theology of Love of Neighbour in Benedict XVI's *Deus Caritas Est*¹

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Abstract

The Encyclical *Deus caritas est* of Benedict XVI, issued in 2005, examines the subject of love, as seen from a Christian perspective, and God's place within all love. It presents a theological and philosophical reflection on the different dimensions of love, and explains certain essential facts concerning God's love for man and the intrinsic connection of this love with man's love for his neighbour. In a way that is reminiscent of the principle enunciated by St. Augustine – that the higher does not negate, but elevates and perfects, the lower – Benedict XVI presents the three forms of love, that is, *eros*, *philia* and *agape*, as essentially ordered to one another. When the lower is properly ordered to the higher, love perfects love. This is the sense in which “love of neighbour” is studied in this essay. The essay seeks to achieve two things. In the first place, to examine how Benedict XVI's theological reflection on love helps make the connection between love of God, love of self and love of neighbour; and, secondly, to explore the theological significance of Thomas Aquinas' proposition that “a man ought to love himself more than his neighbour”, and then draw the conclusion that “love of neighbour” is perfected by “love of God”.

Keywords: Agape (Charity), Eros, Perfection of love, Philia.

¹ *Deus Caritas Est*, is a 2005 encyclical of Benedict XVI, the first written by him, in large part derived from writings by his late predecessor, Pope John Paul II. Its subject is love, as seen from a Christian perspective, and God's place within all love. The work is divided into two parts. The first part presents a theological and philosophical reflection on the different dimensions of love – *eros*, *philia*, and *agape* – and explains certain essential facts concerning God's love for man and the intrinsic connection of this love with human love. And the second part deals with the actual practice of the commandment to love one's neighbour.

Introduction

The conversation between Jesus and the Scribe in Luke 10:25-37 was climaxed by the question posed by the scribe: “And who is my neighbour?”² In response to this question, Jesus narrated what is popularly known as the parable of the “Good Samaritan”. However, one notes that instead of addressing the question of who a neighbour is, the parable specifies on how to be a neighbour. This shift in approach not only universalises the concept of neighbour, but it also gives a whole new understanding to how man should relate to his fellow man. The content of the command to “love your neighbour as yourself,” is no longer about whom to love, but about how to love, and for what reason the love is to be expressed. Though, this parable might have answered the question of how love is to be expressed, it, nevertheless, leaves unanswered the reason why one ought to love his neighbour. Moreover, the injunction at the end of the parable is to “Go and do likewise,” does not also address this point; at best, it urges the scribe to go and show care to those in need. The puzzle does not become any easier when a link is drawn between the reason one ought to love a neighbour and what it means to love a neighbour.

The very command to “love your neighbour as yourself” does not itself give any indication why this should be done. It raises a further question of; what loving your neighbour as yourself means. Some have suggested that to “love your neighbour as yourself” is not a perfect Christian love. They argue that the perfection of the commandment to “love your neighbour” is rather contained in the statement of Jesus, when he says: “This is my commandment, that you love one another

² Luke 10:29. This question lays bare the very reason the scribe had engaged Jesus in this conversation: to put him to the test. It seems he was not just interested in what Jesus thought about what he should do in order to inherit eternal life, since, as a scribe he knew what the law said about it. Rather, the whole conversation was more likely directed at condemning the activities of Jesus, who welcomed sinners and tax collectors, those who were not regarded as neighbours, and dined with them. It was more of a debate about who qualifies to be a neighbour.

as I have loved you” (Jn. 15:12). It is furthermore argued that what Jesus means in this injunction should be understood in what follows: “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (Jn. 15:13). As much as one might agree that there is a point to this claim, there could also be much that is wrong in the self-limiting understanding of “love your neighbour as yourself” that the Scribe’s question seems to suggest and insinuate.

In question 26 of the *secunda secundae* of the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas raises the question: “Whether out of charity, man ought to love himself more than his neighbour?”³ In his treatment of this subject, Aquinas proposes that a man ought, out of charity, to love himself more than his neighbour. Does this proposal then set love of self in antithesis to love of neighbour? If it does not, how do we understand his proposal, and how does this understanding help to shed light on the reason one ought to “love his neighbour”? In the Jewish tradition, the proper context in which “love of neighbour” is given as a command is its reference to “love of God”. The pious Jew daily prays the words of the *shema*: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”⁴ Jesus united into a single precept this commandment to love God (in Deuteronomy) and the commandment to love the neighbour (in Leviticus).⁵ In this light, the proper context for understanding the “love of neighbour” is in its relation to love of God. A further question remains: what is the connection between love of God, love of self and love of neighbour? Benedict XVI opens his Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* with the

³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 26, a. 4. Citation of this classical work is from the Complete English Edition in Five Volumes, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Further citation of this work in this essay shall be *Summa Theologiae*.

⁴ Deuteronomy 6:4-5.

⁵ “You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18; cf. Mk 12:29-31).

words of the evangelist John: “God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God and God in him” (1 Jn 4:16). He notes that this statement is the heart of the Christian faith: “the Christian image of God and the resulting image of mankind and its destiny.”⁶ This essay seeks to achieve two things. In the first place, it shall examine how Benedict XVI’s theological reflection on love helps make the connection between love of God, love of self and love of neighbour; and, secondly, the essay shall explore the theological significance of Thomas Aquinas’ proposition that “a man ought to love himself more than his neighbour”, and then the conclusion shall be drawn that “love of neighbour” is perfected by “love of God”.

Love Perfects Love: *Eros*, *Philia* and *Agape*

Of the three Greek words for love – *eros*, *philia* and *agape* – the Greek Old Testament uses *eros* only twice, while the New Testament does not use it at all. The New Testament writers prefer *agape*. *Philia*, the love of friendship, is used with added depth of meaning in John’s gospel in order to express the relationship between Jesus and his disciples. In his assessment, Benedict XVI notes that the “tendency to avoid the word *eros*, together with the new vision of love expressed through the word *agape*, clearly point to something new and distinct about the Christian understanding of love.”⁷ This tendency was seen as negative, especially as the critique of Christianity which began with the Enlightenment grew more radically. According to Friedrich Nietzsche, Christianity had poisoned *eros*, which for its part, while not completely succumbing, gradually degenerated into vice.⁸ The widely-held perception is that the Church, with all her commandments and prohibitions, has

⁶ Benedict XVI, *Encyclical letter Deus caritas est to the bishops, priests and deacons, men and women religious and all the lay faithful on Christian love*, 1. Further citation of this text in this essay shall be *Deus Caritas Est*.

⁷ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 3

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche is cited by Benedict XVI, see *Deus Caritas Est*, 3 for his reference to Nietzsche’s comment on *eros*.

turned to bitterness the most precious thing in life. However, as Benedict queries, one wonders if Christianity has really destroyed *eros*. Such conclusion only comes from a wrong assessment of how the Christian tradition understands *eros*. This point shall be further examined as the work progresses.

The encyclical notes that in the pre-Christian world, the Greeks, like other cultures, “considered *eros* principally as a kind of intoxication, the overpowering of reason by a ‘divine madness’ which tears man away from his finite existence and enables him, in the very process of being overwhelmed by divine power, to experience supreme happiness.”⁹ *Eros* was celebrated as divine power, as fellowship with the Divine, and this found expression in fertility cults and “sacred” prostitution which flourished in many temples. But the Old Testament firmly opposed this religion, combating it as perversion of religiosity. It, however, did not reject *eros*; rather, it was averse to the destructive form of it, because this counterfeit divinisation of *eros* actually strips it of its dignity. The prostitutes, who had to bestow the divine intoxication, were not treated as persons, but simply used as means of arousing divine madness. Remarking on this perverse notion of *eros*, Benedict XVI says: “An intoxicated and undisciplined *eros*, then, is not an ascent in ‘ecstasy’ towards the Divine, but a fall, a degradation of man. Evidently, *eros* needs to be disciplined and purified if it is to provide not just fleeting pleasure, but a certain foretaste of the pinnacle of our existence, of that beatitude for which our whole being yearns.”¹⁰

One thing that emerges from this assessment is, the infinity promised by love is not attained by submitting to the instinct. Purity and growth in maturity are called for; and rather than reject or poison *eros*, they heal it and restore its grandeur.¹¹ When body and soul are intimately united, the proper order in

⁹ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 4.

¹⁰ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 4.

¹¹ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 5.

which man is fully and truly himself is realized. And in that order, the challenge of *eros* is overcome. If, however, man aspires to be pure in spirit, and rejects the flesh, then he loses his dignity; and if, on the other hand, he denies the spirit and considers matter, the body, as the only reality, he loses his greatness. Therefore, it is neither the spirit alone nor the body alone that loves: it is the whole man, composed of body and soul who loves. "Only when both dimensions are truly united, does man attain his full stature. Only thus is love – *eros* – able to mature and attain its authentic grandeur."¹² When *eros* degenerates to bad use of concupiscence, it becomes a commodity, a mere "thing" to be bought and sold; and man himself becomes a commodity. *Eros* understood in this way, makes human sexuality a purely material aspect of man. According to Benedict XVI, when *eros* is understood and used in this sense, it leads to a debasement of the human body: "no longer is it integrated into our overall existential freedom; no longer is it a vital expression of our whole being, but it is more or less relegated to the purely biological sphere."¹³

Pope Benedict suggests that rather than degenerate into "divine madness", *eros* in its true sense tends to rise "in ecstasy" towards the Divine, to lead us beyond ourselves. For this reason, it calls for the path of ascent, renunciation, purification and healing.¹⁴ When *eros* is purified and healed, it matures into true love. It no longer becomes a self-seeking love; a sinking into "the intoxication of happiness." Rather, it rises above any mere expression of inordinate desires, and it reflects the true love in which the lover seeks the good of the beloved. In this, the intentional orientation of the lover is towards the beloved, as the beloved is the reason why the lover loves. It represents that true moment of ecstasy towards the divine, not a display of "divine madness", but a going out of the self towards authentic self-discovery and ultimately, the discovery of God. Hence, a

¹² Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 5.

¹³ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 5.

¹⁴ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 5.

purified *eros* leads to the path of greater *agape*. Love perfects love – *eros* is elevated and perfected by *agape*. This understanding must inform how we view love of God, love of self and love of neighbour: that is, love of God is the crowning of all our love, and it is the reason one loves both self and neighbour.

Eros and *agape* are often contrasted as “ascending” love and “descending” love. In philosophical and theological debate, the distinctions between the two have often been radicalised to the point of establishing a clear antithesis between them. Yet, both can never be completely separated. As Benedict XVI notes: “The more the two, in their different aspects, find a proper unity in the one reality of love, the more the true nature of love in general is realised.”¹⁵ When, instead of sinking in the intoxication of happiness, *eros* seeks the happiness of the other, it becomes concerned more and more with the beloved; it bestows itself and wants to “be there for” the other. “The element of *agape* thus enters into this love, for otherwise *eros* is impoverished and even loses its own nature.”¹⁶ It is equally true that man cannot live by descending love alone. He cannot always give; he must also receive. *Eros* seeks God and *agape* passes on the gift that is received. When these two dimensions of love are cut off from one another, the result is a caricature or an impoverished form of love.

Love of Neighbour as Path to Encounter God

It serves a good purpose to recall, once again, the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Before elaborate teaching expressed in this parable, the concept of “neighbour” among the Jews was essentially one’s countrymen and the foreigners who had settled in the land of Israel. Now, the limit is abolished; the concept of neighbour is universalised, and yet it remains concrete. Thus, it does not mean a universalist understanding of neighbour which eliminates the notion of the individual and particular person,

¹⁵ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 7.

¹⁶ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 7.

and emphasises humanity as a whole. In such universalist notion, the demand and practice of charity become vague and abstract humanitarianism. So, even when the concept of neighbour is extended to all mankind, it is not reduced to a generic, abstract and undemanding expression of love, but calls for practical commitment.¹⁷ The “Samaritan love” becomes a standard that imposes universal love towards the needy whom one encounters by chance, whoever they may be. And because in charity all men are united in Christ and to Christ, this universal love towards all men goes beyond anything that terminates in man as its proper end. Since love is free, it is not practiced as a way of achieving other ends. Rather, its goal is love of God. As such charitable activity must not leave God and Christ aside.

Concerning the love of God, Benedict XVI observes that two questions are raised: in the first place, can one love God without seeing him? And second, can love be commanded? Since no one has ever seen God, how could anyone love him? And it does not seem that love can be commanded, since it is ultimately a feeling that is there or not there, nor can it be produced by the will. The words of the Evangelist John may even seem to reinforce the objection that we cannot love God whom we do not see when he says: “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.” (1 Jn 4:20). But this text does not exclude the love of God as something impossible, rather, it explicitly demands it, and expresses its unbreakable bond with love of neighbour. These words mean that love of neighbour is a path that leads to the encounter with God, and that closing our eyes to our neighbour also blinds us to God.¹⁸

Moreover, no one has seen God, yet he is not totally invisible to us; he does not remain completely inaccessible. He loved us

¹⁷ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 15.

¹⁸ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 16.

first, and he made that love a concrete reality by sending his Son into the world so that we might live through him (1 Jn 4:9). God's love challenges us to respond with love. Since he has loved us first, we too can respond with love. "Since God has first loved us (cf. 1 Jn 4:10), love is now no longer a mere 'command'; it is the response to the gift of love with which God draws near to us."¹⁹ In commanding love, "God does not demand of us a feeling which we ourselves are incapable of producing. He loves us, he makes us see and experience his love, and since he has 'loved us first', love can also blossom as response within us."²⁰ Love, therefore, is not merely a sentiment, because sentiments come and go. It was said earlier that *eros*, through a process of purification and maturation, retains its full meaning as love. When, therefore, we encounter the visible manifestations of God's love, these awaken in us the joy born of the experience of being loved; and this encounter also engages our will and intellect. In the words of Benedict XVI: "Acknowledgement of the living God is one path towards love, and the 'yes' of our will to his will unites our intellect, will and sentiments in the all-embracing act of love. But this process is always open-ended; love is never 'finished' and complete; throughout life, it changes and matures, and thus remains faithful to itself."²¹ In this communion of will, God's will is not alien to our will; it is not something imposed on us from without by the commandments. It is our will because God is more present to us than we are to ourselves.²²

In this understanding of love, love of neighbour is possible. It consists in loving the other person in God. Such love is only possible when there is, first of all, an intimate encounter with God, an encounter which has become a communion of will, an encounter which even affects one's feelings, but from the perspective of Christ. This love goes beyond external

¹⁹ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 1.

²⁰ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 17.

²¹ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 17.

²² Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 17. Cf. Augustine, *Confessions*, III, 6, 11.

experiences, it recognises and perceives in others, an interior desire for a sign of love. In an encounter that is born of a sincere love for God, love of neighbour finds its place. Benedict XVI draws our attention once again to the words of the Evangelist John, that love of neighbour cannot be real and authentic unless it is rooted in the love of God. He summarizes the correlation in the following words:

Here we see the necessary interplay between love of God and love of neighbour which the *First Letter of John* speaks of with such insistence. If I have no contact with God whatsoever in my life, then I cannot see in the other anything more than the other, and I am incapable of seeing in him the image of God. But if in my life I fail completely to heed others, solely out of a desire to be 'devout' and to perform 'my religious duties', then my relationship with God will also grow arid. It becomes merely 'proper', but loveless. Only if I serve my neighbour can my eyes be opened to what God does for me and how much he loves me."²³

Consequently, love of God and love of neighbour are inseparable, they form a single commandment. The two receive their life from the love of God who has loved us first.

Love of Neighbour, Love of Self and Love of God

It has been said that love of neighbour is possible only when we truly and intimately encounter God. God's love for us was made concrete in the one who was pierced for us (cf. Jn 19:37, Zech 12:10). Our relationship with God is established through communion with Jesus. "The relationship with Jesus, however, is a relationship with one who gave himself as a ransom for all (cf. 1 Tim. 2:6). Being in communion with Jesus Christ draws us into his 'being for all'; it makes it our own way of being. He commits us to live for others, but only through communion with him does it become possible truly to be there for others, for the

²³ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 18.

whole.”²⁴ Therefore, when we encounter God, through our communion with Jesus who died for all, we live for him and we allow him to draw us into his being for others.

Augustine makes a connection between love of God and love of self when he writes: “he who knows how to love himself loves God; on the other hand, he who does not love God, even though he loves himself which is naturally implanted in him, is not unfittingly said to hate himself, since he does that which is opposed to himself, and pursues himself as though he were his own enemy.”²⁵ Two observations can be made from this claim. First, when the love of self is truly inseparable from the love of God, it means the human mind is properly ordered to God. This right order of the soul towards God is represented by the movement of the mind, from the *exteriora* to the *interiora*, and then finally to the *superiora*. It is a movement from *eros* towards *philia*, and ultimately towards *agape*. There, *eros* seeks God and *agape* passes on the gift that is received. The second inference one draws from Augustine's statement is, love of self is disconnected from the love of God when we do not live by what is highest in us (*ratio superior*) but by what is inferior (*ratio inferior*); when human reason does not rule the passions, and we are not able to ascent from the *exteriora* towards the *superiora*. This corresponds to what was earlier seen as the degeneration of *eros*. It gives rise to a caricature of love, in which the self sinks in the intoxication of self-derived happiness, instead of an ascent in ecstasy in which the self moves towards the Divine.

The connection that Augustine makes between love of self and love of God provides a platform for also understanding Thomas Aquinas' proposition on the love of neighbour. The

²⁴ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 28.

²⁵ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, XIV, 14, 18. The English citation of this work is from Saint Augustine, *The Trinity*, translated by Stephen McKenna (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1963). Further citation of this work in this essay shall be *De Trinitate*.

following words drawn from the *De Trinitate* highlight this perspective.

But when the mind loves God and by consequence, ... remembers and understands Him, then with respect to its neighbour it is rightly commanded to love him as it loves itself. For it no longer loves itself perversely but rightly when it loves God, by partaking of whom that image not only exists, but is also renewed so as not to grow old, reformed so as not to be disfigured, and beatified so as not to be unhappy. For although it so loves itself that, if the alternative is proposed to it, it would rather lose all that it loves less than itself than to perish, yet by abandoning Him who is above it... it has become so weak and so dark that it has unhappily slipped away from itself into those things which are not itself and to which it itself is superior, through the affections which it cannot control, and the delusions from which it sees no way to return.²⁶

The general inference from these words of Augustine is, love of self reaches its fullest flourishing in the love of God. Let us now attempt to read this in light of Thomas Aquinas' proposition that "a man, out of charity, ought to love himself more than his neighbour."

In his treatment of the object of Charity, Thomas Aquinas says the consideration is twofold: the first consideration is the things we ought to love out of charity; and the second concerns the order in which they ought to be loved. He treats of the issues in the things we ought to love in question 25 of the *secunda secundae* of the *Summa Theologiae*. One significant point he makes here is, God, one's neighbour and oneself are loved with the love of charity.²⁷ Hence, the three are objects of charity. For him, habits are not differentiated except their acts be of different species.²⁸ This is because every act of the one

²⁶ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, XIV, 14, 18.

²⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.25, a.1.

²⁸ See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.17, a.6; q.19, a.3; I-II, q.54, a.3.

species belongs to the same habit. And since the species of an act is derived from its object, considered under its formal aspect, it follows of necessity that it is specifically the same act that tends to an aspect of the object, and that tends to the object under that aspect. For example, it is specifically the same visual act whereby we see the light, and whereby we see the colour under the aspect of light. From all this, Aquinas says that the aspect under which the neighbour is to be loved is God, since what we ought to love in our neighbour is that he may be in God. Therefore, it is specifically the same act whereby we love God, and whereby we love our neighbour. By the same token, we can make the argument that it is also the same act whereby one loves oneself.²⁹ Charity denotes friendship with God. Thus, if a man loves himself out of charity, the aspect under which he loves himself is God, since what he ought to love in himself is that he may be God's friend, that is, to be in union with God.

After this first consideration of the object of charity, namely, things we ought to love out of charity, Aquinas treats the second consideration, that is, the order in which we ought to love them – and this he examines in question 26. It is in this context that we revisit the proposition: “Whether in charity, man ought to love himself more than his neighbour?” As a fundamental premise for discussing this matter, it should be noted that there must be some order in things loved out of charity, and this order is in reference to the first principle of that love, which is God.³⁰ Consequently, the order of charity shows that out of charity, “man ought to love God more than his neighbour”, “man ought to love God more than himself”, and “man ought to love himself more than his neighbour”. In opening the discussion on “whether out of charity, man ought to love himself more than his neighbour?” Aquinas cites the Book of

²⁹ See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.25, a.4.

³⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.26, a.1. Wherever there is a principle, there is order of some kind. The love of charity tends to God as to the principle of happiness, on the fellowship of which the friendship of charity is based (cf. q.23, a.1; q.25, a.12).

Leviticus: “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” (Lev. 19:18). By citing this text, it immediately indicates that Aquinas does not here intend that “love of self” and “love of neighbour” should be in antithesis. In fact, he states that the consequence of the command to “love thy neighbour as thyself,” makes man’s love for himself the model of his love for another. He goes further to allude to man’s spiritual nature and his corporeal nature, claiming that a man is said to love himself because he loves himself with regard to the spiritual nature.³¹ It is therefore in this spiritual dimension that a man loves himself more than his neighbour. This dimension is where, in the movement from the *exteriora* to the *superiora*, man truly encounters God. When man lives by what is highest in him, he lives by love in its purest form, because at that level he contemplates God who is the principle of good, on which the love of charity (*agape*) is founded. When a man truly loves himself, *eros* does not sink into the intoxication of happiness, but grows towards *agape*, and man receives the gift of intimate union with God.

Aquinas states further that “God is loved as the principle of good, on which the love of charity is founded; while man, out of charity, loves himself by reason of his being a partaker of the aforesaid good, and loves his neighbour by reason of his fellowship in that good.”³² This represents the connections between “love of God”, “love of self” and “love of neighbour”. First, it must be stated that “love of self” and “love of neighbour” are rooted in the “love of God”, without which they degenerate into impure love; and secondly, these represent different levels of union with God. When a man loves himself, he loves himself with the love of charity (*agape*), which unites him with God. By reason of this love he partakes of the good of which God is the principle. When, however, he loves his neighbour, he does so by reason of his neighbour’s fellowship in that good. Thus, man is united to God and he is in union with

³¹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 25, a. 7.

³² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 26, a. 4; cf. q. 25, aa. 1, 12.

his neighbour, whom he loves because of God. Aquinas concludes by saying that “just as unity surpasses union, the fact that man himself has a share of the Divine good, is a more potent reason for loving than that another should be a partner with him in that share. Therefore man, out of charity, ought to love himself more than his neighbour: in sign whereof, a man ought not to give way to any evil of sin, which counteracts his share of happiness, not even that he may free his neighbour from sin.”³³ Yet, this does not make “love of neighbour” any less a love because of God. It must therefore be maintained that “love of self” and “love of neighbour” is ultimately because of God, that is, love of charity.

Conclusion: Love of Neighbour Perfected by the Highest Form of Love

Not only is the love of neighbour inseparable from the love of God, it is perfected by the love of God. The text of John 21:15-19 provides a theological context for this claim. Jesus, after his resurrection, reveals himself again to the disciples by the sea of Tiberias, and gives Peter a command. This one command was repeated in three forms: “Feed my lambs”, “Tend my sheep”, and “Feed my sheep”. Each time Jesus enunciated each of these imperatives, it was preceded by a question that he addressed to Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?”; and there was the corresponding response of Peter, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” So much is sometimes made of the number of times that Jesus addressed the question to Peter. Some draw a connection between this and Peter’s denial of Jesus three times (Jn 18:15-27) – the denial of which Christ himself had predicted (cf. Mt 26:34; Mk 14:29-30). Therefore, there are those who explain that Jesus asked Peter, “Do you love me?” three times so that he might remedy the three times he denied him, and also so that he might pledge his loyalty three times. However, there is a more profound theological note here than a

³³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 26, a. 4.

reference to the denial of Peter. Jesus asks Peter a question, “Do you love me?” Peter gives an answer, “Yes, Lord, you know I love you.” The first thing that is clear from the response of Peter is that it is not from self-knowledge, or even from self-conviction; rather, he says, “Lord, you know I love you.” When Peter said earlier – in response to the statement of Jesus that “You will all fall away” (Mk 14:27) – “Even though they all fall away, I will not” (Mk 14:29; Mt 26:33), he was relying on himself. But when he now says to Jesus, “Lord, you know I love you”, he is no longer working by his earlier assumptions of self-conviction and self-confidence.

However, a more profound meaning of the passage of John becomes clearer when we refer to what was discussed earlier in this essay concerning the three Greek words for love – *eros*, *philia*, and *agape* – where the higher does not negate the lower, but the lowest form of love (*eros*) is perfected by the highest form (*agape*). To situate the discussion in such context, some insights can be drawn from how the original Greek texts render the question of Jesus and Peter’s response in John 21:15-19. According to the Greek text, Jesus asks Peter, ἀγάπῃς με (*agapas me*) – “Do you love me?”; and Peter responds, φιλῶ σε (*philo se*) – “I love you.” In the English translation, the words *agape* (in *agapas me*) and *philia* (in *philo se*) are both rendered as love. However, the original Greek texts show that even though the English uses the word love, two different forms of love are referenced here, that is, *agape* and *philia*. Where Jesus uses the form of love that is *agape*, Peter responds with the form of love that is *philia*. This indicates that Jesus and Peter were not saying the same thing. Yet, the love that Jesus requires from Peter does not negate the love that Peter professes. Jesus is asking Peter for the most perfect love, that is, *agape* (charity) – the purest love of God or love for the sake of God; but Peter is professing the love of friendship, that is, *philia* (brotherly love). Nevertheless, what Jesus requires does not negate what Peter professes, because it is in the love of God that love of friendship, that is, love of neighbour or brotherly love finds its perfection.

As it were, Jesus holds out the ideal for Peter to which he must aspire. The evangelist John shows that Jesus wants his disciples to understand that this is the purest form of love to which his disciples must aspire before he leaves them and ascends to the Father.

The question remains, why did Jesus ask Peter three times, “Do you love me?” It was, indeed, to emphasize to Peter that although he says, “I love you”, he should not remain on that level of love. He must do more; he must be elevated – his love must be perfected by the highest form of love. When the same question was addressed to Peter a third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” we are told that Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And Peter said to him, “Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you” (Jn 21:17). Peter’s grief was not because Jesus persisted in asking him three times, nor was it, for that matter, that Peter felt Jesus was reminding him of how he denied him three times; rather, Peter’s grief was because he finds himself incapable of the love that Jesus requires. But the persistence of Jesus, asking Peter three times, “Do you love me”, was not a condemnation or negation of Peter’s professed love. Jesus was only exhorting Peter to a perfection of the love he professed. Thus, he said to him, “Feed my lambs”, “Tend my sheep”, “Feed my sheep”. The command that he gave to Peter is not a command to love. Love cannot be commanded, since it is a feeling that is either there or not there, nor can it be produced by the will. Rather, Peter is called to the highest form of love, because it is with that form of love that Jesus loves him. So, to rise to the level of that form of love, Peter will show it by “feeding the Lord’s lambs”, “tending the Lord’s sheep”, and “feeding the Lord’s sheep”. In other words, in the very act of loving in the way that Peter professed, his love of *philia* must be perfected by the love of *agape*. In this we see that love of neighbour or brotherly love should not be separated from the love of God, since it is because of the love of God that we love our brothers. This is what Jesus communicates to Peter.

Therefore, instead of seeing himself as incapable of the love that Jesus requires, he should rather allow his love to be elevated and perfected by the highest form of love – *philia* must be perfected by *agape*. Love of neighbour can only have its true meaning and perfection in the highest form of love, that is, love of God.