

**God is Love**  
**Theological Synthesis**

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## Contents

### Preamble

- *Definition of Love*
- *Love as Revelation*

### How We Know that God is Love

- *Israel*
- *Jesus Christ*
- *The Holy Spirit*

### What it Means for God to be Love

- *The Trinity: God is Love*
- *Creation and Salvation History: The Outward Expression of Trinitarian Love*
- *The Human Person: Invited to Love Like God Who is Love*
- *Eschatology: The Definitive Realization of God's Revelation as Love*
- *Ecclesiology: Witness to God Who is Love*

### What it Means if God is Love

- *Church History*
- *Office in the Church*
- *The Parish and the Church*
- *Mission*
- *Morality, Spirituality, and the Sacraments*

## Preamble

### *The Definition of Love*

What is love? In preparation for this synthesis, I asked a variety of people from different age groups and backgrounds for a succinct definition of love. The responses I got were enlightening, to say the least. While there was a great variety among the definitions I received back, there was also a great deal of common ground. Many terms and concepts were repeated, like giving, caring, sacrifice, putting others' needs ahead of one's own, trust, sharing, accompanying, and so forth. I then took some of my theological understanding to list some of the main attributes of love.

- Love draws the lover toward the beloved. Love, however, is always given freely; it is always a choice to remain with another. For while the lover is drawn, she is not forced to love. Love, then, is not just a feeling; it is a decision for the other.
- Love allows the one to reveal herself to another. That love then itself becomes self-revelation as it is given, and must be expressed both by words and actions in order truly to be love.
- In love, the lover puts the beloved ahead of herself, even giving herself to him. This could be described as a *kenosis*, and frequently involves sacrifice. Love can then be painful, as love, permitting the beloved total freedom, makes the lover vulnerable to the beloved's acceptance or rejection. Love therefore takes great courage.
- Love, however, does not mean losing one's self in another; rather one fully realizes herself in her love for him. At the same time, love is delighting in the joy, freedom, and self-actualization of the beloved.
- Love inspires awe: the beloved is confronted with the lover's free decision to love him, and is amazed. As such, love then invites love in return, teaching the beloved how to love.
- Love is warm and safe. When one lets himself be loved, he can be free of fear, can trust, and let himself be cared for. Love is receptivity, expressed in faith in the other's love.
- Love is a covenant, a commitment, and a dynamic union between lovers. Lovers continue to disclose themselves to each other as they share new experiences, to give themselves to each other in ever-new ways, to surprise each other, and to be mutually amazed with each other.
- Love bears fruit. In love, lovers don't collapse into each other; love is fruitful and creative, and is therefore powerful. Lovers seek to share the life they receive from each other with others, and with the world around them.

Interestingly, none of the responses I received focused on love as an emotion or on various forms of infatuation. Rather than emphasizing that perfect expressions of love are rarely realized within human experience, if ever, everyone who wrote back to me described love in terms of an ideal (even in sacrifice). They all expressed faith that a perfect expression of love could be realized. I believe such a faith has a connection to Christian belief, which rather than despairing that perfect love is a theoretical ideal that can never be reached, tells us that perfect love *has* been realized and expressed to us by God, through the revelation of Jesus Christ.

It is my contention that the nature of love is particularly relevant to a synthesis of Christian faith, because as 1 John 4:8 & 16 tell us, “God is love.” This biblical verse implies that love is *the* essential characteristic of divinity. I believe that this statement is a summary of revelation, and includes every aspect of Christian belief and practice. What I find particularly profound is that God reveals that God is love by being what God is: by loving us, completely disclosing God’s self to us in a love that is “to the end” (Jn 13:1).

### *Love as Revelation*

Revelation must have both a subjective and objective component. If it is purely subjective, it cannot be passed on from one person to another, and is so open to personal interpretation that it can be re-suited to each person’s individual liking, and even be completely disregarded. If it is purely objective, it is forced upon the individual, who is then robbed of the opportunity to assent to it personally and make it part of who she is. Thus, God’s revelation must be founded within temporal history, to a people, not just an

individual, but must be such that it does not overpower them. Rather, through grace it must permit this people to assent to their own conversion, or to reject it.

In addition, revelation must be both “word” and “action.” If it is just “word” there is no reason to believe it. If it is just “action” one is free to interpret the revelation in his or her own way. God’s revelation must therefore consist of a concrete “word” about his own nature and the relationship he chooses to have with those he reveals himself to, but a “word” that is backed up by “action” that is consistent with that “word.”

Both of these criteria are satisfied by love, for love offers a verbal expression of itself that backs itself up with action, and in doing so tangibly invites the beloved to accept freely and return that love. God’s revelation fits these characteristics as a revelation of love, in creation, in the history of a people, and definitively in the total self-disclosure of the Christ event.

A word on symbol: a symbol is an object that represents a greater reality beyond the object that cannot be expressed except within a form. However, the symbol is more than just a sign, for the symbol contains the full nature of the reality it represents within itself. As such, love will always be expressed symbolically. Love felt within the heart for another can only be expressed through symbolic acts like the embrace, the kiss, service, self-sacrifice, and so forth. These acts contain within themselves the full transmission of that love in a real and tangible way.

## How We Know that God is Love

### *Israel*

Within Judeo-Christian revelation, God is not an Aristotelian first unmoved mover, who, after initiating creation, takes no further interest in it (Deism). Rather, the starting point of our faith is belief that God has chosen to be involved in history. This fact in itself is revelatory, in that it begs the question as to why God would involve himself with us or even take an interest in us, or why he would even create us in the first place. In my view there are two possible answers to this question. Either God is mischievous and perhaps even sadistic, taking joy in meddling with earthly affairs (like the gods of the Greeks), or God is a loving God, who cares for his creation. Scripture will tell us that the God of Israel is the latter.

The chosen people first encounter God as one who involves himself in their history, and then they extrapolate backward to include creation in God's activity. God chooses to be present and active in their history in such a way that affirms their dignity, the dignity of all peoples, and the goodness of all creation. God institutes a loving covenantal relationship, archetypically with Abraham, then with the nation of Israel.

A typical example of God's activity in history is Israel's formative event: the Exodus. Here God takes the initiative, revealing himself and his love for Israel first, electing them, blessing them by watching over them, protecting them, and delivering them. He *earns* their trust through his intervention in their history, particularly at the Red Sea, where he displays his love for them with "great signs and wonders" (Ex 7:3). At the same time, he challenges Israel to allow him to reveal his love as *he* sees fit. In the wilderness, Israel must learn to let themselves be loved by God, to trust, and to be receptive to his plan. They must grow into maturity, accepting responsibility for the

freedom that God's love has given them. Only once they have been converted as a people are they then ready to enter into the Promised Land.

As a sign of thanksgiving for the love God has shown for them, Israel accepts the law, which is summarized in love of God (Dt 6:5; Mt 22:37), and love of neighbor (Lv 19:18; Mt 22:39). Jesus will teach that because this law is a law of love, not only will it include all the precepts of the Torah, but it will also call us to go radically beyond it.

Israel is not compelled and overpowered either to obey the law or face immediate annihilation. Rather they are invited, at times exhorted, to choose the life that comes with having a loving relationship with God (Dt 30:19-20). Their decision to enter into covenant with God is thus a sign of thanksgiving for everything that God has done for them.

Within this covenant God reveals himself, choosing to be present to Israel, and lovingly makes himself vulnerable to their misinterpretation and even rejection. In spite of this he still commits himself to be faithful to them, to care for them, and upon their rejection to continually make it possible for them to be reconciled with him. His power and sovereignty are, however, maintained. While the people of Israel are free to reject God, this rejection carries consequences. To choose God is to live, to reject him is to choose death. Israel is always candid about its own history, particularly how it has fallen short of its side of the covenant time and time again. In doing so, it admits its own weakness, but also glorifies God, who is continually faithful to that covenant in bringing his blessing and mercy to Israel.

This covenant, as a sign of love, is never intended for exclusivity. Rather, through fidelity to their covenant with God, the people of Israel are to bear witness to God's love for them as "a kingdom of priests, a holy nation" for the entire world (Ex

19:6). Thus we see that the identity of Israel is to be connected to their mission; it is in bearing witness to the love God has for all creation.

The prophets would often reflect on Israel's failure to fulfill the true intent of the law. In statements like Hosea 6:6, "For it is love that I desire, not sacrifice," we see Israel's use of its sacrificial cult to try to manipulate God, and the tendency for the underlying command of love and charity to give way to empty ritual. For the prophets, Israel is not true to her identity as a people set apart to manifest God's love to the world. Rather they regress to nationalism, ritualism, and syncretism. Their rejection of God would of course carry the consequence of captivity and separation from their heritage. At the same time, we also see the reaction of God to their rejection: the prophets, particularly in Hosea and Jeremiah, mediating not only God's words, but also his feelings of sadness and regret, reflect pain on the part of God. This view of God need not be pejorative, particularly if we identify the nature of divinity with love.

Through scripture we see an evolution in Israel's understanding of God within different epochs and socio-cultural circumstances. As the nation moves through its monarchical period, one can see a move away from a strict theology of retribution, wherein God's activity can be manipulated by ritual and human activity. Reflecting on the death of Josiah, the suffering that takes place during and after the Babylonian captivity, and particularly in the persecution suffered under Antiochus IV Epiphanes, there is a reformulation of the understanding of God's activity within history. Job and Qoheleth both reflect that human suffering seems to be disconnected from righteousness; their solution is to consent to the sovereignty and freedom of God to act as He chooses in human history. At the same time, they maintain their faith in God's mercy, and the door



is opened both for a belief in the afterlife, and for hope in the future redemption of God's people through the coming of the messiah.

### *Jesus Christ*

Within Israel, and symbolized in the person of Mary, God has established the foundation for his ultimate revelation and self-disclosure to the world. Through creation and the salvation history of Israel, God is revealed as loving. In Christ, God will be revealed as a God who *is love*.

Jesus represents both a continuity and a break with Israel's history. The Old Testament prefigures the messiah, anticipating the coming of Jesus. However, the fulfillment that Jesus brings is not in line with Israel's expectations. The break consists in the fact that the nature of the loving self-gift manifest in Jesus is so baffling, so all-inclusive and so awe-inspiring in its radicality. However, in retrospect, only such a radical sign of love (such a break) could fulfill all the hopes and desires established in the scriptures. The revelation of Jesus Christ therefore transcends the revelation of the Old Testament, and allows us to look back at it in a new and profound light. Mary symbolizes this continuity with Israel, while her virginal conception symbolizes the break, as the sign of God's total and radical freedom and grace.

The incarnation, life, ministry and mission, death and resurrection of Jesus can all be unified in one term, as the Christ Event. This event is revelation, in that while it has an historical component, as testified to in the scriptures and maintained through the history of the church, it must also be appropriated in faith by each individual in every generation.

Jesus reveals a God who is not only close, but infinitely so. In preaching the arrival of the Kingdom of God, with its Good News of liberty, harmony and reconciliation, and its reversal of the human situation (Mt 4:17; Lk 4:18-19), Jesus testifies to the closeness of God in his own person. Jesus calls God *Abba* (Mk 14:36), indicating an unprecedented intimacy with God. He displays a deep relationship with the Father, a mutual indwelling between them: “As you Father are in me and I am in you” (Jn 17:21b). His miracles and preaching objectively herald the arrival of the Kingdom, manifesting this closeness to the Father. Within this kingdom, all are invited to know God as Father. Thus the love between the Father and the Son is not exclusive; Jesus makes it possible for all to enter into a familial relationship with him and the Father, and to become part of their mutual indwelling, “that they may be one in us” (Jn 17:21c).

Jesus himself demonstrates total receptivity to the Father. This receptivity takes on the form of obedience that goes radically beyond the prescriptions of the law. He trusts that God will provide for him and care for him, and does the Father’s will. In the same way, Jesus invites all people to share his own childlike trust in and awe before God (Mt 18:3). In love for all people, especially the lowly, the poor, the sick, the suffering, and sinners, Jesus chooses to live in total solidarity with them. He sets out to re-establish severed relationships with God, making possible the return of all peoples to the knowledge of God’s love for them, and their inherent dignity as God’s loved ones.

The Christ Event is then a revelation of God’s love for the world. Loving the world “to the end” (Jn 13:1c) will mean a total out-pouring, and a total kenosis on the part of the Son for creation (Phil 2:7). Christ ratified everything that he represented in his life and ministry by risking it all through submission to death on a cross. His Word of love is accompanied by this act of love.

Through his horrifying crucifixion and death like a sinner, Jesus experiences total separation from the Father (Mk 15:34). As one who knew infinite closeness to the Father, separation from the Father would be worse for Jesus than for any other human being. But just as no other human but Jesus could experience the intensity and hopelessness of this experience, no other human could bear it, for no one could have knowledge of the presence of the Spirit as Jesus did. It is here that Jesus' total divinity and humanity come into play more than anywhere else. Now, because of Jesus' redemptive act, no one need ever experience the pain of hell, the horror of separation of God, unless they knowingly and totally refuse God's total love in Christ.

Even though Jesus experiences the ultimate form of alienation from the Father, moving as far as one can go from God's love, the love between them remains intact. This is proven by Jesus' resurrection, which reveals the infinite power of God's love to overcome all that is opposed to it. Because the love between the Father and the Son did endure, it can envelop all other forms of human alienation from God. Only because of infinite intimacy (and thus the agony of separation) between the Father and the Son, fully human, is it possible for any and all other forms of human separation from God to be overcome. Therefore, "where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more" (Rm 5:20). God's ability to love and forgive is greater than our ability to separate ourselves from him.

Only through the historical event of the resurrection of Christ from the dead does a soteriological interpretation of his death make any sense (1 Cor 15:17). This reality is displayed within the Gospels themselves: the risen Jesus, while clearly transformed, transcending earthly existence, still bears the scars of his death. Only when the disciples can recognize that the cross is not a defeat but a victory of divine love can they resolve

the paradox of cross and resurrection. Only in love, shown in the physical act of the resurrection, does the cross move from being a scandal to the revelation of the glory of God.

The resurrection is not a purely symbolic reality. Rather it must be an actual temporal event, physically witnessed by Mary of Magdela and the disciples. Upon Jesus' death, the disciples would have despaired at the death of his cause. Only the physical but completely transformed appearance of the risen and exalted Christ can explain the total reversal of spirit within them, and explain the foundation of the Church from this event.

### *The Holy Spirit*

Shortly thereafter, Jesus would be proclaimed as the Son of God and Lord. Because Jesus is raised from the dead, we can see that his death by no means signaled the failure of his ministry, nor is it a breaking apart of his relationship with the Father. The passion and resurrection reveal that the Father and the Son can be infinitely close, even through infinite distance, forming a communion of perfect love. However, this revelation extends outward. We can see that it is an ultimate *expression* of love, an ultimate act of vulnerability for the sake of humanity, so that we may enter into a familial relationship with the Father and the Son. Christ is the Word of God, the ultimate total self-disclosure of God's nature and essence to creation. Those who see Christ see the Father who sent him (Jn 14:9). Further, Christ also shows us the perfect human response to the Father's revelation. This is then to say that the purpose of the Christ event is to equate very essence of divinity God with the expression of divine love; i.e. it is to reveal that God is love. The love between them, which is the Holy Spirit, is poured out for all humanity (Jn

19:34; Tit 3:6), so that humanity can be caught up in that love between the Father and the Son.

The resurrection unifies the present and future dimensions of the Kingdom of God. It signals the completion of creation and the beginning of the eschaton: as Christ is risen, so all who believe may rise with him (Eph 2:6), ascending to the Father. Yet this last stage in the history of salvation is yet in the process of completion. Rather than imposing the Kingdom on all humanity, God invites all generations to become active participants in its continued building. Christ invites us to love as he did (Jn 13:34), and thus through the presence of the Holy Spirit maintains his continued presence in the world, which through our acts of love, works toward the Kingdom's completion.

Because God's revelation is love, it can be believed. Jesus' message of love is backed up by the love he expresses on the cross. The Father's message of love is backed up by his raising of the Son from the dead. We can only know of God's love because it has been revealed in its actual, physical and historical symbol: the person of Jesus Christ. Christ then is revealed as divine and human; if the nature of divinity is love, Christ's divinity is revealed through the extent he goes to be one with humanity.

The Holy Spirit then continues to make the love revealed in Christ known in humanity. As love, the Spirit dedicates himself to glorifying the Father and the Son, and empowers us to respond to it, united with Christ's body. It maintains the continued revelation that was made once and for all in Christ, as set down in scripture and lived out dynamically in the Tradition of the Church. Through its history, the Church will manifest the definitive revelation of Christ as love, and therefore as ever-new and ever-creative, as it encounters and is appropriated and transmitted by each new generation. The Spirit will

make the church the “sacrament” of Christ in the world, as he made Christ the sacrament of God who is love.

Throughout its history, the church has grappled with trying to understand what it means to have a monotheistic and yet Trinitarian faith. The struggles with the first church councils seem to revolve around trying to express Christian revelation within Jewish and Greek understandings of divinity and creation. Often there was a tendency toward various forms of Gnosticism, largely because it was inconceivable to many that God could come so close to humanity while still maintaining his divinity. As such, in focusing too much on either the divinity or humanity of Christ, the early heresies essentially attacked the love paradigm revealed in Jesus. What will win out through Nicea I (325) to Chalcedon (451) and beyond is the incarnation, as attested to in scripture: that Jesus Christ is both completely divine and completely human, both in nature and in will. Christ must be both divine and human in order for Christ to truly mediate God’s infinite love, and thus save creation. Divine transcendence is not compromised, because if we understand divinity as being Love, Christ’s weakness, receptivity and obedience to the Father are not pejorative; rather they glorify his divinity all the more. From this understanding, a concept of the Trinity will emerge in the history of doctrine in harmony with scriptural revelation. The councils then philosophically guarantee what scripture tells us about God as love, which unites divinity and humanity. God can be *one* because God is *three*, a community of perfect love, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

## What it means for God to be Love

### *The Trinity*

What can be definitively said at this point is that the Trinity is revealed entirely and exclusively through the Christ event. Christ reveals God completely, and our knowledge of God finds its norm in Christ's revelation. However, neither is it acceptable to equate the immanent Trinity with the Economic Trinity, nor to say that the economic Trinity *does* reveal the immanent Trinity, but not entirely. While the former robs the Trinity of its freedom and transcendence, the latter reduces the impact of God's revelation in that it implies that God holds something back of himself in his self-disclosure. The resolution to this paradox lies within love. God's self-disclosure is that God is love; God reveals himself completely in the economy of salvation, but in doing so as *infinite* love, reveals how completely beyond human comprehension a Trinity that is love must be. This definition of God as love does not diminish God's essence nor subject God to our manipulation, because it is not based on the imperfect human experience of love. Rather it is an expression of the totally kenotic love demonstrated in the Christ event, a love that is completely mind-boggling and astounding. God therefore reveals himself with infinite closeness, but because he does as he does, the only human response possible is utter awe, and total thanksgiving.

To summarize then, what we behold is a Trinity, which is a dynamic union of three persons, united in essence and will. The Father, as love, chooses to be love by loving the Son, allowing the Son the infinite freedom to be begotten of the Father. In begetting the Son, the Father gives the Son everything of himself, loving him with that complete love, and giving all glory to the Son. In this way, the Son becomes the image of the Father (Col 1:15). Simultaneous with this begetting is the procession of the Holy

Spirit, who as love allows the space or freedom for the Son to be begotten, and maintains the connection between the Father and the Son through that freedom. Only infinite love, equal in nature to the infinities of the Father and the Son, can unite them in such a way.

The further the Father permits the Son to go from himself, the closer he actually is, because permitting this freedom is a sign of the Father's love. The Son, because of his love for the Father, freely chooses to be love; he loves the Father back with the same Spirit of perfect love he received, giving all glory back to the Father. He permits the Father the infinite freedom to be the Father: rather than usurping the role of the Father, he takes on the mode of receptivity and total childlike trust.

As the love between them, the Holy Spirit magnifies and glorifies the two, revealing the superabundance of love that exists between them through its continued expression in ever-new and ever-greater ways. The love is perfect *because* it is dynamic, and makes possible its outward expressions as we witness them in creation and in salvation history.

*Creation and Salvation History: The Outward Expression of Trinitarian Love*

God creates out of love so that he may coax love out of his creation, and thus be glorified. He does not need to love creation to be a God of love, for God already exists as a community of love. However, as love, the Father chooses to create in the image of the Son. The Son's freedom to be distinct from the Father will permit creation's freedom to be distinct from God. The Father then creates all things for the Son (Col 1:16), and loves creation through the Son, who mediates the Father's love to the world. Through the power of the Spirit, the world is created, as it passes over to the Son. It continues in being through Christ (Col 1:17), and in the fullness of time finds its completion in Christ,



who returns it to the Father (Eph 1:7). This process of creation is not to be understood as a one-time event; rather it involves God's continual participation in nature and history (including Israel), which culminates in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Spirit now acts to complete all of creation, inviting it to participate in divine love as part of the Body of Christ. It is truly an expression of Triune love when it freely assents to this transformative work of the Spirit.

The suffering that exists in the world, its groaning and travail (Rom 8:22), are then an expression of creation's incompleteness. Yet, in Christ its completion has been realized in a localized way. We can be inspired to have hope that through the Spirit, the completion of creation and thus the end to suffering is guaranteed, as sealed in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Creation can then be understood as an expression of God's love. Like a painting, it reveals the qualities and passions, and even the essential nature of the painter, yet it is distinct from the painter. One may thus encounter God's love in a limited capacity within creation.

*The Human Person: Invited to Love Like God Who is Love*

If God is love, to be created in the image of God is to be created with the capacity to love. The model human is then Christ, who loves perfectly, as the perfect image of the Father. He shows us how to love, and thus how to be truly human. It is to be other-directed, receptive and dependent in a childlike way towards God, and charitable and communal towards others. Humans are only what they are truly meant to be when they are in relationship with others.

Because the nature of being in God's image is to love, and love is always by its very nature a free act, humans are not compelled to realize their intended nature. They have the freedom to love, or not to love. This opens the door for sin, which is the rejection of love, and ultimately the rejection of God and true humanness. Moral evil in the world is a result of the refusal to love.

As love begets love, so too does sin beget sin until it is confronted by love. For one will find it more and more difficult to love if one has not learned love by being loved. The notion of "original sin" can be understood in this way: it is the human tendency to reject love, to lack in trust and receptivity, and instead to opt for the self.<sup>1</sup> As such, all sins are intrinsically connected to this "root sin;" rather than directing ourselves toward God and others, we collapse in on ourselves. We are born into a world so inundated by this form of sin that it can be very difficult to learn to love and to be loved. As such, all people inevitably sin, and thus share in the sin of Adam.

However God's grace has made it possible to learn to accept love, no matter how cut off from love one may be because "Where sin abounded, grace abounded all the more" (Rom 5:20). God's love revealed in Christ is so astoundingly greater than our ability to sin, that our weakness and difficulty to love can be overcome.

Christ, though he was free of sin, took on the form of a sinner (2 Cor 5:21). In solidarity with us he experienced complete alienation from the Father so that we might experience his righteousness. As the sinless one, Christ never rejects God's love; as *fully* human, Jesus continues to have faith in the Father's love, even when feeling the deepest pain of isolation from the Father. As a result, God's love fully envelopes all forms of the human experience; it can reach out to anyone, and through grace humanity can respond to

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<sup>1</sup> I believe this is synonymous with Adam's refusal to accept his creatureliness.

God's love, no matter how far from him we can go. It then remains up to us to return to God or to remain in isolation.

In like manner, any form of suffering can be transformed. God does not will that evil take place, and he does not desire that we suffer. It is an unfortunate result of our freedom. However, rather than erasing all evil from the world, and our freedom along with it, God has instead chosen to love us, to invite us to love him back, and to let us share in his work of creating and transforming the world. Suffering need no longer be regarded as an absence of God or God's grace. Instead, through the cross and resurrection, God has made it possible for every form of suffering to bear the fruit of goodness, and every tragedy can be turned into an opportunity for love. It is up to us to decide either to see it that way, in other words to have faith, or to opt out of God's continued work. However, in accepting our creatureliness we must accept that we may never see the fruit that is born. We can trust that it will bear fruit, because it did with Christ, who stared into the ultimate oblivion of the cross, yet was vindicated through his resurrection.

*Eschatology: The Definitive Realization of God's Revelation as Love*

In his perfect response to God's love, Jesus has revealed sin for what it is: the rejection of God's love. On the cross, Jesus reveals that such a rejection is destructive, and as such, an attack on God himself. In this way, Jesus judges sin, and all are judged as sinners insofar as they fall short of loving God and one another in the same way. Jesus shed the light on sin. Those who are repentant will not shy away from this light and prefer to remain in darkness, but will rather admit their failings and allow themselves to be confronted and transformed by the love of God (Jn 3:19-21). Then, because they love

God so much in return, they will choose to be images of that same love, extending it to others in imitation of Christ. Here we face a resolution to the *already/not yet* paradox of the Kingdom of God, for salvation is realized within an individual in that she makes herself willing to mediate salvation to others.

One must also keep in mind that conversion is always a process. Personally, I believe that even the sacraments are processes whose efficacy is merely initiated by the liturgical event. Just as Israel had to be prepared for the revelation of God's infinite love in the person of Jesus Christ through its salvation history, and as the Church continues to grow in appreciation of God's ultimate revelation, so too the believer must grow to deeper levels of understanding and acceptance of God's love for him.

This process of conversion is only completed in death. Upon Christ's death, death was transformed from annihilation and total separation from God into total union with him. In baptism one shares in Christ's death to sin; it is, however, only in physical death that this process of baptism is complete. In his resurrection, Christ changed the pattern of the human life cycle: sharing in Christ's physical death, we may have assurance of the resurrection of the body, that is, the resurrection of our essential selves, but in exalted form, with Christ in eternity (1 Cor 6:14; 15:35ff).

As for hell, I would like very much to believe that all people, when confronted with the infinite love of God (as I believe all people are, if not in life, then certainly after death), would choose to accept his love and enter into his Kingdom. However, I know that God will never force anyone into heaven. Love must be accepted and returned in freedom; otherwise it is not love. Therefore this supposes that there must be a possibility for an alternative state to heaven beyond death.

Mary shows the continuity and realized hope of Israel, and models the Christian response to salvation brought about in Christ through her *fiat*. As such she also stands as an eschatological figure, showing the efficacy of Christ's saving work for one who is merely human in her own Immaculate Conception and Assumption. In her faith and ability to say "yes" to God, and thus bear Christ for the world, Mary shows that it is possible for God's overwhelming revelation as love to be comprehended by those other than Christ. She is the sign that the Kingdom is not just "to come" but is also truly "at hand." In her definitive and singular "yes," empowered by the Spirit, our communal "yes" is made possible, so that we too may bring Christ to the world.

Heaven then involves our inclusion into the Trinitarian love of God. However we do not become God as "fourth persons" of the Trinity; rather we find our place in the Trinity as part of the body of Christ. Our place there is made possible only through our submission to Christ as Lord, and the acceptance of our own creatureliness, a sign of love and thanksgiving to him.<sup>2</sup> This is patterned on Christ's acceptance of his own sonship, which ensures his place in the Trinity, as a sign of infinite love for the Father.<sup>3</sup>

### *Ecclesiology*

In order to continue his presence and action on earth, Christ established the Church. The Church's function is to testify to the historical reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. It is the unbroken historical chain of witnesses that originates with the Apostles, testifying that Jesus is risen. The Church provides the objective witness that is to be accompanied subjectively by individual faith and conversion.

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<sup>2</sup> Just as "the Body of Christ" symbolizes our unity within God, that divinizes us, Mary symbolizes our role as counterpart, or "Bride of Christ," which maintains our creatureliness.

<sup>3</sup> This contrasts with the sin of Adam, who rather than accepting his creatureliness, wanted to usurp the role of God.

This definition may seem narrow, but I believe it to be all-inclusive, because the nature of the Church's witness is to be a message of love, passing on the love that Christ himself revealed in his own life, death, and resurrection, for "this is how all will know you for my disciples: your love for one another" (Jn13:35). This love is to be the same love, the same Holy Spirit, that is poured out from the cross of Christ (Jn 19:34), that was breathed on the disciples by the risen Christ (Jn 20:22), and that descended upon them at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). The Church is to continue to reveal to all generations what the Father and Son revealed definitively in the death and resurrection: God is Love. To say that Christ is risen is to say that God is love.

The witness is a message of love: all disciples, in every age, are to be united by their love for one another into the Body of Christ, so that they can offer their prayer of love and thanksgiving to the Father through, with, and in Christ their head. The universal law to love God and neighbor is thus encapsulated within the Church's very identity.

Christ himself answers who our neighbor is, who we are to love, with the story of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:29-37). In doing so, he indicates that the community of Christ is not a self-contained one. Rather we are to be a Priestly People (Ex 19:6), sharing Christ's love with all peoples (Mt 28:19-20). Again the witness is one of love: we show the world that God is love by loving it with God's love. The Church's identity is its mission, in the image of Christ whose identity is his mission as the one who is sent.

So the Church's role is to continue Christ's presence in the world, by continuing to proclaim that God is love. We can be assured that we, though sinful humans who fall short of this love, can still transmit this revelation successfully. Mary, who is the exemplar of the Church, shows the efficacy of God's grace to make it known. God's grace acts in her, causing her own redemption, and permitting her to bring Christ to the

world. Seeing her, we may know that it is possible for us to do the same: through God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit, we are to manifest Christ's presence and bring him to the world.

## What it means if God is Love

God has revealed that God is love, but has done so in such a radical and astounding way that the only possible response left for the redeemed is to stand in awe, to be transformed by it, to worship and give thanks, and somehow to return that love to God. This return involves not only prayer and worship, but also love of neighbor, who is beloved of God, and in whom we are to see the image of Jesus Christ, for “whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers, you do it unto me” (Mt 25:40). By loving God and neighbor as a sign of thanksgiving to God for his love, the Church continues Christ’s work, and makes him sacramentally present as the Body of Christ.

### *Church History*

The Church’s mission is thus to reveal God’s love for the world through the love shared among all believers and the loving worship returned to God. There can be no separation between these two, for “one who has no love for the brother he has seen cannot love the God he has not seen” (1 Jn 4:21). The history of the Church bears witness to how well it has lived up to fulfilling this mission. There have certainly been times when it has operated with poor motivations and has even sinned, as in the case of the inquisition, the crusades, the suppression of science in figures like Galileo, the abuses of simony. From a modern standpoint, we can certainly evaluate the Church’s various political scandals, its siege mentality after the council of Trent, and other mistakes as signs of the Church’s failure to live up to its mission of proclaiming the Gospel of love. The Church, however, in addition to being the Body of Christ, is also an institution of human beings who are endowed with freedom, and therefore who must struggle against sin and failure in the call to love. This paradox is not a sign of the Church’s inefficacy to



continue Christ's presence in the world: it is not a sign of the absence of the Spirit. Rather it is a sign that God's grace continues to act, at times in spite of our obstinacy, just as it does in the lives of each individual Christian. If the Church were not made up of sinners, it would not need to be dependent on Christ. The history of the Church, like that of Israel, has been and must continue to be a reflection of candor and honesty about how it has often fallen short of its side of the covenant. By doing so, God's unconditional love continues to be magnified, and God, rather than our human institution, is glorified. Bearing this in mind, the Church must admit that it is still open to sin in the present, and must be continually vigilant to its overwhelming responsibility to manifest God's love to the world.

The church, therefore, must be continually aware of its own humanity, subjectivity, and ability to err. Each Christian must be open to the work of the Spirit with humility and receptivity. The Gospels give us the model of the Pharisees as a warning.<sup>4</sup> The Pharisees were so sure of their interpretation of the law and its tradition that they closed themselves to the greater revelation of love brought by Christ. As a result they assumed themselves righteous, and set themselves up as judges over others. Happily, the Apostolic tradition, and the tradition of the early church fathers, shows a more tolerant picture. While they certainly disagreed and argued about matters of doctrine and morals through the arguments, debates, and ecumenical councils, a synthesis was generally obtained that took the valid points of every party into consideration.<sup>5</sup> And so we see that the working of the Spirit is rarely localized in one individual. Rather the will of God

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<sup>4</sup> That is, the Pharisees as they appeared in the Gospels. It is possible that some of the Pharisee's positive contributions were left out of the Gospel picture of them for polemic reasons. We should instead understand the Pharisees in the Gospel as models of self-righteousness and judgmental attitudes.

<sup>5</sup> Even Arianism, although heretical, can be seen as raising some valid theological points, in that it showed the insufficiency of Irenaeus and Tertullian's approach to understanding the incarnation, and created the need for the council of Nicea.

typically comes forward through the collaboration of a collective body, the Church as a whole, “where two or three are gathered in my name” (Mt 18:20). Usually it is in the synthesis, the fruit of sharing discussion and even argument and conflict, that God’s will is revealed. Humility and openness to accept God’s freedom to reveal himself in ever new and surprising ways are then necessary for the working of the Spirit. I believe this approach should be applied to modern day ecumenism as well.

When viewed from an historical perspective, this collective revelation can be understood as the Church’s sacred Tradition. God continues to reveal himself, in that he continues to bring us into a deeper and fuller understanding of his definitive revelation in Christ testified to in scripture, through each epoch of the Church’s history.

Also throughout the Church’s history we can see an evolution of the Christian ideal as a sign of love for God. In the days of the Roman Empire, the ideal Christian was one who gave his or her life as a martyr. In doing so, Christians acted in imitation of Christ, and shared in his death. After the Edict of Milan (313), due to the huge influx of new Christians who lived out their faith with much less zeal than before, the austere monastic life moved into the forefront as the ideal Christian lifestyle. Perhaps motivated in part by Augustine and certain neo-Platonic dualistic influences, austerity, prayer, and separation from the world were seen as the ultimate sign of love for God. Such a notion can still be held today, as long as one acknowledges that what one sacrifices in monastic life is not necessarily evil. If it is a “good” that is sacrificed, the sacrifice can be an even greater sign of love. This monastic influence reflected the needs of society during the middle ages, fulfilling the Church’s role of establishing unity in the otherwise chaotic medieval world.

In the modern world, where the relevance of the Church to human life, particularly human suffering, can be difficult to see, the Christian ideal has shifted to those who manifest radical acts of service, particularly to the poor, the sick, the oppressed, and the marginalized. Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Archbishop Oscar Romero, and Jean Vanier represent the Christian ideal of today, who love Christ through their love of brothers and sisters. Not only do they die for others, they also live for others, giving over their entire lives in service, just as Christ did.<sup>6</sup>

### *Office in the Church*

If the institutionalized form of the Church is more than just a result of the sinful nature of humanity, it too must be connected to the fact that God is love. I believe that this can be done. The first step is to understand the nature of authority in light of the Gospel. Christ exercises authority, but as love and service, displayed most fully on the cross (Mt 20:25-28). Here Christ wields love as God's power to conquer death, and reconciles the world to the Father. Thus the nature of the Church's authority must also be love, which authenticates itself through demonstration. Christ as God does not need to earn our obedience, yet this is what he does. Therefore the Church must also earn the obedience and trust of those both within and outside it through charity and service.

The second ingredient in my understanding of office is the notion of individual charism. Just as love permits distinction within unity in the Trinity, so also the Church contains individuals with a variety of different charisms and abilities, united together in the pursuit of love and service to the body as a whole. Some are called to be doctors, teachers, parents, lawyers, parish financial administrators, pastoral ministers and so on.

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<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that these figures also have lives centered on prayer and devotion to Christ, which then motivates them to love and serve others..

Some are out-going and friendly, others more quiet and reserved, some have a variety of life experiences, some endowed with wisdom, others with idealism, some can minister to the sick, others to children. Each is endowed with a different gift or variety of gifts, given as signs of God's love, and intended for service to the community as a whole. Serving the whole body according to their individual gifts, all people are to make the Church fruitful and life-giving, a symbol of Triune love. One gift among the many is that of pastoral leadership, the ability to unite the community in love of God and neighbor. Within the church, the ordained minister has this special role because we are united by its sacramentally around the Lord's table.

The third ingredient is the role of "the other." In the Christian understanding, we do not redeem and sanctify ourselves. Rather we receive our salvation from "another:" through our acceptance of God's grace. I believe this reliance on "another" for our salvation is symbolized in the office of the Church. Within the Church, the laity must receive the sacraments from "another," the ordained minister who represents Christ, who in turn receives the authority to preside over the sacraments through his ordination, which includes an assent of the whole Church and a connection to the Apostles; in other words, by Christ. Within this context, we must remember that just as the laity are sanctified through the sacramental role of the clergy, so to are the clergy sanctified by their service to the laity, for they serve Christ by serving their brothers and sisters (Mt 25:40). All, then, are sanctified by "another."

The final aspect of office in the church is the idea of mediation, and for it I will use the example of the ordained priest.<sup>7</sup> The priest mediates the presence of Christ to the people, particularly in the dispensation of the sacraments. As such, he operates with the

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<sup>7</sup> This idea however is not exclusive to the ordained priest, for all who bare the name of Christ, all "Christians," are to mediate Christ's presence to others.

authority of Christ, which must be authenticated by his imitation of the charity and love of Christ. He must be deeply prayerful, and continually connected to Christ. At the same time, the priest mediates the people to God. He must know the people: their hearts and minds, hopes, fears, dreams, pains and joys. He must NOT remove himself from them; rather he must share in every aspect of their lives. Only in this way is the priest ministering *in persona Christi*, for Christ could only mediate salvation to us by being both divine and fully human.<sup>8</sup>

### *The Parish and the Church*

The Church for the most part lives out its identity and its mission in the individual parish, for it is there that most Catholics practice their faith and that most non-Catholics encounter the Church. This makes it abundantly important for each community to be united in the Holy Spirit, that is, united in genuine love for one another. This is not an abstract notion. Rather it demands that the members truly *know* each other and share each other's lives in a life-giving way.

This should not lead to the exclusion of the rest of the Church, for if it is truly a union *in love*, it will look outward, and its unity will be fruitful through its drive to connect with the diocese, united by the bishop, which then spurred on by love will seek unity with the entire Church, united by the Pope and his magisterium. It is my firm belief that one cannot love someone that he does not know. For this reason it is important to have the intimacy of the local parish as our starting point, which then as a community of love will reach out toward uniting the Church as a whole.

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<sup>8</sup> This is not to take a Donatist view. The efficacy of the sacraments is not determined by the Priest's worthiness, but by God's grace. However, at the same time, the credibility he offers to the people of God, and therefore the quality of their acceptance of the sacraments, can be greatly effected by the witness of love he offers in his own Priestly life.

The Papal office serves to unite the global Church, so that it may effectively bear witness to the Gospel of love for the world. This is a unity that respects and encourages diversity. At the same time, it upholds and safeguards revelation itself. In insisting on its infallibility, the Church's teaching office testifies that humans *can* know God through the Church, that Christ truly *can* maintain his presence in our history, and that we *can* grow to understand his definitive revelation more deeply and profoundly. It safeguards teaching, particularly through the Ecumenical Councils and its dogmatic statements. In this way, it serves the truth of revelation, the revelation that Christ himself made as true God and true man, that God is love.

### *Mission*

As mentioned before, Christian identity is equal to its mission, because it is to love as Christ did. We as Church are to bring others to the knowledge of God's love for them. However, Paul's approach to missionary activity, particularly at Athens (Acts 17:22ff), was to nurture the understanding of God that they already had. In light of this, it is my view that it is *not* the role of the missionary to deliver God's love to those who do not otherwise have it. Rather it is to be an image of Christ for others, but also to recognize Christ in others, and to awaken them to Christ as he dwells there. Once thus awakened to God's love for them, they will then be able to see Christ in the missionary, and in the Church as a whole, and respond to Christ's love in an ever-deepening relationship of mutual love. The sower has already cast the seeds (Mt 13). The missionary's role is to go into the fields and nurture the crop that it may bear fruit abundantly. Missionary work, and Christian witness in general, is not about making

people see how Christ is not with them; it is about making people come to realize that he is. By loving such as these, Christ himself is loved (Mt 25:40).

As for judging, that is not the role of the missionary. Whether one needs salvation or has already obtained it is not for the missionary to say (Mt 7:1). The Christian need only focus on loving, desperately making sure that there is no one who is not loved, and therefore no one who does not know God's love.

### *Morality, Spirituality, and the Sacraments*

The fundamental problem of Christian spirituality, simply put, is that God seems invisible. Thus there is a risk of taking on a purely subjective relationship with God, wherein one can decide for herself what God is like and how God reveals himself. The Christian model of spirituality is therefore rooted in objective revelation, manifest in word and sacrament, and action.

Just as Christ is the objective historical symbol of God as love, so too are the Word and the sacraments, as physical symbols of the presence of Christ, objective witnesses to God's love expressed to us as individuals and as a community today. In a tangible way, the sacraments back up God's Word of love by revealing His decision to heal us (Reconciliation; Anointing of the Sick), to commit himself to us in love and service (Marriage, Holy Orders), or to bring us into communion with him (Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist). At the same time, they also include our response to His love, in that we freely consent to them and permit ourselves to be transformed by them. In the sacraments of healing, we allow God's grace to heal and convert us so that we may love more perfectly. In the sacraments of service and communion, we commit ourselves to love and service to Christ and one another in particular ways, to another individual or to

the Church as a whole. In the sacraments of initiation, we allow ourselves to be united as the Body of Christ. We choose to share in his life, death, and resurrection, to depend on him as our Lord to feed us with spiritual food, and as the Body of Christ to offer Christ's perfect prayer of thanksgiving to the Father.

While the Word of God in scripture gives the verbal sign of God's love for his children, the sacraments provide the physical signs of love. Together they give a complete expression of God's grace, the perfect symbol of God's love as it has been shared with us. Strengthened by Christ's love, the Church is then to act as the fundamental sacrament of that love, proclaiming it in the Word, and substantiating it in works of charity, service, and justice.

Accompanying the sacramental manifestation of Christ's presence, we should adopt a life of personal prayer, an intimate personal relationship with God. Through prayer and reflection, we open ourselves up to the unique ways that God speaks to us in scripture and in the everyday, and deepen our awareness of his love and presence in our individual lives and in the lives of those around us. God ceases to be invisible, and becomes as completely present and active to us as He has throughout salvation history.

Our response of thanksgiving, flowing from the Word and the sacraments, takes its form in Christian living, which includes not only prayer and worship, but also service and witness: love of God and of neighbor. Because we love Christ so much, we take on his name, and live in imitation of him. This is not as simple as it sounds. Imitating Christ requires an ever-deepening relationship with him. We have to get to know who Christ is, through our encounter with him every day of our lives. We can then become sacraments of Christ, Christ to others, but only insofar as we subordinate ourselves to



him. This is the law of Christian morality: to live as Christ would live. It is also the way to be truly human.

Here we see an interplay between *being Christ* for others, and *seeing Christ* in others. First, responding to God's love, we choose to become images of Him. Through our imitation of Christ, we grow to see Christ in others (Mt 25:40), with inherent dignity in their creation through Christ and for Christ, and love them as Christ loved us (Jn 13:34). Letting the Spirit of love pour out of us in this way, we form the Body of Christ with one another, the Church, and manifest this same Spirit of love through our offering it back to God in thanksgiving and to the world in service. In this communal aspect, in our ability as a community to receive God's love, share it, and give it back to God, we truly realize ourselves as self-actualized human beings.

This is the meaning of the Eucharist as we celebrate it as Church. Christ, speaking to us in scripture, and making present his death and resurrection in the sacrament of the altar through the anamnesis of the Holy Spirit, reveals that God is love. Confronted by God's love, the community gives its assent in the great amen, and the individual assents in her own amen as she receives the Body and Blood of Christ, to being fed by God's love, to being dependent upon and receptive to God's love, and to giving God praise and thanksgiving. Through this sign of love, the community is united in love to one another and with Christ as Lord, and offers itself in the prayer of Christ to the Father. As such, it may manifest that God is Love to all the world. The dismissal signal is then not the end of the Eucharist; rather, like Christ, we become the "ones who are sent," to continue to celebrate that God is love through the lives of all who bear the name of Christ.