

## What Does Love Mean?

*This question is perhaps the most pertinent of human questions, because it touches on what is most profoundly and essentially human – our capacity for love distinguishes us most, or best, from all other living organisms known to us on our planet. What indeed does love mean? It is a timely question, when we consider that we – who are at this very moment alive – of all human generations since the beginning, experience the most confusion over this simple word “love”. Putting aside all the superficial or common, everyday uses of the word, such as “I love ice cream, holidays, taking a warm bath, being with friends, my family...” – in statements that we generally make without giving them too much thought – what are we left with? We seem to be left with a whole complex network of connections with various people, groups of people, or even ideals, involving deeper and more intense experiences lasting for varying durations. We can experience love in relations with other persons, in relations with groups or institutions such as our church, our country, our province or city, our club or other group, our family or clan, or our profession. We can also experience love for ideals such as truth, goodness, justice, peace, harmony, equality, or freedom.*

*Still, though we can recognize love happening between us and other people, groups or institutions, or ideals; we are still left with the question, “What does love mean?” One thing we can readily observe about love is that it involves a kind of exchange, dialogue, interaction, or intercourse. This latter word was most often used to name a lively exchange with someone that went on over a period of time, and was meant to focus only on the conversation. Then, through frequent use – especially in dramatic arts – this word became almost exclusively associated with what used to be called “the act of procreation”. This English expression also changed during what is now called the “sexual revolution” of the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century.*

*Let us stay away from the specific focus on sexual intimacy, for the moment, and go back to the general overview of exchange, dialogue, interaction, or intercourse that takes place between our self on the one hand, and on the other hand, other people, institutions, groups, professions, or ideals. These exchanges all have a beginning, before which we cannot speak of love, because – at least on our part – there was no awareness of anything happening. Then something did happen, and after some time, we began to experience the favor and attachment that can at least begin to be called love. Looking at this process then, to put it as simply as we can, there is a good exchange already existing, and at some point – either intentionally or accidentally – that exchange touches me and I become aware of it. I become aware that it is good, and that it has touched me or is continuing to touch me. Love expresses the growing attachment I feel for this good, the value I place on it, and my desire to continue being touched by it.*

*Then comes another moment when, in gratitude for this good that has touched and enriched my life, I take steps within me and on the outside reach out in an attempt to touch back. I come to desire to touch the good itself, especially if it is a person, or group, or else I desire to touch anyone at all – either a person or group – with the same kind of goodness with which I have been touched. I want to reproduce in someone else what I have myself received, or I want to pass on to others the good that I have received. At this level I can be said to want to love back by attempting to touch with goodness another person, or an institution, or even an ideal by passing on to others an awareness of and appreciation for this ideal. For example, at some point I experience and taste the goodness of living in my country, and I want to touch others with the goodness of my country – that they should in their turn taste the goodness of our country and become aware of its goodness for them.*

## Wilderness Reflections - 4 - Meaning and Purpose of Life

*Another dimension, then, to what love means is that it flows in both directions – receiving and giving – passive love and active love. I experience love coming to me when I am touched by a real and genuine good – I find myself in a passive mode of love in simply being the recipient and the beneficiary of goodness that already exists outside of myself. Even without intending it, I can myself be a good that touches and benefits others – so that I find myself in an active mode of love – even without intending it. Of course, loving intentionally intensifies both the receiving and giving.*

*Whenever intentionality or deliberateness is added to love, this brings the whole experience to a deeper and more intense level. Such aware and freely chosen motivation can exist in one of the parties or in both or all of them. As I grew up, at one point I discovered that my parents went to some lengths of effort to love me – to be for me a goodness that would touch and enrich me – and at times they did it for nothing they could ever get back, but only and simply for me and for my own good. For my part, however, for a long time love meant my search for all the opportunities I could find of being touched by good, by others. I was primarily stuck in the passive mode – often looking to receive – and in my more desperate moments, I became a kind of famished, groping, grabbing, grasping kind of hunger that could never get enough of the good, which unfortunately at times caused me to go into dead ends or blind alleys searching for what seemed good, but really wasn't.*

*It took quite a bit of time for me to discover that I could be a good for others and find ways to deliberately be good for others, even if it caused me some trouble or inconvenience to do so. At this point, then, friends weren't only those whose company could be beneficial to me, but could also be people for whom my company would or could be beneficial. Now I was able to discover what is perhaps the greatest experience of loving – a friendship in which both of us spontaneously and then in a chosen way put the good of the other first. In other words, in thinking of and going to the other, what mostly or at times alone motivates me is the good of the other – I want to be a good for the other – with little or no preoccupation or concern about receiving anything back. When both are motivated in this way, then the friendship is mutual – both persons are loving the other selflessly to some degree. Their love becomes perfect when each person is also confident that the other will do no harm, and allows the heart and mind to open up to the other with trust. Both demonstrate their true love with a readiness to accept the other's faults and to forgive every hurt or transgression; so that love actually becomes mercy – a love not deserved yet freely given without condition or limit.*

*Our imperfect understanding of what our life and destiny are about can still misguide even such mutual love. There is an intimate connection between goodness, truth, and love. This is the kind of love that Jesus has for us – a love that is completely in accord with the good of the other, perfectly attuned to the truth of who and what we are, and wholly given for the sake of the other. He loves us in a way that draws us toward our eternal destiny – granting us growth in how we are in our relation to God as our origin and goal. It is because He leads us into all goodness, truth, and love that Jesus one day said to those listening to Him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.”*

*Jesus shows us the way to God in the living of our life. As we contemplate the face of Jesus, we enter into his mind and heart and learn how to follow his lead at every moment and in every life situation. As we come to know Him through his words, Jesus becomes for us the truth that begins to set us free from all the cultural constraints that tie us into knots. This freedom is not contempt for truth and law, but finds deeper motives to observe them. Then in time, we begin to know Jesus from within, since He is a living being and has the power to touch our minds, hearts, and souls in a life-changing, mysterious, but real dialogue. As our hearts recognize in Jesus the true love of God for us, and we do everything that He tells us to do; his life in the Spirit fills us to overflowing.*