



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Saint Peter's Square
Wednesday, 15 May 2024

[Multimedia]

The following text includes parts that were not read out loud, but should be considered as such.

Cycle of Catechesis. Vices and Virtues. 19. *Charity*

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Today we will talk about the third theological virtue, *charity*. The other two, let us remember, were faith and hope: today we will talk about the third, charity. It is the culmination of the entire itinerary we have undertaken with the catecheses on the virtues. To think of charity immediately expands the heart, and it expands the mind, it evokes the inspired words of Saint Paul in the First Letter to the Corinthians. Concluding that wonderful hymn, Saint Paul cites the triad of the theological virtues and exclaims: “So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor 13:13).

Paul addresses these words to a community that is anything but perfect in fraternal love: the Christians of Corinth were rather litigious, there were internal divisions, and there were those who claimed to always be right and did not listen to others, regarding them as their inferiors. Paul reminds them that knowledge puffs up, whereas charity builds up (cf. 1 Cor 8:1). The Apostle then speaks of a scandal that touches even the moment of greatest union for a Christian community,

the “Lord’s supper”, the Eucharistic celebration: even there, there are divisions, and there are those who take advantage of this to eat and drink, excluding those who have nothing (cf. *1 Cor* 11:18-22). In the face of this, Paul gives a stark judgement: “When you meet together, it is not the Lord’s supper that you eat” (v. 20), you have another ritual, which is pagan, it is not the Lord’s supper.

Who knows, perhaps in the community of Corinth, no-one thought they had committed a sin, and those harsh words by the Apostle sounded somewhat incomprehensible to them. They were probably all convinced that they were good people, and if questioned on love, they would have answered that love was certainly a very important value for them, just like friendship or the family. In our days too, love is on the lips of many “influencers” and in the refrains of many songs. We speak a lot about love, but what is love?

“But what about the *other* love?”, Paul seems to ask to his Christians of Corinth. Not the love that rises, but the one that descends; not the one that takes, but the one that gives; not the one that appears, but the one that is hidden. Paul is concerned that in Corinth — as among us today too — there is confusion and that there is actually no trace of the theological virtue of love, the one that comes to us only from God. And even if people ensure to us with words that they are good people and that they love their family and friends, in reality they know very little about the love of God.

The Christians of antiquity had several Greek words at their disposal to define love. In the end, the word “*agape*” emerged, which we normally translate as “charity”. Because in truth Christians are capable of all the forms of love in the world: they too fall in love, more or less as happens to everyone. They too experience the benevolence that is felt in friendship. They too feel love for their country and the universal love for all humanity. But there is a greater love, a love which comes from God and is directed towards God, which enables us to love God, to become his friends. It enables us to love our neighbours as God loves them, with the desire to share the friendship with God. Because of Christ, this love drives us where we would not humanly go: it is the love for the poor, for what is not lovable, for those who do not care for us and are ungrateful. It is love for what no one would love, even for one’s enemy. Even for the enemy. This is “theological”: this comes from God, it is the work of the Holy Spirit in us.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus preaches: “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them” (*Lk* 6:32-33). And he concludes: “But love your enemies” — we are used to speaking badly of our enemies — “love your enemies and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish” (v. 35). Let us remember this: “Love your enemies and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return”. Let us not forget this!

In these words, love reveals itself as a theological virtue and assumes the name of charity. Love is charity. We immediately realize that it is a difficult, indeed impossible love to practice if one does

not live in God. Our human nature makes us love spontaneously what is good and beautiful. In the name of an ideal or a great affection we can even be generous and perform heroic acts. But the love of God goes beyond these criteria. Christian love embraces what is not lovable, it offers forgiveness — how difficult it is to forgive! How much love it takes to forgive! — Christian love blesses those who curse, whereas, faced with an insult or a curse, we are accustomed to replying with another insult, with another curse. It is a love so ardent that it seems almost impossible, and yet it is the only thing that will remain of us. Love is the “narrow gate” through which we will pass in order to enter the Kingdom of God. Because at the twilight of life, we will not be judged on generic love; we will be judged precisely on charity, on the real love we had. And Jesus says this to us, which is so beautiful: “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (*Mt 25:40*). This is the beautiful thing, the greatest thing about love. Onwards and upwards!

Special Greetings

I greet all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors taking part in today’s Audience, especially the representatives of the British All Parliamentary Group on the Holy See and groups from Uganda, Australia, India, the Philippines, Vietnam, Canada and the United States of America. As we prepare to celebrate the Solemnity of Pentecost, I invoke upon you and your families a rich outpouring of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. May the Lord bless you all!

My thoughts turn to the dear people of Afghanistan, who were severely struck by tragic floods that caused many deaths, including children, and that continue to cause the destruction of many houses. I pray for the victims, especially children and their families. And I appeal to the international community, to immediately provide aid and necessary support to protect the most vulnerable.

Lastly, my thoughts turn to young people, to the sick, to the elderly and to newlyweds. A few days before the Solemnity of Pentecost, I urge you to be ever docile to the action of the Holy Spirit. May the comforting presence of the Consoler be for each of you a wellspring of relief in trials.

And let us pray for peace. Let us not forget martyred Ukraine. Let us not forget Palestine, Israel and Myanmar. Let us pray for peace, let us pray for all the people who are suffering as a result of war. Altogether with all our heart; let us pray that there may be a definitive peace and no more wars. None. Because war is always a defeat. Always! I offer my blessing to all of you.

Summary of the Holy Father's words

Dear brothers and sisters, in our continuing catechesis on the theological virtues, we now turn to charity, the greatest of the virtues (*1 Cor* 13:13). More than mere friendship, affection for family, or benevolence towards others, charity is a gift from God, directed to loving him above all things and our neighbour as ourselves. With the Holy Spirit's grace and through the power of Christ's redeeming love, we can love each other in a way that surpasses our natural inclinations. Christian charity or *agape* is lived by loving the poor, the unloveable and those who don't love us, by pardoning all who have offended us and by blessing those who curse us (*Lk* 6:28). May we be bearers of Christian charity to all people, witnessing to our love for God with generosity and humble service.