

The Greatest of These is Love

*A Resource for
Small Group Faith Sharing*

By Christopher J. Ruff, M.A., S.T.L.

- Discipleship Series -

Novo Millennio Press

The Greatest of These is Love

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Foreword

In the summer of 2006, Christopher Ruff, director of the Office of Ministries and Social Concerns for our diocese, came to me with a proposal. He wanted to develop a diocesan small group faith-sharing program that would take the typical “Bible study” ingredients of prayer, reflective study and fellowship, and add one more—loving service.

Chris felt too many Catholics saw ministry to the suffering and needy as belonging only to Church social justice committees and institutions like Catholic Charities, with their own role reduced to giving these groups financial support. Of course it is true that Jesus tells the story of a Samaritan who gave money to an innkeeper for the care of a beaten man—but not before compassion had moved the Samaritan personally to clean the man’s wounds with oil and wine and to lift him onto his own animal to bring him to that inn.

With this kind of love of neighbor in mind, Chris looked for a faith-sharing resource that would combine a prayerful, contemplative spirit with the universal call to serve Christ in “the least of his brethren.” He wanted to find something that penetrated to the heart of the Gospel but that was

concise, readable and workable for people with busy lives. Even the vital service component had to be manageable and broad enough to include various kinds of service. In the end, Chris decided to write his own resource, on his own time so he could publish it. He then wrote a second book, with a third in the works and more planned.

The response in the Diocese of La Crosse has been extraordinary.

In what was supposed to be a small pilot phase in Lent of 2007, over one thousand people in more than thirty parishes took part (in our modest Wisconsin diocese of 165 parishes). Concluding surveys reflected great enthusiasm and more than 95% said they wished to continue with the next resource. As the program was made available to the entire diocese with the second book in the fall of 2007, nearly two thousand people joined groups in close to one hundred parishes.

This expanding set of faith-sharing resources is aptly named the Discipleship Series. I am seeing it form disciples in our diocese—integral and authentic disciples growing in love of God and love of neighbor. It is my hope that in the planting and nurturing brought about through this Discipleship Series, we will look forward to a harvest of apostolic works. I

recommend it wholeheartedly to individuals, groups,
parishes and other dioceses that wish to foster a
deeper discipleship in Christ.

Most Rev. Jerome E. Listecki
Bishop of La Crosse

Acknowledgments

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I would also like to thank Alice Andersen for her skilled editing and design.

Finally, and most of all, I would like to thank my wife Clare, whose love for Christ shines out, and who continues to show great patience with my late nights at the keyboard.

Christopher Ruff

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Introduction

Welcome to *The Greatest of These is Love*, part of the Discipleship Series of faith-sharing resources.

The aim of this book, and of the series in general, is to foster shared prayer and reflection that bears fruit in loving action; in that it differs from a linear, more academic “Bible study.”

The focus here is to:

- Soak deeply and prayerfully in a select number of Scripture passages.
- See the meaning of those passages come alive in human stories that inspire.
- Reflect as a group on discussion questions that apply to daily living.
- Foster a modest commitment to love of neighbor through service.
- Experience the fullness of joy that only Christ can give!

In just over twenty years of organizing and writing materials for faith-sharing groups, these are the fruits I have come to see and expect. The component of active love of neighbor comes from the conviction that true discipleship must take seriously Jesus’ words, “Whatever you did for the least of my brethren, you did for me” (Mt 25:40). And truly the fruit of love is joy.

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As support for this approach, I turn to Jesus' allegory of the Vine and the branches (John 15:1-17). We have all heard it many times, with its image of Jesus the Vine, to whom we as branches must be joined if we are to bear fruit. I encourage you to read it again and to consider some key phrases:

“Abide in me . . . abide in my love.”

Let “. . . my words abide in you.”

“. . . that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples.”

“Love one another as I have loved you.”

“. . . that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.” (see verses 4-12)

I believe we can find in these forty-six words of Jesus the very essence of his Gospel, his call to us. And the faith-sharing approach of the Discipleship Series is an attempt to respond actively and enthusiastically to that call. *“Abiding” bears fruit in love, whose nectar is joy.*

But what of St. Paul, the subject of this book? Actually, the true subject of this and all books in the Discipleship Series is Jesus Christ, but in fact St. Paul and his words are paths to the Lord. And if we have been painting a picture of oneness with Christ, we have already been painting a picture of Paul, who wrote in his letter to the Galatians, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (2:20).

From the moment of his encounter with the Lord on the Road to Damascus, Paul was seized by Christ and full of passion for his Gospel. He poured out his life spreading that Gospel, enduring countless sufferings along the way, culminating in martyrdom.

Paul's words to the men and women of the churches he founded burned with the fire of loving concern, correction, exhortation. Those words speak to us as they first spoke to them. Indeed, as Pope Benedict XVI urged in his homily inaugurating the "Year of St. Paul" (June 28, 2008): "Let us not ask ourselves only: who *was* Paul? Let us ask ourselves above all: who *is* Paul? What does he say to me?"

Let us listen and abide. And may the fruit of our abiding be a fuller, more charitable, more joyful discipleship that moves the world to marvel, as the ancient pagans did: "See how they love one another!"

Christopher Ruff

How to Use This Book

The Discipleship Series of faith-sharing materials aims to be simple and flexible. What follows is everything you need to know to move forward:

Establishing and Running One or More Groups

- Through personal invitation or parish announcements, form one or more small groups (5-12 people each).
- If established for Lent, the groups should meet weekly. Otherwise, once a month tends to be more workable for most people's schedules. Typical length for a session is about 90 minutes. Whatever time frame is established, it should be rigorously respected.
- Each group should have a facilitator. It can be the same person at each meeting, or the facilitator role can rotate.
- The job of the facilitator is not to be an expert in the material or to do a lot of talking. Rather, it is to start and end the meeting on time, to help keep things moving and on topic, and to foster a friendly, supportive environment in which everyone feels invited to contribute.

- The group members decide where they would like to meet. It is ideal to hold the sessions in each other's homes since a key goal is to bring faith into daily life. If this is not workable, a room on church grounds is fine, or some combination of the two.
- Each member is expected to read the material prayerfully ahead of the session, jotting a few notes in response to the "Questions for Discussion."
- The session begins with the Prayer to the Holy Spirit or some other appropriate prayer so that hearts may be opened to God's presence.
- The group members then read aloud the material for that session, taking turns reading small sections. This pattern should continue all the way through the discussion questions.
- When there are about ten minutes left in the allotted schedule, it is time to proceed to the "Group Prayers of Intercession," even if the group has not finished all the discussion questions.
- The prayers of intercession are intended to be spontaneous prayer intentions. They direct the power of prayer to various needs and simultaneously deepen the spirit of fellowship in the group. Conclude with the "Closing Prayer."

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- The session should end on time, even if members are eager to keep going. This is vital for the health and longevity of the group. It is good to follow with fifteen or twenty minutes of social time for those who are able to stay. Simple refreshments are a nice touch, with emphasis on the word simple; otherwise, people feel pressure to keep up with high expectations.

The Service Component

- The Service Component distinguishes this program from many other faith-sharing approaches. It is anticipated that group members will devote an hour or two to some form of service between sessions (if meetings are weekly, this could be an hour or two each month). The service may be carried out individually or together with others.
- Service can take many forms, but it should come from the heart. Certainly service to the poor, the sick, the elderly, the homebound, the homeless, etc., has always had a privileged place for Christ's followers.

- Some may already be devoting a great deal of time to service. In that case, it is enough to consciously “dedicate” some portion of that service to the group’s communal effort and spirit.
- Each set of "Questions for Discussion" includes at least one that touches on the component of service. This is to keep alive the awareness of the importance of the service aspect, which however is done on the “honor system” (with no one watching over anyone else’s shoulder).

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Group Etiquette

- Pray for the members of your group between sessions.
- Maintain confidentiality.
- Be a good listener and encourage everyone to contribute to the discussion, without anyone monopolizing. Members that are more talkative should allow everyone a chance to respond before they speak a second time.
- Love your neighbor by speaking charitably and refraining from any kind of gossip.
- Be on time, come prepared, and actively take part in discussion and prayer.
- Take seriously the service component so that you may be a loving (and always humble) witness to the others in your group.
- Be open and expect God's action in your life and prayer—expect to be changed!

A Biographical Sketch of St. Paul

St. Paul was born in approximately 8 AD (hence the anniversary “Year of St. Paul” declared by Pope Benedict XVI for 2008) in Tarsus, the capital of the Roman province Cilicia, in what is now Turkey. He was both a Jew and a Roman citizen and had two names—Saul, his Jewish/Hebrew name, and Paul, his Roman/Latin name. In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke refers to him as Saul until 13:9, where he shifts to Paul. No explanation is given, but it may be intended to signal Paul’s mission as Apostle to the Gentiles.

At age 12 or 13, Paul left Tarsus for Jerusalem to be taught by the renowned Rabbi Gamaliel, a strict Pharisee. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul recalled: “I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers” (1:14). It is not surprising, then, that he viewed the movement started by Jesus of Nazareth as a threat to Jewish orthodoxy. Three times in his letters he admits he proudly “persecuted the Church of God” (1 Cor 15:9; Gal 1:13; Phil 3:6). In fact, when we first meet Paul in Acts 7:58, he is guarding the robes of those stoning St. Stephen to death.

Everything changed for Paul upon his dramatic

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encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-19), which took place in approximately 36 AD. Powerfully transformed, this man who had zealously persecuted Christians would become an even more zealous preacher of Christ and the Gospel in what we know today as Israel, Syria, Turkey, Greece, Italy and possibly Spain. His travels are typically clustered into three main missionary journeys.

Wherever Paul went, he preached first in the synagogues and then to the Gentiles. Viewed as a dangerous traitor by the Jewish authorities, Paul was often persecuted and threatened with death. Yet he was able to found numerous churches, and his thirteen letters, which make up nearly a third of the New Testament, consist mostly of his correspondence with these Christian communities. These letters, written roughly between 50 and 67 AD, are generally held to be the earliest New Testament writings we possess. It is possible that a few did not have Paul as their actual author (the letters to Timothy and Titus are the most disputed), but the Pauline tradition behind them is strong.

Paul was arrested and imprisoned or kept under house arrest several times, and Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon are known as his “captivity letters.” He was ultimately martyred in Rome, probably under Nero in about 67 AD.

It is worth noting in conclusion that Paul dictated his letters. That spontaneity helps us understand the passion of his words as he pours out the feelings and concerns of his heart. Pledged to celibacy, he had no children of his own, yet he felt himself a father to the people of the churches he founded, and his paternal love and zeal light up his words. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, those words are just as capable of touching us today. As Pope Benedict XVI declared: “For us Paul is not a figure of the past whom we remember with veneration. He is also our teacher, an Apostle and herald of Jesus Christ” (Year of St. Paul, Inaugural Homily, June 28, 2008).

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Pope Benedict XVI

Let us . . . thank the Lord for having called Paul, making him the light to the Gentiles and the teacher of us all, and let us pray to him:

Give us even today witnesses of the Resurrection, struck by the impact of your love and able to bring the light of the Gospel in our time. St Paul, pray for us! Amen.

(Year of St. Paul, Inaugural Homily, June 28, 2008.)

Recommended prayer to start each session:

Prayer to the Holy Spirit

**Come Holy Spirit,
Fill our hearts with the fire of your love.**

**Draw us near to Jesus,
so that we may witness to his presence
in every moment of our lives.**

**Renew us, so that our homes, parishes,
neighborhoods and world
may be transformed into the heavenly
Father's kingdom on earth,
where love and mercy reign.**

Amen.

Session 1



Amazing Grace

The Lord in His Scriptures

The Conversion of Saul

...Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he journeyed he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed about him. And he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting; but rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing

no one. Saul arose from the ground; and when his eyes were opened, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Anani'as. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Anani'as." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." And the Lord said to him, "Rise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire in the house of Judas for a man of Tarsus named Saul; for behold, he is praying, and he has seen a man named Anani'as come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." But Anani'as answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to thy saints at Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call upon thy name." But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."

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So Anani'as departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came, has sent me that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized, and took food and was strengthened. For several days he was with the disciples at Damascus.

And in the synagogues immediately he proclaimed Jesus, saying, "He is the Son of God." And all who heard him were amazed, and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called on this name? And he has come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests." But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ.
Acts 9:1-23.

Soak in the Word.

Two Minutes of Silence.

Reflect . . .

This is where it all begins for Paul . . . a 180 degree turn, a completely new life.

One minute he is Saul the Pharisee, zealous and sure of himself, armed with a mission, determined to stamp out the dangerous sect established by Jesus of Nazareth—in Saul’s eyes, an executed Jewish heretic.

The next minute—a blinding flash of light, the sensation of falling, and that unforgettable voice: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

“Who are you, Lord?”

“I am Jesus”

In that moment it is all over. Blind and helpless, Saul needs to be led by the hand into the city. He humbly bows to the orders he receives from Jesus. How remarkable to think this is the man who in Acts 8 was seen gladly approving of the murder of Stephen and dragging Christian men and women from their homes to be thrown into prison.

Saul denies himself food and drink for three days, then receives the Holy Spirit and Baptism. At last his eyes are opened, he sees.

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The old Saul has died, a new man is born. Is it any wonder the theme of dying to sin and rising to new life would become so dear to him? He has met his Lord. He would refer to Jesus with that title, “Lord,” a total of 275 times in his letters, far more than any other New Testament writer.

Each time he invoked it, one wonders, did he remember that day on the road when he first begged to know—“Who are you, Lord?” Did the answer still take his breath away . . . ?

“ . . . I am Jesus.”

What about me? Have I heard his voice in my heart? Have I met Him—really met Him—along the road of my life?

Pope Benedict XVI

Paul's faith is being struck by the love of Jesus Christ, a love that overwhelms him to his depths and transforms him. His faith is not a theory, an opinion about God and the world. His faith is the impact of God's love in his heart.

(Year of St. Paul, Inaugural Homily, June 28, 2008.)

Turning now to ourselves, let us ask what this means for us. It means that for us too Christianity is not a new philosophy or a new morality. We are only Christians if we encounter Christ. Of course he does not show himself to us in this overwhelming, luminous way, as he did to Paul But we too can encounter Christ in reading Sacred Scripture, in prayer, in the liturgical life of the Church. We can touch Christ's Heart and feel him touching ours. Only in this personal relationship with Christ, only in this encounter with the Risen One do we truly become Christians.

(Year of St. Paul, General Audience, September 3, 2008.)

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Catechism of the Catholic Church

448 - Very often in the Gospels people address Jesus as "Lord." . . . At the prompting of the Holy Spirit, "Lord" expresses the recognition of the divine mystery of Jesus. In the encounter with the risen Jesus, this title becomes adoration: "My Lord and my God!" It thus takes on a connotation of love and affection that remains proper to the Christian tradition: "It is the Lord!"

The Lord in the Life of His People

An Unlikely Apostle

From bitter enemy to fervent apostle. That is the story of St. Paul. It is also the story of Bartolo Longo. Though his remarkable journey would take place more than 1800 years later and differ from Paul's in significant ways, both witness to the amazing power of God's grace.

It was the 1860's and Bartolo Longo was studying law at the University of Naples, where St. Thomas Aquinas had studied and taught six centuries before. But times had changed, and now it was full of revolutionary ideas and anti-religious faculty. Under these influences, it wasn't long before Bartolo brushed aside his Catholic upbringing, calling it "childhood nonsense" and declaring that he "grew to hate monks, priests and the pope." With his hardened heart, he welcomed every opportunity to speak harshly of the Church of his youth. And yet there was an emptiness in his soul that hungered for a deeper meaning to life.

Into darkness . . . and back

It was then that a friend introduced Bartolo to the occult. He began attending séances and conversing with spirits that spoke through a psychic medium in a trance. He was so intrigued he decided he

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wanted to become a priest of the occult. After a period of initiation, he was “consecrated” in a bizarre midnight ritual. From that point he began to experience the presence and guidance of a being he called his “angel.”

But the messages and instructions Bartolo and his like-minded friends received from their spirit guides contradicted each other (besides contradicting the Gospel), and he entered a dark period of confusion, sadness and nervous exhaustion. It would be wrong to characterize him as a satanist, for Bartolo believed he was dealing with “elevated” spirits. But the diabolical source was evident in its fruits—he had lost his faith and was on the verge of losing his sanity.

Bartolo was rescued from his downward spiral by one of the few remaining devout Catholic professors at the University—Professor Vincenzo Pepe. Professor Pepe warned Bartolo of the dangers of his occult path. He prayed for him and introduced him to a holy Dominican priest, Fr. Alberto Radente, who met daily with Bartolo. Gradually the scales fell from the young man’s eyes and he made a good confession and his first Communion in many years.

Charity and the Rosary

Bartolo soon met another holy priest, Fr. Louis da Casoria, a man completely dedicated to helping the needy and the oppressed. This “Mother Teresa” of

Naples radiated gentleness, humility and joy. Fr. Casoria's witness of love captivated Bartolo and radically affected the course of his life. He would later write: "This extraordinary man who founded churches and hospices has been our teacher in charity . . . a living testimony of faith."

Bartolo began to visit dying patients in the hospital. It was now clear to him that while his fascination with the occult had brought him nothing but dark self-absorption and anxiety, the charity of the Gospel fostered humility, generosity and peace. About the same time, Bartolo began to pray the Rosary with friends. These would be the hallmarks of the rest of his life—charity and the Rosary.

At the age of thirty-one, Bartolo made an eye-opening trip to Pompeii on business as an attorney. Never had he encountered such wretched poverty, along with religious ignorance and superstition. When he visited the parish church, he found it infested with pests and falling apart. He had to do something.

A shrine and a legacy of compassion

In 1876, Bartolo began a humble effort to build a new church. This would culminate eleven years later in the magnificent Shrine of Our Lady of the Rosary of Pompeii. Donations poured in, many miracles were recorded, and devotion to the Rosary spread like fire, well beyond the confines of Pompeii.

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Bartolo would later marvel: “We wanted to provide for the religious life of poor peasants; we succeeded instead in producing a truly universal movement of faith.”

But every bit as spectacular as the Shrine was the charitable work done by Bartolo Longo. After the example of Fr. da Casoria, he could no longer look at the world without seeing the afflicted and asking himself how he could help. And so he founded a school for impoverished young children, noting that the first need was to “wash their faces and rid them of the insects attacking their fragile bodies.” He also established an orphanage for girls, founding an order of women religious to care for them.

It broke Bartolo’s heart to see the plight of many boys who were not orphans but whose fathers were in prison. The experts of the day declared these boys doomed to a life of crime, but Bartolo didn’t agree and founded a home for them. Years later hundreds of these boys had passed through the home and grown into virtuous, successful men. The secret? Bartolo wrote: “I gave them, and taught them to love, Jesus Christ.”

Bartolo Longo died peacefully on the morning of October 5, 1926. He was 85. Fifty-four years later he was beatified by Pope John Paul II, who called him “the apostle of the Rosary, the man of Our Lady.”

Through the mercy of God, Bartolo Longo, like St. Paul, had undergone a most radical conversion, from bitter enemy of Christ's Bride the Church, to intimate friend, "chosen instrument," ardent apostle.

Pope John Paul II on Blessed Bartolo Longo

Bartolo Longo is the apostle of the Rosary, the layman who fully lived his Christian commitment. . . . He can truly be defined as "the man of Our Lady": for love of Mary he became a writer, an apostle of the Gospel, propagator of the Rosary, founder of the famous Shrine . . . for love of Mary he created institutes of charity, he became a beggar on behalf of the children of the poor, he transformed Pompeii into a living citadel of human and Christian goodness."

(Homily at Mass of Beatification, October 26, 1980.)

Questions for Discussion

1. As Saul makes his way to Damascus he swaggers with powerful resolve (“breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord”). But at the moment of his stunning encounter with Jesus he is rendered blind and helpless and must then be “led by the hand” into Damascus by his traveling companions. How does this humbling experience prepare him for the new mission he will receive from the Lord? Are there lessons we can draw from it?

2. Jesus bursts into Saul's life in a spectacular way on the road to Damascus, but then he sends Anani'as to restore his sight and bring him into the Christian community. Why do you think our all-powerful God makes use of mere human instruments like Anani'as—or you and me—when he could do it all himself?

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3. When Anani'as expresses fear about following God's command to go and meet Saul, God reassures him by telling him that Saul is his "chosen instrument" for spreading the Gospel. In what ways did God use Bartolo Longo as a chosen instrument in his plan? In what sense is each of us a chosen instrument?

Session 1 - Amazing Grace

4. Discuss the similarities and the differences between the conversion stories of Saul of Tarsus and Bartolo Longo.

6. Bartolo Longo became a fervent apostle of the Rosary. What do you think it is about the Rosary that has made it such a beloved devotion in the lives of so many of the faithful, from the simplest peasants to the greatest Popes?

Group Prayers of Intercession

8 to 10 minutes

Closing Prayer

Ephesians 1:3-5;7-12

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus
Christ,
Who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual
blessing in the heavens,
as he chose us in him, before the foundation of the
world,
to be holy and without blemish before him.

In love he destined us for adoption to himself
through Jesus Christ,
in accord with the favor of his will. . . .
In him we have redemption by his blood, the forgive-
ness of transgressions,
in accord with the riches of his grace that he lav-
ished upon us.

In all wisdom and insight, he has made known to us
the mystery of his will
in accord with his favor that he set forth in him
as a plan for the fullness of times, to sum up all
things in Christ,
in heaven and on earth.

In him we were also chosen,
destined in accord with the purpose of the one
who accomplishes all things according to the inten-
tion of his will,
so that we might exist for the praise of his glory,
we who first hoped in Christ.

Amen.

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Session 3



The Greatest of These is Love

The Lord in His Scriptures

Paul's Tribute to the Highest Gift

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right.

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Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away.

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

1 Corinthians 13:1-13.

Soak in the Word.

Two Minutes of Silence.

Reflect . . .

Poetic as it is—and oh so popular at weddings—Paul wrote this hymn to charity as a kind of correction to the Christians of Corinth. They had become overly fascinated with spectacular gifts of the Holy Spirit, like speaking in tongues, prophecies and mystical phenomena. This aura of mystery and spectacle was part of Greek culture with its pagan rituals, oracles and secret knowledge, and it was tempting for recent converts from that culture to gravitate to those elements.

Not that extraordinary gifts were bad. When genuine, they were a sign of the Spirit that was to accompany the Messiah (see Joel 3:1) and that was poured out at Pentecost. Paul understood that God could and did bestow them, but not for their excitement value or prestige. Paul wanted the Corinthians to see that the proof of true Christian mysticism is not sensational phenomena but the interior grace of the Holy Spirit. And the only sure sign of this grace is a life of charity, a life of love.

Furthermore, all the gifts—whether the unspectacular ones of governing or teaching, or the more

obviously supernatural gifts like healing, prophecy or tongues—are meant by God to serve the good of the whole Christian community, not the individual through whom they manifest. A wonder-worker who says “Look at me!” is not being led by the Spirit of God.

So Paul is saying to the Corinthians, and to us today: Do not be seduced or puffed up by sensational spiritual phenomena, or by any gift or talent God has given you. Do not give in to the desire to be noticed or praised. Pray for one gift above all others—the gift of love! And in a world that has become confused about the meaning of love, reducing it to a feeling, to the flutter of romance, use the “litmus test” provided by 1 Corinthians 13:1-13. If it makes it through that checklist, it is love indeed, a precious gift from God.

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Pope Benedict XVI

Paul is presented by many as a pugnacious man who was well able to wield the sword of his words. Indeed, there was no lack of disputes on his journey as an Apostle. He did not seek a superficial harmony. . . . But what most deeply motivated him was being loved by Jesus Christ and the desire to communicate this love to others. Paul was a man capable of loving and all of his actions and suffering can only be explained on the basis of this core sentiment.

(Year of St. Paul, Inaugural Homily, June 28, 2008.)

Catechism of the Catholic Church

1823 - Jesus makes charity the new commandment.⁴ By loving his own "to the end,"⁵ he makes manifest the Father's love which he receives. By loving one another, the disciples imitate the love of

⁴ Cf. *Jn* 13:34.

⁵ *Jn* 13:1.

Jesus which they themselves receive. Whence Jesus says:

"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love." And again: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."⁶

St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)

Christ has no body now on earth but yours,
No hands but yours, no feet but yours,
Yours are the eyes through which
He looks with compassion on this world;
Yours the feet with which he walks to do good;
Yours the hands with which he blesses.

⁶ *Jn* 15:9,12.

The Lord in the Life of His People

Mother Teresa's Legacy of Love

If you asked people today to give you the name of one person synonymous with self-giving love, most would probably say Mother Teresa of Calcutta. As the following story illustrates, the love exemplified by Blessed Mother Teresa lives on in the Missionaries of Charity she founded.

Sister Francesca, one of the earliest members of the Missionaries of Charity, answers quickly when asked what made her join Mother Teresa and the fledgling congregation 57 years ago.

"Mother's eyes," she said instantly. Mother Teresa gave her a searing look, and "I could not escape," she continued. "It was stronger than the sun. It burned everything inside me. The world was gone, the world was burnt out." All that remained was "God's world, the world of love."

"I spent my life, burnt out my life," she said.

And is she happy?

"Very happy," she said. "I made a good choice."

Sister Francesca was the ninth young woman to join Mother Teresa in 1950, four months before the

official founding of the Missionaries of Charity. Today she belongs to the community at St. Rita's Convent in the South Bronx. Another sister there, Sister Dorothy, who entered in 1949, was the fourth to join Mother Teresa.

Sisters Francesca and Dorothy, together with their provincial, Sister Leticia, and their local superior, Sister Regis, spoke about their life and their founder.

They say they still feel close to her.

"In our work and in our religious life, we feel Mother's presence," Sister Dorothy said.

A different kind of poverty

It was in 1971 that Mother Teresa established a mission in Harlem—her first in North America. A year later they would establish their own convent in the Bronx, and then relocate to St. Rita's in 1973.

"Mother felt the need to serve the poorest of the poor in this rich country," said Sister Dorothy, "because she thought poverty in this country was quite different from poverty in India." The worst poverty in the United States, she explained, is "loneliness, unwantedness, not being loved."

In Harlem, the Missionaries of Charity began visiting shut-ins and others in their homes, helping them with housecleaning and cooking.

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"No one ever visited them," Sister Dorothy said. "Some of them called the sisters 'angels.' They said, 'Angels are coming to visit us.' "

Gifts of love

At St. Rita's, the sisters visit families in their homes and run food pantries. Donations come from "divine providence," the sisters said. The credit goes to God.

"He asks us to care for his people. We concentrate on that, and he provides, totally," Sister Leticia said. Speaking about donors, she remarked, "Mother Teresa loved the American people. They are so loving, so generous, so concerned for the poor."

The sisters also operate a temporary shelter for men, a soup kitchen, and a summer day camp. Shelter guests stay for two weeks, and only overnight; after breakfast they must leave. Some meet with social workers. Sister Leticia said that some get into trouble again, but that does not discourage the sisters, because there always is the chance that someone might turn his life around.

Said Sister Leticia, "One soul is worth everything, no?"

Mother Teresa established an AIDS residence in Manhattan in 1985. Sister Dorothy said the first patient was a prisoner, and Mother Teresa was

warned by prison officials that if they released him to her care, she was responsible to see he did not escape. She offered to take his place if he did. Sister Dorothy laughed at the memory.

The idea of Mother Teresa in a prison lineup would make just about anyone laugh, but she must have meant the offer—and she must have made it with a twinkle in her eye.

The man was a lapsed Catholic who experienced "a great conversion" while being cared for by the sisters, Sister Dorothy added. "Within a couple of months he died in peace," she said.

"Mother was a woman of God," said Sister Dorothy. "She had great, great love for Jesus. Everything she did was for Jesus. She taught us that when we are working among the poorest of the poor, we are touching the body of Jesus . . . we see the face of Jesus."

To quench His thirst

In the sisters' chapel is one of the congregation's symbols, a large crucifix with the words "I thirst"—spoken by Christ from the cross—painted on the wall beside it.

"In the present-day Calvary, we discover the thirst of Jesus in the poorest of the poor," Sister Dorothy continued. "We make them aware that

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Jesus is thirsting for them, and help them to respond to his thirst, to his love. That is our work, that is our apostolate. . . . This is the whole aim of our society."

Sister Leticia explained that Mother Teresa made it clear the Missionaries of Charity are not social workers.

"The most important thing is that we bring Jesus to the poor, take Jesus where he has never walked before," she said. Smiling, she added that when the sisters visit families, children sometimes call them "Mrs. God," or say, "God is here."

"It is so beautiful to see that, and to hear that," she said, "to be able to bring God to the poor and to love him in this way, through the poor."

(Condensed from: "Ten years after Mother Teresa's death, her spirit lives on in her sisters." By Claudia McDonnell for Catholic New York, 9/6/2007. Reprinted with permission.)

Pope Benedict XVI

Anyone who needs me, and whom I can help, is my neighbor. . . . Jesus identifies himself with those in need, with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and those in prison. . . . Love of God and love of neighbor have become one: in the least of the brethren we find Jesus himself, and in Jesus we find God.

(Encyclical *God is Love*, n. 15.)

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Questions for Discussion

1. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 because many of the Christians of Corinth were preoccupied with sensational gifts like speaking in tongues or uttering prophecy, and they were overlooking the absolute centrality of love. One could say that these tendencies have not changed much in two thousand years. How do you explain this?

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3. This faith-sharing program includes a component of service. Take a few moments to share ideas and discuss some of the ways members of your group have been trying to serve.

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4. Obviously service can be carried out more or less mechanically or out of a rigid sense of duty, or it can be performed with love. What helps you to carry it out with love?

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5. What are one or two of the greatest examples of love you have ever seen or heard about? Discuss what you found especially striking about them. Feel free also to mention one or two memorable moments of love (especially sacrificial love) you have witnessed in your own family or community.

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6. A reporter who followed Mother Teresa of Calcutta around for a day said to her, "Mother, I wouldn't do what you do for a million dollars." Mother Teresa responded, "Neither would I." Discuss.

Group Prayers of Intercession

8 to 10 minutes

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, help me to be a living reflection of your love.

May my eyes be loving, that I might never judge harshly from appearances, but look for what is beautiful in my neighbor.

May my ears be loving, that I might be attentive to the needs of others and never be indifferent to their pleas or cries of pain.

May my tongue be loving, that I might speak words of kindness, encouragement, mercy and forgiveness.

May my hands be loving, that I might reach out to work, to serve, to comfort and to heal.

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May my feet be loving, that I might hurry to the side
of the abandoned or distressed.

May my heart be loving, that I might feel the joys,
the hopes and the sorrows of my neighbor as my
own.

Lord Jesus, help me to be a living reflection of your
love.

Amen.

**Inspired by a prayer of St. Faustina Kowalska (1905-
1938).**