

God Is Love

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The most televised Scripture citation is John 3:16, made famous on the signs waved by Christian fans of professional sports teams all over the world. The pericope reads: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that everyone who believes in him might not perish, but might have eternal life.”¹ This much-loved line from Scripture reflects the centrality of God’s love for humanity and radiates the reality that God is a compassionate and loving Father.

The term “love” is quoted approximately four hundred times in the Bible, making it one of the most frequently used terms in the entire corpus of Sacred Scripture. Love has been the topic of some of the world’s greatest poems, songs, theater, books, and art from every age. In Catholic circles, love has also been the topic of theology and spirituality—and with good reason, for love is an expression of the heart and a powerful emotion. Catholics would be wise not to forget that God is the author and creator of love and that God can be found in the beautiful love story in the Song of Songs, the short book in the Bible. The Song of Songs is a magnificent portrayal of the mutual and generous love of God and humanity.

To Love Is Divine

If you grew up Catholic, you have probably heard the statement “God is love” at least once, if not a thousand times, and it may have lost some of its potency over the years. But despite your hearing that “God is love” countless times, the veracity and meaning of the statement does not diminish. The old adage “to love is divine” is an accurate statement that mirrors the ancient axiom “*Deus caritas est*,” or “God is love.” The New Testament makes reference to this divine truth in the First Letter of John (4:16): “God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him.” This text represents the heart of the Christian faith, the idea that God created humanity for love: love of God, love of neighbor, love of self.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1997) reveals that God loves humanity more than any mother loves her children, more than any bridegroom loves his bride, and more than any son loves his father (219). The fact is that God chooses to love us even though we are flawed, weak, frail, and imperfect. The Prophet Jeremiah proclaims, “I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore, I have continued my faithfulness to you” (31:3, NRSV). God’s love for us is everlasting because God is love. God’s very essence and being is love, as revealed throughout the whole span of salvation history: Creation, the Exodus, the Incarnation, the Resurrection, and eventually in the *Parousia* (second coming of Christ). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, “God’s very being is love. By sending his only Son and Spirit of Love in fullness of time, God has revealed [an] innermost secret: God is an eternal exchange of love—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and [God] has destined us to share in that exchange” (221). Since God is love, and God is with us and God abides in us, then Catholics are called to love as God does: wholly, divinely, and without reservation. “We love because God first loved us” (1 John 4:19). To love is divine because love first comes from God and unites us to Christ and each other; therefore, love begets love, according to Pope Benedict XVI in his first papal encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est* (2006) (18).



Theological Love

Theologically, Christian love can be summed up by pointing to the Incarnation, when God became human in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. In *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict states, “The real novelty of the New Testament lies not so much in new ideas as in the figure of Christ himself, who gives flesh and blood to those concepts” (12). It is God’s unconditional love for humanity that allows God to reveal himself to us through the flesh and blood of Jesus of Nazareth. The great German Jesuit Karl Rahner (1978) refers to God’s gratuitous love as “God’s self-communication,” which is to “signify that God in his own most proper reality makes himself the innermost constitutive element of the [human person]” (*Foundations of Christian Faith*, 116). It is God’s self-communication and unmerited love for humanity that allows God to “empty himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are; and being in every way like a human being, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross” (Philippians 2:6–8, NJB). Love within Christianity points specifically to the love of God revealed in Jesus of Nazareth, who is the Christ—the Anointed One of God.

Pope Benedict XVI also addresses the twofold reality of Christian love—(1) love of God and (2) love of neighbor—both of which stem from biblical faith (*Deus Caritas Est*, 16). The two mandates—to love God and to love our neighbor—form a symbiotic association with each other that draws a person into deeper union with God. The Holy Father notes, “The unbreakable bond between love of God and love of neighbor is emphasized. One is so closely connected to the other that to say that we love God becomes a lie if we are closed to our neighbor or hate him altogether” (17). The two great commandments to love God and love our neighbor constitute the love story that exists between God and God’s children. This love story increases and unfolds as our faith in Jesus Christ evolves and recognizes the awesome gift of God’s love. It is a reciprocal love, a gift that must be received and shared (7).

Another theological point regarding love is that love is a gift from God and a virtue of God. Love is one of the three theological virtues: faith, hope, and love (*Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC]*, 1822; 1 Corinthians 13:13). Love is a fruit or gift of the Holy Spirit: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22–23). Love is a gift from God that undergirds the entire Christian message—namely, “Christ died out of love for us” (CCC, 1825). Living a dynamic, Catholic, faith-filled life must incorporate love. The Apostle Paul poignantly remarks, “Strive eagerly for the greatest spiritual gifts—the way of love” (1 Corinthians 12:31). In addition, Paul states, “If I have faith so as to move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing” (13:2). The love that allows us “to move mountains” is an all-inclusive love, an unconditional love, and an everlasting love: a love that grows and flourishes as we grow in holiness.

Types of Love

Traditionally, there are four types of love, and they tend to interact with each other. In his classic book *The Four Loves* (1960), the great Anglican spiritual writer C. S. Lewis (1898–1963) expounds upon four types of love: (1) affection, (2) *philia* (friendship), (3) *eros* (romantic, sexual desire), and (4) *agape* (charity, God’s love).

The first, affection, is the humblest form of love; it puts on no airs (see Lewis, p. 56). Affection is simply the warmth and genuine kindness that parents demonstrate to their children, that teachers show their students, that coaches display to their athletes, and that people demonstrate when working or living among each other, thus forming a small community (see pp. 53–60). Lewis comments that



“affection does not expect too much, turns a blind eye to faults, revives easily after quarrels; just so charity suffers long and is kind and forgives” (p. 61). Affection is the cornerstone for the other three types of love.

Philia, the Greek noun for “friendship,” describes the human social interaction between two or more persons. Lewis maintains that *philia* is based in love: “Very few [contemporary] people think friendship a love comparable in value or even a love at all” (p. 87). When people refer to others as “my best friend” or “my good friend,” these are words of endearment. Lewis contends that *philia* is not at all derogatory in any way; and of all the four loves, *philia* is the least instinctive, organic, biological, gregarious, and necessary (see p. 88). However, not many human beings could survive or live without having any friends—not in any real sense of the word “live.” Friendships are one of life’s gifts that make the world tolerable and more palatable. Finally, *philia* is concerned with freedom and choice: human beings are free to select their own friends and allow other individuals the ability to enter into another’s private world. We may believe that we have chosen our friends—but in reality, and after having traveled several miles along the journey of life, our friends have chosen us. Jesus mentions this reality about *philia* in the New Testament: “For you have not chosen me, but I have chosen you” (John 15:16). This passage gives us a great insight into Jesus’ understanding of *philia*.

Eros, the third kind of love Lewis identifies, describes the state of being deeply in love with another person. *Eros* is the Greek word for love and sexual desire; it goes beyond attraction and friendship. According to Lewis, “*Eros* makes a man really want, *not* a woman, but one *particular* woman,” and vice versa (p. 135). Virtually every young person longs for the great gift that is *eros* with someone with whom they fall in love. But authentic *eros* leads to a deep and binding commitment: to Christian marriage, the pinnacle expression of *eros*. In marriage *eros* reaches its fullness through communal living, sharing, sexual expression, and procreation. In marriage, *eros* can lead two people to spend the rest of their lives with each other, growing old together and seeing their children’s children. Pope Benedict XVI emphasizes that “true *eros* tends to rise ‘in ecstasy’ towards the Divine, to lead us beyond ourselves” (no. 5). The Holy Father reminds Catholics that God is the author of *eros* and also loves humanity with an *eros* love—not a sexual love, but a passionate love, one that can lead a person to a “path of ascent, renunciation, purification, and healing” (*Deus Caritas Est*, 5). Christians can experience God’s love as *eros*, just as married Catholics experience each other’s love in this way, thereby connecting *eros* and *agape* to each other and to God.

Agape (Greek meaning “to be friends with” God or “the love of” God) is a fourth level of love, a realization and connotation that is totally different from charity (Lewis, 165). The New Testament affirms this truth: “Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love” (1 John 4:8). “In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that God has loved us” (4:10a). These two pericopes represent a principle of *agape*: that is, God is love and God desires to be in love with humanity. For Lewis, *agape* is the fullest experience of love because *agape* is God’s full and unconditional love for human beings. *Agape* is more than love; it is divine energy, it is primal love, and it is gift-love from the creator and author of all good gifts—God (see Lewis, p. 175). Two Old Testament figures have enjoyed *agape* with God: the Patriarch Abraham (see Genesis, chapter 22) and the law-giver Moses (see Exodus, chapter 4). Both enjoyed divine friendship with God that demonstrates *agape* with God. Pope Benedict XVI notes that *agape* is “possessive love and oblation love . . . a descending love [coming from God] . . . a source, which is [expressed in] Jesus the Christ, from whose pierced heart flows the love of God (cf. John 19:34)” (*Deus Caritas Est*, 8).

These four types of Christian love represent a relationship that exists between each of the love types—affection, *philia*, *eros*, *agape*—as well as a relationship between spirituality and charity. Human



loving and divine love are intrinsically linked to one's spirituality, which encompasses kindness, empathy, care, and compassion.

Care and Compassion

The real and tangible side of love is the ability for the Catholic body of believers to be caring and compassionate towards others. This ability is the practical side of *agape* and *caritas*, or charity. The primacy of Christian love implies the centrality of pastoral living and ministerial praxis—works of mercy and works of charity—in our contemporary and complex world. The love of God does not end and begin with ourselves; it begins weekly with the celebration of Sunday Eucharist and is carried forth to our neighbors and to others in need (see Pope Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 91). Love demands that we are caring and compassionate to those most in need: the poor, the marginalized, the disenfranchised.

In his apostolic exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, Pope Benedict XVI (2007) states, “The mystery of the Eucharist inspires and impels us to work courageously within our world to bring about that renewal of relationships which has its inexhaustible source in God’s gift [of love]” (91). The Sunday Eucharist moves Catholics to social action and transformation, which are byproducts of God’s *agape* and our *caritas*, or charity, toward each other. The care and compassion that Catholics display pastorally toward one another are the same care and compassion demonstrated by God and are the tangible source and reality of God’s love.

Pastorally, the way Catholics infuse the principle of *Deus caritas est* into the world is through solidarity, reciprocity, and forgiveness, which are genuinely expressed through the care and the compassion shown to others in the world. The love of God—*Amor Dei*—is a powerful force in the world: apart from it, Christians can struggle and flounder, but equipped with God’s love Christians can move mountains and live inspiring lives that join us to Jesus the Christ and reflect the Latin motto *Deus mea lux est*, or God is my light.

The Love Doctor

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), a French Cistercian abbot and spiritual writer, wrote more than 3,500 pages of spiritual theology. The majority of Bernard’s works address love: love between monks and their fellow brothers, love between husband and wife, love between God and humanity. Bernard wrote two specific treatises on love: *Sermons on the Song of Songs* and *On Loving God*. Both describe the mystery of God’s love, and both are considered spiritual masterpieces today. For Bernard, God’s love can be experienced most intimately between bride and bridegroom and between the soul of a Christian and Jesus Christ. Bernard notes, “Love excels among the gifts of nature, especially when it returns to its source, which is God” (*Sermons on the Song of Songs*, p. 9). For Bernard, the primary objective of the Bible is love and the need to spread the message of God’s love to others. It is through love and out of love that God seeks humanity and that humans seek after God in their turn. Bernard comments, “God’s love is self-revealing; it is expressed through the inspired authors and later through [God’s] Incarnate Son” (*On Loving God*, p. 32). Bernard of Clairvaux has many rich spiritual writings and a deep theology of love, but he is best known for his eloquent essays on love. In *On Loving God*, Bernard writes, “You [God] who are everything I can desire and love . . . [are] true charity. True love does not ask for a reward, but deserves it” (p. 187). In other words, God is not loved without reward: there is not only earthly reward, but still greater heavenly reward. Bernard of Clairvaux, also known as “the Love Doctor,” offers us a glimpse of God’s love, a love that can be found if sought.



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Endnotes

ⁱ All biblical passages come from the *New American Bible: The Catholic Bible, Personal Study Edition* unless otherwise stated in the text.

