

# Living God's Call

by Mary McCullough

*I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:34–35)*

Christ came into this world to forgive sin, to bring a new commandment of love, and to be the ultimate role model of unconditional love. *Agape*, as it is lived by Christ in the reports of the New Testament, is unconditional love. Unconditional love means love for all people all of the time with no ulterior or selfish motives, rendering it altruistic and selfless. *Agape*, as a call and practice for daily living, is founded on the intrinsic dignity and worth of every human being. Answering God's call to live in *agape* starts with the belief that God loves all human beings alike, and because we are all created in God's image, we too must love one another as God loves us. Perhaps most important, it is our personal fellowship with God and our love for God that grounds *agape* and our strong desire to live a life based in Christian ethics.

The key to understanding *agape* today is practicing Christian ethics and social justice. We must understand how *agape* translates into "my life" and "my community," and how as companions on a journey we can go the extra mile to fulfill God's call to "love one another" (John 13:34). As Chris Lowney, a writer on business management, writes, "Before we are bankers, priests, astronauts, or film manufacturers, we are human beings." So the first and strategic question to ask is: "What does it mean to be a fulfilled, purposeful, successful human being?" The answer lies in God's commandment of love and starts with our love for God above all. As Christians, we use *agape*—God's call—as a moral and ethical guideline for everything we do. *Agape* is the means to the most purposeful life possible, informing relational ethics at every level of society: It starts with self and ripples out to the family / community level, and to the national / global levels. This article explores *agape* at all levels of God's call for us to live a life of unconditional love.

## Love God Above All

*Jesus replied, "The first is this: 'Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:29–31)*

In addition to being a model for our lives, Jesus gave us two commandments to guide our actions and intentions. The first commandment is: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Mark 12:30). This means to love God above all and to see God in all things, plans, activities, and relationships. This requires a consistent and conscious effort to elevate our awareness and communication with God. Through prayer, as constant conversation with God, we can include God in all aspects of our life, and this takes conscious effort and practice. God is our willing and loving companion.



What does it take for us to see God in all things and in all minutes of our precious life? One strategy is to change the daily plan or order of our life from checklist to constant conversation. Often as we go through the day, week, and years, we make checklists of activities to guide our actions. Sometimes these checklists can be helpful, and sometimes they can be limiting. Life checklists can also make it seem like we are the one really in charge. To make the shift from checklist to conversation begins with consciously taking the time to reflect on our actions and call for God's guidance in every step we take. In moments of reflection, we search for deeper meaning and carve out the time to dialogue with God. Meditation and thoughtful reflection are often prized commodities we reserve for retreats, mass, or religious celebrations. This shift in thinking means more than scattered instances; it means a shift to a way of being that encompasses our thoughts, activities, and relationships. The pace of life is often too fast, but to live God's call to act ethically and live justly, we must allow ourselves time to be thoughtful, purposeful, and God-centered in order to be our best self. When God is our constant companion, we trust that our intentions, activities, and actions are aligned with God's plan for our life and the lives of others. "Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:16–17).

The second commandment is: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31). This means that in order to love our neighbor, we must first love ourselves. But what exactly does it mean to love self?

## Reflection Questions

- How can I find God in all things?
- How can I live in companionship with God?
- How can I really love God with my whole heart, soul, mind, and strength?

## Agape at the Level of Self

*God told us, "Love your neighbor as yourself." So first I am to love myself rightly, and then to love my neighbor like that. But how can I love myself unless I accept myself as God has made me? (Mother Teresa)*

Love of self means recognizing the gift of life God gives to each of us. This notion of gift is carried out in the Catholic social teaching on human dignity, which means doing good to all and promoting tolerance because all human beings are our neighbors and we are all equal. We are first and foremost human. As human beings we have God-given dignity because we are loved by God and created in God's image and likeness. According to Catholic social teaching, nothing can take away our God-given dignity, not even our own destructive actions.

We must love one another as we love ourselves—the latter often being more difficult. Once we recognize that we are a "gift" from God, we can begin to understand the importance of our gift and celebrate self in body, mind, and spirit. To love self in body, mind, and spirit means accepting all aspects of self, including our body, our mind, our talents, and our strengths and areas for growth. In other words, we need to see ourselves through the loving eyes of God, in which we are perfect—perfectly created and unconditionally loved. To love self is to embrace self for what I am: God's image in this world.



We manifest a love of self by guarding our health, nurturing our mind, feeding our spirit, and sharing our talents. Before we can reach out to others, we must first understand our own thoughts, motivations, and passions. What do I believe? What do I know? What are my strengths, biases, needs, and areas for growth? The place of self-knowledge is the place for real truth. Just as looking into a mirror is revealing in the moment, looking deep into the truths of our heart and mind can reveal our inner sense of our essential self. It is this inner self, the most intimate part of our being, that God knows well and loves deeply. To gain a better sense of self, spend time in reflective prayer, meditate on what matters most in your life, and create a habit of ongoing conversation with God. As Lowney writes, "We need to make an investment to get a great result" (2009, p. 22). Relying on God every minute of the day, in every act and encounter, takes practice, but the benefits are immense. If we rely on God, trust in God's presence, and walk in companionship with God, we will be amazed at what we can do as God works with and through us: "For God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26).

Relying on God also means trusting God in all things. To trust in God means to grow in respect for all human life and to protect the dignity of others in every encounter and situation. In our daily lives, we can be kind, greet people with a smile, practice patience and forgiveness, and advocate for those who cannot advocate for themselves. These acts can be as small as holding the door open for someone, or as large as actively advocating against unjust laws. Catholic social teaching calls us to work for the dignity of all. We can do this by protecting the unborn and the elderly, and opposing the death penalty and other forms of violence.

## Reflection Questions

- Why do I matter?
- What does it mean to love myself?
- How do I know who I am supposed to be?
- How do I find balance in my life?
- How do I know what I am supposed to do in life?
- How can I be happy?

## Links

- [U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops](#)
- [Jesuits.org](#)
- [About-face](#)



## Agape at the Family and Community Level

*Each of us has a mission, each of us is called to change the world, to work for a culture of life, a culture forged by love and respect for the dignity of each human person. (Pope Benedict XVI)*

God calls us to live as humans in fellowship and community. One of our first communal spaces is our family. Living in *agape* means to find ways to give love, assistance, and service to others, whether a member of our family, a member of our local community, or a member of society. Social dynamics are complex and there are many factors that inhibit people from flourishing as human beings in the way that they should. As a member of a family, we may become easily frustrated with others in our immediate or extended family. God's call to live in love invites us to see the good in each family member, even when they are acting in ways that are not necessarily loveable. If we always see others as gifts from God, loved by God, we can calm any immediate frustration and turn our thoughts into prayer for our family member. We can also remember to reach out to family members in most need of our care and attention—the young, disabled, elderly, sick, and dying. As Jesus teaches, "I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly" (John 10:10).

Through Catholic social teaching, we are taught about the interdependence of everyone living in communities, large and small. We can advocate for and protect families in society by electing fair-minded government officials, passing fair and equitable laws, ensuring jobs that pay just wages and support families, protecting life, and safeguarding basic necessities (i.e., food, housing, education, and healthcare). In turn, families can participate in society by involving themselves in the political process, helping neighbors, caring for vulnerable members of society (i.e., children, elderly, homeless, disabled, and imprisoned), staying informed on issues affecting community, and allowing all people to live with respect for human life.

In Catholic social teaching on the preferential option for the poor, we are called to care for and give to those who are most in need. God's call to live in *agape* means taking on the problems of those in need and making them our own. In the words of Saint Ignatius, "To give and not to count the cost." It is easy to overlook the needs of the poor, especially if we think of them as "other." If we see God and ourselves in those who are poor in spirit or circumstance, we can no longer look away. Instead we can reach out in love to those in need and spend time with the poor, get to know them, and see them as God's children, not objects of charity. Father James Martin, a Jesuit priest, writes: "One of my friends, a corporate lawyer, told me he found three things that help: first, being grateful for what you have; second, helping out in a church community; and third, really stretching yourself when you give charitably."

The goal of God's call for us to live in *agape* is to live in harmony with our family, in peace with the members of our community, and in solidarity with the poor.

### Reflection Questions

- What does it mean to be a loving member of my family?
- What does it mean to love my neighbor as myself?
- How can I be a good friend?
- How can I remember God's call to care for the poor and vulnerable?
- How do I live in solidarity with others?



## Links

- Volunteer Match
- Link to local charities
- Link to local Church community
- Link to local government official or elected representative

## Agape at the National and Global Levels

*The greatest challenge of the day is: how to bring about a revolution of the heart, a revolution which has to start with each one of us. (Dorothy Day)*

God's call to live in *agape* at the national and global levels builds on *agape* at the levels of self and family. As humans we are social beings, and Catholic social teaching says that the spirit of true friendship and community—among individuals, groups, and nations—are the basis for a just society. God calls us to live in solidarity and to commit to the common good for all. To promote the common good means to respect all life and the dignity of every person, to protect human rights, to commit to the well-being and full development of every person, and to ensure equitable access to basic life needs such as food and shelter. We also must remember that our rights are not unlimited. Rather they are limited by the responsibility for common good. In certain circumstances society must regulate individual rights. In the words of an old saying, "My right ends where another's right begins."

Protecting the common good can happen only if we live out the Church teachings on the universal destination of goods and thus recognize that the earth and all its goods belong to God. These goods of the earth are enough to provide the things all human beings need to live with dignity. A contemporary writer on social justice, Brian Singer-Towns, notes: "God created every person with equal dignity and value. Because of that equal dignity, every human person has the right to the things necessary to live a dignified life." These basic human needs include life, food, clothing, shelter, rest, medical care, social services, economic rights, political and cultural rights, and a healthy environment. We must recognize that the poor, whether poor in spirit or poor in basic human needs, are part of us and therefore it is God's call for us to share with and advocate for those who have less.

Concrete ways of protecting the common good at the national level include advocating for moral and equitable financial processes, such as ensuring fair and equitable taxes and no taxes for nonprofit organizations. We can also advocate for proper funding to support welfare, state-funded education guarantees, free medical clinics, national school lunch programs, disability services, and environmental clean-up efforts. In these efforts, we live up to our important role of citizen in protecting basic human rights and ensuring the protection and promotion of the rights delineated in the U.S. Constitution.

God's call to live in *agape* is also a call for us to live a moral and ethical life in all we do, particularly in relation to our work and the work of others. In thinking about the dignity of work, we need to think about the value of the human being involved in the work. Human work should contribute to the increase of goodness in the world, not detract from it. Workers must be treated with dignity by other workers and by their employers. The rights of the worker must be respected by business owners and protected by society. As consumers we must be aware of the rights of workers so that we support only companies and products that protect the rights of the worker and promote the health of the environment.



*Agape* at the global level is a call to social justice that includes the protection of all people who work and provide services to the products we consume. In addition, to live God's call means we do what we can to promote moral and humanitarian intervention in countries that are suffering mass genocide (e.g., Rwanda, Darfur) and carry out the mission of the United Nations to secure human rights for all people, on a global scale. The goal of *agape* on the global level is to assist all nations to find ways to make their own contribution to the public good through the treasure of their culture and the natural resources of their region. God also calls us to care for all forms of creation with love, including stewardship for natural resources and the environment.

## Reflection Questions

- How do I love?
- How do I pray?
- How do I care for and protect the environment?

## Links

- Catholic Charities USA
- Catholic Worker Movement
- Human Rights USA
- Poverty USA
- United Nations
- Church World Service
- Amnesty International
- Catholic Relief Services
- Center of Concern
- International Labor Rights Forum
- Ten Thousand Villages
- Society of Jesus (Jesuits)

## Agape Reflection Questions

- Am I living God's call? Do I love unconditionally?
- Do I take care of the gift of life that I have been given?
- Do I value my contributions and, above all, myself?
- Do I know and love myself for who I am?
- Do I use *agape* to inform my actions in my family and my community?
- Do I use *agape* to inform what I advocate for at the societal level?
- Do I work to preserve the world that God gave us to nurture and enjoy?
- Do I go out of my way to assist those who are disadvantaged?
- Do I treat everyone with unconditional love?



*[Love] bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.  
(1 Corinthians 13:7)*

Saint Ignatius of Loyola, in the *Spiritual Exercises*, wrote:

Our only desire and our one choice should be this:  
I want and I choose what better leads to the deepening of God's life in me.

We conclude with his prayer and make it our own as we live God's call through a life based in *agape*, Christian unconditional love:

Saint Ignatius's Prayer for Generosity

Lord, teach me to be generous.  
Teach me to serve you as you deserve;  
to give and not to count the cost,  
to fight and not to heed the wounds,  
to toil and not to seek for rest,  
to labor and not to ask for reward,  
Save that of knowing that I do your will.

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The quotation by Pope Benedict XVI is from "Prayer Vigil on the Eve of the Beatification of Cardinal John Henry Newman: Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI," at [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2010/september/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20100918\\_veglia-card-newman\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2010/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20100918_veglia-card-newman_en.html). Copyright © 2010 Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

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