



PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR CULTURE

THE WAY OF LOVE

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The topic of this talk is the “way of love” in the context of a renewed anthropology to reach non-believers and the indifferent. By way of a premise, when we speak of “non-believers”, we must bear in mind that there are baptized non-believers as well as non-baptized believers who believe in Jesus Christ or in some supreme being or deity. That is why in certain quarters today many are disturbed and even protest when people of faiths other than Christian are clubbed together as “unbelievers”.

The “way of love”, to us Christians, is a way of life. “Love of God and neighbor” is a commandment which was carried over from the Old Testament - the *Shema Israel* regarding the “love of God” in Deuteronomy 6:5 and the “love of neighbor” in Leviticus 19:18. Its full meaning, however, was revealed by Our Lord Jesus Christ (Mt 5:17).

As far as “love of God” was concerned, Jesus taught His disciples that God was not only all-wise, all-powerful and all-providing, as they knew Him in the Old Covenant, but also a loving Father who “makes the sun to shine and the rain to fall on the just and the unjust”, and who understands and forgives those who err and repent (Mt 5:45, 6:25-34; 7:9-11). He explained the Father’s care, concern and compassion in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt.5:1-6:28) and in the parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32). He taught them to pray the *Our Father* (Mt 5:9-13).

As for the commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself”, at the Last Supper Jesus gave His followers a “new commandment” to love one another, not “as you love yourself” as it was written in the Old Testament, but “as I have loved you” (Jn 13:34, 15:12), i.e. even unto death, an ignominious death on the cross. Jesus explained the meaning of this new commandment when He told His disciples to forgive their offenders “seventy seven times” (Mt 18:22), and commanded them: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who persecute you” (Mt 5:44); “offer the other cheek to those who strike you, and if someone sues you and takes your coat, give him also your cloak, if anyone forces you to go a mile, go with him two miles” (Mt 5:39-41), etc. In the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:30-37) Jesus taught them that their love of neighbor should go beyond their kith and kin. He identified Himself with those who were hungry and thirsty, strangers, naked, sick and in prison: “As often as you did it to the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Mt 25:40). He showed concretely what love of neighbor meant when He taught the multitudes, healed the sick, fed the hungry, welcomed public sinners who were despised by everyone, cured lepers who were outcasts in society, and asked His Father to forgive those who had unjustly condemned, scourged and crucified Him. This is the royal “way of love” of God and neighbor, as enshrined in the *Gospel of Jesus Christ*.

It is a fact and an everyday experience that many “unbelievers in God” do believe in human and humane values, and many who are “indifferent to things religious” are highly sensitive to matters relating to the care of the sick, the poor and the marginalized.

These persons deeply appreciate the Gospel “way of love” whereby Christians follow in the footsteps of their Founder, who “went about doing good” (Acts 10:38) and sacrificed His life on the cross for the salvation of His brethren. This is particularly true in countries where Christians, even though they are few in numbers, abound in *good works*. In India, for instance, where Christians are a very tiny minority in the midst of a multireligious, multiethnic and pluricultural society, what impresses persons of other faiths and cultures is the eloquent witness of selfless love - at times, without words - which Christians give through their many educational, health-care and social institutions. In fact, Christians in India today are only 2.3% of the total population of over a billion, and yet they cater to

20% of all the primary education in the country, 10% of the literacy and community health-care programs, 25% of the care of the orphans and widows, and 30% of the care of the physically and mentally challenged, lepers and Aids patients. The vast majority of those benefiting from these works of charity, education and, health-care are persons of faiths other than Christian or of no faith at all. They admire Christians for their love in action, and for spreading goodwill and healthy moral values without seeking publicity or the headlines.

Another genuine expression of the Christian “way of love”, which even non-believers and the indifferent appreciate, is *forgiveness*, and they are justifiably scandalized whenever it is not practiced among Christians, be they individuals or ethnic groups or nations. This is what prompted Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of the Indian nation - who admired Jesus and considered His *Sermon on the Mount* as the best sermon ever preached - to say: “I love Jesus Christ, but not the Christians, because they do not live as He has taught them”. Our Holy Father Pope John Paul II impressed one and all when he unhesitatingly forgave the one who had attempted to kill him, and he even visited him in prison. - Three years ago in India an Australian Protestant missionary Graham Staines, who was taking care of lepers in the north of the country, was brutally burnt to death with two of his young sons by some Hindu fundamentalists because he was falsely accused of converting people to Christianity and was considered to be wasting his time on people who were only paying the price for their past misdeeds with the dreaded disease of leprosy:

this is the Hindu belief in *karma*, i.e. a system of spiritual purification through a cycle of re-incarnations. True to Jesus’ teaching, Graham’s widow, Gladys, immediately forgave the murderers and prayed for their change of heart. This made a very favorable impact on everyone, especially on those belonging to non-Christian faiths, because they saw in this noble gesture a true disciple of Jesus Christ. - We have a similar example in Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who was of Albanian origin. When her mother died in Albania, the then Communist dictator Enver Hoxha did not allow her to come for the funeral. Years later, after the dictator’s death, Mother Teresa visited her homeland, and wished to place a floral wreath on her mother’s tomb. When she reached the graveyard, someone whispered to her that even the dictator’s grave was in that cemetery. So she decided to go first to his tomb, and laid on it the bouquet of flowers she was carrying for her mother. It was a concrete gesture of loving one’s enemy which deeply touched the hearts of all.

Speaking of Mother Teresa and Albania, we know that Communist Albania was the only country in the world to declare itself an atheistic state in its national Constitution.

Religion was completely outlawed, all the bishops and priests were imprisoned and condemned to hard labor, and some even to death, and the Church’s institutions were confiscated and used for profane purposes. Once the freedom of religious expression was granted in 1989 (after a period of almost forty years of Communist dictatorship), the Church began showing its proverbial “way of love” by starting educational, health-care and social welfare institutions all over the country. The fact that Mother Teresa was loved and deeply revered by everyone in Albania helped immensely to create goodwill towards the Church and the values it stands for. Today, the Albanian government - which is still communist - has named its capital’s international airport and the central hospital in Tirana after Mother Teresa, it has requested the Holy See to found a Catholic University in Albania dedicated to Mother Teresa, and has declared October 19, the day of Mother Teresa’s beatification, a national holiday. This is a concrete example of how the “way of love” has touched and deeply affected the attitudes of a country once known as the harshest expression of communist ideology in Eastern Europe.

To conclude: The “way of love” is an important means to spread the sweet perfume of Jesus Christ and to give a strong witness of Gospel values which can be easily understood even by non-believers and persons who are religiously indifferent. It implies personal sacrifice, deeds of mercy and selfless service of others while carrying out Christ’s command: “Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Mt 5:16). It is proclaiming the Good News without words. John Henry Cardinal Newman has beautifully summed it up in his prayer “*Radiating Christ*” from which I quote a few phrases: “Lord, help me to spread Thy fragrance everywhere I go. Flood my soul with Thy Spirit and Life.... Let me preach Thee

without preaching, not by words but by my example, by the catching force, the sympathetic influence of what I do, the evident fullness of the love my heart bears to Thee”.