

The Gate of Charity - Third Sermon, Advent 2022 - Raniero Cantalamessa

*Lift up your heads, O gates;
be lifted, you ancient portals,
that the king of glory may enter.*

In our intent to open the gates to Christ who comes, we have reached the innermost door of the “interior castle”, that of the theological virtue of charity.

But what does it mean to open the door of love to Christ? Does it mean, perhaps, that we take the initiative to love God? So the pagan philosophers would have replied, based on the idea they had of God’s love. “God – said Aristotle – moves the world insofar as he is loved” . As much as he is loved, not as much as he loves! This philosophical view was completely reversed in the New Testament:

In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins... We love because he first loved us (1Jn 4: 12.19).

Henri de Lubac wrote: “The world must know: the revelation of Love upsets everything it had conceived of divinity” . To this day we have not finished (and will never finish) drawing all its consequences from the evangelical revolution on God as love. The Holy Spirit – Saint Irenaeus teaches us – continually rejuvenates the treasure of revelation, together with the vessel that contains it which is the tradition of the Church. With his help, let us try to understand what is the consequence still to be discovered and, above all, to be lived about the theological virtue of charity.

There are many treatises on the duty and degrees of God’s love, in other words, on the “God to love” (De diligendo Deo); I don’t know treatises on the “God who loves”! The Bible itself is a treatise on the God who loves; but, despite this, almost always, when we speak of “the love of God”, God is the object, not the subject of the sentence.

Now it is true that to love God with all one’s strength is “the first and greatest commandment”. This is certainly the first thing in the order of the commandments; but the order of the commandments is not the first order, the one that is on top of everything! Before the order of the commandments, there is the order of grace, that is, of God’s gratuitous love. The commandment itself is founded on the gift; the duty to love God is based on being loved by God: “We love because he first loved us”, the evangelist John just reminded us. This is the novelty of the Christian faith with respect to any ethics based on “duty”, or on the “categorical imperative”. We should never lose sight of this.

We believed in God’s love

Opening the door of love to Christ, therefore, means a very specific thing: welcoming the love of God, believing in love. “We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us”, writes John in the same context (1 Jn 4:16). Christmas is the manifestation – literally, the epiphany – of God’s goodness and love for the world: “The grace of God has appeared (epephane), saving all”, writes St. Paul; and again: “the kindness and generous love of God our savior appeared” (Tit 2, 11; 3, 4).

The most important thing to do at Christmas is to receive, full of wonder, the infinite gift of God’s love. When you receive a gift, it is not delicate to present your gift immediately with the other hand, perhaps already prepared in advance. One inevitably gives the impression of wanting to pay off immediately. First, it is necessary to honor the gift that is received and its donor, with amazement and gratitude. After – almost ashamed and with modesty – one can open one’s gift, as if it were nothing compared to what one has received. (Our gift to God is, in reality, less than nothing!). The traditional “act of charity”, at least in the private and personal recitation, should not begin with the words: “My God, I love you with all my heart”, but “My God, I believe with all my heart that you love me”.

What we must do, first of all, at Christmas is to believe in God's love for us. It seems like an easy thing. Instead it is among the hardest things in the world. Man is more inclined to be active than passive, to do rather than to let himself be done. Unconsciously we do not want to be debtors, but creditors. Yes, we want God's love, but as a reward, rather than as a gift. In this way, however, a shift and an overturning are insensibly effected: in the first place, on top of everything, in the place of the gift, is put duty, in the place of grace, the law, in the place of faith, works.

"We believed in love!": This is a cry for which we must gather all our strength. I call it "incredulous faith": faith that cannot not understand how this can be true, even if it believes it. God – the Eternal, the Being, the All – loves me and cares for me, a little nothing lost in the immensity of the universe and of history! All we can do is to say with the poet: "And it is sweet to shipwreck in such a sea".

You have to become a child to believe in love. Children believe in love, but not based on reasoning. By instinct, by nature. They are born full of confidence in the love of their parents. They ask parents for the things they need, perhaps even by stamping their feet, but the unspoken assumption is not that they have earned it; rather that they are the children and that one day they will be the heirs of everything. It is above all for this reason that Jesus so often recommends becoming like children to enter his Kingdom.

It is not easy to become a child again. The experience, the bitterness, the disappointments of life make us cautious, prudent, sometimes cynical. We are all a little like Nicodemus. "How can a man – we think – be born again when he is old?" (Jn 3, 4). How can we be reborn, get excited again, be amazed at Christmas like children? But what did Jesus answer Nicodemus? "Amen, amen, I say to you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit" (Jn 3: 5).

Being born again is not the result of human effort and ambition, or excitement of the heart; it is the work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus does not speak here only of baptism; at least not just water baptism. It is a question of a rebirth and a baptism "in the Spirit", or "from above" (Jn 3: 3), which can be renewed several times throughout one's life. This was what the apostles and disciples experienced at Pentecost and that we too should desire in order to know to some extent that "new Pentecost" that Pope Saint John XXIII asked God for the whole Church in announcing the Council.

The essential of Pentecost is contained in these words of verse 4 of the second chapter of Acts: "They were all filled with the Holy Spirit". What does this short sentence that we have heard thousands of times mean? "They were all filled with the Holy Spirit": okay: but what is the Holy Spirit? It is the love – says theology – with which the Father loves the Son and with which the Son loves the Father. We say more freely: it is life, sweetness, fire, bliss that flow in the Trinity, because love is all these things together and in an infinite degree.

So saying that "all were filled with the Holy Spirit", is like saying that all were filled with the love of God. They had an overwhelming experience of being loved by God. By dying, Christ had destroyed the dividing wall of sin and now God's love could eventually pour out on the apostles and disciples, submerging them in an ocean of peace and happiness. By saying that "the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Rom 5: 5), St. Paul only describes – in a synthetic rather than a narrative form – the event of Pentecost, actualized, for each one, in baptism.

God's love has an objective aspect that we call sanctifying grace, or infused charity, but it also involves a subjective element, an existential repercussion, as it is in the very nature of love. It was not, as we are inclined to think, something purely objective, or ontological, of which the person concerned has no awareness. The gift of the "new heart" did not happen under total anesthesia, like normal heart transplants! We see it from the sudden change that takes place in the apostles. No more fears, rivalry, shyness; new men, ready to reach out and give their lives for Christ.

"Charity edifies"

The discourse on the theological virtue of love certainly does not end at this point. It would be an unfinished speech, like a protasis not followed by the apodosis. The protasis is: "If God loved us so much ..."; the apodosis, or the consequence, is: "we too must love him and love one another". But we

have so many opportunities to talk about the exercise of charity that for once we can leave aside “duty” to deal only with the “gift”. I will therefore limit myself only to a few brief considerations on the social and ecclesial implications of the theological virtue of charity.

It is said of charity that it edifies: “Knowledge inflates with pride, but love builds up” (1 Cor 8: 2). First of all, it builds up the edifice of God which is the Church. “Living the truth in love, we should grow in every way into him who is the head, Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, with the proper functioning of each part, brings about the body’s growth and builds itself up in love” (Eph 4: 15- 16).

Charity is what constitutes the invisible reality of the Church, the *societas sanctorum*, or communion of saints, as Augustine calls it. It is the reality of the sacrament (the *res sacramenti*), the meaning of the sign which is the visible Church. “Charity remains”, says Saint Paul (1 Cor 13:13). It is the only one that remains. Once the Scriptures, faith, hope, charisms, ministries and everything else cease, charity remains. Everything will disappear, as when the scaffolding that was used to build is dismantled and the building appears in all its glory.

For a certain time, in ancient times, the whole reality of the Church was designated by the simple term of charity, *agape*. This immediately brings to mind the famous saying of St. Ignatius of Antioch: “The Church of Rome is that which presides over charity (*agape*)” . This sentence is usually used in function of the primacy of Rome and the pope. But it affirms not only the fact of primacy (“presides”), but also its nature, or the way of exercising it (“in charity”). This is what the Church of Rome did in its best moments and which it certainly intends to do today, having chosen – also in the new constitution *Praedicate Evangelium* – fraternal dialogue, synodality and service as a method of governance.

However, charity not only edifies the spiritual society which is the Church, but also civil society. In his work *The city of God*, Saint Augustine explains that two cities coexist in history: the city of Satan, symbolized by Babylon, and the city of God, symbolized by Jerusalem. What distinguishes the two realities is the different love from which they are moved. The first has as its motive the love of self pushed to the point of contempt of God (*amor sui usque ad contemptum Dei*), the second has as its motive the love of God pushed to the point of contempt for oneself (*amor Dei usque ad contemptum sui*).

The opposition, in this case, is between the love of God and the love of oneself. In another work, however, St. Augustine partially corrects this contrast, or at least balances it. The real contrast that characterizes the two cities is not between the love of God and the love of oneself. These two loves, correctly understood, can – indeed, must – exist together. No, the real contrast is that internal to self-love, and it is the difference between the exclusive love of self – *amor privatus*, as he calls it – and the love of the common good – *amor socialis* . It is private love – that is, selfishness – that creates the city of Satan, Babylon, and it is social love that creates the city of God where harmony and peace reign.

Social sentiment was born on the soil irrigated by the Gospel, and it is strange that in modern times this conquest has been used as an argument to be thrown in the face of Christianity. In the early centuries and throughout the Middle Ages, the means par excellence, to act in the social field and to help the poor, was almsgiving. It is a biblical value and always retains its relevance. However, it can no longer be proposed as the ordinary way of practicing social love, or the love of the common good, because it does not safeguard the dignity of the poor and keeps them in their state of dependence.

It is up to politicians and economists to initiate structural processes that reduce the scandalous gap between a small number of the very rich and the endless number of the disinherited of the earth. The ordinary means for Christians is to create the conditions in the heart of man for this to happen. For those involved in the social sphere, it is a question of promoting the so-called “social doctrine of the Church”. For Christian entrepreneurs, for example, it means creating jobs, as the Holy Father reiterated in the meeting in Assisi last September, for young economists who are inspired by his social teaching.

Only love can save us

Before concluding, I would like to mention another beneficial effect of the theological virtue of charity on the society in which we live. Grace, says a famous theological axiom, presupposes nature, it does not destroy it, but perfects it . Applied to the third theological virtue, this means that charity

presupposes the capacity and natural predisposition of the human being to love and be loved. This ability can save us today from an ongoing trend that would lead, if not corrected, to a real “dehumanization”.

I took part in a public debate in London a few years ago. The moderator posed a series of questions to a number of theologians, including a professor of theology from the American University of Yale, an Anglican bishop and theologian and myself. The crucial question was the following. After replacing man’s operational abilities with robots, the technique is now on the verge of replacing his mental abilities with artificial intelligence. What remains, therefore, of its own and exclusive to the human being? Is there still reason to consider it separately in the universe? Is it still indispensable, or not quite harmful, to nature?

When it came my turn to answer, with my poor and broken English, I added a simple reflection. We are working, I said, on a computer that thinks: but can we imagine a computer that loves, that is moved by our pains and rejoices in our joys? We can conceive of an artificial intelligence: but can we conceive of an artificial love? Perhaps it is then precisely here that we must place the specific of the human and the inalienable attribute of him. For a biblical believer, there is a reason that explains this fact: it is that we were created in the image of God, and “God is love”! (1 Jn 4, 8).

Despite all our mistakes and misdeeds, we humans are not – and never will be – a nuisance to earth! At the end of his philosophical reflections on the danger of technology for modern man, Martin Heidegger, almost throwing in the towel, exclaimed: “Only a god can save us!” We can paraphrase: only love can save us! God’s love, however, certainly not ours.

“For us as Child was born

Let us now turn our thoughts to Christmas which is upon us. With the coming of Christ, the great river of history has reached a lock and starts again at a higher level. “Old things have passed away, new ones are born” (2 Cor 5:17). The great “gap” that separated God from man, the Creator from the creature is filled. Not for nothing, from then on, human history is divided into “before Christ” and “after Christ”.

There are naive Christmas images, but with a profound meaning. In them, we see the Child Jesus who, barefoot, with snow around his feet and a lantern in his hand, at night, after knocking, is waiting in front of a door. The pagans imagined love as a child to whom they gave the name of Eros. It was a symbolic representation, an idol. We know that love has truly become a child; that it is now a reality, an event, indeed a person. “The love of the Father became flesh”, so a second century author paraphrased the verse of John 1:14. Love really became a child: the baby Jesus.

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, [then] I will enter his house and dine with him, and he with me”(Rev 3:21). Let us open the door of the heart to that Child who knocks. The most beautiful thing we can do at Christmas is not, I said, to offer ourselves something to God, but to welcome with amazement the gift of his Son that God the Father gives to the world.

A legend says that among the shepherds who went to see the Child on Christmas Eve, there was a shepherd boy so poor that he had nothing to offer his Mother, and he stood aside in shame. Everyone competed to give Mary their gift. The Mother could not hold them all, having to hold the Child Jesus in her arms. Seeing the little shepherd next to him with empty hands, she then takes the Child and puts him in his arms. Having nothing was his luck. Let’s make this luck be ours too!

Let us join in the amazement and joy of the liturgy which at Christmas repeats – as an accomplished fact and no longer a simple prophecy – the words of Isaiah (9: 5):

For a child is born to us, a son is given to us;
upon his shoulder dominion rests.
They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero
Father-Forever, Prince of Peace.*

Happy Christmas to you, Holy Father and to you all brothers and sisters!

- 1.Aristotle, Metaphysics, XII, 7, 1072b
- 2.Henri de Lubac, Histoire et Esprit, Aubier, Paris 1950, cap. V.
- 3.Giacomo Leopardi, The Infinite (Transl. by Henry Reed).
- 4.Ignace of Antioch, Letter to the Romans.
- 5.Augustine, De civitate Dei, 14,28.
- 6.Augustine, De Genesi ad litteram, 11, 15, 20 (PL 32, 582).
- 7.Cf. Tommaso d'Aquino, S.Th. I, q. 2. a. 2 ad 1 (gratia [praesupponit] naturam"); I, q. 1, a. 8, ad 2 (gratia non tollit naturam, sed perficit).
- 8.Martin Heidegger, Antwort. Martin Heidegger im Gespräch, Gesamtausgabe, vol. 16, Frankfurt 1975.
- 9.Evangelium Veritatis, 23.

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