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"Christian love embraces what is not lovable"

In his 15 May general audience, Pope Francis continued his catechetical cycle on vices and virtues, speaking about hope.

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Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Today we will talk about the third theological virtue, *charity*. The other two, let us remember, were faith and hope: today we will talk about the

third, charity. It is the culmination of the entire itinerary we have undertaken with the catechesis on the virtues. To think of charity immediately expands the heart, and it expands the mind, it evokes the inspired words of Saint Paul in the First Letter to the Corinthians. Concluding that wonderful hymn, Saint Paul cites the triad of the theological virtues and exclaims: “So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (*1 Cor* 13:13).

Paul addresses these words to a community that is anything but perfect in fraternal love: the Christians of Corinth were rather litigious, there were internal divisions, and there were those who claimed always to be right and did not listen to others, regarding them as inferior. Paul reminds them that knowledge puffs up, whereas charity builds up (cf. *1 Cor* 8:1). The Apostle

then records a scandal that touches even the moment of maximum union of a Christian community, the “Lord’s supper,” the Eucharistic celebration: even there, there are divisions, and there are those who take advantage of this to eat and drink, excluding those who have nothing (cf. *1 Cor* 11:18-22). In the face of this, Paul gives a stark judgement: “When you meet together, it is not the Lord’s supper that you eat” (v. 20), you have another ritual, which is pagan, it is not the Lord’s supper.

Who knows, perhaps in the community of Corinth, no one thought they had committed a sin, and those harsh words of the Apostle sounded somewhat incomprehensible for them. Probably they were all convinced they were good people, and if questioned on love, they would have answered that love was certainly a very important value for them, just

like friendship or the family. In our days too, love is on the lips of many “influencers” and in the refrains of many songs. We speak a lot about love, but what is love?

“What about the *other* love?”, Paul seems to ask to his Christians of Corinth. Not the love that rises, but the one that descends; not the one that takes, but the one that gives; not the one that appears, but the one that is hidden. Paul is concerned that in Corinth (as among us today, too) there is confusion and that there is actually no trace of the theological virtue of love, the one that comes to us only from God. And if even in words everyone assures that they are good people, that they love their family and friends, in reality they know very little about the love of God.

The Christians of antiquity had several Greek words at their disposal

to define love. In the end, the word “*agape*” emerged, which we normally translate as “charity.” Because in truth Christians are capable of all the forms of love in the world: they too fall in love, more or less as it happens to everyone. They too experience the benevolence that is felt in friendship. They too feel love for their country and the universal love for all humanity. But there is a greater love, a love which comes from God and is directed towards God, which enables us to love God, to become His friends, and enables us to love our neighbour as God loves him or her, with the desire to share the friendship with God. This love, because of Christ, drives us where humanly we would not go: it is the love for the poor, for those who are not lovable, for those who do not care for us and are not grateful. It is love for what no one would love, even for one’s enemy. Even for the enemy. This is “theological:” this

comes from God, it is the work of the Holy Spirit in us.

Jesus preaches, in the Sermon on the Mount: “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them” (*Lk* 6:32-33). And he concludes: “But love your enemies” – we are used to speaking badly of our enemies – “love your enemies and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish” (v. 35). Let us remember this: “Love your enemies and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.” Let us not forget this!

In these words, love reveals itself as a theological virtue and assumes the name of charity. Love is charity. We immediately realize that it is a difficult, indeed impossible love to

practice if one does not live in God. Our human nature makes us love spontaneously what is good and beautiful. In the name of an ideal or a great affection we can even be generous and perform heroic acts. But the love of God goes beyond these criteria. Christian love embraces what is not lovable, it offers forgiveness – how difficult it is to forgive! How much love it takes to forgive! – Christian love blesses those who curse, whereas, faced with an insult or a curse, we are accustomed to replying with another insult, with another curse. It is a love so ardent that it seems almost impossible, and yet it is the only thing that will remain of us. Love is the “narrow gate” through which we will pass in order to enter the Kingdom of God. Because at the twilight of life, we will not be judged on generic love; we will be judged precisely on charity, on the real love we had. And Jesus says this to us, which is so beautiful:

“Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (*Mt* 25:40). This is the beautiful thing, the greatest thing about love. Onwards and upwards!

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