

OMNIUM TENENS n. 9

SAN BONAVENTURA, Collationes in Hexaameron I, 10 Love and the Franciscan Vocation

“*Non est perfecta cognitio sine dilectione*” (St. Bonaventure of Bagnoregio)

We could say that love is the basis of our Franciscan vocation; a sincere, profound love for Christ and for our brethren, as St. Francis himself exemplified.

When we speak of love in a Christian context, we immediately think of God’s love, of which we are the continual focal point, recipient and, if we correspond, the realisation. Such divine love, moreover, is the most perfect, eternal, and enduring. But when this love seeks to be incarnated in our personal existence, when it desires to become the soul of our community, then the question becomes more difficult.

What does it mean to love? How did St. Francis love?

Love is an active capacity within man, a power that annihilates the walls that divide man from his fellow man. It annihilates all that isolates him from others and tends toward union, while always preserving and favouring the individuality of each person. It is, therefore, a force that builds familiarity and the element that constitutes our community dimension of living together as brothers. To love St. Francis and the charism that God gave him means to desire to *actively* live what he lived while still remaining oneself. This entails letting our person be taken up by love. To love our Founder means wanting to *give* ourselves as he gave himself to all. In this way, he experienced communion with God, with creation, and with his brothers and sisters.

Love is an active ability that generates: from it proceeds life and beauty. Francis recognised the beauty and goodness of God in every created reality. He recognised the profound meaning of the word of God which He exclaimed before all the works of His hands: “*and He saw that it was good*”. Plato said that love is not only the desire for beauty, but the eagerness to generate within beauty¹, to emerge from oneself, as beauty and goodness. Saint Francis was enamoured with God, Supreme Beauty, and he profoundly sought beauty in everything.

Love is also active because it helps us to personally mature. To love one must grow, and if we do not seek to develop our personality, every attempt to love fails. One will never manage to satisfy his thirst for love if he does not seek to love others with growing humility, faith and courage, but also with increasing willingness to emerge from himself, to take risks, and let himself participate in the gift of life.

We personally mature as Franciscans in the measure in which we seek to love Christ and our brethren in this way, and develop these virtues. Thus, little by little, love transforms us and draws us nearer to our Founder. Nothing better than love, in fact, bears the authentic knowledge of the charism that we are called to live. The best way to live it, is to love it. As Erich Fromm writes, the act of love surpasses that of thought and of every word.²

In the light of these truths, we can ask ourselves how we can grow in our capacity to love, and how to adequately transform our love into various actions, works and choices.

One such way might be study, animated by a profound and passionate love. If we refer to the original meaning of the word study, however, it means zeal and committed application. It requires love that becomes a faithful attempt to orient one’s own energies, directing them toward the knowledge of that which St. Francis received from God for us, for both yesterday and today.

It is necessary to further specify that love involves some very important values that we could consider fundamental, especially for us Franciscans, if we particularly take into consideration the experience of our Seraphic Father. Love requires *attentive consideration, responsibility, respect, and knowledge*. These dimensions are just as human as they are divine. They rend our common life and our ecclesial testimony much richer and incisive, warm, alive, and near to the existence of our neighbour.

Love is *attentive consideration*, that is the vigilant interest and commitment to the good of others. This *attentive consideration* renders us active in the life and growth of others, attentive to their true needs, solicitous of what they are deeply in need of. This aspect requires much activity, a true “working” for others because, in reality, work and love are inseparable. One will not be able to truly work without loving the person for whom one is striving to help.

¹ *Simposio*, 206E.

² Cfr. E FROMM, *L’arte di amare*, A. Mondadori, Milano 1983, p.40

Care and interest for others also implies *responsibility*. This is the attention and response to a person's need, even unspoken, especially his need to be cared for and to receive attention. *Responsibility*, therefore, is feeling oneself involved in the other's life and growth toward fullness. However, this recalls an important aspect: that of respect, or the capacity to see the other person as he or she is and not according to the idea or the design that I have fabricated of that person according to the expectations that I have of him or her. This dimension is particularly important among us Franciscans, called to a life spent *together* and made fully possible only in the extent to which we reciprocally recognise each person for that which he or she is and serve each other, promoting the growth and good of one another. We are, in fact, called to *adapt ourselves* to one another.

Without respect there cannot exist a true *acquaintance* in love. If one does not become acquainted loving, one does not really love, one does not fully know the other but only superficially. Each of us has a deep thirst to know everything, but in particular the other person, and even more him or her with whom I am called to share my existence, whether it be confreres or sisters or the people to whom I am sent. However, it calls for much patience, humility and courage to come to know others while I love. If this is true for people in any kind of community relationship, it is equally true for our Franciscan charism. Our understanding of it will be very difficult and partial without true love for Christ, for Francis and the gift of God in him; without patience and humility in our daily life.

Such an understanding requires humility and courage; it requires a commitment in study, effort, and courage to proclaim and testify. Love, therefore, requires maturity and the capacity to dominate one's instincts, or temporary desires which are often merely transient passions so that one can commit oneself with discipline to true knowledge with respect, responsibility and attentive consideration.

Our vocation, therefore, requires humility in the assimilation of our charism and the courage to live it in a creative way that is appropriate for our times, and for the needs and necessities of today's men and women. This demands intelligent examination, a life commitment, profound and attentive reflection that is always anchored in the reality in which we live.

The celebration of the VIII centennial of the Rule invites us in a particular way to live this out is a profound way shown to us by Plato: with the desire to generate by loving. The occasion gives rise to the question of how much we love the Franciscan charism, but also of the necessity to love it ever more and better, and to always generate new life within it. It calls us to reflect on how much we are ready to put ourselves at risk for love, how much we are ready to "dirty our hands" for one another, sharing one another's burdens, and thus *repairing* the church and humanity of today.

This sacred Lenten season prepares us for Easter, the solemn celebration of the life of God that is ever new; the soul of all reality and every life. May it be an occasion for deepening our experience of the rich human and spiritual elements of our being Franciscans.

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