

ONE LOVE, MANY LOVES

By Sheila Gibson, Ph.D.

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Last Sunday we had a gathering at my house, of many people I love, in many different ways and degrees: husband, children, grandchildren (one of them still a month from being born), old friends, friends of children, children of friends, friends of friends. How do I love them? I can't even begin to count the ways. And yet---I comfortably use the one word "love" for these wonderfully diverse personal connections—intense or casual, demanding or delightful, spontaneously appearing or deliberately chosen to be cherished in my life. But the word stretches well beyond such connections between *persons*. At one point during the party, six- year-old Jeremy hovered next to me as I put cookies and lemon bars on a tray: patiently and politely but with growing, almost desperate, insistence he kept saying: " I really really really *love* chocolate chip cookies."

And I knew what he meant, and what he hoped for. He delights in the very being of chocolate chip cookies---but more than that, he wants to have one for his very own. He is in the grips of *eros* in his desire to possess, to become one with that cookie. And if I, lovingly, give it to him---he will almost certainly not be satisfied, but will come back for another, and another, until...?

Like Jeremy, we use the one word "love" to express not just all sorts of personal relationships, but also how we feel about many things we delight in ---and desire to possess: favorite foods, music, cars, books, sports, jokes, places. We also use it for more abstract passions—love of country, love of justice, love of wisdom, love of one's work or profession, love of fame and glory, and so on. In the Encyclical which we are reflecting on today, Pope Benedict XVI refers to this "vast semantic range" of the concept of love as "a problem of language" but it is a very real problem for all of us struggling to deal with the disordered, often competing, and sometimes destructive "loves" in our lives---and for Benedict it is the problem that sets up his very lovely analysis of the greatest linguistic stretch of all: from the whole motley crew of human loves to "God is love". ¹

The way the Holy Father first poses the question is simple and blunt: "are all these forms of love basically one, so that love, in its many and varied manifestations, is ultimately a single reality, or are we merely using the same word to designate totally different realities?" ² His answer, however, is both complex and nuanced: the term "love" is analogous, not equivocal; love is both one and many—but we must uncover the differences before we see the unity.

Benedict's analysis of these differences begins by comparing two Greek words for love--- *eros* and *agape*. In doing this he joins a long philosophical/ theological conversation, going back to the Fathers of the Church, drawing in mediaeval thinkers like Aelred of

Rievaulx and Thomas Aquinas, and generating lots of heat (and some light) in the past century and a half, in the writings of such thinkers as Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, Andres Nygren and Denis de Rougemont, Martin D'Arcy and C. S. Lewis.³ Most of the modern thinkers focus on the radical opposition of these two kinds of love--- *eros* as human, all-too-human, willful and self-seeking, exclusive, strong and covetous;

agape as Divinely-sourced, humble, self-sacrificing, universal, gentle and generous. Nietzsche, as Benedict notes, takes the side of *eros*, and blames Christianity for "poisoning" the joyful experience of human love with its exaltation of meekness and its restrictive sexual morality.⁴ Kierkegaard, interestingly, agrees with Nietzsche that Christianity commands us to reject all loves based on choice, on inclination, passion or personal preference---and for him this means disqualifying the love of friendship as well as romantic, erotic love! He argues that there is only one genuine love, the spiritual love of God and neighbor which is self-renouncing and indiscriminate, given with scrupulous evenhandedness to friend and enemy alike. Both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, and Nygren, too, in his magisterial *Eros and Agape*, thus see a fundamental, unmediated opposition between any love, like *eros*, which is *ego*-centric and any love, like *agape*, which is *God*-centric. They just disagree about which of these two kinds of love has any moral worth.

But what of all the many ordinary human loves mentioned earlier--- of husband or wife, of child or parent, of friends, and food, and all things good---are these not all in their way passionate, and preferential, and thus *eros*? Are they all then ultimately "selfish" loves, in that they move us to seek and possess and enjoy what we desire? Is even our love of God inevitably tainted by our self-seeking desire for our own ultimate fulfillment and bliss? Are all human loves, as this extreme opposition of *eros* and *agape* seems to suggest, utterly different from the love which God *IS*? For that matter---what is there in common, in strictly human terms, between the concupiscent love involved in really, really wanting a chocolate chip cookie and the generous love that gives the child his heart's desire? And---how can the same word also be used for the many "dark loves" that drive human beings to destructive acts of violence, greed, exploitation, and fanaticism?

Indeed--what terrible, ruthless things have been done in the name of love of country, of family, of a righteous cause, or even of religion? How many tragedies, in life as well as fiction, grow out of the all-too-human perversion of love which is obsessive jealousy? How many lives are ruined by addictive love, of hurtful things and persons from whom it seems impossible to break away? What of the blind self-absorption of lovers so caught up in each other that they "let the rest of the world go by?" What of conflicted loves, the tug of war in our hearts, and our obligations, when our best friend and our spouse can't stand each other? What of the love of money which Paul tells Timothy is the root of all evil? Greed, avarice, miserliness are also all-too-human perversions of the needy love which is *eros*---and so, as a flip-side, is the smothering love that tries to keep the beloved helpless and needy, and the exploitative love that turns the desired other into just another object that will scratch its itch. ("When I'm not near the

girl I love, I love the girl I'm near.") Why are so many of our love songs either cynical or sad---full of hopeless longing, or grief at abandonment, or chagrin that the while the joys of love are but a moment long, its sorrows last a whole life long? Why do we expect great love stories to end badly---Antony and Cleopatra, Tristan and Iseult, Romeo and Juliet, and all the "weepies" that follow, from great opera to soap opera? And if it doesn't end in the death of the star-crossed lovers---will such love inevitably be "too hot not to cool down?" Is

human love indeed always (as some poets, novelists and even philosophers show it) a dark, insatiable dance of sadistic possessiveness and masochistic self-immolation? 'Can't get no satisfaction'---or if temporarily we manage to enjoy what we love, in the end he or she or it begins to pall, and our restless hearts want something more. At some point, after too many cookies, or when an even tastier treat appears on the scene, we become sick of what we most loved.

I am reciting this desolate litany of the dark side of human loves because it points up how absurdly wide we stretch the concept, and how huge a gap there is between the many, (both sweet and terrible) experiences we call love and the one love to which we are called, the love of the two great commandments, the love which God IS. Pope Benedict is not unmindful of some of the "warped and destructive" potentials inherent in human loving. He notes, for example, that "*eros*, reduced to pure "sex", has become a commodity, a mere "thing" to be bought and sold, or rather, man himself becomes a commodity"---and even more pointedly, he addresses the debasement and exploitation of women in ancient fertility cults that sought ecstatic union with the divine through sex with temple prostitutes.⁵ But, as we have seen, the bewildering griefs and disastrous outcomes of human love are not confined to disordered *sexual* behavior.

At this point, before returning to Benedict's Encyclical and the way he answers his own question about the "sameness and difference" of the one Love and many loves I think it might help to consult my favorite of the writers on love mentioned earlier, C. S. Lewis. In his book *The Four Loves* he widens the canvas beyond just *eros* and *agape*, and in so doing illuminates not just the distinctiveness of four kinds of love, but also the reason they can—and must, if the 'dark side' is to be avoided—interact. (I use this book regularly in a class I teach on "Ethics and Friendship", and it is always a revelation to students that friendship *is* a kind of love, and that the arts and duties, the blessings and problems of friendship flow from the peculiar kind of love it is.)

Lewis calls on four different Greek words to distinguish the chief varieties of human love. The first, the simplest, homeliest and seemingly most untroubled is *storge*, or Affection. This is the love of family and of the familiar, the warm and fuzzy and indiscriminating love of babies and puppies and comfortable old furniture. In Lewis' words, "Affection almost slinks or seeps through our lives. It lives with humble un-dress, private things: soft slippers, old clothes, old jokes, the thump of a sleepy dog's tail on the kitchen floor...." We usually take the things we love with affection for granted, "and this taking for granted, which is an outrage in erotic love, is here right and proper."⁶

As for *Eros* itself, “the kind of love which lovers are ‘in’,”⁷ Lewis insists that it is much more than sexual desire: there can be sex without *Eros*—in which case what is desired is an “it”, a pleasure, the scratching of an itch—whereas *Eros* desires the very person of the Beloved. *Eros* is uncalculating, extravagant and self-surpassing—and, he notes:

...it is one of God’s jokes that a passion so soaring, so apparently transcendent as *Eros* should be linked in incongruous symbiosis with a bodily appetite which, like any other appetite, tactlessly reveals its connections with such mundane factors as weather, health, diet, circulation, and digestion. In *Eros* at times we seem to be flying; *Venus* gives us the sudden twitch that reminds us we are really captive balloons. It is a continual demonstration of the truth that we are composite creatures, rational animals, akin on one side to the angels, on the other to tom-cats. It is a bad thing not to be able to take a joke. Worse, not to take a divine joke; made, I grant you, at our expense, but also (who doubts it?) for our benefit?”⁸

Then there is *Philia*—the love which is proper to Friendship. This, Lewis explains, is the least natural of all our loves, “the least instinctive, organic, gregarious and necessary.... Without *Eros* none of us would have been begotten, and without Affection (*Storge*) none of us would have been reared, but we can live and breathe without friendship.”⁹ Later, in one of his most quoted aphorisms, this is how he clarifies the “exquisite arbitrariness and irresponsibility” of friendship: *Philia* “is unnecessary, like philosophy, like art, like the universe itself (for God did not need to create). It has no survival value; rather it is one of those things which give value to survival.”¹⁰ Friendship, he shows, is in some ways the most “spiritual”, the least jealous and most free and open of our loves, linking persons “at their highest level of individuality.” “We picture lovers face to face, but friends side by side; their eyes look ahead.”¹¹

Finally, and with great humility as well as insight, Lewis treats “Charity”—the English translation of the Latin *Caritas* and the Greek *Agape*—the word for love which occurs most often in the New Testament, and which allows us to think of a love beyond our nature, a graced love of which we are capable and to which we are commanded because God first loved us. Before I tell you more of what C. S. Lewis says of *this* love, I’d like to mention briefly three other running themes in *The Four Loves* that I believe help to unravel some of the puzzles alluded to earlier in this paper, and to contribute interesting insights and sidelights to the Holy Father’s analysis of human and divine love.

First, there is another set of distinctions: *All* of the four loves, Lewis says, can be shown, in varying proportions, to manifest themselves as Need-love, as Gift-love—and also as something he calls Appreciative love. His analysis of Affection, for instance, shows that while it is marked by an easy “appreciation” of familiar, favorite things and people, it is perhaps most characteristically seen in the perfectly reciprocal Need-love of an infant and the nourishing Gift-love of its Mother. The passionate, desiring love called *Eros* may seem to be primarily Need-love, *par excellence*--but it also moves the lover to *give* all for the Beloved: “in one high bound it oversteps the massive wall of our selfhood and makes appetite itself altruistic”¹²—and of course, also, in *Eros* the Beloved is singled out, super-appreciated as the “one and only”. Friendship, by its nature, exhibits the least amount of

Need-love and perhaps the highest degree of Appreciative love---but I think you begin to get the point, that playing with these distinctions helps to clarify the complexity even *within* our different loves.

Next, and relating directly to the “litany of the dark side” I put you through earlier, Lewis shows at every stage of his analysis why and how many good loves go bad. His overarching thesis is that *none* of the natural, human loves is self-sufficient, that all of them, from the humblest to the most soaring, conceal traps and pitfalls that can darken and degrade human lives—if left to themselves. Affection can descend into treacherous sentimentality, or to a smothering need-to-be- needed seen in all-consuming mother-love. *Eros* can become a demon, all-consuming and destructive, leading to “cruel and perjured unions , even to suicide-pacts and murder.” Even friendship has its own special dangers: it can be a “school for vice as well as a school for virtue,” and its peculiar, and very spiritual vice is pride, which appears when it gets us to lock step with chosen kindred spirits and exclude everyone else.¹³ Only *Agape* has no dark side.

In fact, and this is Lewis’ third over-arching theme, it is only the love which is Charity that can save the others from themselves. This is so because *agape* is not in the end just their rival or even their perfect and unattainable model. This supernatural love can build on and perfect our natural loves, mixing and mingling with them, strengthening, steadying and making them sweet. Early in the book, in his discussion of Affection, Lewis introduced the idea that while the four Loves may and must be kept distinct in idea, in reality they can and should interpenetrate. He shows this in a nifty metaphor: “As gin is not only a drink in itself but also a base for many mixed drinks, so Affection, besides being a love itself, can enter into the other loves and colour them all through and become the very medium in which from day to day they operate. They would perhaps not wear very well without it.”¹⁴

Even more, as we see in his final chapter, must the love which is *agape* interpenetrate and transform all of our other loves. It does not substitute itself for the natural loves---as in the mystery of the Incarnation, in which Christ is perfect God and perfect man, so our natural loves are meant to remain perfectly what they are, joined to, purified and inspirited by the graced love of Charity. Pardon me for quoting one last lovely passage from *The Four Loves*:

How this can happen, most Christians know. All the activities (sins only excepted) of the natural loves can in a favoured hour become works of the glad and shameless and grateful Need-love or of the selfless, unofficious Gift-love which are both Charity. Nothing is either too trivial or too animal to be thus transformed. A game, a joke, a drink together, idle chat, a walk, the act of Venus—all these can be modes in which we forgive or accept forgiveness, console or are reconciled, in which we ‘seek not our own.’ Thus in our very instincts, appetites and recreations, Love has prepared for Himself ‘a body.’¹⁵

And so we return to Benedict XVI and *Deus Caritas Est*. He too rejects the simplistic opposition of *eros* and *agape*, and his analysis of the Biblical language of *eros* in the Old Testament and *agape* (and *philia!*) in the New Testament reveals even more clearly than

Lewis does how the love of God and various forms of human love can, and must, interpenetrate.

Fundamentally,” he writes, “‘love’ is a single reality, but with different dimensions; at different times, one or other dimension may emerge more clearly. Yet when the two dimensions are totally cut off from one another, the result is a caricature or at least an impoverished form of love. And we have also seen, synthetically, that biblical faith does not set up a parallel universe, or one opposed to that primordial human phenomenon which is love, but rather accepts the whole man; it intervenes in his search for love in order to purify it and to reveal new dimensions of it ¹⁶

In a beautiful passage, using the great metaphor of Jacob’s Ladder, the Pope describes *eros* as “ascending” love, the desire through which we passionately seek the infinite and eternal---thus essentially, in Lewis’ words, “Need-love”--- and *agape* as “descending,” “oblative” or sacrificial love---thus, in Lewis’ terminology, “Gift-love.” “Yet” he continues, “*eros* and *agape*—ascending love and descending love—can never be completely separated. The more the two, in their different aspects, find a proper unity in the one reality of love, the more the true nature of love in general is realized. Even if *eros* is at first mainly covetous and ascending... in drawing near to the other, it is less and less concerned with itself... is concerned more and more with the beloved, bestows itself and wants to ‘be there for’ the other. The element of *agape* thus enters into this love, for otherwise *eros* is impoverished and even loses its own nature. On the other hand, man cannot live by oblativ, descending love alone. He cannot always give, he must also receive.” ¹⁷

Benedict’s analysis of human love (and indeed of the human condition) contains a number of surprises which may be discussed more fully in other sessions today, but to me the most astonishing, enlightening part of this section of the Encyclical is the way in which he shows how God’s own love for us can properly be called *eros* as well as *agape*, Need-love as well as Gift-love.¹⁸ But this is shocking--how we say that God has *need* of anything? In God, surely, there is no hunger that needs to be filled, no necessity that drives Him to create! After reading and being startled by Benedict’s serene assertion of God’s *Eros* for us I remembered a wonderful phrasing of the 14th century Franciscan theologian John Duns Scotus: “Deus vult habere alios diligentes”¹⁹—which is to say, *God wants to have other lovers*. Scotus seems to be implying that Creation is not just the unmotivated overflow of Divine goodness, but the desire of the three Persons which are One God for other *persons* ---the only kind of creatures who can enter with God and each other into a free communion of knowing and loving. And that made me think of Thomas Aquinas arguing that Charity itself should be seen as a species of Friendship, the friendship that is possible even between humans and God—because there is communication, mutuality, fellowship between God, and us, and the angels.²⁰ Amazing!

Finally, Benedict has something to say about the other, not-so-obviously Divine, aspect of *eros* that Kierkegaard condemned in human love: that it is preferential, elective, seeking and choosing a *particular* Beloved instead of being offered freely and equally to all---how can it be right to see even this “choosiness” in God’s infinite love for us?

Benedict's answer: "His love, moreover, is an elective love: among all the nations he chooses Israel and loves her—but he does so precisely with a view to healing the whole human race. God loves, and his love may certainly be called *eros*, yet it is also totally *agape*.... This is not only because it is bestowed in a completely gratuitous manner, without any previous merit, but also because it is love which forgives."²¹

That last bit, on love and forgiveness, makes me want to go off on a whole new tangent—but some other day. This encyclical can and should give rise to all sorts of fruitful commentary, application and at least some controversy. For now, however, let me just pick up on one more thread, which may pull together a number of things we have been talking about. Benedict quotes and refers several times to St. Augustine, arguably the theologian who most vividly depicts in his life and writings "*eros* which seeks God and *agape* which passes on the gift received."

Augustine is of course also a poster boy for the "dark side" of human love. So, in his *Confessions*, he pungently describes his experience as a young man away from home for the first time, "in love with loving," caught up in "a seething cauldron of unholy loves," desiring "to be scraped by the objects of sense" and falling "headlong into the love wherein I longed to be ensnared."²² Earlier he had analyzed what he saw as the great sin of his childhood—"so small a boy, and so great a sinner"—stealing a neighbor's pears just for the hell of it, loving not the pears but the rebellious act itself, and the company of his friends and accomplices, without whom he thinks he would never have done the foul deed. Later he recounts his great delight in conversation and *convivium* with beloved friends—and his overmastering grief at the death of a friend whom he loved immoderately. He shows still another kind of love driving his passionate, often frustrated ambition for worldly success as a teacher of rhetoric. "In my unloveliness I plunged into the lovely things which you created."

All these good things Augustine eventually saw as traps, occasions of sin, seductive rivals that were keeping him from his true heart's desire. "Late have I loved thee, Beauty of ancient days, yet ever new, too late have I loved thee!" But the point is that it was not *too* late—he did come to find that love, or rather It found him, and in fact those many rival passions, in their beauty but perhaps most of all in their *unsatisfactoriness*, were what drove him on. "*You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless till they rest in thee.*" His human loves are not set aside after his dramatic conversion; he passes on the gift he has received to his friends, to his love-child son Adeodatus, and eventually to the whole community of Carthage that he serves as pastor. The greedy little boy (for whom one cookie is never enough), the sexual athlete "in love with love", the devoted but somewhat domineering friend, the uncompromising truth-seeker and the bishop whose words and charity for his people are indefatigable and inexhaustible—all one person, vulnerable, fallible, conflicted, and in the end caught up, clarified and stabilized in the mercy of God. The many loves become one Love, not just in some speculative philosophical synthesis, but in the dynamic, enfleshed and inspirited passages of a real life story.

Notes

¹ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, I, 2. This first astonishing encyclical of his papacy, presented to the world on Christmas, 2005, can be easily accessed on the Vatican web-site, or at <http://www.ewtn.com/library/ENCYC/b16deuscaritas.HTM>.

² Ibid.

³ Cf. Aelred of Rievaulx, *On Spiritual Friendship*; Thomas Aquinas in the Questions on love and charity in the *Summa Theologiae*, I-II: 26-28 and II-II, 23-46; Soren Kierkegaard, “You Shall Love Your Neighbor” in *Works of Love*; Anders Nygren, *Eros and Agape*; Denis De Rougemont, *Love in the Western World*; Martin D’Arcy, S. J., *The Mind and Heart of Love*; C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*.

⁴ In the Encyclical (I,3) the Pope cites Nietzsche’s aphorism from *Beyond Good and Evil* (IV, 68) as an example of the widely held perception (which he then vigorously attacks!) that the Church just wants to “blow the whistle” on the joys of human love.

⁵ *Deus Caritas Est*, I, 4: “...this counterfeit divinization of *eros* actually strips it of its dignity and dehumanizes it. Indeed, the prostitutes in the temple, who had to bestow this divine intoxication, were not treated as human beings and persons, but simply used as a means of arousing ‘divine madness’: far from being goddesses, they were human persons being exploited.”

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1960), 56-57.

⁷ Ibid, 131.

⁸ Ibid, 142.

⁹ Ibid, 88.

¹⁰ Ibid, 103.

¹¹ Ibid, 98.

¹² Ibid, 158

¹³ Ibid, 151 and 115.

¹⁴ Ibid, 57.

¹⁵ Ibid, 184.

¹⁶ *Deus Caritas Est*, I, 8.

¹⁷ Ibid., I,7.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Op. Oxon. III, dist.32, qu.1, no.6.

²⁰ S. Th. I-II, qu.23, a.1

²¹ *Deus Caritas Est*, I, 9 and 10

²² All quotations from Augustine's *Confessions* are from the translation of Edward Pusey, D.D. (New York: Macmillan, 1960.)