

EROS AND AGAPE

Fr. Lorenzo Carraro MCCJ

EROS AND AGAPE

by Fr. Lorenzo Carraro MCCJ (2019)

Table of contents

- ❖ Introduction: The Eros of Jesus and my Eros
- ❖ Eros and Agape in “Deus caritas est” (Benedict XVI)
- ❖ A taste of Eros in the Old Testament
- ❖ Eros and Agape in Mary of Bethany and in the Blessed Virgin Mary

Questions for personal reflection

Bible Quotations

1. Introduction:

THE EROS OF JESUS AND MY EROS

(to love as Jesus loved)

The choice of the topic came from a recent book by the title: *Come Lui ha amato:*

L' Eros di Jesus (As He has loved : Jesus' Eros), by Aristide Fumagalli, diocesan priest and theologian, Edizioni San Paolo 2010.

The basic idea comes from Jesus' words: **“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.** Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant doesn't know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide; so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. This I command you, to love one another” (*John 15:12-17*)

The evangelist who gave us these words of Jesus, was reclining on Jesus' breast: “One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was lying close to the breast of Jesus” (*John 13:23*).

How was Jesus' ways of loving, his Eros? Since he told us to love as he loves, the way he loved....

So, it is from the Gospel of John that the author develops his original approach, analyzing and describing the different ways the loving instinct of Jesus, his “love making” is shown in his relationships with the different people/characters.

These are the traits of Jesus' loving as seen by the author:

- with John the Baptist: fascination;
- with Nicodemus: discretion;
- with the Samaritan woman: seduction;
- with the adulteress: conquest;

- with Mary of Bethany: intimacy;
- with the beloved disciple: confidence;
- with Judas: passion;
- with Mary Magdalene: freedom;
- with Peter: commitment.

The Eros of Jesus is nothing new, although pushed to the extreme because of the Incarnation: God is with us in Jesus as one of us. Jesus' Eros continues Yahweh's Eros in the Old Testament. In the Gospels, there is also the Eros of those who answer to Jesus' love. We will see examples of this presently.

In the Old Testament, we have the anthropomorphic expressions of God's love for us: i. e. the many touching ways the love of God for his chosen people assumes mostly in a masculine fashion but sometimes with feminine overtones. Pope Benedict XVI writes about Eros and Agape in his encyclical **Deus caritas est** (2005). The words of Benedict XVI about Eros (ascending love) and Agape (descending love) are quoted by the author of the book and are the inspiration of his analysis of John's Gospel. The pope shows how the two types of love: Eros (sexual, sensual, emotional, sentimental love) and Agape (outgoing, generous, serving, self-forgetting, sacrificial love) tend to meet and integrate.

1. EROS and AGAPE are two necessary aspects of our spirituality.

The place of EROS (From Benedict XVI: DEUS CARITAS EST, 6-9)

“Nowadays Christianity of the past is often criticized as having been opposed to the body; and it is quite true that tendencies of this sort have always existed. Yet the contemporary way of exalting the body is deceptive. *Eros*, reduced to pure “sex”, has become a commodity, a mere “thing” to be bought and sold, or rather, man himself becomes a commodity. This is hardly man's great “yes” to the body.

On the contrary, he now considers his body and his sexuality as the purely material part of himself, to be used and exploited at will. Nor does he see it as an arena for the exercised of his freedom, but as a mere object that he attempts as he pleases, to make both enjoyable and harmless.

Here we are actually dealing with a debasement of the human body: no longer is it integrated into our overall existential freedom; no longer is it a vital expression of our whole being, but it is more or less relegated to the

purely biological sphere. The apparent exaltation of the body can quickly turn into a hatred of bodiliness.

The Christian faith, on the other hand, has always considered man a unity in duality, a reality in which spirit and matter compenetrates, and in which each is brought to a new nobility. True, *eros* tends to rise “in ecstasy” towards the Divine, to lead us beyond ourselves; yet for this very reason it calls for a path of ascent, renunciation, purification and healing.

6. Concretely, what does this path of ascent and purification entail? How might love be experienced so that it can fully realize its human and divine promise? Here we can find a first, important indication in the *Song of Songs*, an Old Testament book well-known to the mystics. According to the interpretation generally held today, the poems contained in this book were originally love songs, perhaps intended for a Jewish wedding feast and meant to exalt conjugal love.

In this context it is highly instructive to note that in the course of the book two different Hebrew words are used to indicate “love”. First there is the word *dodim*, a plural form suggesting a love that is still insecure, indeterminate and searching. This comes to be replaced by the word *ahabà*, which the Greek version of the Old Testament translates with the similar-sounding *agape*, which, as we have seen, becomes the typical expression for the biblical notion of love.

By contrast with an indeterminate, “searching” love, this word expresses the experience of a love which involves a real discovery of the other, moving beyond the selfish character that prevailed earlier. Love now becomes concern and care for the other. No longer is it self-seeking, a sinking in the intoxication of happiness; instead it seeks the good of the beloved: it becomes renunciation and it is ready, and even willing, for sacrifice.

It is part of love’s growth towards higher levels and inward purification that it now seeks to become definitive, and it does so in a twofold sense: both in the sense of exclusivity (this particular person alone) and in the sense of being “forever”. Love embraces the whole of existence in each of its dimensions, including the dimension of time. It could hardly be otherwise, since its promise looks towards its definitive goal: love looks to the eternal.

Love is indeed “ecstasy”, not in the sense of a moment of intoxication, but rather as a journey, an ongoing exodus out of the closed inward-looking self towards its liberation through self-giving, and thus towards authentic self-

discovery and indeed the discovery of God: “Whoever seeks to gain his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will preserve it” (*Luke* 17:33), as Jesus says throughout the Gospels (cf. *Matthew* 10:39; 16:25; *Mark* 8:35; *Luke* 9:24; *John* 12:25).

In these words, Jesus portrays his own path, which leads through the Cross to the Resurrection: the path of the grain of wheat that falls to the ground and dies, and in this way bears much fruit. Starting from the depths of his own sacrifice and of the love that reaches fulfillment therein, he also portrays in these words the essence of love and indeed of human life itself.

7. By their own inner logic, these initial, somewhat philosophical reflections on the essence of love have now brought us to the threshold of biblical faith. We began by asking whether the different, or even opposed, meanings of the word “love” point to some profound underlying unity, or whether on the contrary they must remain unconnected, one alongside the other. More significantly, though, we questioned whether the message of love proclaimed to us by the Bible and the Church’s Tradition has some points of contact with the common human experience of love, or whether it is opposed to that experience.

This in turn led us to consider two fundamental words: *eros*, as a term to indicate “worldly” love and *agape*, referring to love grounded in and shaped by faith. The two notions are often contrasted as “ascending” love and “descending” love. There are other, similar classifications, such as the distinction between possessive love and oblation love (*amor concupiscentiae* – *amor benevolentiae*), to which is sometimes also added love that seeks its own advantage.

In philosophical and theological debate, these distinctions have often been radicalized to the point of establishing a clear antithesis between them: descending, oblation love-*agape*-would be typically Christian, while on the other hand ascending, possessive or covetous love-*eros*-would be typical of non-Christian, and particularly Greek culture.

Were this antithesis to be taken to extremes, the essence of Christianity would be detached from the vital relations fundamental to human existence, and would become a world apart, admirable perhaps, but decisively cut off from the complex fabric of human life. Yet *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, a fascination for the great promise of happiness, in drawing near to the other, it is less and less concerned with itself, increasingly seeks the happiness of the other, 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 oblation, descending love alone. He cannot always give, he must also receive. Anyone who wishes to give love must also receive love as a gift. Certainly, as the Lord tells us, one can become a source from which rivers of living water flow (cf. *John* 7:37-38). Yet to become such a source, one must constantly drink anew from the original source, which is Jesus Christ, from whose pierced heart flows the love of God (cf. *John* 19:34).

In the account of Jacob’s ladder, the Fathers of the Church saw this inseparable connection between ascending and descending love, between *eros* which seeks God and *agape* which passes on the gift received, symbolized in various ways. In that biblical passage we read how the Patriarch Jacob saw in a dream, above the stone which was his pillow, a ladder reaching up to heaven, on which the angels of God were ascending and descending (cf. *Genesis* 28:12; *John* 1:51).

A particularly striking interpretation of this vision is presented by Pope Gregory the Great in his *Pastoral Rule*. He tells us that the good pastor must be rooted in contemplation. Only in this way will he be able to take upon himself the needs of others and make them his own: “*per pietatis viscera in se infirmitatem caeterorum transferat*”.

Saint Gregory speaks in this context of Saint Paul, who was borne aloft to the most exalted mysteries of God, and hence, having descended once more, he was able to become all things to all men (cf. *2 Corinthians* 12:2-4; *1 Corinthians* 9:22).

He also points to the example of Moses, who entered the tabernacle time and again, remaining in dialogue with God, so that when he emerged he could be at the service of his people. “Within [the tent] he is borne aloft through contemplation, while without he is completely engaged in helping those who suffer: *intus in contemplationem rapitur, foris infirmantium negotiis urgetur.*”

8. We have thus come to an initial, albeit still somewhat generic response to the two questions raised earlier. Fundamentally, “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. This newness of biblical faith is shown chiefly in two elements which deserve to be highlighted: the image of God and the image of man”.

2. A Taste of Eros in the Old Testament

The best example of Eros in the Old Testament is in the Song of Songs. I will give a taste of the Song with commentary by Fathers of the Church and popes.

A taste of the “Song of Songs” with commentary

Song 1:2 “Beloved: “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth. Your love is sweet like wine...”

Saint Bernard has an extensive commentary on the Song of Songs, interpreted allegorically, as referring to the journey of the soul to God, the journey of perfection. Interesting his interpretation of the abrupt and vivid second verse.

He writes: Slowly please, not immediately the kiss of the mouth: we must start from the kiss of the feet like the woman sinner: that is the symbol of the stage of PURIFICATION, the first step in the journey towards perfection.

Then Jesus will raise us up for the kiss of his blessed hands and that will be the sign that we are now on the stage of ILLUMINATION: the second step on the journey towards perfection: the exercise of the human virtues of fortitude, temperance, justice and prudence.

Eventually Jesus will kiss us on the mouth and that will signify our entrance in the third stage: UNION: the life of faith, hope and charity, life in the spirit with its gifts and fruits, a life of contemplation.

Song 2:6 “Beloved: His left arm is under my head, his right embraces me”

The intimacy of the spousal embrace is the symbol of our intimacy with God in prayer, confer *Psalm 63:6-8* “On my bed I remember you, on you I muse through the night for you have been my help, in the shadow of your wings I rejoice. My soul clings to you, your right hand hold me fast”. A fitting conclusion of this psalm that describes the soul’s longing for God to the point that even “the body pines for God like a dry, weary land without water”.

Song 8:6-7 “Beloved: set me like a seal on your heart, like a seal on your arm. For love is strong as death, passion as relentless as Sheol. The flash of it is a flash of fire, a flame of Yahweh himself. Love no flood can quench, no torrent drown. Were a man offer his family wealth to buy love, contempt is all that he would gain”.

The commentary of Saint John Paul II in his document *Redemptionis Donum* (1985) is beautiful, in relation to consecrated life: “May the knowledge of belonging to God himself in Jesus Christ, *seal your heart*, all your thoughts, words and deeds, with the sign of the biblical spouse...May the knowledge of belonging to Christ, as his exclusive possession, *open your hearts*, thoughts and deeds with the key of the mystery of Redemption, to all the sufferings, needs of individuals and of the world, in the midst of which your evangelical consecration has been planted as a particular sign of the presence of God...”.

This commentary is in line with the traditional allegoric interpretation of the Song of Songs that understands it as a symbol of the love of Yahweh for his chosen people or as in the spiritual interpretation of the mystics like Saint John of the Cross, the love of God for the soul.

This however is based on the data of the biblical love song itself: in it, as Pope Benedict puts it: “Eros tends to rise “in ecstasy” towards the Divine, to lead us beyond ourselves...No longer it is self-seeking, a sinking in the intoxication of happiness; instead it seeks the good of the beloved: it becomes renunciation and it is ready, and even willing, for sacrifice.

It is part of love's growth towards higher levels and inward purification that it now seeks to be definitive, and it does so in a twofold sense: both in the sense of exclusivity (this particular person alone) and in the sense of being "forever".

Jacob's Ladder: Eros and Agape towards a unity

EROS, "ascending" love, and AGAPE, "descending love, tend to form a unity. "The element of Agape thus enter into this love, for otherwise Eros is impoverished and even loses its own nature. On the other hand, man cannot live by oblation, descending love alone. He cannot always give, he must also receive. Anyone who wishes to give love must also receive love as a gift."

Pope Benedict brings **Jacob's Ladder** (*Genesis 28:12; John 1:51*) as symbol of Ascending love and Descending love in the interpretation of pope Saint Gregory the Great: he tells us that the good pastor must be rooted in contemplation. Only in this way will he be able to take upon himself the needs of the others and make them his own... Fundamentally, love is a single reality, but with different dimensions (Eros, Agape); at different times, one or other dimension may emerge more clearly" (*Deus caritas est*, 5-8).

3. The Eros of the Gospel characters in relation to Jesus

In the Gospels, Jesus defends and accepts the expressions of human love towards his blessed Humanity: for example the love of the woman/sinner: washing his feet with her tears, drying them with her hair and covering them with kisses.

The best example is with **Mary of Bethany**: In the first episode (*Luke 10:32-35*), Mary sits at the feet of Jesus, looking at him and listening to him. It is a loving passivity. It has no apparent use, complete gratuitousness. She is absorbed by the person of Jesus. Jesus defends her and highly praises her choice: the "better part that nobody will take away from her".

We find Mary again in the episode of the anointing of Bethany (*John 12:1-6*). Here she is active: she takes the initiative of anointing the feet of Jesus (head), breaking the bottle of precious nard. Her gesture is still apparently without practical use (although Jesus says that she has unknowingly anticipated his burial), but in addition to gratuitousness it is abundant, extravagant: "The house was full of the fragrance of the perfume". Even on

this occasion, Jesus defends her and emphasizes: “She has done a beautiful thing to me...And truly I say to you, wherever the Gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her” (*Mark* 14:3-9).

The Eros and Agape in the Blessed Virgin Mary

Eros is the power of the feeling of love and affection/ it is proper of human beings/ it anthropomorphizes the love of God (when applied to God, as we see in the Bible). **Agape** is descending love, it prevails on the relationship of a mother to her son/daughter; it is more *amor benevolentiae* than *amor concupiscentiae*.

In Mary, *agape* prevails over *eros*. In Mary, love takes the two aspects in her relationship with God the Father and with Jesus:

Mary’s relationship with God the Father takes after Jesus’ love for the Father, especially as seen in the Gospel of John. It assumes the following characteristics: gratitude and praise for the realization of the incredible, exceeding love of God, the Father for her; obedience of Faith; vital dependence and contemplation of God’s plan.

Mary’s love for Jesus: is the vital, unbreakable link of a mother, the one who gave life; she is in syntony/same wavelength with her Son: deepest, closest association to Jesus’ redemptive work on the Cross (*John* 19:26-27); she holds a nurturing empathy for the faith and piety of the first Christian Community (*Acts* 1:13-14).

Conclusion: Loving as Jesus loved

What about us? How is the human quality of our loving? How are our relationships with people? With our friends? With the people we serve in our apostolate? With Jesus, with God? What is the quality of our prayer? How is OUR EROS?

Questions for personal reflection

(How are my relationships with people & with God in prayer)

1. Where do I experience beauty in my life?
2. When did I experienced anger, indignation, disappointment, tears for loss of a friend, etc...Do I usually bring my feelings to the Lord in prayer?
3. Am I able to listen to other people with empathy and patience?
4. Do I enjoy friendship in the context of my relationship with God?
5. Do I remember with gratitude the moments when I have experienced God, Jesus, my missionary vocation in a sensible, emotional way?
6. Am I concerned with the trials of the Church in the world, with the suffering of the poor or am I usually wrapped up in my own problems? Do I usually enjoy peace of mind or am I restless, unsatisfied?
7. Do I panic when I have nothing to do or do I turn naturally to God in prayer, to study and reflection?
8. Does the Mass, the Liturgy of the Hours, fill my heart? Do I find joy in preaching? In dealing with people?
9. Which are the Saints who have touched my heart and with whom I identify?
10. Do I give enough time to my personal prayer?
11. How do I experience my devotion to the Sacred Heart?
12. How can I describe my personal spirituality?

Bible References

Genesis 28:12/*John* 1:51

Song 1:2

2:6/*Psalm* 63:6-8

8:6-7

Psalm 63, 103, 130, 131, 139

Isaiah 43:1-8

49;13-18

Hosea 11

Ezekiel 16:1-22. 59-63

Luke 10:32-35

John 12:1-6

John 13

15

17

1 Corinthians 13

#####