

Fourth Sunday of Lent

A businessman visited a farm. He noticed a weather vane on top of the roof of the barn. It was windy, and the weather vane was turning fast. Directly below the instrument were the words painted in large letters: "God is love." The businessman was curious. There must be some reason why those words were written beneath such a changeable thing as a weather vane. So he asked the farmer: "Do you think God's love is so fickle and inconstant, like the wind?" "Quite the contrary," the farmer replied. "It means that, no matter which way the wind blows, God's love is constant and unchanging."

The fourth Sunday of Lent is called Laetare Sunday. "Laetare" in Latin means, "rejoice!" In the middle of the serious season of Lent, the Church invites us to rejoice: "Rejoice, Jerusalem! Be glad for her, you who love her; rejoice with her, you who mourned for her" (Entrance Antiphon — Isaiah 66:10-11). This is precisely because of this Good News: God is love, and His love for us sinful humanity is constant, generous and self-sacrificing: "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son" (Jn 3:16). If there is one question that can elicit the greatest number of diverse responses, it is the question "What is love?" Each person has his own understanding of love. It has become, unfortunately, the most common victim of what Pope Benedict XVI called the "dictatorship of relativism". So, what is love, in its real and objective sense?

A four-year-old boy went to the house of a neighbour: an elderly man whose wife just died recently. When he saw that the man was crying, the little boy climbed onto his lap, and just sat there. Later that day, his mother asked him what he had said to the neighbour. The little boy said: "Nothing. I just helped him cry." What the boy did was quite simple – which the world truly needs nowadays: compassion. This word comes from two Latin words: "cum" (with) and "passio" (suffering). So, literally it means "to suffer with", to be one with people in their sufferings.

Compassion is the most precise expression of love. This is what we hear in the Gospel today: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only and only Son so that all who believe in him might be saved" (Jn 3:16). The world has been in bad shape due to sin. And people are suffering under the slavery of sin and the dominion of evil. God cannot be a passive bystander. He is one with us in our sufferings. So, in the fullness of time, He decided to send His only Son, born of the Virgin Mary, so that he might be one with us and suffer with us. Hence, the most perfect image of total self-giving, and the best expression of perfect love, is the image of Jesus dying on the cross: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (Jn 15:13). That is love, in its real and objective sense. The Greek word used by the Gospels for such kind of love is "agape".

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As we enter the last two weeks of Lent, the Church invites us to hope and to rejoice, as we reflect on God's self-sacrificing love for us. He truly loves us, despite our being sinful and disobedient, that He is willing to suffer and die for us. This is more than enough reason to smile and rejoice every day. God loves us!

But love is not a one-way movement. In order for love to grow and bear fruit, it has to be reciprocated. So, if God loves us so, what should be our response? It should be to follow the most important command of Jesus at the Last Supper: "A new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another as I have loved you." To love should be natural for us. We all come from God who is love. To be greedy and selfish does not belong to our nature. Unfortunately, such is not the case in reality. That is why it is said that while God usually "gives and forgives", people, on the other hand, usually "gets and forgets"!

As long as we do not obey the commandment of love, the world will continue to be in pain and trouble. As long as our selfishness and greed rule our lives, poverty and shortage of resources are here to stay. The call and challenge for us, therefore, is to love in the manner that Jesus loved us. It is not easy, though, for it necessarily involves total self-giving and true compassion – to be ready to "suffer with". As St. Gemma Galgani said, "If you really want to love Jesus, first learn to suffer, because suffering teaches you to love."

St. John the apostle spent the last part of his life in exile in the Greek island of Patmos. It is said that when he was already too old, he would just be carried to Church on Sundays. And he would always address the congregation. Each time, his message would be the same: "My dear children, love one another." After some time, a disciple asked him, "Master, why do you say the same message over and over again?" He answered: "Because it is the command of the Lord. And if it is followed, it is enough."