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Love of the World

How do we live in the reality of Jesus Christ? For the great German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, this question was central to the discipline of Christian Ethics.

The fundamental point he makes is this. Christ Jesus is the true union of Godhead and manhood. Jesus is, therefore, the highest reality of being human. Given this reality, Christians are those who by grace participate in Christ. It is this grace of participation for which we pray continually in the Prayer of Consecration, and which we receive continually in the Holy Communion, that we might be "made one body with him, that he may dwell in us, and we in him."

Participation in Christ, then, has pro-found implications for how we live in our world. Or to put it even better, our participation in Christ clarifies how we love the world.

On the face of it, to say that the Christian ought to love the world could be profoundly misunderstood. And so it is helpful for us to distinguish the love of the world in two senses, one negative and one positive.

We begin with the negative. On the one hand love for the world is secondary to our love for God.

To use the language of the Book of Revelation, God is our "first love." Jesus made this very point when distinguishing between the "first and great commandment," and the second that is "like unto it". St. Augustine framed this with philosophical meaning when he said that in order to love one another, we must first love Love itself. God is love, the very source of love, and in the words of St. John, "he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God and God in him."

To love God first means that we desire the origin of love, love in its essence and totality. But such love of God as the source also means that we seek Him as our end.

To love God first means that life in this world is not after all our primary reality. With the Ascension of Jesus to the right hand of the Father, we believe that our final home, and thus our final love, is not in this world but in the life of blessedness with God Himself. The biblical image of the new heaven and the new earth embraces this eternal life. There is there no corruption, no pain, the chase of the animal

kingdom, "red in tooth and claw," is forever done away. The world to come resounds with the joy and liberty of the children of God. In this sense, the love of God is first as our true reality and end, and the love of the world and all its life is and must be second.

Of course, there is a way that the world is not even secondary in love, but rejected altogether. Jesus rebuked our evil and error. Before Pilate he proclaimed that His kingdom is not of this world. In this sense the world stands for the lust of domination that is the character of earthly power,

ambition, greed, and violence. The world in this sense stands for man in the cruelty of his fallen nature and cannot be loved but rather must be rejected. The kingdom of Christ is altogether different.

Summing up thus far, to look at the love of the world in this negative way is to see it as secondary to the love of God. And with the priority of the love of God there is also a rejection of all worldliness, all those motives of fallen nature that hurt and destroy.

But in addition to this *via negativa*, this negative way of looking at the world, is the *via positiva*, the positive way to see the world as good, as God has created it, and into which the reality of Jesus Christ has entered.

To love the world in this positive way is to see the world forever changed by the reality of Christ Jesus. This way of love says first of all that God loves man and indeed all creatures, that the world has an eternal place within the divine love, and that God has acted in Jesus Christ to redeem the world in love. In the words of St. Paul, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself."

God loves man and all creation. In the first part of his *Summa Theologiae*, describing the inner relations of God, St. Thomas Aquinas wrote that in knowing Himself, God knows all things as well. From "before" the beginning, God has known creation in the mystery of His eternal life, and therefore creation holds the place of everlasting goodness in the eternal mind.

Out of this eternal love, God sent His Son to redeem man and His creation, which was tainted by sin. St. Anselm called this intention of God's love the divine justice, by which he meant the everlasting will for the eternal happiness of man. God would not allow His love to go unsatisfied, but would indeed satisfy and accomplish His will in the God-Man, Jesus Christ.

Now this very moment, through the reality of the God-Man, God's love for the world extends to the world through the Body of Christ, which is the Church. And in the diverse members of the Body that make up the Church, Christ is present in the charity that each member lives.

It is a remarkable thing that each of us is given the calling and the gift to be Christ's own in the world. We have the opportunity to live by His grace, to share His peace with others, and to rejoice even in the midst of difficulty and heartache.

And so we are, and become more and more, the vehicle for God's love for the world. What He has known from eternity to be good, we know

also and rejoice in with thanksgiving. And what He has intended in redemption, which is the source of His justice, becomes the way that we approach a world of sin and death. There is no suffering that falls outside of His care. And so there is no pain, which the ministry of His servants cannot soften and encourage with charity and hope.

If it is true, and we believe it to be so, that God is bringing each one of His people to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, then it is our joy to grow up in all ways in Him, to participate in the fullness of the God-Man. The negative way and the positive way are both ours. And so the lilies are considered with thanksgiving, sinners are forgiven and reconciled, and the love of God, and the love of our neighbor for His sake, rules our hearts until that great Day.

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