

Mutual Love and the Presence of God in the Community according to Christian Thought and Experience⁷

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Abstract

Agape or Christian love, which can be seen as a participation in the very life of God who is Love, reaches its fulfillment when love is both given and received, in communion of purpose and intent. In the first letter of John we find love of God and love for our brothers and sisters closely interconnected. The love of God for us becomes the model and motive of our love for others, and at the same time love of neighbour is an answer to God's love for us. Furthermore God's love for men and women pushes them in the direction of reciprocity in their relations with one another, and ultimately this mutual love becomes a vehicle of His presence among them. In the writings and experience of Chiara Lubich, a modern mystic and founder of a movement of spirituality and life, we see a vivid confirmation of this interconnection between mutual love and the presence of God in the community.

Agape or Christian love can be seen as a participation in the very life of God who is Love. God whose very essence is love⁸ is considered to be the

⁷ Adapted from a paper presented by the author at an Interreligious Symposium: "Muslims and Christians in Dialogue", Castelgandolfo, Italy, 24-27 April 2005.

⁸ See 1 Jn 4:8.16. The author of the first letter of John does not say simply God

font and wellspring of authentic love in the hearts of men and women. Thus *agape* love in human beings can be described as reflecting the attributes of divine love. In the first place it should be universal and without restrictions. It is also creative, in the sense of being proactive, not waiting to move only in response to others. In this paper I would like to reflect on another important aspect of Christian love, namely that it is forcefully oriented towards reciprocity. *Agape* love, in fact, reaches its fulfilment when love is both given and received, in communion of purpose and intent. This aspect of love in Christian thought (mutuality) is also founded in the intrinsic being of God: one God in a communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Ultimately for Christians, a trinitarian ontology explains and underlies the significance of mutual love among human persons and the connection of their mutual love with the presence of God in the community. Since we are concentrating in this journal issue on the spiritual dimensions of charity, I merely state this ontological foundation without expounding on it further.⁹

Rather, in expanding on the topic of mutual love and God's presence in it, I will draw from Christian Scripture, in particular from the writings attributed to John, without attempting an exegetical analysis, but primarily seeking to deepen their practical and spiritual content.¹⁰ At a certain point, I will also draw from the inspired writings of Chiara Lubich, a modern mystic and founder of a worldwide Movement of spirituality and life,¹¹ who gave new impetus in modern times to the

loves, but God is love: both connotations: love as conduct and love as essence, are implied. See R. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, Doubleday, New York 1982.

⁹ For a recent study in this regard see P. Coda, *Dalla Trinità*, Città Nuova, Roma 2011.

¹⁰ For an exegetical analysis, in addition to the classical work of Brown cited above, see G. Giurisato, *Struttura e teologia della prima lettera di Giovanni, Analisi letteraria e retorica, contenuto teologico*. Ed. Pontificio Istituto Biblico, Roma 1998; U.C. von Wahlde, *The Gospel and Letters of John*, Vol. 3, *The Three Johannine Letters*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, Cambridge 2010. See also G. Rossé, *La spiritualità di comunione negli scritti giovannei*, Città Nuova, Rome, 1996.

¹¹ The Focolare Movement: a relatively new ecclesial movement with origins in the Roman Catholic Church founded in Italy in 1943. It is known for its work

dimension of reciprocity in love and to its connection to the presence of God in the community. By putting mutual love into practice she saw a community grow around her and expand to reach all the corners of the globe.

To introduce our theme, I will begin by quoting a passage taken from a part of Christian Scriptures called “the first letter of John”, written late in the first century, after the death of Jesus, and directed to one of the early Christian communities. The author begins this letter saying that he wants to bear witness to what he has seen and heard in the years he lived at the side of his Master, whom, as he affirms, was sent by God to give his life to atone for the sins of men. He then goes on to say:

“Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.” (1 *Jn* 4:11-12).

I chose this passage – and I could have chosen other similar excerpts as well – because it expresses so well the typical connection I wish to highlight between mutual love and the presence of God in a community united in love. The author is proposing God’s way of being and acting as

in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, and more generally as an effective instrument to build unity between people of different cultures, races, and social backgrounds. Its founder, Chiara Lubich (1920-2004), has been the recipient of numerous *honoris causa* degrees in diverse fields. For basic texts see C. Lubich, *Essential Writings*, New City Press, New York, 2006. For studies on *agape* in Lubich see M. Cerini, *Dio Amore nell’esperienza e nel pensiero di Chiara Lubich*, Città Nuova, Roma 1991; M. Vandeleene, *Io. Il Fratello, Dio nel pensiero di Chiara Lubich*, Città Nuova, Roma 1999. For a study on the connection of mutual love with the presence of God in the community see J. Povilus, *United in His Name, Jesus in Our Midst in the experience and thought of Chiara Lubich*, New City Press, New York 1992 (translated from the original, ‘Gesù in mezzo’ nel pensiero di Chiara Lubich, Città Nuova, Rome 1981).

an example and foundation of human conduct, an ethical standard which reaches its apex in mutual love.

Love of God and love for our brothers and sisters

The first part of the passage quoted defines the underlying premise: “if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.” The author is referring here to the love of God he has witnessed through his encounter with the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth. “That which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands... we proclaim also to you” (*Jn* 1: 7-8). In the preceding passages the author has made it clear that the love he is referring to is concrete, something which he and others have verified first hand. It is, moreover, a love “to the very end” (*Jn* 13:1), to the highest extreme; in fact “there is no greater love than this, to lay down one’s life” (*Jn*. 15: 13) .

The author immediately extends the love of God, made manifest to him personally through the life of Jesus, to all those who will receive and read his letter: “if God so loved us...”. So in the first place the author is indirectly affirming the universality of God’s love, which in turn indicates the ethical structure for Christian conduct. If God’s love extends to every human person, without exception, in every time or place, it is clear that whoever is at my side, every individual, is immensely loved by God, just as I am. Understanding that God is Love moves us to go out towards others, to love those who are loved by Him, seeing every neighbour as a brother or sister.

The love of God, visible in the life of Jesus, thus becomes the model and motive of our love for others. Does God love everyone? Then I too must love everyone. Does He send rain on the just and the unjust? I too must love friends and enemies (cf. *Mt* 5:45). Is He merciful, does He forgive my faults? I too should forgive those who offend me (cf. *Lk* 6:36). Does God take the initiative in loving me, without my meriting His love? I too have to take the initiative in loving my neighbour without expecting any

return, going two miles if someone forces me to go one, and adding my coat as a gift if someone would like to deprive me of my dress (cf. *Mt* 5:40).

Moreover, love of neighbour is not only a moral necessity but also an answer to God's love for us. Again in Scripture we find: "If anyone says, 'I love God', and hates his brother, he is a liar" "for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen" (1 *Jn* 4:20). An exegete has commented that, in the context of this passage, being a "liar" does not mean intentionally wanting to deceive others, but rather deceiving oneself, unawares.¹² It is an essential point, often overlooked even by Christians, that love of God cannot be separated from love of neighbour.

Furthermore - and this is fundamental in the light of our theme - the passage we have been considering does not say: "If God so loved us, we also ought to love Him in return", nor merely, "If God so loved us, we also ought to love others", but rather "we also ought to love one another". God's love for men and women pushes them in the direction of reciprocity in their relations with one another; it would have it that the love of human beings become love that is given and returns. If we find that not all human relations are characterized by such reciprocity, we are urged to desire this and do all that we can to make it become so.

In the Gospel of Matthew, we find the following words of Jesus:

"If you are offering your gift at the altar, and then remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go, first be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (*Mt* 5: 23-24).

Before worshipping God there must be harmony in human relations. It is quite surprising to note that Jesus does not say "if you have something

¹² See P. Bonnard, *Les épîtres johanniques*, Labor et Fides, Genève 1983, comment on 1 *Gv* 2.

against your brother,” but rather “if your brother has something against you.” It does not matter who is actually “right” or “wrong.” In any situation, before setting out to pray, before approaching God, we are advised to see to it that our relationship with our neighbour, every neighbour, be a relationship of mutual love.

Mutual love: the fulfilment of the law

In the last hours of His life, before dying, Jesus left a mandate – as a final summary of all His teaching – the new commandment of mutual love: “This is my command, that you love one other” (*Jn 15:17*).

The early Christians were keenly aware of this and saw love as a compendium of all the laws they had formerly received from God and put into practice in their Jewish faith (cf. *Gal. 5:14, Rom 13: 8-10*).

Commenting on the passage “Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law,” (*Rom 13: 8*). Chiara Lubich emphasized the dimension of mutuality that is implied:

“In the first place, love is presented as a debt, that is, as something we cannot be indifferent to, something we cannot put off. It is presented as something pressing on us, spurring us on, leaving us no peace until it is satisfied.

It’s like saying that mutual love is not an ‘extra’, the result of our largesse, whose strictures we can set aside without incurring any legal penalty. This Word urges us to put mutual love into practice on pain of betraying our dignity as Christians called by Jesus to be instruments of his love in the world.

Secondly, this passage tells us that mutual love is the moving force, the soul and the goal of all the commandments.”¹³

Mutual love and the presence of God in the community

While mutual love among human persons is viewed as a necessary condition for loving God, at the same time – and herein lies the originality - it becomes a vehicle of His presence among them.

“No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and His love is perfected in us.” (1 *Jn* 4:12).

This second part of the quote that we mentioned at the start of this paper brings us to the very heart of our theme: the presence of God in the community, which is evidenced here as being linked to mutual love in a clear and direct way. Provided there is mutual love among the members of the community, God “abides” in it, in each individual and in the plurality, making His dwelling there. God’s dwelling in the community is synonymous with His stable presence. His love for each person and for the community as a whole can be manifested more perfectly thanks to His presence in the mutual love among the members.

This connection between mutual love and the presence of God in the community is one of the most significant and vital discoveries that Chiara Lubich made at the beginning of the spiritual movement which grew up around her as she and her first companions strove to put the words of the Gospel into practice,¹⁴ for although love and indeed mutual love is at the very heart of Christian faith, it has not always been lived with due consciousness and intensity. Although we can find an awareness of the presence of God among persons united in love documented in the writings of early Christianity, with the passage of time this awareness began to fade. More emphasis was given instead to

¹³ C. Lubich, *Il debito dell'amore*, in "Città Nuova", 15-16, 1990, p. 9.

¹⁴ See J. Povilus, *United in His Name*, for the entire documentation on Chiara Lubich and her thought on Jesus in the midst.

the presence of God in houses of prayer, as for example in churches; He was considered as being present in His Word, in Sacred Scripture; but rarely did people recall His presence in mutual love.

The presence of “Jesus in the midst”

When Chiara Lubich and her companions first began seeking to carry out the words of the Gospel to the letter and in particular to live in that mutual love which corresponds to Jesus’ command, they experienced something which she described as a “qualitative leap” in their lives. There was a fullness of joy and peace and light they had never experienced before and the people around them were attracted by “something extraordinary” but hard to define, which touched their hearts and made them feel called to change their lives in a radical way.

Only later, as Chiara recalls, did she grasp the meaning of this new ongoing experience of light and joy. It was in a particular moment and on a particular day when she opened the Gospel and read Jesus’ promise: “Where two or three are gathered in my name there am I in their midst” (*Mt 18:20*). “Gathered in my name”, which she interpreted as meaning “gathered in mutual love”. In that radical unity and love which she and her companions had begun to practice, they experienced the presence of Christ in their midst, Christ who for Christian belief is the Word of God made man.

According to Christian thought the presence of God among faithful believers who love one another is explicitly linked to Christ. This is true not only because Jesus conveyed the commandment of mutual love to his followers in such an unequivocal way, but also because He Himself promised to be in them and among them. “I am the vine, you are the branches.... Abide in me and I in you” (*Jn 15: 4-5*). Before ascending to the glory of heaven, Jesus promised to remain with his disciples “to the end of time” (*Mt 28:20*), and to be present “where two or three are gathered” in his name (*Mt. 18:20*). Thus Christians trust that if they love one another according to Christ’s command He is present among them in His glorified condition, as a source of God’s presence.

The conditions for having God's presence in the community

Perhaps we should pause for a moment to explore in greater depth the conditions which – according to Christian thought – are necessary premises for experiencing the presence of God in the community.

The basic condition, as we have mentioned, is mutual love. Mutual love is the first thing that is required of the members of the community in order for God to remain and for His love to be perfected in them. It is in fact in the life of *agape* that the faithful come to know God and participate in His life. This is repeatedly mentioned in the first letter of John: "Let us love one another, since love comes from God, and everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Anyone who fails to love can never have known God, because God is love" (1 *Jn* 4: 7-8). The community to which this letter is directed is being reminded that their love for one another is a share in the life of God and that only by continuing in mutual love can they remain in Him and grow.

We could go on to analyze the sort of love that is here implied. There are many nuances to the word "love", many varieties of love in the world. The love that calls God's presence among persons living in communion is surely not an ordinary or sentimental love. In fact, if love for others is based on divine love, the measure of which is fathomless, it would seem to require of those who live it heroic total gift of self.

This is confirmed by the gift Jesus made of his life for others. His command of mutual love: "love one another" is qualified by the words "as I have loved you" (*Jn* 15:12). Reflecting on those words one can infer what degree of love is being asked. Jesus had said: "Greater love has no man than this: that a man lay down his life for his friends" (*Jn* 15:13), and after soliciting His disciples to love one another, He actually gave his life – according to Christian faith – for them and for all humankind, dying on the cross.

Therefore the mutual love Jesus asks for is not a question of logic nor of feelings, but something very concrete and real which invests one's

entire existence. Once Chiara Lubich and her companions had understood this fundamental requisite, they formulated a pact to love each other to the point of being ready to give their lives for one another. That measure of life itself, the highest measure, comprised every lesser measure, anything else that could be asked. “To give one’s life implies total selflessness in order to be constantly oriented towards the good of others, with God as our only guide.”¹⁵ It is “the constant sacrifice of one’s entire self to live the life of our brothers and sisters...”¹⁶

If life is the measure of love, it means not holding anything back, but being ready to give up everything, including one’s ideas or personal inspirations, being ready to pay any tribute great or small. It is readiness to share, out of love for one’s neighbour, both material goods and spiritual riches (such as the inner light and life experienced in living out one’s faith). It is readiness to forgive and to ask forgiveness and to start again. Therefore the profound reality behind “loving one another” in a way which, according to Christian thought, is the premise for having God’s presence in the community, is based on a very demanding, concrete and dynamic praxis.

And while all this may appear extremely challenging – and of course being ready to put self aside in order to love others is a radical choice – the presence of God in the community thus united brings with it such effects of peace and freedom, and a fullness of joy never experienced before, that it entices whoever has experienced it to continue on, overcoming the obstacles that inevitably arise along the way.

Consequences of the presence of God in mutual love

Besides the typical joy and peace which God’s presence conveys, when He is present in the community its members experience an inner strength

¹⁵ P. Foresi, *L’Agape nel cristianesimo*, in *Nuova Umanità*, 155 (September-October 2004),

p. 576. Foresi, priest and theologian, is co-founder of the Focolare Movement.

¹⁶ C. Lubich, unpublished script of 1950.

and conviction that can be discerned as being more than a mere effect of human reasoning or will. Moreover there is an abundance of light: for grasping a deeper meaning in life, joys, sorrows, even death; light for intuiting the steps to take in the path ahead.

All this could be described as a phenomenology of the presence of God in the spiritual communion among human persons, and the continuing experience of the Movement founded by Chiara Lubich stands as evidence to it.

But there can be still other far-reaching effects. For instance not rarely individuals experience a radical change of heart which marks the start of an entirely new existence. Another effect is a spreading of reciprocal love to others, for if God is present in the community He does not leave things as they were. His presence, in the words of Chiara Lubich, is like a fire catching up everything around it and setting it all ablaze. Indeed very often people who come into contact with a community where God is present, be it large or small, sense a special atmosphere; they feel their hearts burning, and find or experience God even without His being spoken of.

Using another example, Chiara speaks of the “living cells” which we come to form when God is present among us through mutual love, lifting us up together, so to say, to a new level of life. Prophetically she goes on to affirm that if we love one another in such a way as to have God among us: “there will be an upsurge of vibrant, living cells which will with time animate the society which surrounds them until the whole mass is penetrated,”¹⁷ and which will restore health to it, in view of God’s plans for a world of peace and unity.

Perhaps it would be well to evidence at this point the fact that according to the Gospel passage we have quoted (*Mt* 18: 20), God’s presence among two or three united in love is not limited to churches or houses of prayer. There is no such specification. As a result, two or three in any

¹⁷ C. Lubich, *Yes, Yes, No, No*, New City, London 1977, pp. 89-90.

place living in mutual love would suffice: in parliament, in a home or office, mother and child, doctor and patient, student and teacher, and so on. This possibility of bringing God's presence outside of places of worship, into the grain of society and to daily life, is a precious key towards a positive transformation of the world.

Conclusion

In this paper I have highlighted the fulfillment of love in reciprocity and the Christian conviction that God is present where there is mutual love. However these two points, which are a focus of Christian doctrine, are not limited to Christian life and thought. Their broader anthropological underpinnings and their explication in other religions currents would merit further study and development. In the meantime, on an empirical level, the practice of mutual love between members of various religious communities can give a more solid basis to common efforts to construct a social order that promotes a culture of peace.

I have heard – and this has been confirmed to me – that Islam was born in a distinct perspective of concreteness. Converting to God in this faith brought a change in every aspect of human existence, from politics to private life. Christians, too, as Pope Francis has repeatedly reminded us, are called to a concrete commitment for others, to build a world of solidarity and peace. The newness in what we have described in this paper lies in the desire to do all this, including our social commitments, in unity of sentiment with other men and women of faith, aspiring to have God present among persons united in love, so that He may enlighten our path and lead us forward according to His will.