

LOVE: SOME BASIC THEOLOGICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

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Abstract

The theme of love is one that has always bewildered man, for love itself, as a Christian virtue (*agape*), is always an exteriorization – a going out of oneself for the sake of the other. Notably, this work, with the philosophical method of analysis, aims at examining the theological and epistemological foundations of the theme of love while taking special cognizance of the novel value which Archbishop Valerian Okeke has brought into this sphere in his *The Measure of Love*. Love, as the paper analyzes, is a Christian Vocation that we must possess to remain in relation with God, and to visibly express our discipleship. Furthermore, the paper discusses love in different aspects. As eros, love is a romantic attraction which is aimed at satisfying one's needs. As philia, it is an affection based purely on friendship and is democratic in nature. As storge, love is a form of affection based on natural bond such as blood ties and family relationship. And ultimately, as agape, it is 'the love of God operating in the human heart' which is sacrificial, redemptive, and seeks to give without being paid in return. Consequent upon this, the work enjoins us to take love as a weapon with which we will transform the world. Therefore, love must be a constant going out to others, a constant eviction of egotism, a constant searching for the formation of an "us."

Keywords: Love, eros, philia, storge, agape, egotism.

Introduction:

The Lenten Pastoral of 2005 entitled *The Measure of Love*, squarely dealt with one of the issues of great theological and philosophical concerns throughout the history. The author, Most Rev. Valerian Okeke laid bare the motive behind this project on Love as first inspired by our Christian vocation or call to love if we can meaningfully maintain any relationship with God who himself is Love (1 Jn. 4:7). Moreover, it is the only visible sign of discipleship with Christ for it is the only way by which 'all men know that we are his disciples' (cf. Jn. 13: 35). The significance was further heightened, he

said, by the call of His Holiness Pope John Paul II in his message for the World Day of Peace 2005, to win the world with the weapons of love¹, citing the Council Fathers who said that the fundamental laws of human perfection and consequently of the transformation of the world, is the new commandment of love.²

It is on the strength of this added importance that I have decided to look deeply into the theological foundations and philosophical consideration on the theme of love, taking cognizance of the value which Archbishop Okeke has brought into the discussion through his work *The Measure of Love*.

The Meaning of Love

In defining the term love, Archbishop Okeke first eliminated the wrong conceptions men have often paraded about love since sometimes we know a thing by what it is not. One unique and particularly interesting exegesis he made on the concept of love which hitherto had not been encapsulated by writers when they refer us to the Greek conceptualizations on the kinds of love, is the inclusion of *Storge* to the often three traditional classifications: *Eros*, *Philia* and *Agape*. Some people stop just at two: *Eros* and *Agape* taking the former to include the other term. The *storge* which he distinguished from *Eros* and *Philia*, is a form of affection based on natural bond such as blood ties and family relationship.

On the other distinctions made by writers on the concept of love, the word *Eros* is largely seen as a beautiful type of love; it is a sort of Romantic love. G.K. Chesterton speaks about this love when he wrote to his future wife, Frances Blogg: "There are four lamps of thanksgiving burning before me. The first, that I was born out of the same earth as you. Two, I have tried to love everything in the universe as a remote preparation for loving you. Three, I have never run after strange women. You cannot understand how much this prepares a man for true love. Four, my previous existence ends here. It has led me to you."³ Shakespeare equally referred to this love when he said: 'Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds, or bends with the remover to remove; O' no! It is an ever fixed mark that looks on tempests and is never shaken; it is the star to every wandering bark.'⁴ This is quite Romantic love, and Plato talks about it a great deal in his Dialogue especially in the yearning of the soul for the realm of the divine. In Plato's *Symposium*, Diotima gives a dazzling picture of the potential value of love in our lives; how through the love of beautiful objects or persons we can transfer this affection to another more capacious object, and so ascend through various levels to a

vision of absolute beauty.⁵

This aspect of Diotima's speech had become one of the favorite inspirations for religious and mystical writers of the medieval times. It is a sort of ascent at the background of Augustine's mysticism which led to reconciling *Eros* with *Agape*; but this has been sharply criticized by later theologians because they have two different ends.. Plotinus also described the ascent to the One in terms which consciously echoed *Symposium (Enneads 1.6.8-9)*. Similar echoes occur in Origen's description of the soul's renunciation of the things of the world and advancing to perfect knowledge and contemplation of the pure realm of causes (*De Principiis* II. xi. 7).

Because *Eros* is not that which pushes one towards another but an *attraction*, it is said then to embrace such things as love of a friend, love of a man and a woman, love of philosophy, love of literature, etc. It is a passionate kind of love and as Archbishop Okeke signalled, it is 'aimed at satisfying one's needs, such as an intimate relation between man and woman' or the yearnings of one's soul, one's desire. As it is based on attraction, it fails once the object of attraction ceases to give all that was promised, being capable of giving. Here, once the 'the ecstasy does not continue, and the band stops playing, and the champagne of life loses its sparkle, the other person or the object of attraction is called a cheat'.⁶ Since erotic love is therefore selfish whereas *agape* is selfless, it became then one of the strongest reasons, as we shall see, why the theologians pronounced the reconciliation or synthesis a failure.

Another level of love found in the Greek language is *Philia*. It is a close affection between personal friends; it is a reciprocal love, you love because you are loved. It can be called a democratic kind of love in which there is a reciprocal devotion founded on natural honour, common likes and similar sense of decency. In *Philia*, the other person is treated with befitting respect and dignity; it is friendship. As an affection based purely on friendship, said Archbishop Okeke, it is "without blood ties but characterised by mutual fondness or enthusiasm for one another".

The next kind of love in Greek language is *Agape*, which goes beyond Romantic love or the love of friendship. *Agape* is a sacrificial love, redemptive, good will to all men. It is an overflowing love which seeks the good of others without anything in return. Theologians would say, it is 'the love of God operating in the human heart'. *Agape*, according to Archbishop Okeke, is the 'unconquerable

benevolence towards others. It is completely selfless'. It is without lack, without any bit of evil. It is at the level of love which enables one to seek the good of another regardless of men's detractions or calumnies. It is, he said, 'the triumph of the spirit'.⁷ *Agape* springs from the need of the other person. It is the love in which the individual seeks not his own good, but the good of his neighbour (1Cor. 10:24). The Samaritan who gave a help to the Jew on the road to Jericho was 'good' because he responded to the human need that he was presented with. *Agape* is therefore spontaneous, unmotivated, groundless, makes no distinction between friends and enemy.

Agape is a sacrificial love in which the lover sacrifices himself for the beloved, counts himself most free when he is a 'slave' to the object of his love, and desires even to immolate self that the other might be glorified. This is the kind of love which led Christ to a cross and kept Paul unembittered amid the angry torrents of persecution, says Martin Luther King jnr. 'Such love', he continues, 'confronts evil without flinching and shows in our popular parlance an infinite capacity 'to take it'. Such love overcomes the world even from it, rough-hewn cross against the skyline'⁸

Fulton J. Sheen makes a vivid illustration of this type of love explaining the ultimate form of sacrifice experienced when one rises to this level of love. He compares it to what obtains with amoeba at the lower level of life; while it has to struggle for its own existence, it also shows thoughtfulness for others. The amoeba, he says, has only one cell; yet at some moment in its life, it has to decide whether or not it will live for itself, or sacrifice a part of itself by splitting in order that another life may live. Unconsciously it perceives that it must reproduce itself, it saves the species by sacrifice, and thus is a kind of Old Testament preparation for the higher love in human nature.⁹ Sheen made us understand, that all through nature, those communities that include the greatest number of sympathetic members flourish best; those that manifest the greatest mutual aid have the best chance of survival. In almost the same language, Archbishop Okeke expresses this type of love as one that propels peace and progress in every society. It is the love of solidarity and sacrifice which "sustains a given society."¹⁰

Eros and Agape: Any Possible Synthesis?

We have seen that the *Eros* which in Plato was the desire for vision of the ideal beauty became for the Neo-Platonists, St. Augustine inclusive, the desire or yearning for union with God, a union not separated from eternal life. This love of longing is stated in the famous expression of St. Augustine

in the *Confession* that our souls are restless until they find rest in God. The expression itself shows that God which the soul loves or yearns to be united with, is sought for the sake of the soul (its peace and joy), a selfish love although it has been transferred to love of a 'higher' good. Here is another but fairly long and classic example of such love expressing itself in terms of the union of soul with God. St. Augustine writes:

My love of you, O Lord, is not some vague feeling...Not material beauty or beauty of a temporal order; not the brilliance of earthly light, so welcome to our eyes; not the sweet melody of harmony and song; not the fragrance of flowers, perfumes, and spices; not manna or honey, not limbs such as the body delights to embrace. It is not these that I love when I love you my God. And yet, when I love him, it is true that I love a light of a certain kind, a voice, a perfume, a food, an embrace; but they are of the kind that I love in my inner self, when my soul is bathed in light that is not bound by space; when it listens to sound that never dies away; when it breathes fragrance that is not borne away on the wind; when it tastes food that is never consumed by the eating; when it clings to an embrace from which it is not severed by fulfillment of desire. This is what I love when I love my God (*Confessions*, 9.6).

We are meant to understand that ideas such as were the springboard of medieval mysticism. It received its intellectual formulation from Thomas Aquinas who in *Summa Theologica* treated all natural love as a passion, stirred by some good to which the love is adapted, an object of possession which is different from the 'love of friendship' which is directed only towards the good of the friend, based on God's self-communication to man where God is loved 'for himself' and not for anything to be obtained from him.

The above scholastic distinction which appears to say that God can be loved 'for himself' or 'for his sake', however did not impress Anders Nygren who in his influential study of the doctrine of love in Christian theology maintained that the 'eros-motif' predominant in Christian mysticism is irreconcilable with the 'agape-motif' of the NT because *Eros* is always ego-centric as the pursuit of a good to be acquired for the self. The acquisitive nature of the desire for self is not affected simply because the desire has now been transferred from 'lower' to 'higher' good, from earthly to heavenly good (thing). *Agape*, on the other hand, is entirely selfless, seeking only the good of others, which is

theo-centric because it is the reproduction of God's own outgoing love, a love not engendered by any existing goodness in the object.¹¹ Thus, the synthesis which is achieved between *Eros* and *agape* could not hold, said Nygren because the *Eros*, the longing for God which is met by the descent of the divine love in the incarnation bringing about a union with God, a satisfaction to the soul, is selfish. And one cannot say he loves God in *agape* way, i.e. a creature selflessly 'seeking the good or welfare of God'. For Nygren, what God actually enjoined us then in the first commandment: 'thou shall love the Lord your God with all your heart... and thou shall love your neighbour as yourself', is an attitude of faith towards God while at the same time loving our neighbour by making room for God's own *agape* flowing through our human hearts to our neighbour.

The above contrast and application between *Eros* and *agape* is also comparable to the position of Soren Kierkegaard who in his *Works of Love* (1847) saw the former as love between man and woman or friend and friend. This is selective, centred only on particular person or persons preferred to all others. It is a love that depends on certain lovable qualities found on its objects. It is a disguised form of self love said Kierkegaard and it is necessarily exposed to alteration and failure. But, Christian love (*agape*) does not choose its object rather goes out to the neighbour who is everyman; it is secure from change because it is accepted as a duty, as obeying to the command 'thou shall'. Kantian rigorism allows moral quality only to this later type of love. By making love a commandment, Our Divine Lord separates it from emotion or temperament. In this way, love then is shown not to be 'a gush but a virtue, not a spasmodic enthusiasm, but an abiding relationship of service, affection, and sacrifice'.¹²

Implications and Demands of Christian Love:

After showing us how love is the epicentre of creation and salvation of the world, Archbishop Okeke took time to explain in detail how it is also at the base of most of the social organizations of the world: the family, the human society, the call to leadership and followership etc. One important character of this love is that it is zeroed to *agape*; even in the family, the husbands and wives must be 'partners of divine love'.¹³ Though their love may have begun by some form of attraction (erotic in nature), it must abandon it for a higher level for there are no flat grounds in the kingdom of love. According to Archbishop Sheen, "one is either going uphill or coming down. If there is no purification, the fire of passion becomes the flicker of the sentiment, and finally only the ashes of

habit. No one is thirsty at the border of a well. There is no such thing as loving too much; one either loves madly or too little... The joy and the ecstasies, unless they are freshened by sacrifice, become mere friendships.¹⁴

Apart from the family, the Christian love must also express itself in the human society, in the love of neighbour. *Agape* must set itself freely at the service of neighbour; just as erotic love freely seeks the sweet servitude of affection and devotions to partner. We cannot say we love God without giving room to God's love flowing through our hearts to our neighbour. Though every love is by nature free, for love to be utterly free from all restraint, one would have to be alone, but then he/she would have no one to love. This is the ideal type of life for Sartre, who says: 'Others are hell'. The basis of his philosophy is that anything restraining the ego is nothing. But if man actually sets out to be free in the sense of living life only on his own terms, he finds himself in the nihilism of hell. Sartre did forget that to fall in love means to fall into something which is just responsibility to another.

Christian love therefore should express itself in the love of neighbour, which according to Archbishop Okeke "includes all, especially...the poor, the needy, the sorrowful, the bereaved, the disabled, and the disadvantaged"¹⁵ There will always be love for the lovable, but there will never be love for the unlovable unless we begin to love them through the action of God in our hearts and the fact that he has commanded us to do so. It also includes the love of our enemies which Archbishop Okeke calls 'the apex of love'. This is the unique teaching of Christ, he said, which when applied, would eliminate all forms of 'hatred, revenge, violence and war'. Certainly, it is pretty difficult to like one's enemy, someone who is so wicked to you. Fortunately, Christ did not say 'like your enemies' rather 'love your enemies'. Like is sentimental but love is redemptive, good will for all men. St. Paul said it well with regard to Christ: 'For at the very time when we were still powerless, Christ died for the wicked. Even for a just man, one would hardly die, though perhaps for a good man one might actually brave death. But Christ died for us when we were yet sinners and that is God's own proof of his love towards us' (Rm. 5:6-8).

The leaders in particular should show this sacrificial love, completely devoted to the interest of the community and not seeking their own interest alone which is the hallmark of greed, selfishness, corruption, bribery, lust, abuse of power, sectionalism, nepotism etc. as enunciated by Archbishop Okeke¹⁶. He prophesied about true love and human society in the words similar to those of Plato as

he expressed his firm belief in philosophy that "until the sons and daughters of divine love become leaders or the leaders adopt the principles of love, there will be no end to the troubles of our states and nation."¹⁷ Good leadership, he says, 'involves sacrifice', 'giving and not counting the cost'. *Agape* is readiness to go any length to restore community; the cross is an eternal expression of the length to which God could go in order to restore broken community.

In general, love demands a constant going out to others, exteriorization, an increased searching for the formation of an 'us'. Love of God is inseparable from love of neighbor. Words of love must be translated into action, and they must go beyond the boundary of one's home. Sometimes, the needs of neighbor may become so imperative that one may have to sacrifice one's own comfort for another. Love that does not expand to neighbor dies of its own egotism. Perhaps, there is no best way to end this work than quoting Archbishop Okeke about how our lives may not be transformed and our troubles overcome if we do not allow the culture of Christian love (*agape*) translated into our society. He said: "There may not be easy solutions to the many problems of life as long as we continue to abhor the virtue of love. There may be no end to wars and tumults among the nations; there may be no end to destructions of lives and property; there may be no end to shamelessness, foolishness and ignorance; there may be no end to the culture of impunity; there may be no end to robbery and such destructive tendencies; yes, there will be no end to the troubles and cares of our lives until we live lives of love or allow love to influence the principles of our existence"¹⁸

References

- ¹ Pope John Paul II, *Message for World Day of Peace* Jan. 1, 2005, n. 12.
- ² *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 38., See V. M. Okeke, *The Measure of Love*, (Onitsha, 2005), p.10-11.
- ³ Cf. F.J. Sheen, *Through the Year with Fulton J. Sheen*, compiled by Henry Dieterich, Mumbai-India: St Pauls, 2005, p. 190
- ⁴ See Martin Luther King jnr. Love, Law, and Civil Disobedience, in James M. Washington (Ed.), *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jnr.*, New York: HarperCollins publishers, 1991, p. 46.
- ⁵ It is the whole theme of the *Symposium* but see esp. *Symposium* 211c
- ⁶ F.J. Sheen, *Way to Happiness*, Mumbai: St. Pauls, 2006, p. 52.
- ⁷ Okeke, *op. cit.* p. 6.
- ⁸ Martin Luther King jnr. The Strength to Love, in James M. Washington (Ed.), *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jnr.*, New York: HarperCollins publishers, 1991, p. 513.
- ⁹ F. J. Sheen, 'Love, Marriage and Children', in *From the Angel's Blackboard*, India: Asian Trading Corporation, 1998, p. 112.
- ¹⁰ V. M. Okeke, *op. cit.*, 22
- ¹¹ Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, part I, 1932,
- ¹² F.J Sheen, The Evolution of Love, in *From the Angel's Blackboard*, India: Asian Trading Corporation, 1998, p. 114
- ¹³ V. M. Okeke, *op. cit.* p. 21.
- ¹⁴ Sheen, *The World's First Love*, Mumbai: St. Pauls, 2005, pp. 139-140.
- ¹⁵ V. M. Okeke, *op. cit.* p. 23.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 24-29
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 43.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 44-45.