

The Virtue of the Love of God

“Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” And he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have answered right; do this, and you will live.” (Luke 10:25-28)

With our whole heart, our whole soul, our whole mind, with our whole strength and fortitude, with our whole understanding, with all our powers, with every effort, every affection, every feeling, every desire and wish, let us all love the Lord God Who has given and gives to each one of us our whole body, our whole soul and our whole life, Who has created, redeemed and will save us by His mercy alone, Who did and does everything good for us, miserable and wretched, rotten and foul, ungrateful and evil ones. Therefore, let us desire nothing else, let us want nothing else, let nothing else please us and cause us delight except our Creator, Redeemer and Savior, the only true God, Who is the fullness of good, all good, every good, the true and supreme good, Who alone is good, merciful, gentle, delightful, and sweet, Who alone is holy, just, true, and upright, Who alone is kind, innocent, clean, from Whom, through Whom, and in Whom is all pardon, all grace, all glory of all penitents and just ones, of all the blessed rejoicing together in heaven. (Earlier Rule of 1221)

Why do you think that loving God is listed first by Christ in the Gospel reference before the love of neighbor? In the writings of St. Francis, we observe an emphatic declaration that the love of God is preferential. Today in many spiritual circles, the love of neighbor is placed as primary or on the same level as the love and worship of God. In all fairness, these writers and spiritual leaders may believe that the love of God is clearly understood. However, so many in our society place the works of social justice ahead of worship and the love of God. Clearly, Jesus did not declare this, and Francis did not either. Love of God and neighbor have a common source but are qualitatively different.

In the book *Into the Silent Land*, the author Martin Laird provides an image used by the early church that may help to make this point clear. The image is of a wheel with spokes centered on a single hub. Toward the outer rim of the wheel, the spokes are furthest from one another, but at the center the spokes are closer and more united to one another. If the center or the hub of the wheel represents God, we can see that the closer we grow to God, the closer we will grow to others. Could this be a reason that Art. 8 of our Rule says the following, “As Jesus was the true worshipper of the Father, so let prayer and contemplation be the soul of all they are and do.”?

You may be thinking, “Of course I love God!”. Yes, of course, you do! Then read the scripture verse again and read the writing of St. Francis. Notice these words, “with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind,” and these, “with our whole heart, our whole soul, our whole mind, with our whole strength and fortitude, with our whole understanding, with all our powers, with every effort, every affection, every feeling, every desire and wish.” Measure your love of God against these phrases. Do you measure up?

Spend time meditating on the virtue of the love of God. At the end of your time, ask yourself:

- 1) Do I really love God or am I putting on a show? Am I fooling myself by saying that I love God? How do I know if I love Him? Do I love God more than anything else in my life? What comes between me and God? How do I show my love of God to God and to others? Am I afraid to love God too much? If so, why?**
- 2) Find another section in scripture which illustrates the virtue of the love of God. Find a statement of Jesus or an incident in His life that deals with the love of God.**
- 3) Find a place in the Rule, Constitutions, and Statutes which calls for the virtue of the love of God.**
- 4) Practice the virtue of the love of God this month and examine this virtue each evening. Pray each night, “Lord, help me to love you fully and to love you constantly. Amen.”**

(Adapted from Franciscan Virtues Through the Year: 52 Steps to Conversion from Saint Francis of Assisi, written by the members of the Confraternity of Penitents.)