

## *To Love Oneself*

"He who loves me, also loves my dog," says St. Bernard in one of his sermons. "He who likes the tree also likes its branches," proclaims Molière. "Where we love, we do not offend." "When love is deficient, faults assume enormous proportions" (Italian proverb). "Love is love albeit that of a dog" (Targui).

In the arena of love, the most difficult task is yet to love oneself without being egotistical, acknowledging the positive values sown within one's breast by nature. One has to grasp and accept the value of one's own intelligence, will-power, heart, body, in order to be able to develop in the world without complexes and generate good and healthy human relations.

Much has been written on self-effacement, on the love of oneself, and on self-derision. Evidently, self-effacement can perhaps be good if it is conducive to a total surrender of one's being to one's Creator, but it is reprehensible if self-effacement is synonymous with negligence of oneself, such as the neglectful drunkard who dissipates his wealth, ruins his health, abrogates his responsibilities, and turns away from his home.

To love oneself is wholesome if it signifies an awareness of one's human values, a living out of these values for self-fulfilment, and the development of an outgoing attitude towards others.

If love of self signifies egoism, it must be unceasingly combatted. It is a pernicious virus which corrodes the entire being and leaves it in abhorrent tatters.

What does self-derision signify? It is the despising of oneself which leads to the conviction that one is useless, burdensome, the refuse of society, deserving of all chastisements. This is wrong, it is an exaggeration, it is inhuman, it is unacceptable.

If self-derision implies a certain sense of humour which in the end allows others to laugh a little bit at oneself, if it implies that one does not believe oneself to be the centre of the world, if it implies not putting on airs, then all is well.

An experienced professor often used to say: "We are neither the pick of the crop nor are we imbeciles fashioned by the hand of God."

Erich Fromm, the German psychoanalyst, affirms: "If it is a virtue to love my neighbor as a human being, it must be a virtue — and not a vice — to love myself, since I am a human being too... The idea expressed in the Biblical 'Love thy neighbor as thyself!' implies that respect for one's own integrity and uniqueness, love for and understanding of one's own self, cannot be separated from respect and love and understanding for another

individual. The love for my own self is inseparably connected with the love for any other being." (E. Fromm: *The Art of Loving*, Bantam Books, p. 49.)

Once one becomes aware of oneself, it will be easier to love others; it will be easy to fulfil one's destiny as conceived and fashioned by the Author of life. I have not understood the sense of the commandment of God, "You will love your neighbour as yourself," if I constantly fret and fume about the limits of my intelligence, the fickleness of my will, the prejudices of my heart, and the frailty of my body. Then I will not become aware of my inner values, my vital energies; it will be impossible for me to evaluate others objectively. It is ridiculous to believe that I will be able to discover the treasures of others if I am not in the habit of valuing those same riches in myself.

The grand reformation of the century ought to be for all men and women to look at themselves and to take an inventory of their own profound riches; the other changes will naturally follow with gentle ease.

## *Unconditional Acceptance of Others*

Evidently, an openness towards others does not stem solely from their natural capacity to attract. The welcoming heart does not reside within someone else but rather within one's own self. I ought, at first, to become aware of my own self, and of my life experiences. I have to continue to persevere tirelessly in the study of my own self in order to discover the depth of my potential. I also ought to delve into my innermost self and be aware of what is happening within me.

When I have accepted myself and have had the opportunity to discover my humanness in my own style, then, I will be ready to accept others whatever their thoughts, words and actions may be. I will thus accept them, continue to love and appreciate them.

We have to struggle every day to be capable of establishing fruitful human relationships. The initial struggle is with our own selves. Our love of others, instead of being structured on the love that we have for ourselves, very often resides in their exterior attitudes and in their behavior. It seldom results in the creation of stable relationships based

on being human. We love but conditionally, only to the extent of finding one's pleasure and insofar as we are able to avoid a commitment. Our nerves are on edge and often our natural aggressiveness is on the point of exploding.

If we linger idly talking about a third person, as soon as that person receives an exaggerated report of what was said, dialogue becomes more troublesome and trust is shattered.

As we get to know ourselves, we become aware of how we are different from another. Because we are different, we wish to attract special attention to ourselves depending on our own needs. We have to treat others in the same way, basing ourselves on the premise that they are unique and different, that is to say, that they do not have the same reflexes, the same tastes, the same mode of thought, and the same power of expression. We have to accustom ourselves to living with the originality of others because every human being has been cast in a special die which is the only copy, the only prototype. Unconsciously, we would wish them to be the same as we are — we would hate to see them different.

Every time that I say: "So-and-so is not sympathetic to me, I have difficulty in opening a dialogue," I implicitly admit that I don't want him or her to be different: our philosophies of friendship, of human relations distance us instead of uniting

us and promoting companionship, friendship and community.

If we have so much difficulty in enduring others, it is because of our own intolerance or domineering attitude. What is infuriating is not our inability to identify others with ourselves, nor our inability to have others on an even keel with ourselves, but rather that we are not averse to having them slightly inferior to us.

We ought to analyze ourselves to review our relationships with others. With some people, we feel tense, slightly irritated, because we refuse to be receptive to a different attitude of mind, to listen to discourses or counsels contrary to our own way of thinking. We wish to bend them to our own way of thinking, to coerce them to become somewhat like ourselves. Most often we are the victims of a rigid mentality which attempts to level everybody, and which induces the peculiar specialty which is that of uniformity: "What is good for the goose is good for the gander." That is what we wrongly call the spirit of the group or of the community.

One day, a young religious requested of his superior permission to retire to his cell at seven in the evening. "I have the flu. I wish to go and rest." The superior replied: "Remain with your brothers until nine o'clock. Even though you may have the flu, go to bed when they do." This manner of discipline is unacceptable today. In the days of old, one

did not find this intolerable because everyone was subject to the same rules. There were no exceptions.

Unconditional acceptance of others involves a consent on our part to leave them as they are without obliging them to change either their positive qualities or their shortcomings. We have to love the cantankerous and allow them to fly off the handle.

Jesus accepts Peter even with his impulsiveness. "One of you will betray me," says Jesus. Peter makes a profession of faith. "You and I are inseparable, in life or in death. I will never betray you." "Peter, before the cock crows twice, you will have denied me three times." (cf. Mt. 26:21,33-35.) Peter believes none of it. Jesus spoke so good naturedly that Peter did not take him seriously.

Thomas, the philosopher of the group, the father of reasoning and of debate, rejects in the Upper Room the testimony of his ten companions and of Mary, the Mother of Jesus. Jesus does not wish to change him, he accepts him as he is... but he makes him reflect by obliging him to enter into himself... Judas has a tendency towards avarice, he loves money. Jesus does not seek to thwart him. He entrusts him with the common purse.

In the process of accepting others and their diverse personalities, we recognize in them some remarkable similarities. We discover, for example, the strong desire to function as a team, to work together to understand each other, to help one

another. Very often we discover that we have the same tastes in music, in art, or in many other disciplines. We feel that links are being forged.

To strive to know somebody, to attempt to understand him or her, to give him or her an attentive ear, is laudable, but this does not suffice. We really have to open up to the other our mind, our arms, and our heart, to assure him or her of our total sympathy, to allow him or her to speak freely without interruption. Unconditional acceptance, however, does not imply the compromise of our own principles just in order to accommodate the ideologies of our new-found friend.

To open ourselves to others, to accept others unconditionally, presupposes strength of character, a way of life which is but an echo and a reflection of our conscience, of our "inner being." We are enabled also to evaluate the positive values of others. If we take people only at their face value, our friendships will sooner or later turn to indifference or hatred. Deep and profound human relationships never generate indifference or hatred.

We really accept others if we grant them the warmth of our hearts, if we accept them without condition, not on account of what they bring, but because of who they are.

One of our biggest difficulties is the process of psychological analysis we use. We seize upon the drawbacks of others too rapidly. We have not looked carefully, we have not been sufficiently obser-



vant. We have been mistaken. We must therefore retrace our steps, retrieve the positive, if we wish to preserve the true love of neighbour. The more we develop the positive, the more we undermine the negative. Intoxicated with the others' good qualities, we become incapable of judging them, of condemning them, of criticizing them. To live is to love; love is the spur to positive energy; it accelerates the process of personality development.

## *To Respect the Liberty of Others*

The more we grow, the more we feel the need to be free. Children are easily enslaved; we can dictate terms to them. We are able to inculcate in them our attitudes and ideas. They are docile by nature. Adolescents desire freedom and will even be violent towards those who attempt to dominate them. Adults will perhaps speak less but they wish to be free and earn the respect of others for their own initiatives.

When we love, we ought not to bind others to ourselves with the shackles of our affection. We do not really love when we inflict upon others the burden of our love. We ought never to manipulate people so as to mould them to our own way of thinking under the pretext of our love for them. It would be salutary to enter into a few practical reflections in order to discover the depth of our own capacity to love:

- Can I name five people with whom I regularly associate?
- Am I sure that these people feel free with me?
- Do I receive others with sufficient care?

- Am I adequately warm-hearted?
- What is it in them which attracts me or holds my interest?
- Do I want them to be different, and, if so, how?

The answers to these various questions allow me to focus on the kind of freedom which other people experience in my company.

If we wish to respect the liberty of others, we ought not to impose our own will on them in order to change, to transform, to cause them to be different. If we are disappointed in a person, we are inclined towards changing him or her. We must reflect and realize that we do not change people with arguments, nor with advice. The caution that they ought to change does not suffice to bring about their transformation. Only that person has the ability to change himself or herself. We cannot directly change a person without offending him or her. Our counsels, our opinions, our remarks are superfluous. We must keep them to ourselves. We are able to help others by our love, by our understanding, by giving information upon request. Let us avoid giving advice. Advice is directive, while information is respectful of others' liberty. All we can do to help is to create a climate of freedom, of trust, an atmosphere of warmth and of love around the friend, thus permitting him or her to remain as

he or she is, whether positively or negatively inclined. A day will come when he or she will sense the need to change, for his or her own personal liberation.

It is not always easy to respect the liberty of others. Who does not have the inclination to be the master of another, the desire to give commands? It is so interesting to make suggestions which are often almost orders, especially to people who are naturally docile. We imagine ourselves being on their side. Many people naturally enact the role of the centurion of the Gospel.

This centurion said: *"For I too am a person subject to authority, with soldiers subject to me. And I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes; to another, 'Come here,' and he comes..."* (Mt. 8:9)

Naturally, we encounter on the journey of life many docile individuals. Some have not put away the things of a child, others lack personality, others are prepared to do anything to earn another's love, yet others use these expedients to further their own designs. Such docility inhibits and severely retards the development of the personality.

To leave to others their liberty, is a guarantee against the total alienation of oneself; it is to set oneself free. We are free only if those around us are free. We must avoid imitating others and, also, not allow others to imitate us. Let us also avoid those occasions when we can be wounded by critics, by the egocentrics, by the intolerant and by the domi-

neering. Let us watch for the atmosphere which allows us to be ourselves and let us attempt to respect the rhythm of life in others.

Our work is to develop, as far as is naturally possible, our capacities for understanding and listening; let us apply these skills with people who have empathy, who are sincere, who are understanding, with whom we can exchange ideas, with whom we can express ourselves without constant reprisals.

I ought to ask myself certain questions to judge my capacity to allow others their freedom:

- Are there any people who avoid me?
- Am I perceived as a judge always ready to pass sentence? as an egocentric who does not admit of another's freedom of speech? as an intransigent person who does not tolerate contradiction? as a domineering person who holds in his hand the solutions to all of the world's problems?
- What are the obstacles which impede my relationships with others?
- Am I frank enough to discover the truth, to adhere to it and to live it?