

## REFLECTION 14 – THE SEARCH FOR LOVE

---

**M**y mind goes back easily to my Noviciate days under Br Killian O’Donough and the lesson on the three paths to holiness. The Christian tradition states them as the purgative way, the Illuminative way and the unitive way. John of the Cross called them the three levels of growth as we mature in our loving search for God. Somehow I like this approach a lot more than the Tanqueray version which we studied so long ago. Later in life I read that they were actually three steps which tried to explain our gradual movement towards a closer loving relationship with our God.

My version of all this is best explained by a little story which came to me as we were riding out our first Typhoon in the Philippines. It helped me clarify the three ways in simple terms. With no power for two days we were thrust into darkness each night which tends to help make space for a little meditation time.

*“There was once a family, Mum dad and three sons, who lived on an Island. Now the three brothers knew all about the King who lived across the water and had heard marvellous things about how generous and kind he was to anyone who cared to visit him. The older son was contented with his life on the Island and was happy to wait for the King to send for him when the time was right. He was a good lad but did not have a great drive to improve his station in life or to make that visit to his king. (Level 1) The middle brother was more adventurous and decided he would really like to meet this king so started planning ways to get across the water. He thought of a bridge then of building a boat and spent a lot of energy designing and building different contraptions for his desire to meet the king was very strong. At times he got distracted of course and left the work unfinished but always returned to try and complete the task so one day he would make that desired journey to the king. He was not too worried as he knew he would get there one day soon and certainly stayed loyal to the king. (Level 2) Then there was the youngest brother who actually succeeded in crossing the expanse of water as he was a champion swimmer, though there were many dangers in doing so, and hurriedly made his way to the king’s palace. Nothing could stop him now. He was eventually appointed to the king’s household and experienced the joys of being in the king’s court and finally became a real favourite with the king as the king did love him very much and he could not help but love in return. He was even allowed to visit his family occasionally, but always he returned to his relationship with his king. (Level 3) ”*

It’s just a story, but it did help me to realise that we all do have the power to move to whatever level we feel comfortable with. The trouble is it is easy to get stuck at one level and not really want to make the effort necessary to move on. By the way I suspect these three levels are rather arbitrary and that there are in fact many levels in reality “In my Father’s house many mansions” springs to mind. For real love to flourish one does need the

## REFLECTION 14 – THE SEARCH FOR LOVE

---

desire to seek out the beloved which is a vital part of the story and then the will must come into play, but God has to be in this mix too. This is where grace enters the stage. “Hail Mary full of grace” the angel said and because she was full of grace, she could love to an extraordinary degree. We know the more we desire something the more likely we are to achieve it. However we must have the will power to act on what we long for otherwise we are like the older brother in our story. “They will be done” was Mary’s act of will. She said yes and thank goodness she did. It sounds simple enough. This other ingredient which is missing in us some times is called grace. Also there might be something stopping us despite all this, otherwise a lot more of us would be closer to union with God than we are. Most of us desire union with God and exercise our will in trying to achieve it. So what’s going on? Why have we not got a world of holy and good people? The simple answer is we don’t love enough and as such are not graced by God to go that one step further. Yes we need to fall in love with our God or the God that is in our neighbour.

To love someone passionately is to be for the other completely. Having eyes only for the beloved takes you out of yourself and you find that you are in a place resembling what we call ecstasy. I certainly remember falling in love with someone when I was a young brother or in my case thinking I had and unfortunately my work and a few other things suffered. Love can do that to you and one can feel quite helpless to do much about it. True enough we might like to be in this love space forever if we could arrange it but it’s just not humanly possible to keep in a high for that long. Sooner or later we come back to earth and for a million reasons which I don’t need to go into. I suspect it is like this for us religious too. We would like to park ourselves in the top stage of growth in our search but, like our lover, we have to come back to earth some time.

There is no doubt in my mind that the degree to which we desire to love God is directly proportional to the degree that we become aware of His love for us. We know intellectually that God loves us, after all we are taught this from infancy, so the will has to come into play and this takes us into the possibility of actually loving God because He first loved us. It’s this realisation that boots us up to another level in our search for the love of God. Of course this desire to love Him is like our faith in so far as faith is a gift so is this desire thing. The interesting thing here, God gives all the desire to love him but like Martha we become too busy about things we think are more important and we take our minds away from the main game. Mary, Martha’s sister, understood this very well and as Jesus said “Mary chose the better part”. She was no better than Martha, far from it, she was just a little more attuned to the main game and that in her case was simply being with Him. Jesus then added this wonderful line “It shall not be taken from her” **Desire, Will and Grace,**

## REFLECTION 14 – THE SEARCH FOR LOVE

---

these three are the ingredients for true love. Being aware that God loves us is the graced bit and this realisation can overwhelm us when experienced. We return his love because we are taken out of ourselves just like our lover. “My grace is enough for you” He told Paul when he was having trouble in this department, so I guess he is saying the self same words to us. Grace is there on the shelf; all we need to do is ask for a share. “Ask anything in my name and my Father who is in heaven will grant it”

“There is Faith, Hope and Love, but the greatest of these is love.” Love is no push over and as many of my friends tell me there is a sting to the tail. Pain and love are bed fellows. These two can’t be separated so here is another little blockage that can prevent us loving. (It maybe all just too hard) You don’t have to go far to see love in action and that it is capable of bringing in its wake much pain and suffering. “Jesus loved us so much He was willing to come down on this earth and suffer even unto death, death on a cross” Mother Teresa of India knew what suffering was and she was known for her most extraordinary love of Jesus, but we saw this love manifested in her service to the poor wretches on the streets of Calcutta. She just poured out her love on those people. “I see Jesus whom I love in them” she said when asked what motivated her.

Just in the last couple of days we had a terrible tragedy here in the Philippines when a Ferry went down during Typhoon Frank with many of the 802 people, including 50 children on board, lost at sea. The news bulletin revealed the pain in the faces of those poor people who lost their love ones. My heart went out to them - Yes love does have its price and sometimes that price is the feeling of pain and loss. We need to pray for the souls of the departed but also we need to pray for those left behind who experienced the flipside of this mystery called love.

The last thought I had was to recall my International Renewal time in Rome, when we had six delightful months studying under some brilliant men of our Order. The first trip to St Peter’s Basilica is still burnt into my memory when I found myself standing in front of that wonderful Master Piece called the Pieta. (These were the days before the bullet proof glass) Michael Angelo captured the two realities that Mary was experiencing at the same time. (**Love and Sorrow**) Just to look at her face was enough to make me realise that if you want to fall in love you better steal yourself for a bit of suffering too. You can’t have one without the other and that is the issue here. It can be a happy struggle or it can be a struggle that asks too much of us. So it depends on how deep or how real our love for Him is. Of course this translates into how much we are prepared to love our fellow man. “You do it to the least of my brothers and you do to me”