

The Virtue of Charity

Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few. ~ Matthew 7:13-14

CHRIST OPENS UP TO US the way that leads to life. Apart from God there is no life and only the way that leads to death, but the way that leads to life is characterized by charity expressed in words and actions toward God and neighbor. The reality of this “two ways” doctrine found in the Gospel passage above is set before us as a challenge to live out the Christian life in holiness of action, enlightened by faith, and influenced by the working of charity in our hearts.

“Small acts motivated by charity are infinitely greater than any heroic action when it lacks charity.”

Jesus, when asked which of the commandments is the greatest, responds, “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind*” (Mt 22:37). Jesus also explains that this love for God must inspire us to love our neighbor, making the commandment of love twofold. This twofold command to love is not only the source of the whole law (see Mt 22:40) but also its fulfillment: “[H]e who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law... Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law” (Rom 13:8-10). One of the great theologians and early bishops of the Church, St. Augustine, wrote, “as charity comprises the two commandments to which the Lord related the whole Law and the prophets ... so the Ten Commandments were themselves given on two tablets. Three were written on one tablet and seven on the other”¹ (CCC 2067).

The Virtue of Charity

Charity comes from God and is given to us at Baptism along with faith and hope; it is the greatest of the three theological virtues and also the greatest gift that God bestows on us. Moved by charity, we as believers are able to love God above all things and to love our neighbors in a supernatural way. Jesus



Arrival of the Samaritan at the Inn, by Gustave Doré, 1833-1883

says, “*This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you*” (Jn 15:12). His love is the source of charity and what enables us to overcome our self-centeredness and love others with the same redeeming love he revealed on the cross. To love as Jesus loves means to follow Jesus in this love to the end, even if it means giving up our own life. Such an attitude of love is characteristic of a life of charity. Not only heroic acts of martyrdom but also simple daily acts of charity are expressions of charity (for example, exercising patience, showing kindness, etc.). In fact, such small acts motivated by charity are infinitely greater than any heroic action when it lacks charity. St. Paul says, “*If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing*” (1 Cor 13:3).

Love or charity, then, is what most characterizes the Christian life. It is more than human love and, in its perfection, is nothing other than God himself.

¹ St. Augustine, Sermo 33, 2, 2 from J.P. Migne, ed., Patrologia Latina 38, 208 (Paris: 1841-1855)

“Christian holiness is all about charity.”

“God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (1 Jn 4:16). Because it pervades all our actions, charity is the virtue binding all the virtues together, perfecting all our actions and raising them to expressions of divine love.

Charity: The Source and Holiness of Life

Charity is the source of the Christian life. It is what moves our faith to action and inspires us to depths of love that are unimaginable at a human level. The *Catechism* explains that “[t]he charity of Christ is the source in us of all our merits before God. Grace, by uniting us to Christ in active love, ensures the supernatural quality of our acts and consequently their merit before God and before men. The saints have always had a lively awareness that their merits were pure grace” (CCC 2011; italics in original).

Charity is especially love and care for the poor.

“Do not turn your face away from any poor man, and the face of God will not be turned away from you. If you have many possessions, make your gift from them in proportion; if few, do not be afraid to give according to the little you have. So you will be laying up a good treasure for yourself against the day of necessity. For charity delivers from death and keeps you from entering the darkness; and for all who practice it charity is an excellent offering in the presence of the Most High” (Tb 4:7-11).

Christian holiness is all about charity. The saint of the “little way,” St. Thérèse of Lisieux, explains that if “the Church was a body composed of different members, it couldn’t lack the noblest of all; it must have a Heart, and a Heart **BURNING WITH LOVE**. And I realized that *this love alone* was the true motive force which enabled the other members of the Church to act; if it ceased to function, the apostles would forget to preach the Gospel, the Martyrs would refuse to shed their blood. **LOVE, IN FACT, IS THE VOCATION WHICH INCLUDES ALL OTHERS; IT’S A**

UNIVERSE OF ITS OWN, COMPRISING ALL TIME AND SPACE — IT’S ETERNAL!”² (CCC 826; emphasis in original). While it is true “*we are justified by faith*” (Rom 5:1), we know that this faith must bear fruit in our actions. “*Faith working through love*” (Gal 5:6) is what counts.

Charity and the Holy Spirit

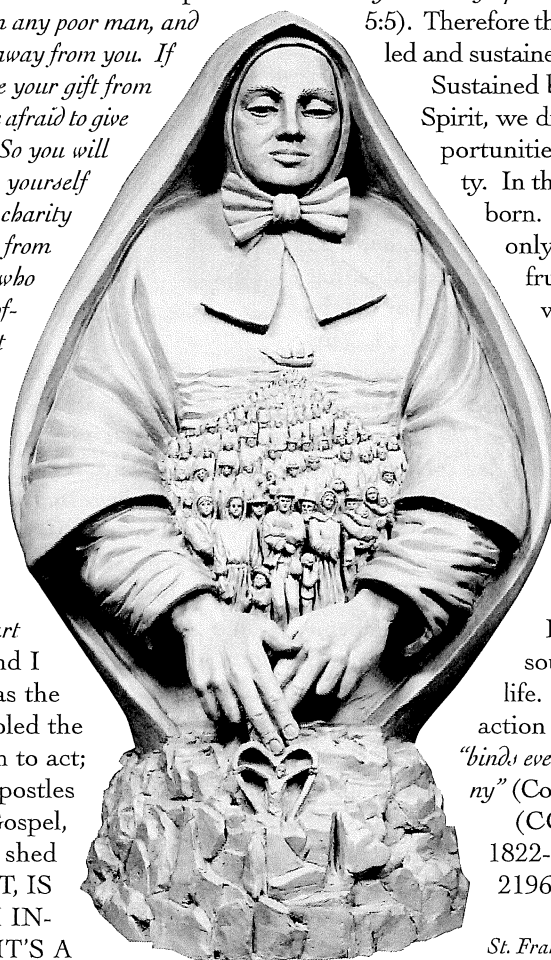
We cannot speak about charity without also speaking about the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is responsible for the movement of grace in our hearts, and he is the one who infuses into the heart this gift of charity. In the Blessed Trinity, the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son as the love between them. When we receive the theological virtue of charity at Baptism, we also receive the giver and source of divine love, the Holy Spirit. “*God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us*” (Rom 5:5). Therefore the life of charity is a life which is led and sustained by the Spirit of God.

Sustained by the abiding presence of the Spirit, we discover more avenues and opportunities in which to exercise charity. In this way the fruits of charity are born. Joy, peace, and mercy are not only fruits of the Spirit but also fruits of charity enjoyed by those who seek not our own interests but live our lives in the service of love, fulfilling his vocation in this life. Charity becomes our only motivation to act and, sustained by hope, we discover that these fruits of joy, peace, and mercy are a foretaste of the Heavenly reality for which we long.

In this way, charity is both the source and goal of the Christian life. It is what moves our faith into action and, as Scripture says, what “*binds everything together in perfect harmony*” (Col 3:14).

(CCC 826, 1696, 1699, 1813, 1822-1829, 2011, 2067, 2093-2094, 2196)

St. Frances Cabrini, by Timothy Schmalz



² St. Thérèse of Lisieux, *Autobiography of a Saint*, tr. Ronald Knox (London: Harvill, 1958) 235