

BOOKS BY THOMAS MERTON

The Ascent to Truth
Disputed Questions
The Last of the Fathers
Love and Living
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No Man Is an Island

BY THOMAS MERTON



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is. It does so by making us aware of our own real selves, and placing them in the presence of God.

This book is, then, a sequel to a previous volume called *Seeds of Contemplation*. But instead of going on from where that book left off, it goes back to cover some of the ground that was taken for granted before the earlier volume began. This book is intended to be simpler, more fundamental, and more detailed. It treats of some of the basic verities on which the spiritual life depends. It is dedicated to the scholastics studying for the priesthood at the Abbey of Gethsemani, who will perhaps recognize in it some notions they have received in spiritual direction.

Fr. M. Louis, o.c.s.o.

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Prologue

NO MAN IS AN ISLAND

No matter how ruined man and his world may seem to be, and no matter how terrible man's despair may become, as long as he continues to be a man his very humanity continues to tell him that life has a meaning. That, indeed, is one reason why man tends to rebel against himself. If he could without effort see what the meaning of life is, and if he could fulfill his ultimate purpose without trouble, he would never question the fact that life is well worth living. Or if he saw at once that life had no purpose and no meaning, the question would never arise. In either case, man would not be capable of finding himself so much of a problem.

Our life, as individual persons and as members of a perplexed and struggling race, provokes us with the evidence that it must have meaning. Part of the meaning still escapes us. Yet our purpose in life is to discover this meaning, and live according to it. We have, therefore, something to live for. The process of living, of growing up, and becoming a person, is precisely the gradually increasing awareness of what that something is. This is a difficult task, for many reasons.

First of all, although men have a common destiny, each individual also has to work out his own personal salvation for himself in fear and trembling. We can help one another to find out the meaning of life, no doubt. But in the last analysis the individual person is responsible for living his own life and for "finding himself." If he persists in shifting this responsibility to somebody else, he fails to find out the meaning of his own existence. You cannot tell me who I am, and I cannot tell you who you are. If you do not know your own identity, who is going to identify you? Others can give you a name or a number, but they can never tell you who you really are. That is something you yourself can only discover from within.

That brings us to a second problem. Although in the end we alone are capable of experiencing who we are, we are instinctively gifted in watching how others experience themselves. We learn to live by living together with others, and by living like them—a process which has disadvantages as well as blessings.

The greatest of disadvantages is that we are too prone to welcome everybody else's wrong solution to the problems of life. There is a natural laziness that moves us to accept the easiest solutions—the ones that have common currency among our friends. That is why an optimistic view of life is not necessarily always a virtuous thing. In a time like ours, only the coarse grained still have enough resistance to preserve their fair-weather principles unclouded by anxiety. Such optimism may be comfortable: but is it safe? In a world where every lie

has currency, is not anxiety the more real and the more human reaction?

Now anxiety is the mark of spiritual insecurity. It is the fruit of unanswered questions. But questions cannot go unanswered unless they first be asked. And there is a far worse anxiety, a far worse insecurity, which comes from being afraid to ask the right questions—because they might turn out to have no answer. One of the moral diseases we communicate to one another in society comes from huddling together in the pale light of an insufficient answer to a question we are afraid to ask.

But there are other diseases also. There is the laziness that pretends to dignify itself by the name of despair, and that teaches us to ignore both the question and the answer. And there is the despair which dresses itself up as science or philosophy and amuses itself with clever answers to clever questions—none of which have anything to do with the problems of life. Finally there is the worst and most insidious despair, which can mask as mysticism or prophecy, and which intones a prophetic answer to a prophetic question. That, I think, is likely to be a monk's professional hazard, so I purify myself of it at the beginning, like Amos who complained, "I am not a prophet, nor am I the son of a prophet, but I am a herdsman, plucking wild figs" (Amos, 7:14).

The prophetic illusion—which is quite common in our time—is at the opposite extreme from the gregarious illusion, which is more common still in every time. The false prophet will accept any answer, provided that it is his own, provided it is *not* the answer of the herd. The

sheep mentality, on the other hand, accepts any answer that circulates in its own flock, provided only that it is *not* the answer of a prophet who has not been dead for at least five hundred years.

If I know anything of intellectual honesty, and I am not so certain that I do, it seems to me that the honest position lies somewhere in between. Therefore the meditations in this book are intended to be at the same time traditional, and modern, and my own. I do not intend to divorce myself at any point from Catholic tradition. But neither do I intend to accept points of that tradition blindly, and without understanding, and without making them really my own. For it seems to me that the first responsibility of a man of faith is to make his faith really part of his own life, not by rationalizing it but by living it.

After all, these meditations are musings upon questions that are, to me, relatively or even absolutely important. They do not always pretend to be final answers to final questions, nor do they even claim to face those questions in the most fundamental possible terms. But at least I can hope they are thoughts that I have honestly thought out for myself and that, for better or for worse, mean something in my own life and in the lives of those I live with. They point, therefore, toward what seems to me to be the meaning of life. They do not aim to include everything that life can possibly mean, nor do they take in a broad general view of all that matters. They are simply observations of a few things that seem to me to matter. If there is a thread of unity run-

ning through them all, I should say it was the following idea:

What every man looks for in life is his own salvation and the salvation of the men he lives with. By salvation I mean first of all the full discovery of who he himself really is. Then I mean something of the fulfillment of his own God-given powers, in the love of others and of God. I mean also the discovery that he cannot find himself in himself alone, but that he must find himself in and through others. Ultimately, these propositions are summed up in two lines of the Gospel: "If any man would save his life, he must lose it," and, "Love one another as I have loved you." It is also contained in another saying from St. Paul: "We are all members one of another."

The salvation I speak of is not merely a subjective, psychological thing—a self-realization in the order of nature. It is an objective and mystical reality—the finding of ourselves in Christ, in the Spirit, or, if you prefer, in the supernatural order. This includes and sublimates and perfects the natural self-realization which it to some extent presupposes, and usually effects, and always transcends. Therefore this discovery of ourselves is always a losing of ourselves—a death and a resurrection. "Your life is hidden with Christ in God." The discovery of ourselves in God, and of God in ourselves, by a charity that also finds all other men in God with ourselves is, therefore, not the discovery of ourselves but of Christ. First of all, it is the realization that "I live now not I but Christ liveth in me," and secondly it is the penetra-

tion of that tremendous mystery which St. Paul sketched out boldly—and darkly—in his great Epistles: the mystery of the recapitulation, the summing up of all in Christ. It is to see the world in Christ, its beginning and its end. To see all things coming forth from God in the *Logos* Who becomes incarnate and descends into the lowest depths of His own creation and gathers all to Himself in order to restore it finally to the Father at the end of time. To find “ourselves” then is to find not only our poor, limited, perplexed souls, but to find the power of God that raised Christ from the dead and “built us together in Him unto a habitation of God in the Spirit” (Ephesians 2:22).

This discovery of Christ is never genuine if it is nothing but a flight from ourselves. On the contrary, it cannot be an escape. It must be a fulfillment. I cannot discover God in myself and myself in Him unless I have the courage to face myself exactly as I am, with all my limitations, and to accept others as they are, with all *their* limitations. The religious answer is not religious if it is not fully real. Evasion is the answer of superstition.

This matter of “salvation” is, when seen intuitively, a very simple thing. But when we analyze it, it turns into a complex tangle of paradoxes. We become ourselves by dying to ourselves. We gain only what we give up, and if we give up everything we gain everything. We cannot find ourselves within ourselves, but only in others, yet at the same time before we can go out to others we must first find ourselves. We must forget ourselves in order to become truly conscious of who

we are. The best way to love ourselves is to love others, yet we cannot love others unless we love ourselves since it is written, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” But if we love ourselves in the wrong way, we become incapable of loving anybody else. And indeed when we love ourselves wrongly we hate ourselves; if we hate ourselves we cannot help hating others. Yet there is a sense in which we must hate others and leave them in order to find God. Jesus said: “If any man come to me and hate not his father and his mother . . . yea and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26). As for this “finding” of God, we cannot even look for Him unless we have already found Him, and we cannot find Him unless he has first found us. We cannot begin to seek Him without a special gift of His grace, yet if we wait for grace to move us, before beginning to seek Him, we will probably never begin.

The only effective answer to the problem of salvation must therefore reach out to embrace both extremes of a contradiction at the same time. Hence that answer must be supernatural. That is why all the answers that are not supernatural are imperfect: for they only embrace one of the contradictory terms, and they can always be denied by the other.

Take the antithesis between love of self and love of another. As long as there is question of material things, the two loves are opposed. The more goods I keep for my own enjoyment, the less there are for others. My pleasures and comforts are, in a certain sense, taken from someone else. And when my pleasures and comforts are

inordinate, they are not only taken from another, but they are stolen. I must learn to deprive myself of good things in order to give them to others who have a greater need of them than I. And so I must in a certain sense "hate" myself in order to love others.

Now there is a spiritual selfishness which even poisons the good act of giving to another. Spiritual goods are greater than the material, and it is possible for me to love selfishly in the very act of depriving myself of material things for the benefit of another. If my gift is intended to bind him to me, to put him under an obligation, to exercise a kind of hidden moral tyranny over his soul, then in loving him I am really loving myself. And this is a greater and more insidious selfishness, since it traffics not in flesh and blood but in other persons' souls.

Natural asceticism presents various insufficient answers to this problem. Each answer contains a hidden temptation. The first is temptation to the hedonism of Eros: we deny ourselves just enough to share with one another the pleasures of life. We admit a certain selfishness, and feel that in doing so we are being realistic. Our self-denial is, then, just sufficient to provide us with a healthy increase in our mutual satisfactions. In a bourgeois world, Eros knows how to mask as Christian charity.

Next comes the temptation to destroy ourselves for love of the other. The only value is love of the other. Self-sacrifice is an absolute value in itself. And the desire of the other is also absolute in itself. No matter what the lover desires, we will give up our life or even

our soul to please him. This is the asceticism of Eros, which makes it a point of honor to follow the beloved even into hell. For what greater sacrifice could man offer on the altar of love than the sacrifice of his own immortal soul? Heroism in this sacrifice is measured precisely by madness: it is all the greater when it is offered for a more trivial motive.

Yet another temptation goes to the other extreme. With Sartre, it says: "*L'enfer, c'est les autres!*" ("Other people—that's hell!"). In that case, love itself becomes the great temptation and the great sin. Because it is an inescapable sin, it is also hell. But this too is only a disguised form of Eros—Eros in solitude. It is the love that is mortally wounded by its own incapacity to love another, and flies from others in order not to have to give itself to them. Even in its solitude this Eros is most tortured by its inescapable need of another, not for the other's sake but for its own fulfillment!

All these three answers are insufficient. The third says we must love only ourselves. The second says we must love only another. The first says that in loving another we simply seek the most effective way to love ourselves. The true answer, which is supernatural, tells us that we must love ourselves in order to be able to love others, that we must find ourselves by giving ourselves to them. The words of Christ are clear: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."

This is not merely a helpful suggestion, it is the fundamental law of human existence. It forms part of the first and greatest commandment, and flows from the ob-

ligation to love God with all our heart and soul and strength. This double commandment, giving us two aspects of the same love, obliges us to another asceticism, which is not the answer of Eros, but the answer of Agapé.

Whatever may be said in following pages rests upon this foundation. Man is divided against himself and against God by his own selfishness, which divides him against his brother. This division cannot be healed by a love that places itself only on one side of the rift. Love must reach over to both sides and draw them together. We cannot love ourselves unless we love others, and we cannot love others unless we love ourselves. But a selfish love of ourselves makes us incapable of loving others. The difficulty of this commandment lies in the paradox that it would have us love ourselves unselfishly, because even our love of ourselves is something we owe to others.

This truth never becomes clear as long as we assume that each one of us, individually, is the center of the universe. We do not exist for ourselves alone, and it is only when we are fully convinced of this fact that we begin to love ourselves properly and thus also love others. What do I mean by loving ourselves properly? I mean, first of all, desiring to live, accepting life as a very great gift and a great good, not because of what it gives us, but because of what it enables us to give to others. The modern world is beginning to discover, more and more, that the quality and vitality of a man's life depend on his own secret will to go on living. There

is a dark force for destruction within us, which someone has called the "death instinct." It is a terribly powerful thing, this force generated by our own frustrated self-love battling with itself. It is the power of a self-love that has turned into self-hatred and which, in adoring itself, adores the monster by which it is consumed.

It is therefore of supreme importance that we consent to live not for ourselves but for others. When we do this we will be able first of all to face and accept our own limitations. As long as we secretly adore ourselves, our own deficiencies will remain to torture us with an apparent defilement. But if we live for others, we will gradually discover that no one expects us to be "as gods." We will see that we are human, like everyone else, that we all have weaknesses and deficiencies, and that these limitations of ours play a most important part in all our lives. It is because of them that we need others and others need us. We are not all weak in the same spots, and so we supplement and complete one another, each one making up in himself for the lack in another.

Only when we see ourselves in our true human context, as members of a race which is intended to be one organism and "one body," will we begin to understand the positive importance not only of the successes but of the failures and accidents in our lives. My successes are not my own. The way to them was prepared by others. The fruit of my labors is not my own: for I am preparing the way for the achievements of another. Nor are my failures my own. They may spring from the

failure of another, but they are also compensated for by another's achievement. Therefore the meaning of my life is not to be looked for merely in the sum total of my own achievements. It is seen only in the complete integration of my achievements and failures with the achievements and failures of my own generation, and society, and time. It is seen, above all, in my integration in the mystery of Christ. That was what the poet John Donne realized during a serious illness when he heard the death knell tolling for another. "The Church is Catholic, universal," he said, "so are all her actions, all that she does belongs to all. . . . Who bends not his ear to any bell which upon any occasion rings? but who can remove it from that bell which is passing a piece of himself out of this world?"

Every other man is a piece of myself, for I am a part and a member of mankind. Every Christian is part of my own body, because we are members of Christ. What I do is also done for them and with them and by them. What they do is done in me and by me and for me. But each one of us remains responsible for his own share in the life of the whole body. Charity cannot be what it is supposed to be as long as I do not see that my life represents my own allotment in the life of a whole supernatural organism to which I belong. Only when this truth is absolutely central do other doctrines fit into their proper context. Solitude, humility, self-denial, action and contemplation, the sacraments, the monastic life, the family, war and peace—none of

these make sense except in relation to the central reality which is God's love living and acting in those whom He has incorporated in His Christ. Nothing at all makes sense, unless we admit, with John Donne, that: "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main."

I

LOVE CAN BE KEPT ONLY BY BEING GIVEN AWAY

1. A happiness that is sought for ourselves alone can never be found: for a happiness that is diminished by being shared is not big enough to make us happy.

There is a false and momentary happiness in self-satisfaction, but it always leads to sorrow because it narrows and deadens our spirit. True happiness is found in unselfish love, a love which increases in proportion as it is shared. There is no end to the sharing of love, and, therefore, the potential happiness of such love is without limit. Infinite sharing is the law of God's inner life. He has made the sharing of ourselves the law of our own being, so that it is in loving others that we best love ourselves. In disinterested activity we best fulfill our own capacities to act and to be.

Yet there can never be happiness in compulsion. It is not enough for love to be shared: it must be shared freely. That is to say it must be given, not merely taken. Unselfish love that is poured out upon a selfish object does not bring perfect happiness: not because love requires a return or a reward for loving, but because it

rests in the happiness of the beloved. And if the one loved receives love selfishly, the lover is not satisfied. He sees that his love has failed to make the beloved happy. It has not awakened his capacity for unselfish love.

Hence the paradox that unselfish love cannot rest perfectly except in a love that is perfectly reciprocated: because it knows that the only true peace is found in selfless love. Selfless love consents to be loved selflessly for the sake of the beloved. In so doing, it perfects itself.

The gift of love is the gift of the power and the capacity to love, and, therefore, to give love with full effect is also to receive it. So, love can only be kept by being given away, and it can only be given perfectly when it is also received.

2. Love not only prefers the good of another to my own, but it does not even compare the two. It has only one good. that of the beloved, which is, at the same time, my own. Love shares the good with another not by dividing it with him, but by identifying itself with him so that his good becomes my own. The same good is enjoyed in its wholeness by two in one spirit, not halved and shared by two souls. Where love is really disinterested, the lover does not even stop to inquire whether he can safely appropriate for himself some part of the good which he wills for his friend. Love seeks its whole good in the good of the beloved, and to divide that good would be to diminish love. Such a division would not

only weaken the action of love, but in doing so would also diminish its joy. For love does not seek a joy that follows from its effect: its joy is in the effect itself, which is the good of the beloved. Consequently, if my love be pure I do not even have to seek for myself the satisfaction of loving. Love seeks one thing only: the good of the one loved. It leaves all the other secondary effects to take care of themselves. Love, therefore, is its own reward.

3. To love another is to will what is really good for him. Such love must be based on truth. A love that sees no distinction between good and evil, but loves blindly merely for the sake of loving, is hatred, rather than love. To love blindly is to love selfishly, because the goal of such love is not the real advantage of the beloved but only the exercise of love in our own souls. Such love cannot seem to be love unless it pretends to seek the good of the one loved. But since it actually cares nothing for the truth, and never considers that it may go astray, it proves itself to be selfish. It does not seek the true advantage of the beloved or even our own. It is not interested in the truth, but only in itself. It proclaims itself content with an apparent good: which is the exercise of love for its own sake, without any consideration of the good or bad effects of loving.

When such love exists on the level of bodily passion it is easily recognized for what it is. It is selfish, and, therefore, it is not love. Those whose love does not transcend the desires of their bodies, generally do not

even bother to deceive themselves with good motives. They follow their passions. Since they do not deceive themselves, they are more honest, as well as more miserable, than those who pretend to love on a spiritual plane without realizing that their "unselfishness" is only a deception.

4. Charity is neither weak nor blind. It is essentially prudent, just, temperate, and strong. Unless all the other virtues blend together in charity, our love is not genuine. No one who really wants to love another will consent to love him falsely. If we are going to love others at all, we must make up our minds to love them well. Otherwise our love is a delusion.

The first step to unselfish love is the recognition that our love may be deluded. We must first of all purify our love by renouncing the pleasure of loving as an end in itself. As long as pleasure is our end, we will be dishonest with ourselves and with those we love. We will not seek their good, but our own pleasure.

5. It is clear, then, that to love others well we must first love the truth. And since love is a matter of practical and concrete human relations, the truth we must love when we love our brothers is not mere abstract speculation: it is the moral truth that is to be embodied and given life in our own destiny and theirs. This truth is more than the cold perception of an obligation, flowing from moral precepts. The truth we must love in loving our brothers is the concrete destiny and sanctity that are

willed for them by the love of God. One who really loves another is not merely moved by the desire to see him contented and healthy and prosperous in this world. Love cannot be satisfied with anything so incomplete. If I am to love my brother, I must somehow enter deep into the mystery of God's love for him. I must be moved not only by human sympathy but by that divine sympathy which is revealed to us in Jesus and which enriches our own lives by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

The truth I love in loving my brother cannot be something merely philosophical and abstract. It must be at the same time supernatural and concrete, practical and alive. And I mean these words in no metaphorical sense. The truth I must love in my brother is God Himself, living in him. I must seek the life of the Spirit of God breathing in him. And I can only discern and follow that mysterious life by the action of the same Holy Spirit living and acting in the depths of my own heart.

6. Charity makes me seek far more than the satisfaction of my own desires, even though they be aimed at another's good. It must also make me an instrument of God's Providence in their lives. I must become convinced and penetrated by the realization that without my love for them they may perhaps not achieve the things God has willed for them. My will must be the instrument of God's will in helping them create their destiny. My love must be to them the "sacrament" of

the mysterious and infinitely selfless love God has for them. My love must be for them the minister not of my own spirit but of the Holy Spirit. The words I speak to them must be no other than the words of Christ Who deigns to reveal Himself to them in me.

Such a conception of charity is, above all, proper to a priest. It is an aspect of the grace of Orders. It is, so to speak, inseparable from the priesthood, and a priest cannot be at peace with himself or with God unless he is trying to love others with a love that is not merely his but God's own love. Only this charity which is as strong and as sure as the Spirit of God Himself can save us from the lamentable error of pouring out on others a love that leads them into error and urges them to seek happiness where it can never be found.

7. In order to love others with perfect charity I must be true to them, to myself, and to God.

The true interests of a person are at once perfectly his own and common to the whole Kingdom of God. That is because these interests are all centered in God's designs for his soul. The destiny of each one of us is intended, by the Lord, to enter into the destiny of His entire Kingdom. And the more perfectly we are ourselves the more we are able to contribute to the good of the whole Church of God. For each person is perfected by the virtues of a child of God, and these virtues show themselves differently in everyone, since they come to light in the lives of each one of the saints under a different set of providential circumstances.

If we love one another truly, our love will be graced with a clear-sighted prudence which sees and respects the designs of God upon each separate soul. Our love for one another must be rooted in a deep devotion to Divine Providence, a devotion that abandons our own limited plans into the hands of God and seeks only to enter into the invisible work that builds His Kingdom. Only a love that senses the designs of Providence can unite itself perfectly to God's providential action upon souls. Faithful submission to God's secret working in the world will fill our love with piety, that is to say with supernatural awe and respect. This respect, this piety, gives our love the character of worship, without which our charity can never be quite complete. For love must not only *seek* the truth in the lives of those around us; it must *find* it there. But when we find the truth that shapes our lives we have found more than an idea. We have found a Person. We have come upon the actions of One Who is still hidden, but Whose work proclaims Him holy and worthy to be adored. And in Him we also find ourselves.

8. A selfish love seldom respects the rights of the beloved to be an autonomous person. Far from respecting the true being of another and granting his personality room to grow and expand in its own original way, this love seeks to keep him in subjection to ourselves. It insists that he conform himself to us, and it works in every possible way to make him do so. A selfish love withers and dies unless it is sustained by the attention of the

beloved. When we love thus, our friends exist only in order that we may love them. In loving them we seek to make pets of them, to keep them tame. Such love fears nothing more than the escape of the beloved. It requires his subjection because that is necessary for the nourishment of our own affections.

Selfish love often appears to be unselfish, because it is willing to make any concession to the beloved in order to keep him prisoner. But it is supreme selfishness to buy what is best in a person, his liberty, his integrity, his own autonomous dignity as a person, at the price of far lesser goods. Such selfishness is all the more abominable when it takes a complacent pleasure in its concessions, deluded that they are all acts of selfless charity.

A love, therefore, that is selfless, that honestly seeks the truth, does not make unlimited concessions to the beloved.

May God preserve me from the love of a friend who will never dare to rebuke me. May He preserve me from the friend who seeks to do nothing but change and correct me. But may He preserve me still more from one whose love is only satisfied by being rebuked.

If I love my brothers according to the truth, my love for them will be true not only to them but to myself.

I cannot be true to them if I am not true to myself.

"The Lord trieth the just and the wicked, but he that loveth iniquity hateth his own soul" (Psalm 10:6).

"Iniquity" is inequality, injustice, which seeks more for myself than my rights allow and which gives others

less than they should receive. To love myself more than others is to be untrue to myself as well as to them. The more I seek to take advantage of others the less of a person will I myself be, for the anxiety to possess what I should not have narrows and diminishes my own soul.

Therefore the man who loves himself too much is incapable of loving anyone effectively, including himself. How then can he hope to love another?

"An unjust man allureth his friend and leadeth him into a way that is not good" (Proverbs 16:29).

9. Charity must teach us that friendship is a holy thing, and that it is neither charitable nor holy to base our friendship on falsehood. We can be, in some sense, friends to all men because there is no man on earth with whom we do not have something in common. But it would be false to treat too many men as intimate friends. It is not possible to be intimate with more than very few, because there are only very few in the world with whom we have practically everything in common.

Love, then, must be true to the ones we love and to ourselves, and also to its own laws. I cannot be true to myself if I pretend to have more in common than I actually have with someone whom I may like for a selfish and unworthy reason.

There is, however, one universal basis for friendship with all men: we are all loved by God, and I should desire them all to love Him with all their power. But the fact remains that I cannot, on this earth, enter deeply

into the mystery of their love for Him and of His love for them.

Great priests, saints like the Curé d'Ars, who have seen into the hidden depths of thousands of souls, have, nevertheless, remained men with few intimate friends. No one is more lonely than a priest who has a vast ministry. He is isolated in a terrible desert by the secrets of his fellow men.

10. When all this has been said, the truth remains that our destiny is to love one another as Christ has loved us. Jesus had very few close friends when He was on earth, and yet He loved and loves all men and is, to every soul born into the world, that soul's most intimate friend. The lives of all the men we meet and know are woven into our own destiny, together with the lives of many we shall never know on earth. But certain ones, very few, are our close friends. Because we have more in common with them, we are able to love them with a special selfless perfection, since we have more to share. They are inseparable from our own destiny, and, therefore, our love for them is especially holy: it is a manifestation of God in our lives.

11. Perfect charity gives supreme praise to the liberty of God. It recognizes His power to give Himself to those who love Him purely without violating the purity of their love. More than that: selfless charity, by receiving from God the gift of Himself, becomes able, by that fact alone, to love with perfect purity. For God Him-

self creates the purity and the love of those who love Him and one another with perfect charity.

His charity must not be represented as hunger. It is the banquet of the Kingdom of Heaven, to which many were invited by the great King. Many could not come to the banquet because they desired something beyond it, something for themselves—a farm, a wife, a yoke of oxen. They did not know that if they had sought first the banquet and the Kingdom they would have received everything else besides.

Charity is not hungry. It is the *juge convivium*—the perpetual banquet where there is no satiety, a feast in which we are nourished by serving others rather than by feeding ourselves. It is a banquet of prudence also, in which we know how to give to each other his just measure.

“And the Lord said: Who, thinkest thou, is the faithful and wise steward, whom his lord setteth over his family, to give them their measure of wheat in due season? Blessed is that servant, whom when his lord shall come, shall find him so doing” (Luke 12:43-44).

But to feed others with charity is to feed them with the Bread of Life, Who is Christ, and to teach them also to love with a love that knows no hunger.

“I am the Bread of Life: he who comes to Me shall not hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst” (John 6:35).