

*Agape in the New Testament*

VOLUME II



CESLAUS SPICQ, O.P.

AGAPE IN THE NEW  
TESTAMENT

*Volume Two*

*Agape in the Epistles of St. Paul,  
the Acts of the Apostles  
and the Epistles of St. James,  
St. Peter, and St. Jude*

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## Introduction

Thirty years after the death of Christ, the Church already had its own language, its own full and precise theological vocabulary. The word *agape*, in particular, had acquired so specialized and rich a meaning that it seemed almost a neologism. The circumstances in which the early Church existed required that the apostles, and especially St. Paul, teach all aspects of doctrine and morality; and in their instructions they placed charity in every part and at the center of the new religion. Whatever they were explaining—God's initiative in renewing his relationship with sinful man, the gift of his only son, the Lord's coming, the grateful response of the faithful, the relations of Christians with one another in community or with outsiders, even the happiness of heaven—the final word of the mystery of God and the source of the Christian life is always love. Everything is summed up in love.

It is impossible, therefore, to read the word *agape* in any of the apostolic writings without becoming aware of its extremely full theological content. The most practical moral exhortations make sense only if their call to love refers to God's own charity and its infusion into the Christian's heart, to its intense "dynamism," and to its continued life in the next world. The primary intention of this volume is to present the enormous richness of Christian *agape* itself. This richness can be discovered through a determination of the notion and nuances conveyed by the word *agape*.

The texts we examined here have already been studied by the commentators of the *Études Bibliques*, but as we analyzed them in terms of *agape*, new values in them were brought to light. Furthermore, the incessant production of scientific writing today has contributed both new problems

and better solutions to old problems. We have tried to consider both contributions and to present the contemporary state of each question. We have concentrated principally on philological analysis.

C.S.

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## CHAPTER I

# St. James and the Acts of the Apostles

THIS work will consider the word and concept *agape* as they are found in the New Testament writings taken in their chronological order as far as that order can be determined. Because the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke record the earliest oral tradition, indispensable to an understanding of the rest of the New Testament texts, they were treated in the first volume even though they were not the first to be written down. The Epistle of St. James, which was apparently composed before the Council of Jerusalem in 50 A.D., is probably the earliest written work we have.

In his Epistle St. James addresses his readers three times using the expression *adelphoi mou agapētoi*<sup>1</sup> which he probably originated; it has no parallel in Jewish literature. He uses the expression to introduce a serious exhortation. It can be read "my beloved brothers." "Beloved" characterizes the Christians, who cherish their deeply-felt union with one another in a single religious and moral life. Neither in the Septuagint nor in classical Greek, which the Epistle resembles in style, does the word "beloved" convey an intense love.<sup>2</sup> It is more a designation of honor or a title of nobility than an expression of emotion. A correct translation would be "my reverend and dear brothers." "Beloved" refers

<sup>1</sup> Jas. 1:16, 19; 2:5.

<sup>2</sup> The Vulgate's *dilectissimi* is responsible for this misinterpretation.

less to the virtue of charity as such than to the well-defined and manifest "religion" <sup>3</sup> which united both author and readers in the service of God. The noun *agape* is not used in the Epistle.<sup>4</sup> The verb *agapan* is used three times, always in the strictly traditional and religious sense.

## 1.

Blessed is the man who patiently endures trial, because after he has withstood the test, he will receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those that *love* him (Jas. 1:12).

This verse repeats the assurance of verse 2: "Consider it genuine joy, my brothers, when you are engulfed by trials of various kinds, since you know the trying of your faith makes for patience." It reiterates the thought of the Old and New Testaments on suffering and trouble; the just man's determination to serve God must be proved.<sup>5</sup> As precious metals are tested and purified by fire, men are proved by moral adversity to permit them to show the strength and seriousness of their attachment to the Lord and to exercise and develop their virtue.<sup>6</sup> Suffering is a sounding of man's heart, made by God himself to see their fidelity. Because they are well aware of their profound weakness, Christians pray daily not to be led into temptation.<sup>7</sup> The virtue of patience endures the evils sent by Providence; the Christian perseveres in his attachment to God without murmuring.<sup>8</sup> At the end of his spiritual experience, a true trial, he will have been tested and qualified;<sup>9</sup> he will truly have proved himself.

For St. James, constancy is not only a major element of the moral life but also a condition for eternal life, a pledge

<sup>3</sup> Jas. 1:26-27; cf. Acts 26:5.

<sup>4</sup> From the point of view of semantic evolution, this omission is significant. The noun *agape* was rarely found in the synoptic tradition. It was St. Paul who truly introduced it into the language.

<sup>5</sup> Sir. 2:1; cf. Jdt. 8:22-26; Acts 20:19; 2 Tm. 3:12.

<sup>6</sup> Jb. 23:10; Wis. 3:5; Sir. 2:5. <sup>7</sup> Mt. 6:13; cf. Lk. 8:13.

<sup>8</sup> Jas. 5:11; cf. Mt. 24:13; Lk. 21:19; Rom. 5:4; Heb. 5:36; 12:1; cf. C. Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux* (Paris, 1952), pp. 6 ff.

<sup>9</sup> 2 Tm. 2:15; cf. 1 Cor. 11:19; 2 Cor. 13:7.

of beatitude. "Blessed is the man . . ." The long-suffering man will indeed receive the "crown of life." In the Bible the crown, emblem of royalty, is also the reward of the victorious<sup>10</sup> and a sign of honor,<sup>11</sup> festivity, and joy.<sup>12</sup> All these meanings are appropriate here and make "the crown of life" of Apocalypse 2:10 the equivalent of "the crown of justice" of 2 Timothy 4:8 or "the crown of glory" of 1 Peter 5:4. The accent is on the triumph of the man who has endured and remained steadfast in spite of everything.

St. James speaks of the crown of life as having been promised by God, although according to Jewish custom God is not explicitly named. The word "promised" would suggest that St. James is referring to some text of the Old Testament or to some assurance made by the Lord, perhaps to Zacharias 6:14 or Wisdom 5:15-16: "The just live forever . . . therefore they shall receive the splendid crown, the beauteous diadem, from the hand of the Lord"; or to Daniel 12:12: "Blessed is the man who has patience and perseveres . . ."; or he might be referring to some unrecorded words of Jesus.

It is enlightening to compare St. James' "promise" with the "promise" of 1 John 2:25: "And this is what he has promised us, life eternal"; and of Apocalypse 2:10: "Do not fear what you are about to suffer. . . . Be faithful even till death, and I will give you the crown which belongs to life." It would seem best to understand the promised blessedness in the light of the total revelation of Christ concerning eternal life; the promise is made to "those who love him," an expression which occurs frequently in the Old Testament. The originality of its application here is in the linking of patience with love, *agape*,<sup>13</sup> and in the association of a steadfast moral life with charity toward God. The first part of the verse expresses the common Israelite tradition about suffering; the second incorporates it, or rather completes it

<sup>10</sup> Ap. 6:2; 4:14; 19:12; 1 Cor. 9:25.

<sup>11</sup> *Ep. of Arist.*, 280 and 320. Philo, *De Somm.* 2:62; Is. 62:3; Ps. 21:4; Prov. 4:9; 16:31; 17:6; 1 Thes. 2:19; Phil. 4:1; Ap. 3:11.

<sup>12</sup> Sir. 1:11; 6:31.

<sup>13</sup> Ex. 20:6; Dt. 5:10; 7:9; Jgs. 5:31; Ps. 5:11; 145:20; Sir. 1:10; 31:19; 34:16 etc.

in Christian terms, without really making clear whether beatitude belongs to the patient man or to the loving man. Two things are clear: a strict correlation exists between persevering fidelity and reward; the reward is given to those who love. Perseverance itself, it would seem, is an effect of love. God will give the crown of life to those who have persevered through love. It is evident, and extremely important from a semantic point of view, that *agapan* has here the meaning it had in the Septuagint—religious attachment and moral fidelity which express themselves through “works.” It does not have the specifically theological meaning St. Paul later gave it. *Agapan* refers to a general disposition of soul, a basic spiritual attitude toward God of preference and choice, which directs the entire moral life. St. James opposes “those who love God” to “the rich man who will vanish with his pursuits” (v. 11). The context suggests a reference to the *logion* of Matt. 6:24: “A man cannot be the slave of two masters. He will either hate the one and love the other. . . .” The “beatitude” of patient *agape*, later described by St. Paul as love undying (Eph. 6:24), is inspired by the Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount, especially the last two (Mt. 5:10–12; Lk. 6:22–23), which promise a rich reward in heaven to those who are reviled or persecuted or made a target of malicious lies on earth. Jesus said that a victim of persecution ought to rejoice and leap for joy even during his persecution, and St. James’ “blessed man” refers precisely to the despised and exiled Christian.

The crown of life will be bestowed only after death, however, and only to the charitable. The qualification, “to those who love him,” has the same eschatological ring as in 1 Corinthians 2:9: “It is the wisdom which, in the words of Scripture, proposes ‘what no eye has ever seen, what no ear has ever heard, what no human heart has ever thought of, namely, the great blessings God holds ready for those who love him’”; in 2 Timothy 4:8: “What remains is the crown due to holiness which the Lord, the just Judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to those who love his brilliant coming”; and even in Romans 8:28–30: “Now

we know that in all things which are for their good, God works together with those who love him, who according to his purpose are called; for those whom he has foreknown he has also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that the Son should be the first-born among many brothers. Those whom he has predestined, he has called; and those whom he has called, he has sanctified, and those whom he has sanctified, he has glorified." Finally, it must be noted that in its first use in New Testament literature, the verb *agapan* designates both man's love for God and the joy which his love brings.

## 2.

Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he promised to those that *love* him? (Jas. 2:5).

St. James condemns any kind of discrimination of persons and urges his readers not to prefer the rich to the poor. Judgments should be made according to the values of God, and God deliberately chooses the poor to become members of his Church. Christ himself evangelized the poor (Lk. 7:22), the spiritually and materially destitute, and the pious who were detached from the world and completely abandoned to God. The divine choice has made the poor rich in supernatural goods. The contrast is intentional. It had been traditional since first pronounced in the Magnificat. Those who have nothing, humanly speaking, are divinely filled to overflowing; faith is the true treasure. It is possible that "heirs of the kingdom" is a redundancy, referring again to "rich in faith," "possession" of Messianic goods, and entrance into Christian society; but since it is always used eschatologically,<sup>14</sup> the formula suggests, rather, some chronological and theological relationship between divine choice, the call to faith, and entrance into the heavenly kingdom. Understood

<sup>14</sup> Mt. 25:34; 1 Cor. 6:9-10; 15:50; Gal. 5:21.

this way, the verse would refer to the Lord's own teaching: "Blessed are you, the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Lk. 6:20; Mt. 5:3, 5).

Just as in James 1:12 neither suffering alone nor patience along with suffering assures one of eternal life, here, too, being poor is not in itself a condition of salvation. St. James repeats that God's promise is directed "to those who love him." The phrase has the same meaning here that it had in 1:12, with the additional idea that the Christian's *agape* is the result of divine election. It is no longer those who endure who prove their love, but those who are poor. Here again St. James' thought depends directly on Christ's. According to the synoptic tradition, nothing chokes charity so completely as the possession of riches, and nothing disposes the heart to love God more effectively than freedom from riches.<sup>15</sup> The believing poor are rightful heirs of the kingdom. Through God's pure goodness they are always ready to enter into possession of the kingdom because their hearts are always free to love God. Their love must necessarily have a special accent of gratitude. Using the technical formulas of Old Testament language, St. James expresses what is most characteristic of New Testament religion. Beatitude is a function of love. God attaches importance only to the love that is borne him. Men are distinguished according to their aptitude for love, and the call to faith is made for the sake of the manifestation of love in works.

### 3.

If you fulfill the royal law, which according to the Scripture reads, "*Love your neighbor as yourself*," you do well (Jas. 2:8).

In the first part of this chapter, St. James had remonstrated with his readers about their snobbishness, which made them shower some persons with attention and kindness and ignore others for reasons that had nothing to do with their real

<sup>15</sup> Mt. 13:22; 19:16-30; Mk. 10:23; 1 Tm. 6:10.



worth and that were sometimes even contrary to the suggestions of faith. They despised the poor whom God especially loves and tried to outdo one another in deference to the rich. Authentic charity can express itself in deference, and apparently these sham and snobbish Christians had refused to accept his reproach on the grounds that their behavior was really a manifestation of charity. Their excuse accounts for his skeptical, "If you are truly inspired by *agape*, you do well. . . ."

He speaks of fraternal charity in Old Testament terminology, referring to the authority of Moses and not to the authority of Jesus Christ. The "law" is to be obeyed or, more exactly, "fulfilled." The Greek word the inspired authors usually used for law, *nomos*, ordinarily refers to the Torah, the collection of laws prescribed by Moses, or to the Scripture as a whole; a different word, *entolē* (Mt. 22:36), is used for an individual precept. Although St. James uses *nomos*, he is clearly referring to a single commandment. Just as the phrase, "according to the Scriptures," which introduces the quotation, refers to one text of the Old Testament, so also the word "law" must refer to a single precept, but to a major precept that is an entire rule of life. It is the precept of charity, therefore, that is called "royal."

What does "royal" mean? It can mean excellent or honorable, as in "royal crown of glory" (Wis. 5:16) and "a royal priesthood" (1 Pt. 2:9); its dignity should be understood in this strict sense when it refers to persons or things that belong to the king. Philo calls the road which leads to God, king of the universe, a royal road.<sup>16</sup> Taken in this sense, St. James' "royal law" would be the law emanating from God's sovereign authority<sup>17</sup> or the law governing members of his kingdom. The royal law governs the heirs of the kingdom and not slaves. "Royal" also implies value, quality, and perfection. It always has this connotation when applied to "law"; the royal law is the perfect law. The pseudo-Plato wrote: "Even in writings which concern the just and the

<sup>16</sup> Philo, *De post C.*, 101.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. 2 Mc. 3:13.

unjust, and in a general way the organization of the city and the means of its governing, whatever is correct is a royal law; everything that is incorrect and appears law only to the ignorant is not royal law, for it is in fact illegal."<sup>18</sup>

Excellence implies supremacy. Astronomy is "the king of sciences";<sup>19</sup> piety, "the king of virtues";<sup>20</sup> the wise man himself is a sovereign.<sup>21</sup> "Royal" is applied to virtue because virtue commands and rules human activity.<sup>22</sup>

In James 2:8, the royal law is the law of Leviticus 19:18, the precept of love of neighbor as it was explained by Christ, who gave it the most important place in his teaching. It seems indisputable that St. James, in calling the commandment of fraternal charity royal, was referring to the oral tradition later set down in Matthew 22:39, Mark 12:31, and Luke 10:27. St. James was one of the first to express this tradition in writing. According to Matthew, the Lord had said: "On these two commandments hinge the law and the prophets."<sup>23</sup> Mark has: "There is no other commandment greater than these." The supremacy of the royal commandment was so clear that the scribe glossed: "It is more precious than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices." Jesus approved: "You are not far from the kingdom of God." Luke puts it: "Act accordingly and you will have life," which is reminiscent of James', ". . . you do well." These similarities do not in the least arise by coincidence; St. Paul understood the "second commandment" in the same way and formulated it even more strongly.<sup>24</sup> It can be concluded, then, that fraternal charity is the royal precept, partly because of its dignity and importance in the New Covenant, but fundamentally because it "dominates" the other commandments. The supreme precept is king over all the others. Far from being isolated, it controls all moral life. The simple adjective "royal" marks a considerable evolution of the precept of

<sup>18</sup> Plato, *Minos*, 317.

<sup>19</sup> Philo, *De Congr. Erud.*, 50.

<sup>20</sup> *Idem.*, *De Spec. leg.* 4:147.

<sup>21</sup> Stoic sentence.

<sup>22</sup> Philo, *De mut. nom.*, 80.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. C. Spicq, *Agape in the New Testament* (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1963), I, pp. 26 ff.

<sup>24</sup> Rom. 13:9-10; Gal. 5:14.

love stated in Leviticus 19; indeed it "Christianizes" it. James is the first and very reliable exegete of the thought of his "brother" Jesus.

This new religious meaning gives rise to a semantic innovation. This is the first time there is an allusion to the sincerity of *agape*, to its deference and attachment as inspired by something besides human views, natural sympathy, or personal interest. True charity is disinterested and makes the divine predilections its own (v. 5); its judgment is illuminated by faith. The *agape* of Christians is, therefore, a clearly supernatural love, completely opposed to the friendship with the world that is enmity with God (4:4). Christian charity is real only when its motive is right. It is an interior and spontaneous love which springs from the law of liberty. The loving Christian knows why he devotes himself to his neighbor. His freely-given love is like that of a king who in giving still remains master of his favors and gifts. Finally, *agape* is an essentially active and manifest love; to act well is to love truly. The sincerity of charity can be gauged by its effective manifestation: "Be sure you act on the teaching and do not merely listen, for that would be to deceive yourselves" (1:22).

It would be impossible not to cite the splendid definition of James 1:27: "Religious practice pure and undefiled before God our father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself untarnished by the world." Although the word *agape* is not mentioned, the helpful mercy St. James describes clearly arises from charity. He had just dissipated the illusions of the Christian who imagines himself religious because he is faithful to the laws of worship, but at the same time has no control over his tongue (v. 26). His religion is worthless and he is deceiving himself. But what is true "religion" (*thrēskeia*)? The word is of Ionian origin and became current only in the era of the Emperor Augustus. It is difficult to define because, like our words "piety," "devotion," or "mystic," it expresses an aspect of religion that can extend from the saddest counterfeits to the truest sanctity. It has a different meaning in

almost every text. The noun is derived from a verb meaning "to observe religious practices." Often it has only a ritual significance and describes the ceremonial aspect of religion. Normally, however, "religion" is associated with the interior piety it expresses. In this sense the word refers to a pure and simple religion, not only to the adoration given to the divinity, but also to the cult that flows from it. Thus Philo sometimes opposes the "religion" of offerings and ablutions to the true virtues of piety and devotion; at other times he insists that only "authentic religion" is contrary to selfishness and ingratitude and is agreeable to God.<sup>25</sup> In the same way, St. James makes the notion of true religion clear. He refuses to reduce it to a mere carrying out of ritual but emphasizes the duties it implies, essentially those of the moral life and, first of all, of charity.

Religion that is true and sincere because it is total can be qualified by the epithet appropriate to worship, "holy" or "very pure." This religion alone is acceptable to God, whom St. James evokes as God our Father because his loving providence fills all men with good things. God's generosity directs the conduct of his children. They must help and care for widows and orphans. The verb translated "to care for" can mean "to go to examine and inspect," but it often means "to go to a friend or sick person to help him or perform some service." The current meaning was "to come to help; to bring aid." The Book of Sirach exhorted: "Neglect not to visit the sick—for this you will be loved (*agapan*)" (7:35); but the Lord said to the just: "When I was sick, you visited me" (Mt. 25:36; cf. v. 43). St. James was undoubtedly thinking of this *logion*. The remarkable thing is that he makes a helpful visit to one's neighbor an act of religion.

The phrase, "widow and orphan," appears only this once in the New Testament, although it is frequent in the Old, often with "the oppressed and strangers living in Israel" added to it.<sup>26</sup> "The widow and orphan" are proverbial types

<sup>25</sup> *Quod det. pot. ins.*, 21; *De sacrif. A. and C.*, 58.

<sup>26</sup> Dt. 14:29; 16:11; 24:21; 26:12.

of the oppressed—weak, abandoned, defenseless, easily wounded and exploited.<sup>27</sup> Psalm 94:6 adds that they are likely to be slain and murdered. In any case, the widow and the orphan stand for the poor,<sup>28</sup> the afflicted who weep,<sup>29</sup> whom God protects,<sup>30</sup> whom he orders us to help.<sup>31</sup> Religion pure and agreeable to the Father consists, therefore, in coming to their aid in every possible way. The motive for giving assistance is neither obedience to the divine will nor the hope of being loved in return as the Book of Sirach suggests, but rather compassion for so great an affliction. The Greek word for “affliction,” *thlipsis*, is well-chosen to evoke the pitiable condition of the widow and orphan in Israel. Its literal meaning is “compression,” and then moral “oppression”; it can refer to anything from simple annoyance to distress, calamity, and every form of suffering, tribulation, and even persecution. By using the phrase “in their affliction,” St. James shows that these poor people are in a state of permanent misery; by relating the “visit” of the Christians to their lasting distress, he suggests why and in what spirit the act of authentic religion ought to be accomplished. St. James, who as first bishop of Jerusalem organized assistance to the widows in his church (Acts 6:1), is undoubtedly expressing his completely spontaneous and charitable compassion. The care St. Paul took to make mercy efficacious is well-known.<sup>32</sup> In helping widows or in making rules for their care, both saints performed acts of true religion, “liturgies.” The act of mercy toward neighbor was at the same time an act of reli-

<sup>27</sup> Ex. 22:22; Dt. 24:17; 27:19; Is. 10:2; Jer. 5:28; 7:6; 22:3; Ez. 22:7; Za. 7:10; Jb. 22:9; 24:3; Ps. 82:2-3. Judith and Abigail are the only rich widows in the Old Testament.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Jb. 29:12; 31:16.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Acts 9:39; Ap. 18:7; Sir. 35:18.

<sup>30</sup> Dt. 10:18; Ps. 68:6; 146:9; Sir. 35:16-17.

<sup>31</sup> Is. 1:17; Sir. 4:10, 11.

<sup>32</sup> 1 Tm. 5:9-16. It is surprising that widows, who were the privileged object of the early Church's compassion, receive so little attention in the contemporary world. They are not considered a separate group like so many others which receive special attention in the twentieth century, and yet, as St. John Chrysostom remarked, the widow has received the cruelest of wounds, for she has been affected in her most intimate being (*To a young widow*, 1).

gion toward God or, at least, was received by him in that spirit.<sup>33</sup> The union of kindness with piety, surely the most marked characteristic of revealed religion, belongs to *agape*.

In the light of this truth, it is understandable that St. James should require a man who desires to worship in spirit and in truth to keep himself untarnished from the world. The basic condition for approaching God and being pleasing to him is to be free from stain. Fraternal charity is religious only to the degree that it is accomplished in perfect innocence.

The Scribe who spoke with Our Lord understood that love of neighbor is greater than the sacrifice of unblemished victims (Mk. 12:33). St. James freed the new religion from legalism by substituting charity for Jewish ritualism, which had strained out gnats.<sup>34</sup> Religion culminates in the exercise of merciful charity (2:13) which is an act of true worship acceptable to God when the worshiper is spotless. It is more easily understandable, then, that St. Paul should so often associate charity and sanctity, particularly in Ephesians 1:4. He sums up the whole law in the precept of fraternal love without ever mentioning adoration of God. The "religion" of the Lord is expressed through the liturgy of service of neighbor. Whoever grasps this doctrine cannot doubt that true *agape* mounts from man to God. This ascension is *agape*'s very nature.<sup>35</sup>

#### 4.

We have, after reaching a unanimous decision, determined to select representatives and send them to you with our *reverend and dear* Barnabas and Paul (Acts 15:25).

In the year 50 or 51 A.D., shortly after St. James had written "to the twelve tribes of the Dispersion," the apostles and

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Jer. 22:16.

<sup>34</sup> Mt. 23:23-28; Cf. Mk. 7:20-23; Lk. 11:38-54.

<sup>35</sup> It is strange that A. Nygren (*Eros und Agape*, Gütersloh, 1930) quoted not one single text from St. James' Epistle!

presbyters of Jerusalem wrote to the Christian communities in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia to notify them that the Mother Church had just made several doctrinal decisions which would be communicated to them by delegates from Jerusalem. The word St. Luke used in describing the delegates is *agapētos*. His choice is particularly interesting because it is the only time he used any form of *agapan* in the Acts. What meaning did he intend?

At first reading he would seem to be using the word in the same sense as St. James was in 1:16, 19; 2:5. St. James was referring in general terms to all his "beloved brethren," however, and the apostles and presbyters of Jerusalem were referring to two persons mentioned by name. They construct the adjective with the subjective genitive which we translate "our." *Agapētos* could be taken, then, as a synonym for *philos*, "our deeply-loved Barnabas and Paul," except that the context does not allow this meaning. The Church of Jerusalem was formulating resolutions and promulgating an official decree. In spite of the earlier differences of opinion among its members (vv. 1-21), it had come to a unanimous decision about both the content and the method of promulgation of the decree. This unanimity was of the greatest importance, less as witness to the Church's unity than as a reassurance to the converts from paganism that the obligations imposed on them were valid. The document was not the product of a Jewish minority who did not understand their problems (v. 5) nor of a relative and perhaps hesitant majority, but of the full assembly of the heads of the Church, where the most diverse tendencies had been represented and expressed. The document carried all the weight of supreme authority.

In so juridical and solemn a context, the phrase, "with our *agapētois* Barnabas and Paul" should not be understood as an expression of tenderness as the Vulgate's *charissimis* and many modern translators' "well-beloved" would suggest. *Agapētos* in this context has its classical nuance of esteem. The Mother Church recommends her delegates to the respect and veneration of the Antiochians. She accents not

so much the affective attachment she has for them as the title of honor which accredits them for so delicate a mission. Paul and Barnabas are "loved" because a lucid judgment has been made about them: "They have exposed their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 26). Their heroic zeal is the reason for the *agape* borne them, *agape* which is first of all a love of veneration, praise, even gratitude. Barnabas and Paul, without official title or permanent charge in the Church, recommend themselves to you by what they have done and by their virtue. They have been chosen by unanimous vote because of the respect we bear them and the honor they have deserved, which we now confer upon them: "our reverend and dear Barnabas and Paul."

The use of *agapētos* as "reverend and dear" by one of the "pillars" of the Church is not surprising. St. James had already used it this way in his Epistle, and St. Peter was to use it later of Paul himself (2 Pt. 3:15) when he wanted to emphasize Paul's authority and wisdom. St. Paul, in his turn, used *agapētos* several months later but gave it a personal and religious stamp (1 Thes. 2:8).



## CHAPTER II

# *Agapan* in the Epistles of St. Paul

ALTHOUGH St. Paul used the noun *agape* many times, he used the verb *agapan* only a little more frequently than the synoptic writers did—34 times to their 25. However, beginning with the Epistle to the Thessalonians in the year 51 A.D., he enriched its meaning and consecrated it as a technical term of the new Church.

### 1. Christians Beloved of God

Brothers *beloved* by God (1 Thes. 1:4).

In the introduction of his letter, St. Paul blessed God in a spirit of thanksgiving and rejoicing characteristic of the greetings of all his epistles. He praised God for the success of his preaching at Thessalonica and for the fervent Christian life which the faithful expressed in the practice of the theological virtues. Such fruit is proof that God had chosen them for the faith. In later letters, St. Paul was to call them "brothers,"<sup>1</sup> saints, believers, the faithful; here he calls them "beloved of God."

This is the first time the New Testament uses "beloved" to refer to God's love for men. The synoptic writers had

<sup>1</sup> 1 Thes. 2:1, 9, 14, 17; 3:7; 4:1, 10, 13; 5:1, 4, 12, 14, 25, etc.

reserved the term to the Son of God, the unique object of the Father's love, his *agapētos*, but St. Paul applies the perfect passive participle of the verb, *ēgapēmenoi*, to "the brothers," members of the community at Thessalonica. He is simply echoing a phrase long used to describe Israel.<sup>2</sup> The psalmists asked God to save and deliver his people in the name of his love for them. St. Paul makes the same association between charity and divine kindness. The man the Lord loves can be recognized by the graces he receives. The remarkable conversion of the Thessalonians, the evidence of their faith, the works of their charity, and the constancy of their hope make St. Paul know that they are "called," chosen, and preferred—especially loved by God. St. Paul, father and founder of their community, understood his converts through the insight given by faith. These men who have clung to the Gospel are those whom God cherishes more than he cherishes other men. Paul explains this love to them, a love as certain as it is mysterious. No disciple of Jesus Christ can be separated from the world by faith and the witness of baptism and united to the Church of God unless he has been chosen, given the gift of divine predilection. In terms of this theology, *ēgapēmenoi*, "beloved," is one of the most authentic descriptions of the faithful. Its perfect participial form shows the immovable permanence of the love of God. Christians are forever the privileged objects of the Father's love.

## 2. Fraternal Charity

Concerning brotherly love, you need not have anyone write to you since you yourselves have learned from God *to love* one another (1 Thes. 4:9).

In the first part of his letter to the Thessalonians, St. Paul recalled his ministry to their city and expressed his kind feelings for them freely and warmly (2:1—3:13). Now, before

<sup>2</sup> Ps. 60:7; 108:7; 127:2; Jer. 11:15; cf. Za. 12:10.

setting down his teaching on the dead and on the day of the Lord (4:13—5:11), he makes a series of moral recommendations about purity, charity, and work.

Christians, who are all sons of God, sharers in one covenant, and members of one community and spiritual family, the Church (cf. 1 Pt. 2:5), are united to one another in the bond of a true brotherhood. This brotherhood is not the same kind of thing as the diffused benevolence of a fictitious relationship or political friendship which sometimes unite persons, nor is it just a title of honor used to begin a letter. The union between Christians is as real as a blood relationship. Although it is invisible and exists between very many persons at once, each Christian is perfectly aware of it. "Remember that you are experiencing the same sufferings as befall your brothers all over the world" (1 Pt. 5:9). He loves the brotherhood (1 Pt. 2:17) and draws comfort and courage from it in the trials and difficulties he shares with his brothers.

The love of Christ's disciples for one another takes the form, consequently, of fraternal love, *philadelphia*. Christian men and women love one another as brothers and sisters. Their love must not be understood in the banal sense as a feeling of closeness among the members of the Church because they share the same faith, destiny, and manner of life, but as a fellowship that is the fundamental necessity of their vocation. Once he has been sanctified and consecrated to God by baptism, the disciple of Jesus is, as it were, vowed to the practice of fraternal love: "You have purified your souls by submission to the truth, that you might have a sincere brotherly love. Therefore, fervently and unaffectedly love one another from the bottom of your hearts" (1 Pt. 1:22). Brotherly love is a constitutive element of the Christian's being. The divine calling which separates the neophyte from the world and purifies him from sin also makes him belong exclusively to God so that he becomes holy. His consecration to the Lord places him among the people of God. It constrains him to cherish his brothers, other children of the one Father, not superficially in words alone because he is com-

manded to do so, but spontaneously and from the heart;<sup>3</sup> not merely in some circumstances and sometimes, but actively, constantly, and intensely. Romans 12:10 explains that fraternal love unites a kind of innate tenderness with a most respectful attention. It is totally different from camaraderie, which can often be abrupt and not particularly respectful. The behavior of Christians to one another is a totally original expression of the loving communion of brothers who adore one Lord. It has both the sweetness and confidence of family love and the respect and delicacy religious persons necessarily feel for the holy creatures who are their brothers in Christ. Such a love can exist only in the Church; Christians can be distinguished from the rest of men by this love so perfectly aware of itself and so deliberately maintained and exercised. "Persevere in brotherly love" (Heb. 13:1). Brotherly love must be reciprocal, of course, since it exists for those who live by the same grace; but its purest, most active respect and devotion cannot confine themselves to a restricted group—in other ways *agape* will extend itself to all men.<sup>4</sup>

The newly baptized were always instructed about this fundamental requirement of the Christian life. Brotherly love (*philadelphia*) and *agape* were the two essential articles of early catechesis, and in his letter the Apostle is merely reminding his readers of them as he pays a discreet compliment to their religious understanding and fidelity. "Concerning brotherly love, you need not have anyone write to you." Love of neighbor was not one of the objects of apostolic teaching in the same sense as the teaching about times and dates (5:1–11). It was the very revelation of the Lord himself in his Gospel, as the neophytes were made to understand from the moment of their conversion. When St. Paul tells them that they "have learned this from God," he is referring to the day of their Christian initiation. He contrasts their infused knowledge with the preaching he would ordinarily have to do to others. At best, preaching is an intermediary between Master and disciples, while faith is the direct hearing

<sup>3</sup> Cf. 1 Pt. 2:1.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Thes. 3:12; cf. 2 Pt. 1:7.

of the word of God. Everyone immediately recognizes the authority of a precept pronounced by the Lord.<sup>5</sup> St. Paul announces the evangelical teaching on brotherly love in terms already chosen and consecrated by oral tradition: "to love one another", *eis to agapan allēlous*.<sup>6</sup>

This is the first time St. Paul prescribes charity as a Christian obligation. Far from setting his prescription forth as a personal doctrine, he bases his teaching on the Gospel and the tradition of the Church. He refers to the precept without giving any explanation of it, for the Thessalonians knew very well that the whole moral life was contained in the charity they practiced so largely (v. 10). As in the Sermon on the Mount, it is not love of God which is prescribed but love of neighbor, as it had been carried out for more than twenty years in the Christian communities of brothers. These considerations are basic to an understanding of the nature of the new religion centered on *agape*.

### 3. Christians Loved by God

We owe continual thanks to God for you, brothers, *beloved* of the Lord, because God has selected you from eternity to be saved through the sanctification which the spirit effects and through belief in the truth (2 Thes. 2:13).

The thought here is exactly the same as in 1 Thessalonians 1:4, but with a greater emphasis on the relationship between divine charity and the election of the believers.

Twice before in this letter St. Paul had called his readers "brothers" (1:3; 2:1). Here he adds that they are "beloved of the Lord." He had just mentioned Satan and those he leads to destruction (2:10), and next he turns to his Thessalonian converts to encourage their hope. He finds in the divine charity which envelops them both their reason for confidence and his reason for gratitude.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. 1 Thes. 4:2.

<sup>6</sup> The same formula is found in Rom. 13:8; 1 Pt. 1:22 (cf. Gal. 5:13; Heb. 10:24).

The faithful have truly been chosen and preferred by God. The Greek word *haireō*, "selected," is very strong. In the active voice it means "to take into one's hands, to seize, to secure, to capture"; in the middle voice, "to take for oneself, to take by preference, to choose."<sup>7</sup> The Septuagint used it to describe Israel's divine election;<sup>8</sup> St. Paul uses it only this once in a religious sense, but it contains the elements of his synthesis of God's plan of election as he would later explain it in Romans 8:29-30: "Those whom he has foreknown he has also predestined, to be conformed to the image of his Son. . . . Those whom he has predestined, he has called; and those whom he has called he has sanctified, and those whom he has sanctified, he has glorified."<sup>9</sup> The direct end of these divine acts, enumerated to strengthen the hope of the faithful, is glorification.<sup>10</sup> From the moment God regards them with knowledge and love, Christians are "predestined" to association in the glory of Christ. Everything depends on the first divine act, a foreknowledge which is also a choice. The Greek verb *proegnō*, used in "he has foreknown," implies a knowledge which discerns through love; therefore, it implies preference also. Predestination logically follows on preference, for predestination brings about the efficacious call to the faith that engenders justice, the pledge of salvation.

The phrase, "God has selected," of 2 Thessalonians 2:13 is practically synonymous, then, with "God has foreknown" of Romans 8:29. The eternity of God's loving choice, attributed to the Father, is emphasized; God's choice is unchangeable and transcendent over all temporal and random contingencies. The believer is chosen for "salvation" and receives an array of goods: pardon of sins; the gift of the Holy Spirit; certainty of the love of God; liberation from spiritual slavery; and, above all, the assurance of final happiness. God's loving decision is made so that the faithful may gain the glory of our

<sup>7</sup> In Phil. 1:22 and Heb. 11:25 a preferential decision is made for one of two possibilities.

<sup>8</sup> Dt. 7:6; 10:15; cf. 26:18.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. B. B. Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies* (Philadelphia, 1952), pp. 270-333.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. M. J. Lagrange, *in h.v.*

Lord Jesus Christ (2 Thes. 2:14), which Christ will share with the beloved of his Father. "Those whom he has predestined . . . he has glorified" (Rom. 8:30).

Christians learn of the eternal choice ordained for their eternal salvation by the divine call <sup>11</sup> contained in the preaching of the Gospel. When they adhered to the faith, they were incorporated into the infallible plan of salvation which is carried on in time for the sake of its fulfillment in heaven. To receive the divine "call" is to be assured that God is accomplishing his plan of salvation and that we are the objects of his privileged love. Thus the object of Christian faith is at once the grasping of the divine love which chooses its elect and the commitment of all one's life in response. As soon as we hear the call to salvation, we know we are chosen by God. The most accurate description of Christians is "those who are beloved of God." The passive participle *ēgapēmenoi* indicates that God's eternal love lives forever. The faithful are those whom God cherishes above all others, and who know it. When St. Paul calls them "brothers beloved of the Lord," he is not trying to honor them by a flattering title in accord with the forms of good address. He is writing as "steward of God's mysteries" (1 Cor. 4:1) who sees these baptized Christians, those who have been called, within the divine charity that envelops them.

#### 4. God Loves Christians

And may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who *has loved* us and by grace given us unfailling encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and make you steadfast in every good deed and good word (2 Thes. 2:16).

In the midst of the exhortation to perseverance he made to the Thessalonians, men "beloved of the Lord" (v. 13), St. Paul paused to pray. In the very name of God's love for them, Paul asks God to fulfill his divine plan for their salvation.

<sup>11</sup> 2 Thes. 2:14; cf. 1:11; 1 Thes. 2:12; 4:7; 5:24.

Although Jesus and God the Father are invoked together, and the four verbs of the sentence are in the singular, the divine Persons are clearly distinguished from one another (cf. 1 Thes. 3:11). The two persons, God the Father and Christ, are acting in concert; their action in the giving of grace is coordinated. The love of charity for us which the Apostle attributes to the Father and Jesus together is even more remarkable. The joining of Father and Jesus implies that the Son is divine; the subjects are separate, but the love is one. The synoptic tradition, especially of the Sermon on the Mount,<sup>12</sup> makes the verb *agapan* the natural choice for expressing the Father's love and explaining it as a generous kindness; God loves men as a Father who gives good things to his children. God's love is often invoked as a motive of prayer because it is the reason for all the hoped-for benefits he will grant. That both *agapēsas* ("loved") and *dous*, ("given") are in the past tense is significant. St. Paul is not calling on some mysterious divine predilection, but on a manifest and already proven love. Since this love is common to the Father and the Son, its having been proven must refer to God's having sent his Son and to the Son's passion. These facts of history are the mystery of our salvation; above all, they are the revelation of the divine *agape*. God showed his love for us when he did not spare his Son but delivered him up to death for us (Rom. 5:8; 8:32; cf. Gal. 4:4); Christ immolated himself out of love (Gal. 2:20). St. Paul says elsewhere: "We are more than victorious through him who has loved (*agapan*) us" (Rom. 8:37); and "The life that I now live in this body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved (*agapan*) me and sacrificed himself for me" (Gal. 2:20). Clearly, St. Paul was speaking to the Thessalonians of "the charity of God which is *in* Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:39).

The Father's proof of love and Jesus' redeeming blood give the Christians, who have been freed from Satan's slavery, from sin, and from death, a wonderful comfort in all their present and future trials. They have present possession of a

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Mt. 5:43-48; Lk. 6:35-36.



sure hope. St. Thomas Aquinas comments that a good hope is one whose fulfillment is guaranteed. Pagans are those who have no hope (1 Thes. 4:13), but the life of Christians is illuminated and encouraged, even on this earth, by the certainty that they are the beloved of God and already possess life eternal.

Their call to faith (v. 13) has revealed God's love for them and the gift of the grace of Christ. These wonderful kindnesses are imperishable and form the conscience of the Christian into something vigorous and joyful from the moment of his baptism. He is relieved of burdens and bonds by the dynamism of a hope rooted in the love of God and the blood of the Savior.

God (Rom. 15:5; 13) and Christ (Col. 1:27) are permanent sources of encouragement and hope. Christians obtain these ever-renewed gifts of God through prayer. Not only do their hearts open out under this consolation, but also they grow stronger and more determined than ever to make the divine grace live in all their words and actions. The joy and strength that inspire Christian conduct are infused, but they are nourished by the believer's contemplation of God's love and his assimilation of the fruits of Calvary.

St. Paul's insistence in his early letters on the love of God and Christ gives a tone to this teaching that is entirely different from the tone of his propaganda discourses recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. The revelation of charity is reserved for the faithful. The simple suggestions of the letters are references and allusions to a doctrine that evidently must have been well-known to their readers, already profoundly instructed about divine charity.

## 5. The Reward of Christians Who Love God

We do, however, speak wisdom among those that are mature, yet not the wisdom of this world, or of the rulers of this world who are on the wane. The wisdom we speak is of God, mysterious, hidden, which God foreordained to our glory before the

world's beginning, a wisdom which none of this world's rulers knew, because if they had known it, they would never have crucified the Lord to whom belongs all glory. It is the wisdom which, in the words of Scripture, proposes "What no eye has ever seen, what no ear has ever heard, what no human heart has ever thought of, namely, the great blessings God holds ready for *those who love him*." These it is that God has revealed to us through his Spirit (1 Cor. 2:9).

From a philosophical and literary point of view, the use of *agapan* in this description is unusual and even surprising in St. Paul. The verse in which it occurs is a quotation, and the description of Christians as "those who love God" (cf. 1 Cor. 8:3; Rom. 8:28) must be attributed to the author of the quotation and not to St. Paul. The reward of love is magnificently expressed.

The Apostle has just approached the subject of his teaching, the wisdom of God, the mysterious and hidden wisdom that had remained unknown from the beginning of humanity until the fullness of time.<sup>13</sup> Only then was it revealed and made manifest to those ready to receive it (2 Cor. 4:3-6). "God's hidden wisdom" is not a reference to a newly revealed attribute of God; it refers, rather, to God's plan for his creatures. St. Paul says that from all eternity God had framed and foreordained his plan to bring us to our full glory. "To our glory" in the eschatological sense means "to the completion of our salvation" (Rom. 8:18; 21). The final object of God's plan for us is the glorification of the elect. Since the context exalts Christ crucified as "God's wisdom" and the unique source of our salvation (cf. 1:18-30), God's mysterious wisdom is clearly to be identified with his secret plan established from all eternity for the salvation of humanity. Christ is the center of the plan;<sup>14</sup> the faithful are its beneficiaries. God's decree of salvation determines both means and end, from preaching of the Gospel and possession of justice to eternal life and its consummation in glory.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Lk. 10:24; Rom. 16:25; Eph. 3:5.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Acts 4:28; Eph. 3:11.

Verse 9: "What no eye has ever seen . . ." is in apposition with verse 7; it refers either to "wisdom," of which it gives the object and content, or to "glory," which it explains.<sup>15</sup> What precisely is this glory? In typically Semitic descriptive style, the words of Scripture speak of the inadequacy of sight and hearing and heart. No faculty of man, whether sensible or intellectual, can grasp the fullness of happiness that God wishes to give to sinners; much less can sinners ever attain it. The faithful can arrive at glory only in and by Christ. Glory is already prepared and placed in reserve,<sup>16</sup> as it were, as a reward for those who love God. *Agapan* has the same sense in this verse as it did in Deuteronomy and Matthew 6:24. It expresses a religious love of adoration and fidelity, an exclusive belonging to the Lord. As it is used here, it does not describe love overflowing in the joy of close union with God, the beloved. On the contrary, the passage contrasts the happiness reserved for the faithful at the end of their earthly lives with the singular austerity of their lives as lived here on earth. It is impossible to love God without foregoing earthly happiness and carrying the cross.<sup>17</sup> The love of charity proves itself practically in detachment from riches, in endurance of trials, in obedience and courageous patience. For those who love him and serve him, body and soul, God has prepared joy inexpressible.

Man's intelligence is radically incapable of seizing the immensity of its future beatitude, but the Holy Spirit, who sounds God's depths, speaks to the faithful of the New Covenant. He removes the veil and reveals what was invisible, the impenetrable divine plans and secrets: "God has revealed them to us through his Spirit" (v. 10). If those who love God receive a revelation, it is obvious that there is a link between *agape* and knowledge, *gnōsis*. In contrast to the "world's rulers" of verse 8, who did not recognize God's wisdom in Christ, "those who love God" adhere to Jesus and recognize

<sup>15</sup> E. B. Allo, *St. Paul Première Epître aux Corinthiens* (Paris, 1934), in *h.l.*

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Rom. 9:23.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Mt. 10:39; 16:25; Lk. 9:24; 14:26; Jn. 12:25.

him as Lord of glory. The first light given, therefore, illuminates the Son of God crucified, and those who are faithful to him because they love God receive, besides, an eschatological knowledge about the future life. St. Paul speaks of this knowledge again in 1 Corinthians 13:12. None but the "charitable" are enlightened by the Spirit.

"Those who love God" have the privilege of being initiated into the mystery of their salvation, of the happiness that will crown it, and of the means of attaining it. Their knowledge, revealed by the Spirit, is not the result of keen intellectual insight, but rather of *agape*, which makes the faithful more "spiritual," able to grasp the meaning of a spiritual secret and the value of a spiritual joy. It must be pointed out here that the "beatitude" of the "mature" (v. 6), of "those who are ripe for it," is intrinsically linked to the "passion" of the Son. St. John later discovered the charity of the Father in this mysterious relationship.

## 6. Love for God Is a Gift of God

Mere knowledge breeds conceit; it is *love* that builds. If anyone thinks he knows something, he does not yet know how to know. But if a man *loves* God, he is known by him (1 Cor. 8:3).

Whether or not to eat food that had been offered to idols was a problem of conscience for some members of the Corinthian community. All the Christians knew that since the food came from animals immolated to false "gods" (v. 1), it could be freely eaten, and the "strong" among them wanted to exercise their right and eat. The others were troubled at the idea of eating offerings made to gods they had adored just a short time before. St. Paul counsels the stronger Christians not to scorn their brothers' weakness. Simply knowing (v. 2) the emptiness of pagan cults is not yet true Christian knowledge, which knows as one should know, respecting a brother's scruples. True knowledge is both speculative and

practical; it knows God and knows how to draw the proper conclusions from its knowledge. It is completely different from pure intellectualism because it is religious knowledge; its possession implies the possession of fraternal charity, "the knowledge of neighbor."<sup>18</sup>

St. Paul does not make these observations explicit, but they can be understood from the pericope taken as a whole. Its wording is not entirely clear. In verse 3 one would have expected "A man who knows fully and accurately is known by God," meaning that the only perfect knowledge, both loving and practical, is given by God. Instead, St. Paul writes: "If a man loves God, he is known by him." The last part of the sentence is grammatically ambiguous since one of its pronouns apparently refers to man and the other to God. From the point of view of the thought expressed, the verse is surprising in two ways. It speaks of loving God when the whole discussion was about loving the weaker Christians, and it substitutes the idea of being known by God for the idea of knowing him.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, verses 1-2 are broken by the omission of the conjunction one would expect to introduce the second part of verse 1. We are led to believe, therefore, that the text as we now have it has been altered by copyists and does not represent St. Paul's original phrasing.

There is an existing manuscript (P<sup>46</sup>) which contains a different reading, logical, clear, and very probably authentic: "If anyone thinks he has knowledge he does not yet know how to know; but if anyone loves, he is the man who possesses knowledge." St. Paul's text as we have it has three additions to this version: (1) "of something" after "has knowledge"; (2) "God" after "loves," perhaps under the influence of Romans 8:28; and (3) "by him" after the final verb "is known," which is taken in its passive sense. St. Paul is trying to show that true religious knowledge seeks the good of the other person, not its own interest (cf. 10:24, 33; 13:5). He is not thinking here of love for God but of fraternal

<sup>18</sup> Cf. 1 Jn. 4:8.

<sup>19</sup> J. Dupont., *op. 1.*, p. 52.

charity, which is true knowledge. A man who feels complacent because he "knows," but who is indifferent to his brothers does not know. True knowledge is deployed in love (13:2) which understands when the use of knowledge should be restrained. The inclusion in the verse of "God" undoubtedly encouraged the inclusion of "by him." These observations all force us to doubt that the expression, "a man who loves God," is really St. Paul's, but we must, nevertheless, try to discover its significance in the text as we have it.

The phrase "to be known by God" was relatively current in Hellenistico-Oriental language, always in a favorable sense. St. Paul uses it as it was used in the Old Testament, though, to mean knowledge as a function of the will as well as of the intelligence. To know is an act of the whole person, who appropriates what he knows, makes it his own, and uses it in any way he chooses. "To be known by God" means to belong to him and receive his kindness and solicitude. Thus Yahweh knew Moses, who had found grace in his eyes; Moses was the object of the divine pleasure.<sup>20</sup> God knew Jeremias before his birth and sanctified and consecrated him as prophet; the divine knowledge discerned him, singled him out, and marked him for God's service.<sup>21</sup>

St. Paul several times makes the knowledge received by faith, the sign of divine election, the result of God's pre-knowledge of the person. "Since you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary notions?" (Gal. 4:9). Here he is telling the Galatians that their conversions to Christianity were not so much personal decisions on their part as the result of God's loving knowledge of them and of his having chosen them first. The knowledge they receive through faith remains partial here on earth, he says, but in heaven they will know God as they have always been known by him (1 Cor. 13:12). The same thing is true of

<sup>20</sup> Ex. 33:12-13, 17-18.

<sup>21</sup> Jer. 1:5; cf. Is. 43:15-16; Na. 1:7; Ps. 1:6; 2 Tm. 2:19; cf. C. Spicq, *Saint Paul: Les Épîtres Pastorales* (Paris, 1947), in *h.v.*

charity and every other virtue; everything is a gift of God. If we had not been first known by God, we could not love. We must have been singled out and chosen for intimacy with God who fills us with love.

St. Paul does not use so didactic a form to present the principle, it is true, but from the nature of charity he concludes to the free and loving initiative of God, which he expresses in terms of knowledge, according to biblical custom. "To be known by God" is to be loved and chosen by God. The same close bond between divine charity and the choice it determines, the same "foreknowledge" as is mentioned in Romans 8:29 and 11:2 is expressed here. Perhaps it should not surprise us, then, that the Apostle mentions the Christian's love of God where the context seems to call for love of neighbor. Indeed, since *agape*, attributed in the first place to God, is the very love with which he both loves himself and loves men, his gift of love infused into the faithful necessarily embraces both objects; it could not do otherwise. More exactly, the only accurate way of understanding Christian religion and morality is through a revealed and infused knowledge with two intrinsically united parts, faith in the one true God and love of neighbor. Only the person who unites the two in his practical conduct proves that he has been known and loved by God; he alone is the authentic Christian.

However the text should read, it states clearly that the *agape* of the believer is religious adherence to the divine will and fidelity to God's precepts. It is an infused virtue, or at least it is deeply rooted in an act of God himself. Characteristic of the Christian life, it is almost a pledge of "predestination." It implies attachment to God and to one's brothers. In the Corinthian community there must have been some converts who knew Aristotle's sentence on the foolishness of pretending that a man could love God. Could there have been a more sure way of showing that this love is really possible than by showing that God himself truly communicated it to men with his own knowledge of them?

## 7. God Loves Those Who Do Good

Let each one give as he has determined in his heart, not grudgingly or from compulsion, for "*God loves a cheerful giver*" (2 Cor. 9:7).

St. Paul is explaining what he has done to get financial help for the poor of Jerusalem. He strongly recommends the collection being taken for them as he describes the motives and characteristics of Christian generosity.

What counts in such gifts is the graciousness of the giving. Everyone recognizes that how a gift is given is much more important than the gift itself. St. Paul does not want the Corinthians to make their contributions merely out of obedience to his request; he has no intention of demanding anything from them. Nor should they give to avoid being criticized by their brothers if they should refuse. To give for unworthy motives would be to make a grudging and burdensome sacrifice. The purity and freedom of the Corinthians' giving will be evident in their joy. The adjective "cheerful" is contrasted with "grudgingly" and "from compulsion." Generous giving has a spontaneity that only fraternal love can give. "In joy because of your love for the saints," St. Thomas comments, and Bengel glosses correctly, "joyful, like God." The giver is happy to help his brother and his happiness shows.

Promptitude is characteristic of virtue. It was a tradition in Israel that happiness accompanies good works. Yahweh had prescribed: "When you give to your brother in need, give freely and not with ill-will; for the Lord your God will bless you for this in all your works and undertakings" (Dt. 15:10). "With each contribution show a cheerful countenance, and pay your tithes in a spirit of joy" (Sir. 35:8). "The kindly man will be blessed, for he gives of his sustenance to the poor" (Prv. 22:9). St. Paul repeats the thought of this text from Proverbs but substitutes the reward of God's love for his blessing. Evidently, God's blessing is not excluded, since divine love is the source of every blessing, as our Lord



revealed in his Sermon on the Mount,<sup>22</sup> but St. Paul does not wish to stress the material or supernatural rewards of generosity. His substitution of God's *agape* for God's blessing will appeal only to deeply spiritual souls. Those who give willingly and joyfully can be sure that God is pleased with their generosity. *Agape* here is a love of delight and intimacy as in John 14:21: "He who accepts my commandments and treasures them—he is the one that loves me. And he that loves me will, in turn, be loved by my Father; and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him." Because he accepts a gift made to the poor as having been made to himself, the Lord responds lovingly to generosity willed and carried out from the heart. His love is poured out on those who pour out their love on others. Charity is the virtue the Lord loves above all others.

## 8. St. Paul's Love for the Corinthians

Is it that I do not *love* you? God knows I do (2 Cor. 11:11).

In his second letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul was very severe toward the false apostles whose propaganda was ravaging the Christian community, but he displayed a sincere, profound, and disinterested love for the faithful.

Although he had accepted voluntary donations from the other Churches (v. 9; Philip 4:15), he always refused to take anything from the Corinthians. For one thing, he did not want to give his enemies any opening for accusing him of greed; for another, he wanted his disinterestedness to be inescapably obvious. To spread the Gospel out of pure generosity was a matter of honor to him. All his pride and title to glory lay in his gratuitous preaching.<sup>23</sup>

The Corinthians were mistaken when they thought he refused their offering because he did not love or trust them, and St. Paul vehemently rejected their suspicions. There may have been apparent grounds for their feelings, but certainly

<sup>22</sup> Mt. 5:45–48; cf. Phil. 4:19.

<sup>23</sup> V. 10; cf. 1 Cor. 9:11–18.

they had no right to judge his intentions or, worse still, to question his loyalty. Here they touched on tender territory. Why have I acted like this? Why have I refused this sign of your affection? Why have I intentionally wounded and humiliated you? Whatever the reason may be, there is one possibility that is absolutely inadmissible—that I do not love you. The Corinthians should have remembered the explicit declarations of love for them which their Apostle had made.<sup>24</sup> At this point we would expect St. Paul to protest his love all over again, but he is so filled with indignation at the suspicion aroused by their stupid blindness and at the inanity of any attempted justification on his part that he calls on God who sounds the depths of hearts: "God knows." These two words, which amount to an oath, are his proud and final reply. The great-souled Apostle cannot lower himself to answer reproaches which border on insolence. He is answerable only to God; God knows whether I love you and he knows the reasons for my conduct.

What kind of love does he mean? When used independently, the litotes, "I do not love you," can mean "I detest you," or in its classical sense, "I hold you in contempt; I do not esteem you." St. Paul's refusal to be a burden to the Corinthians when he had been willing to take help from the Philippians seemed to them to be an insulting lack of confidence. If he is unwilling to ask us for a service, he must despise us! The strength of St. Paul's affection for the faithful causes the vehemence of his reply. But is his affection a tenderness like a father's for his children (cf. 2:4; 6:11-13) or like a mother's for the child she nurses (cf. 1 Thes. 2:8)? Tenderness was probably part of his feeling, for his exclamation certainly shows a spontaneous and deeply felt reaction. If tenderness were all that he felt, however, St. Paul would probably have used some verb which conveys emotion more explicitly than *agapan* does (*phileō*, *stergō*, *spagchnizomai*).

This passage is a beautiful example of the tumultuous soul

<sup>24</sup> 2 Cor. 6:11-13; 7:2-4; cf. 11:2.

of St. Paul, lashing out harshly in indignation and anger at the hypocrisy of his adversaries, yet at the same moment cherishing with all his heart the very Church that was causing him so much suffering. Obviously, he did not love the Corinthians with the same sweet and confident affection he felt for the Thessalonians or the Philippians; he had endured too much from them. He was not at all disposed, at the moment, to show them the slightest tenderness. His irritation explains the extreme curtness of his declaration, but he remained profoundly attached to them just the same, and he said so in the very midst of his polemic. In context, therefore, without excluding tenderness, *agapan* expresses the supernatural and apostolic love of the founder of the Corinthian community for his people. If St. Paul had been swayed by a desire for human affection, he would undoubtedly have asked the Corinthians to help him meet his expenses, but his "charity" required him to cause them pain (cf. 7:8) for the sake of a greater spiritual good: the glory of the Gospel and the good reputation of its apostle (cf. 12:15). He could call upon the God of charity as witness that his love for the faithful was pure, supernatural, and deep. His deep love was more a desire for the good of his neighbor than an attachment of flesh and blood. It was precisely the *caritas in Christo Jesu* described in 1 Corinthians 16:24.

### 9. The Reciprocal Love of Paul and the Corinthians

But I will most gladly spend myself and be spent to the limit for the sake of your souls, even though the more *I love* you the less *I am loved* (2 Cor. 12:15).

This verse is exactly parallel to the preceding text (11:11), and its further development of the same thought confirms that our choice of meanings for *agapan* there was correct. St. Paul returns to his enemies' calumnies about his "pretended" dis-

interestedness and his hypocrisy. Some of the faithful were inclined to interpret his behavior toward them as arising from disdain or cold indifference.

St. Paul answers their charges very mildly. Do not scold me for not having asked you for a contribution. I acted like a true father, and you know it is natural for parents to be treasurers for their children, not children for their parents (v. 14). As for me, I would consider it a joy to give you everything I possess and even to ruin myself for you; what shall I say—to exhaust and consume myself in serving you.

St. Paul's love is not so much tenderness as heroic devotion, all the more heroic because the Corinthians could very easily misunderstand and scorn his total gift. His dedication to them is not intended to satisfy their feelings, even their apparently legitimate feelings. St. Paul has no intention of modifying his discretion and reserve toward them. He is determined to overlook their touchiness, their vanity, and their too natural feeling for him.<sup>25</sup> He wants the good of their souls and not their approval.<sup>26</sup> True love of neighbor does not consist in words and feelings, but in acts and gifts.

In its two uses in this sentence, *agapan* has its classical meaning of manifestation of love. St. Paul has decided to follow a single line of conduct, even if it is misinterpreted, and devote himself personally and to the very limit of his strength to the Corinthians, whether or not they respond with affection and gratitude to his generosity.

It is normal for parents to love their children more than their children love them, and it is just as normal for the devotion of an apostle to be misunderstood and unappreciated, for his love to meet indifference or ingratitude. St. Paul seems to have accepted the fact, and he reasserts the purity of the love he will always pour out on the Corinthians—no matter how they respond to him.

The great underlying principle of this declaration governs all Christian revelation: love attracts love. Ordinarily there is a correspondence between love and gratitude. The more

<sup>25</sup> Cf. 1 Thes. 2:5, 6.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. 1 Thes. 2:8; Rom. 16:4.

generous the love shown, the deeper the gratitude returned—a truth Simon the Pharisee had recognized and the Lord affirmed.<sup>27</sup> Luke 7:42–43, where Simon makes his declaration, is parallel to 2 Corinthians 11:11 in using *agapan* as a love of both generosity and gift, and gratitude and fidelity. Because he had given the Corinthians his heart, St. Paul had a right to ask for their confidence and loyalty. God deals with men in the same way, as St. John explained later. He loves men with a gratuitous love before they begin to love him, and he has proved his love by giving his Son. He loved first, not only to convince men of his goodness, but also to awaken in their hearts a *redamatio*, a return of love rooted in gratitude (cf. 1 Jn. 4:9). It is remarkable that fraternal *agape* infused into the souls of the faithful has the same nature as God's *agape*, follows the same rhythm, and obeys the same laws. In love, even more than in justice, the axiom holds true. *Do ut des*.

## 10. The Love of God's Son for Christians

The life that I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who *loved* me and sacrificed himself for me (Gal. 2:20).

This well-known exclamation is the most exact and complete definition of the Christian life (cf. Eph. 5:2) that St. Paul ever gave. It concludes the section of his letter to the Galatians which tells them that the Jews who have been converted to Christianity must not go back to the Law (2:15–21), which is now powerless to justify them (v. 16). They are dead to and for the Law (v. 19). But without the Law, how can they know how to live? Christ has brought them a new life, a life for God (v. 19) necessarily, but exactly what kind of life is it? How does it sustain itself and grow? How understand it and how live it fully at each moment? In trying to answer these questions, St. Paul speaks from his own personal experience, which will become the experience of each of Christ's disciples.

<sup>27</sup> Lk. 7:42–43.

a. The new life is a life *in and by faith*. "I live by faith." Faith's power to vivify is a major theme of Paul's gospel. Union with God and Christ removes sin and engenders a new life in the soul. "The just man lives by faith" (Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11). The light and confidence which faith gives animate and direct the entire existence of the just man (Rom. 4; Heb. 11).

b. The new life is *real and in the here and now*, not metaphorical or in the future. "The life that I now live in the body." For all his belonging to God, his heavenly "citizenship," and his interior renewal, the just man goes on living a bodily life on earth in the ordinary human way. His dual condition begins the day of his conversion ("now") at the same time that his death to the Law occurs.

c. *Yet the new life is not a human life in the strict sense* and man is neither its principle nor its master. "It is now no longer I who live." The Christian lives "by faith"; he is not the source of the life perpetually infused into him.

d. *The new life is a Christian life*; more exactly, it is Christ's own life in the believer. "But Christ lives in me" is parallel to "I live by faith." To say we live by faith is to say Christ lives in us (cf. Eph. 3:17; cf. 2 Cor. 13:5) and makes us live with his own life (cf. Col. 3:4). The "Lord of the living" (Rom. 14:9) is both above us and within us. He possesses the very life of God, and he dwells in the believer's heart. We can understand in what sense the Christian is vivified by faith; he is brought to life, flooded, and stirred by the personal life of Christ.

Obviously St. Paul is speaking of the risen and glorious Christ. Faith—vital union between two persons—assimilates (Rom. 6:5) the convert to his risen Lord to such a degree that their oneness grows more and more complete, transforming the Christian into Christ's image (2 Cor. 3:18). St. Paul, who sees all things in the light of salvation, loves to join the mystery of the transforming divine life to its source, Christ crucified: "by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and sacrificed himself for me." The Christian life was born on Calvary and