

Loving Ketchup Chips

There is an English word we need to redeem. It has gotten to the point where it's meaning is almost completely obscured, and that word is love. It is not that this word is being avoided. It is safe to say that the majority of songs we listen to all have to do with love, relationships, break ups etc. Poems are written about love, love is uttered in supreme court cases, it's all over the news and in rallies with the slogan 'love is love.' But what do we mean by this four letter word 'love'? Because if we do not understand what it truly means, we will misunderstand the deepest truth of Christianity.

Understanding what love is, is critical for evangelization because in English we only have one word for love. With the same breath I can utter, 'I love ketchup chips' and then say 'God loves you'. So when I go to schools to teach students about the basic Gospel message of God's love, the students look at me like I'm crazy because if God loves me like I love chips then that love is not so salvific, not so special.

Love has a variety of definitions. Someone defined love as the greatest and worst thing that could ever happen to a person. (That person is probably a little bit jaded). Yet the most common definition of what love is, is that it is an intense romantic feeling. In light of this definition, the slogan 'love is love' makes a lot more sense because it essentially means 'how I feel is how I feel.'

Yet we find that this idea of love does not coincide with our deepest intuitions about what love is. When we think of a 'heroic love' it seems silly to think of heroic feelings because heroism pertains to acts. You do not get a medal of honor for feelings.

So our rich Catholic tradition has defined love in two ways and they are both related. St. Thomas Aquinas defines love as willing the good of the other, desiring the good of the other. Here, love is not a noun but a verb, it is an action, the movement of the will to desire and do the good for the other. This is related to our second definition of love from St. John of the Cross who says that to love is to give everything, to give one's self. Love is the gift of self. When we desire the good of the other person, this desire and action becomes a gift; by desiring and carrying out the good for the other you make a gift of yourself to the other.

Think of the mother caring for her child at 2am in the morning or the husband caring for the wife who is sick. They desire the good for the other (the nurturing of the child, the good health of the wife) and in sacrificing, in loving, in these actions they reveal their love; these actions become the gift of themselves.

Bishop Fulton Sheen said that love is measured not by the amount of emotion but by the amount of sacrifice. And sacrifice is nothing other than the gift of self.

Hence, when we proclaim the mystery of the God who IS Love, we no longer think of God as some sort of eternal, ethereal feeling. God is a communion of self gift; the Father makes a gift of himself to the Son and the Son in turn makes a gift of himself back to the Father and the bond of love between them, the literal love between the Father and the Son is the Spirit.

Yet this mystery is not just pie in the sky: the mystery of our God who IS Love desires to abide in you. When we hear that God LOVES us, God is making a gift of himself to you, he is holding his heart and offering it to you and he offers this gift every day through the Eucharist. Therefore, let us too respond with a love that is full of deep devotion, not just full of feeling but full of true sacrifice, full of the gift of ourselves.