

Saying our love

Most of my immediate family's phone calls end with "I love you." Visit good-byes are stamped with the same declaration. The brothers have not yet fully subscribed to this with each other, or maybe it's just me. But these words transmit a world of meaning, and "next times" are no longer taken for granted.

In the family of the Faith, I recommend saying our love to Jesus and to the Father. I have no doubt that it is the Holy Spirit who inspires us to speak our love.

We cannot deeply love someone whom we do not know. Jesus is the path to our getting to know God. We come to know Jesus by attending to him as he is revealed in the Scriptures. The Gospels, Acts, epistles and letters each bring aspects of this real person to life. He walks toward us in the reading and public proclamations of these sacred texts. As we accumulate our own life experiences, our experience of the Lord matures.

With the apostle Peter, can we say to Jesus, "you know that I love you" (John 21:15-17)? The words do not come easily to our lips, and we know why. Saying it requires sincerity, makes us vulnerable and commits us to ongoing conversion. Saying "I love you" means we surrender some control and submit to some unknowns, some unknowables. And to a Person.

A part of us questions saying anything to God whose immensity, we imagine, could not notice our few words. St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) tackled this in a meditation on God who is the source of love. "Love is a great thing so long as it continually returns to its fountainhead, flows back to its source, always drawing from there the water which constantly replenishes it. Of all the movements, sensations and feelings of the soul, love is the only one in which the creature can respond to the Creator and make some sort of similar return however unequal though it be. For when God loves, all he desires is to be loved in return; the sole purpose of his love is to be loved, in the knowledge that those who love him are made happy by their love of him" (Sermon 83).

During my recent retreat, I examined two hymnals present in the chapel. Each has an index at the back. I thumbed pages until I arrived at themes for the hymns, particularly Love, Love for God, Love of God, with numerous titles listed below each. Since hymn singing is both adoration and catechesis (when done well), I had to wonder about the proportion of "love hymns" at parish Masses.

During a stretch while I was part of a high school faculty, I helped at a parish on weekends. It took months to rotate through the Saturday and Sunday Mass schedule a few times. Each Mass had its own musicians and song leaders. After a while, I noticed that the Saturday music was always about Jesus the Son. The first Sunday morning Mass was generally about the Father. The noon choir was heavy into Holy Spirit hymns. If the Trinity is our principal doctrine, were people being deprived of the fuller tradition, not to mention parish unity? Which returns me to my central thought: If God is love, and if he so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son (John 3:16), are we getting the help we need to affirm its importance? Do our Eucharistic liturgies and hymn selections help us to say it?

I am almost finished with a book about parish and church administration (see my next column). In commercial settings, activities and expenditures happen in order to “add value.” In our Catholic Church settings, our mission is to be an expression of God’s love, responding to God’s loving presence as possible and attainable. Buildings, programs and social outreach only have meaning when they express love (see 1 Cor 13:1-13). When we do not inhale God’s love as a personal and parish reality, however imperfectly, we cannot preach sincerely, much less successfully.

True enough, rote professions of faithful love appear in the paragraphs of the Act of Love or the Act of Contrition. In a way they are like training wheels on a child’s bicycle. As adults, we now should be able to say an undecorated “I love you” to our Lord Jesus or to our Father. It is easier to end our personal prayers this way, once we realize that it is the best motive for beginning them.