

AGAPÉ IN I CORINTHIANS XIII (II)

AFTER we have attempted to understand the right context of *Agapé* in St. Paul, we now examine briefly the main interpretations given to the word under study.¹

E.B. ALLO's interpretation of *Agapé* is given mainly in the introduction to Chapter XIII in his 'Premier Epître aux Corinthiens'. He starts by saying that Paul finds himself seized and captivated by the same Spirit which the Apostle has been speaking about. Paul's soul 's'épanche en une sorte de poème d'hymne, de psaume, qui est la meilleure exemple qu'il nous ait donné pour comprendre la nature du logos sophias, le discours de sagesse. C'est la plus belle page de l'oeuvre apostolique, avec Rom. VIII, 31ss'.

The object of the hymn is charity, *agapé*, which brings us to the culminating point of the Epistle. Here, says Allo, the whole question is brought back to the question of our union to God and to Christ, that is, to that mutual love that comes down from God and binds God and man. It is true that in this chapter St. Paul deals with the right attitude and kind behaviour towards the neighbour; but it is beyond doubt that the 'caritas', or *agapé* he refers to *is the love of God that flows down upon men and 'd'où l'amour du prochain découle, et dont il est le signe, comme dira saint Jean'*.

This interpretation, says Fr. Allo, is considered to be evident by all orthodox commentators, and he fully sides with Bachmann who argued against the dull and colourless morality and against the mere philanthropy 'que certains "activistes", à côté desquels l'on regrette de compter Hamack, voudraient voir enseignés dans ce chapitre comme l'essence de la religion'.

Allo points out that Paul quite often, without talking about the verb 'agapao', gives it a precise meaning, describing it as '*love of God*' or '*love of Christ*'; and, if these genitives are usually taken as subjective, it still remains true that there must be an objective value corresponding to them, for 'God's love has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom we have received'.

¹ The first part of this study appeared in *Melita Theologica*, Vol. XVIII, pp. 22-31.

In the same Epistle, in chapter VIII, where Paul deals with the problem of the social intercourse between Christians and pagans, arising from the question of eating food offered to pagan gods, he shows that this problem should be solved in the light of the Christian law of charity. And a propos of this St. Paul says:

'any man who loves God is known (i.e. loved) by him' (v. 3)
to show that this is the principle that should rule the whole question.

The Son of God loved all with a supreme love – the love of the death on the Cross – and this divine love explains the command given to men to love one another: for they should love one another, if they love the God who loved them so much. To understand the question otherwise, affirms Allo, is a sign of a complete misunderstanding of Paul. Moreover, at the end of chapter XIII charity is grouped with faith and hope, which virtues have God as their object. Consequently, Allo's interpretation boils down to this: *agapé* refers primarily to man's love for God who instilled this love in man; man loves his neighbour because of his love for God and only in and for this love! Even heroic sacrifices, maintains Allo, made for the good of the community, ('*si distribuero in cibos pauperum omnes facultates meas, et si tradidero corpus meum ita ut ardeam...*') could be counted for nothing in the eyes of God, in spite of the utility they could offer to people; and this shows, therefore, that *agapé* has not only men as its object, but *primarily* God himself who is far above all the heroic acts of philanthropy.

Mgr. V. Jacono follows closely Allo in his interpretation, and expresses himself so:

'S. Paolo non illustra teoricamente la carità, ma praticamente, dalle opere verso il prossimo; si ricordi però che non si dà perfetta carità fratema se non in Dio e per Dio; si ama Dio in se e il prossimo per amor di Dio'.

Allo's position is also echoed by CERFAUX who, writing briefly about charity in I Cor. XIII in 'L'Eglise des Corinthiens', says that on top of all *charismata* stands charity which is the gift of God and which flows through Christ into our souls.

And his thought gets more precise in the conclusion of this section where he says:

'Révélation, gnose, prophétie, enseignement, l'hymne à la charité est tout cela à la fois. Sur les traits inspirés de saint Paul, on a vu se refléter une lumière de l'au-delà. Il contemplait, dans le mystère du ciel, la charité, fille de Dieu. Elle n'appartient pas aux choses cadu-

ques de notre monde, elle est ineffable participation aux richesses divines et nous est octroyée directement; sans intermédiaire, sans miroir créée'.

From the emphasis laid on the divine properties of agapé, one can safely deduce that Cerfaux interprets agapé as our love for God, a love born from God himself, 'la charité, fille de Dieu'.

W. REES, commenting this chapter in the C.C.H.S., remarks that the exact scope of Love is not directly stated, but it must be understood throughout *in its full sense* – love of God and of man for God's sake. And Rees' position leads us straight to Fr. Bonsirven who dealt more fully with love in its full sense and gave his interpretation in this light.

J. BONSI RVEN introduces the problem by giving Paul's general approach to love which could be found in the Epistle to the Galatians, especially in 5,6:

'All our hope of justification lies in the spirit; it rests on faith; once we are in Christ, circumcision means nothing, and the want of it means nothing; *the faith that finds its expression in love is all that matters*'.

Love, says Bonsirven, flowing into our souls from Jesus Christ, is the foundation of our hope and it gives value and efficacy to our faith. Then Bonsirven posits the problem of Agapé in these terms:

Does Agapé, without any direct or indirect determination, designate the love of God for us and ours for him, or does it designate the fraternal love to our neighbour? Is the love of God conceived and understood through fraternal love or vice-versa?

Bonsirven makes a few important remarks before he gives his reply. It is supposed, says Bonsirven, that such a theocentric author, like Paul, would certainly put foremost that which comes from God. This is quite evident in the Epistles where it is often said that God loves us, that we are loved by God (or by Jesus Christ).²

It is love, after all, that has brought God among men. The fundamental motive of creation itself is love; we are redeemed out of love:

'He has chosen us out, in Christ, before the foundation of the world, to be saints, to be blameless in his sight, for love (en agapé) of him... and so he would manifest the splendour of that grace by which he has taken us into his favour in the person of his beloved Son' Eph. 1, 4-6.

² Confer 1 Thess 1,4; 2 Thess 2,13,16; Rom. 8,37; 9,13,25; 5,5-8; Gal 2,20; Eph. 1,6; 2,4; 3,19; 2 Cor. 9,7; 13,13; Col. 1,13; 3,12.

In the last phrase, remarks Bonsirven, is contained an important assertion: Jesus Christ is the beloved, the Son of the love of God 'filii dilectionis suae' (Col. 1.13), for he is the first to receive the fullness of divine love. God created us to manifest his love or grace, and he gives it to us through the universal mediator. Fr. Bonsirven continues to analyse texts and try to determine their meaning. From the analysis of 2 Thess. 3,5:

'Dominus autem dirigat corda vestra in charitate Dei (eis tèn agapên), et patientia Christi',

he concludes that love has a comprehensive meaning:

'"l'amour de Dieu", non pas seulement l'amour que Dieu a pour nous ou celui que nous avons pour lui, et non pas seulement l'attribut divin en soi, mais un principe qui règne dans nos coeurs et qui découle des propriétés divines'.³

All these primary indications throw a light on the other texts which speak of the building up of the Body of Christ:

'Veritatem autem facientes in charitate, crescamus in illo per omnia, qui est caput Christus: ex quo totum corpus compactum... *augmentum facit in aedificationem sui in charitate*'.

'... charité' says Huby, 'au sens plein de l'amour de Dieu et de l'amour du prochain'.

And so 'nous arrivons à l'amour fraternel pour le prochain, qui se manifeste particulièrement dans le Corps du Christ: nous savons en quelle parfaite unité et étroite solidarité en sont liés tous les membres, — conséquence directe de la charité que la tête influe dans les siens'.

Now Dr. Bonsirven replies to the question set in the beginning:

What does Agapé designate? Love of neighbour or love of God?

Reply: Love for our brethren is a part of 'the love of God' taken in its most comprehensive sense, as it has been explained above.

C. SPICQ, in his work 'Agapé', analyses all the New Testament texts where the word 'Agapé' occurs. The interpretation of Agapé in I Cor. XIII is found in the second volume and in an article published in 'Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses' (1955).

By way of introduction to the problem Fr. Spicq makes a few important remarks about the method of analysis and interpretation. To estab-

³This same interpretation is given by Lightfoot in 'Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul' to Rom. 5,5; Eph. 3,19; 2 Cor. 5,14. Bonsirven adds Gal. 5,6.

lish the text, to settle it into its historical, literary, cultural, and religious environment, to make an exegesis based on the evolution of thought and the philological analysis of every word – all these are very necessary preambles, but the important thing is to collect the results of the analysis, to make a synthesis of them and thereby to determine the theological import of the passage, that is, to interpret the text.

A difficult task! for many prejudices could easily determine unconsciously the commentators towards a particular conclusion. Moreover, adds Spicq, this biblical theology is valid if taken in the light of other parallel passages and if it does not go beyond that which is given or suggested by the immediate context. We hold that the 'intentio Pauli' is to teach (deiknumi, XIII, 31) the superiority of agapé over the charismata and over the virtues under three headings:

- i) Charity is indispensable to the Christian (vv. 1-3)
- ii) It is a source of a virtuous and various activity (vv. 4-7)
- iii) It lasts for ever (vv. 8-13).

THE OBJECT OF CHARITY

The first question put by Spicq is to define the object of this love which is so much exalted by St. Paul. Spicq notes that 'agapé' is never used here, with an adjective or a complement, and that the verb 'agapan' does never appear at all. Hence, this absolute notion of 'love' remains in itself far above any objective determination!

However, the 'ensemble' of chapter XIII tells us undoubtedly that Paul is dealing with love to the neighbour, and in this commentators agree unanimously. But since the last line (c. 13) groups together 'agapé' 'pistis', and 'elpis', and the whole hymn tends to the vision of God *facie ad faciem* (*prosopon pros prosopon*), one ought to see how to reconcile the same love having God and man as its object.

It is usually affirmed – for the sake of an easy classification, – that some authors interpret the 'agapé' of I Cor. XIII as fraternal charity, and other authors as the love of God. In reality, few commentators draw such a sharp distinction. In connection with this it is, however, interesting to note that R. Balducelli, in his 'Il concerto teologico di carità attraverso le maggiori interpretazioni patristiche e medievali di I ad Cor. XIII', concludes that the Greek Fathers, above all Chrysostom, identify agapé with the fraternal love of neighbour, whilst the Latin Fathers see in agapé a love essentially religious of which God is the centre and the object. Before his solution, Spicq gives some common interpretations:

a) Some exegetes lay stress on the last line (v. 13) of the chapter and consequently they emphasise love towards God.

b) W. Lutgert in 'Die Liebe im Neuen Testament' maintains that in the whole chapter Paul does not think only of fraternal love, but he blends it with our love for God, and what is more, Paul thinks primarily of this love. Love of God and love for man are not, according to Lutgert, two different acts of the will, but one sole love which goes out to God and to man.

c) A great number of commentators,⁴ taking into consideration the homogeneity of the three stanzas, simply consider God and man as the object of agapé.

d) Some commentators⁵ consider the distinction between love of God and love of neighbour as a false distinction – a false problem!

After enumerating some of the above interpretations, Fr. Spicq comes to his determination of the problem. He analyses the texts and finds, first of all, that agapé in the Pauline epistles has sometimes God, sometimes man (or neighbour) as its object:

Agapé refers to *love towards God* in: I Thess. 1,3; 3,6; 2 Thess. 3, 5.
It refers to *our love towards others* in: I Thess. 3,12; 2 Thess. 1,3.
I Cor. 8,1.

Not only has love a double object, but, if Christians define themselves as 'those who love God' (I Cor. 2,9), then it is necessary to refer to this predominant love everytime Paul mentions love of neighbour. 'Parler ainsi', says Spicq, 'n'est pas autre chose que d'évoquer le premier et le plus grand commandement et le second qui lui est semblable'.

Nevertheless, it is beyond doubt that I Cor. XIII lays special stress on our love for neighbour, and this fact has been emphasized by Godet, A. Robertson, A. Plummer, and above all by Hamack in his 'Das hohe Lied des Apostels Paulus von der Liebe'. Moreover, says Spicq:

'Ce n'est même pas une question de prédominance. A lire le texte candidement, on ne découvre aucun verset orientant l'agapé vers Dieu même. Si celui-ci doit être supposé, en fonction des textes antérieurs et indiscutables, il est non moins certain que l'apôtre, voulant situer la hiérarchie respective de la charité et des charismes – donnés par le Saint-Esprit en vue de l'utilité commune – n'envisage la charité que dans ses rapports avec le prochain'.

⁴ R. Cornely; Ph. Bachmann; F.W. Grosheide; J. Huby; J. Mofatt; F. Ceuppens.

⁵ H. Leitzmann; H.D. Wendland.

Not even verses 12 and 13 should make an exception for, as Spicq shows, it is not at all inconvenient from the doctrinal point of view to associate fraternal charity with the virtues of faith and hope. 'Il n'y en a pas davantage à penser que cet amour du prochain ne déchoit pas et durera à jamais (v. 8). Bien au contraire, c'est en cette pérennité que se marque surtout l'excellence de l'agapé par rapport aux charismes'. It is precisely on account of this perennial quality that fraternal love lasts for ever! With Fr. Spicq we do not see at all the difficulty of many exegetes to interpret verse 12 according to fraternal love – as if the love of neighbour does not endure in heaven! And Spicq sums up saying!

'Encore une fois, l'amour pour Dieu est présupposé, mais ce n'est pas à lui que l'Apotre pense en premier lieu. Ce serait bien plutôt l'amour de Dieu pour l'homme, dont on sait – depuis le Sermon sur la Montagne – qu'il fonde l'amour de l'homme pour son prochain et le comble de bénédictions'.

THE NATURE OF CHARITY

In such a rich chapter about agapé it should be possible to find all the necessary elements which could in a way determine the nature of agapé. But, Spicq repeats, here too one must be aware of any 'a priori' conceptions which may force one to read the text with partial eyes.

Paul starts to design agapé as a way, almost as a moral behaviour; but Paul soon adds that he was dealing with interior dispositions rather than with exterior ones. However, the word itself agapé (as it has been explained in the beginning of the paper) and the extraordinary dynamism of this love show clearly that Paul was not meaning a 'sentiment intérieur', as Weiss suggested. The force that characterises it makes us think of a 'virtue'; but 'arete' is too narrow a concept and it evokes too much stoicism to render well the meaning of agapé in this context. However, from its comparison to the charismata one can surely deduce that it is a gift of grace and that it has many relations with the Holy Spirit. Hence it must have a pneumatic character. It is superior to the 'charismata' *kat'uperbole* – consequently it surpasses this category and is envisaged as a 'dunamis' of a divine origin, a participation 'aux forces du monde à venir'.

St. Paul associates agapé with faith and hope and says that 'charitatem... habuero' (vv. 1-3); 'Sectamini charitatem' (14,1). These show that the christian is master of this love and that he can possess it, if agapé were a person. But how can we reconcile this immanent posses-

sion with the divine character of agapé? And here Spicq replies that one must recall the texts where Paul considers fraternal agapé as an infused gift (1 Thess. 3,12; 2 Thess. 3,5) and above all I Cor. 8,3 where Paul says that no one could love God if God has not first known him and loved him. And now comes Fr. Spicq's conclusion which sums up all that has just been said:

'Là est peut-être l'enseignement le plus important de ce chapitre. Une fois assuré cet éclairage, en effet, les affirmations si absolues de l'apôtre ne font plus difficulté. La charité divine pour l'homme est première; cette agapé se répand dans le coeur de l'homme, d'où elle s'écoule, s'exerce vis-à-vis de son prochain! Cette dunamis n'est pas seulement jaillissante et rayonnante; elle est une plénitude, et à ce titre radicalement distincte de l'eros platonicien qui était désir et indigence.

Disons donc que l'agapé de I Cor. XIII est à strictement parler l'amour du prochain, mais un amour chrétien, c'est-à-dire qui n'est pas issu de la chair et du sang; il est donné par Dieu; mieux encore, il est effet et participation de l'amour par lequel Dieu 'connait', aime les hommes. Voilà pourquoi sa tendance, sa nature même est de vouloir le bien du prochain et de s'y employer; voilà pourquoi il est si généreux, universel et éternel; voilà enfin pourquoi saint Paul ne s'intéresse point à l'objet précis de cet amour, mais insiste tellement sur sa transcendance et son absolu. Ce qui compte, c'est son origine et son fondement: 'être connu de Dieu'; car là est l'explication de ses manifestations et des modes de son activité.

Si maints textes du Nouveau Testament, conformément au génie sémitique envisagent si exclusivement tantôt l'amour pour Dieu, tantôt l'amour du prochain, que l'on pourrait penser qu'ils sont, sinon antagonistes, du moins divergents, en réalité, leurs auteurs ne connaissent qu'un unique amour, celui dont Dieu vit et dont il fait vivre les croyants. Cette dilection, c'est l'agapé — théologique par définition et nécessairement unique — et rien ne lui est plus étranger que la philanthropie 'laïque' lorsqu'elle s'adresse au prochain, puisqu'elle est toujours l'amour de Dieu et du Christ dans le coeur du chrétien. La preuve en est simple: Que l'on donne comme *sujet à l'agapé de I Cor. XIII*: Jésus ou Dieu même, cette charité garde les mêmes propriétés et les mêmes activités; mieux encore, celles-ci leur conviendront encore plus éminemment. En définitive, l'Agapé fraternelle n'est pas une vertu morale, mais une réalité religieuse une force divine.

La théologie latine précisera: 'Ex una eademque caritate Deum proximumque diligimus, sed Deum propter Deum, nos autem et proximum propter Deum' (St- Augustin, De Trin. VIII, 8) 'mais, en langage paulinien, il faut dire que c'est Dieu et le Christ qui, en nous, aiment notre prochain'.

PROTESTANTS generally tend to interpret agapé as being *fraternal charity*. Of course, this is not the opinion of all. It is enough to recall the interpretation of A. Nygren, in 'Eros and Agapé', who says that: 'L'Agapé est en première ligne l'amour qui est propre à Dieu. Sa nature est de se répandre... Cette nature divine s'est emparée du plus intime de l'homme. Le chrétien vit dans le Christ, et le Christ vit et agit en lui. Celui-ci est pressé par l'agapé du Christ ou mu par l'Esprit. Le courant d'amour, qui s'écoule dans son coeur, se repand sur le prochain... Cette agapé, non seulement n'a rien d'humain mais elle est une émanation (Ausfluss) de la vie propre de Dieu. C'est cette puissance divine d'aimer qui est l'objet de l'hymne paulinien'.

Nevertheless, no one will deny that the general tendency among Protestants is to emphasize fraternal love in interpreting agapé. The first big name which comes to mind is HARNACK. He maintained that agapé refers exclusively to love of neighbour. The full exposition is found in his 'Das hohe Lied des Apostels Paulus von der Liebe'.

BONNARD in the article 'Amour' in the protestant 'Vocabulaire Biblique' gives a very good introduction to the common protestant explanation of Agapé.

In the Old Testament, says Bonnard, the love of Yahweh was expressed and revealed mainly through his historical interventions in favour of his people. These interventions in the history of Israel explain the grouping together of the people. It is an elective, creative, and merciful love that accounts for Israel being the people of God!

In the New Testament God's love takes a more precise significance, for it is revealed through a historical fact that has fulfilled all the promises of the old covenant. It is the fact of Jesus Christ, which for Paul is principally the fact of the Cross and of the Resurrection.

Jesus follows the method of the Rabbi: he takes into consideration the two commandments, that is, love of God and love of neighbour. More than the Rabbi Jesus underlines and lays stress on the indissoluble unity of the two. In the Old and in the New Testament 'to love' is, first and foremost, 'to serve': a service to God expressed in an obedience

renewed according to God's will; service to man expressed in the immediate assistance and help given to him, when occasion offers. More categorically than the Rabbi Jesus commands the love for our enemies. Bonnard then quotes Rom. 13,8-10 and comments that love is said to be the 'plenitudo legis' not because it is above the Decalogue, but because he who loves resumes all the laws of the Decalogue. Bonnard remarks that the command of love is given at the end of the Epistles (Romans and Galatians, especially) as a result of the salvation of God, described in the body of the letter. This love is presented as the 'fruit of the Spirit' (Gal. 5,22; and Rom. 15,30). The Law and the Spirit work together towards the building and forming up of the believer according to the divine order: only through love could faith become active and fertile (Gal. 5,6); the Spirit infuses love and love gives life to faith and covers all the law.

But the Epistles insist less on love of neighbour than on fraternal love (Gal. 5,15; I Thes. 4,9; Col. 1,4; Phm. v. 5).

'Cet amour fraternel, fait de solidarité active dans la joie comme dans la souffrance, appartient déjà au royaume de Dieu: il 'ne perit jamais' (I Cor. 13,8) alors que les autres démarches provisoires du chrétien (dont la foi et l'espérance) seront accomplies et absorbées par l'irruption définitive du royaume'.

(to be concluded)

A.G. VELLA, S.J.