

'AGAPÈ' IN I CORINTHIANS XIII (III)

WE HAVE come now to the third and last part of this study, where we intend to explain the interpretation of Father Lyonnet and close with a personal critical note about the Pauline text.

Apart from an article written in the French review 'Catéchistes', a short review of Spicq's *Agapè in Biblica*, and a few dispersed remarks in the exegetical notes given during his lectures, there is nothing more written by Fr. Lyonnet on the subject. In fact, I have often wondered if I had really managed to have a clear and right grasp of his views and arguments from this scanty literature; and to do him justice in what I say I decided to see him personally and show him a rough copy of my brief exposition of his opinion and square out some points which were not clear in my mind. And that I did.

In all the Pauline Epistles the precept of love, and, in particular, love of neighbour, plays a prominent role. At times we find that love could be said to be the subject itself of the Epistle.

Nessuno studio ci renderà più coscienti dell'importanza eccezionale che ha questo precetto nel pensiero dell'Apostolo e, sotto la forma più commune, quello dell'amore del prossimo.¹

In the study of St. Paul we find out that the real motive for being invited to practise virtues is always love, and love of neighbour.

Perchè siamo invitati ad esercitare l'umiltà? Perchè non sapremo amare efficacemente i nostri fratelli, cioè 'servirli', senza stimare in tutta umiltà che gli altri ci sono superiori' (Filip. 2, 3 che precede la solenne esortazione all'amore disinteressato, all'esempio di Cristo, vv. 5-10).

We work so that we have something to give to those in need of it (Eph., 4, 28) and not be a burden to others and a bad example to those '*qui foris sunt*' (Thess., 4, 12).

We pray that others may receive graces from God and increase in perfection and in God's love:

'Salutat vos Epaphras, qui ex vobis est, servus Christi Jesu, semper sollicitus pro vobis in orationibus, ut stetis perfecti, et pleni in omni voluntate Dei.' (Col., 4, 12)

¹The quotations are from the Italian translation published by the '*Rinascita Cristiana*'.

After all, the whole moral teaching of Paul may be summed up in one precept, the precept of love, as we find it very explicitly stated in the Epistle to the Galatians:

'Omnis enim lex in uno sermone impletur: Diliges proximum tuum sicut te ipsum.' (5, 13)

And Paul has repeated it to the Romans:

'Nemini quidquam debeatis: nisi ut invicem diligatis: qui enim diligit proximum, legem implevit', for the whole decalogue and 'quod est aliud mandatum, in hoc verbo instauratur:

Diliges proximum tuum sicut teipsum ... Plenitudo ergo legis est dilectio.'

One would wonder how it is that Paul recalls simply the second commandment: the precept of love to the neighbour; and Lyonnet replies: No wonder at all! for this has been the teaching of the Lord whom Paul wanted to follow closely in everything:

'Ma Gesù agiva forse diversamente quando dichiarava:

"Tutto ciò che volete che gli uomini vi facciano, fatelo ugualmente a loro: ecco la legge ed i profeti!" (Mt. 7, 12)

Besides, says Lyonnet, Christ himself told us that the characteristic note of his disciples will be fraternal love (Jo., 13, 35) and, what is really important and striking, Jesus's authentic teaching tells us that we shall be judged according to our attitude and behaviour towards our neighbour.

Of course, Our Lord did not intend to abolish, in any way, that which He has taught through the first commandment (cfr. Mc., 12, 28-34; Mt., 22, 34-40; Lc., 10, 25-37) But even here one should note that when the scribe asked him about the first and the greatest commandment Jesus Christ was not contented merely to reply with the first words of the profession of faith which was recited by the Jews every morning and evening; he added that for which he was not asked, and to the 'first' he added a 'second' 'similar to the first': 'Love your neighbour as yourself'. From the study of the synoptics one could also notice a development in the teaching, and St. Luke made note of this. In fact, both in Matthew and in Mark we read that the doctor of the law put questions to our Lord about the first and great commandment and our Lord replied to him, unifying the 'first' and 'second' commandment. In Luke the question is put by the scribe and the answer is given by the scribe too who did not speak of two commandments, that is, of 'first' and 'second' but one unified precept. (Lc., 10, 25-28)

Consequently, concludes Lyonnet, it seems that by the time Luke wrote the Gospel, there has already been a development in the doctrine and the Evangelist ordered Christ's teaching as it was already known by the people who listened to his divine words.

In reality, the two commandments are included in one another: who loves God as he should love him will certainly love his neighbour, for he loves all that God loves; and vice-versa, he who does not love the neighbour 'whom he sees' will never know to love God 'whom he does not see'. This is the teaching of St. John (I Jo., 4, 20). Hence, love of neighbour is the normal and necessary expression of our love for God, and then Fr. Lyonnet proceeds to say – and this is very important for the questions at issue – :

'ed è per questo che San Paolo riserva la parola 'agapè' per indicare (oltre l'amore di Dio a di Cristo per noi) l'amore che testimoniamo ai nostri fratelli: per convincersene basta consultare confrontandoli i brani che comprendono la parola agapè, oppure esaminare la descrizione, così completa, che egli dà dell'agapè nel I Cor., 13, vv. 4-7, dove egli propriamente intende parlare della virtù 'teologale' della carità, messa vicino alla fede e alla speranza o meglio al di sopra di queste.'

In the analysis of the Pauline texts Lyonnet says that agapè refers always to love towards our neighbour. One of the main argument of Lyonnet is the fact that in St. Paul '*pistis*' and '*agape*' are always found together and always in the order which is given them in I Cor., 13, 13: first '*pistis*' and then '*agape*'. According to Fr. Lyonnet '*pistis*' refers to our love for God, whilst '*agapè*' expresses our love for our neighbour. To love God, in the Old Testament, meant nothing else but to be obedient to God, to render service to Him, to choose Him out of all the pagan gods and acknowledge Him as your true God, in other words, to believe that He was the right God and to brush away all the pagan gods as false ones. Hence, to love God and to believe in Him were exchangeable concepts.

Besides, Lyonnet remarks that Paul, following closely the teaching of the Lord, wants to lay special stress on fraternal charity, for this was the precept, once given to the Jews in Leviticus, which was practically forlorn and gone into abeyance. It has always been known among the Jews, but far from practised! Jesus did not intend, as many exegetes maintain, simply to universalize the precept of fraternal love and to teach that we have to love everyone, even our enemies. First and foremost, he wanted to put this precept into a new light, to lay a special

stress, on it, to bring it one with the 'first' precept of love and so to fuse the love of God and the love of neighbour together. And this too intended Paul in his teaching. But let us not forget, points out Lyonnet, that the agapè, the fraternal charity, is not merely a moral ruling; it is above all a theological virtue, and the explanation he gives is contained mainly in the following lines:

L'amore del prossimo è teologale nel senso che unisce l'uomo direttamente a Dio stesso' (St. Th., in I Cor., 13, 13): superiore alla fede ed alla speranza esso unisce l'uomo direttamente a ciò che in Dio, se si può dire, è più Dio, poichè secondo la Rivelazione "Dio è amore" (I Jo., 4, 8). Così il nostro amore per i fratelli sarà essenzialmente il riflesso dell'amore stesso con cui Dio ci ama, amore di cui il Cristo è l'espressione perfetta.'

Fraternal love is a theological virtue for our love towards the neighbour is a participation of God's love towards mankind. We love others by the same love by which God loves us and them! Consequently our love, as a reflection of God's or Christ's love for us, should necessarily produce in us the same characteristics of the divine love for us: a love that is merciful, compassionate, loyal, '*patiens*', '*benigna*' ... and above all disinterested.

Il cristiano avrà, sì, preferenze per gli umili (Rom., 12, 16), coloro dai quali non ci si aspetterà nulla in ricambio (Lc., 14, 13-14). E gli si comanda specialmente di amare i suoi nemici (Rom., 12, 14; Mt., 5, 43-47; Lc., 6, 27-35) perchè non esiste amore più gratuito e disinteressato, più simile a quello stesso di Dio e di Cristo, che ci ha amato: "Quando eravamo ancora peccatori" (Rom., 5, 6-8; 15, 1-3; Mt., 5, 48; Lc., 6, 35-36)'.
 'L'amore del cristiano si modellerà dunque sull'amore di Dio e quello di Cristo che ne è la perfetta espressione: "Mostratevi imitatori di Dio, come figli teneramente amati. Vivete nella carità secondo l'esempio di Cristo."

Lyonnet's second argument to prove that fraternal charity is a theological virtue centres in St. Paul's doctrine about the Mystical Body:

'Ma bisogna anche chiamarlo teologale nel senso che per San Paolo colui che ama il prossimo ama Cristo, poichè tutti gli uomini uniti a Cristo (e tutti sono chiamati ad esserlo) formano con Cristo risuscitato un unico essere vivente (Gal., 3, 28: "un solo" al maschile); essi sono 'le membra del Cristo' e costituiscono il suo corpo (I Cor., 6, 15; 12, 12 & 27; Ef. 1, 23 ecc.) Questa dottrina che è al centro della teologia di San Paolo, semplice eco, del resto, dell'insegna-

mento del Maestro e del suo 'mihi fecisti' (Matt. 25, 40) consacra la dignità suprema della persona umana, che sempre la morale cristiana si sforzerà di promuovere: L'uomo è figlio di Dio perchè è "un altro Cristo."

This typically Pauline doctrine of the Mystical Body, which has always been a favourite subject for the Fathers, especially in their sermons, explains how we can love God really and effectively, how our love is not simply an act of admiration, but a concrete, active, personal, and immediate act of love towards God. It is a love of real friendship, a love which is expressed in an exchange of 'give' and 'take':

'... un amore per cui un amico vuole il bene del suo amico, e fa del tutto per procurarglielo; non solamente egli riceve, ma dà. Tra Dio e l'uomo un tale scambio di beni, necessario pertanto nella vera amicizia², pare decisamente escluso. Si direbbe che da Dio l'uomo non possa che ricevere e debba, di conseguenza, essere privato della beatitudine che, secondo la parola di Cristo riportata da San Paolo, consiste nel dare più che nel ricevere (Atti 20, 35). Il mistero dell'incarnazione opera proprio questo prodigio: senza perdere nulla della sua trascendenza Dio, infinito, si fa uomo, finito, e dunque capace di "ricevere" qualche cosa dalle sue creature. Per quanto strana e sacrilega la cosa possa sembrare, Dio ha voluto aver bisogno dell'uomo ...

Con l'incarnazione noi comprendiamo fino a quel punto Dio ha voluto condividere il nostro destino, e farsi uno di noi. Poichè durante la sua vita mortale Gesù Cristo non è soltanto passato facendo del bene; essendo un uomo autentico ha voluto bisogno degli altri; Egli ha dato, ma ha ugualmente ricevuto, e quando seduto sul pozzo di Giacobbe implorava un poco d'acqua per smorzare la sete, non era certo un gioco che faceva con la donna Samaritana. Ora l'incarnazione continua. Cristo ha voluto rimanere presente in mezzo agli uomini nell'Eucarestia e nei membri del suo corpo: due presenze di cui S. Paolo nota espressamente il nesso: un solo pane (eucaristico), un solo corpo (di Cristo) (I Cor. 10. 16-17).' (p. 9)

Lyonnet's position may, perhaps, be briefly given in the following points:

- (i) Love, in particular, love of neighbour, is the centre of the great pauline epistles.

²Lyonnet conceives love in the same way as it is concretely explained and expressed in the '*Contemplatio ad Amorem*' of St. Ignatius.

- (ii) All the moral teaching of Paul is summed up in one precept: love of neighbour (Gal. 5, 13; Rom. 13, 8-10).
- (iii) In emphasizing the precept of fraternal love, Paul follows the teaching of the Lord.
- (iv) No abolition of the 'first' precept, but the 'first' and the 'second' are fused into one. Christ himself brought the two precepts together, so that one includes the other. Love of neighbour is the normal and necessary expression of our love for God. (I Jo., 4, 20-1)
- (v) Hence Paul reserves the word *agapè* to indicate (besides love of God or Christ for us) our fraternal love.
- (vi) This is shown from an analysis of the texts where *agapè* occurs, from the description in I Cor XIII, and from the intentional juxtaposition of '*pistis*' (love for God) and '*agapè*' (love for neighbour). With respect to the last point, confer '*Biblica*' vol. 40 where Lyonnet explicitly affirms the meaning of this juxtaposition.³
- (vii) This fraternal love is a theological virtue, for:
 - (a) It is grouped with other theological virtues: faith and hope.
 - (b) We love our neighbour by the same love by which God loves the neighbour.
 - (c) He who loves his neighbour loves Christ himself: doctrine of the Mystical Body, one of the principal teachings in St. Paul.
- (viii) The doctrine of the Mystical Body explains how we can *effectively* love God – with a real love that exists between real friends where he who loves does not only receive, but gives –.
(Love conceived as an exchange of goods is a concrete notion of love vividly expressed in Scripture)
But who can ever 'give' anything to God? How could this be ever possible?

³ "... D'autant plus que les autres passages où Paul juxtapose les termes de *pistis* et d'*agapè* autorisent pour le moins une interprétation analogue, et par conséquent en Phm 5 les exégètes n'ont sans doute pas tort, de "de Calvin à Huby en passant par Bengel et Lightfoot", de "dépister un chiasme: la foi se rapportant au Christ et la charité aux saints". Assurément "dans le cas, l'activité charitable de Philomén est une manifestation, voire même une 'œuvre' de sa foi"; il n'en reste pas moins que Paul ne parle jamais de foi à l'égard d'un homme. En fait, pour saint Paul, comme d'ailleurs le plus souvent pour saint Jean lui aussi (I Jo 3, 23), la foi semble bien caractériser l'attitude du chrétien à l'égard de Dieu ou du Christ et l'*agapè* son attitude à l'égard de ses frères..'

The Incarnation made this possible! We can 'give' to God in his Mystical Body.

Fr. Lyonnet's approach is a phenomenological one and that is why his explanation is in many respects like that of some Protestants.

A concrete, phenomenological analysis of the texts, affirms Lyonnet, should leave no doubt about the meaning of agapè in St. Paul's mind!

A CRITICAL NOTE

The concluding part has been titled 'A Critical Note', for the simple reason that the paper should be considered to have been closed with the exposition of Fr. Lyonnet's interpretation; but, since I have promised a critical note here it is!

Of course, to go through all the exegetes and give my view about their explanations would not be a note at all, but another paper, and this I have no intention to do at the moment. At any rate, I shall try to make a few remarks about the main exegetical trends in this matter.

To begin with, it seems to me that there is much point in insisting, as Fr. Spicq has repeatedly done, on the impartiality and objectivity with which the exegete should analyse and interpret the texts. An unprejudiced, calm, objective 'a priori' attitude is of paramount importance to the right understanding of the mind of the writer. What the exegetes should be after is to enquire after the idea which the inspired writer wanted to put across to the readers. To start with an 'a priori' partial attitude or with the idea of proving false your adversary might lead anywhere but to the right solution or explanation!

As far as the language and style of I Cor XIII goes, we think that the 'Hymn of Love' is a rich literary piece of work gushing out from Paul's heart and mind absorbed in God's love and in the interests of the first budding churches of Christ.

As we have seen in the exposition of some of the interpretations, it does not look very easy to determine definitely the meaning of Agapè in St. Paul, especially if one ignores the immediate context or the parallel passages. For it is useless, not to say foolish, to attempt to give the meaning of Agapè in I Cor XIII without taking in great consideration the immediate context of this chapter and without studying it in the light of all the other passages where Agapè occurs. So, we feel grateful to Professor Martin for establishing the context of chapter 13 excellently. It's a great help to have the context so well settled before one starts to analyse and make comparisons with other texts; but the context by itself is not enough, and consequently we do not believe

that Agapè could be rightly interpreted *merely* from its context, as Martin would have us maintain. The word Agapè is found 65 times in the pauline epistles, and let us not forget that every time it was conceived and written or dictated by the same man: Paul! hence, we do not see how one can arrive at the real grasp of the word, if one prescind from the meanings attached to Agapè by Paul in other circumstances. The exegete should examine the import of the word in other contexts and make sure if it bears the same characteristics as the one at issue; and if it does not, he should try to find out what were the circumstances which made Paul emphasize an aspect of the meaning and why this aspect and not another one. By so doing the exegete may succeed in fixing the fundamental meaning of the word in the Apostle's mind. Once this has been done, then it will be possible to find out how this word in this particular context fits in with the basic and fundamental notion of the word in the writer's mind; and this fitting of the word in the general frame-of-the-word (in Paul's mind) will determine the meaning of the word in the particular context. We have said this to stress the fact that the determination of a word does not by any means depend merely on the immediate context. Without a thorough knowledge of St. Paul it's hopeless to manage a valuable, scientific interpretation of such a typical pauline word like Agapè.

Controversy has often prompted study and many exegetical obscure points have been enlightened through controversies; but it is also true that in the heat of a controversy one can easily overlook an important point or lose sight of objectivity.

Fr. Allo's interpretation has been followed by a number of commentators. Allo does not maintain that Agapè can be primarily referred to fraternal love and in his opinion Agapè is the divine love that flows down upon us and that makes us love our brethren. The latter part of his affirmation — especially Agapè taken as God's or Christ's love for us — is found fundamentally in the positions held by Bonsirven, Spicq, and even Lyonnet who, however, disagrees flatly with what Allo says regarding fraternal charity in the first part of the assertion. At any rate, one should be grateful to Allo for establishing a fundamental point of the solution; with respect to this point we find Allo cited by Huby, Bonsirven, Spicq, and others. One may also remember that Allo's main concern was to disprove Harnack's interpretation, and in this concern it seems to Lyonnet that Allo was labouring under some of the disadvantages of a controversy, for he had succeeded more in disproving Harnack's position than in interpreting and determining the text itself.

Well, with respect to this we can say that Allo showed pretty well the fundamental mistake of the protestant exegete; for the patent and fundamental error of Harnack lies in fact that he affirmed that (our love for God is theological but) our love for the neighbour is no more than a moral virtue. In saying that *only* our love for God is theological Harnack definitely missed the boat, but in affirming that Agapè in Paul refers to fraternal charity he still finds exegetes – even Catholic exegetes – defending the same position.

Fr. Bonnard in his article 'Amour' in 'Vocab. Bibl.' maintains that Jesus in his teaching insisted on the unity of the 'first' and 'second' precept, fraternal charity should be conceived as a theological virtue; but both words: 'theological' and 'virtue' are understood in the meaning attached to them by protestants. It is interesting to note, however, that Nygren explains Agapè very much in the way explained by Spicq; it is enough to have a look at the two quotations on pages 28-9 and 30 and draw a comparison between them.

Spicq's interpretation is a very plausible one. It seems to me that it's a right rendering of Paul's mind to say that Agapè in I Cor XIII is, strictly speaking, love for neighbour, but a christian love – 'not a love of flesh and blood', but '*il est donné par Dieu, effet et particip'* of the love by which God loves us. Subject of Agapè in I Cor XIII is '*Dieu et le Christ qui, en nous, aiment notre prochain.*' And I would have gone quite a longer way with Fr. Spicq if he had not based much of his explanation on I Cor VIII, 3 which has the words '*ton Theon*' omitted in the readings of p. 46 and of Clement of Alexandria. Fr. Lyonnet's criticism on this point seems to me to be correct, for Spicq does not seem to have been consistent:

'Le seul exemple proprement paulinien serait I Cor 8, 3:

"ei de tis agapa tôn Theon", mais précisément le P. Spicq se prononce en faveur de la leçon de P. 46 et Clément d'Alexandrie qui omettent' tôn Theon (I p. 223-224; autrement dans la conclusion, p. 308)' (Lyonnet, in Biblica)

Nevertheless it's beyond any doubt that Fr. Spicq's huge work is a priceless contribution to the problem, and I feel sure that his efforts will encourage other exegetes to affront similar scriptural problems with such earnestness and seriousness.

To conclude I make my last remark about Fr. Lyonnet's recent approach to the question. As we have hinted above, Lyonnet's approach is a phenomenological one, and Lyonnet himself affirms that his conclusion is nothing more than the obvious result of this phenomenological

analysis of the use of Agapè by St. Paul. With respect to this concrete study of the texts, there is nothing to say to the contrary; in fact, it's a good sign that the exegete does not intend to project, in any way, his particular frame of mind into the texts to be interpreted.

Lyonnet's explanation of his interpretation and the main arguments supporting this explanation centre in the doctrine of the Mystical Body. This doctrine, we surely admit, constitutes one of the central points in the Pauline Theology, and since the teaching of fraternal love is fundamental in Paul we should not be surprised at all that Lyonnet tried to find the explanation of a fundamental teaching in a central theological doctrine! That fraternal love holds such a prominent place in the writings of Paul has been very well realized by the Fathers, especially in the earlier centuries of the Church (as it is well illustrated by Fr. Prat in the '*Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*'). Lyonnet believes that this patristic understanding of Paul has now been long forgotten and this accounts for the great difficulty the exegetes are finding to see that Agapè in Paul refers to fraternal charity. If this is true, then Lyonnet's efforts should be well appreciated. One should also bear in mind that Lyonnet does not say that Agapè refers *exclusively* to fraternal love; for he does not deny in the least that it refers to God's or Christ's love for us as well. By saying this Lyonnet seems to be maintaining the same interpretation of Spicq who holds that Agapè in I Cor XIII is strictly speaking, fraternal love, but a christian love, the same love by which God or Christ '*en nous, aiment prochain*'. If this is so, then I would say for Lyonnet's position that which I have just said above for Spicq's.

Lyonnet insists that his solution depends wholly on the objective, concrete reading of Paul, and consequently it remains still debateable among exegetes that he has done this reading concretely and thoroughly; it all depends on this!

However, it would be always safer for Lyonnet if in his eventual further study of the problem he will keep to this concrete vision of Scripture, so favourite to him, and avoid, by all means, defining in the abstract what he has found in the concrete. He should be content with the concrete scriptural notion of love and leave the obtruse problems of *love in se* to the speculations of philosophy; after all, it does not serve his exegetical purpose to elaborate philosophically the data he draws from Scripture.

Paul followed closely the teaching of Christ, and therefore, if Christ insisted so much on the precept of fraternal charity, no wonder that Paul did the same! And we must *not* 'look beyond Paul to Jesus for the

law (of love) we teach' as Professor Shepherd dared to say. For in Paul himself we read Christ himself, especially in such a central teaching as that of LOVE.

However, the question is still open to further study, especially after the scientific investigations of the word Agapè carried out by exegetes, and in a special way, by Fr. Spicq.

And so we better wait for further study and deeper understanding of the problem, which are very liable to follow as a reaction to Lyonnet's recent interpretation.

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