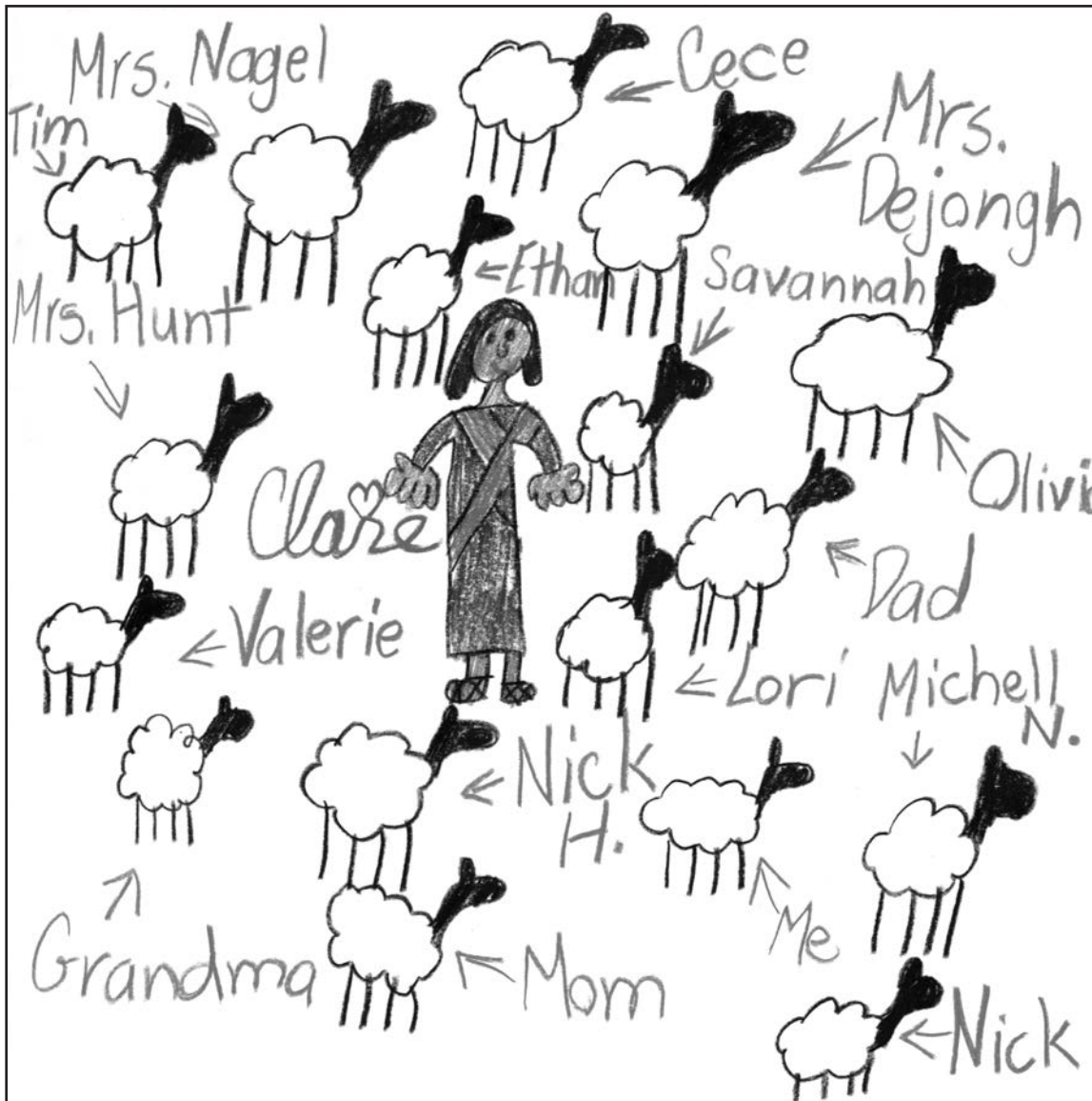


Learning to Love



Clare, age 10
 Good Shepherd Atrium
 at St. Pius X Catholic Church
 Des Moines, Iowa

DALMAZIO MONGILLO, OP

For many years, Father Dalmazio Mongillo was invited to come to Canada to give courses in the French-speaking Dominican College (of philosophy and theology) at St. Paul's University, Ottawa. One such course in 1988 was "Learning to Love Oneself"; his lectures on this theme were based on "the human condition in the light of experience and revelation."

After this course, Father Mongillo came to Toronto and we met a few times, during which he offered some of his reflections on that theme and other themes close to his heart. When Father Mongillo was speaking in Italian, I was jotting down as much as I could in English, and what follows here are the notes I made during two conversations.

—Patricia Coulter

At the heart of our theme of loving oneself is the question: What is my relationship with God? What kind of relationship do I have with God? Is it dependency . . . submission . . . fatalism? Is it trust . . . friendship . . . working with God?

That is to say, the question of loving me is bigger than me. It is about what I say about myself, and what image I have of myself. The essential in this is to provide an image of God because this is the basis of my whole identity, including my image of myself, of the world, and of other persons.

The image that God has of me is that I be myself. If God made me, it's me that God wants me to be. God gives himself to me; I am God's. Therefore, to love myself is to love as God loves himself. God loves himself; I am in him and he is in me. It is one reality.

I cannot love God if I am not me. How can I give to you if I am not being myself? If I am not in relationship with God and I am not myself, then I will have a negative image of myself and a negative image of God. The true image of me is the image God has of me, because God and I are one.

The first act in love is to accept to be immersed in God, to accept that God is the origin of everything, and that God is in communication with me and I am in communication with God. So now the question becomes: from where do I originate? This is our reality: I am; I am from someone; I am from someone with whom I am in communication and to be in communication with God makes me happy.

However, the world's message contrasts with God's message, and it exerts an influence on us. What does the world base its image on? "Are you successful . . . rich . . . beautiful? Do I take the world's message about me, the world's image of me? What, then, is the real image of me? My image of myself—and loving myself—depends on whether I recognize that I *am* in relationship with God, and in recognizing what my relationship is with God. For example, my image of myself is very different if I believe "only I am thinking about me," which means I am alone, or if I believe "I am thinking of myself in Another, who is thinking about me."

As for our image of God, we can think of God in many ways, for example, as an enemy, or as one to appease. Why? Because sometimes we do not get what we want, and our expectations are frustrated, and then we don't like God. But when I say, "I love God," I am proclaiming: "I have love; I am love. You are in my life and I enjoy that you are in my life." In this

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context, the focus of love is not about *doing* something. Rather, it is this awareness: You are in my life. I am happy that it is so.

And when I say, "I love myself," it involves asking what "love" and what "me"? That is, what is my image of myself? The true image of me is: I am the one who knows myself, forgives myself, heals and nourishes myself. Where does that image come from? It comes from Jesus Christ.

A Christian is invited to become like Jesus: "Love as I love you" (John 13: 34). Jesus says to us: I will show you how to love. And I have already given you the means to love—the Spirit, creation, and yourself. Jesus says to us: let your life be. You are in a world that carries you and brings you forward.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd

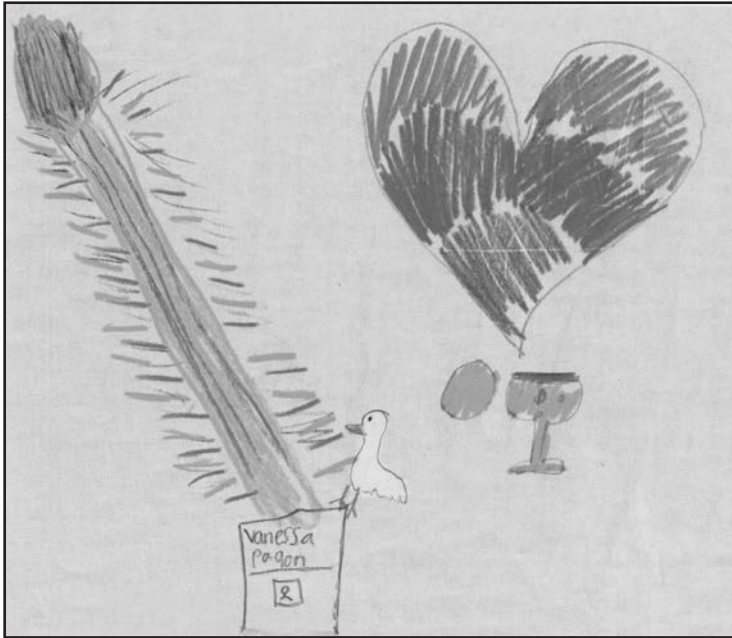
There is a need to provide a positive image of God. What about children? We need to help children to cultivate the joy of life by becoming aware of the life they are immersed in and the beauty of nature, themselves, and others. We do this by helping children to reflect on the Good Shepherd. For instance: look at all that you have! Who gave it to you? Did you give it to yourself? When children discover that all of it comes from the Good Shepherd, they are very happy.

What is the dynamic at work here? First, the child listens and hears about the Shepherd and the sheep and how happy they are together. The child begins to discover who the sheep is: I am that sheep. I am given all that I have. I am cared for and protected. Then the child discovers the Good Shepherd is for *me*. Jesus is that for *me*.

Our self-image is based on discovering who we are as known by and in God. I know myself as having good things, good gifts. I am lovable. This is linked to the fact that I did not make myself. God is the source of all this.

Children must be helped to discover this on their own and to know the one who is, and who does, all this for them. Then the child can come to realize all this is for me. Each child must be allowed to make the connection between the "sheep," and who the sheep is. If we make the connection for the child, there is the risk that it will not be the child's own. So the child needs time to discover that all that the shepherd is, and all the things the shepherd does—he walks ahead, he feeds, he guards and so on—is for *me*.

There is a transition, which takes a lot of time, during which the child accepts and enjoys all of that, when it moves



Mia, age 8
 Incarnate Word Academy
 Corpus Christi, Texas

This was drawn in the atrium after a child in the school had died. The top of the heart is colored green, the center red, and the bottom blue. The chalice and host are yellow. The dove is white. Soaring upward from the name *Vanessa* is a column of yellow, red, and purple; these same colors radiate out from it as well.

inside the child and helps the discovery: “I am that sheep.” Then more time is needed for the child to identify with and interiorize all that joy, goodness, and love. This is the time when the child claims and receives it all again in the light of the reality: “All of this is for me. The Good Shepherd is for me, here and now, in that way.” The gradual awareness that is happening is:

All this is me and for me.
 I am the sheep and someone is for me.
 The Good Shepherd is my shepherd.
 Jesus is that Shepherd and Jesus is God.
 God is my shepherd.

Dynamism of Love

To know is one thing. Knowing is something I bring to myself. For instance, I know *x* and *y*, this fact and that. But to love is another thing. It means I am given something, and I am carried out toward something. Love draws me out. It is not

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something I draw to myself as, for example, with certain facts or information.

When we say I know someone, it does not mean that we love that person. We know lots of people and lots of people know us, but this does not give me anything. Love is a movement that brings me forth and carries me forward. This is what Jesus means when he says “I know my sheep” (John 10:14). This is a lover’s knowing; no one knows better than a lover.

The relationship between *doing* and *being* in love—with God, myself, and with another—is rooted in our human nature. The human dynamism in love is based on human nature and the structure of the human person. And the nature of the verb “to love” is involvement. For example, when I say “I write,” it means I am doing something. But when I say, “I love you,” it is not first about doing something. Instead, it is to say, “You are present in my life and I enjoy that, and I will give you something; I give you myself.”

The moment of *being* is the first moment in loving, and *doing* is the last moment. When I say “I love you” I am saying, “You are in me and that is joyful for me. You are drawing me to you and you give yourself to me. I give myself to you.” When I say, “I love myself,” I am saying, “I am in my love. I am happy with myself. I want to give myself to myself.”

This is the structure and dynamism of being in God’s love. “I love you” means and proclaims above all, “You are in my life. You are in my love. I am happy that it is so, and I give myself to you.” This love carries us and moves us toward *doing*, so that now “I love you” means: “You are in my life, in my love, present to me. I am with you and I am happy to be with you. It gives me joy that you are in me, within me, with me. And I love you more, I want to give you myself, and I want to do” Love is the unifying element in all the relationships we have.

Bible, Liturgy, and Love

Now our question is do we have the capacity to love, the possibility for love? And God says: You love and I will take care of that. I will give you the capacity and the opportunity to love. Love and you will learn to love. Let yourself be loved and you will learn what it is to be loved.

We might think that if I do not have the capacity, then I cannot love. But love presupposes the capacity. This is important to understand because it has consequences. Our

capacity depends on the structure of love, and we live in the light of this understanding and with its consequences. In this context let us look at the way we see the Bible and the liturgy.

Liturgy is an exchange. It is what God is doing for and with us and what we are doing for and with God. Love asks for co-presence. It is not that I do something and you do something; instead, it is both persons doing the same thing. Take a simple example. When two persons are holding hands, both are doing the same action. It is not two persons doing two different things, but two persons doing one thing together.

This is true for the liturgy. One gives oneself in accepting the gift of the other. I give myself in accepting the gift of you. In this mutuality of giving, each receives the other. A sacrament is not just something we receive. God wants to unite himself to me; God wants me to give myself to him.

Sacraments are nuptial signs. They are signs of a spousal love that is being built together, two in one reality, two in one flesh, to be united together in the same reality. If love is a unifying reality, the “signs” of this love are speaking to us of the “means” of making union. This union with God also brings union within us and helps in overcoming the distance there is between me and myself as, for example, when I do not accept or help myself, or when I judge or disdain myself.

Sacraments are signs of union, of becoming one. The Eucharist is the greatest sacrament, because it is the act of becoming “one body, one spirit in Christ” (Eucharistic Prayer III). It is more than collaboration. In gestures of love, as we said, both persons are doing the same thing: you hold someone’s hand, and the other person holds your hand.

Sacrament is when God gives and acts, but it is not just a matter of my receiving, as we said. God is saying to each of us: I give myself to you that you may give yourself to me. Acts of love are not merely receiving something. When I give you something, that is one thing; when I kiss you, I do not give you something, I give you my love and you give your love to me. And I accept myself in your love.

We said that love is a verb of involvement. It means I give all of myself in this commitment. It is no longer just “I” who lives. It is Jesus who is living in me and in whose life I am living:

“I live now not with my own life, but Christ lives within me.” (Galatians 2:20)

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Finnegan, age 6
Queen of Angels Montessori School
Cincinnati, Ohio

At the top of the drawing is a yellow sun in which is written: “I love you Jesus in the Holy Spirit.”

To live this reality we need faith and also understanding, because when someone loves, they know what it means. This union is real. It is not physical in the sense that I have the person beside me, as a wife her husband and vice versa; however, it is even deeper than that.

Therefore, this exchange in the liturgy is not simply circulation—as in a circular movement. Rather, it is the mutual exchange of two persons doing one and the same thing. The biblical image for this is two “becoming one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). Seen in the spiritual sense, it is two persons living in one life, so that there will be one body and one spirit in Jesus.

Translated by Patricia Coulter