

A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON LOVE AS A SUPREME HUMAN VALUE

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ABSTRACT: A Theological Reflection on Love as a Supreme Human Value.

It is the aim of this article to underline the fact that love is not merely one of the human values, as conceived by human thought over history, but rather it is a supreme human value. This quality is given by the fact, as it will be argued by the theological argument of this article, love originates in God, being the way God lives in the complexity of the three divine Persons, who share the same being. Moreover, love, from a theological perspective, is expressed in creation of everything that exists, being the reason for the creative act of God, that is One in three Persons. Finally, the article will focus on the way Christ event is the culmination of God's love, that is overflowed in creation and in the redemptive acts of the Father, in the Son, through the Holy Spirit.

Keywords: *love, human values, Trinity, creation, redemption.*

Introduction

There is much talk today in the world, about love. From the romance literature to the romantic movies, humanity is in a frenetic search for meaningful love. Different disciplines of thought, join the search, by attempts to define love. And these attempts vary, from a high view about love, placing it among the „highest values of the Trinity of values, Truth, Goodness and Beauty,” and as essential for human transformation,¹ through defining it as a “secondary innate value-emotion,’ even though an essential one for the survival of the human species,² to ignorin it from the list of universal hu-

1 Pitirim A. Sorokin, “The Powers of Creative Unselfish Love,” in *New Knowledge in Human Values*, Abraham H. Maslow (Ed.) (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1959), p. 5.

2 Daniel Raphael, *Seven Innate Human Values* (USA: Daniel Raphael Publishing, 2022, p. 11.

man values,³ that are however „not to be found elsewhere, outside ourselves and our practices; they are profoundly human products made real by human action.”⁴

The argument of this work is that love is not only a highest human value, nor merely an emotion. It is rather a constitutive reality for the human being and for her existence. And this is so, because, as it will be argued, human beings as created by God, reflect His image. Therefore, as the Scriptures affirms that God is love, is appropriate, from a theological perspective, to affirm love, not only as an attribute of God, but rather as being the essence of God's being.⁵ Moreover, as a being created in God's image, for human being, love is constitutive and essential.

The argument about love as constitutive human value, will start with a reflection on love as eternal universal, having its origin in the divine being, will continue with the way this love as eternal universal constitutes the reason of creation, and will end with the way love as eternal universal is embodied in Christ, the culmination of divine love.

Love as Eternal Universal: The Origin of Love

The belief and theology of the Church, over centuries, confess, that God is one in three Persons.⁶ In order to describe the dynamics of the internal

3 Shalom H. Schwartz, „Les valeurs de base de la personne: Théorie, mesures et applications [Basic Human Values: Theory, measurement, and applications], in *Revue Française de Sociologie*, 42 (2006), p. 249-288. He speaks of ten basic human values: Self-Direction, Stimulation, Hedonism, Achievement, Power, Security, Conformity, Tradition, Benevolence, Universalism. Also, Schwartz, „Universals in the Content and Structure of Values: Theoretical Advances and Empirical Tests in 20 Countries,” in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, vol 25 (Cambridge: Academic Press, 1992), p. 4. He defines values in this way: „Values (1) are concepts or beliefs, (2) pertain to desirable end states or behaviors, (3) transcend specific situations, (4) guide selection or evaluation of behavior and events, and (5) are ordered by relative importance. Values, understood this way, differ from attitudes primarily in their generality or abstractness (feature 3) and in their hierarchical ordering by importance (feature 5).” Also, Stanley Krippner, Daniel B. Pitchford Jeannine A. Davies, and Kishor Adhikari (Eds.), „Rethinking human values,” in *NeuroQuantology*, December 2012, Volume 10, Issue 4, p. 595-600.

4 Steven L. Winter, „Human Values in a Postmodern World,” in *Yale Journal of Law & Humanities*, vol 6, Issue 2 (1994), p. 235.

5 Eric J. Titus, „Divine Perfection in Barth's Thought,” in *Kairos Evangelical Journal of Theology* / Vol. IV. No. 2 (2010), pp. 203-222, p. 204.

6 Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologie Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol 1 (București: IBMBOR, 1996), p. 282.

life of the three Persons that share the same Being, was consecrated the term *perichoresis*, meaning, mutual interpenetration and participation in the divine being or essence of each Person, and a movement of each Person towards the Other, having the Other as center.⁷

The Holy Trinity is not only a mystery,⁸ but, as such, it reveals itself as “the structure of Supreme Love,”⁹ a Trinity of Persons united in love.¹⁰ This love is understood as a *perichoretic reality*, and that means, reciprocity, unity and intersubjectivity of the three Persons. Therefore, the divine love is a love given and received, uniting the Persons as they give and receive it from the Other. And in this unity of love, mutually shared, the divine Persons remain unconfused and unseparated. Or in the words of Dumitru Stăniloae:

Love always presupposes two “I’s who love one another or one “I” loving another who receives that love, or of whom the lover knows that he is aware of his love. And this is reciprocity. At the same time, however, love unites these two “I’s” in proportion to the love between them, thought without confusing them with one another, for that would put an end to love. Thus, perfect love is a paradoxical union of these two things: on the one hand, many “I’s” who love one another while remaining unconfused, and, on the other hand, the highest degree of unity among them.¹¹

Moreover, besides, the reciprocity and unity of this perichoretic divine love, it is also perfect for it is free. That means that “God is God’s own, belonging to and dependent upon no other or upon no thing,”¹² and that God “lives and loves in being in freedom.”¹³ Eric Titus notices Barth’s understanding of the interplay between “this living, loving, and freedom, a distinct integration and perichoretic interaction and interessence:”

7 Stăniloae, *Teologie Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol 1, p. 264.

8 Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997), p. 21.

9 Stăniloae, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology, vol 1, Revelation and Knowledge of the Triune God* (Brookline, Massachusetts: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1994), p. 245.

10 Stăniloae, *Sfânta Treime sau La Început a fost Iubirea* (București : Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1993), p. 24.

11 Stăniloae, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology 1*, p. 245.

12 Titus, „Divine Perfection,” p. 207.

13 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 2: 1, G.W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Eds.) (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), p. 301.

God is free and is therefore free also to reveal God's self in the act of revelation. God is absolutely free to love. God is completely free to live. God is utterly free to exercise God's freedom to live and to love.¹⁴

In Barth's own words:

It is not that God first lives and then also loves. But God loves, and in this act lives. If we have interpreted the divinity of His act, or the divinity of God as freedom, we could not and cannot mean by this notion of freedom anything different from Himself as the One who loves.¹⁵

The divine love is total participation of one person into the loved Person, and in the fulness of this participation, the loving Person is "entirely himself."¹⁶ Love is profoundly participative as it cannot be "consummated by a solitary subject," not oriented towards himself, as it always "engenders and bring forth," or answers "in "obedience and surrender."¹⁷ As such, the perichoretic divine love is eternal and infinite, "Father, Son, and Spirit love each other eternally," being the "essence" of God. And divine love is infinite for it "has its existence in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."¹⁸ Or in the words of Jurgen Moltmann:

Father and Son are alike divine beings, but they are not identical. The Son is other than the Father, but not other in essence. The inner-trinitarian love is therefore the *love of like for like*, not the love for one who is essentially different.¹⁹

The eternal perichoretic love is also expressed in the affirmation of the identity of One Person by the Others in the eternal communion of the divine Persons. The Father is in His paternal identity, constantly affirmed by the Son and the Spirit's calling Him Father. The identity of the Son is in His quality of being begotten by the Father, the Spirit is a life-giving Spirit because He is communion. In the person, life and love are identical.²⁰

14 Titus, „Divine Perfection,’ p. 207.

15 Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 2: 1, p. 321.

16 Jurgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (Fortress Press, 1993), p. 57.

17 Moltmann, *The Trinity*, p. 57-58.

18 Veli-Matti Karkkainen. *Trinity and Revelation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2014), p. 801.

19 Moltmann, *The Trinity*, p. 58

20 John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1993), p. 48-49.

The intersubjectivity of the Son and the Spirit is given by the fact that “Both are from the Father and in the Father and each rejoice together with the Other in the Father.” This pure intersubjectivity of the three Persons is manifested by the fact of the mutual affirmation of each other as distinctive persons.²¹ Stăniloae describes the triune intersubjectivity in this way:

Each sees himself only in relation with the Other, or sees the Other, or sees himself in the Other. Father does not see himself but as the subject of the love for the Son. But the “I” of the Father does not lose himself because of that, for He is affirmed by the Son, who in His turn, does not know himself but fulfilling the will of the Father... Each Person discovers not His own “I”, but two of them, the third one... So, all Godhead is revealed sometimes in the Father, sometimes in the Son and in the Holy Spirit.²²

Gerald Bray affirms in the same direction:

The mutual relationships of the three persons of the Trinity are perfect and all-embracing. The Father loves the Son and the Holy Spirit fully and absolutely, but in a way that is peculiarly appropriate to his identity as the Father. The Son also loves the Father and the Holy Spirit to the same degree, but in a way that is especially indicative of his identity as the Son. The Holy Spirit loves the Father and the Son likewise, but again in a way that brings out the particular nature of his relationship to each of them.

Love as the Reason of Creation: The Expression of Love

The perfect communion, communication, and love between the Three in One, is overflowed in the act creation, that is not an act of necessity for God,²³ but the expression of the perfect love shared by the Father, Son, and the Spirit. In this context, the creation is caused by Holy Trinity’s love,²⁴ and becomes the medium in which the love of God is expressed and confessed.

21 Stăniloae, *Teologie Dogmatică*, vol. 1, p. 209.

22 Stăniloae, *Teologie Dogmatică*, vol. 1, p. 210.

23 Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 2: 1, p. 275

24 Părintele Galeriu, *Jertfă și Răscumpărare* (București, Harisma, 19910, p. 49. Also, Stăniloae, *Teologie Dogmatică*, vol. 1, 245. He says : “Apart from the existence of a perfect eternal love there can be no explanation for love in the world... This love does not produce the divine persons...but presupposes them...From eternity the divine persons

Church's theology inspired from the hymn of creation from the book of Genesis 1-2, in the dialogue of the Old and New Testament, reveals the reason for the creation of God, namely, the love of God. He creates in love (1 John 4:8) and to His glory (Isaiah 43. 7). Or, in the words of Thomas Aquinas: God the Father created everything through the Word, that is His Son and, in His love, that is the Holy Spirit.²⁵

To be sure, from a Christian theological perspective, creation as majestic it is, does not equal the majesty of God, being a manifestation of a *kenosis* of the Holy Trinity.²⁶ In this regard, if love is the reason of creation, in bringing it into existence, God himself reveals another dimension of His love, besides that revealed in the internal relationships of the Trinity that is perichoretic love, namely, a *kenotic* love. This becomes evident in the written revelation, where creation is a witness to the majesty of God.

Psalm 8, the first hymn of glory, from the first book of the Psalter²⁷ underline, the universal majestic sovereignty of the loving God. The glory of God is confessed amidst humanity's suffering²⁸ (Psalm 8: 2) in the contemplation of divine creation (Psalm 8. 3 as a mirror of Genesis 1:1-2:4 where is described the beauty and perfection of God's creation unaffected by sin),²⁹ a glory of God beautifully mirrored in Christic redemptive humanity, towards which the end of Psalm 8 points (Psalm 8. 4-8 red in the mirror of Hebrew 2. 6-8- the affirmation of the uniqueness of human being in creation - and Philipians 2. 5-8 – the affirmation of Christ unique role in the new, redeemed creation).

If love is the reason of creation, fellowship with God in obedience is the purpose of creation.³⁰ Yet, this fellowship is again mirroring the life of

remain perfect, for their love is that perfection of love which is not able to increase the communion among them."

25 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Q32 a1 ad 3.

26 Galeriu, *Jertfă și Răscumpărare*, p. 50.

27 James Luther Mays, *Psalms: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), p. 65.

28 Gerald H. Wilson, *Psalms volume 1, The NIV Application Commentary: From Biblical Text...to Contemporary Life* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2002), p. 555.

29 Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), p. 37.

30 Brueggemann, *Genesis: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1982), p. 44.

the Holy Trinity with its internal unique relationships between the three divine Persons. Therefore, God creates everything, through Word and Spirit, by separation and formation, two actions that signify distinctiveness and purpose. All that was created is placed in the interdependence with each other mirroring in this way the perichoretic intersubjectivity within the Trinity. Besides the beauty of complex interdependence, evident horizontally in creation, there is also an evident dependence of all on the goodness of the Creator, artfully expressed in the Psalter:

These all look to you to give them their food in due season; when you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things. When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the ground (Psalm 104: 27-30)

This divine love, that is magnificently, even though kenotically, imprinted in the features of created things, that are placed in a relational web with each other and with the Creator, is placed as a masterpiece of His creation, the human being, created in the image of God, to be His overseer over creation (Genesis 1: 28, 2: 15). That is implied from the original design, that human being will live in continuous obedience to God (2: 16-17), as the center of her existence (this being the meaning of the tree of life: Genesis 2: 9), acknowledging the limits inherent to human being as God's creature (*tob* and *ra* of Genesis 2: 9b). Moreover, the proof that this is the divine original design is the delegation of authority from God to human being over the entire creation (Genesis 2: 18-20), in the partnership of love (Gen 2: 21-23), and covenant union (2: 24) between man and woman. Or in the words of Karl Barth:

In contradistinction to mere affection, love may be recognized by the fact that it is determined, and indeed determined upon the life partnership of marriage. Love does not question; it gives an answer. Love does not think; it knows. Love does not hesitate; it acts. Love does not fall into raptures; it is ready to undertake responsibilities. Love puts behind it all the Ifs and Buts, all the conditions, reservations, obscurities, and uncertainties that may arise between a man and a woman. Love is not only affinity and attraction; it is union. Love makes these two persons indispensable to each other. Love compels them to be with each other. And obviously this is not simply partial and transient. It is not a matter of relationship without

obligations, in pure freedom. The freedom of love is freedom from this final limitation of pure affection. It is freedom to achieve the life-partnership of marriage.³¹

Love as Embodied in Christ: The Culmination of Love

The profound love of the Persons of the Trinity for each other,³² imprinted in the features of creatures and their relationships, should have been mirrored in the answer in love from creation.³³ Yet, human being failed to answer accordingly, and the Fall is the proof for that sad reality. And if creation is an act of divine love overflowed, and if creation was brought into existence through divine eternal Logos, creation is renewed through the incarnation of the divine Logos, the Son who becomes human.

The incarnation of the Logos is the solution to the Fall of human being in disobedience, a reality that separated her from God. Then, the incarnation of the Son, the divine Logos, reveals a transcendent God in His full immanence. Our Father, from heavens, descends in His Son to tabernacle among us full of grace and truth (John 1: 14). The Son reveals, the true character of the Father (John 1: 18). Tatăl, în revelația Fiului, nu este *Deus absconditus ci Deus revelatus*,³⁴ the Father of mercies ărintele îndurărilor (2 Corinthians 1: 3), and Father of Lights (James 1: 17).

The Son also reveals the true human being in relation with God. Or, as Barth said, human being is the being that is visible when mirrored in

31 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 3: 4 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961), p. 222-223.

32 Douglas A. Campbell, *Pauline Dogmatics: The Triumph of God's Love* (Grand Rapids Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2020), p. 54.

33 Stăniloae, *Teologie Dogmatică*, vol. 1, p. 238-241. Also, John R. Franke, „God is Love: The Social Trinity and the Mission of God,” in *Trinitarian Theology for the Church: Scripture, Community, Worship*, Daniel J. Treier and David Lauber (eds) (Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 2009), p. 115. He says: „God's love for the world is not that of an uninvolved, unmoved, passionless Deity, but rather that of one who is actively and passionately involved in the ongoing drama of life in the world, one who lavishly pours out this love in Jesus Christ. This lavish expression of love for humanity and creation is revealed in Jesus Christ and points us to the internal life of God as an eternal trinitarian fellowship of love shared between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In other words, explication of the triune God in God's self-disclosure in and to creation is at the same time the explication of the triune God in the divine reality.”

34 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 3: 4, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1961, p. 87.

Jesus Christ.³⁵ Yet, the incarnation reveals another characteristic of God's love, besides being a perichoretic and kenotic love, namely, God's love as a *cruciform* love.³⁶ Therefore, theological discourse should not hesitate to speak of an eternal *via Dolorosa*, on which a loving God, steps in history,³⁷ a participative reality for the Son of God and the Spirit of God.³⁸ Or in the words of David Tracy:

In a Christian theological perspective, the world and the self are really related as coexistent. Both are really related to the God who, as Love, is their beginning and their end. That God as Love affects all and is affected by all. That God, in the decisive self-manifestation of who God is in the proleptic event of Jesus Christ, also discloses who we are in our real-as-graced possibility and what the world is in its graced reality. By the emancipatory power of that revelation, the Christian faith is a risk taken in the trust that, in spite of all, the self and the world are held in the always-already, not yet reality of God's redemptive love.³⁹

This is a perennial call for humanity, of the testimony of the Spirit from the *Via Dolorosa* of the Son, that only the cross assumed fully and carried to the very end of existence, in obedience and in accordance with the will of the Father embodied in the Son, makes the resurrection possible in us and in the world, we live in.⁴⁰

Conclusion

It was the aim of this article to underline the fact that from a theological perspective love is not merely a human value, intrinsic to human nature. It is neither a merely human emotion. In the theological discourse as well as

35 Barth, *God Here and Now: Religious Perspectives*, editată de Ruth Nanda Anshen (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1964), p. 3.

36 Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), p. 73.

37 Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, p. 26. Moltmann speaks of "the pathos of God...in his passion and in his interest in history."

38 Ivana Noble, *Theological Interpretation of Culture in Post-Communist Context: Central and East European Search for Roots* (Ashgate: Farnham, 2010), p. 176-177.

39 David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1981), 438.

40 Stăniloae, *The Victory of the Cross* (Oxford: SLG Press, 2001). p. 2.

in the Church's confession and worship, over centuries, love is affirmed as being a divine reality.

From Johannine declaration that God is love (1 John 4. 8), the Christian Church's theological reflection, in history, revealed the fact that God's love is perichoretic, being always oriented towards another self. Yet, this orientation consists in a perfect intersubjectivity of the divine Persons, that makes them participate perfectly in Each Other, in a perfect and eternal unity.

From this perspective of love as eternal universal, originating eternally in God, the reflection continued with regarding love as the reason of all that is created. Creation came to being because of God's love, yet, equally true, it was meant to be the expression of His love. And this is revealed in the way all that was created, was placed in relationship with the rest, the living plants, and trees with the living creatures, over which human being, was crowned as overseer.

The harmony of all creation, unaffected by sin or evil, is revealed in the hymn of creation of Genesis 1 and 2 and then underlined in the first hymn of praise to the majesty of God from the Psalter, Psalm 8. These texts are also a useful reminded not only of the truth that creation, reflects, in its original design and conditions, the majesty of a unique Creator, but also that God is an eternal being, that cannot be equated with creation. Therefore, God's love as the reason of creation is a kenotic reality.

In the end, the love that originates in God, being in eternity, in the three Persons' relationships a perichoretic reality, and is expressed in creation, as a kenotic reality, being the reason for it, was culminated in the incarnation of the Son of God, revealing the fact that God's love is also cruciform. Therefore, the perfect love of the Trinity, manifested in creation, is fully revealed, in the Son incarnated as a suffering love.

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