Keeping the great commandment: What does it mean to love God?

by J. Mary Luti in the March 22, 2000 issue

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart," our priest droned for the tenth time. His pedagogy was nothing if not dogged. He would have said it again, but I jumped in: "How can I love someone I can't see?" The other kids sat up. Would he ignore me or call my parents? I always tried to rattle him, but for once I wasn't showing off.

The first hymn I'd learned as a child wondered, "Jesus, my Lord, my God, my All, how can I love Thee as I ought?" It was a rhetorical question, more mystical than mechanical; but from the day I read in the Baltimore Catechism that I'd been created to love God, I'd wanted an answer.

The nuns used to tell us that you could love God so much you'd want to marry God. I didn't know what divine matrimony entailed, but it sounded good. At Catholic summer camp, I got a clearer picture. Camp was a piety blitz: daily mass in the chapel, devotions at the grotto, rosary in our cabins after lights-out. Spiritual aspirations ran high; dreams of joining the convent were as common as athlete's foot—we were all potential Brides of Christ. One summer, both my counselors made plans across bunks after dark. "I'm joining this fall," one whispered. "Are you?" She wasn't sure: "Maybe if I were more in love with God . . ."

In love with God! There it was again. You couldn't grow up in the pre–Vatican II era unscorched by the possibility of such a passion. For one thing, we were surrounded by God's lovers. I knew their stories the way boys knew box scores: Agnes, martyred for taking Christ over a pagan spouse; Francis of Assisi, stigmatized with the real wounds of Jesus; Ignatius Loyola, diary drenched with a mystic word, tears; John of the Cross, crooning to Baby Jesus in the crèche; Simeon the hermit, for years perched atop a pole (a dottiness that, according to Phyllis McGinley's wry verse, "puzzled many a desert father [and even] puzzled the good Lord rather").

This was rich fare for the affections. Loving God, you found out early, was no tame thing. It made you say yes or no—but never maybe. It made you loopy. It ruined your health. Most of all, it made you feel something. How did they come by it? How could I come by it?

Sure that in the convent I'd find out, I married God after my first year at college, only to discover that in my religious community passion for God meant coolness toward people. Of course, we didn't ignore the second great commandment, ". . . and your neighbor as yourself." Indeed, we were resolved not only to die for generic unknown neighbors, but also (and this proved more difficult) to suffer Sister Peggy's nasty quirks in close quarters. No one missed the logic of 1 John 4: 20: you don't love God if you loathe your roommate. Nevertheless, when it came to loving "creatures," we found ourselves at a far emotional remove from the torrid love of the saints for God to which we aspired.

We knew the theory—all love is divine, one in origin and end. In practice, however, people-love was a different breed and a greedy competitor. You could never love God inordinately, but you could love God too little by loving people too much. And you had to be vigilant: creatures could sneak up and steal love reserved for God while, distracted, you made supper or serviced the car. We tried to love for Christ's sake alone, aiming X-ray affections through people's skin at the One who alone made them lovable in the first place. If you could bypass embodiment, it was licit even to feel love for others: pure intentions made affections chaste, and chaste affections did not cheat God.

Some sisters never got it right; others never tired of disapproving. The former sinned warmly, pursuing various attractions to unsurprising ends; the latter sinned coldly, loving no one really, thus attaining (they imagined) perfect love for God.

This painful muddle was foreign to the Catholic high school kids I ended up teaching. They were oblivious to the wary rationing going on around them. Whatever loving God was like, they knew it wasn't like loving your boyfriend, your school or your Harley. They also knew that if it meant sitting on a pole, they'd never love God. No one they hung around with would either. When I'd drone on, they'd object: "You can't love a God you don't see!" It crossed my mind to call their parents.

If they got romantic about God at all, it was on weekend retreats. Then, softened up by candles and guitars, they'd weep love for parents, classmates, God and all living

things on the planet. On Monday, they'd revert to emotional inconstancy. But they always showed up for service projects. Matthew 25 was the one scripture passage they knew by heart; and since the Judge was happy with deeds of love, deeds were the way to go. In the daylight, the saints those kids admired did not weep or croon; they were all business, dispensing coats and crusts to the least.

I went on to graduate school, no closer than I'd been at six, 12 or 20 to feeling what saints in love with God must surely feel. In the first month, an earnest classmate reading Anders Nygren intervened. From him I learned that human "love" for God is a false and blasphemous thing, hardly a Christian ideal. Nygren had my number: I was all eros, no agape. All my life I'd craved not God, but the rewards of experience. I'd reduced God to one among many objects of human avarice to satisfy my selfish needs. Mortified to have made it to graduate school still desiring, I gave it up and hitched my wagon to obedient trust through naked faith alone.

It didn't take me long to unhitch it. For one thing, I found that renouncing the rewards of experience was, well, rewarding. For another, I wondered why God, whose history with us is a trajectory into flesh and blood, would require from us a flesh-and-bloodless response. But mostly, it just seemed silly to pretend that God was not in fact attractive (I was now reading Augustine).

I relapsed completely while writing a dissertation on the 16th-century Spanish mystic Teresa of Ávila. You'd be hard-pressed to find a saint more in love with God than Teresa. While Spain's top bishop did time in the Inquisition's jail for preaching that Christians could be friends with God, she was practicing bridal mysticism, exposing flustered nuns to the Song of Songs, and frightening priests with reports of angels shooting her with flaming darts.

Teresa would be easy to dismiss had she not also been hard on the idea that loving God consists solely of "experiences." In good monastic fashion, she taught that you can't build anything sturdy on that base. Feelings are fickle, easily induced and manipulated. Experiences are overrated, a dime a dozen. Whenever a goose-bumpy novice, languid with love and hoping to levitate, tried making permanent camp in the chapel, a no-nonsense Teresa laid down the law—nix the theatrics, eat something solid, go lend a hand in the laundry.

Yet Teresa came down even harder on the idea that loving God has nothing to do with experiences. She was never convinced that trust, obedience and service cover

the territory of love. To love by doing good was essential, but by itself too small an ambition for people saved by God's passion. So she taught the nuns also to love God explicitly, to unleash their hearts. To be sure, she also taught them humility, theology and discernment, created a demanding communal life and required obedience to the hierarchy—traditional safeguards against self-deception. But the best thing she taught them was not to be afraid, not of feelings for God, not of feelings for each other (she herself tended to sin warmly).

Finishing graduate school, I began teaching in an ecumenical seminary. Soon afterwards—Nygren notwithstanding—I became a Protestant. I still hoped to love God passionately; but by then I'd decided that hoping for such a love was itself a pretty good way of loving. Now and then, however, I felt compelled to conduct comparative spot-checks. Cornering unsuspecting seminarians, I'd ask, "Do you love God?" Most said yes, but not without qualifications ("if what you mean by love is . . ."). Only a few ever expressed feelings for God unbidden. Others, prompted, spoke of awe at the creation or at the birth of a child, and of gratitude for God's encompassing mercy. They were, of course, onto something solid. Yet these were the same students who never said "think" if they could say "feel," and who let you know their "comfort levels" with everything from classroom temperature to creedal affirmations. Why were they so diffident about God?

Some were quite properly protecting themselves: how they felt about God really was none of my business. Others, however, said they were afraid of sounding flaky. They had no serviceable language for what they felt. One woman explained that the church she grew up in was still mortified by outbreaks of enthusiasm in previous centuries, and newly anxious about the high number of Catholics, with their propensity for "smells and bells," now joining the congregation. Showing signs of passion for God in that church meant polite but effective ostracism. A frank young man said he loved God the way his late father loved his family: his wife and kids rarely saw him, yet they knew he cared (although he never said so) because he worked hard and provided well. Shouldn't that be enough? Aware of my own lack of sacred diligence, I dissembled and said I wasn't sure. But I am sure: it may be enough, but it's not all there is.

Last year I led a few programs for church groups about loving God. A pastor at one session complained that it was much ado about nothing. "Navel-gazing" was his verdict on the heart's quest to feel something for God. (So much for Jonathan Edwards and Bernard of Clairvaux.) A laywoman wondered whether trying to love

God after the Holocaust might be a morally vacuous enterprise. Someone else observed that a command to love is a contradiction. At my urging, a minister spent the free time reading the Song of Songs, a book he knew only by snippets. He returned with red ears and a pained look. “What’s this doing in the Bible?” he asked. A thoughtful denominational leader wondered whether love for God is best conceived as a corporate activity—the whole church loves; the individual members participate in Christ’s perfect love for God.

Most agreed finally that loving God explicitly (with or without feelings) is required if Christian life is to be more than “anonymous monotheism,” in ethicist Edwin Vacek’s words. They also agreed that it’s easier to talk about God’s love for us and our love for self and neighbor than it is to get a fix on our love for God. Even though the famous verses of John’s first letter teach that loving God is both inseparable and distinct from love for neighbor, we had to acknowledge that the modern habit is routinely to collapse the former into the latter. Inseparability has given way to substitution, and the result is near-silence about the one thing necessary. Vacek calls it “the eclipse of love for God.”

When I first read that scary phrase, I tried counting the sermons on loving God I’d heard in the last ten years. I couldn’t recall even one. A cursory check through a theological library did turn up a scholarly book, a dissertation, a published sermon. But I had to strain hard for sounds of recent mainline ecclesial reflection on keeping the great commandment. Independently, a pew mate noticed this hush, too. After another in a series of sermons about Christian obligation in the world, he sighed, “OK, I think I know what I’m supposed to do. What I’d really like now is to meet the God who wants me to do it.”

So how do you meet, know, even fall in love with God? Well, over the years I’ve learned this much from the classics and the saints: loving God is not any one thing, nor is it shown in any one way. As Roberta Bondi observes in a recent book on prayer, people love God differently, employing “incalculably numerous expressions” over a lifetime.

Astute Christians will say this too: love for God in any form is God’s initiative, a divine gift. If we love at all, the New Testament says, it’s because God loved us first—although as much as I believe that to be true, I’m not sure it’s much practical help. In those church groups I led, the idea that love is a gift was often more a conversation-stopper. After all, when something’s a gift, you might be given it or you

might not. More bewildering than a command to love or a hot angelic arrow to the heart is the prospect that God is going about whimsically wooing some people, but not others.

Fortunately, the Bible that says love is a gift also tells us it's universally available, and that God does not consider it excessively forward of human beings to ask for it. If we want to love God wholeheartedly, whatever that means in practice, we begin by praying. I've found, however, that persistently begging for "More Love to Thee," as the old hymn goes, is such a no-frills, basic step that even sensible people sometimes skip it as they cast about for fancier techniques by which to deepen their life with God.

I've also learned that great lovers of God tend to have imagination and a lot of cheek. They create conditions of possibility for love, waving their arms in God's face, as it were, so there'll be no mistaking a potential target for grace. Believing themselves unworthy and incapable, nonetheless they expect God to draw them into intimacy. They put themselves in the way of every kind of beauty, knowledge, person and pain, developing reflexes of awe, reverence, compassion, compunction, gratitude, zeal and delight. They meditate on the Gospels, exposing themselves daily to the ambush of Jesus's unboundaried appeal. They hang around God's likely and unlikely friends—the precious folks, as Rowan Williams once observed, in whose presence you sense that what God promises is possible and in whom you catch a glimpse of life as it was meant to be. And if it seems like they're getting nowhere, God's lovers don't quit; they fake it if they have to, knowing that God deserves even an "as-if" love arising from utter incapacity.

The canonized saints of my childhood fascination did these things and more. To be sure, they were often bizarre, in many respects decidedly (and justifiably) inimitable—even if you are so inclined, rolling naked in thorn bushes is not a good idea, and Lord knows we don't need any more violent conquests born of zealous love for God. All the same, if you scratch this distancing surface, you'll always find more than messy psyches and fervor run amuck. You'll also find the hard muscles of heroism on behalf of the neighbor, some of it as subtle as a kiss on a leper's eyes, some as dense as a notion that feeds the minds of millions over time.

My old saints uniformly attributed their formidable love for neighbor to their prior love for God. Without that first love, they claimed, no heroism or longevity in the service of others is possible. How could Mother Teresa lift the dead from Calcutta's streets day after day, year after year, if not for love of God? But we know that this

claim, although edifying, is not really true. Atheists routinely do the same, humbling believers like me who do much less. We must love our neighbor if we say we love God; but experience teaches that the reverse is not necessarily so. Vacek says that the Christian believer is distinguishable from the atheist in this alone: one loves God, the other doesn’t. But if the practical outcome is the same, why bother loving God? What’s it worth to keep the great commandment? There’s a way to find out.