

# **Paul of Tarsus, Teacher of Love (doctor caritatis): His Insights on Love and Charity**

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## **Abstract**

Paul of Tarsus has experienced love on his way to Damascus when he met Christ. This encounter has changed his view on life and love. He exalts love as the highest virtue or quality in life in his teaching to the Corinthians (1 Cor 13). Also to the Romans we see him stressing the love of God which is going a lot further than the highest form of friendship in Antiquity. There is consistency in all his teaching: human behaviour is first of all rooted in the act of divine love to us, revealed in Jesus. We love as we have been loved, even then when we still were enemies, so he discovered.

## **Among the Sages**

Even before his first contacts with members of the Christian movement during the time he was living and studying in Jerusalem, Saul of Tarsus already had a very intense religious life, one that was in strict conformity with the tradition of the Sages or—as they were called by outsiders—the Pharisees. Even as a Pharisee he was open to ecstatic experiences, as was usual in some branches of the large tree of pharisaic way of life at the time. Describing his own past, Paul always stresses how observant he was, absolutely correct, stronger in his practice than everyone else of his age.

He was—and will remain his whole life—a true perfectionist. God, the Torah, the tradition with its detailed rules of behaviour were actual norms of conduct for the young student who arrived in the Holy City from Tarsus in Cilicia and was eager to deepen his knowledge at the feet of the best masters in Jerusalem, one of them being Rabban Gamaliel.

### **On the way to Damascus and just before**

The great change in Saul's life came the day he went to Damascus with a special mission to arrest the first few members of the Christian movement who were living in that city. He intended to bring them to Jerusalem to be judged and perhaps executed. His heart was full of hate, with a strong will to kill, as he testified later on. And then a total change suddenly took place.

Before this trip to Damascus, Saul—that was his first name at the time; later he took the name “Paul(os)” (“the little one” in Greek)—was present at the speech of a certain Stephanos/Stephen. At the end of that speech, related in chapter 7 of the Acts of the Apostles, those who heard him were so filled with rage that they took Stephen outside the city walls and there stoned him to death. Saul gave his full assent to that execution. But he had witnessed something very strange: the man called Stephanos was surrounded by hate but continued to look radiant; he was stoned but continued to pray; he was abhorred but had still the power to love and to pray for the forgiveness of his executioners. Saul saw that. For him, such power was unheard of, unfathomable, stronger than any power one can find within oneself. Saul—observant religious zealot and maximalist that he was—must have been greatly puzzled. Maybe he even sensed that although he regarded Stephen as an enemy, this young man, even as he was being stoned to death, was loving him.

### **The great change: a revelation of love**

On the way to Damascus Paul/Saul experienced love. That is the great event of his life. It changed everything, and after that encounter, nothing was as it had been before. In three different chapters, 9, 22 and 26, the

Acts of the Apostles reports that he heard a voice asking him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

The repetition of his name, “Saul, Saul,” is significant. In the Jewish exegetical tradition, it is said that when you hear or read a name twice, you can be sure that this repetition is an expression of love. If a name appears only once, as in “Simon, I have something to tell you” (Luke 7:40), you should perceive it as a judgment or at least a summons to give an account of your past behaviour.

“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting”, said the voice a second time. But Saul was not persecuting “Jesus” as such; he was only going after the followers of that new movement! He wanted to stop this new sect before it could develop any further. And then Jesus himself appeared to him on the way to Damascus and, instead of condemning him, loved him. The greatness of Paul is that, then and there, he accepted being loved. He let the love of Christ overwhelm him. Slowly, but in an irreversible way, Paul will become the witness of that love. He will build his life on the right understanding of that event of absolute love and on the correct response to that love. The response will be to love back, to trust, and to hope.

Before we turn to Paul’s own writings on love and charity, it is important to recall this overpowering event in the life of this well-trained young rabbi who was Saul. *Caritas Christi urget nos*: “The love of Christ compels us when we consider that One died for all—therefore all died—and he died for all, so that all should no longer live for themselves but for Him who died and was raised for them” (2 Cor 5:14-15). The love of Christ is, from now on, the decisive reality; it became for Paul the inner norm of all his actions and thought.

### **1 Corinthians 13: the hymn to Agapè**

If we now look at chapter 13 of Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians, we discover a very original and brilliant piece of literature. It has been called

an *elogium* or *enkomion*, a hymn to or *laudatio* of *Agapè*. It comes as a digression within a rather long treatise on spiritual gifts in the Corinthian community (chapters 12 to 14).

But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels,

but do not have love,

I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains,

but do not have love,

I am nothing.

If I give away all my possessions to the needy, and give my body to be burnt,

but do not have love,

I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.

It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends.

But as for prophecies, they will come to an end;

as for tongues, they will cease;

as for knowledge, it will come to an end.

For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part;

but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child;

when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.

For now we see in a mirror, dimly,

but then we will see face to face.

Now I know only in part;

then I will know fully, as I am fully known.

And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love. (12:31—13:13)

The structure of the poem consists of three strophes. The first one harkens back to wisdom sayings that are found in the Book of Wisdom and the Song of Songs:

Indeed, though one be perfect among the sons of men, if Wisdom, who comes from you, be not with him, he shall be held in no esteem (Wis 9:6).

Were one to offer all he owns to purchase love, he would be roundly mocked (Song of Songs 8:6b).

Paul uses the logic of these wisdom proverbs to exalt the value of values that he calls *agapè* (love, charity). He contrasts it with all those spiritual gifts the Corinthians are so eager to possess: language, knowledge, prophecy, and so on. He had dealt with those charismatic gifts in the previous chapter. Now he points to something that goes far beyond them (see 12:31: “a more excellent way”!). The last sentence of the first strophe makes a clear but paradoxical point: even generosity to the point of martyrdom can be “without love”, and in that case, it is just “nothing”! In that strophe Paul deconstructs any kind of spiritual self-realization, as he does in the most of his letters. We can no longer rely on self-made constructions to reach God. God has come to us in Christ: our unique task is to receive him by faith, by trust, by an unconditional confidence in the word announcing that good news.

When we come to the second strophe (13:4-7), *Agapè* is described as a queen reigning over all. She supports all kind of contradictions, without reacting irascibly or impatiently. She is patience, she is kindness. She trusts, believes, hopes, supports all things. After listing nine negations – things that love does not do, he concludes with just one positive reaction of her: “*Agapè* rejoices in the truth”. Then follows the last line, which express a superb fullness: “*Agapè* bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (7).

In the center of that strophe we read: *Agapè* does not look out for herself, “it does not insist on its own way”, “it does not seek its own interests” (different translations of the same verse). There is no movement back to herself. She is absolutely disinterested in herself. While the first strophe is full of *ego* (“if I..., if I..., if I...”), in the second, the first person singular has disappeared.

The relationship between the first and the second strophe could be compared with Paul’s statement in Galatians 2:20, which is somehow the Pauline ‘grammar’ of all spiritual life: ‘It is *no more I* who live, *but Christ* living *in me*’.

The first strophe negates the “I” with the threefold affirmation that without love, I am nothing, absolutely nothing! The second strophe shows how the person’s identity is completely filled by *Agapè*. In Philippians we read: “I have the strength for everything in Him who empowers me” (4:13). The one who empowers Paul is Christ, and the Love/*Agapè* of 1 Corinthians 13 functions in exactly the same way: *Agapè* gives the strength to “believe all things, to hope all things, to endure all things” (7).

When we look at the text carefully, we observe that the Greek word for the second verb of this second strophe is “*christeuetai*”. Its literal meaning is that *Agapè* is “kind”, “helpful”, “useful”. But the Greek word also contains the word “Christ”! Another good translation of this verse, then, might be: *Agapè* is “christic”!<sup>3</sup>

In fact, Paul never mentions “Christ” or “God” or “the Spirit” in this passage, although he is speaking about the value of values, the highest and fullest reality, which cannot be thought of without or apart from God! Only when we listen carefully can we discover that in the Love or *Agapè* Paul speaks of, no one and nothing else is suggested except the revelation of God’s Love in Christ.

In the last strophe Paul considers *Agapè* in light of the end, the final consummation. Everything will pass. Knowledge, gifts of tongues, prophecy, and all the other gifts that the Corinthians are so eager to possess, will all come to an end. He then illustrates each of the three: prophecy has to do with looking in a mirror; the gift of speaking in tongues is like the language of babies. Knowledge, however, stands by

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<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere in Paul’s writings we find a similar play of words between the name of Christ and the words that means “useful” or “kind”. See, for instance, the short Letter to Philemon, where Paul plays on the name of Onesimus (“useful”) and tells Philemon that his slave, by running away, has been “not useful” (*achristos*) to him, but now is clearly useful: *euchristos*. Here again we discover a double meaning: that slave was for a time “without Christ” (*a-christos*), but he has now been born to Christian faith by Paul’s preaching in prison and therefore is “happily of Christ” (*eu-christos*) (see Philemon 11).

itself; it is not compared to anything else. In the last verb, which is in the passive form, we can see a subtle reference to the presence of God who knows. Only faith, hope and love will remain until the very end. They are not pure realizations of men but they are nourished by God himself.

## Reflections

Paul could have chosen another name for the Reality that gives meaning to everything. He could have called it “Wisdom” or “the Spirit”, as he does elsewhere (see 1 Corinthians 1-2 on Wisdom, and Galatians 5 on the Spirit). Here he prefers to call that Reality *Agapè*, “Love”. He goes on to show what happens when Love is at work in someone by giving a description of a person plainly rooted in the Spirit of love—a person who is (to use an expression that is often found in Paul’s writings) dwelling “in Christ” or “in the Lord”.

In speaking about love, Paul does not stress that it involves “doing something for someone”. In his mind, love is not primarily altruistic. The characteristic of love that he most frequently mentions is patience. In his list of the qualities of love, he begins by saying that love is “patient” (1 Cor 13:4), and at the end he says that Love “*bears everything*”, “*endures everything*”. For Paul, the quality of patience is essential. It implies the radical renunciation of any kind of “doing” to reach the realm of God. The primary attitude Paul expects us to adopt before God is that of receptivity, trust, belief. Once a person has received Grace, he may work hard and accomplish a great deal—even more than all the others, as we hear Paul saying with reference to himself. But then he immediately corrects himself by saying, “Not I!”

. . . by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me has not been ineffective. Indeed, I have toiled harder than all of them; NOT I, however, *but the grace of God that is with me* (1 Cor 15:10).

Once again, Paul’s description of the right disposition begins with a negation of the *ego*, followed by “Christ” or “the grace of God” that is



“in me” and “with me” (see Gal 2:20). In all cases, insists the ex-Pharisee Paul, we must reject any thought or action that would lead us to believe that we can once again become—by our great zeal—agents of our own justice, of our own salvation.

## On love in Romans

If we look at what Paul had to say about love in his Letter to the Romans, his final synthetic work, we will find the same emphases and the same spiritual strategies.

### a. In Romans 5:1-5 and 6-11.

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access, by faith, to this grace in which we stand, and we boast in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we even boast of our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance, proven character, and proven character, hope, and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the holy Spirit that has been given to us (Rom 5,1-5).

In the very first verses of chapter 5 Paul gives us a short recapitulation of the heart of the matter: in this new state of justification that is ours through faith in Christ, we recognize that God has accepted us fully and gracefully, without any merit on our part. Faith, hope and love characterize our current experience, even if we still live with contradictions and are subject to all kind of afflictions. Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the past, the present and the future: Paul includes them all in one long Greek sentence. Some allusions to the Psalms can also be perceived: “hope does not disappoint” (see Ps 25:4), and to the Prophets: “the love of God has been *poured out* in our hearts *by the Holy Spirit*” (see Ezek 36-37 and Joel 3:1f.). Interesting, surely, is the direct connection between the “love of God” and the “Holy Spirit” in 5:5, a point that will become a standard affirmation over the centuries, especially after the

contribution of Augustine (354-430 C.E.) to a theology of the Holy Spirit. However, the connection between the Holy Spirit and love is not very common in the New Testament.<sup>4</sup>

Paul continues chapter 5 of his Letter to the Romans by making something more explicit of that love of God poured out in our hearts. Indirectly he will evoke again the moment of his meeting with Christ on the way to Damascus:

For Christ, while we were still helpless, yet died at the appointed time for the ungodly. Indeed, only with difficulty does one die for a just person, though perhaps for a good person one might even find courage to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. How much more then, since we are now justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath. Indeed, if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, how much more, once reconciled, will we be saved by his life. Not only that, but we also boast of God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation” (Rom 5:6-11).

“While we were still helpless . . . while we were still sinners . . . while we were *enemies* . . . “. Paul was just that, an *enemy*. What he discovered on his way to Damascus was love, a divine love, exactly what he expresses here: “*God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us*” (5:8). Paul compares God’s love for him with the way the ideal of love between friends was developed in antiquity. It might be possible to find, he says, someone ready to die for a just person. In fact, that point was made in almost all treatises on friendship from that period and before. But God’s love goes much further, he notices: his Son Jesus consented to “die for us, sinners”, and so to “reconcile us with God,

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<sup>4</sup> However, in his earlier letter to the Galatians Paul does say, “But the fruit of the *Spirit* is *love*, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness” (5:22). Also in Romans 15:30 we have: ‘I urge you... by the *love* of the *Spirit*’. But this is more or less everything we find in the New Testament (Col 1,8; 2 Tim 1:7).

when we still were enemies”. Now “we are in peace with God through Christ” (see 5:1). “Through him we have now received reconciliation” (5:11). Paul ends with an inclusion, using the same wording as he did in the beginning of this development (5:1).

Here we perceive how Paul is able to develop a complete theological reflection, enlarging the argument and making it true for all, while he remains rooted in his own very particular experience at the time of his encounter with Christ near Damascus. He knows very concretely about being loved as an enemy.

### **b. In Romans 8**

At the end of that central development of his thought in the Letter to the Romans (see chapters 5 to 8), Paul returns to a consideration of the quality of love he has experienced and demonstrates how strongly that love still affects him in the midst of so many contradictions and trials.

What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but handed him over for us all, how will he not also give us everything else along with him? Who will bring a charge against God's chosen ones? It is God who acquits us. Who will condemn? It is Christ Jesus who died, rather, was raised, who also is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.

What will separate us from the love of Christ? Will anguish, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword? As it is written: “For your sake we are being slain all the day; we are looked upon as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we conquer overwhelmingly through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 8:31-39).

These two paragraphs constitute the *peroration* of chapters 5-8 of the Letter to the Romans, and even of the entire first eight chapters. Its many rhetorical questions all exalt the strength and depth of God's love for us in Christ. The opening verse (32) even contains a reference to the episode on mount Moriah, when Abraham was ready to hand over his own son (see Genesis 22). Paul dares to say that by not sparing his own son, God went even further in his love for us. In verse 35, a long verse made up of two sentences, the Apostle lists seven situations that will not be able to separate us from the love of God, manifested in Christ Jesus our Lord, and then in verse 38 he adds even ten other realities. Paul is convinced that God's love for us is so strong that there is no situation and no creature that can separate us from it.

### c. In Romans 12-13.

Chapter 12 begins a lengthy exhortation to the Christians in Rome. He starts with a general practical catechesis in chapters 12 and 13, and then he zeroes in on the question of the strong and the weak in the community (14-15). In his general catechesis we find what some have called the new ten commandments for the Christian way of life (see 12:9-21). It concludes with an entire paragraph on the love of enemies<sup>5</sup>. At the end of that first part we have this short but strong exhortation to "love one another" taken from the Torah of Moses:

Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; you shall not kill; you shall not steal; you shall not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are

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<sup>5</sup> "If possible, on your part, live at peace with all. Beloved, do not look for revenge but leave room for the wrath; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' Rather, 'if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head.' Do not be conquered by evil but conquer evil with good" (Rom 12:18-21).

summed up in this saying, namely: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” Love does no evil to the neighbour; hence, love is the fulfilment of the law (Rom 13:8-10).

It is revealing that in his teaching about love, Paul makes same references to the commandments that Jesus does—and also the Apostle James in his Letter (see James 2:8-11). All the commandments find their source and their fulfilment in the practice of love.

## Conclusion

According to the Apostle Paul, love is the very first fruit of the Spirit in one’s life (Gal 5:22). It is impossible to imagine a life rooted in Christian faith that would be without “*agape*”. We may conclude with two piercing statements that Paul makes at the end of his Letter to the Galatians:

For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love (5:6).

For neither does circumcision mean anything, nor does uncircumcision, but only a new creation (Gal 6:15).

In Christ Jesus we are that “new creation”, and He, working in us, achieves all those possible forms of love and charity without making any distinction of social rank, race, gender, or color<sup>6</sup>. It is not I who love; it is Christ loving me. “My present life in the flesh, I live it by faith in the Son of God who has loved me and given himself up for me” (Gal 2:20). What Paul expresses here in the first person singular —as he does in many other places—is what he believes *every Christian* should think and believe and finally put into practice. For Paul, life has become a mystical

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<sup>6</sup> Gal 3,28: ‘There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus’.

way of living, rooted in Him who loved him first, rooted in the one he met on his way to Damascus.