

YE ARE MY FRIENDS

Last year, on the seventh day of October, Hamas, the Islamic Resistance Movement, led a military attack on the nation of Israel. Tens of thousands have been killed, many more wounded, and over two-million displaced. Early in the conflict, Hamas took hostage more than two-hundred people, including children and elderly people. Journalists asked Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the Latin Catholic patriarch of Jerusalem, if he would exchange himself for the hostages. He answered, “Am I ready for an exchange? Anything, if that can lead to freedom and bring those children home, no problem. There is an absolute availability on my part.” Four years ago, a Mohammedan entered a supermarket in France, killed two people, and took others hostage. After he set free all but one hostage, whom he used as a shield, Lieutenant Colonel Arnaud Beltram, a gendarme, offered to exchange himself for her, and the terrorist accepted. Three hours later, the terrorist shot Beltram three times, and stabbed him several times in the throat. Beltram was to be married three weeks later, but Father Jean-Baptiste performed the ceremony in the hospital before Beltram died of his wounds. Father Jean-Baptiste had this to:

These holy days recall the redemptive sacrifice of Christ. Let us praise the Lord for having let Arnaud imitate Jesus, to live out the teaching that “greater love has no one than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.” (Jn 15:13). Arnaud knew the terrible risk that he was taking in offering himself as a hostage to the terrorist. He did it to save a life—many lives perhaps—because such was his commitment as an officer and a Christian. I believe he offered his life to stop death. The belief of the jihadist directed him to kill. The Christian faith of Arnaud invited him to save life, if necessary at the price of his own.

Jesus taught that true love, Christian love, expresses itself in sacrifice, and He taught it both by precept and by practice.

After Jesus triumphantly entered Jerusalem, some Greek proselytes, who had come to Jerusalem to observe the passover feast, told Philip that they wished to speak to Jesus. Philip told Andrew, and the two told Jesus. After they told Jesus, He said:

The hour is come, that the Son of man should be glorified. Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit. He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal. If any man serve me, let him follow me; and where I am, there shall also my servant be: if any man serve me, him will my Father honour. (John 12:23–26)

Jesus had, a number of times before, told His disciples that He would be killed, and rise from the dead to glory, and the time had finally come. Jesus then spoke of an important law of nature: death leads to life. When a kernel of wheat is part of the stalk, it remains alone, by itself. If, however, it falls to the ground and dies, then it produces new life. As in the physical, so in the spiritual. If a man tries to preserve his life as he desires it, and lives as it pleases him, then he will lose his life forever. If, however, he gives up his life as he desires it, and lives as it pleases Christ, then he will live forever. If a man would serve Jesus, then that man must imitate Jesus, and wherever Jesus is, that man is also, because they are joined together. God the Father honors His Son because of His Son's obedience. If a man obeys the Son, then the Father honors that man.

Then Jesus said, “Now is my soul troubled; and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour: but for this cause came I unto this hour. Father, glorify thy name.” (John 12:27, 28) The penalty for sin is death, and, although Jesus committed no sin, He had to die so that He might make atonement for the sins of others. This prospect greatly troubled Him. Yet, He would suffer it, for He came into the world for that very purpose. Jesus would by His faithful obedience to God, and His loving sacrifice for men bring glory to God. Saint John recorded what happened next: “Then came there a voice from heaven, saying, I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again.” (John 12:28) At both Jesus’s baptism, and at His Transfiguration, God said, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3:17; 17:5) Jesus did not live for Himself, but for God. In every moment of His life, He obeyed His Father in heaven, and by His obedience glorified His Father. Therefore His Father was pleased with Him. Jesus glorified His Father with His life, and He would glorify Him with His death, His final, and greatest act of obedience.

Jesus said, “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me.” (John 12:32) Saint John made this comment: “This he said, signifying what death he should die.” (John 12:33) Jesus had before told His disciples that He must die, and even that He must be killed, but He now told them precisely how He would die: He would die by crucifixion. He would, although He was innocent, die a criminal, under the curse of God. Jesus was innocent, and did not deserve to die; yet, He would willingly, gladly, die to glorify God, and to save men. Jesus’s crucifixion would be a propitiation for the world, so that all men, Jew or Gentile, might be saved from their sins.

Jesus, at His last supper with His disciples, after Judas left to betray Him, said to those who remained with Him:

Now is the Son of man glorified, and God is glorified in him. If God be glorified in him, God shall also glorify him in himself, and shall straightway glorify him. Little children, yet a little while I am with you. Ye shall seek me: and as I said unto the Jews, Whither I go, ye cannot come; so now I say to you. A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another. (John 13:31–35)

The Son of God had humbled Himself by becoming a man, and coming into the world to serve men. By His obedience to God He glorified God, and so God would glorify Him. His final humiliation would be His crucifixion, but after that God would glorify Him by raising Him from the dead and giving Him dominion over the entire world. Jesus would for a little while longer remain with His disciples, but then He would die, rise from the dead, and ascend His Father in heaven, and to that place none, not even His disciples could follow. So, before He left His disciples, He gave them final instructions. He gave them a new commandment, to love each other as He had loved them. To love is not a new commandment. In the law of Moses, God commanded His people, “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.” (Leviticus 19:18) Jesus said that this is the second great commandment, after the commandment to love God with one’s entire being. (Deuteronomy 6:5) A person naturally loves himself. He looks after himself, sees to his needs, seeks justice when wronged. God commanded His people to love their fellow man as they would love themselves. So, one ought to see to the needs of his fellow man. Jesus by His death would perform the greatest act of love toward another: He would give His life so that men might live. So, Jesus amplified the commandment to love by telling His followers to love each other as He loved them, by giving His life for them. Jesus sacrificed Himself for men, and men ought to sacrifice themselves for each other. If followers of Christ love each other in this way, then all men will know that they are indeed His followers, because they follow His example of love.

Jesus would soon leave the world for heaven, and He would leave His disciples behind. He said He is the way, the truth, and the life. (John 14:6) For three years, Jesus's disciples learned from Him, by both His precept and His practice. What would they do without Him? Who would teach them? Who would guide them? Jesus consoled them, saying:

And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you. I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you. (John 14:16–18)

Jesus would ascend to heaven, but He would ask His Father in heaven to give His disciple another helper like Himself, One who would take His place and be with His disciples forever. This is the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth. The world cannot receive Him because cannot see Him, and do not know Him, and they do not know Him because they do not know Christ. Jesus's disciples knew Him, because He was with them. Yet, after Jesus ascended into heaven, the Spirit would come to them in a new way, and be in each one of them forever. So, Jesus would not leave them alone, and without a guide. He would come to them by way of the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit would be their guide.

Then Jesus said:

As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you: continue ye in my love. If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love. These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full. This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you. Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you. Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you. Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain: that whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, he may give it you. These things I command you, that ye love one another. (John 15:9–17)

The Son of God always obeyed His Father in heaven, and His Father loved Him for His obedience. He remained in His Father's love by keeping His Father's commandments. The Son loves His followers with the same kind of love that God has for His Son. Jesus exhorted His disciples to remain in His love, and the way for them to remain in His love is the same way that He remained in His Father's love: by obedience. Just as the Father was pleased with His Son because of His Son's obedience, so Jesus is pleased with His followers by their obedience. The obedience of Jesus's followers is a cause of joy for Him, and, if He is pleased with His followers, then that is a cause of joy for them.

Jesus again told His disciples His commandment: to love one another as He loved them. The love that Jesus commands is not one feeling, but of doing. It is not one of affection, but of action, of giving, of sacrifice. It does what is good for the object loved. So, although the world was hostile toward God, and offensive to Him, He loved it by doing what was good for it: He gave His only begotten Son to die for the sins of the world. (John 3:16) People have many needs, and love seeks to meet those needs. To live a life of love is to live for others, to give one's life to the service of others. This love is expressed in various ways, but the greatest way is to die for

someone. The Son of God came into the world, and, although the world did not receive Him, He would do what was good for it: He would die for it, so that it might live, and live for God. The greatest love a man can have, Jesus said, is to give his life for his friends, and His disciples were His friends, and they would remain His friends so long as they did whatever He asked of them. The Scriptures say of Abraham, “And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness.” (Genesis 15:6) God made a promise to Abraham, and Abraham believed God, and so God considered Abraham righteous. Because Abraham believed God, he obeyed God. So, when God told Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, Abraham was prepared to obey, but God at the last moment stopped Abraham from completing the task. God said to Abraham, “Now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me.” (Genesis 22:12) Because of Abraham’s faith and obedience, Abraham is called a friend of God, one who loves God, and whom God loves. (2 Chronicles 20:7; Isaiah 41:8; James 2:23) So, a friend of Jesus, a lover of Jesus, is one who lives for Jesus.

Under the Old Covenant, the people of God were servants of God who obeyed God out of a sense of fear. (Exodus 20:20) A master gives his servants orders, and does not explain himself to them. Servants simply do as they are told. Under the New Covenant, however, God’s people are friends of the Son of God, and He shares with them all that His father, the master of the house, has made known to Him. Jesus’s followers do not choose Him; rather, He chooses them, and He chooses them and unites them to Himself so that they might bear the fruit of good works. If one of Christ’s followers obeys His command, then he may ask God for anything that he needs, and God will grant it. The command that Christ has given is in principle quite simple: love one another.

At Pentecost, God poured out His Spirit upon His people, Israel. Saint Peter said that this was the fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel, through whom God said He would pour out His Spirit upon all men. Sometime later, the Spirit told Peter to go to the house of one Cornelius, a Gentile, and when Peter was there, He told them that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Saint Luke recorded what happened next:

While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word. And they of the circumcision which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost. For they heard them speak with tongues, and magnify God. Then answered Peter, Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we? And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then prayed they him to tarry certain days. (Acts 10:44–48)

When Peter told them that Jesus is the Christ, they believed, and when they believed, the Holy Spirit came upon them, according to the promise of God. The Jewish Christians who were with Peter were surprised that God gave the gift of the Holy Spirit to Gentiles, but they could not deny the fact, for they heard them magnify God in languages they had not learned. Because the Gentiles had received the Holy Spirit, Saint Peter ordered that they receive water baptism, which signified what they received. In this way, the Gentiles were joined to the body of Christ, along with Jews, and so the two were united to each other, and bound to love each other by the power of the Holy Spirit, just as Christ had loved them, and gave His life for them.

Saint John wrote:

Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God: and every one that loveth him that begat loveth him also that is begotten of him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his

commandments: and his commandments are not grievous. For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God? This is he that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is truth. (1 John 5:1–6)

Because of Original Sin, men are spiritually dead, and so they cannot rightly believe or rightly love. Rightly to believe and rightly to love requires a new birth. If anyone believes that Jesus is the Christ it is only because he has been begotten by God. A man naturally loves His Father, and a man of God naturally loves his Heavenly Father. If the Christian loves the Heavenly Father who begat him, then he naturally loves all others whom God begat, which is to say, God's spiritual children, the Christian's spiritual brethren. If a man loves God and obeys His commandments, then he knows that he loves the children of God, because it is God's commandment that he love them. Love for God shows itself in obeying His commandments, and His commandments are not burdensome. His commandments are to love God, and to love God's children.

The way of the world, which is to say, the way of mankind in its state of sin, is contrary to the way of God. God is love, but man is not. God is loveable, and so are men, because they are made in the image of God. Yet, because men are sinful they are both unlovable and unloving. Nevertheless, whoever is born of God overcomes the world. He has victory over the world and its ways because he believes that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and so follows Him and His ways. Jesus's earthly ministry began when He was baptized by John the Baptist, and it ended when He died upon the cross. At Jesus's baptism, His Father in heaven declared that Jesus is His beloved Son in whom He is well pleased, and, at His death, He obediently completed the work His Father gave Him to do. From beginning to end Jesus loved God and man, and so lived for them, and died for them. So, by the water of baptism, and by the blood of the Eucharist, Christ saves His people, and the Holy Spirit, who is truth, bears witness that this is true.

Let us believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, who died for our sins, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven. Let us be glad that He did not leave us alone, but sent His Spirit into the world. Let us by the power of His Spirit love one another, as He loved us, and gave His life for us.

Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.