

Fr. Perozich comments —

Anthony Esolen has woven so many good instructive quips, comments and instruction into this article. I have bolded some of them, so there is no need for me to comment further.

When Love Isn't Love

ANTHONY ESOLEN



If there is a telltale of the social justice Catholic, it may lie in one of two assumptions, or both together. The first is that we know what *justice* is. The second is that, when we say that *God* is love—and presumably we pursue justice because we wish to love those who suffer injustice—we know what such *love* is, and we have the capacity to love, at least in a way that adumbrates that divine love.

Others, who say, “Love is love,” have set themselves out of the discussion already. We in the West have been

distinguishing love from love since the time of the Hebrew prophets and the Greek philosophers. “Such love is hate, and such desire is shame,” says the poet Edmund Spenser, referring to a lust to possess the body of one you have fallen for, outside of marriage, and with no thought of marriage at all. It doesn’t help matters that the lover in this case is a young woman who mistakes another woman, a paragon of chaste desire disguised as a knight as she searches for the man she is destined to marry, for a male.

But let us look at those matters of justice and love.

As to our knowledge, I wonder what species we are talking about, because every side in a political battle believes, and usually with considerable reason, that they are pursuing justice. The Union Army—at least, many soldiers in it—fought to preserve the still new experiment in government that the United States was, or *were*; the Confederate Army—at least, many soldiers in it—fought to preserve the sovereignty of the individual states, rather than seeing them reduced to provinces of a single central state. Yes, I know that the evil of slavery lay near the heart of the division between north and south, but it was not the only point of contention.

I am not agnostic when it comes to determining where justice lies, or a probable preponderance of it. But in general, human affairs are a muddle, and good and bad motives are tangled up in the human heart like the wheat and the tares in Jesus’ parable. **And even a pure motive does not a just action make.** Consider the judge who tilts the field of battle against a man he is certain is a malefactor. He is like an umpire who calls all the close plays against a team full of bullies. That is not a bad umpire but no umpire at all, and his principle of action would make the very game he officiates a farce.

Suppose your motive is good, and the end you seek is good, and the means is not illicit; still you may be acting unjustly, or at least imprudently, and sometimes with disastrous consequences that you might have foreseen had you not been so in love with your dream of justice—and had you troubled to listen fairly to those who opposed you.

“Education should be free!” I hear some people cry, referring to the thing that passes for such in our colleges and universities. It is often a delight to demand that other people, or a vague and generalized populace, pay for something deemed good, when nothing, after all, can be gained without cost.

But the consequences of such a decision will be many, and not all of them pleasant. Nations that provide free post-secondary education put a strict limit on the number of people who can have that good. Son, your future may be determined for you before your voice finishes breaking.

Then there is the danger of state interference in what is taught, or a standardization that makes one school indistinguishable from another; and we in America have still, in part, resisted each of these. And what about the moral hazard? People take entitlements for granted, and they grow ungrateful and indolent. That is human nature—fallen human nature.

Of course, the cost of college in the United States is obscene; it is the second worst swindle in the nation, second only to that of the central government that has enabled it by its imprudent or perhaps duplicitous largess. I have plenty of ideas about how to choke back those costs. Every one of them will hurt *somebody*. And like all proposals that treat of the common good, they must be judged by such things as probability of success, degree of usefulness, inherent rightness, moral hazard, good or bad precedent, logical or pragmatic implications, and so forth.

Evaluating them requires sober and mature weighing—not just of good against bad, but of one good against a partly incompatible other good, of probabilities and payoffs, and of risks

and losses. It also requires a keen—even ruthless—probing of the real premises of the action, so that we will know where it may all lead. We know where good intentions alone pave the way.

And then there is love.

“We do not know how to love,” writes the brutally honest and often hard-hearted Louis, at the brink of his conversion to Christ, in Francois Mauriac’s *Vipers’ Tangle*. We sometimes do not love those people or those things we think we love. We may also love and not be aware of it. **But the human heart, without grace, hardly beats at all. It is a tangle of vipers, and when it beats, it squeezes out its poison.**

So, when we say that God is love, and we are blithely confident about it rather than abashed or stunned into silence by the mystery, we are apt to make a false god of the pleasant affections we feel. Virgil says to Dante, in Purgatory, that love, meaning a desire for something that in itself may be good, is the seedbed of all the good we do, *and all the evil*. It is good to love your country. Hitler loved Germany; at least he was sure he did; it was what his feelings told him. A man who leaves his wife loves the woman he turns to; at least he is sure he loves her; his feelings tell him so.

The mother who coddles her son and shields him from rough play loves her boy, and she may very well love him right into loneliness and sexual confusion. That does happen. The father who is severe with his son and swings from excessive praise to squint-eyed faultfinding may love him right into rebellion and self-destruction. That happens too. **The apostles begged Jesus to teach them to pray. It did not occur to them to beg Jesus to teach them to love, and yet that was what Jesus was doing, constantly, and often to their disappointment or consternation.**

How on earth can I make *such love as I feel, such love as I act upon* a law for myself, let alone for anybody else? “We do not

know how to love,” says Louis. **What we need, he adds, is a love that the world has forgotten. And that is the love of Christ, the love that is a consuming fire, that burns to ashes our hearts of stone and fills the emptiness with Christ’s own heart, a heart of true flesh.**

Political action is necessary, but, as Gilbert Meilaender wrote in *Faith and Faithfulness*, it is at best what he calls “penultimate,” a pointer toward the truly ultimate, rather, he says, citing Bonhoeffer, as a tangent of time veering off and away into eternity. “When we recognize the limits of politics, we will not claim for political achievements—even ones as important as advancements of justice or freedom—the status of events in the history of salvation.”

Affection, too, is good as far as it goes; what kind of human life can we have without it? But when we think of the love of Christ, the best we can say of affection, what people mainly mean by “love,” is that it is a flicker reflected in a puddle, to the magnificent and immense bonfire of a star.

So let us leave the slogans behind and be a little less confident of what we know and what we can do. Without the grace of God, we are nothing.