

“If it were not for your love, they would never forgive you”

Valérie Boiten

Can love be selfless? I thought about the question as I made my way to the convent. I assumed I was in for a silent retreat, but that seemed like a silly mistake to me now. With the busy traffic of the inland port of Brussels in the background, just a few hundred meters away, I walked past noisy kebab shops, cafés with people watching FC Barcelona, a mosque where countless men wearing linen trousers and sandals were pouring in and out, until I finally managed to find the small and ordinary house where I was expected for the weekend.

Love, in the Christian sense, was never a feeling or emotion, but a virtue. Where the Greek word “agape” is mentioned in the New Testament, it usually describes the virtue of *caritas* – charity. Christian thinkers such as Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas wrote about the essence of charity, which they considered a foundational virtue. Love, therefore, is first and foremost the love of God (*Amor Dei*), which gently breaks human beings’ selfish and greedy nature (*Amor Sui*) and leads to an *Amor Mundi* of some sorts, whereby we act towards others to reflect the spiritual love we experience in faith. But can we really “love our neighbor as ourselves”? Is love truly that void of participation of the self, a self who may wish to love a fashionable Instagram-idol more than the grumpy neighbor downstairs?

Sister Martine opened the door and welcomed me into their home. Over tea and biscuits, she introduced me to the congregation of the Little Sisters of Nazareth, a community built on ideals of social justice, humility and service, inspired by the life of Charles de Foucauld. Breaking with the idea of religious life as seclusion, the sisters were working day jobs in textile factories, industrial laundries and hospitals. “You can only speak on behalf of the deprived, if you live and work among them,” Martine said. In her case, it meant settling in a lively but impoverished neighborhood in Brussels, with high levels of unemployment and many residents living under the radar, undocumented.

The next morning, after an hour of silent prayer, we headed out to the market to buy strawberries, as the Sisters loved their sweet and mildly sour flavor. Martine tirelessly greeted people on the street. Then she stopped me and went over to a homeless woman. As I watched how she handed the woman a few sandwiches and helplessly tried to strike up a conversation, I realized I never once dared to open my mouth when giving money to people on the street. I usually felt too embarrassed.

Paradoxically, the commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself” seems to suggest having little or no concern for ourselves and our interests, while at the same time it is our very self-concern that serves as the point of reference – *as yourself*. Isn’t that slightly ironic, knowing how many of us experience fraught relationships with our “selves”? No one escapes the relentless drive for self-improvement and productivity these days, or the steady marketing by brands and corporations whose aim is to spark the desire of building a new self, through things like make-up or fashion.

Today’s forms of charity may well be more about feeling good about ourselves than about helping others. After all, by clicking “donate”, the power balance between giver and receiver stays intact, each person safely locked into their own space. In the spiritual sense of the word, people may act out

of charity because they feel compelled to do so, to reconfirm their love of God and to advance their private spiritual journey. Isn't that self-interest just as well?

To my surprise, Martine was all too painfully aware of these questions: "The poor would never forgive you for giving them bread, were it not for your love," she whispered. "Love means brushing your ego aside. You're no longer in control, as you begin to realize that others are more important for who you are than your own thoughts. Love has nothing to do with selfishness. It's your encounter with the world. And like with any meeting, you need to show up. So what self-less love are you talking about? You are a part of this world."