

“DO YOU LOVE ME?”

Introduction

On a spring morning along the Sea of Galilee some 2,000 years ago, the Risen Jesus asks his disciple Peter this deeply personal question: “Do you love me?”

At first glance, we might expect Peter to give a whole-hearted “Yes!” After all, Peter was one of Jesus’s first disciples. He had left his fishing nets behind and made many sacrifices to follow Jesus for the last three years. Moreover, Jesus selected Peter as one of the Twelve Apostles to whom he entrusted his mission of proclaiming the Kingdom of God. To top it off, Peter was the first to confess explicitly that Jesus was the Messiah and as a result was given the keys of the kingdom, symbolizing his special role of leadership among the Twelve.

That’s why Jesus’s question “Do you love me?” seems on the surface to be a no-brainer. Of course Peter loves Jesus! Peter the Fisherman-Turned-Disciple, Peter the Chosen Apostle, Peter the First Pope—surely *he* would be a model of faithfulness!

But the word Jesus uses for “love” here makes Peter pause. The Gospel of John employs the Greek word *agapao*, which describes total, unconditional, self-giving love—the kind

of committed, sacrificial love Jesus models throughout his life, most especially on the Cross. Jesus, therefore, is not asking Peter if he loves merely with ordinary human affection. Another Greek word, *phileo*, tends to describe that kind of love—the love of friendship, tender but not all-encompassing.¹ Rather, Peter is being asked if he loves as Christ loves. Does Peter love Jesus with *agape* love?²

At this, Peter holds back. He knows he can't go there. He sadly wishes he could say yes, and in the past his naïve overzealousness may have led him to do so. In fact, not too long ago, Peter even boldly pledged his absolute fidelity to Jesus, saying at the Last Supper, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death" (Lk 22:33). But his threefold denial of Christ later that same night makes Peter's shortcomings in *agape* painfully clear. Peter gives in to fear, betrays his friend three times, and turns away weeping bitterly when he realizes what he has done. He has tasted the bitter sorrow of his weakness and infidelity.

So now, a much more humbled Peter qualifies his affirmation of love. He admits to Jesus, "Lord, you know that I love you (*phileo*)." It's as if Peter is saying, "You of all people, Jesus, know how far away I am from *agape*. You know that I am only capable of loving you with my imperfect human love: *philia*."

Jesus, however, doesn't back down. He asks a second time, "Do you love (*agapao*) me?" Again, Peter humbly admits he can only love Jesus with his lesser human love: "Lord, you know that I love you (*phileo*)."

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, "Peter, the Apostle," General Audience (May 24, 2006).

² The word *agape* is the noun related to the verb *agapao*. The word *philia* is the noun related to the verb *phileo*.

Finally, Jesus changes the question. He does not lower the standard of love in any way, but he does lower himself to meet Peter where he is. He accepts what Peter can offer, even if it's only weak, human love. He uses the word *phileo*: "Do you love (*phileo*) me?" Here, Jesus puts himself on Peter's level and does not demand that Peter immediately rise up to his. And that's encouraging to Peter. He replies to Jesus as if to say, "Lord, you know everything. You know this is all I can do on my own. The best I am capable of offering is my weak, human love: *philia*. I wish I could do more, but I humbly entrust this imperfect gift to you."

And here we come to the most amazing part of the story—and the one that sheds light on the drama of our own walk with the Lord. Jesus accepts this imperfect human love of Peter's and transforms it into *agape*. Peter finally presents himself to Jesus as he really is—not in the inflated view he previously had of himself or in the ideal way he'd like to live someday, but in the truth of his own fragility. And once Peter does this, once he comes to terms with the truth about himself—that he is simply not capable of *agape* right now—a new era begins in Peter's friendship with Christ. At precisely this moment, Jesus suddenly starts talking about how Mr. *Philia* Peter will one day live *agape* like Christ himself did. Peter will be changed. His heart will be transformed. One day, Peter will find his hands stretched out on a cross like Jesus's were on Good Friday. Indeed, Jesus foretells Peter's crucifixion in Rome: "When you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will fasten your belt for you and carry you where you do not wish to go' (This he said to show by what death he was to glorify God)" (Jn 21:18–19).

The story of Peter's transformation is the story God wants to write in the hearts of all disciples. Jesus wants to meet us

where we are, as we are, with all our fears, wounds, and sins, and transform our *philia* hearts into *agape* hearts. As Pope Benedict XVI once observed,

From that day, Peter “followed” the Master with the precise awareness of his own fragility; but this understanding did not discourage him. Indeed, he knew that he could count on the presence of the Risen One beside him. From the naïve enthusiasm of initial acceptance, passing through the sorrowful experience of denial and the weeping of conversion, Peter succeeded in entrusting himself to that Jesus who adapted himself to his poor capacity of love. And in this way he shows us the way, notwithstanding all of our weakness. We know that Jesus adapts himself to this weakness of ours. We follow him with our poor capacity to love and we know that Jesus is good and he accepts us.³

What Jesus did in Peter he will do in each of us—if we learn to follow him as a disciple.

Being a Disciple

In the first-century world of Jesus, being a disciple was all about one key word: imitation. When a disciple followed a rabbi, he lived with the rabbi, shared meals with the rabbi, prayed with the rabbi, and studied with the rabbi. The goal of the disciple wasn’t merely to master his rabbi’s teachings, but to imitate the way he lived—the way he prayed, worked, trusted in God’s providence, helped the poor, lived friendship, and served the people.

So if we are going to be disciples of Jesus today, we must aim for a lot more than believing a set of doctrines and

³ Pope Benedict XVI, “Peter, the Apostle,” General Audience (May 24, 2006). While it is often pointed out that John’s Gospel uses *agapao* and *phileo* interchangeably, the play on words in this particular passage, coming as they do in light of Peter’s recent failures in love (his threefold denial of Christ), make possible Pope Benedict’s pastoral insight and beautiful, spiritual reflection on this scene: Peter humbly recognizing he is incapable of *agapao* and Jesus accepting what Peter can offer.

following the rules of our faith. We must go deeper and consider what's happening interiorly in our spiritual lives: Are we moving closer to Christ, encountering him anew each day and becoming more like him? Do we intentionally strive to live like him, think like him, and love

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like him? Being a disciple of Jesus is not about merely going through the motions with our faith—attending Mass, saying some prayers, and avoiding bad things. Following Jesus as a disciple is a whole way of life—*his* way of life transforming us, his *agape* love radiating through our lesser *philia* love.

All of this reminds us that being Catholic is not a stagnant reality (“I identify on this survey as a Catholic.”) It’s something intensely dynamic. It implies movement and transformation as the disciple deepens his friendship with Christ and becomes ever more like him. Indeed, a disciple humbly recognizes two things:

(A) *The truth about himself*—his many weaknesses, failures, and areas where he falls short of living like Christ

(B) *The truth about what he’s made for*—being conformed to the image of Christ: living like him, loving like him, *agapao*

In summary, a true disciple knows what he’s made for: transformation in Christ (B). But he also knows the many ways he falls short (A). Discipleship is all about moving from A to B. It’s the long journey Peter made from *phileo* to *agapao* that Jesus wants to reproduce in the hearts of all his disciples.

When our Catholic Tradition talks about growing in holiness, pursuing sanctity, and becoming saints, it's basically describing this process of a Christian disciple being conformed to the image of Christ (see Rm 8:29). Most of all, a mature disciple becomes increasingly aware of how this is not something he can do on his own. As with Peter, our discipleship is a lifelong process of becoming ever more convinced of our littleness, learning to rely on God, and cooperating with his grace as we are slowly being transformed into Christ's likeness "from one degree of glory to another" (2 Cor 3:18).

Do you sense that movement in you—that desire to go deeper in your relationship with Christ? Do you have a longing to follow Jesus more closely, to be transformed by him, to move from A to B, from *phileo* to *agapao*? Do you notice a stirring inside, a longing to love God with all your heart, but feel unsure about what steps to take next?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, know that God is the one who has put those yearnings in your soul. He has already given you the heart of a disciple. This book simply aims to help you follow those initial promptings of the Holy Spirit so that you may more intentionally encounter Jesus anew each day and be more disposed to the power of his grace molding you, transforming you ever more into his likeness.