

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

“Love.” “Love wins.” “Let love win.” “All you need is love,” or “love is all you need.” You’ve, no doubt, heard all the mantras. Love, love, love, love, love...

There, of course, is a gravely dangerous, and—dare I say—evil, problem with the way we think about and use this word “love.” This word, and many other familiar words (a very short list might include: nice, religious, spiritual, personal, relevant, dynamic, young, genius, and good), have become so overused in our culture that they no longer have any meaning. The word “love,” as used by American Pop Culture, and, by extension, you and me, has become so vacuous in meaning that its definition, if any, exists solely in the mind of the user. It has become the quintessential postmodern word. It’s a word that means anything to anybody and so means nothing at all. In this state, it has taken on the queer character so that, when applied, it labels any choice acceptable and any criticism of said choice or choices as intolerant (another word that might be added to the list above). You are labeled loving or unloving (a handy synonym for “intolerant”) by your acceptance or questioning of another’s choice of love. Now, while all of this might seem rather muddy, it has already had disastrous and readily apparent consequences. It has neutered our culture leaving us unable to label any choice as bad—regardless of how obviously bad the thing might be.

If I may digress for a paragraph or two, I desire to add that this is the logical outcome of a consumer culture. The consumer culture, in which we are reared (it’s our “native” environment), has succeeded spectacularly in emptying the word “love” of meaning thus releasing us (and the seller, actually) to create a love that suits our tastes. As long as I have the money, I’m free to invent myself, to love myself and others, in any way that suits my fancy. I’m also free to denounce those relics (a term which might describe you and me) whom, having a more precise understanding of the word “love,” might call my actions into question. How do you call something that has little or no meaning—or can be continuously redefined in the mind of the user—into question?

Are you starting to see the danger?

This consumer defined (and seller defined) love is based on desire, be it real, perceived, or implied. It is selfish. Instead of looking out to the community, it looks only to the self, and, as a result, cares nothing about its impact on the neighbor and the community. Look around. You’ll see the results. The livelihood and well-being of a spouse, children, one’s own health, and life itself are secondary to the consumer’s pursuit of his or her ideal of love. It is sinful.

This self-centered and self-defined love has other dangers. Since we are conditioned to consume, we gravitate to the new and shiny (including newer and shinier people). As a case in point, think about the last time you called a pastor. Was your “desire” for someone my age with my physical appearance, or was your hope for someone young and dynamic (there’s another one of those words). I know the answer, and so do you. Now ask yourself this: Why? Why are youth and appearance prized more than age and experience? We often cannot see (or refuse to see) the consequences this has had on the church. This thinking, of course, moves well beyond our little

churches and right into our homes and communities. It destroys marriages, families, and friendships as our eyes wander always to the younger and prettier. Ill-defined love takes a heavy toll. It has no quarter for ugliness, the odors and textures of a varied humanity, nor for personal difficulty (hence the ever-progressing devaluation of life).

We, however, as God's people, understand very precisely what the word "love" means. This translates into how a life filled with love functions—breathes—as it sojourns through this world. The meaning, full freight, and depth of the word "love" is given to us by Christ our Lord. What follows is one passage (of many) describing what this love is:

*"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another (John 15:12-17).*

So Christ instructs us, His Church, to love. To clear up any ambiguity, He defines what love is—how it acts. Love lays down its life. It submits to God. It serves. It serves not the self, but the neighbor. As Christ loved you and served you by giving Himself over to a horrid death so you, underserving one, might live, so you love. We love by denying ourselves and loving—sacrificing ourselves—for our neighbor. This is where the beauty of love is found: In serving as we have been served.

Love, Christ's love, has no regard for selfishness. In fact, Christ's love, which is our love by virtue of our call into His Church, does what selfish love cannot. It lives and serves in ugly, dirty places. This love goes to the sick and contagious. It cleans their wounds and anoints them. It stands beside and cares for the sick and dying. It travels to the gutters and shadows of society, and, when there, it cares. It cares for sick children. It works extra hours to provide for the need of others. And, in return, it asks for nothing. This love honors the friend and neighbor by seeking to aid, not harm. It lives and breathes with the betterment of the neighbor and community in view. It forgives those who speak against it, and those who actively try to hurt it. It suffers so others may be spared. And it is totally antithetical to what the culture defines as love. It is this life of love, the life in Christ, to which you have been called.

So love. Love as you have been loved by Christ.

A blessed Lententide to you.

Rev. Leonard Astrowski, Pastor