

Eros and Agape will Embrace



What are we to infer when Valentine's day coincides with Ash Wednesday in the Church's liturgical calendar?¹ Chance coincidence? Perhaps. Hint from above? Likely.

In the ancient world, occurrences such as planets crossing paths or constellations overlapping with heavenly bodies were not interpreted as chance occurrences. They were taken as hints from above—as in literally, from above. Every planet had its character, and an encounter between one and the other implied a confluence of the traits that were proper to each. Planets were not just huge rocks floating in space; they were gods. Mars (*Aries* for the Greeks), was the god of war, violence and aggression; and Venus (*Aphrodite* for the Greeks) was the goddess of love, beauty and pleasure. Whenever the trajectory of Mars was noted to be on a 'collision course' with that of Venus, the predictions that such an encounter portended would be as many as could be cooked up by the fertile imaginations of their fortune-tellers.

It is said that the Wise Men from the East were able to foretell the coming of the Messiah thanks to their keen observations of heavenly bodies. Being scholars and astronomers, they must have been aware of the prophecy in Numbers 24:17 which was uttered centuries before them by their countryman, Balaam:

"I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel."

¹ As was the case in the year 2024 ...

Tradition tells us that whilst still in Persia (present day Iran), the Magi first noticed that the bright light in the sky arose when Saturn and Jupiter crossed paths. They set out in haste for Judea such that by the time they were arriving in Bethlehem they could guess the place wherein to find the prophesied Virgin and Child precisely because the Sun was in *Virgo* (the Virgin Constellation) and the New Moon was in the Royal Constellation of *Leo* (i.e. Judah). The heavens were literally declaring his glorious presence (See. Psalm 19).

What then should we portend for this year in which Valentines and Lent have crossed paths; this year in which *Eros* and *Agape* have embraced. Two kinds of loves—Man’s ascending, searching love and God’s descending, sacrificial Love have met at a cross-roads.

We no longer indulge in star-gazing or fortune-telling in the New Testament because, as St. Gregory Nazianzen said:

... at the very moment when the Magi adored Jesus, astrology came to an end as the stars from then on traced the orbit determined by Christ. (See Poem. Dogm. V 55-64)

Still, there is no reason why we should not allow the bright light shed by the coming of Christ to guide our conversation about how these two kinds of love should be ordered to each other. In his very first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est* (Latin for God is Love), Pope Benedict XVI made some pretty convincing arguments for the rehabilitation and [re]union of these loves:

Yet *eros* and *agape*—ascending love and descending love—can never be completely separated. The more the two, in their different aspects, find a proper unity in the one reality of love, the more the true nature of love in general is realized.

Eros needs to be disciplined and purified if it is to provide not just fleeting pleasure, but a certain foretaste of the pinnacle of our existence, of that beatitude for which our whole being yearns.

When St. John tells us that “God is Love” (in Greek; *Theos agape estin*) in his first epistle, he was not saying that God is Nice or that He is Romantic. “Love in action”, as Dostoevsky reminded us in the *Brothers Karamazov* “is a harsh and dreadful thing compared with love in dreams”. There’s something stark and grim about the true nature of love as it is revealed to us in the event that took place on that Friday we call Good:

This is love in its most radical form. By contemplating the pierced side of Christ (cf. 19:37), we can understand the starting-point of this Encyclical Letter: “God is love” (1

Jn 4:8). It is there that this truth can be contemplated. It is from there that our definition of love must begin. BXVI, *Deus Caritas Est*

If it is not brought to the point of self-sacrifice, *eros* remains naïve and immature—like a teenage girl who stuffs herself with sweets and chocolates and still expects to maintain her figure. We are all intuitively aware of the sacrificial dimension of love. We know for instance that the *eros* of young people who are not ready to wait for marriage before engaging in sex will never mature into *agape*. When we accept that the way of love (read, *The Way of the Cross*) requires this kind of *exodus*—a going out of oneself—then and only then, will we also understand that suffering is the process through which man becomes truly human. Only in abandoning ourselves – only in the disinterested gift of the ‘I’ in favour of the ‘Thou’, only in the ‘Yes’ to the greater life, i.e. the life of God – does our life too become full and spacious, not empty and boring. This is, by the way, the main message of Holy Week. Jesus knew he was going to die, but he nevertheless entered Jerusalem in triumph – like the King that He was ... that He Is. He “passed through the Cross” giving himself totally because he knew that only as the Risen One could He make himself present to all of us.

In music the process by which a change of key is brought about is called modulation. A modulation is usually brought about when a note or chord that is common to both keys acts as a bridge or a cross-over point. The kind of love we normally celebrate on Valentine’s day is not bad; but it needs to be transposed into a new key for it not to devour itself through selfishness. The contemporary world’s obsession with sex for its own sake risks turning all of us into “sexual drunkards”—disciples of Dionysius; the Greek god of wine and ecstasy.

How can we modulate *Eros* upwards into *Agape* and alongside this, *Agape* downwards into *Eros* without confusion or separation? Is there a mysterious musical ladder that stretches from the depths of Sheol to the heights of heaven (See Ps. 139)? How can we maintain the dance between these two apparently incompatible bed-fellows? The key note or chord common to both *Eros* and *Agape* is sacrifice; asceticism; purification—in a word, the Cross. The Cross, on which the Crucified hangs until the end of time, is the mysterious ladder on which Jacob saw the angels of heaven ascending and descending. The “fundamental note” on this ladder is the Incarnation—the humble descent of God into our fallen world. The “seventh note” on this ladder is the Resurrection which consequently *leads* to the Ascension of the Glorified One back into the Empyrean Heaven from whence He came, and where He is currently seated (body and soul) at the right hand of His Almighty Father.

In her masterwork, *The Interior Castle*, which she wrote in 1577 when in the prime of her life, she described the soul's journey of intimacy with Christ as a continuous and ever-deepening entry into a castle with seven mansions or chambers. A faithful soul's interior pilgrimage, she said, is comparable to an ascent which paradoxically and simultaneously involves a complete descent into *selflessness*. Teresa referred to the structure of the castle with seven rooms as an image of human interiority—a veritable *ladder* of interiorization. She famously used the symbol of the silkworm reborn as a butterfly to express the transfiguration that happens in Christian's soul when it *passes over* from the natural to the supernatural realms ... from natural *eros* to supernatural *agape*.

When we take the trouble to *really* work on our capacities for self-giving (e.g. through prayer, sacrifice, work, almsgiving ...), with energy and perseverance, until the toil makes our soul scream; we can *really* expand our finite human capacities to “infinity and beyond”. When *Eros really* strives upwards, *Agape* condescends to meet *her* half-way so as to insert her into the dynamic of *His* own self-giving.

And speaking of toil, ladders and “Jacobs”, there is a reason why someone who has spent LOTS and LOTS of hours, toiling and moiling in the practice room, like Jacob Collier, is able to expand his musical capacity to near-infinity. Collier has this uncanny ability to modulate from almost any key to any key, up and down the solfa ladder. He has mastered all kinds of chord extensions, a million and one jazz reharmonization techniques and all manner of voice leading concepts. He knows the difference between just intonation and twelve-tone equal temperament and can control his voice to exploit that difference. He can hear and play all kinds of strange triplets and complex time signatures... no wonder they have dubbed him *The Mozart* of Gen Z. When we love something to the point of dying for it, we open up channels for transcendence. Where's there's a Will there's a Way.

If-ever we manage to internalize “Jacob's Ladder” (the Mystery of the Cross), the words of Scripture shall be fulfilled in us – albeit with a modern twist: “Justice and Peace shall kiss ...” (See Ps. 85), *Eros* and *Agape* shall embrace. We will inherit Christ's ability to transpose *Eros* into *Agape* – and back again.