SERVAIS PINCKAERS is quite right when he observes in his book, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, “All Christian ethicists recognize the primary place of love in Christian morality.”¹ The purpose of this essay is to survey the state of the conversation on love in Catholic moral theology.² The essay is in three parts. The first part describes problems basic to discussions on love in theology. The second part illustrates what is perhaps the fundamental tension in the conversation. Is love best described as sacrifice or union? The third part looks at discussions of appropriate self-love.

The movement of this essay then is as follows. First, given the ambiguity of the word within theology as well as the contrast of a theological sense of the word compared to the popular usage, it is a difficult project to conceptualize love. Second, union/intimacy and sacrifice/service are two primary characteristics of love in moral theology. The latter is meant to be of service to the former. Third, the theological entry point into moral reflection on love is that we ought to love what God loves.

² There are theologians who place a good deal of emphasis on love in their moral thought, but do not but offer a sustained discussion on the nature or characteristics of love. See for example Romanus Cessario, *Introduction to Moral Theology* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2001).
The Problem of Love in Moral Theology

The theologian who reflects on love necessarily bumps into problems along the way. This first section will address such problems. The first problem is a basic ambiguity with the word love within the tradition of Catholic thought. Put simply, are all “loves” the same or are there distinctive “loves?” This debate was at the core of Anders Nygren’s argument in *Agape and Eros.* He famously argued that there is “Christian” love, namely *agape,* distinct from and superior to human love or *eros.* Catholic moralists rejected Nygren’s thesis as it denied the moral validity of natural love. But Nygren was not the first to make distinctions in love. Thomas Aquinas made a similar distinction between human love and charity. Thomas’ distinction remains today but in a somewhat curious state. Other problems are more obvious, such as the role of love as a moral norm and the problem of relating moral reflection on love to the experiences of people. Thomas offers a model, albeit one with limitations for addressing these questions.

Charity and/or Love?

Is there a difference between charity and love? A quick review of the history of biblical translation is helpful here. The Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek some two and a half centuries before the birth of Jesus. The translation, known as the Septuagint, used the word *agape* most often for the Hebrew words for love, *hesed* and ‘ahed. The authors of the New Testament, following suit, used *agape* as their primary word for love. The Greek Bible was translated into Latin some three and a half centuries after the death of Jesus. This translation, known as the Vulgate Bible, primarily used two words (or forms of two words) for *agape,* *caritas* and *dilectio.* The English translation of the Vulgate used charity for *caritas* and love for *dilectio.* Recent translations of the Bible take their cue from the Greek (*agape*) rather than the Latin (*caritas* or *dilectio*) and thus do not use the word charity at all. So, is the “greatest of these charity” or is the “greatest of these love?” It depends on your Bible translation! The 1961 *The Holy Bible: New American Catholic Edition* says charity. The 2010 *New American Bible, revised edition* (the USCCB’s official translation) says love. The point here is that in the tradition, we have two words for love. This is not a trivial point for in moral theology, at least since Thomas, charity is distinct from love.

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For Thomas, charity, what he calls “friendship with God,” has a particular meaning: it is a supernatural virtue related to love. His use of the term highlights a development in the tradition from Augustine, who “does not make an essential difference between the three Latin words amor, caritas, and dilectio.” In the words of Etienne Gilson, Augustine is “flexible” in his use of caritas and love. In contemporary moral theology, at least in the use of charity/love, there are Thomists and Augustinians. Some moralists distinguish charity from basic human love; see for example, William Mattison’s 2008 *Introducing Moral Theology.* Others do not use charity at all; see Edward Vacek’s 1994, *Love, Human and Divine.* Still others, like Augustine, are flexible on the distinction; see Pope Benedict XVI’s 2005 encyclical *Deus caritas est.*

Consider the following selection from the *Catechism* (nos. 1825-1888). The authors seem to have a preference for the Vulgate over the Greek translation of the Bible as they use charity instead of love. It is not a stretch to suggest they use the Latin to make a theological point. They are arguing that charity (as understood by Thomas) is a biblically based concept. It is interesting to note that the USCCB’s translation of the Bible could not be used to support the *Catechism’s* theology as it uses love every time charity appears below.

The Apostle Paul has given an incomparable depiction of charity: “charity is patient and kind, charity is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Charity does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Charity bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” [1 Cor 13:4-7].

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5 Tarsicius van Bavel, “Love,” in *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed., Allan Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 509. There seems to be a shift in the understanding of *caritas* with Thomas. Theologians up through Peter Lombard used *amor, caritas* and *dilectio* interchangeably, none of which were understood to be a virtue. See Philipp W. Rosemann, *Peter Lombard* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 85-90, 134-44.


9 Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedictxvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritaseset_en-.html. This is not surprising given Benedict’s theological interests. *Deus caritas est* relies heavily on patristic sources. Of the thirty-six footnotes in the text, four cite Augustine. There are no references to Thomas.
“If I… have not charity,” says the Apostle, “I am nothing.” Whatever my privilege, service, or even virtue, “if I… have not charity, I gain nothing” [1 Cor 13:1-4]. Charity is superior to all the virtues. It is the first of the theological virtues: “So faith, hope, charity abide, these three. But the greatest of these is charity” [1 Cor 13: 13].

The practice of all the virtues is animated and inspired by charity, which “binds everything together in perfect harmony” [Col 3:14]; it is the form of the virtues; it articulates and orders them among themselves; it is the source and the goal of their Christian practice. Charity upholds and purifies our human ability to love, and raises it to the supernatural perfection of divine love.

The practice of the moral life animated by charity gives to the Christian the spiritual freedom of the children of God. He no longer stands before God as a slave, in servile fear, or as a mercenary looking for wages, but as a son responding to the love of him who “first loved us” [Cf. 1 John 4:19].

Theologians often look for overarching themes or organizing principles. Distinguishing charity from love serves this purpose. Consider the following quote from Karl Rahner’s 1965 lecture published as “Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbor and the Love of God” (note how he interchangeably uses charity and love):

If Christianity is faith, hope and charity, and if these three are not realities added to each other externally, each with a different origin and a different nature, but if love is rather the one word for the perfection of the one reality which we signify by these three names, then love could be the valid topical word for today which calls the whole of Christianity in the man of tomorrow into the concreteness of life and out of that depth into which God (and not ourselves) has immersed it by his offer of grace, the grace which He is Himself.

Charity/love is, for Rahner “the one word for the perfection of the one reality which we signify by these three names.” Similarly the Catechism, in the Thomistic tradition, describes charity as “the form of the virtues” because it orders the other virtues, and it is “the source and the goal” of the virtues. Charity directs other moral terms, such as love, that then direct moral actions. There is then a fundamental ambiguity of the word love within Catholic moral theology.

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10 Catechism of the Catholic Church, nos. 1826-8, www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s1c1a7.htm (emphasis original).
Love as Norm/ Love as Feeling

This language of love or charity as an overarching principle is very different from the personalistic moral terms normally used for love. The usual role that love plays in morality is as a guide to “being” and “doing,” that is to say, as an expectation for our character and our actions. Here is another ambiguity. I take it that there are three fundamental ways to express the expectations of morality. Moralists speak of rules, intentions, and virtues. The question then is, “Is love a rule, an intention, or a virtue?” The answer is, “In the Christian tradition, indeed in the New Testament, it is a rule, an intention, and a virtue.”

Is love primarily a rule? Jesus commands us to love (see Mark 12:28-34, Matt 22:34-40, and John 13:34). Is love primarily an intention? The interconnected stories of Jesus eating with the Pharisees, the woman described as a sinner who washes his feet, and the parable of the creditor and debtors (Luke 7:36-50) seem to indicate that love is perhaps best understood as an intention. Is love primarily a virtue? The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) seems to indicate that love is a character trait, a “habit of the heart and mind.” The point here is that love does not fit neatly into the usual moral categories; thus, moral theologians are inclined to use it as the organizing theme of morality.

Note the biblical citations in the above paragraph. There is something distinctive about the biblical concept in comparison to the use of the word love in contemporary public discourse. Love for most people today, and according to most dictionaries, is an emotion. Love in the Bible is not simply an emotion. Love is better understood as a fundamental moral perspective or stance in life. The biblical view of love has directed the understanding of love in moral theology. No moral theologian would define love primarily as an emotion; yet, to ignore emotion in love is to miss a necessary element.

The idea that love is an emotion seems justified. Consider how people come to know and understand love. I think it is safe to say that most people learn love and learn how to love through personal or vicarious experiences of loving and being loved. Love is a deeply personal reality. People tend to experience love, moreover, in a variety of contexts and relationships. They love and are loved by their parents; they love and are loved by their children; they love and are loved by their friends and so on. Their experiences of loving and being loved are somewhat different in each relationship. A common feature of love in all these experiences and contexts is emotion. James Keenan warns, “When theologians start talking about love, it often loses its visceral sense. If we take the visceral meaning out of love, we
It is the energy of love that connects love in moral theology to love in the lives of people. If moralists miss the emotion in love, they not only ignore a necessary element of love but they end up merely talking among themselves. Moralists have the problem of talking about love as an objective expectation (rule, intention, virtue—a fundamental stance in life) while at the same time acknowledging the deeply subjective experiences people have had loving and being loved.

A Model from Thomas?

Thomas Aquinas seems to have recognized (or anticipated) these problems. He offers a complex look at love that addresses these problems. Following Augustine,13 he described what we might call the three-part “structure” of love. The first “part” of love is the one who loves, the lover. This part is characterized by the “intensity” of love. Love is fundamentally a “passion,” an internal movement that persons feel as they experience the goodness of other persons or objects. This movement “draws” them to the other person or object. The second “part” of love then is object of love, the person or thing that is loved. In Aquinas’ words, this is the “species” of love. Finally there is the love itself (Augustine’s words) or as Aquinas writes, the level of “unity” between the lover and that which is loved. This is the degree of intimacy or sense of oneness the lover has with the beloved.

The threefold structure of love brings other sets of distinctions. The first set concerns a theologically determined ordering of all the possible “species” of love. Some things are to be loved more than others. Another set of distinctions in Thomas’ theology of love concerns the nature of persons (the lover and the beloved). Thomas describes human nature in three parts: the “natural,” what we share with all creation; the “sensitive,” what we share with animals; and the “rational,” that which is unique to humans. These distinctions direct appropriate love for persons.

Thomas’ genius is simply that with these categories he can coherently address the basic characteristics of love. Love is passion (and there are varying and appropriate levels); love is union (and there are varying and appropriate levels); and there is an ordered list of persons and things we ought to love. Putting all of these together, Thomas describes how, what, and why we ought to love enemies, love sinners, love animals, love angels, love our parents, love our children, love our neighbors, love our God.

love friends, love our fathers, love our mothers, love ourselves, and love God.14 Most of this complex discussion of love occurs within the broader context of his “Treatise on Charity.” Some of the discussion occurs in his “Treatise on Human Acts.”

This is not to say that a simple retrieval of Thomas is sufficient today. We already mentioned the problems with the (primarily) two-track translation of *agape* as *dilectio* and *caritas* and the subsequent distinction between love and charity. Thomas’ anthropology is also suspect at times. It leads him, for example, to conclude, “The father should be loved more than the mother” for “the father is principle in a more excellent way than the mother, because he is the active principle, while the mother is a passive and material principle.”15 These issues are important; yet, I think they are correctable within the framework of Thomas’ thinking (although I will not do so here). First, an argument for the virtue of charity can be made without a (proof-texting) reference to First Corinthians and the many other places in the Vulgate that use *caritas* for *agape*. Second, an argument can be made that there is room in Thomas’ anthropology for an egalitarian rather than a hierarchical view of the relation between the sexes.

Another problem is more challenging to Thomas’ view as it goes to the heart of his theology of love. I quote the words that Nygren, the great critic of charity, used to close his *Agape and Eros*: “God’s love has made a new way for itself down to lost humanity. Once for all, and in a decisive manner, this has come to pass through Christ. He came to us in the form of a servant and in humiliation, yet His majesty has not thereby grown less. He has rather revealed it in still greater glory. His majesty is the sacrificial, self-giving majesty of love.”16 For Nygren, the dominant characteristics of true love are sacrifice and self-giving, neither of which play a prominent role in Thomas’ theology of charity or love, which is marked by passion, union, and loving someone or something appropriately given its place in the natural order of creation.

While Catholic moral theologians have long criticized Nygren’s argument, his concluding words do offer a compelling point. Given that the cross of Jesus is the ultimate example of true love, ought not sacrifice play a dominant role in the theology of love?

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15 Aquinas, *ST* II-II q. 26, a. 10.
SACRIFICE AND UNION IN LOVE

This second section of the essay has four parts. The first part reviews the work of three contemporary Catholic moralists on love, two of whom (Schindler and Pinckaers) highlight sacrifice and another (Melina) who highlights unity. The second part reviews the teachings of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI on love and suggests that John Paul tends to emphasize sacrifice while Benedict tends to emphasize unity. The third part offers some comparisons and commentary on the tension between sacrifice and unity. The fourth part looks at the tension of union and sacrifice within the context of the conversation between science and theology.

Ordering Love

The passion, crucifixion, and death of Jesus are powerful expressions of the nature of true love and thus it is not surprising that theologians have stressed sacrifice and self-giving as the primary characteristic of love. David Schindler’s 2011 book, Ordering Love: Liberal Societies and the Memory of God, is a solid expression of this view. The book collects seventeen papers, essays and articles written by Schindler over the last dozen years. While themes on love appear in various places within the seventeen works, it is the introduction to the text, “Ordering Love,” where Schindler develops something of a theology of love.

Schindler’s argument follows the classic natural law “architecture” of Catholic moral theology. That is to say, the argument begins with theology, an understanding of God; it then moves to a view of reality, particularly the human reality, that exists in God and because of God. From the view of reality and anthropology then comes the consequent morality that persons and communities are to appropriate. Schindler’s theology here is simple and direct. God is the gracious creator of all things. Because God is gracious there is a “natural participation in and tendency toward generosity that is structured into the original constitution of being.”17 All being is gift and consequently it is in the nature of being to share itself. Schindler’s justifying biblical verse, repeated several times in the book, is 1 John 4:10, “Love consists in this, not that we love God, but that he loved us and sent his Son.” This sharing, this love which for the human person, “fulfills the very meaning of his being and existence”18 is understood as “the

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18 Schindler, Ordering Love, 262 and 299.
basic act and order of all things because all things are created by God.”

The outstanding feature of love as gift is suffering. Schindler writes, “What creation implies, in a word, is that even in the face of massive sin and brokenness, there remains in the depths of the human heart a recognition, even if not fully conscious, of the need to sacrifice and to suffer the good and God into one’s own life history.”

In our world, the desire for love “will always involve suffering” but we must come “to see that suffering bears an intrinsic meaning.” Living in the reality of love “is to release joy into the heart of our suffering, a joy that derives from being what one truly is in one’s inmost depths before God.”

If 1 John 4:10 is Schindler’s central biblical verse, his foundational biblical image is Mary’s fiat, her “let it be done unto me.” In her response to God, Mary “makes space for the incarnate Other, a space that is ready to endure, in the face of evil and with a gratitude eventually full of sorrow, even his crucifixion and death.” She is then, for Schindler, the model for human beings. I note here that Schindler does not reject union or mutuality in love as he writes that Mary’s response to God leads to mutual and fruitful love.

Love is expressed freely, as Mary’s fiat illustrates, and thus is expressed only by persons. “Non-human realities,” notes Schindler, in themselves are not “matters of love.” They can, however, participate in love “as they become instruments of human-personal love.” As all beings are meant to serve, so are animals, says Schindler. “Subhuman beings” too have the basic nature to share; thus they are meant to be “instruments of human love.” “The instrumentality of nature” does not mean that humans ought to see these things as “brute facts” but as things “created thus given” and consequently as signs of their “meaning in relation to God.”

One of the more notable books in moral theology of the past few decades is Servais Pinckaers’ 1995, The Sources of Christian Ethics. This formative book aims to push moral theology from the traditional language of obligation to a system of morality based on the virtues. In discussing the role that love plays in moral theology, Pinckaers writes, “In my opinion a moral system based on obligation or duty

19 Schindler, Ordering Love, 5.
20 Schindler, Ordering Love, 9 (emphasis original).
21 Schindler, Ordering Love, 132 (emphasis original).
22 Schindler, Ordering Love, 132 (emphasis original).
24 Schindler, Ordering Love, 298.
25 Schindler, Ordering Love, 1.
26 Schindler, Ordering Love, 9.
could never give charity its rightful place. On the other hand, if we begin with the question of happiness—linked of course with that of suffering or evil—the question of love and its truth come to the fore at once.” Pinckaers is not only critical of obligation-based ethics, he is also critical of some contemporary (unnamed) moralists who over-react to traditional emphasis on duty with a “strong attraction for love and spontaneity, without due regard for the demands of integrity and truth.” These moralists have an “allergy to all obligation or authority in the name of the primacy of a naïve and confused love.”

In such moral theology, love’s role is exaggerated in such a way that it rejects “one of the conditions for authentic love” namely “sacrifice and renunciation.”

Pinckaers offers a correction for these views. “Human love,” he states, “is built on sacrifice.” This descriptive statement pushes him to a quick evaluative statement uncharacteristic of his writing: “How many homes have been broken because one partner could not endure sacrifice.” Returning to the broader conversation on love, he concludes, “radical self-renunciation is a necessary condition for love of God. There is no real charity without detachment and self-renunciation.”

In contrast, for Livio Melina, love is union in all its aspects and features. In his 2001 book, Sharing in Christ’s Virtues: For a Renewal of Moral Theology in the Light of Veritatis Splendor, he writes, “In fact, the originating experience of the Good is an experience of fullness in love, in which is contained a promise of perfect communion with God and others. Human actions correspond to the good of the person to the extent that they promote the communion of persons in love.” Quoting Gaudium et spes, no. 24, he comments: The “ideal mystery of the communion of love… reflects ‘a certain likeness to the union of the divine persons and the union of the children of God in truth and in charity’.”

Melina develops this understanding of love more fully in his 2010 book, The Epiphany of Love: Toward a Theological Understanding of Christian Action. Consider that his thick description of love includes

27 Pinckaers, Sources of Christian Ethics, 29.
28 Pinckaers, Sources, 29.
29 Pinckaers, Sources, 29-30.
30 Pinckaers, Sources, 30.
31 Pinckaers, Sources, 30.
32 Pinckaers, Sources, 30.
34 Melina, Sharing in Christ’s Virtues, 74.
not only what we would normally call the love itself but also the origins of a love in the person—both of which are primarily determined by unity. The first union of love, he says, “occurs within a person’s interiority.”\(^{35}\) This union of an external thing and one’s internal senses is “intentional and affective.”\(^{36}\) The interior union of love then “orients persons toward achieving…the real union (unio realis) with the good that gave birth to the movement of desire.”\(^{37}\) Love, according to Melina (quoting Thomas who quotes Pseudo-Dionysius), is a “uniting and binding force” that “respects the difference between lover and beloved.”\(^{38}\) Otherness and difference are “not eliminated” in love as if love were some “indistinct fusion.”\(^{39}\) Difference rather “becomes the basis of communion.”\(^{40}\)

**Love in the Encyclicals**

Pope John Paul II’s theology of love is grounded on a view of the gracious and universal God. These two theological claims direct the pope’s understanding of love: Love is primarily characterized by self-giving and suffering on one hand (we can see his influence on Schindler here) and at the same time it is characterized with the equally strong emphasis on universal love. In his 1998 encyclical, *Fides et ratio*, John Paul writes what might be a summary line of this thinking: God’s self-giving love is “a grand and mysterious truth for the human mind, which finds it inconceivable that suffering and death can express a love which gives itself and seeks nothing in return.”\(^{41}\) For the pope, the moral life is then “the response due to the many gratuitous initiatives taken by God out of love for man. It is a response of love.”\(^{42}\)

The emphasis on self-giving cannot be missed in his encyclical corpus. In his 1980 encyclical, *Dives in misericordia*, the pope writes, “The events of Good Friday and, even before that, the prayer in Gethsemane, introduce a fundamental change into the whole course of

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\(^{36}\) Melina, *Epiphany of Love*, 27.


\(^{38}\) Melina, *Epiphany of Love*, 27, see also 11.


the revelation of love.” The cross of Christ is the definitive statement of love. In his 1993 encyclical Veritatis Splendor, John Paul explains, “Jesus asks us to follow him and to imitate him along the path of love, a love which gives itself completely to the brethren out of love for God… Indeed, his actions, and in particular his Passion and Death on the Cross, are the living revelation of his love for the Father and for others. This is exactly the love that Jesus wishes to be imitated by all who follow him… Being a follower of Christ means becoming conformed to him who became a servant even to giving himself on the Cross.”

John Paul continues his description of love as sacrifice: “Jesus reveals by his whole life… the gift of self.” Love, writes the pope, “is manifested and lived in the gift of self, even to the total gift of self, like that of Jesus” on the cross. Jesus is the “the source, model and means for the witness of his disciples, who are called to walk on the same road: 'If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.' Charity, in conformity with the radical demands of the Gospel, can lead the believer to the supreme witness of martyrdom. Once again this means imitating Jesus who died on the Cross.” Indeed the martyrs in our tradition bear witness and continue to engage us, for they, according to John Paul, “provide evidence of a love that has no need of lengthy arguments in order to convince.”

As Jesus died for all humanity, so his love—expressed so vividly on the cross—is for all humanity. Our love must imitate that love. Thus the second outstanding feature of John Paul’s understanding of love: it is forthrightly universal. It is love for all neighbors, whether they are strangers or enemies. Indeed love has a particular concern for the poor. In his 1987 encyclical Sollicitudo rei socialis, the pope writes, “One’s neighbor must therefore be loved, even if an enemy, with the same love with which the Lord loves him or her; and for that person’s sake one must be ready for sacrifice, even the ultimate one: to lay down one’s life for the brethren.” The pope, moreover, promotes what he calls “the option or love of preference for the poor.” He

44 John Paul II, Veritatis splendor, nos. 20-21.
45 John Paul II, Dives in misericordia, no. 87 (emphasis original).
46 John Paul II, Dives in misericordia, no. 89 (emphasis original).
47 John Paul II, Dives in misericordia, no. 89 (emphasis original).
48 John Paul II, Fides et ratio, no. 32.
writes: “This is an option… [that] affects the life of each Christian inasmuch as he or she seeks to imitate the life of Christ, but it applies… to our manner of living, and to the logical decisions to be made concerning the ownership and use of goods. Today… this love of preference for the poor, and the decisions which it inspires in us, cannot but embrace the immense multitudes of the hungry, the needy, the homeless, those without medical care and, above all, those without hope of a better future.”

In his 1995 encyclical, *Evangelium vitae*, John Paul uses the parable of the Good Samaritan to illustrate that, “A stranger is no longer a stranger.” In love, indeed, “an enemy ceases to be an enemy for the person who is obliged to love him, to ‘do good’ to him and to respond to his immediate needs promptly and with no expectation of repayment.” The pope concludes, “The height of this love is to pray for one’s enemy.” Love commits us to promote and defend the lives of our neighbors, particularly those who are “weak or threatened.”

While the pope’s dramatic “option for the poor” often takes believers by surprise, his teaching on sexual ethics is generally well known. Again the starting point for morality here is theology. In his 1982 Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, the pope writes, “God created man in his own image and likeness: calling him to existence through love, he called him at the same time for love… God inscribed in the humanity of man and woman the vocation, and thus the capacity and responsibility, of love and communion.” John Paul continues, sexuality “is realized in a truly human way only if it is an integral part of the love by which a man and a woman commit themselves totally to one another until death. The total physical self-giving would be a lie if it were not the sign and fruit of a total personal self-giving.” Contraception is an affront to self-giving. The pope then concludes, when couples use contraception “they ‘manipulate’ and degrade human sexuality—and with it themselves and their married partner—by altering its value of ‘total’ self-giving.”

To understand John Paul’s theology of love we gleaned from a variety of his official teachings, including six encyclicals and an apostol-
ic exhortation. Pope Benedict XVI, on the other hand, makes our work easier. His 2005 encyclical, Deus caritas est is an extended study and reflection on love. His 2009 encyclical, Caritas in veritate, is an exploration of the implications of love for the moral life. Benedict writes, “Caritas in veritate is the principle around which the Church’s social doctrine turns, a principle that takes on practical form in the criteria that govern moral action.”

It is not surprising that a gracious God and self-giving love are important themes in Deus caritas est. Indeed Benedict writes what may be the most inspiring line in any encyclical when he describes a fundamental characteristic of giving in love: “My deep personal sharing in the needs and sufferings of others becomes a sharing of my very self with them: if my gift is not to prove a source of humiliation, I must give to others not only something that is my own, but my very self; I must be personally present in my gift.” Yet, his emphasis is not on the cross, nor on self-donation. In words that almost read as a corrective on his predecessor’s thinking, he says that persons “cannot live by oblation.” We must also receive. If there is a unifying theme in this encyclical, it is union.

In the introduction to the encyclical, Benedict notes the essence of Christian faith: “Being Christian,” he writes, “is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person.” The essence of faith and indeed love is relation; it is union with God, union with particular others, union in the Christian community, and unity in humankind. After discussing Song of Songs, for example, he writes, “man can indeed enter into union with God—his primordial aspiration. But this union is no mere fusion, a sinking in the nameless ocean of the Divine; it is a unity which creates love, a unity in which both God and man remain themselves and yet become fully one.”

Note how Benedict ties union in with sacrifice: “When Jesus speaks in his parables of the shepherd who goes after the lost sheep [seeks to be reunited with the sheep], of the woman who looks for the lost coin [seeks to be reunited with the coin], of the father who goes to meet and embrace his prodigal son [seeks to be reunited with his son], these are no mere words: they constitute an explanation of his very being and activity. His death on the cross is the culmination of

58 Benedict XVI, Deus caritas est, no. 34.
59 Benedict XVI, Deus caritas est, no. 7.
60 Benedict XVI, Deus caritas est, no. 2.
61 Benedict XVI, Deus caritas est, no. 10.
that turning of God against himself in which he gives himself in order to raise man up and save him. This is love in its most radical form.”

Furthermore, Benedict stresses, the union between love of God and neighbor both within the Christian community and in the broader sense. “Love of neighbor… consists in the very fact that, in God and with God, I love even the person whom I do not like or even know.” I see “the other person from the perspective of Jesus Christ. His friend is my friend.” In his conclusion, Benedict writes, “In the saints one thing becomes clear: those who draw near to God do not withdraw from men, but rather become truly close to them… At the same time, the devotion of the faithful shows an infallible intuition of how such love is possible: it becomes so as a result of the most intimate union with God.”

The theme of love as unity pervades Caritas in veritate. Benedict writes, “Charity is love received and given… As the objects of God’s love, men and women become subjects of charity, they are called to make themselves instruments of grace, so as to pour forth God’s charity and to weave networks of charity.” “Charity in truth is a force that builds community, it brings all people together without imposing barriers or limits… The unity of the human race, a fraternal communion transcending every barrier, is called into being by the word of God-who-is-Love.” Commenting on contemporary life, the pope continues, “The risk for our time is that the de facto interdependence of people and nations is not matched by ethical interaction of consciences and minds that would give rise to truly human development. Only in charity, illumined by the light of reason and faith, is it possible to pursue development goals that possess a more humane and humanizing value. The sharing of goods and resources, from which authentic development proceeds, is not guaranteed by merely technical progress and relationships of utility, but by the potential of love that overcomes evil with good.”

On the other hand, as Benedict recognizes throughout the encyclical, progress and utility are needed and can be the products of love. Thus, for example, when he addresses Jesus’ command to feed the hungry, he calls for the development of a network of systems to solve

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62 Benedict XVI, Deus caritas est, no. 12.
63 Benedict XVI, Deus caritas est, no. 18.
64 Benedict XVI, Deus caritas est, no. 42.
65 Benedict XVI, Caritas in veritate, no. 5
66 Benedict XVI, Caritas in veritate, no. 43.
67 Benedict XVI, Caritas in veritate, no. 9 (emphasis original).
the problem of hunger in the world. I quote him at length to highlight the importance of the practical action of love.68

What is missing, in other words, is a network of economic institutions capable of guaranteeing regular access to sufficient food and water for nutritional needs, and also capable of addressing the primary needs and necessities ensuing from genuine food crises, whether due to natural causes or political irresponsibility, nationally and internationally. The problem of food insecurity needs to be addressed within a long-term perspective, eliminating the structural causes that give rise to it and promoting the agricultural development of poorer countries. This can be done by investing in rural infrastructures, irrigation systems, transport, organization of markets, and in the development and dissemination of agricultural technology that can make the best use of the human, natural and socioeconomic resources that are more readily available at the local level, while guaranteeing their sustainability over the long term as well.69

Some Points of Conversation

When we compare those who emphasize sacrifice over unity with those who emphasize unity over sacrifice we find a few interesting things. The first is common ground on what would be the “opposite” of love. For the authors considered so far, it is not hate. Hate is the opposite of love for those who think love is a strong feeling toward another. For these authors the opposite of love is not apathy. Apathy is the opposite of love for those who think love is a strong feeling toward another. The opposite of hate for these authors is (to use Melina’s words) some form of “eudaemonistic individualism.”70 The authors above, while concerned with egoism or disordered self-love, offer no substantive discussions of appropriate self-love.

For Schindler, self-love is only true “as at once ordered toward and centered in others.”71 “Thus we truly ought to love ourselves, but only at once as we, in the manner of Jesus, give ourselves away to the other. We will indeed find ourselves, but only in losing ourselves, and in no other order.”72 Schindler thus holds a great place for lives dedicated to love, particularly to married and celibate life: “The vow that

68 Commenting on Caritas in veritate James Keenan notes, “The encyclical marks, then, not just the development of church social teaching itself, but demonstrates the mutual and interactive need to integrate theological ethics with that social teaching: each field needs the other.” Keenan, A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century: From Confessing Sins to Liberating Consciences (New York: Continuum, 2010), 242.
69 Benedict XVI, Caritas in veritate, no. 27.
70 Melina, Epiphany of Love, 45, citing Pinckaers, Sources.
72 Schindler, Ordering Love, 181.
establishes a state of life, either as consecrated virginity or as marriage, is ordered intrinsically to martyrdom: to the witness of the gift of one’s self unto the end, even to the point of including (possibly) the sacrificial gift of one’s own life.”73

Pinckaers distinguishes natural self-love from egoism. Like all God’s works, the former is good. “Unfortunately, this initial love never retains its original purity.” Egoism always arises and corrupts true love. He concludes, “Only the truth of humility, working through renunciation to the point of self-contempt and ‘hating [one’s] life’ (Luke 14:26) can rid of us egoism and reestablish the purity of natural self-love which flowers in charity.”74

John Paul also contrasts selfishness with love. In his 1994 “Letter to Families” he writes, “Here one thinks first of all of selfishness, not only the selfishness of individuals, but also of couples or, even more broadly, of social selfishness, that for example of a class or nation (nationalism). Selfishness in all its forms is directly and radically opposed to the civilization of love.”75 Individualism for the pope means that persons establish their truth rather than acknowledging the objective truth. Thus, one “does not want to ‘give’ to another on the basis of truth; he does not want to become a ‘sincere gift.’ Individualism thus remains egocentric and selfish.”76

Benedict offers a different interpretation or perhaps a different emphasis on the role of sacrifice in love. Sacrifice for the pope is a natural part of mature and pure love that develops from our natural self-seeking love. Reflecting on the Song of Songs, he writes, “[E]ros tends to rise ‘in ecstasy’ towards the Divine, to lead us beyond ourselves.”77 Eros is then the “path of ascent, renunciation, purification and healing.”78 It unites the body and soul of the person (the matter and spirit of the person) in dramatic contrast to contemporary culture’s radical divorce of the two and consequent “debasement of the human body.”79 This “path of ascent and purification” is not, however, simply inward. Love grows as it discovers the reality of another person and matures to the level of “concern and care for the other.”80 Self-seeking love now develops into love for another by union with

73 Schindler, Ordering Love, 320.
74 Pinckaers, Sources, 43.
76 John Paul II, “Letter to Families,” no. 14
77 Benedict XVI, Deus caritas est, no. 5.
78 Benedict XVI, Deus caritas est, no. 5.
79 Benedict XVI, Deus caritas est, no. 5.
80 Benedict XVI, Deus caritas est, no. 6.
the other and “is ready, and even willing, for sacrifice.”

Benedict says, is a “journey, an ongoing exodus out of the closed inward-looking self towards its liberation through self-giving, and thus toward authentic self-discovery and indeed discovery of God.”

Benedict writes from within a tradition in Catholic theology that holds there are stages in love, and love “begins” with the natural (immature but not immoral or amoral) love of self. Bernard of Clairvaux, for example, in his classic description of loving God describes the natural progression of this love in four “degrees.” The first two are self-centered: one loves one’s self for one’s own sake and then one loves God for one’s own sake. Describing one’s growth to the third stage, Bernard writes, “When forced by his own needs he begins to honor God and care for him by thinking of him, reading about him, praying to him, and obeying him. God reveals himself gradually in this kind of familiarity and consequently becomes lovable. When man tastes how sweet God is, he passes to the third degree of love in which man loves God not now because of himself but because of God.” The fourth degree, says Bernard, is when one comes to love oneself for the sake of God. Benedict’s developmental view of love, and its proportionate understanding of sacrifice, resonates with contemporary views of personal growth and may indeed reflect what most people experience in love. As walking is related to running, self-love is related to committed love of another.

A second area of interest is the role that the affective or the emotive plays (or does not play) in union and sacrifice. The emphasis on unity highlights, in a way the sacrificial approach does not, pleasure (on a certain level), satisfaction, and indeed joy. Consider Melina’s words here: The attraction to the good “is made possible by affective union, which is the elementary level of the experience of love. This experience implies that there is an initial enrichment of the person who bears within him– or herself a promise of fulfillment or happiness.” Benedict also notes the importance of emotive language, par-

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81 Benedict XVI, De caritas est, no. 6.
82 Benedict XVI, De caritas est, no. 6.
83 Thomas describes three stages in charity. Beginners work to avoid sin. In the second stage persons aim to be and do good. The perfection of charity is “union with and enjoyment of God.” Thomas, ST II-II q. 24, a. 9.
85 Melina, Epiphany of Love, 72 (emphasis added); see also 13.
particularly joy, in love. 86 Joy does not play a directive role for authors who highlight sacrifice. 87

A third area of interest is the understanding of the Eucharist. I make a tentative claim here: If the Eucharist is, as Pope Benedict states, the “sacrament of love,” then one’s understanding of love may influence one’s understanding of the Eucharist. None of the works cited above present a theology of the Eucharist, but Schindler, Melina and Benedict do reference the Eucharist in their writings. It is not surprising that Schindler, quoting Benedict’s Deus caritas est (no. 13), highlights Jesus’ “act of oblation” in the Eucharist. 89 In another place Schindler writes, “What is meant by the wholeness of the gift of self… can be understood and realized in the full and proper sense only when incorporated… into Christ’s own Eucharist and crucified love unto death and rising from the dead, and into the Church’s Christological sacrament of this love.”90 Melina, on the other hand, while by no means ignoring Jesus’ self-offering in the Eucharist, presents the value of the sacrifice in instrumental terms, not in intrinsic terms. Jesus’ “offering of his body to the Father” was “to bring us unity.” His Eucharistic self-offering “is the basis for communion among persons.”92 Participation in the Eucharist leads to “an interpersonal communion among the saints.” Melina concludes, “This is the communion, the ultimate reality, in view of which the sacrament exists.”93

Benedict does refer to the Eucharist as Christ’s “oblation.” The pope follows that idea, however, with his characteristic stress on unity. The sacrament, he writes, “is social in character.” Participating in it, “I become one with the Lord, like all the other communicants.” There is one bread, and there is then one body. “Union with Christ is also union with all those to whom he gives himself. I cannot possess Christ just for myself; I can belong to him only in union with all those who have become, or who will become, his own. Communion draws me out of myself towards him, and thus also towards unity with all Christians. We become ‘one body,’ completely joined in a

86 See Benedict XVI, Deus caritas est, nos. 17-18.
87 Pinckaers notes that for St. Thomas joy is consequent of charity. He wonders, as he himself gives joy a line or so, “Is joy still mentioned in modern moral theory?” Pinckaers, Sources, 132.
89 Schindler, Ordering Love, 140.
90 Schindler, Ordering Love, 320.
91 See Melina, Epiphany of Love, 35, 36, 133, 134.
92 See Melina, Epiphany of Love, 35.
93 See Melina, Epiphany of Love, 36.
single existence.”94 “The authentic content of love,” the pope writes, is “the one becomes similar to the other, and this leads to a community of will and thought.”95

One cannot speak about love and suffering in contemporary moral theology without noting a significant turn in the conversation, and thus the fourth area of interest in this section. While many moral theologians still speak of the meaning of suffering in one’s life, others explore the question of suffering of others, particularly the suffering of the poor and oppressed in the world, and speak of a particular love for them. We see this in John Paul’s “option for the poor.” His use of this phrase no doubt comes from liberation theology, particularly the work of Gustavo Gutierrez. Gutierrez maintains that God’s love is universal; yet, at the same time God has a “predilection for those on the lowest rung of the ladder.”96 That is to say, God has a partiality or preference toward the poor. He writes, “The universality of Christian love is, I repeat, incompatible with the exclusion of any persons, but it is not incompatible with a preferential option for the poorest and most oppressed.” 97

According to James Keenan, this turn in moral theology is the “irruption of suffering into Catholic theological ethics.”98 Its call is twofold. The first is compassion. As Bryan Massingale notes, in the experience of compassion one feels for the other who is suffering and identifies with the other who is suffering. But compassion is more than this; it is “action to meet the other’s need.”99 Gutierrez writes, “charity exists only in concrete actions (feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, etc.); it occurs of necessity in the fabric of relationships among persons... But charity does not exist alongside or above human loves; it is not ‘the most sublime’ human achievement like a grace superimposed upon human love. Charity is God’s love in us and does not exist outside our human capabilities to love and to build a just and friendly world.”100 The second call of this turn to suffering is, in Keenan’s words, “to face the fact that we are often the cause of others’ suffering.”101

95 Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, no. 17.
100 Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 113.
Love and Science

We return to union and sacrifice in love in a different context. The question in this section is “What happens to Christian love when it is in dialogue with contemporary science?” We hear repeated throughout the first creation story that God saw his creation as “good.” Tied to this is the affirmation of creation (including persons), and the realization that human reason can understand God’s intentions in creation, in nature, and thus derive “natural” law. Moral theology has long relied on ancient and medieval descriptions of nature and the natural to base its positions. Yet, how adequate is this understanding of nature for the contemporary moralist? Vatican II makes a descriptive claim on humanity and human knowledge that often seems unheeded by moral theologians. The Council writes, “Thus, the human race has passed from a rather static concept of reality to a more dynamic, evolutionary one.” \(^{102}\) The insights from modern science can help us understand the nature of human persons in ways inconceivable to medieval theologians. To speak of “human nature” today without including the information provided by microscopes or indeed telescopes is foolish. All of this is to say that the most interesting contemporary discussions of love today come from theologians exploring the connections between morality and science. Noteworthy is Stephen Pope’s 1991 article “The Order of Love and Recent Catholic Ethics” and his *Human Evolution and Christian Ethics* (2007) as well as Jack Mahoney’s *Christianity in Evolution* (2011).

Pope argues, “Christian ethical understanding of love can be enriched by knowledge of the evolved human emergent emotional and cognitive capacities that play various roles in love.” Certainly, Scripture and tradition are normative. But, he continues, “We are evolved creatures, embedded in nature, possessed of a range of complex evolved capacities, whatever we say about our created capacity to love has in some way to be related to this natural basis.” \(^{103}\) Several points stand out in his dialogue. The first is, frankly, that “the nature of human love is complex because it reflects both our animality and our rationality.” \(^{104}\) We have much in common with other animals, indeed, “we share much more with them than the Christian tradition has recognized.” \(^{105}\)


\(^{104}\) Pope, *Human Evolution*, 228.

\(^{105}\) Pope, *Human Evolution*, 228.
A second point is the explanatory power of evolution. It “provides an account of why we are emotionally inclined to learn to care for ourselves, our own families, friends, and communities more than for others.”

We have “evolved to form bonds of love with a small number of people.” We have a “deeply ingrained tendency to prefer ourselves.” As he says, we have a tendency “to care excessively and in the wrong way for ourselves, and to care wrongly and insufficiently for others.”

The antidote is not self-hate but “loving ourselves in the right way.” Proper self-love “thrives when accorded a secondary status to the more encompassing love for God.”

A third point for Pope is the complementarity of love for God, love for neighbor and love for self. Christian love supports and directs natural love (loving self and members of the community), and it also pushes an “inclusive openness and generous love for all others with whom we share a common humanity.” It “pushes us to regard all people as made in God’s image and so to act for their benefit whenever reasonably possible.”

A fourth, and perhaps most interesting point for Pope, is that Christian love has us focus not only on the objects of love, namely the persons and things we love, but more importantly on ourselves as lovers. Christian love ought to transform the lover. Here he adds something often overlooked in Christian morality. It is something that people who are parents and people who are spouses and indeed people who are friends know all too well; yet, little do we hear of it. That is, loving those “nearest and dearest” to us is more demanding and more intense than loving those far from us. Pope writes, “Friends and family can require degrees of trust, patience and readiness to forgive that go far beyond what is entailed in good will for strangers and enemies.” “Indeed, because of the emotional intensity and degrees of vulnerability it involves, love of intimates can be more painful, require many kinds of self-denial, and call upon emotional resources that will not characterize expectations generated from more distant relations.”

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110 Pope, *Human Evolution*, 238
111 Pope, *Human Evolution*, 244.
love ideally moves toward mutuality and friendship,” Christian ethics gives then “a special place to marriage and family.”

Mahoney’s *Christianity and Evolution*, like Pope’s work, is a dialogue. Socio-biologists can learn from and critique moral theologians, and moral theologians can learn from and critique socio-biologists. He is, however, more comfortable than Pope using the word altruism as a synonym for love—given its prominence in socio-biology. The debate in socio-biology about egoism vs. altruism is reminiscent of the debate in moral theology over egoism and love; yet, it is without normative implications. Because Mahoney accepts the distinctions of the scientific discussion of altruism, his emphasis is less on union and more on self-giving. He argues that altruism originated in God and Jesus’ life displays “the definitive and all-exhaustive act of human altruism as imaging God’s.” It is “totally non-self centered and other-serving... whose purpose is to increase the solidarity of the human race.”

**LOVING WHAT GOD LOVES**

The sacrifice/union conversation is the major issue on love in moral theology. Put in direct words, is the greatest love experienced in sacrifice or intimacy? Our review has illustrated other interesting points of emphasis in the understanding of love. Some authors have had more emphasis on emotion while others have had more emphasis on direct action. We might ask, is the greatest love known through intense feelings or in particular actions? Is love primarily “being” or “doing”? We have also seen an interest in particular love and an interest in more universal love. Who is the better lover, the person with deep concern for her family or the person with deep concern for the children suffering with AIDS in Africa? All these questions point to the complicated issue that is Christian love. What we have seen so far in this essay is that presentations of love that focus on one feature, whether sacrifice or union, are not sufficient.

Other questions remain. Two will be addressed in this section. The first, and perhaps most interesting, is the discussion of appropriate self-love in Christian morality. We have already touched on this topic. There seems to be hesitancy in moral theology to discuss appropriate self-love. Perhaps the worry behind this is that too much emphasis on appropriate self-love places too much interest on the self. This may be a question of the experience of the moral theologi-

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118 Mahoney, *Christianity in Evolution: An Exploration*, 45.
an, comfortable, educated and well fed (all things that lead to a positive and constructive self-love) in contrast to the experience of much of the world’s population who live in conditions and environments destructive of such love. I think for example of Gregory Boyle’s *Tattoos on the Heart* where he narrates his work with members of street gangs in Los Angeles. At one point, describing the people he works with, Boyle writes, “They are comrades in despair, and their inability to care for their own lives consistently plays itself out in the abandonment of all reason and surely all hope.” An important part of his ministry is to help people develop a positive sense of self-love as a first step in turning their lives around. This section will consider the issue of self-love.

*Appropriate Affirmation of Self*

When Augustine reviews the Great Commandment, he notes, “it is clear that love yourself is not omitted.” For him, one loves oneself on account of God. He writes, “You should love yourself not only on your own account but on account of Him who is most justly the object of your love.” “For,” he writes, “it is impossible for one who loves God not to love himself.” Indeed it appears for Augustine that the opposite is true as well: “Hence, he who knows how to love himself loves God.” Appropriate self-love is so important to Augustine and Aquinas that they say we must love ourselves more than we love others. In Augustine’s words, “There are four kinds of things which may be loved—first, the kind which is above us; second, the kind which constitutes ourselves; third, the kind which is equal to us; and fourth, the kind which is below us—no precepts need to be given concerning the second and the fourth. However, much a man departs from the truth, there remains in him the love of himself and of his body.” According to Thomas, we are to love our rational nature above the physical and sensitive natures of others. Thus we cannot harm our rational nature, that is to say, we may not sin for the good of others.

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In Augustine and Thomas there is no overriding riding concern for individualism or egoism. There is also a noticeable lack of heroism in their discussions of love. There seems to be more room for self-love in Augustine and Thomas than for the authors who stress sacrifice.

Consider again the work of Servais Pinckaers. Pinckaers’ discussion of self-love rests on a basic sense that this type of love is natural to us. This natural love, he writes, “forms within us our desire for the most natural goods, such as life and health. It leads us to seek everything we need for subsistence—food, clothing, and shelter. It spurs us on to action, persuades us to find rest in sleep. Through its promptings we make progress in acquiring and using these goods in proper measure.” This love “prior to any egoistic reaction… is the source of our need to love.” Pinckaers calls this the “spiritual inclination” of natural love that “when it gains strength” can overtake desires for the natural goods mentioned above. “We see this in people who endure privation and suffering to the point of giving their lives for those they love, or for the truth, for justice, or for their faith. In doing so, they love themselves in a nobler way.” Mature natural love then overcomes itself, denies itself.

What is missing in the sacrificial emphasis type is a notion of a substantive and morally praiseworthy sense of self-love that sits between natural love (meeting our subsistence needs) and egoism. For those who highlight union there is the presupposition, if often understated, that there must be something in the self that makes it a worthy partner and that the union will benefit the partners in some way. The quality and intensity of the union are dependent on the preparation of the individuals in the union. In order to be in relation with another, one has to have something to offer and the ability to receive. Both of which demand a substantive and positive appraisal of the self. This is to say, can Christian morality account for a form of self-love that is more than natural love and is as true as sacrificial love?

The answer sits right in front of us. The Church has long declared that all persons have a fundamental dignity and that life is sacred. Persons are “created in the image of God.” This moral principle is usually cited in reference to how we are to see others, particularly the poor and vulnerable. Yet it should equally be cited in how we are to see ourselves. The doctrine of the Incarnation, that is to say, Jesus sharing in day-to-day human existence, certainly raises the estimation of human life. Fulfilling the basic needs of subsistence such as

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125 Pinckaers, *Sources*, 424.
126 Pinckaers, *Sources*, 424-5.
eating and drinking are more than simply putting “gas in the tank.” They can be joyful occasions where we celebrate God’s love and goodness.

Edward Vacek’s 1994 book, Love, Human and Divine, is perhaps the most important book on love in moral theology in recent times. In it he writes, “A Christian loves, within limits, what God loves. What then does God love? In brief, God loves God, the world, other persons, and me. Within our limits, what then should we love? The answer is the same: God, the world, other human beings, and myself… This is not a matter of God first, after that others, and then perhaps one’s self. God asks our whole heart all the time, and our love for creatures should increasingly be part of the way we cooperate with God.”

Vacek’s work illustrates a third tendency, or emphasis, in recent Catholic moral theology, that is, while not rejecting sacrifice, it highlights union with a positive sense of self. Margaret Farley in her 1986 book, Personal Commitments, provides a careful examination of this emphasis. Farley describes love as an “affective affirmation which is responsive and unitive.” But, she notes, not all loves are true. We can have distorted, foolish or even destructive loves; thus, she argues, we need a notion of “just” love. Farley writes, “A love is right and good insofar as it aims to affirm truthfully the concrete reality of the beloved.” I remember teaching this book when it first came out and a student saying out loud in class, “I am going to make my boyfriend read this!” Just love includes not only affirmation of the other, but also self-affirmation. In her words, “When I love another person, I place my own self in affirmation of the other… If love of another person is to be just, it must of necessity be also just in terms of its affirmation of myself. If as a way of loving it falsifies or distorts my concrete reality, it cannot be a just way of loving another.”

Just love requires sacrifice, but as Farley notes, not all self-sacrifice is love. We have, she writes, “a moral obligation not to relate to another person in a way that is truly destructive of ourselves as persons.” “While we may sacrifice everything we have, we may not sacrifice everything we are. We may not sacrifice in a final sense our autonomy. We may not sacrifice our capability for union and com-

130 Farley, Personal Commitments, 82.
131 Farley, Personal Commitments, 83.
132 Farley, Personal Commitments, 83.
munion with God and human persons.” In her 2006 book *Just Love*, Farley writes, “A love will not be true or just if there is an affirmation of the beloved that involves destruction of the one who loves. I do not refer to a justifiable ‘laying down one’s life’ for the beloved, but rather to a letting oneself be destroyed as a person because of the way in which one loves another.” In words reminiscent of Thomas’ (and Augustine’s) three-part structure of love, she writes that “love is just and true... (1) when it does not falsify or ‘miss’ the reality of the person loved (either as human or as unique individual), (2) when it does not falsify or ‘miss’ the reality of the one loving, and (3) when it does not violate, distort, or ignore the nature of the relationship between them.”

Farley points to affirmation of the self in love. Discussing desire, she writes, “It is grounded in and rises from love—ultimately for myself or another or in some mixture of love of self and other. *Desire grounded in love of ourselves* is the form love takes when it wants (or rather, we want) greater self-affirmation, or well-being, or acquisition of some sort, or even developed virtue. *Desire grounded in love of another* is the form love takes when we are not fully united with the object of love.” Likewise, James Keenan writes, “When we learn lessons in love, we learn not to reduce love, but that love’s nature is to extend itself... love is, after all, union, a deeply felt visceral union, that we keep pursuing.” Loving and being able to receive love, particularly God’s love, requires a certain sense of self, that is to say, an active receptivity.

Vacek is quite direct in his affirmation of self-love. “God,” he writes, “passionately wants our good.” Vacek at once confirms and challenges the emphasis on sacrifice. “Other-centered and self-sacrificial agape is essential in the Christian’s heart. There are roughly equivalent dangers of excessive self-assertion and self-giving. The danger of self-love is selfishness. The danger of other-love is that we treat ourselves merely as means for the fulfillment of the interests of others.”

Thus we see Vacek’s balanced view of Christian love. He recalls the three Greek words associated with love, *agape*, *eros* and *philia* and defines them in relation to the basic intention of the lover. Thus

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133 Farley, *Personal Commitments*, 106.
agape is love “for the sake of the beloved”; eros is love “for our own sake”; and philia is love “for the sake of a relationship” that I have with another. 140 Philia “is the most complete Christian love.”141 Indeed it is “the foundation and goal of Christian life… [for all] human love finds its culmination and ultimate goal in a community of solidarity with and in God.”142 When one loves God as God, the three loves ought to balance and correct each other. Agape corrects selfishness and pride as well as our tendencies to exclusiveness. In times of depression or self-hate, eros enlivens us to goodness, and indeed to our own goodness, potentially making us able to love others more. “Philia,” he writes, “corrects the temptation to think that life is nothing more than individuals walking next to, or behind or in front of others, but not with others.”143

The strongest arguments for self-love in moral theology (and indeed neighbor love in moral theology) are those that place it within the context of a loving God and loving this loving God. This is Darlene Fozard Weaver’s point in her 2002 book, Self-Love and Christian Ethics. “By taking love for God,” she writes, “as our center of gravity, we avoid subjectivism and excessive reticence about normative anthropologies; love for God directs our attention to the divine as the highest good and the source of value, and to our creatureliness and to the goods that comprise it.”144 Vacek’s pithy line (reminiscent of Augustine’s famous “Love and do what you will”145) summarizes this point: “My full love occurs when I love my God.”146

Beyond “Safe” Love

Paul Wadell has been a strong and consistent figure in moral theology who is able to translate traditional language of love into more public discourse; at the same time, he has pushed the traditional discussion of love in new directions.147 This translation and extension

141 Vacek, Love, Human and Divine, xvi.
142 Vacek, Love, Human and Divine, 280-81.
143 Vacek, Love, Human and Divine, 309.
146 Vacek, Love, Human and Divine, 224 (emphasis original).
draws on the love of friendship—from his 1989 book *Friendship and the Moral Life* to his 1992 *The Primary of Love* and 2002 *Becoming Friends*. Rooted in Thomistic ethics and articulated in contemporary discussions of love in moral theology, he seeks to help people understand the Christian theology of love, and at the same time he invites readers to become better lovers. In doing so he is effectively attempting to answer Keenan’s concern about theologians taking the “visceral sense” out of love. Thus in his *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life*, Wadell discusses the Christian vocation to love grounded on a fundamental anthropology. He describes basic “rules for love.” In his *The Christian Moral Life*, he and co-author Patricia Lamoureux address the vocation to love as well as offering an extended discussion of how love “works.”

Fundamental to Wadell and Lamoureux’s understanding of love is the basic human need for intimacy, community and relationships. “As God’s earthly images,” they write, “we are created to be-in-relation-to-others.”

“Love is a strong, passionate assertion that we want something to be and that we will do whatever we can to keep it in being.”

At the same time, these authors warn us against the dangers of “safe” neighbor love. Safe neighbor love is the comfortable love that sees only people who are like me as objects of love, that is to say, “people we find easy and pleasing to love... [making] it acceptable for us to ignore and neglect the very people who typically are most in need of our care.” This “love is assiduously at odds with how Jesus taught his followers to love.”

One of Aquinas’ images of charity is that it is like a furnace (perhaps a wood-burning stove might be a better contemporary image).

The hotter the fire is inside of the stove, the more the heat is able to spread throughout the house. The “hotter” one’s love of God, the wider one’s love. That is to say, the more one is able to love those who seem “unlovable,” for example sinners, enemies, people who are distant from us and indeed animals (we are to love them like God loves them). Wadell and Lamoureux’s challenge to safe neighbor love and their call for ecological love are in this spirit of Thomas. Wadell writes, “If we are called to love and to value everything God loves and

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148 See also Mattison, *Introducing Moral Theology*.


152 See Thomas, *ST* II-II q. 27, a. 7.
values, then we are called to respect and care for everything that has been brought into being as an act of God’s love.”