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Who Loves First?

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Who Loves First?

Who loves who first in a love relationship? We might easily assume that parents love their children long before their children love them, though the first time an infant smiles back at his or her parents, most mothers and fathers are certain that the love is mutual, and they care not about assigning a date and time to the beginnings of this love. With friendships, we might have a friendly "battle of memories" recalling who spoke first, or when one knew that he or she loved the other. But most of us are far more interested in the experience of loving and being loved than in having certainty about who first chose to love the other.

God loves us before we love God, but that does not diminish the value to us or to God or our response, any more than families would evaluate their love for one another on the basis that parents love their children from their birth or even during pregnancy, and children only later mature to the point where they love their parents. Many of us can recall the first time that we felt love for God or chose to love God in return. Recalling or reflecting upon moments and experiences of our love for God is both consoling and encouraging.

Some say that they "fell in love" with God when they came to know at a deep level that they could have a personal relationship with their creator. Others, after years of having believed in God as someone distant and impersonal, are now able to say with confidence: "I love God." Still others can say that they love God, but have no feelings associated with their commitment. Many can recall having an experience of love when they read a Scripture passage from Isaiah, one of the Psalms, or one of the Gospels, and knew that they were responding in love to a love that had been manifested to them. Each one's relationship with God is unique and personal. Though many of us can talk about love of God, we might have widely differing descriptions of our experiences.

Whenever we tell others that we love them - friends, family members, life-partners, or any persons we choose - we give them a gift. With most people, we hope that the gift is appreciated, and in some measure reciprocated. In declaring love for God, we are always responding to a love that precedes ours, and yet our love is valued exceedingly. God created us in love so that we might have the experience that alone ultimately satisfies us, of loving God in return.

Though God's love flows from an infinite source, God loves each of us with a unique personal love, as each of us is a unique creation. When we respond, our love bears a resemblance to that infinite source, and tends to encompass more rather than fewer of the other unique individuals whom God loves. When parents manifest their love for their children, they evoke a response that at first is directed to them alone, but soon expands to include others. Our love, originating from the heart of God, can never be satisfied or fulfilled in exclusive love for only one other human, but opens out to include love for other persons.

Love, even for God, is only love when it is freely given. We might remember, as a little child, being told to kiss grandma, or some friend of the family. Perhaps we did not want to at the time; it was our parents who loved this other person. We were taught to love, encouraged to love, urged to use the words, signs and symbols of love. Perhaps only at a later date did we find it in ourselves to choose to express love spontaneously for grandma, or the friend of the family. Love remains a mysterious, free activity, with great benefits not only for those we love, but for we who love.

At any time of the day or night, in any place on the face of the earth, we can stop for a moment; turn our attention towards God, and say, "I love you." Whether the words come easily, or only with difficulty, our sense of honesty will support us in speaking only what is true. The experience of speaking such words to God is very worth noting, for God cannot help but treasure infinitely our gift, and respond to us graciously with love, love that does not come to an end.