

# Human Love

## *The nature of human love and its demands*

Love between two human beings, when it is born, is a source of joy not only for them, but also for all those who are able to watch it unfolding. No other human being can, by his or her own efforts, obtain this happiness for those who do not already have it. This is an important point, because it indicates that this happiness comes from the most intimate part of each person and is a manifestation of what is basic to human nature. It bears witness to the special character of the message of love itself. Many people do not know any other way of showing them, in a sufficiently expressive and personal way, what they ought to try to achieve in order fully to reach themselves.

When it is born, love requires one to give oneself entirely, not simply for a time, but forever. In demanding this, it reveals its relationship with the whole of one's being. By means of this quality, which is an essential characteristic, it transcends the nature of the goods which have to be renewed constantly and by means of which each person is nourished each day. If we do not recognize in an absolute way the definitive aspect of love, then, however delicate and selective that love may be in other respects, it will not be raised to a really human level, nor will it fulfill the hope that we place in it. On the contrary, it will prevent us from achieving our hopes.

This total self-giving, however, is underpinned by the obscure, powerful and unlimited desire to possess the other carnally, completely to satisfy one's expectations of the other and to find self-identification in the other. At the beginning, self-giving and possession are so completely inseparable that it is impossible for the one to exist without the other, with the result that really human love goes back both to having and to being. This twofold origin, when it is successful, means that love is especially able to help human beings to become mature. This inherent ambiguity, however, gives rise to various crises, which we must overcome if we are to satisfy the demands that growing love makes on us throughout our lives.

*Love makes men and women individuals*

Thanks to love, man and woman, although each remains essentially alone, are able to come to a knowledge of the intensity of life in relationship to one another. Society surrounds this extreme intensity with silence or else does violence to it, because it is not concerned with what exists at the deepest level of being of man and woman in this relationship. This couple can only know each other through the creations of their imaginations, places that they share and the conventions that are common to their environment. Those who surround them and indeed their whole environment are quite outside the experience that they share. The most intimate and instinctive and the least developed of their human activities enable them to escape from that environment.

The implicit taboos set up by a healthy society to protect its members from their own childishness and mediocrity are shaken by this, to the extent that their absolute character is lost. They are, after all, no more than barriers that are only crossed consciously, in the light of what is human in the most noble sense and subject to the observation of socially indispensable disciplines. Immature fears and phobias, even perversions, are caused almost always by gaps in the individual's education which make it impossible for persons to deal satisfactorily and at the time when they have to with their most personal human needs. Sometimes, of course, they are the result of constraints imposed by society or scandals with which society cannot deal. Married life helps to do away with these and may even soothe, if not completely heal, certain wounds that may be unknown to those who bear them or at least be misunderstood by them. Recovery, however, is slow and difficult. It is also as difficult for us to accept our animal nature with natural ease without damaging it in some way as it is for us to spiritualize it completely. Each effort made by one partner helps the other and adds genuine happiness to their married life.

Even if man and wife love each other truly, it is not easy, despite all appearances, for them to become one flesh. In their married life, their private relationship has to achieve an entirely new authenticity that so far has not been available to them or at least has been powerfully inhibited. It has also to find a new freedom that has so far seemed to them to be a form of license. Their intimate relationships can no longer be restricted by any rule defined a priori. They, in fact, depend on initial situations. Even if those situations are apparently repeated again and again, they are always new and even if all people experience them, they are always original. Their relationships are subject to the demands imposed by the flesh in the most extreme familiarity. Because of this, the only possible norm open to them is the love that one partner has for the other and which can never be defined.

The behavior required, allowed or sought by love cannot be described either as objective or as general. It cannot be seen from the outside and judged in the abstract. It has to be viewed within the situation in which it was brought into being and was justified. Seen in any other light, its nature is changed and violence is done to it. The whole of life itself is not enough for man and woman to be set free from the reactions that they have inherited from even the very distant past and from the prejudices that they have acquired from the society in which they live. These reactions and prejudices enslave the fundamental energies of human nature. They do not fulfill them and enable them to unfold and develop within the orbit of love. This process of liberation often fails, especially when man and woman do not try to become free, both separately and together, with faith and determination. They may not make the effort for a variety of reasons—lack of dynamism, a wrongly conceived prudence or a restricted moral attitude. It is, however, only subject to this condition that human love will ever carry out its work in them.

*Love helps men and women to discover their true selves*

Disturbed by their personal reactions, man and woman, once joined together by the act of love, find in their nakedness, which is for each person who experiences it quite new, an almost unique opportunity to examine their reality as human beings. This consciousness goes far beyond anything that they would be able to find out by an individual effort of the will or by individual understanding or inner experience. When two human beings succeed in this way in reaching themselves in the depths of their original selves, it sometimes happens that one of them is able, in a flash, to catch a glimpse of the fundamental significance of what he or she is and what is being experienced.

Since we are unable to come into contact with our essential being without at the same time being in contact with the animal nature that is common to all people and in this case through another person, we seem to need to cross those normally formidable frontiers which separate us from others and which make those others more alien to us than they would ever have imagined possible.

On the basis of this union of bodies, which has so far been forbidden, unknown or misunderstood, in which the roots are more closely joined than the summits and which we may both have feared as much as falling into a pit and desired as much as ascending to a peak, our lives may seem to us, when they are full of light, to be simple, harmonious and natural. Death itself may therefore be regarded either in such a way that love reveals itself in these conditions both as the beginning and the end or as an infinite promise and its fulfillment or as being based on no more than duration, being outside time. It

is enough for love to have been for it to be. It is enough for it to have been for us to be.

A slight intuition, which, even when it is frequently renewed, is always secret, fleeting, too remote from ordinary life for it not to be concealed and buried by what are said and done every day in society, a spontaneous and crude knowledge, not understanding in the true sense of the word—this is the form taken by the light that penetrates so deeply into each one's conscious perception. In so doing, it illuminates the depths that form the foundation of our lives as well as our past and our future. If we give our entire attention to this revelation, we can and will inevitably find in it so much matter that, however much we seek, we will never exhaust it.

*The knowledge of the other disclosed by human love always leads to a recognition of irreducible differences*

Without ever having consciously desired it, man and woman are cast on the path of human achievement by the incarnation of their love. Through their union and thanks to it, they discover, while they are treading this path, the irreducible differences between them. It is not possible for two beings to come so close to each other in such an intimate, free and direct way without each of them sensing, blindly perhaps, but quite vividly, the secret and mysterious reality of the other. Because of this extreme closeness to each other, however, and this loss of isolation that is brought about in the relationship between man and woman as in no other way, people's essential solitude, the state in which they exist in themselves, is powerfully affirmed. The more deeply transformed their mutual relationship is by love, the more clearly the distance which separates them from each other is revealed. Although this revelation of the permanent distance between them is unambiguous, moreover, it is for the most part unconscious or semi-conscious, thanks to human weakness and the demands made by the relationship between man and woman. What is more, it is a distance that is based on the individuality, the heredity and the education of each. They are also separated to an extent that can never be known by their sex, which makes the distance between them even more difficult to transcend because of their radically different ways of feeling, acting, reacting and even thinking. Apart from these deeply rooted causes, however, there is another that is even more firmly based on the very structure of their being—individuals are solitary by nature and cannot be united to another being except only to exist through and in that other person.

This distance is not simply recognized and accepted. It is taken up with faith and it makes love authentic and lasting. It is denied by those who refuse to accept it and rejected by those who are destroyed by the attempt to adapt themselves to the other. It reduces love to the level of goods that are possessed

and degrades it, making it fragile and dependent on chance. Even if persons submit to it as a situation that cannot be rectified and as a phenomenon which they have to accept, it still makes love debased, letting it express itself in sentimentality and desires of the flesh, both of which are soon reduced to the level of need. Love itself disappears and is replaced by superficial habits of co-existence, so that the couple become no more than a small society of two persons who are useful to each other in providing physical necessities and the commodities of life. As truly human love disappears, all the promises that were hoped for when it was born are wrecked. The deep disappointment caused by this failure often leads to a secret break between man and wife, when divorce is not practiced in the name of a false authenticity that is limited to the feelings and the conditions of the moment.

If their love is to last and to make progress, the couple must not try to suppress the distance that separates them. They must accept it. Love enters their solitude, but does not break it. It does, however, prevent it from deteriorating into isolation. It sets man and woman up in an implicit communion with each other rather than helping them to communicate with each other. This communication, if it is ever to begin, requires conditions that are contingent, risky, to a great extent dependent on chance and often very difficult to achieve in lives that are too busy or too diversified.

Human love can only be kept at its own level if it is recollected, since it is through recall that persons are able to be present to themselves. It is, moreover, only by means of this presence to oneself that, despite the distance that separates the two solitary beings (that distance that can never be crossed), the other's presence can ever be perceived. Human love is both a call and a response to a call. It is discreet because of its nature rather than because of modesty. It lives naturally in a silence that does not change when it is expressed in words, because it gives those words their sustenance, value and importance. It is important for this love not to be reduced to the level of reactions, decisions, regrets and scruples. It must transcend all tensions and be faithful to itself if it is to be confirmed in its vital immobility.

#### *Married faith as the condition of human love*

If the distance that separates the couple and which cannot be forged is not to isolate them from each other and if it is, on the contrary, to become the paradoxical way to their communion with each other, love must be founded more and more firmly on the level of being. This distance cannot be strengthened by any possession and we cannot really have anything real if we are separated from it. Each person becomes the source and, at the same time, also the end-point of the love that the one has for the other, not by virtue of what one has, nor by what one offers, but by what one is. We claim no right and call for

no exchange. We are extremely discreet in our search. This love that exists between two human beings is the fulfillment of a love which, despite its possessive character, does not have its exclusive origin in the goods that are thrown aside as soon as they have been used and have become worn out, since it is definitive in its orientation. At this point of perfection, then, love is established between man and wife in such a way that no harm can ever destroy it, not even the death of one of the partners.

Adult love requires the partners to believe in each other beyond their manifestation of that love to each other and beyond the extent to which they are able to guess at the love that the other has. This absolute affirmation that each partner has for the other is married faith. This married faith is closely related to the lasting quality of love. It very soon becomes indispensable, even before the differences between the partners are manifested. Although sentimentality and the flesh feed love generously at the beginning and give it a very special character, it is not long before they become insufficient to help that love to remain real. It soon loses its virginal character, its shyness, purity and reserve and the partners quickly recognize that sentimentality alone cannot suffice to serve love. On the contrary, without the assistance of love, supported by faith, it can neither be experienced nor desired for long at a noble level. It inevitably deteriorates into the pursuit of a habitual satisfaction which enslaves because it debases and reduces to a vulgar level. It wears out like every other possession. It tyrannizes those who seek it for its own sake more quickly than any other search, because it disguises itself in the authentic appearance of love, yet makes that love in the long run impossible.

### *The originality of married faith*

Married faith is not the result of a virtuous decision or a desire that is in accordance with the obligations imposed by the marriage bond and the promises made, nor is it the consequence of shared tastes, a harmonious life in common or a profitable co-operation, especially in the bringing up of children. It may be strengthened and made easier by these factors, but they are of secondary importance. This faith is not a trust based on originally sentimental or even intellectual reasons. It is quite different in kind from such a trust, which may have quite legitimate reasons for disappearing, at least partially. No, married faith is of the same kind as faith in oneself and, like faith in oneself, it calls for inner experience. It goes beyond all the reasons that human beings can understand and is born in them, if they have great enough depths, as soon as they find out whom they love. Thanks to the transformation of marriage and the unique experience that it involves, married faith is rooted in human instincts and because of this its strength is often increased.

People are able to make married faith, like their faith in themselves, the most supreme expression of their faithfulness to the peaks of human experience. They do this by clinging constantly to the original source of this light.

There is no more serious mistake that can be made in respect to oneself than that of denying the existence of this light after having become conscious of it. This denial can, after all, only take place by reducing this exceptional event to the level of a very ordinary, everyday event that happened, like so many others, in the past. A denial of this unique encounter which took place in an exceptional environment and was experienced in all the nakedness and immediacy of reality is bound to degrade it and do violence to it. Its originality makes it transcend all other experiences of reality and to deny its existence is to refuse to believe that its contribution may be irreplaceable. Even if appearances are preserved intact in this denial, the personal consequences will last and be revealed in the future. This is also a reason why a chance encounter in love or love that is briefly stimulated for the sake of the experience or indeed any love undertaken without sufficient maturity almost always has unhappy consequences. All such encounters tend to make people misunderstand the meaning that love may have for their lives and they all too frequently fail.

There are certain exceptional cases and these are often increased in number or magnified in importance—quite incorrectly—in the minds of those who experience them. Apart from these, however, it is only possible through the medium of human love to have faith in the other when one has reached him or her in the depths of real existence. This love, however, can only gain greater depth and therefore remain alive in faith. From the moment, then, that it becomes evident that the distance between the partners is impossible to cross, love and married faith are inseparably bound together, far more closely than mutual love and possession of each other.

#### *Married faith and the bond of the flesh*

By means of a very special development which takes place in parallel to the deepening of love, the need to find oneself in the other or to receive what one expects from the other disappears more quickly than the desire to possess each other in the flesh. Although it remains what it is and within its crude and primitive context, the latter becomes in this way the main opportunity for the partners to remain in contact with each other within the exceptional harmony of marriage. In addition to these everyday and of necessity superficial encounters and certain and usually infrequent moments of special grace, there is also this broad and shared path along which everyone learns about the incommunicable aspect of the other who is the object of their faith. If we are determined to make the effort to understand the other, then the latter can,

although remaining basically beyond our reach, be glimpsed by us, especially in the peace that follows the act of love, as a mysterious center existing in itself and moving toward being in its own solitude and following its own path.

This understanding is unique within its own category and, apart from a few special cases, it is confined to the experience of love and especially at certain times. It is not simply valuable for our maturity—it is necessary for it. Without this deep and direct understanding, there are no real neighbors in the strict sense of the word and no kindred human beings. There are only those who live nearby and traveling companions, however precious these may be. Human love, then, without calling for exceptional attitudes or encounters, makes it possible for us to come close to our real neighbor. Normally, this will be the first time that we have such a neighbor. Frequently, it may also be the only time. The bond of the flesh, then, may receive from the faith that exists between the partners an impulse that changes its initial end and an achievement that may justify it, even if human love has already reached its perfect state.

At the same time, however, it sometimes happens that the fullness of physical experience that accompanies this form of communion raises doubts and scruples in our minds because we do not know how to situate this euphoria, which is both psychological and of the flesh, in our daily lives. It remains separate from the rest of our life. The act of love is too special for it to be otherwise. The man's need to act suddenly and impulsively and the woman's tendency to be submissive and to wait are not always related to everyday behavior. These attitudes are, however, silent but expressive manifestations of love and in that act of love each partner tries to find or to welcome the other in what that person is, by means of the most extreme intimacy, although the attempt may not be fully successful. The memory that that person retains of these special moments in life will inevitably become separated from the events themselves and at a lower level, showing both quite openly what they are. Because of this memory, they may become unjust toward themselves, especially if they are not capable of finding, by means of their own judgment, the atmosphere that led them to behave in that way.

Whenever, in pursuit of an idea that we already have, we aspire to spirituality and give way to the temptation outlined above—the temptation which assumes an apparent nobility in order to lead us astray—we no longer give nature any opportunity to display itself fully, but render it impotent by running away from it. We give up using it, although we cannot replace it with anything else. We do without it forever. Our love is almost fatally condemned to live on the past. It dies down and becomes a complex of intimate habits, each partner becoming an isolated unit. It is no longer possible for us to be open to the other in respect of the deepest aspects of life. It is even impossible

for perfect friendship to exist if the partners are so far removed from each other after having been so close.

### *The difficulties of human love*

The path that leads from the birth of love to mature love and from the first promises to their fulfillment may seem easy at the beginning, but it is certainly more difficult than the ways that lead to a possession of the most demanding goods and less well known than those ways. The route cannot simply be discovered as one follows it, partly because it is different not only for each couple, but also for each partner. There is no technique by which we can satisfy the questions posed again and again by love, which has to ask these questions if it is not to lose its inborn qualities. Even the most precise forms of reason and morality are not enough in this case, however much they may claim to be.

Under these circumstances, our whole being is confronted with itself, from the most blindly spontaneous part of our nature to the least conscious part. There are surely few more brilliant stars in our firmament and few others which are so persevering in throwing light on our way. Yet there are also few who follow this star for long enough. Most only see it go out and preserve no more than either a fond or a bitter memory of it.

No one really knows how deeply illiterate one is. Society helps less to discover our true intentions than to absorb us entirely in a very demanding elaboration and a childishly satisfied contemplation of its sciences and techniques. Society is fundamentally insensitive to the real substance of love and is only concerned with pouring it into molds which will not endanger the order required by society itself for its elementary task of education. It limits itself, in the case of love, to legal enactments. It only makes use of morality when it is sure that it is politically or economically profitable to do so.

We are often weighed down by our physiological inheritance. We may also be without a really human education and exposed to mediocre examples, sometimes from those closest to us. We are everywhere in danger of falling into the traps on our path, so often laid by those who, like us, are wandering in pursuit of happiness. Despite this, however, we have to confront our own destiny. All that we have at the beginning of our journey is our inborn generosity, our instinctive purity—so often mixed with fearfulness, candor and prejudice—and a spontaneous uprightness that is all too frequently bent by society.

Although drawn to the peaks of experience by all that is best in us, we are also attracted to the low-lying boggy ground where our love is swallowed up and destroyed. This happens when we have recourse to what is taking

place around us and do not attempt to go beyond the surrounding moral environment by using our own spiritual vitality. It is with our own resources, many of which are unknown to us, and our own reactions, which are frequently instinctive rather than premeditated, so that it is only later that we discover their existence and understand what they mean, that we are able to move, as well as we can, in the direction of mature love. It is therefore hardly surprising that, in these conditions, we are almost bound to hesitate and even stumble on the upward path. We are always exposed to the risk of chance encounters, especially when we set off, and we make such false starts that the unhappy consequences will be felt throughout the rest of our lives. Who is able to know this at the time and recognize it with certainty?

*The stages of human love are almost fatally marked by mistakes and crises*

We must go further. Many of us have a very high level of knowledge, but are almost completely without true human education. This is the result of a series of misinformation to which they have been subjected or which they have themselves consciously accepted. Because of this, they are insensitive to the most basic intuitions of their own nature and incapable of recognizing true love at the beginning of their lives. Love is therefore made profane by such people and is prevented from penetrating to them because of their childishness. For some, then, it is no more than a delectable adventure that has to be repeated again and again. For others, it is simply a particularly solemn stage in life and sometimes even a disturbing and dangerous stage, to which we feel obliged to conform in accordance with the accepted conventions of our environment.

Is it therefore possible to speak of marriage at a non-sociological level of understanding when persons of this kind decide to set up a home and perhaps found a family? Such marriages very often lead, quite quickly, to a breakdown that is either publicly displayed or discreetly concealed. They do not go back to really human love and, apart from a few exceptions, do not lead to it later. They possess neither the indispensable characteristics of that love nor its spiritual fertility.

*These mistakes and crises are necessary to men and women for the deepening of their existence*

In these conditions, only really serious crises, many of which are very painful, can reveal to us, amid the ruins of our mediocre past, the depths, greatness and strengths of our humanity. These crises emerge from a labyrinth of contradicting behavior and decisions, meetings and events, succeeding one another apparently quite incoherently and with frequently terrible

consequences, thus revealing a deep immaturity or even perversity. They often crush other beings and reduce other lives to irreparable ruins. They also lead to situations that are physiologically or psychologically impossible. They often form what is for many a difficult, dangerous and even scandalous exception. We may, however, be able to recover ourselves or maintain ourselves by means of a leap forward, for which our past life may have made no preparation and to which it may even be totally opposed. In that case, these crises, which are sometimes secret and at others more visibly dramatic, end by saving us from ourselves. They do so almost by an ordeal of fire, making us endure, for the rest of our days, a failure as large as life. They burden us with the idea of what we might be but will not be and with the thought of all those whom we have hurt permanently and cannot in the future ever heal. Our conversion to humanity, finally discovered or rediscovered, takes place subject to certain clear situations. Unconsciously or at least semi-consciously, we were at the origin of these situations when we were living in darkness. We are also bound to bear the consequences of these situations like stigmata.

These crises are too ambiguous and their outcome is too exposed to risk. They also produce far too many innocent victims. It is therefore quite right that we should fear them. In the absence of more harmonious paths, however, they are necessary to us for the deepening of our life. No witness can possibly remain silent when faced with this great and complex number of human beings who are hardly conscious of the course that their lives will take when they set off and who look for a long time and are blind to the risks involved in the sudden leaps that they have to make in their search. Silence is similarly impossible in the face of the inextricable interweaving of these many human destinies. All counsel is given in vain, all judgment is false and all condemnation is clearly unjust. These reactions are not the result of self-defense, either personal or collective. We have to be patient and silently present. We will then be able to keep both weakness and hardness at a distance. Patience and silence act as a call and an aid. They are nourished by our faith in ourselves as we follow our difficult paths.

#### *Human love calls for continuous search and renewal*

We are not spontaneously faithful, because, when it is born, our love is too full of the desire to possess for it to escape being rapidly degraded by time in every form that it assumes. Surely there cannot be a single husband or wife, however much their behavior may be beyond reproach, who has not, at least fleetingly, regretted marrying and looked back with a little longing to the time before they were married! And surely too every wife and husband, however faithful, must at some moment have recalled the time when they were engaged to their spouse and have despaired, at least a little, of being really

united to that spouse. And there must be many who have often wished that their lives had followed a different course.

Not everyone, of course, gives way to these irrational dreams and many people reject them too quickly, without really understanding their meaning and without listening attentively enough to their implication. Is it not true to say that these people have, quietly and without even admitting it to themselves, abandoned love? Confronted with their radical inability truly to rediscover husband or wife and partly because it is easier for them to communicate with others, such people have possibly come to be satisfied to be, in the eyes of the world and its morality, beyond reproach. This situation between married couples is commonly accepted as normal and men and women are usually regarded as wise if they conform to it. But, if love is not to sink down into the mediocrity of such an accepted and stable situation (its apparent stability hiding its gradual destruction), then we must look that situation firmly in the face.

This clarity is necessarily very strict. No one can be expected to help us to acquire it. Who, after all, would venture to speak plainly to another about this hard situation, when individuals are tempted to turn away from it because it both condemns them and goads them unceasingly to look for what was promised to them? We are only able to discover and accept this condition in silence and by looking inward when we are alone and confronting ourselves face to face. This also applies to everything that is essential to us. This clarity calls, moreover, for more than simply good will. It also requires intelligence and sincere courage. What is more, in order to continue to exist in the sharp light of its revelations and to take them to a deeper level, it needs married faith.

This clarity, then, is closely related to married faith and made possible by it. It reaches purity and stays with it. It does not allow love to sink into lethargy, but helps it to keep away from paths which ultimately prove to be no more than dead ends. It encourages it to find its way according to the promises that glorified its birth.

#### *Human love enables people to discover their absence of being*

Love requires a great deal of human maturity if it is to set itself free from the passion of love that helped it to come into the world and to survive. No one can in fact reach a deeper level of experience simply by following the demands made by love, since our inconsistency and that of our partner are even more opposed to this development than our own faults and the mistakes that we make. In our possession of our partner in the flesh, we hesitate between the two poles of physiological need, which is increased by marital relationships, and our approach to our partner, which is for him or her a very precious privi-

lege and begins with an exceptional form of charity. The presence in ourselves of the being whom we love, a presence that comes from the depths of our being, is always disappearing and evading us, since it is as fragile as our own recollectedness and our own presence to ourselves.

On the other hand, if we continue to be loyal to this faith, we will discover our own inability to be what love requires us to be. We will accept this revelation and bear it courageously. It is, after all, one of the most precious fruits of love. Our absence of being will therefore be shown to us, not only through the extreme crises that occur in our lives, but also in a more harmonious and positive way, by the recollection of love's birth and its promise that has never been denied and is always hoped for and that has never been reached, but continues to call us.