

Concerning True Charity and the Method of Acquiring it

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Translator's note:

This translation is based on the introduction, text and footnotes which were published by P. Costanzo Cargnoni O.F.M. Cap. In I Frati Cappuccini: Documenti e testimonianze dell primo secolo, Edizioni Frate Indovino, Perugia, vol III/1, pp.2146-2155. The only additions to the notes made by the translator are references to Francis of Assisi: The Early Documents, edited by Regis Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap., J. A. Wayne Hellmann, O.F.M. and William J. Short O.F.M. Conv., New York City Press, New York, London, Manila, for an English version of quotations from the Writings or Biographies of St Francis.

Introduction by Castanzo Cargnoni O.F.M. Cap.

In this sermon which was delivered in Lucca Ochino dealt with the subject of fraternal charity against the background of the social life of this city. He expounds how God's love cannot be found in creatures or in philosophical or doctrinal questions, but in the wisdom of ignorance, in the humble reading of Sacred Scripture when savoured by the inner spirit and in the experience of tribulations and contradictions. Therefore, in order to serve and love God it is necessary to detach ourselves from possessions and indeed place them "in the hands of Christ's poor." He concludes by saying that the example of St Bernard of Siena, who had such great compassion for the poor, ought to stimulate the city of Lucca to love "poor little people" as brothers and members of Christ even if they are filthy and uncouth.

4. Third sermon Lucca 1538

[Concerning true charity and the method of acquiring it]

5640 My beloved in Jesus Christ, it is certainly most difficult to love with perfect charity the one who is the infinite, pure, truthful, steadfast and perfect Good because he is the highest Good without evil, wisdom without ignorance, truth without error. As we see every day, I say that it is difficult for those who serve and prefer to serve creatures than the Creator because it is hard for such a person to hate his soul, his father and mother, his wife and children and possessions,¹ to abandon his own will, and despise everything under heaven.

However, even though a person who possesses charity despises all the things that were mentioned above, it remains difficult for a person who is concerned about the things of the world to acquire supreme charity. Concerning this matter our Saviour had this to say: *how narrow is the gate that leads to life,*² which is the road that leads to true life is very narrow even though you who are a bogus Christian you can make it wider. However, for the person who, out of love for Christ, has despised and

¹ Cf. Lk 34, 26; Mt 19, 29.

² Mt 14, 7.

abandoned all the things which are vile, base, weak, ruinous and momentary, the road is very easy because he regards all the above things as dung³ and mud and he finds it very easy to despise them. This is what the Lord says to them: *my yoke is sweet and my burden light*,⁴ which means is my yoke, that is, being in my service is very light and my burden is sweet, joyful and completely pleasant. I want to speak to you about true charity and the way to acquire it. This material will be both useful and necessary. Listen to me carefully and let us begin in the name of Christ.

5641 We come to know God by means of wisdom that is enlightening when we see and scrutinise all the good things under heaven with our bodily eyes, and say with Augustine: *If God provided so many good things when we were in prison, what will he provide in his palace?*⁵ This means that if the living God has prepared so many great and beautiful things in this vale of misery, how many greater things will there be in his heavenly palace? If here we are able to see a star and a small portion of his treasure, how great must it be to see the treasure and God himself? Thus by loving creatures in God and not restricting yourself to loving them in themselves, and by detaching yourself from them, they become the image of God's love for you and you can say with David: *For you have given me, O Lord, a delight in your deeds, and in the works of your hands I shall rejoice.*⁶ You, O Lord, have delighted me in what you have made and in the fabric of this universe. Then you can say with Paul: *For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen being understood by the things that are made.*⁷ This means that we can and should come to know God's invisible things through mankind as it was created by God and through the order of the universe. Therefore, the educated and uneducated can come to know God by means of this book

However, dear me, my Christian, who are so ungrateful and insensitive when you love creatures, are loaded with wealth, stuck in the mud of your lust, proud of honours and ambitious, educated in blind prudence and teachings, proud in your love for your children as fathers and mothers, insensitive because of self-love, and so you despise the Lord and while praising the servant⁸ you come close to the creature and abandon the Creator. You despise him and replace him with these things and choose lead, and give your love to a servant who can bring and present you with gifts, and not to the Lord who sent you and sends you all that you possess that is good and which you see proceeds from him and comes from him.⁹

5642 Dear me, O my Christian, as I have said, are you not becoming confused by giving your love to the servant who brings you gifts rather than to the Lord who allows and commands you to be his servant? This is how philosophers and men of learning are deceived when they claim to know God using human prudence. *They*

³ Cf. Phil 3, 8.

⁴ Mt 11, 30

⁵ Augustine explains how the world is a prison in *Enarr. In ps. 141 (PL 17, 1842-44)*.

⁶ Ps 91, 5 (*Vulg.*)

⁷ Rom 1, 20. See also the parallel with note 35 of the *Dialogue* between Ochino and Cibo concerning the method of falling in love with God (above, n. 4027).

⁸ This reminds us of L.M. 1, 3; 2C 6; L3C 6 (FAED II, p. 530; p. 249; p. 77)

⁹ This brings to mind what St Francis said in *A prayer inspired by the Our Father*: "For You, Lord, are Supreme Good, the Eternal Good, from whom all good comes, without whom there is no good." (FAED I, p. 158.)

*become lost in their thoughts and become fools.*¹⁰ Such philosophers and men of learning have become fools by means of their blind prudence and vain thoughts. This is certainly not enough. If you want to know God you need more than is contained in philosophical questions and worthless teachings, otherwise if only men of learning were the only ones to acquire knowledge of God's love what would happen to the uneducated and simple people? However, this is not the way things are. Indeed, they are quite different for there are many who know God only by means of human knowledge and not by means of sensitivity to sweet charity. *For example*, a person who is wise studies and reads and by reading comes to know that honey is sweet, but he has not tasted the sweetness and smoothness of honey. This is how it is with blind and carnal prudence with its vain teaching and useless questioning, arguments and debates. They recognise God's power, goodness and wisdom and only provide knowledge of his immense charity, but do not provide the interior experience of this so that this is lacking. However the uneducated, simple, good Christian knows these things by faith with more certainty than if they were present, and is completely in love and on fire with love of God in whom he is at rest,¹¹ and having been transformed into a flame of veritable charity he does not fear, is not affronted by anything that is created or harmful and is no longer a man of the earth, but an inhabitant of heaven,¹² whose conversation is no longer about earth but about heaven.¹³

5643 Yet a person can know and love God with greater certainty by means of informed ignorance. Thus, St Augustine used to say: *Idiots rise up and grasp heaven, while we drag ourselves to hell with our doctrines.*¹⁴ When you stop thinking about God with your intellect and your knowledge, then you begin to know God. When you begin to doubt that you can fathom out God, or comprehend His wisdom, goodness and power then, becoming humble in the Lord's sight, you will know him, and sweet Jesus will make you know him, such is the effectiveness and power of the virtue of humility in his sight.

Thus, the Church sings about the Virgin: *He whom heaven could not contain was present in your womb.*¹⁵ O glorious Virgin, he whom heaven could not contain, you came to know, held in your womb, embraced in your¹⁶ most beautiful arms because of the fervour of your most profound humility. Then, my Christian, fix your mind for a while, I beg of you, when there is a calm moment and the atmosphere is free of any cloud and you are recollected lift up your eyes and consider the heavens adorned with the sun, the moon and the stars and how beautiful they are and say: "O my goodness, if my sweet Saviour's palace which is so incomprehensibly far away looks to be so well laid out without anything being out of place, and we can see the entire universe that appears so beautiful to our eyes, O what will it be like when seen from close up,¹⁷ with all the blessed spirits, and what will it be like to see God face to face,¹⁸ where by means of Jesus Christ I can go to live for eternity?" Then blame yourself for being sunken in dung and mud in the past, and feel embarrassed when recognising that

¹⁰ Rom 1, 24

¹¹ Cf. *Const. 1536, n. 81* "we ought to be relaxed in his supreme goodness."

¹² Cf. 1 Cor 15, 48-49.

¹³ Cf. Phil 3, 20.

¹⁴ St Augustine, *Confes.* Lib VIII, c. 8, n. 19 (*PL* 32, 125).

¹⁵ Marian antiphon in the Roman liturgy.

¹⁶ In the text; *tuoi* and the same in other similar cases.

¹⁷ That is from inside.

¹⁸ Cf 1 Cor 13, 12; 1 Jn 3, 2.

Christ has not discharged¹⁹ you. This is how a person ignites love of Christ and comes to know God.

5644 In a similar way a person comes to know God by interpreting and relishing sacred scripture in a humble manner and not by posing philosophical questions, not by following clever reasoning and ingenious subtleties, not by undertaking study to show off or to acquire knowledge for the sake of knowledge, nothing like this will lead to the knowledge of God. Rather a person ought to be like a child who runs hastily to the mother's breast to suck milk and embrace her without being concerned if she is red or white but only being concerned about the milk.²⁰ This is how a Christian ought to act when he wishes to study. He should not go to philosophers or to profane sciences, but to the source of what is sweet mild that is Sacred Scripture. He ought to approach it with humility and fervour of spirit in order to taste and know God's goodness towards us, and our lack of gratitude towards him in order to follow a burning light, to discover the true path and genuine road that leads to love of God, and to be able to teach and indicate it to our neighbours and for this reason alone. Say with St Paul: *Avoid foolish questions and genealogies for they are unprofitable and vain.*²¹

We can easily come to know God in tribulations and prosperity and say with St Francis: *God, my God may you be everything to me.*²² Being completely in love with his Saviour St Francis used to say, "O my God, my God, you always mean everything to me." He meant that he recognised God's love in everything. O my Lord I know your goodness, see your hand, and your very great providence. If you are eating it is God who gives you the health to be able to eat. When he provides food for you he gives you the strength and ingenuity to fetch it. When you obey your prelate or superior say: "It is my God who is speaking through him and who is commanding me." When you hear God's word say: "It is God who is speaking and saying to me, *it is not you who speak.*"²³

5645 If you have everything that was created, wealth, children and everything that you could possess in this world, and if you suffer persecutions, injustices and all kinds of tribulations that you could possibly suffer in this frail life, God should mean everything to you because out of his supreme goodness he preserves and keeps you away from suffering the great anger and eternal suffering to which Paul refers when he

¹⁹ *Saccheggiare* in the text literally means *to pillage*.

²⁰ The image of a "little child" is also contained in Bl. Cordonì's *Dyalogue Concerning the Spiritual Union of God with the Soul*, [Milan 1539], f. 232v-233r "A soul that wants to grow and derive benefit from the seraphic state needs to deliberately cultivate childlike simplicity in accord with the advice of the Apostle Peter who said: "As newborn babes, desire the rational milk without guile, that thereby you may grow unto salvation" (1 Pet, 2, 2). This childlike simplicity will lead you into the state of love since because of his purity a small child believes everything which is a characteristic of love". (This is taken from chapter 48: *How God reveals and makes known his secrets to simple souls and not to the wise people of the world*).

²¹ Tit 3, 9.

²² This is a free quotation signifying how St Francis felt. Cf. also Bl. Cordonì, *Dialogie* [1, 21] rv. "The ardent affection of the soul makes a loud sound in God's ear when it says: My God, my love and my all, O my soul's sweet spouse, open me up to your love so that I may learn and experience how sweet and gentle your love is and make my soul melt. Make me love you more and may I not love myself except because of you. Let my soul sing a new song to you, and let it be a love song. May my soul conclude by rejoicing with your praises, singing with love. Grant that I may always wish and desire what is pleasing to you. May I want what you want. May my will follow your will and be in accord with your will completely."

²³ Cf. Mt 10, 20.

speaks of the *wrath and indignation, tribulation and anguish upon every soul of man who works evil* ²⁴

Thus in every kind of tribulation be like John the Evangelist in the boat who when he saw the Lord in the distance,²⁵ jumped from the boat and abandoned it completely saying: “This is the Lord who has come to visit me out of his kindness”²⁶ and go to meet them,²⁷ and embrace the tribulations and accept them with a happy heart as gifts and presents from your most clement Lord and say with Job: “*If we have received good things at the hand of God, why should we not receive evil?*”²⁸ If you have lost children, belongings or repute or anything say: “Indeed, if God gave up his Son with all of his treasures for me how much more would he give my children, even if I do not have a child, Why would he would take a child or belongings, my reputation, my status, my dignity or sanctity from me if that was not profitable for my salvation. *To them that love God all things work to good,* ²⁹ that is for a person who loves everything that works towards what is good.

5646 What is more when something happens that you do not want to happen, and which is contrary to your love of yourself, you should say: “O dear me, why am I so lacking in love of God seeing that God gave his only Son and his treasures for my salvation. My ungrateful soul, do you believe that he will deny you such a small thing if it benefits your salvation? Then say with the Prophet: *I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall be always in my mouth.* ³⁰ That means that I shall always bless the Lord during tribulations or prosperity. I ought to praise my Lord always, since without a doubt all good things always come from him and he permits everything for my salvation. If you do this you will find life in death, hope when things do not make sense, joyfulness in grief and happiness when you are unhappy.

Consequently, you who are so impure and filthy, be ashamed as you are dealing with and approaching one who is purity and meekness itself. If you are a Christian, you ought to be embarrassed to love Christ who is supreme purity, as you are steadfastly involved with most impure creatures and worldly sentiments. O dear me! If Nicodemus and Joseph, both of whom were just people, and John the Baptist, who was pure, did not dare to touch Christ; and if the angelic spirits minister to and serve the living God with such reverence, how much more ought you to serve the living God in a spiritual manner,³¹ and not serve him with such little consideration and with such impurity and with the kind of service that you would be embarrassed to offer to a worldly lord who is a corruptible creature.

My Christian, I do not believe that you could find that there was ever a person who was so proud and so puffed up or who thought so maliciously, that when he walked along the street in this city³² in sunlight that the shadow of his body was carved on the

²⁴ Rom 1 8-9.

²⁵ *Dalla discosta* in the text = da lontano.

²⁶ A reference to Jn 21, 7

²⁷ That is face the tribulations.

²⁸ Job 2, 10.

²⁹ Rom 8, 28.

³⁰ Ps 33, 2 (*Vulg.*)

³¹ This is like what is contained in the Letter of St Francis to the Entire Order, (cf. FAED, I, p. 116).

The same thought is expressed in the Introduction to the Ordinances of Albacina. (Cf. n. 82).

³² Lucca.

pavement. Is this not certainly true, and why? Because it is a shadow and he does not care about it. Likewise, O Christian, I think that you are like a shadow in this life according to what Job said: *he comes forth like a flower, and is destroyed and flies like a shadow*.³³ Because wealth, pleasures and all created things are shadows we should certainly not consider it to be evil when they are lacking and we should despise them as things that quickly disappear and as things that only last for a short time and, which, whether you like it or not, will quickly vanish. God has permitted this since you are not the owner of these things but the one who has the use of them. It is ordained that you cannot take them with you.

5647 Therefore, value the treasures of heaven³⁴ and like Dukes, Lords and Princes send them on ahead of you and do not leave them behind,³⁵ so that later on you would have nothing to enjoy. Dear me, how God has made you masters of what belongs to you, that is wealth, and substance, so that you can take them with you, while you, who are ungrateful and your own enemy, leave them behind and refuse to take them with you thinking that you have nothing. O dear me, how much effort you, who are rich, expend to make your merchandise safe. You feel content and at rest when they are in a safe place. Nevertheless, such security³⁶ is false and untrue. Keep them safe in the hands of Christ's poor little ones. This is a real, solid and secure place of deposit. You not only do not try to do this, but you act like a fool as daily experience proves. Therefore, what is the origin of such a mistake? Certainly, it is derived from nothing else but you not having faith in Christ, or not entrusting what belongs to you to him as you would to a wealthy merchant and earthly man.³⁷

Some might say; "O friend, I have faith and charity, and the will to observe and carry out everything that you tell me, father. It is enough that at the hour of death I recall and seek God's mercy and his goodness, which is very abundant and infinite as you have said and preached, and I shall find it and it will never fail." O how miserable and unhappy you shall be as you have been deceived completely! While you are alive and on a voyage, you may send the goods and carriages ahead as Augustine said: *We may love someone whom we cannot see, but cannot love someone whom we do not know*.³⁸ This means that before you become a good and virtuous man you may know someone by fame and reputation, but it is impossible to love him. Therefore if you have not known God by being obedient to him and by observing his precepts and commandments, begin to know him now in the way that you are able to love him, and he will say these words: "My Christian, if you believe completely that the goodness of God is what it is then you will believe that at the hour of death you will receive pardon for all your sins, for certain, for certain. I declare that you ought to brush away all delay and be instantly moved to repentance. You will become completely detached from this false world with all its concupiscence and you will turn towards your most sweet love. However, O my dear, what misery if you do not believe what I tell you that out of his goodness God will not desert you at the hour and time of your death. Therefore, send

³³ Job. 14, 2.

³⁴ Cf. Lk 12, 33

³⁵ *Dietor* in the text = *indietro*.

³⁶ In the text *tai seguire* = *sicurezza*.

³⁷ There is a clear reference to the concrete situation in Lucca following the revolt of the "straccinoi" (the ragged). Concerning this see above note 8 to the second sermon in Lucca.

³⁸ Cf. St Augustine: *De Trinitate*, lib. X, c. 1-2; n. 1-5. (PL 42, 243).

ahead; send ahead, the treasure and carriages of good works without delay so that in this way with the things mentioned above you will acquire perfect love of God.”³⁹

5648 Ten words from St Bernardino and then I will let you go.

It would be discourteous and uncivil, so to speak, if to praise God and give an example to my neighbour, I did not quote St Bernardino who was an Italian who came from my hometown of Sienna, and who was a member of our Order.⁴⁰ I would do the same even if he was a member of any other Order. I only want to tell you about his immense love of God and neighbour, so that you may burn and be set aflame with love of God and neighbour through his example. This is the basis of all our laws.⁴¹ Following his example may you come to the poor little ones and love them so as brothers, and members of Christ, even if they appear to you to be filthy and wretched, say to your soul: “O, my soul, if Christ had taken account of the horror and disgusting opprobrium and stench of the ladder of the cross what would have become of me?”

While he was still quite young, Bernardino demonstrated a spirit of joy and happiness towards the poor little ones. Because of his thoughtfulness he was not satisfied just to shed tears over them but gave them lavish alms by adding his love to these and repeatedly saying to his Aunt: “O my dear Aunt, I beg of you, give me the share of bread that is owed to me so that I may distribute it.”, and he then gave it to the poor. He willingly listened to the word of God and to sermons and when he came home he stood on a little wall and spoke to the other children. If these children intended or said something rude or coarse to one another they stopped and said, “Be quiet, here is Bernardino”. Then Bernardino, filled with living faith and perfect love of God and neighbour divested himself of human wisdom, and carnal prudence, threw off the world with all its concupiscence, admitted that he was not indebted to the world and its pleasures and delights but exclusively to the kind Christ his neighbour and Christ’s poor little ones.⁴²

Therefore, I adjure you from the bottom of my heart to want to imitate such living faith, hope and charity so that you may be happy in this life and in the next.

³⁹ This is an effective image! Note how good works are considered to be necessary in order to have perfect love of God.

⁴⁰ In the region of Florence.

⁴¹ Cf. Mt 22, 40.

⁴² This is one of the better known incidents in the life of Bernadine when the Saint was working at the hospital of Santa Scala in Siena. (This is why Ochino makes reference to ‘the stench of the cross’ which is a reference to the hospital). The mention of St Bernadine’s “thoughtfulness” comes from another story in his life.