

*“Strive eagerly for the greatest spiritual gifts. But I shall show you a still more excellent way.”* The more excellent way that Paul speaks of is love – not the sentimentality of emotions and feelings, for those are merely self-love – the love that St Paul speaks of is far deeper and more profound, it is the love that Jesus calls us to from the cross. Love is the reason for man’s existence and the vocation of his life, it is why the universe was created, to give man a school in which he can learn how to love. St John tells us that *“God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.”* We hear these words but we do not understand them. God IS love, not God loves but God IS love. Love is diffusive of itself, it grows by giving itself away. This means that God is incapable of not loving, it is utterly impossible for God not to love. Love pours out of God like the waters of Victoria falls, overflowing, encompassing and transforming everything it touches.

Jesus commanded us to *‘love one another as I have loved you’* sacrificially and unconditionally. This is how God loves – sacrificially and unconditionally – and this is how God calls us to love him back. But we do not know how to love as God loves and so God gives us a school in which we can learn to love, our family. When we are born we are squirming, squalling, little bundles of original sin, we do not yet know how to love, we must learn to love from our family. Our first experience of love comes from our mother. She feeds us, she bathes us, she plays with us, she burps us – she even removes that nasty stuff from our diapers. Our father teaches another kind of love, similar to our mother’s love but yet somehow different, a love that comes from security and safety, a love of learning and discovering, a love of boundaries and discipline. Our first response to love is gratitude, it is selfish and self-centered – we love our parents because they take care of us and protect us; our love is only a baby love, not yet a mature love.

Then comes that magical mystical time of our life called puberty, the High

School of our education in love, a time when we establish friendships and relationships outside our birth family, a time when we discover the other sex. We begin to feel God calling us out of selfishness and into relationship. Perhaps for the first time in our life, we begin to care about another for the sake of the other. Soon we leave the family of our childhood and contemplate making a family of our own. When the starry eyed lovers come to me for marriage preparation I tell them that marriage is the college of love, the school where we learn how to love as Christ loves, sacrificially and unconditionally. Those of you who are married know what I mean; your spouse teaches you sacrificial love and your children teach you unconditional love. If marriage is the college of love then parenthood is the graduate school of love. This is why God gives us children, to teach us the depth of the Father's love for we are not ready to enter into eternal beatitude with God until we learn how to love as He loves, sacrificially and unconditionally. This is the purpose of marriage and family and this is the reason God gives us his children, to teach us how to love as the Father loves.

I think it was Archbishop Fulton Sheen who coined the term "The world's greatest love" as a description of the love of Jesus Christ for us; the love that impelled him to mount the cross for our salvation. There was another love, no less than his; it was the love of his mother who stood at the foot of his cross loving her child in his suffering and death as he gave his life in atonement for our sins. But there is, I think, an even greater love than that of Mary and Jesus. It is the love of the Father who so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life. (John 3:16) Let us then ask the Father and Mary our mother to teach us how to embrace the cross as Christ embraced it, to teach us to love their Son as they loved him so that we might come to know the true depth of the Father's love for us.