

The gospel story of Peter’s threefold profession of love for Jesus following his resurrection from the dead is as familiar as his threefold denial at the time of Jesus’ trial and crucifixion. It is a story full of drama and pathos. For me, personally, it is always a moment of reflection as I can so easily identify with Peter in both his denial and his love for Jesus—times when out of fear or the desire to be accepted, liked, or not wanting to stir controversy, I have compromised in my faith and following of Jesus individually and as a priest, but also times when, despite or even because of my human sinfulness and weakness, Jesus has reassured me of his love and called me to still greater love and commitment to him.

In a reflection on this encounter between Jesus and Peter in his little book, *The Apostles*, our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI gives us the key to understand today’s gospel. It is in the word translated “love.” In his first two questions to Peter, “Do you love me?” in the original Greek language of the gospel the evangelist John has Jesus use the term “agape”. Agape love is the highest form of love; a self-sacrificing, self-emptying love, a love wholly given over to the welfare of another or a community of persons. The whole life of Jesus, from the first moment of his conception in the womb of Mary his mother to its climactic conclusion of his death on the cross is one sacrament of “agape” love. It is to such love that Jesus invites Peter as he tells him, “feed my lambs; tend my sheep.” To Jesus’ invitation Peter responds: “You know I love you”. However, instead of responding with “agape”, a like love, Peter employs the Greek term “philia”—the love of friendship. Such love, a step above “eros” or erotic love, the love of passion and emotion, while noble, good and true, yet yearns to become “agape”. It is here that we experience the critical point of the encounter—between Jesus and Peter, between Jesus and us. Realizing Peter’s sincerity, yet knowing too, his weakness, Jesus asks Peter a third time, “Do you love me?” As he does so, Jesus switches the term of his question from “agape” to “philia”. This is more than word play. Jesus reveals that neither Peter, nor us, has to be “perfect” in order to experience God’s saving, redemptive, forgiving love. If we, like Peter, are not yet capable of responding to Jesus with “agape”, God-like-love, Jesus willingly meets us and accepts our love for who,

what and where we are in our life of faith. Jesus will once again humble himself, will become the love we are capable of living and giving, “philia” love, and through that love of friendship call and grace us to our ultimate destiny of “agape” love union in him. Such a transforming love and growth in it, is what the invitation in each Mass to Holy Communion calls us to, and its reception is meant to gradually accomplish within us. As St. Augustine used to say to each person he distributed the Holy Eucharist to: “Become what you receive.”

Today’s first reading from the Acts of the Apostles bears witness to how the love of Jesus can transform us. The same Peter who had denied Jesus, knowing the love of Jesus for him, having entered into a personal relationship of faith and love in Jesus, now openly testifies before the same Jewish religious authorities about Jesus before whom he had so recently denied any association with him. Here lies hope for all of us in our sinfulness. We, too, are capable of such transformation in the love of the Risen Jesus if we, like Peter even with an imperfect incomplete love, open ourselves to him.

The gospels bear ample evidence to such transformation. As they relate, it is often when people are at their worst that Jesus meets them and offers them the gift of his love: an adulterous woman about to be stoned, a woman who has been sick for many years, a possessed man not even in his right mind, a wayward son who after a long absence from home makes his way back to his father’s house. In each of these situations Jesus in direct encounter, or through a parable, said to these stressed-out, frightened, or sinful people, “I’m ready to meet you if you’re ready to meet me. You do not have to wait until you’ve overcome your sinful patterns, have become “perfect” are more “religious” or can pray “better.” You do not have to wait for any of that. I come to you as you are now, so that, in my love and through my grace, you can become what I am now, the one filled with the life, love and glory that is God.”

“Do you love me?”

“Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you.” (Jn.19:17)