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**Reimagining our Personal Relationships**

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The Covid pandemic disrupted the normal dynamics of interpersonal relationships for most Americans. Families were forced to spend more time together. Spouses working at home had to adjust to changing work arrangements. Parents had the added responsibility of serving as teacher for their children. Grandparents had fewer opportunities to interact with their grandchildren. Students were deprived of the opportunity to interact with teachers and classmates at school. Friends found it more difficult to spend time together. Essential workers had to deal not only with their own fears but also with a stressed-out public. These disruptions have been troublesome, but they also provide an opportunity for all of us to reimagine our personal relationships and to look for ways to make them more authentic, fruitful and satisfying.

As Christians, Jesus Christ is our supreme model and guide in making the most of this current opportunity. During his public ministry, Jesus went about doing good. He cured the sick and exorcized demons. He forgave sinners and reached out to the marginalized. He strengthened the weak and challenged the powerful. He forgave his executioners and offered peace to his betrayers. Christ was both divine love incarnate and human love fully actualized. His self-giving love took him to death on the cross and issued in his resurrection to a new glorified life. We can deepen and enrich all our personal relationships by trying to follow Christ’s example of self-giving love.

In his teaching, Jesus gave expression to his own lived experience by joining two commandments found in the Hebrew scriptures: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and all your strength” (Deut 6:5); and “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). The two commands are intrinsically connected. Scripture makes the point: “Whoever claims to love God yet hates his neighbor is a liar” (1 John 4:20). The theologian, Karl Rahner, argues that love of neighbor implies love of God even if we do not recognize it (*The* *Love of Jesus and the Love of Neighbor* pp. 99-104). He goes on to point out that love of neighbor is not one command among others, but is the central imperative through which we find fulfillment and spread God’s kingdom in the world. In genuine love, we commit ourselves to another human being, who like us is not perfect, in a “kiss of two eternities.” This is possible for all people due to the power of God’s love and can be done in the most ordinary circumstances of life: for example, saying a kind word to someone who needs encouragement. Christ calls us to love our neighbor even if our gesture is not recognized or appreciated. In all of our personal relationships, the law of love should inspire and guide our efforts to make them more fruitful and satisfying.

Christians can learn important truths about relationships from the influential Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber (1878-1965), who was steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures and had great respect for Jesus as an important Jewish teacher. In his classic work, *I and Thou* (1929), Buber argues that “relationship” is the primary category for analyzing human existence. He explains: “In the beginning is relation;” “All real living is meeting;” and the “really real is the between,” the sphere created by personal interactions. We are called to live a “life of dialogue,” participating in our world with passion, reverence, and respect for the uniqueness of others.

Buber famously distinguished two fundamental types of human relationships. In I-It relations, individuals treat others in a detached and objective way, as objects to be used or as a means to an end. Such relationships lack freedom and spontaneity and tend toward manipulation, control and stereotyping. On the other hand, I-Thou relationships are inherently involving and demand wholehearted personal presence and intense engagement. They lift us out of ourselves while setting aside our own needs, concerns and projects. In a dialogue, held in Ann Arbor in 1957, with the psychologist Carl Rogers, Buber argued that in our personal relationships we should not simply accept the other person but should “confirm” them by recognizing their true potential and helping them develop it. For the Jewish philosopher, authentic encounters with a human thou provide a glimpse of the Eternal Thou. From Buber’s writings we can glean further advice for improving our personal relations: let other persons surprise us; respect their uniqueness; and treat them as a Thou even if they treat us like an It.

In his 1985 book, *Habits of the Heart*, the late sociologist, Robert Bellah points out that American individualism, which promotes human rights and personal freedom, is less effective in fostering vital communities where personal relationships can flourish. He argues that we should supplement the limitations of individualism by drawing on the biblical tradition that sees all people as children of God and urges believers to care for the needy. Unfortunately, the rugged individualism common in the U.S., which gives personal fulfillment priority over community commitments, militates against authentic relationships. On the other hand, the biblical tradition promotes healthy relationships by emphasizing that we are saved as members of God’s family and are called to care for our brothers and sisters.

Catholic Social Teaching (CST) insists that human beings are not only sacred, but are also social. We realize our potential within communities, starting with the family and extending to the entire human race. The virtue of solidarity inclines us to recognize that we have deep spiritual bonds with all other human beings, which are more important than anything that divides us. We find fulfillment through mutual loving relationships that make explicit and concrete these deep bonds. CST reminds us that love is the key to making all our personal relationships more fruitful and fulfilling.

In all relationships, we need to work at improving our communication skills. Experts advise: express thoughts and feelings honestly; be a good listener by putting aside the phone, attending to the feelings behind the words and replaying what you heard; be cautious about offering unsolicited advice; in disagreements look for common ground; consider not sharing some thoughts or feelings because disclosure would do more harm than good. In all our conversations, love of neighbor should guide our responses.

We need to find ways of actualizing love in our various relationships. For example, spouses could work together to help each other grow in the various dimensions of life: physical (agree on a healthier diet, take a walk together, encourage each other to get regular exercise); intellectual (watch a good TV program together or a attend a lecture and discuss it); imaginative (visit a museum, try a new restaurant or learn a new skill); emotional (periodically set aside time to share feelings about common concerns); moral (work on the budget together that includes charitable giving); spiritual (attend Mass together and discuss the homily, find a comfortable way to pray together, talk about graced experiences). Spousal love surely changes over time, but the ongoing commitment to help the partner become their better self can keep mature love vibrant.

Consider some pastoral advice for actualizing love in the family setting, which is a daily challenge. Do not expect perfection, even the Holy Family had its conflicts and misunderstandings-when Jesus was preaching publicly, his family thought he was “out of his mind” (Mark 3:21). Forgive others for being imperfect, limited human beings, while recognizing and respecting their virtues. Try to share family meals without cell phones. Parents, help your children grow into responsible adults, with deep religious convictions and solid moral values. Read to your children and take them to interesting places. Involve older children in family decisions. Parents, attend to your own relationship, setting aside time for shared leisure and intimate conversations. Grandparents, express your love by being good listeners and offering wise advice when needed.

Catholic Social Teaching calls the family the “domestic church,” the place where Christ’s law of love is learned and lived. Faithful families express their love of God by regular participation in Sunday liturgy that brings them closer together; by praying together at home, for instance, taking turns leading prayer before meals; and by engaging in traditional practices like saying the rosary and abstaining on the Fridays of Lent. In their daily lives, members can express love of neighbor by respecting the privacy of others, by reconciling after disagreements and by forgiving each other for being human.

The pandemic put a strain on friendships, making it harder to get together and enjoy face to face contact. Consider some pastoral advice. Do not take friends for granted, but thank God for them. Put extra effort into maintaining good friendships and reestablishing those that were lost. Let mutually harmful friendships lapse. Find ways to spend more time together with best friends: for example, working out, going to concerts, participating in a book discussion and serving on a parish committee. Be more available to friends and learn from their good example.

During the pandemic, some loved ones died alone and some were buried without traditional funeral rituals. Even in the best of times, we all have to deal with the loss of loved ones. Everyone ultimately grieves alone and in ways unique. With that in mind, here are some pastoral suggestions for consideration. There is a proper Christian optimism about the ultimate salvation of our deceased loved ones, who are in the gracious hands of a merciful God who wills the salvation of all people. Karl Rahner suggested that our deceased loved ones are now closer to us than when they walked the earth with us. Be grateful for any way that we do sense their presence. Remember the ways they enriched our lives and honor them by trying to imitate their main virtues. Ask them to intercede for us in challenging situations. Tell children and grandchildren about their lives and accomplishments. Ask God’s guidance in working through a healthy grieving process. Look forward to joining them in the great Communion of Saints where there are no more tears and the deepest longings of the heart are completely satisfied. Belief in this ultimate triumph of God’s love encourages us and strengthens us to practice love of neighbor in our daily lives, treating all the people we encounter on our earthly journey with respect and love.