

Jesus speaks to us in our Gospel today about the *two* commandments of love: “you shall love the Lord your God” and “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” However, a most important *third* commandment to love is found in those final two English words, “*as yourself.*” We, therefore, have a triangle of love, a trinity of charity, a threesomeness of obligation that involves God, our neighbors, and ourselves.

In our efforts to follow these commands to love, many, if not most of us, often try to observe them from the top down -- beginning with what Jesus termed the First Commandment. However, we probably will have much better success at loving, if we reverse the order and seek to follow these commands from the bottom up. In our response to this triple call and challenge to love -- which incidentally is found, exactly as we have it in texts of both the Old and New Testaments -- the proper place to begin our response to the command to love is with *ourselves.*

To love ourselves in an honest, wholesome and genuine way -- to have healthy self-esteem, as we say -- is the beginning and foundation of our love of neighbor and of God. For unless we love ourselves unselfishly and have a healthy self-image, we will find it very difficult, if not impossible, to truly love anyone else. If I cannot accept myself -- and then still love myself -- with all of my perceived faults and failures, weaknesses and worries, selfishness and sins -- all of which I recognize as being a part of me and my life -- I probably will not be able to accept these qualities in others, and then reach out to them in love. And pretty soon, too, I may be blaming God, and not myself, for whatever it may be in my life that I dislike about myself or my relationships or my circumstances.

The true secret of loving ourselves does not lie in persuading ourselves that we have more beauty, more strength, more wisdom, more possessions, more anything else, than others might have. The continuous surprise in truly loving ourselves is that God is only commanding us to do what God Himself is already doing. We can truly love ourselves -- and must do so --

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because God has *first* loved us. As St. John has written: "In this is love; not that we have loved God, but that He has loved us, and has sent His Son to be the expiation for our sins." Our love affair with life begins, continues, and is completed in God's very personal and everlasting love for each one of us -- repentant sinners, as indeed we all well may be.

I can truly come to love myself because the theological virtues of faith and hope and love all tell me that God does love me. The death and rising of Jesus, that sacrifice which we normally gather in our churches to re-enact in an unbloody manner, the Mass, is but one positive, yet most powerful, proof of that love of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, for me -- and for each and every one of my neighbors both at Mass and at their home as well. When charity begins at home -- and that is what loving ourselves means -- charity does not stay at home. Amazed and grateful for God's unique love for me, I then want to share this abundant love with others. Again, to quote St. John: "If God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."

And in loving others, we truly love the God who loves everyone -- and who does so with His whole heart, His whole soul, and with all His mind.

Among those actually present that day to hear the Gospel command of Jesus to love were the two Apostles the Church will honor next Wednesday Shimon and Jehuda, or as we know them in English, Simon and Jude.

Among the Twelve only these two are always linked, not by blood brotherhood, as were Peter and Andrew and James and John, but by where Tradition tells us they both evangelized in the Middle East and where their tombs are found today; both apostles are entombed at the altar of St.

Joseph in the left transept of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Among all of the Apostles, including even Saints Peter and Paul, probably more prayers of petition are directed to St. Jude Thaddeus each day than to all of the other apostles put together. St. Jude has become known as the saint to pray to for "impossible cases, lost causes and desperate situations."

Finally, truly love -- not just in words: God, your neighbors, and yourself.