

How Desire Can Lead us to God! (From Eros to Agape)! by Fr. Ray Ball

First Draft

Desire is often seen as an enemy or an obstacle in developing a close relationship with God, but did you ever notice how all those who struggled with desire in the Gospels actually became close to Jesus – while those who suppressed it, remained at a distance? Like all created things, desire is good, but, like a child, it also is meant to grow, develop, and mature, without losing its inherent charm, power, and vibrancy! Desire is meant to grow as we grow. Desire often leads us to a place where we discover that what we were looking for we actually had all along – but it is often only through the journey of desire that we are led to make that discovery. In other words, desire can lead us beyond the immediate object of our desire to something much more desirable, that we were not even considering at the beginning! If I had to do things over, the one thing I would most recommend would be to trust desire more, and trust its potential to lead one on a journey – often a long and winding road - to one's truest and deepest self and to God, the source of all desire!

Desire can be seen as a catalyst, something that in its own way destabilizes and disrupts the settled ego. Desire call us – or rather pushes us - into an unknown adventure – moving us past the status quo, leaving behind and letting go of the familiar and the comfortable and what we think we know. This can often offend our fearful rational minds - which demand order and clarity before stepping out into the unknown. Desire can help induce faith – as it pushes us beyond the person we are now to a deeper connection and union - with life, with people, with God. Desire has the power to move us beyond our comfort zone. Desire moves us to take risks, to venture to the unknown that exists on the other side of desire, beyond even our own abilities and limitations.

In English, we only have one word for “love”. In Greek there are several words, such as “eros” (passionate, romantic love and desire) - and “agape” (sacrificial love). In Spanish, there are also multiple ways of saying “I love you”: “Te quiero” and “Te amo”. “Te quiero” literally means “I want you”. It can arise from a sense of discontent and neediness which we want the other person or thing to fill for us. This should not be seen as a bad thing. It is good as a first stage or first step of love and desire – like a caterpillar giving way to a butterfly - which can lead to the further and fuller stage of “Te amo”.

The first stage is where most of us begin, while we are living out of our ego. At this stage we are often filled with a sense of lack, incompleteness, and ‘not-enoughness’. In this state, we may feel the need to add more onto ourselves. This “Te quiero” love can often lead to its opposite when the other person or thing is found to be lacking and unable to fill the insatiable needs of the ego. What one is actually doing is projecting onto this other person one’s own discontent with oneself. One can go through multiple relationships trying to find just the right person to cover up one’s inner discontent. The way to “Te amo” love, begins when one discovers the inner source of contentment within and is then able to live and love out of this deeper presence. But before we can live from this deeper place, we need to start with the first stage of “desire” or “eros” – and treat it not as an enemy or an obstacle, but as gift with the power to grow and lead us to our deeper selves and a deeper love.

To desire or to love seems to suggest duality, that is, there is “me” and then there is “that which I love or desire” – as two separate entities. Love, however, is about the experience of being not two, but one. Loving the other “as yourself” means that you moved beyond the experience of being separate from another and are now living out of union. (When you experience your deepest self as “divine presence”, you then recognize that same presence in everything and everyone – and you then love all “as yourself” because at your deepest core that is you!) When another helps you to see yourself as one with all, then you have found a true love, not as one who completes you, but as one who helps you to discover the

oneness that you already share – with everything and everyone. When you begin with separateness, there is always the feeling that I need to add more in order to be complete. When you begin with the experience of oneness, there is the experience of being loved and in love with all. As Eckhart Tolle puts it: “Love is the recognition of oneness in a world of duality. This is the birth of God into the world . . .”

So do you struggle with desire? Then consider yourself blessed! Really! If you experience desire, that means you are alive and are connected to the energy and the vitality of life itself - and even a part of God's Spirit! It means you are at the beginning of the path. It also means that you are not made to live isolated and disconnected from others and it means you are not made to live in a state of inertia! It means that the status quo is not meant to be an option for you – and that we are meant to change, grow, and become. It also means that you have experienced that there is something more that you need to connect with and get in touch with that's bigger than what you are in touch with now.

Desire is a lot like a child. Desire is good and a child is good, but both are meant to grow and develop and deepen. It is good and natural for a human being to be a child, and then an adolescent, and then an adult - and to grow from one into the other (leaving certain qualities behind like immaturity and impulsiveness, while keeping certain qualities like wonder and energy). Desire is a lot like that – it is meant to develop and deepen as we grow, while not losing its spark and energy. We may look back at ourselves as an adult with a sense of embarrassment over something we did as a child or adolescent, in the same way we may look back at ourselves over desires that we have since outgrown – which paved the way for where we are now.

I've reflected long and hard about desire through my own struggles and mistakes - and haven't we all struggled and made mistakes when it's come to desire! I think struggling and making mistakes is an important part of the process. Desire makes us vulnerable and fully aware that none of us is an island separate from others and from life. We may often see desire as a weakness rather than as a gift from God to cooperate with. Desire can be seen as a danger and a threat that we may try to control or deny with our mind in such a way that we end up losing or muting its energy, power, potential, and vibrancy. Doing that can leave a person even more restless – as well as cold and lifeless! Desire (or attraction or passion), however, is good, it is life energy, and it is not only from God, it is of God. [“God is love!” (1 John 4:8)] It is not something that pulls things and people to us and to our ego, but rather pushes us beyond our borders. Desire is part of our embodied reality that pushes us beyond ourselves to connect with others at a deeper level. Only an energy that is extremely strong and intense can push us beyond the gravitational field of our self-centeredness in order to love another person as oneself. (Kind of like the first stage of a rocket that is needed to blast a spaceship out of the gravitational field of the earth, but then gives way to smaller and more easily guided engines designed to get the ship to a specific destination!) Like the power of a mighty river, a roaring fire, or a driving wind, if harnessed and directed it can be the source of great good.

Jesus tells the beautiful parable about weeds and wheat. He says “Do not pull up the weeds, because you may also pull up the wheat as well” (Matthew 13:24-30). This may be the same way we feel about desires. If we try to pull them up, we may also pull up the energy that fuels our life and connects us powerfully and passionately with one another!

Desire is not meant to be repressed, renounced, denied, numbed, or buried. We are to make friends with desire by creating a deeper channel through which it can flow! Did you ever notice that ALL those who struggled with desire in the Gospels - the prostitutes, those caught in adultery, and those married multiple times – ended up becoming close to Jesus or followers of Jesus – like the woman who anointed Jesus feet and dried them with her hair (John 4, 8:1-11, Matthew 21:31-32, Luke 7:36-50, 8:2, 15:30)! Desire was seen as the tip of the iceberg of someone's capacity to “love much”. Desire ended up leading them to something deeper. Jesus did not tell them to get rid of their desire, but he was patient with them and helped them to channel and transform it into the deepest love possible. This

can be expressed through this simple formula: Eros + Kenosis = Agape. Eros (Desire, Passion, Erotic Love) combined with Kenosis (pouring oneself out for the other without holding anything back) = Agape (Sacrificial Christian Love). This is expressed by Jesus: "There is no greater love (agape) than to give one's life (kenosis) for one's friends (eros)." (John 15:13) The result is oneness and wholeness - not only in the union of the two people, but in each's union with life.

St. Paul refers to "kenosis" (emptying) as the essential quality of Jesus' life (Philippians 2:6-8). One way to understand this is by looking at a candle. A candle reveals its outward self as wax and a wick. But a candle only reveals its truest inward self when it is ignited, and becomes a source of light in giving itself away (kenosis) - just like a person!

Jesus always had patience and respect for people who struggled with desire. This was in contrast with the religious leaders (and the older brother of the prodigal son – Luke 15:25-32) who condemned people who struggled with desire. NONE of these religious leaders became followers of Jesus! They were lifeless, sterile, hardened, dried up, and living out of their heads, having lost touch with their humanity as well as with the ability to empathize with others. Jesus says they are like "whitewashed tombstones, filled with the bones of dead people!" (Matthew 23:27). They were also in denial of their own struggles and projected and hated in others what they were struggling with, hating and denying in themselves (John 8:1-8). Notice how fixated they were on other people's struggles with desire, and how condemning they were as a result. Through renunciation and deprivation these religious leaders were living with no passion, no heart, and no life in them. They had pulled the wheat up with the weeds! This is because they had repressed desire and did not allow it to be transformed into genuine love and friendship. This is the alchemy of the Gospel, turning the lead of desire into the gold of love or like the inner struggle and irritation within the oyster that creates the beautiful and precious pearl!

In the Genesis there is the beautiful story of Adam & Eve hiding in the garden from God because their nakedness made them feel ashamed. And God said "Who told you this?", as if to say "That didn't come from me!" (Genesis 4:7-11). In other words, being human - body & soul - is not something for us to be ashamed of because God created everything not only good, but "very good" (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 24, 31). The Gospel of John begins with Jesus at a wedding (John 2:1-11) and concludes with Jesus and Mary Magdalene in the garden (John 20:1-18), pointing to their relationship as that of a new Adam and Eve. This points to the dignity of all relationships – which begin in desire - as a primary way in which one's relationship with God is meant to grow and deepen. The water being transformed into wine at the wedding feast – points to eros being transformed into agape.

In the Gospel of John 20:1-18, it said that Mary Magdalene came to the tomb in search of Jesus' body. What she found was more than a body – it was an undying loving relationship with the living God! In some ways this can be seen as a metaphor about how what we are seeking can lead us to the discovery of something much more - when what is motivating our desire is love as it was for both Mary Magdalene and Peter. Jesus in fact uses that very word "do not cling to me" (John 20:17) when Mary Magdalene seeks to embrace him after his resurrection – in order to point to the deeper union that the clinging relationship yields to. And this relationship would become the model for all Christians seeking and desiring a deeper relationship with God in their lives.

Those who renounce and abstain from desires – through fasting or celibacy - are often seen as 'storing up' energy, as opposed to those who use the energy of desire to pour themselves out. Those who abstain push things away, and keep things away from themselves so as not to be contaminated by them. Those who practice pouring themselves out are able to embrace the object of desire in a way that does not cling to those objects and are able to move through them to a deeper union. The first way is what John the Baptist embraced: "We and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast" (Matthew 9:14). This second way is the way that Jesus embraced: "For John the Baptist came neither

eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.'" (Matthew 11:18-19).

Overcoming states of disconnectedness and separateness is what desire seeks to overcome - and coming to a state of union is what desire seeks to enable – and that's a good role that desire plays! Living out of a state of "oneness" and living out of state of connectedness to life, people and God is often referred to as "salvation".

In the Gospel of John, Jesus tells Peter that he wants to wash his feet, but Peter objects (John 13:5-8). Peter wants to keep his smelly feet hidden from Jesus. Jesus says that is what we must be willing to do for authentic relationships – to be willing to embrace each other, and be willing to be embraced by others – in those areas we especially want to keep hidden or in denial, smelly feet and all!

In the Gospel of Mark, there is a story about Jesus' disciples violating the Sabbath by eating from the grains in the field (Mark 2:23-28). In defending the disciples, Jesus makes the point that human needs are to be respected and not simply ignored in the imposition of a law.

One of the most meaningful sayings from St. Paul is "Whatever we bring into the light becomes light" (Ephesians 5:13). So all those areas in our lives that we want to keep hidden have an opportunity to become light – and light is grace and the presence of God! How amazing! This means that everything about us, including our desires, have an opportunity to become transformed into the best thing of all, the very light and presence of God!

It is important to get in touch with the aliveness that is within us, an aliveness that is bigger than ourselves and is at the heart and center of the universe itself. When we experience this aliveness as something that lights us up from the inside, all of a sudden everything we see is also lit up, because everything around us shines with that same light. As Jesus told his disciples, "you are the light of the world" (Matthew 5:14-16), and when we allow that light to shine it brightens everything it touches.

Life is too short not to be around people who "light us up" and give us joy from the inside, as long as we allow that life to be harnessed and transformed into the kind of friendship which can brighten the world and lead us from simply a belief in God to a life-giving walk and friendship with God and with people! What I most desire now, is to be around other people who may struggle with desire but are honest and open about it - and who would rather make a mistake with it than to repress it - so we can help and be patient with each other as we grow into the kind of people who are alive and passionate about life, loving God and serving people! Jesus also preferred to be around such people too – not only for what he could do for them, but probably also because of what they did for him (Mark 2:15-17)! The more we learn to accept desire, the more peace and at-one-ness with life do we feel, and with an energy that is compassionate, caring, passionate and loving rather than anxious, restless, clinging and possessive.

So there are two basic levels of desire. The first is a surface desire that feels needy because in it we feel lacking and in need of someone or something to complete us. It is not bad, but, like a child, it is good, just undeveloped. It makes us feel alive and energetic, and it can lead us on a path where it awakens us to a deeper dimension within ourselves by loving and embracing all that is. Another person may help to stir this up in us and help us to get in touch with it. This deeper place is our "state of being" where we are connected to life and to all that is. This is not dependent upon outward situations being a certain way, but depends simply on our being "present to the aliveness of life". Surface desire is not a state, but is an emotion that comes from fearful and anxious thoughts, because we feel we may either not obtain or may lose the object of our desire. In other words the desire is dependent upon the object

of the desire rather than something that is already within us that the object of desire puts us in touch with.

Surface or egoic desire may make us feel that we need to get somewhere else than where we are now. It may make us feel that the now is not enough, and that we need to get to a future time to find fulfillment. We feel this way when we are living on the surface of ourselves and life - like living on the choppy surface waves of the sea rather than from within the peace and stillness at the depths of the ocean. It means we are living out of our worried and anxious minds, and not present in the moment. The real lesson that desire is trying to teach us is that we are actually already in possession of that which we desire – if we only allow desire to take us deeper into the depths of the ocean, into the depths of ourselves, into the depths of what is now! (“You would not be seeking for me, unless you had already found me!” – St. Bernard of Clairvaux) This is what the prodigal son learned (Luke 15). Desire led him to leave home in a restless search for satisfaction and fullness. It was only through that experience that an even deeper desire emerged which led him back home where he had started. His father gave him the space and had the patience to allow him to make a mistake with desire and to learn this lesson from his mistakes. Eventually desire teaches us that life is not about getting somewhere, it is about being somewhere!

The greatest relationships lead us beyond simply satisfying surface desires to the experience of that deeper union where there is not restless longing, but joy, peace, and the experience of abundance! And the amazing thing is that when you have that core, the surface happiness comes in as an added bonus! And it comes in an even more abundant way, because it is no longer anxiously pursued as the only thing, as Jesus says "Seek first the kingdom of God and everything else will be added to you." (Matthew 6:33).

So desire eventually leads us to become aware that we are already in possession of that for which we long, so relationships grow by people helping each other be more present to that deeper abundance, live out of that abundance, and to celebrate it in the joy of their relationship - as Jesus says "I have come to give you life and give it to you more abundantly" (John 10:10)! The object of our desire becomes desire itself, or rather, it's source in life itself, in God. And once you become aware of this, you are then able to enter into relationships that are closer and more intimate and loving, because the spiritual has now become one with the physical.

We've often heard of what's been called "The Seven Deadly Sins" or desires. What they really warn us about, however, is not taking desire far enough! The Seven Deadly Sins should really be called the Seven Holy Longings, for they can lead us to an even deeper connection with life, with people, and with God:

Deadly Sin (Surface Desire)	Holy Longing (Deeper Desire)
Pride	Self-Worth
Envy	Abundance
Greed	Fullness
Lust	Love
Gluttony	Satisfaction
Anger	Justice
Sloth	Peace

Just like a prism reveals how white light is made up of a variety of different colors, so does the variety of people and created things reveal the magnificence of the oneness of God out of who's goodness, love and life we all share. Desire means that while we all share in wanting to be connected to the variety

- even more so do we desire to share in the oneness. But the secret – is discovering that we already do! We are all called to enter into the joyful dance of life – where life is the dancer and we are the dance - and most of the time we enter it with a partner! And one does not look for such a partner to grow old together with, but to remain forever young and childlike with!

Ego, Shadow, & True Self

Our “ego” is the thoughts that we have about ourselves, that create our image or persona. It is also the thoughts that others – or the world – has about us that we have internalized. (This is why Jesus had to ask what people say about him, because he did not know or care (Matthew 16:13) Our “shadow” are those things about us that do not fit the image, what we hide or deny or disguise and project onto others. Peter is one who often tried to make himself out to be stronger than he actually was. His “ego” took a hit when he denied Jesus, after having earlier said “I will never deny you” (Mark 14:31, Matthew 26:35). Jesus calls him and us to be more open about our weakness, and not have to deny or pretend, because it does not fit with our image. We must lose that false self (ego) in order to find our authentic self. As we shine the light on our shadow self, it may appear that our shadow is our true self – until we realize that the light that we shine on the shadow is really our truest self! But we only come to our true self because our shadow self has toppled our ego self, which forced us to bring presence and awareness (our true self) to our shadow self! As Jesus says “You must lose yourself in order to find yourself” (Matthew 10:39, 16:25) The shadow then gets transformed into the light - “Whatever is exposed to the light, becomes light” (Ephesians 5:13), because our true identity is that we are “the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14-16)

Thomas Merton Prayer on “Desire”

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
Nor do I really know myself,
and the fact that I think I am following your will
does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the **desire** to please you
does in fact please you.
And I hope I have that **desire** in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that **desire**.
And I know that, if I do this,
You will lead me by the right road,
though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore I will trust you always
though I may seem to be lost
and in the shadow of death.
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.