
Peter Steinacker

Dear Congregation:¹

Love constitutes one of the most intense human dreams and one of the most existential experiences. For this very reason one has to approach the subject with care. But why? Wouldn’t it be better not to mince words when talking about love? Shouldn’t we speak clearly and come directly to the point? Why beat around the bush? Wouldn’t it be preferable not to be constrained by verbal niceties? That seems to be en vogue today. Language is becoming sexualized in a general way. And this sexualization is spilling almost unnoticed and unresisted into the language of the church, i.e. into the language, which we use to capture and to describe the reality of the world from God’s perspective. Why greed is supposed to be “geil”, meaning “cool” or wicked in an erotic sense, escapes me. Moreover, the somewhat antiquated word “geil” loses all its mystery when used in the economic realm. When we talk about love and its beauty and dark secrets, we are talking about the mystery of the world and not about economics. What is at stake is the mystery of God, the mystery we are onto others and onto ourselves. For when we are in love, we experience with body and soul that we are mysterious creatures to ourselves and to others. When we love, we reveal some of the mysteriousness that’s planted in us. Seen this way, Saint Augustine is absolutely right when he says that we ourselves are the gift of love.

But rare is the individual who is aware of everything inside him or her. Because of this very reason a human being has to be cautious when

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dealing with another beloved individual. For when we have fallen in love, a power takes hold of us in the form of longing, which transcends our own confines and can only be fulfilled by another human being. Since love gives rise to a craving, it calls for trust as its brother and sister. It stands to reason that if we share our secrets with a beloved person, that person must be trustworthy. Love by its very nature is a state of being, which permits the person I love to recognize my desires and longings. It’s a reciprocal relationship: to the extent that I am prepared to respect and even quench her or his desires and longings, she or he must be responsive to my needs and desires. Strangely enough, we are very strong and very weak at the same time when we are in love. This is so, because in our longings we transcend our normal boundaries towards another human being with desires. To put it in simple words, we put ourselves into the hands of another person. If we are lucky we then make the incredible experience of sensing that without the person we love or without having our longings fulfilled by him or her, we wouldn’t be quite the same.

I think that because of this sorrow and the happiness of love are not so far apart. Yes, sorrow is the reverse side of the coin. In the case of Tannhäuser, the minstrel knight has to take flight from the Venusberg, because sorrow is unknown to venereal love. And Tannhäuser longs to experience love in its human form. Seeing that love encompasses just about all feelings, life has in store for us, it is only natural that we mortal creatures do not only have love songs, love poems, and a multitude of love stories, but that mankind also prays for the sake of love. Joy and sorrow, abundant fulfillment and bitter shortage, experiences of success and futility, sweetness and bitterness, gratitude and lamentation have been brought to the gods at all times. We Christians too express these sentiments to our God, who is love, as stated in the Gospel according to Saint John. Of course, erotic love, unique to human beings, is not especially meant in the first chapter of the Gospel according to Saint John. But that this form of love also exists, may be inferred from the fact that love motivated God to create the world. Because of the fact that we have such profound experiences when we are in love, it is quite natural that they enter into our most intense and intimate communication with God, i.e. into our prayers.

This also happens to be the case in the Tannhäuser opera. Later, for instance in the opera Parsifal, Wagner banned prayers from the stage, perhaps to protest against all the praying that went on on stage in Italian and French operas. But in Tannhäuser, one of Wagner’s early