

Solid love in a “liquid society”

Building a kind of love that puts out divorce

«Love never ends» (1 Co. 13:8)

“How can we feed our relationship so that our marriage will work well? Can the flame of love be reignited? What can be done to prevent divorce?”

More and more I am asked to give an answer to these questions, which arise from the heart of many couples as a vital necessity, to survive a pandemic of broken relationships. Indeed, these are bad times for faithfulness and “*life-long love*”. Today, relationships tend to be ephemeral; the very idea of love seems increasingly diluted in an atmosphere of hedonism, in which the first priority is “*to feel good and be happy*”. Divorce, and the break-up of any relationship for that matter, is deemed as something natural, almost as natural as moving one's residence, or changing jobs. The great thinker Z. Baumann, a brilliant analyst of our times, talks about a “liquid society” where nothing remains in place steadily, everything changes capriciously. With this in mind, I would like to talk about a “**liquid love**” that mutates with ease to adapt to the receptacle containing it. This is a light, fragile, superficial, kind of love. It is fleeting as an emotion, adaptable as liquid.

In this social and moral context, the title to this article might seem paradoxical. Today the stress is more on **put off love than on extinguishing love**. Surely, the lack of love puts off a relationship, but there is also a kind of love that puts off the fires that arise in every relationship. Hence our positive approach: there is a sort of love which acts as an antidote against cooling, «a love that never fails» -in the words of the apostle Paul. A love that doesn't expire, **the solid love** contrasting with the “liquid love”. To examine, even if briefly, the very nature of this love that endures the storms characteristic of all relationships, as well as their emotional ups-and-downs, is the goal of this essay.

First of all, we need to clarify that there is a very widespread myth used to justify divorce. To understand this well is the first step to recover solid love.

The myth of the loss of the loving feeling: “I don't love him/her anymore”

“I am not in love anymore. I don't feel anything for her/him. He/she is like a brother/sister, or like a friend”.

Behind this way of thinking we can find two misconceptions, which are passed on to us from the strongly utilitarian and hedonist values of our society.

Being in love is much more than “the bliss from the beginning”

The first misconception is to reduce being in love to a mere emotion, especially to the original emotion, “*what I used to feel at the beginning of the relationship*”. Experts teach us that the “original version” of being in love normally lasts from two to three years, not more than that. This doesn't mean that the state of being in love is over; what is over is the initial form, but not the capacity to keep being in love.

Does this lack of the original feeling legitimize us to say that “*I'm not in love anymore*”? Surely not, since being in love is much more than feeling a certain “chemistry” from the beginning. The exact and true phrase should be: “*I don't feel the same as I used to at the beginning*”. Being in love truly is much deeper and lasting than the initial emotion. Romantic love can last many years, but it changes in how it is felt and how it is shown, like the course of a river changes, but keeps being the same river. I have come to know many marriages in which the spouses keep being in love after thirty years. What has ended is not romantic love, nor their capacity to keep falling in love with their spouse, but the exciting feeling of novelty and adventure characteristic of the first months in a love relationship. **That is the juvenile stage of the relationship**, which is as pleasant as it is ephemeral. Trying to keep this juvenile stage is as illusory as trying to stop the passing of time, and its effects.

Love is much more than falling in love

The second misconception is to reduce love to a feeling. This brings about a **mutilated type of love**. Certainly romantic love is essential for the proper growth of relationships, but there are other essential aspects of love that come together with the feeling and cannot be discarded. Trying to separate these aspects would be like amputating love itself. **Love is friendship**, the type of fellowship and loyalty typical in two people who share a common project and enjoy working on it together. Love is also **giving oneself away**. It focuses on the other person, and it tries to enrich, edify, encourage... putting it in a nutshell, to make the other person happy. This is love in its most altruistic form: to look for the well-being of the other one before one's own. It can be summed up in expressions like “I want the best for you” or “I would give my life for you”. Love also means **affection**; a mysterious sensation of binding that produces in us a deep feeling of emptiness in the absence of our significant other.

These are some reasons why we cannot reduce love to the feeling of falling in love. When someone says, “*love is over because I don't feel anything anymore*” they are narrowing their field of vision and action regarding love in a way that cannot be sustained. Why do we say that it cannot be sustained? Because a love in which its most substantial traits are mutilated does not have any supports. It becomes an unbearable love. Paraphrasing author Milan Kundera, we could talk about **the unbearable lightness of the “just-a-feeling” type of love**. Love is

also an emotion to be enjoyed, absolutely, but it is also an effort to work on. Let's look into it more closely.

The substance of solid love

In contrast to “liquid love”, which depends almost exclusively on feelings, solid love can be compared to a building. Its construction requires three main elements which constitute the essence of marriage:

- ◆ A solid foundation: love is a covenant.
- ◆ A healthy growth: love is closeness.
- ◆ A good maintenance: love is reconciliation.

Each one of these aspects is expressed, respectively, by a different value: faithfulness, intimacy and forgiveness.

A solid foundation: love is a covenant and is expressed by faithfulness

There is a steady rock upon which the edifice of solid love is built: the **commitment** stemming from a covenant. Loving is much more than just feeling. To love means staying faithful to the promises made. Love clings to -and rests upon- **a decision**. Its stability cannot depend upon emotions and feelings, since these are intrinsically unstable. The commitment which stems from a covenant is the anchor impeding the shipwreck when the storm comes, the guarantee of stability in the middle of conflict and crisis.

A covenant is the main safeguard of every relationship, but in marriage it acquires a special meaning, because marital love is a reflection of the perfect love that God has for humankind. In God's eyes the covenant of marriage is a fundamental covenant, not just a simple agreement between two people that can be terminated lightly. **The covenant is expensive** and is desired. It costs dearly, it requires effort and dedication, but it also is desired. To God, the marital covenant is so special that breaking it covers «the altar of the Lord with tears, with weeping, and with crying out» (Mal. 2:13).

The fulfillment of the covenant **-faithfulness-** is one of the most desired attributes because it is a precious reflection of divine nature. God is faithful. A **cheap covenant**, on the other side, leads to poor commitment, fragile relationships and, eventually, to an easy break-up of the relationship.

A healthy growth: love is closeness and is expressed by intimacy

Once the foundation is laid, the building has to grow. The construction of solid love requires a very sensitive material: intimacy. Intimacy is to a couple what oxygen is to the lungs. **Intimacy** is closeness at all levels, it is **global**: it tries to get close to and **inside** the other one at the emotional and physical levels. «To become one flesh» is not just about sexuality, but also about empathy. It is the desire to penetrate the soul of the loved one and to achieve a real encounter between two people, not only between two bodies. In fact, physical intimacy works much better when it comes with this emotional “penetration”.

Intimacy excludes parallel lives -living together, but apart. Intimacy tries to get to know, to understand the other, it doesn't aspire to change the other one, but to accept. It understands difference as an enriching treasure, not as a dividing obstacle. Intimacy enjoys communication and cultivates its many aspects. The absence of this global intimacy is one of the most common causes of cooled down love, and can lead to the break-up of the relationship.

This closeness, however, never comes alone, automatically; **it requires work**. Yes, **solid love requires effort**. This shouldn't be surprising, as we are describing love in terms of construction. There is work to be done every day, in this path to closeness, because our natural tendency is to lock ourselves away and to neglect the other one. The slackness in the cultivation of intimacy generates a feeling of **routine** and boredom in relationships that usually is the first step towards the cooling off of love. By contrast, the active search of new forms of global intimacy is a thrilling adventure that keeps the couple excited.

A good maintenance: love is reconciliation and is expressed by forgiveness

Every building must have an adequate upkeep. **Restoration** can fix cracks and crevices when they come up. The same thing happens with the building of love: the process of dealing with **conflict** must be done in the right way, so reconciliation -restoration- happens. This is a must.

Conflict is normal in all relationships. Actually, far from being a reason to be alarmed, conflict could mean that the relationship is alive. When two people never argue, maybe it is because they are so far from each other that they can't crash into each other. To get angry is not the problem, but to remain angry. In fact, the health of marriage is not measured by how much or how little spouses fight, but by how long it takes them to get back to normal. The quickness of reconciliation is an indicator of the maturity of the relationship. «Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry» (Ef. 4:26). The apostle warns us wisely. Do not go to sleep without having made peace.

Why is it so important to get reconciled quickly? **Anger** has **toxic effects** that get worse with time. First, it turns into **resentment**. While anger is a simple **feeling**, or reaction, **resentment** has become an attitude. In time, an extended resentment will give birth to bitterness, which is an emotional mood, that is, it affects the soul. It has an enormous potential for destruction, both over the relationship and over the person who is feeling bitter. This is the reason why it is so important to put out conflict as soon as possible.

Forgiveness is the balm that allows us to heal a wound into a scar. An unknown person once said: «to forgive is the best way of freeing oneself from one's enemies». It is not easy, to forgive, but it is essential for the maintenance of the relationship. We need to forgive as many times as need be. When we forgive we are stamping a seal of superior quality on our marriage, the divine seal, since “To err is human; to forgive, divine”¹ -as the ancient Romans said.

Everything said above leads us to our conclusion.

Conclusion: God, the architect par excellence

“I was looking for healing, but I discovered that I needed holiness as well”. A woman shared this with me, being thankful after a session of marriage counseling. This phrase, especially the expression **“as well”**, summarizes very accurately the ultimate secret of solid love.

Up to this point, we have been referring to the aspects that bring about **health and healing** to marriage. Is it enough? No, it is not, because healing must go hand in hand with holiness. Healing and holiness go together and boost each other, as the Word of God tells us repeatedly. **Peace is inseparable from truth**: «Yet I will certainly bring health and healing to it and will indeed heal them. I will let them experience the abundance of peace and truth» (Jer. 33:6). Ultimately, the source of solid love is only found in God. That is the reason why the psalmist reminds us: «Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labor in vain» (Sal. 127:1).

There is a different dimension in the building of love that neither psychology, medicine nor any other human science can explain, because it is supernatural. We are referring to God's grace, the supreme architect. This grace makes us strong in our weakness and gives us the certain hope that we are not fighting in our own strength, but with divine assets.

1 An Essay on Criticism by Alexander Pope

- ◆ **The God of the covenant** prepares us for **faithfulness**
- ◆ **The God who drew close to us through Christ** is the one who prepares us for **intimacy**.
- ◆ **The God who did not spare any efforts to reconcile us** is the one who prepares us for **forgiveness**.

Indeed, there is a kind of love that puts out any incipience of divorce or break-up. It is a kind of love that is mature, keeps the covenant faithfully, cultivates global intimacy and is prompt to forgive whenever the need arises. This love is so solid that *«it never ends»*.

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The web **Christian Thought** gives information about the literary work of Dr. Pablo Martínez and his father Rev. José M. Martínez. Through this work the christian thought of the authors flows covering a wide range of subjects; theological, psychological and ethical issues are considered from a biblical perspective with a relevant and practical application to current problems.

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