

Artists Almanac February 2020

God is Love

John 4:16

Saint Valentine was a widely recognized 3rd-century Roman saint, commemorated in Christianity on February 14. From the High Middle Ages his Saints' Day has been associated with a tradition of courtly love.

What is love? Defining it is as hard as last month's effort – that of defining time.

Today we have almost worn out the word. I love travel, I love good food; I love gardening; I love football; I love sex; I love television; I love gambling; I love reading; I love my home. Or, the word rises in abstraction: I love art; I love beauty; I love music; I love God; I love *you*.

There is good love and there is bad love. Excessive love of money is greed; of food, gluttony; of television, sloth; of sex, lust; of gambling, addiction; of celebrity, pride.

The term *love* in John, if it means anything, means all things – a common root of all love. The female disputant who silenced the men in Plato's Symposium with the timeliest definition (at that time) described God as Beauty, and Greek sculpture certainly portrays that. But that was proven a limited understanding, when God, not just beauty, sent his son to make it clear to us. Beauty is good as far as it goes, which is not far enough. Music may be a form of prayer, but even it is but prayer, not God.

The Geeks, as the Greeks would, tried to understand love by classifying it into categories: *eros*, as between a man and a woman, *philia*, the love of friendship, *patria*, the love of our country, from which the word patriotism derives, and *agape*, wonder.

The Good which all love proceeds from is not taking, but giving, turning greed to generosity, pride to humility, gluttony to feeding the hungry, gambling to risking one's life, travel to pilgrimage, beauty to the ugly martyrdom of the cross and lust to the romantic love of a mate. Love is giving, not just candy – even giving one's life, if needed, strengthened by courage.

One my mentors was Tennessee historian Walter Durham. When a close friend of him how to deal with his deepening depression, he told him to do something for others. The prison of self is hard to escape, which is why the rate of suicide among celebrities is 5.9 times that of ordinary people, according to one sociological study¹. When I was in a remote area along the line in Korea, Marilyn Monroe, visited us, riding atop a tank. I thought then she was surely the most beautiful and happiest human I had seen. Not long after, she killed herself.

My favorite celebrity was Malcolm Muggeridge, editor of the famous British humor magazine, *Punch*. He came to speak at Middle Tennessee State College and Claudia and I went to hear him. We were spellbound, as this literary humorist, without a note, nor a single pause filled by *uuhh...* or *aahh...* delivered in flawless English a prophetic speech on *The Death of Christendom*, by which he meant, not Christianity, but the faux faith of National religion. Nixon resigned soon after. Now forty years our national faith been deflated, and the times have turned to its worldwide persecution. Pope Benedict had predicted it years before.

After the speech we lined up to speak to the great man and shake his hand. I muttered something obsequious; Claudia, following behind me, was so rapt she could only grasp his hand and was unable to utter a word. Muggeridge in one of his books had an unlikely interview with Mother Teresa and was smitten with love for this frail little saint who loved the poorest with the purest of love. She once said *Your true character is most accurately measured by how you treat those who can do 'Nothing' for you.*

Muggeridge was attracted to communism in his twenties but after living in the Soviet Union during the 1930s became a forceful anti - communist. He learned from the experience that *Communism* was, as my Uncle Alf used to call it, *Christianity at the point of a bayonet.*

This Valentine's try spreading love around and tell all you can and some you can't – I love you. You might find you do.

¹ 2007 Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health 2007, 61 465-465 Published First :11 May 2007, King-wa-Fu, Paul S F Yio

The Good Samaritan - Eugene Delacroix

The religious avoided the filthy man, walking by on the other side of the road

