

Love

*A Brief History Through
Western Christianity*

Carter Lindberg

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Chapter 1

The Language of Love

“The Greeks have a word for it” is an old cliché but nonetheless apt for our subject. Indeed, in relation to “love,” the Greeks not only had *a* word, they had many words! Like so many aspects of Western culture, our understandings and views of love have been influenced by contributions from Greek thought. The Greek vocabulary for “love” includes the nouns “*storge*,” “*epithymia*,” “*philia*,” “*eros*,” and “*agape*,” and their respective verb forms. On occasion some of these words for love are interchangeable but they are not strong synonyms. As we shall see, the history of the language of love is intimately related to the history of ideas. But as some wag once put it, the history of ideas is akin to nailing jello to the wall. Hence, caveat emptor, readers are warned that past historical contexts are often foreign countries and that words familiar to us may have been used quite differently in different times and places. For example, Cheyette notes in his study of medieval troubadour literature that when we moderns limit our concept of love to a sentiment, we miss its medieval political and social meanings. Bolkestein makes a similar

point in his study of pre-Christian social welfare when he notes that in classical culture “philanthropy” meant love among men or human love not charity or social welfare. And Jaeger notes that by the time of Shakespeare, the increasing privatization of love viewed public expressions of love for such charismatic persons as kings, rulers, churchmen, and saints – common in the Middle Ages – as hypocritical gambits for advancement.

Some of the many Greek terms for love no longer have much currency in our vocabulary. *Storge*, a more literary term for familial love or parental affection, and *epithymia*, a term associated with libido or desire have not had a significant impact on the Western vocabulary of love. *Philia*, *eros*, and *agape*, on the other hand, have significantly influenced Western languages and ideas. *Philia*, with meanings of friendship, close family relations, and human solidarity, is familiar in its English forms of *philadelphia* for brotherly love and philanthropy for benevolence. These expressions of concern for the well-being of others, both of which are present in the Greek New Testament, are reversed in the related term philander. *Eros* is familiar in modern languages in the related forms of the word “erotic.”

In the pre-philosophical Greek cosmogonies, theories of the generation or birth of the cosmos, *Eros* appears as a uniting force. Hesiod, the great eighth-century-BCE poet next to Homer, presents *Eros* as one of the first to emerge from the dark abyss of Chaos, and then as the one who draws everything together, the creative, uniting force. *Eros* is “the most beautiful of the immortal gods, who in every man and every god softens the sinews and overpowers the prudent purpose of the mind.” Ancient Greek literature portrays *Eros* as a violent, crafty god whose arrows drive people into torment and passion for the first person seen after they are struck. In the later Greek myths, *Eros* is the personification of love as sexual desire.

His famous shrine at Thespias, a site for Plutarch's (45–c.125 CE) *Erotikos* ("Dialogue on Love"), held quadrennial festivals to love. Eros was often presented as the son of Aphrodite (Venus to the Romans; goddess of love and beauty) and Ares (Mars to the Romans; god of war). Hesiod portrays Aphrodite's origin in the white foam that arose from the severed genitals of Uranus thrown in the sea by his son Cronos. Hence the famous Botticelli image of Venus on the half-shell arising from the sea. And Ares, Homer tells us in the *Iliad*, was hated by his father Zeus. With parents like that, it is no wonder that Western culture has perennially associated sex and violence. Epicurus (300 BCE) defined Eros as "a strong appetite for sexual pleasures, accompanied by furor and agony." The aggressive aspect of love in the Greek tradition often portrayed the lover as pursuer. Thus in the myth of Apollo and Daphne, Apollo – the god of manly youth and beauty – pursued the nymph Daphne who escaped him by being transformed into a Laurel tree. One needs only to review the Greek myths to realize that Freud was not the first to posit the relationship of sex and death, nor was Stanley Kubrick's 1964 movie, *Dr. Strangelove or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, its first artistic expression.

Eros, the handsome god of sexual love – "the most beautiful of all the gods" – also is associated with the chaos and death accompanying the violent physical desire seen in the stories of Paris and Helen, Zeus and Hera. Paris gave the "apple of discord," a gold apple inscribed "for the fairest," to Aphrodite who thereupon promised him the most beautiful woman in the world, Helen. So Paris carried off Helen, the wife of Menelaus, thereby setting in motion the Trojan War, the destruction of Troy, the death of Achilles, and his own death. The Olympian gods, of whom Zeus is the "father," were not paragons of monogamous or faithful marriages, but rather it seems the initiators and models of the dysfunctional family. Their love stories are

stories of violence and rape. The relations of Zeus and his sister-wife Hera with each other as well as others cannot be abbreviated here, but their activities in sex and war make the most bizarre television talk shows pale in comparison. The Greek poets could portray Eros as cunning and cruel, instilling people with a maniacal drive that disrupts reason and life itself, a theme later explored in Plato's (c.429–327 BCE) *Phaedrus*. Centuries after Hesiod, the Roman poet Ovid (43 BCE–17 CE) noted in his *The Art of Love*, "love is a kind of war." We often forget this disruptive element because we are more familiar with the personification of Eros under his Latin name, Cupid (also named Amor). But the cute, winged, chubby lad of our Valentine's Day cards is far removed from the primal force of nature with its potential for mad passion, the irrationality and chaos epitomized by Eros's sharp arrows that cause severe, painful, and even mortal wounds. There is a sense in which this divine madness of Eros was "baptized" in medieval and early modern Catholic mysticism. For example, St. Teresa of Avila (1515–1582), a "Doctor of the Church" since 1970, wrote of the divine madness that overcame her when pierced by the arrows of God her Lover: "The pain was so great that I screamed aloud; but at the same time I felt such infinite sweetness that I wished the pain to last forever." The (orgasmic) rapture of such wounds are captured in Bernini's sculpture "The Ecstasy of St. Teresa" (1645–1652; Santa Maria Vittoria, Rome) that depicts her "transverberation" – an angel plunging a flaming golden arrow into her heart. When the angel withdrew the arrow, "I thought he was carrying off with him the deepest part of me; and he left me all on fire with great love of God." The image is repeated in the baroque engraving, "Beatrice and the Arrow of Divine Love" (by Liska, 1708) that depicts the Cistercian Beatrice of Nazareth (1200–1268) being stabbed in the chest by an arrow.

A classic Greek expression of the effort to exert rational control over Eros or at least to gain understanding of such

love is Plato's dialogue *Symposium*, also known as the *Banquet*. Martha Nussbaum in her study, *The Fragility of Goodness*, extensively analyses the historical-political context and multi-faceted content of this dialogue, juxtaposing Socrates' famous speech on love (Eros) to that of Alcibiades. I shall focus on Socrates to the neglect of the other major participants because it is largely Socrates' perspective that has influenced the idea of love as an ascent from the material to the spiritual world, the striving for immortality. The immediate setting for the dialogue is a banquet hosted by the poet Agathon who has just won a prize for his poetry. The company decides that their topic of conversation will be Eros. When it is Socrates' turn to discuss love, he relates the knowledge of love revealed to him by the priestess Diotima. Love is either the desire for that which is not possessed or the desire not to lose what is loved. In either case, love is marked by a lack and thus the desire to acquire what is lacking. This is because, Diotima explains, love was born at the gods' feast celebrating Aphrodite's birthday at which Poverty and the god Plenty slept together and conceived Love, who is neither mortal nor immortal. In Diotima's words, love "is always poor," "is always in distress," always in search of fulfillment. Here Eros is the human quest for fulfillment; the drive to possess the good forever.

Plato's understanding of love is tied to his *eudaimonia* (eudaemonism), often translated as the drive toward happiness. We miss the dynamic of eudaemonism, however, if we think of it in a modern psychological sense of feeling pleasure. Plato, and then Aristotle, thought of eudaemonism as an active drive (*daimon*) toward the good (*eu*), that is, the drive to living and doing well. Diotima says to Socrates: "the happy are made happy by the acquisition of good things." Eros in this sense is what C.S. Lewis in *The Four Loves* termed "need-love." Love is the striving or ambition that characterizes all human activity. However, the love of pleasure, wealth, fame, persons,

beauty does not finally alleviate love's poverty or need because all temporal things perish. That is why, Diotima affirms, "all men . . . desire the immortal." Ascent toward immortality begins on the biological level – the hope that children will preserve the memory of the father – and progresses toward the more permanent "children" of fame and ideas. "Who," Diotima says, "when he thinks of Homer and Hesiod and other great poets, would not rather have their children than ordinary human ones?" The imagery of ascent is explicit: "[B]egin from the beauties of the earth and mount upward for the sake of that other beauty, using these as steps only, and from one going on to two, and from two to all fair forms, and from fair forms to fair practices, and from fair practices to fair notions, until from fair notions . . . [to] the notion of absolute beauty, . . ." The perception of beauty in the world recalls in the soul the memory of ideal beauty, and the recollection of beauty and truth inspire yearning for a higher existence in the realm of pure ideas; an immortal realm not subject to the decay and death of the world. With its spiritualizing ascent to the primal form of beauty, the soul discovers a radiance of the Beautiful, the inspired order of the world. The motif of ascent from lower to higher, earth to heaven, will imbue medieval Christian mysticism and theology. The influence of Plato's *Symposium* extended into the early modern period through Dante's (1265–1321) *Convivio* and Marsilio Ficino's (1433–1499) *Commentary on Plato's Symposium on Love* that in turn influenced literature for the next couple of centuries.

The downside of this Hellenistic "beatific vision" was that in identifying the good with the beautiful, there arose the tendency to associate evil with the ugly and the deformed. As Younger notes in the entry "Beauty Contests" in his *Sex in the Ancient World*, "male beauty was considered to connote good character. Similarly, the ugly man was reckoned poor in spirit. . . ." It should be added that the Greeks were not

alone in associating external circumstances of life with the intellectual, spiritual, and moral condition of persons. In the Bible, Job's sufferings are attributed to his sin; in the medieval period, leprosy is seen as a disease of the soul, and the Knights of the Round Table are always exceedingly handsome; in our days, poverty is often attributed to a moral flaw in the poor person.

The image of love as an ascent motivated by a hierarchy of increasing value for the lover is graphically displayed in the long art history of images of the ladder to heaven. The best known of these innumerable artistic renditions relate, in the Byzantine world, to John Climacus's (c.570–c.649) "Ladder of Paradise" and in the medieval West to the "Ladder of Virtues" in the twelfth-century "Garden of Delights." In the Garden of Delights image, figures fall off the ladder because they are attracted to lesser goods than the highest good, heaven, at the top of the ladder. It is significant that the figure at the very top of the ladder receiving the "crown of life" from the hand of God is labeled "caritas," medieval Latin for love. Thus Plato's recasting of the older myths of Eros into a teleology of love was appropriated by Christian iconography. Love is directed toward an end, toward an immortality freed from the fetters of physical existence, freed from the downward pull of appetites such as sexual desire, and freed from loving things or persons for their own sake because eternal happiness cannot be acquired in what is perishable. Eros is finally the desire to overcome desire. Paradoxically, then, Eros may lead to asceticism. At any rate, Eros is the ladder to divinity, from the perishable world to the imperishable, from mortality to immortality. So understood, love is redemptive; it transcends the vulnerabilities of life in the world. Yet in a sense this may be called a kind of redemptive hedonism, the search for spiritual pleasure beyond mere physical pleasure; the use of things and others for one's quest for immortality. That is why some

have argued that Platonic Eros is ultimately egocentric, self-love desiring to be self-sufficient.

Although Aristotle (384–322 BCE) differed significantly from his teacher Plato in ways we cannot pursue here, he too conceived of love as an ascent or a striving for perfection, for pure form in Aristotle's terms. Aristotle rationalized the ancient Greek Eros into the "Unmoved Mover." In Aristotle's chapter on the "Eternal Being" in his *Metaphysics* he concludes: "The self-sufficient activity of the divine is life at its eternal best. We maintain, therefore, that the divine is the eternal best living being, so that the divine is life unending, continuous, and eternal. . . . It has also been shown that the first mover cannot be moved [because it is without attributes; it is impassive] and is unalterable. . . ." The Unmoved Mover moves us "as an object of love." As Pure Form, it does not itself act but rather its perfection kindles eros to strive for it. The world and all its life arises from its longing for God. Thus, love is a one-way street: humankind must love God; but it is impossible for God to love humankind for that would detract from the perfection of the First Cause which cannot think of anything except what is perfect, i.e., himself.

In the eighth and ninth books of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle also diverges from Plato in discussing friendship as a love of benevolence rather than a love of desire. Thus the guiding conceptual word is not eros but *philia*. Nussbaum argues that "friendship" is too weak a translation of *philia* because it does not convey the "very strongest affective relationships that human beings form," including those that have a "passionate sexual component." She prefers to translate *philia* by the word "love." Bolkestein also notes that "friendship" is not identical with the Greek "philia," a word that includes affective relations closer to what moderns term love, such as those of parents and children, brothers and sisters. *Philia* also has the meanings of comradeship and social

affiliations. In Aristotle's *Ethics*, he placed *philia* in his doctrine of the practical virtues. *Philia* as a feeling rests upon a *habitus* ("habit" in the sense of a characteristic attained by repeated, habitual action). The one loving in the sense of *philia* therefore wills the good differently than the person moved by erotic desire: he wills the good for the other for the sake of the other. The lovable is of three forms: the good, the pleasurable, and the useful. Correspondingly there are three forms of friendship. The consummate friendship is that of the good. In this friendship the friend is loved for his or her own sake, not for the sake of something useful or pleasurable that is obtainable through him or her. Their friendship is durable, based upon trust and mutuality.

This friendship-love grounded upon willing the good for the other for the sake of the other is named *eunoia*, benevolence. Because rationally one always desires the good for oneself, the question remains about the possibility of benevolent relationships. Aristotle answers that love to another derives from self-love (*philautia*). The precedence of self-love has its source in a universal principle. All existing being is affirmable and lovable being. Thus when a master craftsman loves his work, he fundamentally loves himself, i.e., his own self, becoming manifest in the work; a similar transference illustrates love to others, to friends. Thus each person initially loves himself, and each person is himself his best friend. To love means to assign good things to the beloved. The self-love that thinks the good exists in possessions, honor, and bodily pleasure is reprehensible. True self-love allots oneself the most beautiful and the good in the highest sense; in this way the person lives to please the best in him or herself. Hence, in this self-love there is also the possibility of self-sacrifice. Still even if a person renounces a noble deed for his friend, he acts according to the command of self-love: with his magnanimous renunciation he allocates to himself the better lot. "[I]f all men were to compete for

what is noble and put all their efforts into the performance of the noblest actions, all the needs of the community will have been met, and each individual will have the greatest of goods, since that is what virtue is." The Aristotelian orientation to friendship was continued by Cicero (106–43 BCE).

Cicero's writing on friendship, *De amicitia*, was appropriated by medieval Christian culture and blended with biblical precepts by, among others, the famous Cistercian abbot and spiritual writer, Aelred of Rievaulx (1110–1167), the "patron saint of friendship." Some scholars have suggested that Aelred's best known work, *Spiritual Friendship*, is mainly a reworking of Cicero's *De amicitia*. Another example is Richard de Fournival (1201–1260), physician and cleric, whose *Advice on Love* praises love as "the virtue of virtues." Thus, "as Cicero tells us, self-interest must come second to love, not vice-versa." Fournival refers to Cicero's oft-repeated definition of friendship when he writes: "Cicero is speaking about such spiritual love when he says that love is a common feeling of compassion and good will for all things divine and human."

It was the Roman poet Virgil (70–19 BCE) who gave Western culture one of its most overworked phrases: "Amor vincit omnia." "Love conquers all" – the inscription on Chaucer's Prioress's brooch – is so commonplace that its origin in Virgil's *Eclogue* is often forgotten. His epic *Aeneid* on the foundation of Rome, as well as his other writings, were a staple of Western Christian culture through the Renaissance, and he was believed to be a "Christian by nature" before Christ because of his ethics. Virgil is Dante's guide through Hell and Purgatory, but has to remain in Limbo.

In addition to the classical influences of Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero, the works of Plutarch (45–c.125 CE) and Ovid have been interwoven in Western concepts of love up to the present. Plutarch's celebration and promulgation of the philosophy and values of Greece, whose political viability by his time

had been replaced by Rome, find expression in his *Moralia*. Among these collected essays on ethics are treatises on love, brotherly love, and marriage, as well as on friendship and the education of children; writings admired by Montaigne and Shakespeare. Plutarch softened the sharp edges of the received Platonic misogyny in discussing marriage as companionship and friendship. Physical intimacies in marriage, he wrote, "are the seeds of friendship;" and it is absurd "to declare that women have no share in excellence." We are to honor and cultivate friends and relatives "for we are neither able nor by nature fitted to live solitary, without friends and without companionship."

Plutarch's dialogue on "Love" (*Erotikos*), an echo of Plato's *Symposium*, is of interest for his praise of marriage over "boy-love." It seems that pederasty may still have been a matter of debate centuries after the late Plato began to question it and Aristotle had condemned homosexual relationships as a disease. In *Erotikos*, Protogenes claims that "there is only one genuine Love, that of boys," and that "of true Love the women's apartment has no shred." The only reason for marriage is that it is "necessary for the propagation of the race." In response, Daphnaios asserts that marriage leads to friendship and mutual respect whereas boy-love is contrary to nature. "But the love of virtuous women not only undergoes no autumn, but flourishes even with hoary head and wrinkles and abides forever in tombs and monuments. Very few unions of male lovers have endured, but of men and women joined in love we can count myriads of cases where unions wholly faithful have been maintained loyally and eagerly to the end." The dialogue, including other participants, reviews the classical Hellenistic views and stories of Eros including the sense of divinely inspired "madness." "This passion is commonly called 'enthusiasm,' . . . because it shares and participates in a divine [*theos*] power." "Enthusiasm" is literally "God-withinism" (*entheos*).

One of the most influential classical writers upon medieval literature and the development of what is known today as “courtly love” was Ovid. He is best known for his *Ars amatoria* (*The Art of Love*) and *Amoris remedia* (*Cures for Love*). These two works in particular are clear sources for Andreas Capellanus’s (twelfth-century) *De arte honesti amandi*, usually called *The Art of Courtly Love*, and for the *Roman de la Rose* (*The Romance of the Rose*) (thirteenth century) begun by Guillaume de Lorris and completed by Jean de Meun. As Allen notes, the major French writers of the eleventh century knew Ovid as well as the Bible by heart. However, all too often, medieval writers did not grasp Ovid’s parody and satire, and thus took him seriously. Francesco Petrarch (1304–1374) thought Ovid wanton and condemned his *Ars amatoria*. On the other hand, Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375) praised Ovid for showing how “to kindle the sacred fires of Venus in cold hearts,” and used his stories in the *Decameron*. And Chaucer (1343–1400) referred to Ovid as “Venus’s clerk.”

As mentioned earlier, Ovid compared love to war: “Love is a kind of war, and no assignment for cowards;” and every lover is a warrior under the command of Love. Ovid’s advice when caught in multiple affairs: “swear up and down it’s a lie. . . . Wear yourself out if you must, and prove, in her bed, that you could not possibly be that good, coming from some other girl.” Indeed, affairs should be kept secret to avoid the complications that arise from angry husbands and jealous women. Ovid adds that this very secrecy will make affairs more pleasant. Deceit and manipulation are among the techniques the teacher in this manual of seduction promotes as skills the reader may practice to gain his goal.

With the rise of Christianity as a world religion, the classical reflections on love were called into question by the church. The initial critique from the side of the biblical tradition was not primarily ethical but rather theological. The biblical

tradition was totally at odds with the common Greek conviction that the relationship of the gods to humankind excludes a love relationship. As noted, Aristotle thematized love cosmologically with his argument of the unmoved mover. In his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle posited the highest good as the ultimate ground of movement because it moves others as the object of their love and desire. The Absolute is the quintessence of perfection that thereby moves everything to strive for it. The final cause thereby remains in itself exempt from movement because movement denotes a lack, a desire for fulfillment. Since the Absolute lacks nothing it also desires nothing. Thus the Absolute need not and does not communicate with any but the Absolute. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, love in the form of self-love becomes relevant as it moves the virtuous to implement for himself the most beautiful and best actions.

Between the Platonic theory of Eros and the Aristotelian teaching of friendly benevolence on the one side and the beginnings of a Christian theology on the other side there appeared at first to be an unbridgeable gap. The Bible understands the relationship between God and the people of Israel and thus extending to humankind to be a relationship of reciprocal love; a relationship that therefore includes self-disclosure and communication. In the Bible, God is presented as the God who communicates his own self to humankind. Furthermore, the Hellenistic anthropocentric perspective permeated the "divine Eros" making it – in its better expressions! – analogous to human love. The biblical perspective viewed human love from a theocentric perspective – love to others is to be analogous to divine love. In contrast to Aristotle's Unmoved Mover, the biblical God enters history, moves and loves humankind encouraging people to call him "Abba," i.e., "Father." To say "our Father" expresses a relationship of trustful love.

Furthermore, "love" in the biblical accounts is rendered by an alternative Greek vocabulary. In place of the usual Greek

word for love, eros, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible and then the Greek New Testament used agape to designate at the same time the creating and redeeming love of God to the world and to humankind, the reciprocal love of humankind to God, and the love of persons as the witness of human love to God.

Agape is a comprehensive term including expressions of the above loves, which in the New Testament specifically expresses God's absolute and redemptive love shown in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Of the many Greek words for love, eros and agape have had particular significance for the Christian concept of love. It seems that agape was not a particularly significant part of the classical Greek religious and philosophical vocabulary of love. Lexicons such as Peters' *Greek Philosophical Terms* have extended entries on eros but not on agape. However, readers of the Greek New Testament have long been aware that agape is the dominant term for love in the Bible, and that eros does not appear in the texts at all. Assuming the writers of the Greek New Testament were self-conscious in their choice of vocabulary, the obvious question is why they chose the term agape and excluded the term eros. One reason may be that the term agape did not have the philosophical, religious, and ethical baggage associated with eros. In addition, the New Testament authors, themselves Jews, had ready to hand their Scripture, the Hebrew Bible, already in Greek translation. Known as the "Septuagint" or "LXX" in reference to the legendary number of 70 translators, this Greek translation of the "Old Testament," in circulation by around 100 BCE, used the term agape to translate the Hebrew words for love, "ahab" and "hesed." While "ahab" may refer to loving things, it is a comprehensive term for the reciprocal love between persons and that between God and people. Such reciprocal love is to be responsibly active in serving others and maintaining relationships. "Hesed" is that

personal love that promotes the well-being of others. It is rooted in God's faithful and redeeming love, and thus is to act likewise toward others. Following the model of the Septuagint, the agape forms for love in the New Testament undergo a fundamental reevaluation in relation to the common Greek language usage; the central meaning of love is set forth as the affection of persons to one another, God's affection to persons, and persons' affection to God.

There is no doubt that the biblical authors used the linguistic tools available to them, and that Greek was the common language of the Mediterranean world. The question, however, is whether the New Testament writers consciously used "agape" in contrast to "eros" in order to convey a specific theological meaning. Günther and Link in their article on love argue that they did: "It is because all human thought, feeling, action and worship are a response to a previous movement by God, that the LXX prefers the simpler word *agape* to the more loaded *eros*. The completely different direction of thought makes this quite understandable." This theologically informed choice was forcefully argued by Anders Nygren (1890–1978) in his study *Agape and Eros*. While Nygren was not the first to note the biblical use of agape for love, he so strongly emphasized the Christian use of agape and so sharply posed the historical–theological opposition of agape and eros, that nearly all consequent studies of the concept of love have reacted to his work.

In *Agape and Eros*, Nygren intended to set forth and to clarify the distinctive character of the Christian concept of love, agape, in contrast to the Greek concept of eros. Agape is primarily God's love, even when expressed by humans. Agape is a descending redemptive love, from God to humankind. Agape is completely unselfish; it is sacrificial giving. Agape loves the other and thereby creates value in the other. Eros, on the other hand, is acquisitive desire; it is the ascending movement

of human attempts to reach God (however perceived). Eros is egocentric and is the highest form of self-assertion. It is primarily an acquisitive desire that loves its object for the value it sees in it. We might say that the opposition between agape and eros may be expressed with the theological epigram that salvation is received not achieved. We shall have the opportunity to discuss criticisms of Nygren's argument when we get to the modern period. For now, we may continue to reflect on the developing vocabulary of love.

By the early fourth century, the church had moved from a persecuted minority to an established position in the Roman Empire. Consequently the language of the Western church was no longer Greek but Latin. Latin did not possess the philosophical and literary distinctions of Greek. So, for example, the Greek eros and *philia* are both expressed by the Latin *amor*. Given the great importance of Scripture to Christianity, the first Latin Christian texts were most probably translations of the Bible. Agape was translated by three Latin words: *caritas*, *dilectio*, and *amor*. *Caritas* is the love of God and also ethical virtue. *Dilectio* is love in the sense of an act of the will on the basis of previous choice. The dominant word choice is *caritas*; *amor* is the least used for translating the Bible. *Dilectio* and *caritas* express the biblical law of love of God and neighbor. Latin-speaking Christians were accustomed to these words in reading and hearing Scripture. The words, while coming from profane Latin, now carried a new sense, a biblical sense of love.

In her massive study of the Latin vocabulary of Christian charity, Hélène Pétré argues that the early Christian claim of a new gospel required a new vocabulary to express that claim and its ramifications. Of course the early Christians were not privy to some special language but rather spoke the languages of their context, first Greek and then Latin. In the process of translating literally and theologically from Hebrew to Greek to

Latin, the authors of the Bible struggled to utilize the linguistic resources at their disposal. Later Christian writers, influenced by biblical vocabulary, continued this process of adapting profane language to evangelical usage. According to Pétré, the most characteristic example of the influence of the biblical text on the Christian sense of words is that of “*caritas*.” *Caritas* was designated to translate the Greek *agape*. This old Latin word had a variety of senses: familial affection, friendship, sometimes patriotism. It took on the special sense of love of God and love of the neighbor for the Christians. At the same time it took on a rich religious and ethical content due to the frequency of its use in the Latin Bible. *Caritas* expressed in the least imperfectly possible way the nature of God of which the essential attribute is love: “God is *caritas*” (1 John 4:8,16). Hence the title of Pope Benedict XVI’s 2006 encyclical, “*Deus Caritas Est*.” *Caritas* expresses the incomprehensible benevolence of God for humankind: “See what *caritatem* the Father has given us” (1 John 3:1; cf. 3:16; 4:9, 16; Rom. 5:8; Eph. 2:4). *Caritas* sums up the entire Christian ethic, the law and the prophets, because the only thing demanded of the Christian is the two loves, the love of God and the love of others. *Caritas* is the compassionate and benevolent love for the poor; it is patience, mildness, unselfish (1 Cor. 13:4); it is dedicated to serve others (Gal. 5:13); it is mutual support (Eph. 4:2); it is the gift of the life that configures human love on the love of God (1 John 3:16).

These texts, as well as others, illustrate the change in import of the word from its profane to its religious sense. Vocabulary is formed in a word’s usage, the resonance it evokes, its affective character, rather than solely in its unique intellectual content. There are splendid words, words that evoke an ideal and for that reason have a great expressive richness. This is so particularly in the language of a group. Words such as *caritas* gained a new quality in Christian language because they

express a notion that is at the same time ethical and religious. The banal comparison of a society with a living organism, expressed by use of the word “corpus,” picks up a completely special force and life when, following St. Paul, the church considers itself the “body of Christ,” and Christians as “members of Christ.” For the Christian community, *caritas* was not simply a human sentiment; it was the highest of the virtues for it conformed the person to God. Why did the word *caritas* itself and its synonyms so frequently recur in Christian authors if their religion was not, above all, the religion of love? It is not without interest for the history of ideas that this name was adopted by Christianity as that of the greatest and most characteristic of the virtues that it preached; it summed up all its ethics.

Toward the end of his *Confessions*, St. Augustine (354–430), the major theologian of Western Christianity, wrote: “Behold, the single love of God and of our neighbor, by what manifold sacraments and innumerable languages, and in each several language in how innumerable modes of speaking, it is bodily expressed.” We shall next look at the “innumerable modes” of love expressed in the Bible.