

College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University

DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU

School of Theology and Seminary Graduate
Papers/Theses

School of Theology and Seminary

4-20-2022

The Role and Characteristic of Love in 1 Corinthians 13

Ninh Van Nguyen

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, nnguyen001@csbsju.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/sot_papers



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), and the [Catholic Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Nguyen, Ninh Van, "The Role and Characteristic of Love in 1 Corinthians 13" (2022). *School of Theology and Seminary Graduate Papers/Theses*. 1932.

https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/sot_papers/1932

This Graduate Paper is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Theology and Seminary Graduate Papers/Theses by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csbsju.edu.

THE ROLE AND CHARACTERISTIC OF LOVE
IN 1 CORINTHIANS 13

BY

FR. NINH VAN NGUYEN

DIOCESE OF HA TINH

BAC PHU, THACH TRUNG,
HA TINH CITY, VIETNAM

A Paper Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Theology and
Seminary of Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota, in
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of
Theological Studies.

SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND SEMINARY

Saint John's University

Collegeville, Minnesota

April 20, 2022

This paper was written under the direction of

DR. VINCENT SMILES
Director

THE ROLE AND CHARACTERISTIC OF LOVE IN 1 CORINTHIANS 13

In this paper, I discuss the role and characteristics of Love in 1 Corinthians 13. Before going into detailed treatment of this topic, I sought to clarify why Paul writes this letter, and the coherent unity of the letter. I also recognize that it is necessary to clarify the term 'Love' in the context of First Corinthians. It is equally important to discern the thematic weight and the position of chapter 13 in the context of the whole epistle. I utilize the structural criticism which considers the chapter in question as the central part of the 'sandwiched' construction between chapters 12 and 14. Chapter 12 outlines the principal importance of the various gifts: while chapter 14 articulates the phenomenon of tongues and the relationship to transmitting the Word into the world. In considering the central theme of the paper, I seek to explore the indispensable role of 'Love' among other essential Spiritual gifts; without Love, Faith and Hope and Good works are of empty significance. My inquiry into this topic led me to the inevitable analyzing and discussing the characteristics of Love. It is interesting to note that there is a structural, internal technique utilized by Paul. It can be deduced that he used a particular system of combining two positives, eight negatives, and then five more favorable terms to do justice to the concept of Love. In the final part of the exposition, I concentrate on expounding the eternal nature of Love and its surpassing quality compared to other gifts of the Spirit. After analyzing the role and nature of Love in the central section of my analysis, I mention the position of 1 Corinthians 13 in the Church's current life, especially in Pope Francis's teachings. Specifically, it is my purpose to shed light upon the concept of Love from a modern Christian literary/theological point of view. Ultimately, I was able to develop a basis of New Testament understanding and find important resonance within the primary theme and internal thought of 1 Cor. 13 and two recent Apostolic documents: *Amoris Laetitia* and *Fratelli Tutti*.

*This paper may be made available for electronic access in current
and future electronic storage databases at
Saint John's University Alcuin Library, Collegeville, Minnesota.*

Ninh Van Nguyen

THE ROLE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF LOVE IN 1 CORINTHIANS 13

What is Love? This may be the one important question we rarely pose for others or ourselves. Yet each of us recognizes a strong intuition or need for Love. However, if we pause a moment and ponder, we can see that this all-encompassing idea is a theme that appears in all aspects of human life. It would not be easy to count how many works of art and literature explore this theme. It stands to reason then that any reader can quickly come across this theme of love in the Judeo-Christian Scriptures. Perhaps we could call the Bible the 'Book of Love.' For Paul, an extraordinary apostle of Jesus Christ, Love is an essential theme in his letters. Love is not only soulful affections or feelings for another arising out of kinship or personal ties, but also a means of contemplating the possibility of a gift of God for human beings. However, love is a big topic, so it is a challenging task to explore it thoroughly in a short essay. Therefore, this essay will analyze the role and characteristics of love in 1 Corinthians 13, focusing on the following topics: the necessity of love, the surpassing character of love, and the eternal character of love. The essay will be developed in three parts: the circumstance of writing and position of the letter, the role and characteristics of love, and 1Cor 13 in the teachings of Pope Francis.

Before analyzing the content of 1 Cor 13, it is necessary to acknowledge what circumstances urged Paul to write this letter. Clearly, the Church in Corinth is one of the favorite communities that he had formed and taken care of. He is intensely interested in the community's life. Even after leaving Corinth in 51 A.D, he still cares for the community from afar- by receiving their information and instructing them with letters. There is evidence to prove that he wrote this community more than two letters, the two we see today in the canon. Thiselton affirms that after Apollos visited Corinth and returned to the Ephesus where Paul was working, he brought Paul some gloomy news from this community. It is likely for some scholars to reckon

that this might be why Paul wrote the first letter to Corinthians. In reality, he wrote the first letter to them before writing 1 Corinthians, which clearly refers to 1 Cor 5:9 and 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1.

Albeit, this letter is considered lost.¹

Other scholars affirm that around A.D 54, Paul got information about the beloved community which inspired him to write the first letter. The information comes from two sources: an oral one: from Chloe's people; and a written form from Christians in Corinth—And then from the verbal report of Chloe's people and "others". Paul grasps the general situation in Corinth where there is a difficult case of sexual immorality (1 Cor:2), causing communal division (1 Cor 11:18), and other problems related to lawsuits (6:1-11), adultery (6:12-20), liturgical attire (11:2-16), and resurrection issue (1 Cor 15).² The second source was a written letter in which the Corinthians question many issues related to the communal life, such as marriage and celibacy (1Cor 7:1-40), food in correlation with offering to idols (8:1), the Holy Spirit's gifts (1 Cor 12-14), and others. Therefore, Paul composes the first letter to the Corinthians as an instructive answer.³

Regarding the unity of the letter, although Paul must deal with many division problems in the Corinthian community, many scholars assume that there is only one letter in First Corinthians.⁴ Indeed, Paul copes with more disparate issues in 1 Corinthians than in other letters. That diversity may lead to speculation that 1 Corinthians was a compilation of letters. Some scholars are prone to this direction; Pascuzzi, for instance, comments that this hypothesis has

¹ Anthony C. Thiselton, *First Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical and Pastoral Commentary* (William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2011), 26.

² Maria A. Pascuzzi, *The Letters to the Corinthians* in Daniel Durken, *New Collegeville Bible Commentary* (Collegeville (MN): Liturgical Press, 2009), 486; Anthony C. Thiselton, 26

³ Anthony C. Thiselton, 26

⁴ Craig S. Keener, *1-2 Corinthians* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005), 8.

proved to be unwarranted, especially given more recent insights about how Paul unfolds his arguments; most scholars now affirm the literary unity of the First Corinthians.”⁵

To go deeply to the second part in examining the characteristics of love in 1 Cor 13, it is necessary to understand the meaning of Love that the author uses in this context. The term ‘Love’ derives from the various Greek words, such as *phileo*, *eros*, and *agape*. Commonly speaking, the word ‘*phileo*’ is the most common to indicate love; it refers to the love humans have for friends, family, or even country. The second concept is ‘*eros*,’ which is often used to speak of sexual passion or erotic love. *Eros* is experienced by the feelings that come to us mysteriously when we are impressed or attracted by other people. Noteworthy, the term ‘*eros*’ never appears in the Scriptures. Finally, the most common word for love used in Scripture is ‘*agape*.’ Paul uses this word in 1 Corinthians 13. *Agape* love is not primarily a love of the emotions but more of a mindset, an orientation of the will that seeks others’ highest good.⁶

Concerning the context and position of the text, chapter 13 continues the clarifications related to spiritual gifts (12:1-14:40). It is considered the lengthiest disputation. We are dealing with the matter affecting community worship; one in which the possession and manifestation of spiritual gifts are pushed to their climax and become criteria for competitiveness. The inevitable consequence from this the unity and harmony in the community are threatened (Ch. 12); the assembly of prayer is also disordered and chaotic (Ch. 14). Confronting this problematic situation, Paul addresses the teaching of Christian charity among them as a response and perfect solution for communal issues (Ch. 13). With a familiar construction ABA’ which is often utilized in the First Corinthians, he highlights the discussion of love in chapter 13 as “sandwiched”:

⁵ Maria A. Pascuzzi, 487; Craig S. Keener, 8

⁶ Robinson, Haddon W. “*Two Traits of Agape Love*.” *The Journal of the Evangelical Homiletics Society*, vol. 15, no. 2, Sept. 2015, pp. 60–63. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx? 60-61.

whereas chapter 12, which addresses various gifts, and chapter 14 mentions tongues are considered the bread.⁷ Commenting about this argument, Pascuzzi writes, “unfortunately, some viewed their gifts, especially speaking in tongues, as tokens of superior spiritual status, exercised for self-aggrandizement. It is this skewed view and abusive use of the gifts that Paul rejects and seeks to correct by his discussion of the relative significance of each gift, whose exercise must be ordered to the upbuilding and unity of the whole community.”⁸

Paul begins chapter thirteen by talking about the essence of Love. This is obviously an effective transition since Paul details the various spiritual gifts in the previous chapter. Firstly, he points out the indispensable role of Love in the context of spiritual gifts. He uses a series of conditional sentences to highlight the virtue. The Apostle asserts that without love, the angelic tongues, the gift of prophecy, knowledge, and self-denial or giving away of the body makes no sense (13:1-3). Actually, speaking in tongues, prophecy, and divine knowledge are ‘charisms’ mentioned in the previous chapter (12:8-10). But love (agape) is regarded as the soul and core of these spiritual gifts. Eastman explains that these gifts have their own purpose, but “love puts them in their place by exposing their powerlessness and temporal limits.” He continues, “without love, human and even supernatural speech communicates nothing. Without love constituting the person, even prophetic knowledge leads to emptiness.”⁹ Martin also reckons that as love is essential for basic existence and thriving in married life, it is also integral to the community of

⁷ Cox, Steven Lynn. “1 Corinthians 13--An Antidote to Violence: Love.” *Review & Expositor*, vol. 93, no. 4, Fall 1996, pp. 529–536. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct, 530.

⁸ Maria A. Pascuzzi, 528.

⁹ Eastman S.G. “Love’s Folly: Love and Knowledge in 1 Corinthians.” *Interpretation* (United Kingdom), vol. 72, no. 1, 2018, pp. 7–16., doi:10.1177/0020964317731325, 14.

the church.¹⁰ Love becomes a vital factor for community life. Without love, our life is meaningless and leaves an abyss which nothing else can fill. In a word, the spiritual gifts will bear no fruits unless we place love at the center, to be the very soul of all action.

The reader may wonder how to understand these “charismata” that have such a strong effect in the Corinthian community. The Apostle to the Gentiles opens the chapter with a phrase: “If I speak in the tongues of man or Angles.” What is meant here by the ‘tongues of man and angels’? Literally, in the popular understanding, it is the capability to speak eloquently. However, in this situation, it can be understood somewhat differently. Gordon D. Fee analyzes that the tongues of man may relate to human speech inspired by the Holy Spirit but unknown to the speaker; tongues of angels refer to the speaker in tongues- in a manner that communicates the dialect of heaven.¹¹ The Corinthians think of the languages of angels coming for some specific reasons. Firstly, there is a tradition saying that Jews believe that angels have their own heavenly languages or dialects; thus, with the inspiration of the Spirit, humans can speak these dialects. Second, the Corinthians think that one can make a good deal of sense of their view of being people of the Spirit if they believe that they had already entered into some expression of angelic existence. This situation somehow explained some denial of sexual life and roles (7:1-7; 11:2-16), refusal of a future bodily existence (15:12,35), and interest in sublime wisdom and knowledge. Indeed, they assumed that when they gained these levels of illumination it proved they were genuine in their speaking of tongues of angels.¹² In the same view, George T. Montague explains that the Corinthians may have considered that they were on the same level

¹⁰ Copenhaver, Martin B. “Love with Its Work Clothes On.” *Journal for Preachers*, vol. 34, no. 3, Easter 2011, pp. 21–24. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx? direct, 22.

¹¹ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 698-699.

¹² Gordon D. Fee, 699.

with angels who convey the voice of praising God and God's messages when they speak in tongues.¹³ Therefore, they appear to highly value this gift.

Similarly, the charismata named in verse 2 have equally high significance for the Corinthians. Indeed, prophecy is considered the most pivotal for the community. Knowledge is one of the Corinthian's favorites. And faith is the core that enables them to perform mighty works (12:9). Noteworthy, Paul referred to enactments of sacrifices that were the early church's effective and honorable practices. How are we to understand the phrase "give over the body to hardship that I may boast"? There is a controversy among scholars about how to interpret the term 'boast.' It might come from the different Greek letters changing the meaning. The better Greek manuscripts read 'boast,' but others read 'burned.' Montague comments that the term 'burned' reminded the reader about the story of three men in the book of Daniel (Dan 3:15-23) and foresaw the martyrdom of many Christians who became living torches in Nero's Garden.¹⁴ In the same view, other scholars interpret the term "boast," as 'burn': a view of martyrdom... or an extreme example of giving oneself up to the most painful torture and death for some great cause. Gordon D. Fee explains that although martyrdom by fire was not yet familiar to Christians in the early church, for Nero's event occurred only some decades later, it could be reasonably seen as an anticipated view that Paul had in mind. However, an authentic martyr is not driven by the ultimate triumph of his pride. Rather, he reaches an ultimatum where there is no alternative way to keep loyal to God. Thus, with other charismata, Paul brings the highest honor of sacrificial action to bear, in order to impress upon hearers that these gifts and practices are

¹³ George T. Montague, *First Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2011), 223.

¹⁴ George T. Montague, 224.

meaningless unless motivated and informed by Love.¹⁵

The Apostle sustains his perspective in the second part when describing the characteristics of love. It is possible to analyze this text's structure as containing two positives, eight negatives, and then five more positive terms depicting love. In using this structure, Paul apparently wants to emphasize the central idea regarding what is problematic for the Corinthian community (13:4-7). Related to the first positive two-fold statement, Paul defines Love as patient and kind. 'Patience' covers a range of experiences in modern language. It can be understood in the passive ways: humans must endure problematic or offensive behavior from others. It may also indicate the demands of waiting in line to buy something or solve a problem. The biblical term goes beyond responses to these types of annoyances in the communal life; though that is certainly involved. Patience refers to the virtuous ability to endure suffering (Rom 12:12; Col 1:11), slow to anger, not pay back injury to injury (1 Thes 5:14-16), but desire for justice and goodwill (1 Cor 6:7).¹⁶ Campbell explains that 'patience' in this context highlights the character of the Christian life at all ages. As indicated above, Virtue is crucial. The elemental characteristic of the practice of love, which often seems to be a weak and foolish, is the way of resistance in the face of the powers of this age. "Patience enables the Christian community to continue to grow in love without becoming demoralized by the persistent challenges and attacks of the powers. Patience enables the church to continue creating the space-note by note and chord by chord-for mutuality and community in the midst of a culture characterized by hierarchy and domination."¹⁷

¹⁵ Maria A. Pascuzzi, 533.

¹⁶ George T. Montague, 226

¹⁷ Charles L. Campbell, *1 Corinthians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 219.

Along with patience as the most positive characteristic of love, the Apostle continuously personalizes his idea of love with ‘kindness’ as the second favorable characteristic. Kindness describes the functional ability to treat others well. This word is understood as corresponding with modern English equivalence to the idea which conveys the warmth meaning of agape in Greek. Thiselton asserts, “in its positive sense, kindness is pure and unselfish concern for the well-being of the other.”¹⁸ Moreover, kindness is one of the characteristics attributed to God; it is easy to find out a series of expressions indicating God’s kindness (Ps 69:14; Rom 2:4; 11:22, Eph 2:7). In the Old Testament, kindness is noticed as one of three virtues (equity, kindness, and humility). The Israelites had to maintain these principles in treating foreign people when entering the promised land (Lev 19:18). It also contributes to the process of building justice and righteousness in the communities of Israel as they live among other nations (Isa 1:16-17; Jere 7:5-6; Am 25:23-24; Ho 6:6). Particularly, Jesus stresses kindness as the premier virtue in his preaching to followers. For instance, when referring to the relationship among people in the Gospel of Matthew chapter 5:43-45, Jesus claims that they not only love and bless their friends but also love and pray for their enemies. In doing so, they demonstrate their identity as the legitimate children of God. In other words, they act in Love as the Father does.¹⁹

When introducing patience and kindness in verse 4, which opens the part discussing the true character of Love, Paul seems to go deeply into his theological intention. This verse profoundly exhibits the Pauline theology of Love- a power which emanates from God, who is

¹⁸ Anthony C. Thiselton, 221.

¹⁹ Lioy, Dan. 2018. “The Supreme Importance of Promoting Equity, Kindness, and Humility: A Descriptive and Comparative Analysis of Micah 6:1-16 and 1 Corinthians 13:1-13.” *Conspectus* 25 (March): 56–91. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAI GW7190311000701&site=ehost-live&scope=site>, 57-58.

Love (1 John 4:8). The idea that Love is recognized by kindness occurs many times in Paul's letters. For example, when talking about the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians, the Apostle places love as the first fruit followed by patience and kindness (Gal 5:22). These thoughts also appear in Romans when Paul questions the Romans about their attitude to kindness and patience, which, in the light of Christ, represent the two sides of one divine attribute toward human beings (Rom 2:4). From His boundless Love, God both withholds his wrath, though we may be worthy of it considering our sins. Rather He pours out his abundant mercy upon us to transform us into his beloved sons. If God makes this two-fold measure of Love as a way of forming us, we have to imitate God to do the same with others.²⁰ Campbell also commends, "Paul's opening emphasis on patience and kindness may itself be a pastoral reminder of the steadfast love of God, on which the community relies on its way to the new creation. As the way of embodying the new age in a hostile world, while awaiting the coming of the Lord, love is necessarily characterized by patience."²¹ In analyzing the essential nature of patience and kindness concerning Love, Cox also claims that these characteristics are crucial in relationships with other people and God. If our attitude toward people is hostile, how can we expect to have a complete relationship with God? The essence of God is not hostility and violence but relentless Love.²²

Following the first two positive descriptions of Love, there is a 'negative' eight-fold expression that concentrates upon what love is not. Paul says that love does not envy, does not parade itself, does not puff off, does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, does not provoke easily, does not think evil, and does not rejoice in iniquity (vs. 4-6). By using the negative form for showing what Love is not, the Apostle seems to show that the domain of Love is unbounded

²⁰ Gordon D. Fee,, 705-706.

²¹ Charles L. Campbell, 219-220.

²² Cox, Steven Lynn, 532.

and difficult to summarize in a few adjectives. When eliminating what Love is not, the rest which belong to Love is good and benevolent. For instance, when saying that Love does not envy, Paul desires that his beloved community focuses on the act of Love and how to serve well the members for whom Christ died, rather than being lost in rivalry or competition. In mentioning to “not parade”, the Apostle indicates humility to those who are serving community. Paul appreciated their spirit of serving; however, their works may only be useful for them and benefit for the community if they acknowledge where the gifts of the Spirit come from; and for what purpose they receive these gifts. Indeed, love and boasting are impossible to manage at the same time.²³

The author uses a series of verbs of action to indicate that true love is not simply an abstract, airy concept but something consistently demonstrated by specific movements.²⁴ Pascuzzi asserts that the eight-fold negative characters are what Paul mentions in previous parts of the letter. For instance, ‘jealous’ and ‘inflated’ (v. 4), the Apostle has mentioned in the first part of the letter in chapters 1-4 and 5. In the latter situation, Paul uses trenchant words to condemn the disordered person; he says, “you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord” (1 Cor 5:5). The attitude of ‘rude’ in verse 5 makes the reader recall the activities of the woman in chapter 11; Paul accuses that they are bringing shame on their ‘heads’ by attiring themselves so as to disregard the distinctions between sexes (11:2-16) and the actions of humiliating the poor at the Lord’s table in verse 22. Still, the matter of self-seeking in verse 5 is also the problem the Apostle warns the Corinthians in chapter 10 for the sake of their salvation (10:22-23, 33). By recalling the negative

²³ Gordon D. Fee, 707.

²⁴ J. Ayodeji Adewuya and Daniel K. Darko, *1 Corinthians: A Pastoral Commentary* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2019),111.

issues in the past, Paul willingly wants to say that the Corinthian community is affected by chronic diseases, and this body *is decreased in strength by a weakening of the immune system* so that it is easy to infect others with bad habits (Vs.11:30-32).

By listing the negatives, the Apostle seemingly brings an indictment against the Corinthians' social behavior by openly referring to it here. Even while mentioning the prized gifts which are most pivotal to this community, he has no intention to deflate the arrogant Corinthians. Indeed, Paul willingly utters some problems in utilizing the Spirit's gifts in the Corinthian community.²⁵ Using this same view, Steven L. Cox asserts that the negative eight-fold descriptions strongly focus on the currently failing situation the Corinthians are facing.²⁶ Actually, First Corinthians as a whole, describes Paul addressing issues that troubled one of the young churches he established during his second missionary journey. Corinthian Christians were divided over several issues: such as leadership (Ch. 1-4), Sexual immorality (chs.6-7), personal conduct (Ch. 8-11), spiritual gifts (chs.12-14), and questions concerning the resurrection (Ch. 15). Paul notes that the matter of division and lack of love has existed in Corinth for some time. At the beginning of the letter, the Apostle pointedly mentions the matter (1:10-13). It is repeated in chapter 11 when Paul says that when the community gathers in the Lord's supper, "but one goes hungry while another gets drunk" (11:17-22). However, the Corinthian community's current failing is related to spiritual gifts as presented in chapter 12. In this chapter, Paul shows that the Corinthians are interested in spiritual gifts that they received from God (Vs. 1-3). Each gift is granted for each person as God's will (Vs. 4-11), all gifts bestowed serve in a unity (Vs.12-26). Most depreciatingly, instead of using the gifts that God grants to serve the

²⁵ Maria A. Pascuzzi, 533.

²⁶ Cox, Steven Lynn, 531.

community, the Corinthians feel boastful about them. On top of this the spiritual gifts become reasons for division in the community. Cox asserts that “the primary issue that caused these divisions in the Corinthian church was a sense of spiritual superiority. Such an attitude often causes jealousy, which is the basic human drive to own or imitate what others have.

Unfortunately, this arrogance led to antinomian views with some people, and strict legalism with others.”²⁷ Confronting the different challenges in the church, Paul acknowledges that the Corinthian community is lacking the essence of all spiritual gifts, that is the Love. Therefore, he advocates Love as a specific remedy for healing his beloved community.

Paul summarizes the discussion of the characteristics of love in verse 7. In this verse, he utilizes important verbs: bear, believe, hope, and endure; followed by a rhetorical repetition of “all things,” which can be considered a practical end. He points out that with the view of using repetition, love never tires of support, never loses faith, and never gives up hope.²⁸ These statements seem to convey an exhortation: a strong voice that provides for more incentive for the Corinthians. He betrays confidence that they can overcome all difficult circumstances and keep their faith and hope firm. In the same view, Pascuzzi comments, “Far from promoting abusive, self-destructive, or self-deceptive behavior, here Paul advocates behavior governed by the love that transcends the self-interest, jealousy, and competitiveness leading to strife and division and promotes reconciliation and unity.”²⁹ Thus, Love is the remedy that will heal the suffering, mend the wounds, and build up unity so that the community might thrive.

The Apostle testifies to the impeccable and perpetual character of love (vs. 8-13). The affirmative opening phrase, “Love never fails,” summarizes the previous section and introduces

²⁷ Cox, Steven Lynn, 529.

²⁸ J. Ayodeji Adewuya and Daniel K. Darko, 112.

²⁹ Maria A. Pascuzzi, 533.

the overall idea that depicts the superiority and abiding nature of love (v.8). That is to say, to highlight the eternal nature of love, Paul shows that though the spiritual gifts are invaluable, they are also temporal. Compared with the permanent nature of love, charismata of tongues, prophecy, and accumulation of knowledge as limited and partial (vs.8-10). He continuously clarifies this issue by using an analogy of childhood. Childhood behavior, thoughts, and actions will be replaced as adulthood ensues. Likewise, by analogy, we can acknowledge that charisms appropriate to the church's present life are the active work of the Spirit in the church's corporate life. However, the temporal gifts will have no more function at the eschaton since the perfect will fulfill and replace the partial things.³⁰ This thought is more manifest in verse 12. Unlike the above helpful necessary ministerial charisms, Love alone is absolutely vital to Christian life. Gordon observes, "as good as the Spirit's gifts are, they are nonetheless only for the present. Sacrificial love, which the Corinthians currently lack, is the more excellent way in part because it belongs to eternity as well as to the present".³¹ Still, the eternity of Love makes it surpassing not only by way of influencing the charisms but also concerning the other "cardinal virtues" as Paul confirms in the last verse: - "so Faith, Hope, Love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is Love" (v.13). Following this inspiration, Pascuzzi explains, "Love is the greatest both because it is the supreme motive that allows Christians to use all the Spirit's gifts for the end toward which God has ordained them and because it alone endures eternally."³²

It is essential to explain further that the declaration in verse 8 is considered the central eschatological statement of the church: "Love never ends." The question may be posed here as to how Love actually has eternal status. We acknowledge that only God is eternal, and all creation

³⁰ Maria A. Pascuzzi, 534; Gordon D. Fee, 717.

³¹ Gordon D. Fee, 719.

³² Maria A. Pascuzzi, 534.

is limited. When confirming something is unlimited it is automatically thought of as something we attribute to God. Perhaps, this matter is clarified in the thought of St. John when he says, “God is love” (1Jn 4:8). Indeed, everlasting love is not a principle or power independent of God, but it is indeed the very nature of God...the absolute extent of what we can possibly say about Him. Campbell explains that this allusion is mentioned through Pauline letters when he depicts God, Christ, and Holy Spirit living and working together in communal love. As the body of Christ, the church takes part in the trinitarian life of God, which is the life of love emanating through the Holy Spirit. When the fullness of time has come, everything is renewed in God, but God and love are still from eternity to eternity (Ps 90:2).³³ Campbell asserts, “Love never ends, not because of ‘mushy-minded moralists’ but because of God. the one who lasts is God. that theological promise alone sustains the church as it seeks to embody the hidden, vulnerable way of love in resistance to the seemingly overwhelming power of this age.”³⁴

After affirming the eternal nature of Love, Paul continues to clarify the surpassing quality of love in comparison with other gifts of the Spirit by utilizing a series of analogically authentic images, such as ‘a child’, versus ‘as an adult,’ ‘seeing indistinctly through a mirror’, versus ‘seeing directly - face to face,’ and ‘knowing partially’ versus ‘knowing fully’ (Vs. 11-12). Along with these couplets of comparative images, the Apostle repeats a couple of adverbs of time, present and then, to highlight the differences between finite things and life in Eternity spanning the present and onward to the eschaton. Childhood and what belongs to it will disappear when adulthood arrives; tongues will cease to be necessary when the Lord returns and completes his plan for Christians; Partial knowledge (awareness) will be substituted by the

³³ Charles L. Campbell, 233.

³⁴ Charles L. Campbell, 224.

fullness at the eschaton when one can see God face to face. At that time, partial knowledge of God will no longer be necessary. Thus, though these Spiritual gifts are vital in the Christian life, it is only essential for the time in this world. The main reason why other gifts apart from love will cease is they are only specially meant to equip the believer to endure in this age. “The milieu in which they operate will one day come to an end and will be superseded by a situation in which they become unnecessary or inappropriate.”³⁵ Besides, when showing the surpassing quality of love to other gifts, Paul has no intention to devalue the gifts but seems to awake the Corinthian community to the reality that they need to distinguish what is for the present and what can last forever. He is adamant in his tone so that they do not overemphasize the temporal-Spiritual gifts and forget other essential virtues. Gordon D. Fee commends, “most likely the purpose of all this is simple to reinforce what was said at the beginning (Vs. 1-3), that the Corinthians’ emphasis on tongues as evidence for being people of the Spirit is wrong because it is truly an essential expression of the Spirit’s presence, self-giving love. As good as the Spirit’s giftings are, they are nonetheless only for the present; Sacrificial Love, which the Corinthians currently lack, is the “more excellent way”; in part because it belongs to eternity as well as the present.”³⁶

Verse 13 is considered the conclusion of this paragraph (8-13) and the end of chapter 13. This ending sentence seems to be an opening rather than closing since there is the appearance of threefold theological virtues: Faith, Hope, and Love. In assertion of remaining this triad here, the Apostle claims that Faith, Hope, and Love are in the same category and coexist in the present and lead to the ultimate cause. Simultaneously, he implies that it is necessary to discern what is crucial for the Christian life. This threefold agenda is more surpassing in comparison with the

³⁵ J. Ayodeji Adewuya and Daniel K. Darko, 113.

³⁶ Gordon D. Fee, 719.

Spiritual gifts since it unites us directly with God.³⁷ Gordon reckons that in emphasizing the nature of Christian life in Christ, “Paul adds faith and hope to love somewhat automatically since for him these are what accompany love, not Spirit gifts.”³⁸ This triad of ultimate transcendental virtue is characterized by a unique equanimity for now, but in the eschatological dimension, “the greatest of these is love.” Love is greater than the other two as much as it is the goal of them, it makes those virtues active in return, and the most important is only it abides onto eternity.³⁹ Thus, when affirming the unique position of love in the Christian life, Paul intentionally declares that love must be the center of all activities in communal life; it is to be the primary motivation lying behind everything they are and do. Also, Love must be the soul of all Spiritual manifestations enacted in the assembly to build up the community, which Paul mentions in the following chapters.⁴⁰

The teaching of St. Paul relates to the surpassing quality of Love among the Cardinal Virtues as not only beneficial for the Corinthian community but also useful for the contemporary Church, embodied most poignantly these days in our world in the person of Pope Francis I. Looking over the Church’s documents and Pope’s teachings in recent years, the reader will see the role of the first letter to Corinthians in the life of contemporary church. Namely, the reader should notice *Amoris Laetitia* and *Fratelli Tutti*.

Amoris Laetitia is a post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Love in the family, which was issued on March 19, 2016. The document opens with the praise of the joy of love which

³⁷ George T. Montague, 234.

³⁸ Gordon D. Fee, 721.

³⁹ George T. Montague, 234; Gordon D. Fee, 721.

⁴⁰ Gordon D. Fee, 696.

emanates from families to the Church.⁴¹ Mentioning Love in the first number of the document, Pope Francis wants to impress that this crucial idea is the key factor in the content of this document. The crisis of the institution of family in modern life is the crisis of love.⁴² In much the same way, Love is considered the crucial factor to revive the foundation of happiness in each family. The Pope asserts, “The experience of Love in families is a perennial source of strength for the life of the Church” since from the family, which is united with love, the couple experiences the marvel of the fatherhood and motherhood. Still, they can learn how to care for others, showing mutual forgiveness, and overcoming the trials and difficulties in life together.⁴³

Particularly, Pope Francis and the bishops of the synod utilize the passage of 1Cor 13: 4-7 as the concrete foundation to explain the features of true love in family life. The document says that it is insufficient to express the Gospel of marriage and the family if we do not speak of Love. Then, the document spends one chapter with nearly 30 names to analyze the characters of love.⁴⁴ For instance, when explaining the first positive character of love, the document declares, “Unless we cultivate patience, we will always find excuses for responding angrily. We will end up incapable of living together, antisocial, unable to control our impulses, and our families will become battlegrounds.”⁴⁵ Regarding the kindness character, the authors claim that kindness is ready to be of assistance, to show more by deeds than by words, to bear the fruits of giving and

⁴¹ Francis, *Amoris Laetitia: On Love in the Family: Apostolic Exhortation* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2016), n^o 1.

⁴² *Amoris Laetitia*, n^o 54.

⁴³ *Amoris Laetitia*, n^o 88

⁴⁴ *Amoris Laetitia*, n^o 91-119.

⁴⁵ *Amoris Laetitia*, n^o 92.

serving.⁴⁶ From the characters of love as Saint Paul mentions in 1 Cor 13, which are analyzed by the bishops of the church, the document concludes that the reflection of hymn of love in 1 Cor 13 give the document the solid foundation to discuss conjugal love, which is building up, enriched, illuminated through the grace of the sacrament of marriage.⁴⁷

Recently, the thought of the surpassing love in 1 Cor 13 continues to echo in the newest Social Encyclical of Pope Francis, named ‘Fratelli Tutti.’ The Encyclical is issued within the context of the dark cloud covering the whole world because of the Covid-19 pandemic and disturbing social movements. Considering these unfavorable circumstances, Fratelli Tutti is offered as a topical message formulated in order to promote a universal aspiration toward fraternity and social friendship. Pope Francis stresses that the unhealthy society is turning its back on the poor and the vulnerable. He insists that we are all called to live out the message of the Gospel, becoming the amicable neighbors of others, overcoming prejudices, historic and cultural barriers. We are called to make bridges of love and approach every excluded person.⁴⁸ In doing so, we follow closely the teaching Saint Paul uses in the hymn of Love by being kind, quick to welcome and serve other people like our brothers and sisters (1 Cor 13:4-5).⁴⁹ The Pope also points out the way to love with a universal dimension is to go outside the self in order to find a fuller existence in another human being. He claims, “Love, then, is more than just a series of benevolent actions... Our love for others, for who they are, moves us to seek the best for their

⁴⁶ Amoris Laetitia, n^o 93-94.

⁴⁷ Amoris Laetitia, n^o 120

⁴⁸ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti on Fraternity and Social Friendship* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2020), n^o 77, 81, 85, 88.

⁴⁹ Amoris Laetitia, n^o 93-94, 101-102.

lives.”⁵⁰ Another aspect of love mentioned in the Encyclical is forgiveness. Saint Paul says, “it (love) does not rejoice over wrongdoing” (1 Cor 13:6a). It means that it is necessary to avoid ill will, do not let it root in the heart, unless it leads to deep resentment. But the opposite of resentment is forgiveness. Is it true that the Apostle wants to allude to forgiveness as an aspect of love?⁵¹ In chapter 7, when discussing the value and promotion of peace, the Pope asserts that forgiveness is directly linked to peace; we must love everyone without exception but loving an oppressor means helping him to change and not allowing him to continue oppressing his neighbor. Forgiveness does not mean to forget but renounce the destructive power of evil and desire for revenge.⁵²

In short, we have investigated the role and characteristics of Love in 1 Corinthians 13; Paul refers to the position of Love as it is related to spiritual charisms and actions, the nature of love in specific actions, and the eternal characteristic of love. The Spiritual gifts are highly essential in the Christian life; however, they must be accompanied with and in Love. Without Love, their activities are nonsense. Thus, the powerful image of audible disturbance: with ear-splitting noises as a resounding gong and a clashing cymbal. True love will fortify Christian life in the present world as the motivating power which purifies us from the evil tendencies and aids us in conforming ourselves to the original image of God who is full of Love and Mercy. Going through this temporal life with abundant love for God and our neighbors, we will undoubtedly savor the Love of the Almighty. What could be better than that we work from the inspiration of

⁵⁰ Fratelli Tutti, n^o 93-94

⁵¹ Amoris Laetitia, n^o 105.

⁵² Amoris Laetitia, n^o 241-242, 246. Isabella Piro, “*Fratelli Tutti*”: short summary of Pope Francis’s *Social Encyclical*, October 04, 2020. <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2020-10/fratelli-tutti-pope-fraternity-social-friendship-short-summary.html>. Access date: Jan 20, 2022.

our merciful God with boundless Love for our neighbors in our efforts to gain with them the fruits of heaven.

Bibliography

1. Adewuya, J. Ayodeji, and Daniel K. Darko. *1 Corinthians: A Pastoral Commentary*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2019.
2. Campbell, Charles L. *1 Corinthians*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018.
3. Copenhaver, Martin B. 2011. "Love with Its Work Clothes On." *Journal for Preachers* 34 (3): 21–24.
<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0001829724>.
4. Cox, Steven L. "1 Corinthians 13—an Antidote to Violence: Love." *Review & Expositor* 93, no. 4 (1996): 529–36. <https://doi.org/10.1177/003463739609300408>.
5. Durken, Daniel. *New Collegeville Bible Commentary*. Collegeville (MN): Liturgical Press, 2009.
6. Eastman, Susan Grove. "Love's Folly: Love and Knowledge in 1 Corinthians." *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 72, no. 1 (2017): 7–16.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0020964317731325>.
7. Fee, Gordon D. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014.
8. Keener, Craig S. *1-2 Corinthians*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005.

9. Lioy, Dan. 2018. "The Supreme Importance of Promoting Equity, Kindness, and Humility: A Descriptive and Comparative Analysis of Micah 6:1-16 and 1 Corinthians 13:1-13." *Conspectus* 25 (March): 56–91.
<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAIGW7190311000701&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.
10. Montague, George T. *First Corinthians*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2011.
11. Pope Francis. *Amoris Laetitia: On Love in the Family: Apostolic Exhortation*. Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2016.
12. Pope Francis. *Fratelli Tutti on Fraternity and Social Friendship*. Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2020.
13. Robinson, Haddon W. "Two Traits of Agape Love." *The Journal of the Evangelical Homiletics Society*, vol. 15, no. 2, Sept. 2015.
14. Thiselton, Anthony C. *First Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical and Pastoral Commentary*. William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2011.

THE ROLE AND CHARACTERISTIC OF
LOVE IN 1 CORINTHIANS 13

Description: In this paper, I discuss the role and characteristics of Love in 1 Corinthians 13. Before going into detailed treatment of this topic, I sought to clarify why Paul writes this letter, and the coherent unity of the letter. I also recognize that it is necessary to clarify the term ‘Love’ in the context of First Corinthians. It is equally important to discern the thematic weight and the position of chapter 13 in the context of the whole epistle. I utilize the structural criticism which considers the chapter in question as the central part of the ‘sandwiched’ construction between chapters 12 and 14. Chapter 12 outlines the principal importance of the various gifts: while chapter 14 articulates the phenomenon of tongues and the relationship to transmitting the Word into the world. In considering the central theme of the paper, I seek to explore the indispensable role of ‘Love’ among other essential Spiritual gifts; without Love, Faith and Hope and Good works are of empty significance. My inquiry into this topic led me to the inevitable analyzing and discussing the characteristics of Love. It is interesting to note that there is a structural, internal technique utilized by Paul. It can be deduced that he used a particular system of combining two positives, eight negatives, and then five more favorable terms to do justice to the concept of Love. In the final part of the exposition, I concentrate on expounding the eternal nature of Love and its surpassing quality compared to other gifts of the Spirit. After analyzing the role and nature of Love in the central section of my analysis, I mention the position of 1 Corinthians 13 in the Church’s current life, especially in Pope Francis’s teachings. Specifically, it is my purpose to shed light upon the concept of Love from a modern Christian literary/theological point of view. Ultimately, I was able to develop a basis of New Testament understanding and find important resonance within the primary theme and internal thought of 1 Cor. 13 and two recent Apostolic documents: *Amoris Laetitia* and *Fratelli Tutti*.

This paper may be made available for electronic access in current and future electronic storage databases at Saint John’s University Alcuin Library, Collegeville, Minnesota.

NINH VAN NGUYEN