



***Agápē*, Touchstone of Saint Paul's Ecclesiology: Revisiting 1 Corinthians 11:17-22.33-34; 13:1-8.13.**

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Resumen: Teniendo en cuenta las instrucciones de Pablo en 1 Cor 11, 17-34 y 1 Cor 13, lo que cristaliza en este punto es que combina consejos bastante prácticos con una profunda espiritualidad. Pablo enseña una progresión de adentro hacia afuera, desde un juicio sobrio de sí mismo (1 Cor 11, 27-32) hasta gestos recíprocos de caridad reverenciando la presencia sacramental de Jesús en la Eucaristía (1 Cor 11, 33-34). De hecho, *agápē* en su incomparable superioridad (12,31) y perfección (13, 8.13) sigue siendo la virtud suprema a practicar, el don y la gracia supremos, la norma más alta imaginable para las fiestas de amor.

Palabras clave: Ecclesiología, *ágape*, fraternidad

Abstract: Taking into account Paul's instructions in 1 Cor 11:17-34 and 1 Cor 13, what crystallizes at this point is that he combines quite practical advice with profound spirituality. Paul teaches a progression from the inside out, from a sober self-judgment (1 Cor 11:27-32) to reciprocal gestures of charity reverencing Jesus' sacramental presence in the Eucharist (1 Cor 11:33-34). Indeed, *agápē* in its unmatched superiority (12:31) and perfection (13:8.13)

remains the supreme virtue to be practiced, the supreme gift and grace, the highest thinkable norm for love- feasts.

Keywords: Ecclesiology, agápē, fraternity

INTRODUCTION

The Bible speaks copiously about food and eating together. From God enjoying Abraham’s hospitality by the oaks of Mamre (Gen 18:1-21), to the marriage banquet of the Lamb (Rev 19:9), and again from the Exodus supper (Exo 12), to Jesus partaking of the wedding feast at Cana (John 2:1-11), meals are ubiquitous in the Old and New Testament. From the unequalled story of a father preparing a festive repast for his prodigal son (Luke 15:22-32), to Saint Paul sharing some food with the alarmed ship crew during a storm at sea (Acts 27:33-38), meals become a sign of the covenant, and in due course they symbolize the Kingdom of Christ itself. In the fulness of time, the Son of God and Son of Man offered himself to his apostles as a “New Covenant” (1 Cor 11:25, *καὶνὴ διαθήκη, novum testamentum*)¹ during his Last Supper.

Given this momentous connotation, Paul is addressing the situation surrounding the love-feasts of his Corinthian community with acute thoughtfulness and candor in 1 Cor 11:17-34. “The style of this epistolary section, together with Paul’s re-description of what he understands to be taking place at the Lord’s Supper, indicates that he is not responding to a question first raised by the addressees, but initiates the raising of an urgent matter for censure and re-education. This is prompted by oral reports of occurrences and practices at Corinth.”² It is a community that God himself established and one that becomes assembled mystically through holy Baptism and the divine Eucharist (cf. 1 Cor 12:12-14; Eph 4:4-6). This action of the Church is not a simple congregating of Christian people, but an assembly in which the one Body of Christ is manifested by its unity under his headship. Yet, since “the literature concerning the history of the *agápē* available for an ordinary reader

1 Greek Scripture quotations are from the *Greek New Testament* (Nestle-Aland 28th ed.), the Latin ones are from the 1979 *Nova Vulgata*, and the English ones are from the *New Revised Standard Version* (1989).

2 THISELTON, A., *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary, Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, MI 2000, p. 849.

is not very extensive”³, it seems to be a worthy project to investigate further into this intriguing practice of the nascent Church.

In this study, we will begin by presenting a brief historical survey of the *agápē* for a broad view of its evolvment through time. Following are three scriptural perspectives along which we will attempt to define the apostle’s teaching on the Church as a whole. First, there is his repeated mention of “coming together”, a concept that will be analyzed in its ecclesial richness. The second backbone of research will be the cluster of rhetorical questions in 1 Cor 11:22; are these representing another yardstick of his ecclesiology? And third, we will take into account the nearest contextual occurrence of the Greek noun *agápē* itself, namely, in 1 Cor 13; could it be argued that the apostle is desirous of the love-feast being ever more imbued with the power of charity as the elemental Christian gift and virtue? Seen together, could these three approaches to *agápē* turn out to be a veritable hallmark of Paul’s ecclesiology, and thus a most relevant part of what he calls “my Gospel” (Rom 2:16; 2 Tim 2:8)? Without further ado, let us start by painting a general portraiture of this early Christian custom.

1. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW ON *AGÁPAE*

1.1. *Apostolic custom*

Agápē (ἀγάπη) is one of several Greek words translated into English as “love.”⁴ Love was understood in a practical sense by the apostolic churches (cf. 1 Jn 3:17-18), so one use of the word came to be a meal served for benevolent purposes. Its historical origin may at least partially be found in the *chaburah*, a fellowship meal of late Judaism. The lesson of Jesus in Lk 14:12-14 was taken seriously in the early Church: “He said also to the one who had invited him, ‘When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. ¹³ But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴ And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.’” That *agápē* came to mean “love-feast” is a testimony to the

3 COLE, R.L., *Love-feasts: A History of the Christian Agape*, The Antiquaries Journal, Oxford University Press: London 1916, p. 7.

4 Cf. Pope BENEDICT XVI, 2005 Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est*, nos. 2-8.

hands-on nature of 1st century Christian charity, and to the prominence of a meal as a way of expressing love.

In the New Testament, *agápē* is frequently used to signify the unconditional, self-sacrificing and volitional love of God for humanity through Jesus, which Christians ought also to reciprocate by practicing *agápē* towards God and among themselves. In early Christianity, *agápē*, therefore, also implied a type of eucharistic fellowship shared by members of the community, also known as love-feast. This religious custom of apostolic origin (cf. 1 Cor 11:17-22) sought to strengthen the bonds and the spirit of harmony, goodwill, thanksgiving and congeniality, as well as to forgive past disputes and instead love one another.⁵ This simple public banquet like a potluck supper was observed in connection with the Eucharist, the two being spoken of as the “Lord’s Supper.” The poor were invited and not just relatives, intentionally setting aside all distinctions of economic and social status they all met as members of one family.⁶ This act of unity and brotherly love was common to all Christians who chose to come, whether rich or poor. The rich brought food for the poor, symbolizing the community of goods as a prime occasion for charity towards the poorer members of the Church.⁷ Portions were also sent to the sick and absent followers and intended as a token of mutual Christian love. The food was prepared from home or at the place of meeting, usually in private residences. The bishop or presbyter would preside, prayers of thanksgiving were offered, and the Scriptures were read. After everyone had their fill, a collection was taken for the widows and orphans, a holy kiss of charity was exchanged, and correspondence from other churches were read and answered. Still, since the *agápē* was never mandated by divine authority, unfortunately it gradually lost its popularity.

Thus, the earliest interpretation of Jesus’ new commandment “Love one another; as I have loved you, so also you must love one another.” (John 13:34) came to be a meal. Reference to such a communal repast is discerned in 1 Cor

5 Cf. article on *agápē* in CROSS, F. L. – LIVINGSTONE, E. A., eds., *Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, U.K. 2005.

6 Cf. Acts 2:46-47, “Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.” See also Acts 20:7.11, “On the first day of the week, when we met to break bread, Paul was holding a discussion with them; since he intended to leave the next day, he continued speaking until midnight. ¹¹ Then Paul went upstairs, and after he had broken bread and eaten, he continued to converse with them until dawn; then he left.”

7 Cf. Acts 4:32, “Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.”

11:17–34. Sadly, however, the Corinthian Church apparently was the first to abandon its first love by destroying the unity between rich and poor, and thereby depreciating the Eucharist itself. If the Lord’s Supper is truly an opportunity to worship the Savior, remember his sacrifice, and “proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor 11:26), then the misbehavior at the early Church’s love-feasts worked strongly against that purpose. Paul wrote that he could not praise them for it as part of a rebuke to the believers in Corinth. Paul’s rebuke of the love feasts of Corinth concerns the gluttony, drunkenness, and selfishness exhibited by some in the Church. These were love-feasts without love. Nevertheless, instead of correcting the abuses, the Church gradually abandoned those love-feasts, preserving only the sacramental communion ritual.⁸

Although *agápē* was commonly known in the sense of love-feast to designate both a rite – using bread and wine – and a meal of fellowship to which the poor were invited, the historical relationship with the Lord’s Supper and the Eucharist remains uncertain. The Eucharist with its consecration of bread and wine either preceded or followed the *agápē*. Some scholars believe that it was a form of the Lord’s Supper, and the Eucharist would have played a central role in the sacramental aspect of that celebration. Others interpret *agápē* as a fellowship meal held in imitation of gatherings attended by Jesus and his disciples; the Eucharist with its sacramental emphasis on Christ’s death is believed to have been joined to this meal later, but eventually to have become totally separated from it.

1.2. Patristic age to modern times

The *agápē* continued to be a familiar part of Christian worship in every locality in which Christianity has left us early records. In chronological order, here are some highlights of its development from the age of the Fathers to modernity. The anonymous early Christian treatise known as DIDACHE of 100 AD, suggests that it still preceded the Eucharist.⁹ The Letter from one of Rome’s magistrates, PLINY THE YOUNGER to Trajan reported that the Christians in Rome, after having met “on a stated day” in the early morning to “address a form of prayer to Christ, as to a divinity”, later in the day would “reassemble, to eat in common a harmless meal (*agápē*).”¹⁰ He perhaps indicates that such a meal was normally taken separately from the eucharistic celebration, although he is silent about its nomenclature. IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH, a disciple of John the Apostle, in his Letter

8 Cf. FREEDMAN, D.N., *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1, p. 90; see also the entry “*Agápē*, Christian Feast” in the *ENCYCLOPÆDIA BRITANNICA*.

9 Cf. X.1 and XI. 9.

10 Ca. 112 AD, Book X, Letter 97.

to the Smyrnaeans, soon after the year 100 AD,¹¹ refers to the *agápē* or love-feast, presided over by the bishop. About the beginning of the 2nd century the Eucharist was detached from the communal banquet and transferred to the early morning. The *agápē* lingered in some Christian communities until the 3rd century.

In times of persecution the custom grew up of celebrating *agápae* in prison with condemned martyrs on the eve of their execution¹², whence sprang the practice of holding commemorative *agápae* on the anniversaries of their deaths, and these in turn gave rise to the feasts and vigils which are observed today. In Egypt, CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA († 215 AD) distinguished *agápae* of luxurious character, which he condemns, from the *agápē* “which the food that comes from Christ shows that we ought to partake of”, namely, the Eucharist.¹³ TERTULLIAN († 220 AD), while giving a detailed account of the *agápē*, denounces the gross indecency of these meals, complaining that the young men misbehaved with the sisters after the *agápē*.¹⁴ His account accords us a precious insight into its ritual in Northern Africa in the 2nd century. In due course, the disappearance of the Christian *agápē* may possibly be attributed to the terrible abuse of the word here referred to. Similar communal meals are attested also in the *Apostolic Tradition* often attributed to HIPPOLYTUS of Rome († 235 AD), who, however, does not cite the term *agápē*.

AUGUSTINE of Hippo (430 AD) in his native North Africa likewise demurred the continuance of the tradition of such meals, in which some indulged to the point of drunkenness, differentiating them from proper celebrations of the Eucharist: “Let us take the body of Christ in communion with those with whom we are forbidden to eat even the bread which sustains our bodies.”¹⁵ He reports that even before the time of his stay in Milan, the routine had already been outlawed there.¹⁶ Then, during the 4th century, the *agápē* became increasingly the butt of disfavor, apparently because of disorders at the celebration, but also because problems were raised by the expanding membership of the Church, and an increasing accent was being placed on the Eucharist. The connection between such ecclesial repasts and the Eucharist had virtually

11 Cf. 8:2.

12 Cf. the 200 AD *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*, XVII. 1, and LUCIAN’s *De Morte Peregrini*, XII (a text historically relevant since it contains one of the earliest evaluations of early Christianity by a non-Christian author).

13 Cf. *Paedagogus*, II, 1; *Stromata*, III. 2.

14 Cf. *De Corona Militis*, 3; *Apologia*, 39; *De Ieiuniis*, 17, “Sed majoris est *agápē*, quia per hanc adolescentes tui cum sororibus dormiunt, appendices scilicet gulae lascivia et luxuria.”

15 *Letter*, 22 (392 AD); cf. *Ep. ad Aurelium*, XXII. 4.

16 Cf. *Confessions*, 6.2.2.

ceased by the time of CYPRIAN of Carthage († 258 AD), when the Eucharist was celebrated with fasting in the morning, and the *agápē* in the evening. BASIL of Cappadocia († 379 AD) records that in Egypt the laity, as a rule, celebrated the communion in their own houses, and partook of the sacrament by themselves whenever they chose.¹⁷ *Agápae* also took place on the occasion of weddings¹⁸ and funerals.¹⁹

CHRYSOSTOM († 407 AD) in his time calls the *agápē* “a custom most beautiful and beneficial; for it was a supporter of love, a solace of poverty, and a discipline of humility”, yet he does add that by his day it had become corrupt.²⁰ The historian SOCRATES of Constantinople († 439 AD) testifies to the survival in Egypt, around Alexandria and in the Thebaid, of such Lord’s suppers on the sabbath, combining love-feast and Eucharist.²¹

In the old Egyptian church order, known as the *Canons* of HIPPOLYTUS (340 AD), there are numerous directions for the service of the *agápē*, held on the Day of the Lord, Saints’ days or at commemorations of the dead. Withal, catechumens were excluded, a regulation which seems to imply that the meeting bore a prominent liturgical aspect. The SYNOD OF GANGRA in Paphlagonia (340 AD) alludes to love-feasts in reference to a heretic who had barred his followers from attending them. It anathematized the over-ascetic persons who despised the *agápae* based on faith. The COUNCIL OF LAODICEA (364 AD) forbade the use of churches for celebrating the *agápē*; moreover, canons 27-28 repressed the abuses of taking home part of the provisions. The 42nd canon of the THIRD COUNCIL OF CARTHAGE (393 AD) under bishop St. AURELIUS likewise banned them. Yet another local synod, namely, the Second COUNCIL OF ORLEANS (541 AD) acknowledges a prohibition of the *agápē*, and canon 57 of the TRULLAN COUNCIL at Constantinople (also known as the QUINISEXT COUNCIL or PENTHEKTE SYNOD, 692 AD) decreed that honey and milk were not to be offered on the altar, and that those who held *symposia* or love-feasts in churches should be excommunicated (canon 74).

Towards the end of that epoch so many abuses had grown up around the *agápē* that it gradually fell into disuse, except perhaps among the churches in Ethiopia and India. At the end of the 18th century, the Carmelite friar Paolino da San Bartolomeo testified that the ancient Saint Thomas Christians of India still celebrated the love-feast, using their typical dish, a type of pancake, called *ap-*

17 Cf. *Epistle* 93 (ca. 350 AD).

18 Cf. GREGORY of Nazianzus († 390), *Epistle* I. 14.

19 Cf. *Apostolic Constitution*, VIII. 42.

20 Cf. *Homily* XXVII on 1 Cor 11:17.

21 Cf. *Historia Ecclesiastica*, V. 22.

pam. In the Gallican Church²² a relic of these feasts of charity can be seen in the *pain béni*; and, in the Eastern Orthodox Church in the *antidoron* (ἀντίδορον) or *eulogiæ*, also known as *prósphora* distributed to non-communicants at the close of the Divine Liturgy (i.e., the Eucharist). In Armenia, the Greek word *agápē* has been used ever since the 4th century to designate sacrificial meals, which either began or ended with a eucharistic celebration. After the Protestant Reformation, there was a move among some groups of Christians to return to the praxis of the New Testament Church: one such group was the Schwarzenau Brethren who, beginning in 1708, counted a love-feast, consisting of feet-washing (also known as *pedilavium*), the *agápē* meal, and the Eucharist, among their sacred ordinances.

Today, Moravian churches observe special times of food and fellowship that they call love-feasts, including prayer, hymn-singing, and the sharing of food. The Ethiopian and many Coptic Orthodox Churches have also continued to celebrate the *agápē*, held every Saturday. Lastly, the *agápē* is a common feature used by the Catholic *Neocatechumenal Way*, in which members participate in a light feast after the celebration of the Eucharist on certain occasions. The North-American tradition among Catholic parishioners of sharing “coffee and doughnuts” after Sunday Masses could be considered a remnant of the early Christian *agápē*.²³

2. “COMING TOGETHER”, A PARAGON OF THE CHURCH

After having sketched the history of *agápē*, let us now turn to 1 Cor 11:17-22.33-34, the decisive passage in the New Testament that describes the practice of *agápē* in ancient Corinth, a local church founded by Paul. Numerous scholars hold that the Christians of that Greek city-state met in the evening and had a common meal including sacramental action over bread and wine.²⁴ 1 Cor 11:17-34 shows that the rite was associated with participation in a meal of a more general character. It apparently involved a full refectio, with the participants bringing their own food, yet eating together in a common hall. Perhaps predictably enough, it could at times deteriorate into merely an occasion for eating and drinking, or for ostentatious displays by the wealthier members of the community, as happened in

22 The Roman Catholic Church in France from the time of the *Declaration of the Clergy of France* (1682) to that of the *Civil Constitution of the Clergy* (1790) during the French Revolution.

23 Cf. ALBALA, K. – EDEN, T., eds., *Food and Faith in Christian Culture, Arts and Traditions of the Table: Perspectives on Culinary History*, Columbia University Press: New York, NY 2011.

24 Cf. WELKER, M., *What happens in Holy Communion?* Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI 2000, pp. 75-76.

Corinth, drawing the criticisms of Paul. The *primum quidem* in 1 Cor 11:18 underlines the urgency and priority of the matter about to be addressed, further proven by his preparedness to postpone other matters (cf. 1 Cor 11:34b, *cetera autem*) until his next visit to the community on the isthmus of Corinth. The literary presentation is that of an *inclusio*, couching the account of the eucharistic institution and related discernment (vv. 23-32) between remarks on the preceding love-meal (vv. 17-22.33-34; cf. 14:23.26). Still and all, what is of greatest importance is the fivefold repetition of “coming together” (συνέρχομαι) in these few verses. Given the concentrated ecclesial undertone of “congregating as Church”, they can be regarded as one of the most intense ecclesiastical texts in all of the New Testament. In this passage the apostle focuses on the Sacrament of the Body of Blood of the Lord, attempting to define and inculcate the quintessential *agapēic* virtues that ought to accompany the preparatory love-meal. “The verb συνέρχεσθε [in 1 Cor 11:17] is repeated in vv. 18.20.33-34, and this specific eucharistic context denotes not simply ‘assembling together’, but ‘the meeting you hold as Church’. In v. 18 this becomes explicit.”²⁵ Next, let us identify the precise lexical meaning of the above word, and then proceed to explore the ways in which the *Doctor Gentium* employs this verb, hopefully leading us to a deeper recognition of the theological magnitude of *agápē*.

The basic philological value of the Greek New Testament verb συνέρχομαι, an obvious composite of the prepositional prefix συν (“with”) and the root ἔρχομαι (“to come”), is “to come together as a group of persons”, and thus, “to assemble, to gather in a close personal relationship, to meet with business intention, joining at a scene.” As a religious technical term, it is indicative of Christians assembling in a congregation (cf. 1 Cor 14:26; Acts 1:6). Euphemistically, it alludes to the conjugal coming together (cf. 1 Cor 7:5), as well as the marital living together (cf. Mt 1:18), which undergirds the nuptial aspect of the ecclesial assembly. It also signifies travel (cf. Acts 15:38), hinting at the pilgrim nature of the Church. The Latin rendition of it is, *i.a.*, *convenire*, which happens to be the etymological stem, *via* French, of the English noun “Covenant”. It is, *ergo*, no exaggeration to view this verb as a preeminent ecclesiological term, indicative of the Church’s assembly *par excellence*.²⁶

25 THISELTON, A., *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC. Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, MI 2000, p. 856.

26 The CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH (no. 1329) mentions the related ancient Greek term *synaxis* (from συνάγω, “to come together”, occurring frequently in the New Testament for gathering together a religious meeting, as also for the Jewish services and councils, e.g., John 11:47; Acts 11:26; 14:27 etc.), for the eucharistic assembly, meaning “gathering, assembly, reunion”, because the Eucharist is celebrated amid the assembly of the faithful, the

2.1. Communal advancement

In his first mention of *convenire* at 1 Cor 11:17b (“when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse (οὐκ εἰς τὸ κρεῖσσον ἀλλὰ εἰς τὸ ἥσσον συνέρχεσθε; *non in melius sed in deterius convenitis*”), Paul does not give the reason of his not praising, yet does declare what it is that he cannot praise: while a congregation of Christians ought naturally always be progressing towards that which is better, the Corinthians meet to their collective detriment. Reinforcing this point is the paronomasia on κρεῖττον – ἥττον, namely, the two adjectives by the similarity of sound forming the more salient antithesis. Contrary to the apostle’s commendation in 1 Cor 11:2, where the emphatic personal pronoun ὑμᾶς (*vos*) shadows the ἐπαινέω (“I commend *you!*”), the Church is said to self-complacently meet for the worse, called out now by hierarchical authority as an egregious irregularity. In this case, the apostle does not appear to excuse it with their ignorance (cf. 1 Cor 11:3.16): such behavior he certainly cannot praise (v. 17a, οὐκ ἐπαινῶ, *non laudans*, cf. v. 22b). Moreover, the *inclusio* of vv. 17 and 22 proves that in his mind, 1 Cor 11:18-22 formed not two rebukes, but one, an interpretation strongly supported by the repetition of the same word *convenire*. Consequently, his directive at this juncture (v. 17a, *Hoc autem praecipio*) consists of a stern reminder that the Church’s συνέρχομαι can only involve an ecclesial advancement in Christian faith and virtue.

2.2. Living in unity

Paul’s severe reprimand in 1 Cor 11:17 is in this following verse 18 elucidated in connection with the actual offense: “For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it (πρῶτον μὲν γὰρ συνερχομένων ὑμῶν ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ ἀκούω σχίσματα ἐν ὑμῖν ὑπάρχειν καὶ μέρος τι πιστεύω, *primum quidem convenientibus vobis in ecclesia, audio scissuras inter vos esse, et ex parte credo*.)” The apostle “first of all” (cf. Acts 1:1; Rom 1:8; 3:2) censures here generally the divisions which appeared in their assemblies, albeit not following up by correction of what was amiss, which he would not have omitted to do, considering the importance of the matter in question, if he had regarded 1 Cor

visible expression of the Church. Incidentally, it is equivalent to the Latin *collecta* (from *colligere*), and corresponds to Synagogue (*synagoge*), the place of reunion, too. In Christian and liturgical use, synaxis is the assembly for any religious function, either in the abstract sense (*nomen actionis*) or concretely for the people assembled (cf. DIDACHE, IX, 4; XIV, 1; EPISTLE OF CLEMENT 34.7; IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH, *Letter to the Magnesians*, 10.3).

11:18 as touching upon a distinct point from that in 1 Cor 11:20-21. Where, however, is the second point, which *primum quidem* leads us to expect? It appears to commence at 1 Cor 12:1, where Paul berates a second sort of aberration in connection with their gatherings, namely, the misinterpretation and mishandling of the gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor 12:1ff).

Furthermore, still in verse 18, *in ecclesia* (ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ) appears to refer to a church-meeting conceived of as a space in which the *convenire* (συνέρχεσθαι) takes place by the arrival of members (cf. Acts 28:17). To be clear, there were no proper church edifices in the sense of buildings devoted to Christian worship then, rather, the Lord's Supper was re-enacted frequently – originally in all likelihood every day (cf. Acts 2:46) – in private houses.

Ensuing is the ponderous term σχίσματα (*scissuras*, compounded incidentally by αἰρέσεις, *haereses*, at v. 19), demonstrating that Paul has already in mind the separations at the love-feasts, not the factionalism or party-divisions of 1 Cor 1:12-13. *Scissura* (σχίσμα) denotes the inner disunion in the church, which shows itself in troublesome division and faction (αἰρέσεις) of chronic occurrence. To be sure, nowhere does the epistolographer speak of absolute party-separations, yet always merely divisions subsisting along with outward ecclesial unity. In Corinth, there simply existed tendencies and views at variance with each other and destructive of harmony (cf. Gal 5:20). The divisions, therefore, consisted of miscellaneous social cliques that had, however, the sinister potential of degenerating into some guise of theological discord.

Attached in the successive verse is the eschatological reason explaining that disharmony is inevitable: “Indeed, there have to be factions (αἰρέσεις, *haereses*) among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine.” *Opportet* (δεῖ) is suggesting the divine decree and teleological necessity (cf. Mt 18:7) that these splits are ordained by God to eventually reveal those Christians that are authentic disciples of Christ. Again, the “heresies” here are not meant in the sense of false doctrine (cf. 2 Pt 2:1).

These disorders had been reported to him on unswerving evidence: the present tense in ἀκούω (*audio*) at v. 18 represents continuance, insinuating sustained information from various quarters of the community (cf. 1 Cor 5:1, ἀκούεται, *auditur*) that he cannot completely discredit (*ex parte credo*), namely, the fissures apparent during Church meetings (vv. 18-19). Nevertheless, Paul, the *Vas Electionis*, cannot bring himself, in a tone of kindness, to believe all that he has heard of the disjunction at their assemblies, truly a delicate way of showing the better opinion that he still has of his readers, and not a reference to the uncertainty of the source from which the news reached him. He excepts

the innocent, using a mild term (πιστεύω, “I believe”), while his apostolic love remained unaffected by it (cf. 1 Cor 13:7).

THISELTON, professor of Christian theology at the University of Nottingham in England, calls attention to the way in which Paul addresses the cacophony within the assembled congregation at worship: “By allowing ‘the other’ only second-class hospitality in the *atrium* [hall] or *peristylum* [courtyard], rather than first-class comfort and service in the host’s *triclinium* [dining room], the proceedings defeated the very proclamation of the Lord, whose death was ‘for us’ and ‘for the other’ as one Body (cf. 1 Cor 12:12).”²⁷ The same author sub-joins that there was a “possibility that the contrast between those who were well provided for and the ‘have-nots’ was exacerbated not only by socio-economic differences of background, birth, patronage and occupation, but also by the specific circumstances of famine, or at least of severe food shortages around the date of the epistle.” As a matter of fact, “SÜETONIUS [*Claudius* 18.2] attests several famines or at least shortages during the reign of Claudius (AD 41-54), and JOSEPHUS [*Antiquities* 3.320-321] alludes to high prices during this period (cf. TACITUS, *Annals* 12.43; DIO CASSIUS, *History* 40.11; cf. Acts 11:29-30).”²⁸ Notwithstanding these partial excuses, Paul is clearly upset about the unmannerly attitudes in the Corinthian community antagonizing the concept of unity that should reside at the heart of *agápē*.

2.3. Primacy of the Lord’s Supper

With verve 1 Cor 11:20-21 resumes the circumstantial clause of 1 Cor 11:18, and draws out the calamitous issue of the *σχίσματα*: they produce a visible separation at the common meal of the Church, defeating the purpose of the Lord’s Supper: “When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord’s supper. ²¹ For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk (Συνερχομένων οὖν ὑμῶν ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ οὐκ ἔστιν κυριακὸν δεῖπνον φαγεῖν· ἕκαστος γὰρ τὸ ἴδιον δεῖπνον

27 *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary, Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, MI 2000, p. 850; see also MURPHY-O’CONNOR, J., “House Churches and the Eucharist”, *BibTod* 22 (1984) 32-38.

28 *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary, Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, MI 2000, pp. 852-853; see also WINTER, B.W., “The Lord’s Supper at Corinth: An Alternative Reconstruction.” *RTR* 37 (1978) 73-82; and “Secular and Christian Responses to Corinthian Famines.” *TynBul* 40 (1989) 86-106; BLUE, B.B., “The House Church at Corinth and the Lord’s Supper: Famine, Food Supply and the Present Distress.” *Criswell Theological Review* 5 (1991) 221-239.

προλαμβάνει ἐν τῷ φαγεῖν, καὶ ὃς μὲν πεινᾷ ὃς δὲ μεθύει. *Convenientibus ergo vobis in unum, non est dominicam cenam manducare; unusquisque enim suam cenam praesumit in manducando, et alius quidem esurit, alius autem ebrius est.*” The Greek conjunction subordinate οὖν, *ergo*, underscores the misapplication of the Lord’s Supper as a consequence of those disunions. 1 Cor 1:12, 3:3f and 4:6 already exhibited that divisiveness as being of partisan character, and 1 Cor 1:19 that intellectual differences entered into them (cf. 1 Cor 8:1-7); and of course, deplorably, discrepancies of wealth contributed to the same effect.²⁹ Is it not portentous that Satan should have accomplished so much in so short a time?!

With the expression ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό, *in unum*, the apostle stresses the unitive place of worship (cf. Acts 1:15; 2:1). It is the only phrase that highlights the location of the Christian assembly. Before the 4th century, the Lord’s Supper was held in private houses. However, what is happening in Corinth is disgracefully not the Lord’s Supper. Parenthetically, the fact that there is no article in the Greek before “dominical supper” gives evidence to an early prevalence of this name for the Eucharist (cf. Rev 1:10). It is ethically impossible for such a degenerate meal to belong to the Lord, to be consecrated to Christ. As discussed above, the name chosen for such a repast was “love-feast” (*agápē*, cf. Jude 12)³⁰, at which the Christians ate and drank together what they brought with them, and with which was conjoined the Lord’s Supper properly so called (δεῖπνον, *cenam*, cf. John 13:2), so that the bread was distributed and partaken of during the meal and the cup after it, in accordance with the precedent of the original institution by Christ in the Upper Room. It would have taken place at least once a week on the Lord’s Day (cf. Acts 20:7-11). Originating as a kind of enlarged family meal in the Church of Jerusalem (cf. Acts 2:46), gradually the Eucharist was separated from the *agápē* for greater *decorum*, and again, the latter disintegrated and became all but extinct.

The table was provisioned not from a general fund, but by each guest bringing his contribution, a practice not uncommon in private parties, which, however, had the disadvantage of accentuating social differences. While the poor brought little or nothing to the feast, the rich would enjoy an abundance of refectation. In the process, all sense of communion (κοινωνία) was destroyed, and the Lord Jesus, the common Host, was forgotten at his own table. Worse even, the poor upon arrival found the table cleared (cf. προλαμβάνει, *praesumit*), while another is replenished even to the point of drunkenness: hunger and alcoholic intoxication

29 On rules and etiquette for social events, cf. ancient authors ARISTOPHANES, *Acharnians* 1085; PLATO, *Symposium* 174A; MARTIAL, *Epigrams* 10.48; 11.52.

30 Analogous to the συσσίτια (“banquets”) and ἔρανοι (“club gatherings”) held by the guilds, private associations and friendly societies then common among the Greeks.

side by side, at what is supposed to be the table of the Lord! “Drunk” (μεθύει, *ebrius*) is not marking the exact opposite of “hungry” (πεινᾷ, *esurit*), but making the picture all the more fulsome and vivid, because they prompt the reader in both cases to imagine for himself the other extreme corresponding to the one specified. Hence, especially 1 Cor 11:21 bears out the gross self-indulgence displayed at the common meals, completely inconsistent with the institution of the Blessed Sacrament. It describes a state of affairs not merely nullifying the primordial intention of, but even repugnant to any true κυριακὸν δεῖπνον. The message sent by Paul is that the absolute primacy of the Lord’s Supper, the Eucharist, has been lost, and is in urgent need to be recovered.

2.4. Patient courtesy

1 Cor 11:33-34 mark the general conclusion (v. 33a, Ὡστε, *Itaque*) of the whole subject of “coming together as Church.” This closing admonition corresponds to the disapproval, with which the section began in 1 Cor 11:18-22. Paul now briefly sums up the practical remedies for this discreditable situation, his counsel and remedy correlating to the reproof of vice. This is, as it were, an *inclusio* of the Institution Account and ensuing spirituality of discernment in 1 Cor 11:23-32: “³³ So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another (Ὡστε, ἀδελφοί μου, συνεργόμενοι εἰς τὸ φαγεῖν ἀλλήλους ἐκδέχεσθε. *Itaque, fratres mei, cum convenitis ad manducandum, invicem expectate*.)” By addressing them as “my brothers and sisters”, he adds a touch of apostolic and paternal affection to what has been said so far with sternness, an appellation perfectly suited to the denouement of his admonition. The ecclesial συνεργόμενοι carries the hearer back to 1 Cor 11:17.20, undergirding how the *agápē* is intended primarily for good fellowship in the Lord, not to satisfy bodily need.

Christian courtesy demands that the brethren “wait for one another” (ἀλλήλους ἐκδέχεσθε, *invicem expectate*), as implied in the grammatical imperative employed in this clause. Instead of each going ahead with their own supper (1 Cor 11:20), the brethren are supposed to politely await and receive one another (cf. 1 Cor 16:11), preventing any scrambling greediness that is so reprehensible. Thus, the charge (1 Cor 11:17-22) seems to progress from inward to outward, from thoughtful self-examination (1 Cor 11:27-32) to mutual accommodation respecting the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor 11:33-34): religious *decorum* depends on two conditions, a purified heart associated with fitting external arrangements, as dictated by common sense and Christian civility. Only in this way does the

agápē honor the pivot of this text, i.e., Paul’s Institution Account of the Holy Eucharist in 1 Cor 11:23-26.

2.5. *Save our souls*

In this his closing argument, Paul wraps up his contemplation of the ecclesial “coming together”, by issuing this command in 1 Cor 11:34a: “If you are hungry, eat at home, so that when you come together, it will not be for your condemnation (εἴ τις πεινᾷ, ἐν οἴκῳ ἐσθιέτω, ἵνα μὴ εἰς κρίμα συνέρχησθε. *Si quis esurit, domi manducet, ut non in iudicium conveniatis*).” At this fifth mention of “coming together”, a neat distinction is made between “coming together as a Church (ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ, *in ecclesia*)”, 1 Cor 11:18, on the one hand, and being “at home (ἐν οἴκῳ, *domi*)” on the other. In light of what was said above in chapter 2.2., it remains certain that Christians gathered in private homes to celebrate the Lord’s Supper (cf. Acts 2:46; 5:42). This final exhortation with its judicial language – centered on the root κρίνω, “to judge” – reinforces his teaching in 1 Cor 11:28-32.

To make his point as unambiguously as possible, the apostle appends a bold warning (ἵνα μή, *ut non*) that closes the precept (παραγγελία) introduced in 1 Cor 11:17. “Coming together for your condemnation (εἰς κρίμα, *in iudicium*)” further defines the “coming together for the worse (εἰς ἧσσον, *in deterius*)” of 1 Cor 11:17. However, Paul may purposely have chosen the simple noun κρίμα (literally “judgment”) over the much more devastating compound noun κατάκριμα (“condemnation, punishment, doom”, cf. Rom 5:16.18; 8:1). Likewise, the firm injunction is tempered by the grammatical subjunctive of συνέρχησθε: “that you *may not* gather for your judgment.” Both mitigating choices of words can only be interpreted as the apostle’s desire to save souls, which remains the ultimate priority of the Church.³¹

Later at his arrival Paul will make further arrangements about secondary issues, 1 Cor 11:34b, “About the other things I will give instructions when I come (τὰ δὲ λοιπὰ ὡς ἂν ἔλθω διατάξομαι. *Cetera autem, cum venero, disponam*).” Of note is the fact that the Greek phrase ὡς ἂν ἔλθω actually implies nebulosity, “whenever I come ...”: the apostle’s plans for visiting Corinth right away had been materially disrupted by the unfavorable reports as to the prevailing conditions of the Church. To give perspicuous guidance on *agápē* did not allow for any adjournment, even in his absence. “The rest”, namely,

31 “The salvation of souls is the supreme law of the Church”, canon 1752 of the 1983 *Code of Canon Law*.

all minor details, can be arranged at a later date. It is not implausible that one of these *minutiae* was the practical dissociation of the *agápē* from the Lord's Supper altogether, since διατάξομαι (*disponam*) hints at the setting in order of outward, ceremonial matters (cf. Mt 11:1; 1 Cor 9:14; 16:1).

3. RHETORICAL QUESTIONS AS A FURTHER ECCLESIAL BENCHMARK

Unsurprisingly enough, the early Christian *agápē* could at times regress into merely an occasion for eating and drinking, or for ostentatious displays by the wealthier members of the community, as happened in Corinth, drawing the criticisms of Paul. However, instead of suppressing the custom, he limits himself to setting it in order. “The *staccato* series of five rhetorical questions in 1 Cor 11:22 creates a strong rhetorical appeal.”³² He thereby demonstrates how unsuitable and unworthy this procedure of theirs was, mindful of the fact that such scandalous breaches of etiquette had been discussed by Christ himself in his parables, as well (e.g., Luke 14:1-11). In the following, an attempt will be made to draw affirmative ecclesial lessons from the lively sequence of open-ended questions, enabling us to further round out the picture of the apostle's teaching on the Church's tried and true *agápē*.

3.1. *Gathering to celebrate the sacrament*

Imploring his brethren, Paul poses the first rhetorical question in 1 Cor 11:22a with importunity, as conveyed by the Greek conjunction subordinate γαρ, replete with inferential pressure: “What?! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in (μη γὰρ οἰκίας οὐκ ἔχετε εἰς τὸ ἐσθίειν καὶ πίνειν; *Numquid domos non habetis ad manducandum et bibendum*)?” He adjures them, “you surely are not without houses?!” There also is a sense of astonishment at the underlying dilemmatic repercussion of vv. 22b and 22c. Paul will reply to his own question with the command in 1 Cor 11:34 “if you are hungry, eat at home!” Sentiments much nobler than the mere gratification of bodily appetite should have been the object of their *agápē*. In fact, as an accompaniment of the Lord's Supper, it was intended to be a symbolical and sacred meal in its own right. Besides, there is the profound significance of the Eucharist in itself as an expression of the bond of charity (cf. Acts 2:42-47; Acts 4:32-35), as the

32 COLLINS, R.F., *First Corinthians*, Sacra Pagina, vol. 7, The Liturgical Press: Collegeville, MN 1999, p. 423.

solemn commemoration of Christ's death and resurrection (cf. 1 Cor 11:26), and as the spiritual food of his most blessed Body and Blood (cf. 1 Cor 10:15-16). Paul's declaration in Rom 14:17 comes to mind: "For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."

3.2. *Highest respect for the Church*

On the spur of the moment, as it were, and not without a touch of indignation, Paul continues to conjure the Corinthian Christians in his next rhetorical charge in 1 Cor 11:22b, "Or do you show contempt for the Church of God (ἢ τῆς ἐκκλησίας τοῦ θεοῦ καταφρονεῖτε, *aut ecclesiam Dei contemnitis*)?" He employs the baneful verb καταφρονέω, which can only be rendered as scornfully despising and disparaging the Church (cf. Rom 2:4). Exacerbating their disdain and mindless disregard is that it is not directed against a mere physical building, but against God himself and his consecrated people (cf. 1 Cor 11:18). Now, instead of displaying such an ungracious response to divine generosity, the *agápē* is really meant to translate the community's utmost respect and reverence for the Church, her teachings and sacraments. In this way, they prove that they are gathered together as those called out of the world to be the habitation of God through the Holy Spirit.

3.3. *Agapēic thoughtfulness*

A third counter-question arises in 1 Cor 11:22c, "and [do you] humiliate those who have nothing (καὶ κατασχύνετε τοὺς μὴ ἔχοντας; *et confunditis eos, qui non habent*)?" The apostolic concern not to cause the poor to be put to shame takes on more meaning when compared PLINY THE YOUNGER's portrayal of the categorization of qualities of food and drink as marks of favor to grades of guests: "The best dishes were set in front of himself [the host] and a select few, and cheap scraps of food before the rest of the company. He had even put the wine into very small flasks, divided into three sorts, one for himself and us, another for his lesser friends – all his friends are graded – and the third for his and our freed persons."³³ Stylistically matching with the above καταφρονέω is the assertive κατασχύνω here, which descends from αἴσχος, signaling disfigurement, ugliness and disgrace. Combined with the prefixed derogatory κατα-, it means to bring utter shame and dishonor on a certain group of people. Such an abject humiliation stands in diametrical contrast to the love and considerateness

33 Quoted from THISELTON, A., *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary, Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, MI 2000, p. 861.

that the Church is called to show for those who are societally marginalized. There is no place in the Church for any action that aims at embarrassing the poor. Hence, with this his third open-ended question, the saintly writer indirectly attests to yet another ecclesial benchmark. To sincerely respect and assist those *qui non habent* is a core value of genuine *agápē*.

3.4. Worthy of praise

Paul's aftermost rhetorical question is two-pronged (1 Cor 11:22d.e): "What should I say to you? Should I commend you (τί εἶπω ὑμῖν; ἐπαινέσω ὑμᾶς; *Quid dicam vobis? Laudabo vos?*)?" Is he finally retracting his lavish commendation of 1 Cor 11:2 (Ἐπαινῶ δὲ ὑμᾶς, *Laudo autem vos*), just as he deferentially did already in 1 Cor 11:17a? He does display some fine self-restraint in this literary device of litotes³⁴, especially evinced in the deliberative subjunctive aorist of ἐπαινέσω, "do you really think it is appropriate for me to praise you?!", or perhaps: "did you seriously expect me to praise you?!" This implied subtext is unreservedly confirmed in 1 Cor 11:22f, "In this matter I do not commend you (ἐν τούτῳ οὐκ ἐπαινῶ. *In hoc non laudo!*)" It is a somber note for this very last clause before the Apostle of the Gentiles introduces his Eucharistic Institution Account at 1 Cor 11:23-26. At this juncture, by way of further illustration of the point, one should cite the even more negative characterization of those love-feasts in the New Testament, namely, verse 12 of the Epistle of Jude³⁵, where a caustic rebuke is addressed to false teachers: "These are blemishes³⁶ on your love-feasts (GNT ἀγάπαις, NVG *agapis*, KJV "feasts of charity", NLT "fellowship meals") while they feast with you without fear, feeding themselves. They are waterless clouds carried along by the winds; autumn trees without fruit, twice dead, uprooted; ¹³ wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame; wandering stars, for whom the deepest darkness has been reserved forever." Speaking in constructive terms, the apostle makes it quite clear that he would rather comment on the praiseworthiness of his local church. Indeed, the most

34 I.e., an ironic understatement in which an affirmative is expressed by the negative of its contrary (e.g., "you won't be sorry", meaning "you'll be glad.")

35 The single occurrence of *agápē* with this meaning in the New Testament; the term also appears in a few manuscripts of 2 Peter 2:13, "suffering the penalty for doing wrong. They count it a pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are blots and blemishes, reveling in their dissipation (ἀγάπαις) while they feast with you."

36 Notice the *hapax legomenon* σπιλάς, literally, "rock over which the sea washes, rocky underwater area, ledge of rock, reef, spot, stain, hidden rock"; metaphorically here, of ungodly people who treacherously wreck the lives of others before hidden danger is suspected, thus, an imagery of hazard with an overtone of threatened spiritual shipwreck.

emblematic ecclesial criterion should be the inherent dignity, the divine honor and praise bestowed on all her sons and daughters.

4. LOVE-FEASTS THROUGH THE PRISM OF *AGÁPĒ*

There is one more step one can take to better comprehend Paul's ecclesiological thought concerning those love-feasts, and that is to compare it with his "Hymn of Love" at 1 Cor 13:1-13.³⁷ Similar to 1 Cor 11:17-34, mutual edification and love are linked in ch. 13 as the appropriate midpoint of the discussion of spiritual gifts in chs. 12 and 14. These chapters must be regarded as the larger scriptural context in which the apostle wished his instructions on *agápē* to be read, in fact, the very term can only be inferred vaguely from its eminence in the most mellifluous panegyric at 1 Cor 13. It is a classical quote from TERTULLIAN, a staple found in numerous commentaries on this passage, who stated that Paul uttered these words on love "with all the force of the Spirit (*totis Spiritus viribus*)."³⁸ This glorious paean, a veritable ovation in honor of Christian love, rises on the wings of inspiration to the most sunlit heights of biblical eloquence. Like Psalm 45:1, it may be entitled "A Love Song." It is no exaggeration to say that the images used originate in a soul burning with the love of Christ. In all ages, this chapter has been the focus of the special admiration by the Church.

4.1. *Agápē is superior to other charismata*

That *agápē* is the superlative way of Christian life is made very clear by Paul in his introduction to the hymn at 1 Cor 12:31, "But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way (*καθ' ὑπερβολὴν ὁδὸν, excellentiorem viam*)!" Immediately following, in 1 Cor 13:1-3, is a threefold exposition of the absolute necessity for love, without which all earthly accomplishments fade away. The oratorical *crescendo* culminates in the triple declaration "but if I do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal, [...] I am nothing, [...] I gain nothing." It is impossible to miss the inward enthusiasm expressed by this trifecta of rhetorical waves, building up into the apostle's discussion of *agápē* as the crowning of Christian virtue in 1 Cor 13:4-8, and thereby arguably the highest norm for love-feasts.

³⁷ "Hymnus caritati", cf. NESTLE-ALAND, *Novum Testamentum Latine*, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft: Stuttgart 2005, p. 462.

4.2. Transecting agápē as virtue

In utilizing the verses of 1 Cor 13:4-7, descriptive of the characteristics of love, to round out Paul's teaching on early Christian love-feasts, cue is taken from Pope FRANCIS' post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*.³⁸

The first trait singled out, i.e., "Love is patient" (μακροθυμεῖ, *patiens est*, 1 Cor 13:4a), is of obvious relation to the love-feasts the way the apostle desired them to be; it neatly echoes his instruction "wait for one another!" in 1 Cor 11:33b. In light of Exo 34:6 ("the Lord is slow to anger"), this *agapēic* patience (literally, being "long-tempered due to restraint passions") refers, then, to the avoidance of giving offense during the communal refectio.³⁹ Such fraternal forbearing will surely remedy the abusive *status quo* surrounding the celebrations of the Eucharist.

In addition to this attitude of long-suffering, *agápē* also embodies Christian kind-heartedness (χρηστεύεται, *benigna est*, 1 Cor 13:4b). This Greek verb appears only here in the Bible and at its root (cra,omai) depicts a blend of being kind and good at the same time. Thus, a gentle person is full of benevolent service to others. This meaning perfectly complements⁴⁰ the preceding notion of pro-active patience, so palpably beneficial to the love-feast: genuine love is ever ready to be of assistance in all works of mercy. In that consists its fruitfulness and experience of happiness. There is the nobility and grandeur of spending oneself unstintingly, without asking to be repaid, purely for the pleasure of giving and serving.⁴¹

Moving on to the next concept at 1 Cor 13:4c, underlining that "love is not jealous" (ζηλοῖ⁴², *aemulatur*). Envy is contrary to it, and there is no room for discomfiture at another person's good fortune (cf. Acts 7:9; 17:5). This seems to redress attitudes that corrupt the poor and the rich alike: the poor in that it is a form of sadness provoked by another's prosperity; and the rich in that it shows that one is not concerned for the happiness of others, but only with one's own well-being. If everybody could rise above themselves and value the other person's achievements, then *agápē* as love-feast would be forever rejuvenated and remain a meaningful prelude to the eucharistic sacrament in Christian communities.⁴³

38 Dated 19 March 2016, it was released on 8 April 2016, following the *Synods on the Family* held in 2014 and 2015 in the Vatican, Rome.

39 Cf. *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 91.

40 Syntactically visible in the chiasmic placement: Ἡ ἀγάπη μακροθυμεῖ – χρηστεύεται ἡ ἀγάπη (*Caritas patiens est – benigna est caritas*).

41 Cf. *Amoris Laetitia*, nos. 93-94.

42 An onomatopoetic word, imitating the sound of boiling water, to bubble over due to boiling: thus, figuratively "to burn with zeal."

43 Cf. *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 95.

Similarly, Paul must have had these love-feasts of his churches in mind when he wrote that “love is not boastful nor arrogant” (1 Cor 13:4d). The Greek verb *περπερεύεται* (*agit superbe*), also unique in the Scriptures, denotes vainglory (literally, “act as a braggard”), the need to be haughty, pedantic and somewhat pushy. Those who love are focused on the other without craving to be the center of attention. Paired with it is *φουσιῶται* (from *fu/sa*, “bellows, wind stream, air bubble”, properly, “inflate by blowing”, ^{NV}*inflatum*, figuratively, “swelled up, like an egotistical person”), which means that one does not become “puffed up” or conceited before others. It also points to something more subtle: an obsession with showing off and a loss of a sense of reality. Applied to the early Pauline *agápē* it signals all necessary humility that shuns any appearance of “holier than thou.” People that have a high opinion of themselves as being more “spiritual” or “wise” will undermine the aspect of communion that would make the love-meals thrive. By the way, the saintly epistolographer uses this verb on other occasions, as when he says that “knowledge puffs up”, whereas “love builds up” (1 Cor 8:1). Elsewhere, the word is featured to criticize those who are “inflated” with their own importance (cf. 1 Cor 4:18), yet in fact are filled more with empty words than the real “power” of the Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 4:19).⁴⁴

Four qualities of *agápē* are recalled in 1 Cor 13:5, all of which, if adhered to, would greatly transform the eucharistic love-meal: “Love is not rude” (*ἄσχημονεῖ*, literally “without proper shape or form, unseemly, unbecoming”, *ambitiosa*). It indicates that love is gentle and well-mannered, meaning that its actions, words and gestures are affable and pleasing. In short, it abhors making others suffer.⁴⁵ The inherent open-handedness of *agápē* also implies that it “does not seek its own interest” (*ζητεῖ τὰ ἑαυτῆς*, *quaeret quae sua sunt*), or, as the NRS version puts it, “it does not insist on its own way.” An identical idea is expressed in another text: “Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Phil 2:4).⁴⁶

If the first word of Paul’s hymn spoke of the need for a patience that does not immediately react harshly to the weaknesses and faults of others, the word he uses next (*παροξύνεται*, *irritatur*) has more to do with an interior irritation provoked by something from without. The verb is composed of *para*-, “alongside”, and *o;xuj*, “a sharp edge”, conveying the concept of “cutting close alongside”, i.e., to incite (“jab”) someone and stimulate their feelings. Hence, true *agápē* does not become emotionally triggered or roused to anger, rather, it controls any violent reaction within, it curbs a hidden irritation that sets one on edge where others are

44 Cf. *Amoris Laetitia*, nos. 97-98.

45 Cf. *ibid.*, no. 99.

46 Cf. *ibid.*, no. 101.

concerned, as if they were troublesome or threatening and thus to be avoided.⁴⁷ Once indignation is allowed to take root in one's heart, it leads to deep resentment.

Not to be "resentful" (οὐ λογίζεται τὸ κακόν, *non cogitat malum*) means that love takes no account of evil, it is not aggrieved. The opposite of bitterness is forgiveness, which is ingrained in a positive attitude that seeks to understand other people's feebleness or fickleness, and to excuse them.⁴⁸ When Paul contends that love "does not rejoice in wrongdoing" (οὐ χαίρει ἐπὶ τῇ ἀδικίᾳ, *non gaudet super iniquitatem*, 1 Cor 13:6a), he implies that any negativity lurking deep within a person's heart has no place in the context of a love-feast. It is the toxic attitude of those who rejoice at seeing an injustice done to others. What is required instead is to "altogether rejoice in the truth" (συγχαίρει δὲ τῇ ἀληθείᾳ, *congaudet autem veritati*, 1 Cor 13:6b). In other words, partakers of the eucharistic *agápē* are expected to acknowledge the good of others, recognizing their dignity and value, their abilities and good works.⁴⁹

Moreover, the *agapēic* properties pointed out in 1 Cor 13:7 can equally be understood as the final earmarks of fruitful love-feasts in preparation for the eucharistic sacrament. Paul's list ends with four phrases containing the words "all things" (πάντα, *omnia*): "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." These Christian bearings are a countercultural force of nature, capable of facing any challenge in this world. When the apostle declares that love "bears all things" (πάντα στέγει, *omnia suffert*), he certainly does not mean that one simply condones any evil. Since the verb is related to στέγη ("roof"), it has to do with placing something under a roof, to cover so as to keep water out, or to stay at home and not venturing outside. Figuratively, one is able to endure because shielded, i.e., bearing up (forbearing) because under the Lord's protection ("covering"). It has to do with the use of the tongue that keeps silent about confidential matters for instance (cf. 1 Cor 9:12). One is holding one's peace about what may be wrong with another person. It likewise involves limiting judgment, checking the impulse to issue a firm and ruthless condemnation, as well as refraining from taking compromising action.

In the context of a eucharistic *agápē*, it is equally propitious that "love believes all things" (πάντα πιστεύει, *omnia credit*). Here "belief" is not to be taken in its strict theological meaning, but rather in the sense of "trust". This goes beyond merely presuming that the other is untruthful or deceitful. It is recognizing God's luminous presence above and beyond worldly darkness, like an ember glowing beneath the ash. Tied into this is the felicitous circumstance

47 Cf. *ibid.*, no. 103.

48 Cf. *ibid.*, no. 105.

49 Cf. *ibid.*, no. 109.

that love also “hopes all things” (πάντα ἐλπίζει, *omnia sperat*). Love does not despair neither of the present nor of the future. There is a profound intuition that God’s grace can transform a person, mature and radiate unexpected beauty and untold potential. Indeed, the experience of the Church gives ample proof that “God writes straight with crooked lines”, and that his divine providence is able to draw some good from the evil we endure on earth.

Last not least, love “endures all things” (πάντα ὑπομένει, *omnia sustinet*). The Greek verb stems from ὑπό “underneath” and μένω “remain”; *ergo*, it signifies how someone is staying in a place when others are leaving. Christians are reminded that oftentimes it will be demanded of them to unflinchingly remain under the burden of the cross. Coupled with this endurance is the patient awaiting of God’s help.⁵⁰ It stands steady even in hostile surroundings, constantly ready to confront any challenge. It is a love that never gives up, even in the darkest hour. It shows a certain dogged heroism, a power to resist every negative current, an irrepressible commitment to goodness.⁵¹ If early Christianity had only put into practice these deep spiritual insights to obtain authentic charity, then their *agápae* would likely have survived, and would unquestionably have drawn Paul’s praise instead of reproach.

4.3. Agápē is the greatest perfection

What could be more fitting in closing his reflection on the greatness of Christian love than for the sacred writer to underscore, particularly in 1 Cor 13:8.13, how it is also of eternal permanence. This thought brings about a noticeable literary *inclusio* regarding 1 Cor 13:1-3, where he had discussed *agápē*’s absolute supremacy. When he says in 1 Cor 13:8a that “Love never ends (Ἡ ἀγάπη οὐδέποτε πίπτει· *Caritas numquam excidit*)”, he conversely implies what is stated at 1 Cor 13:13a, namely, that it remains always steadfast (μένει). Love cannot ever fall into decline, as contrariwise suggested by καταργηθήσονται (*evacuabuntur*) and παύσονται (*cessabunt*). This point is further illuminated by its concordant Septuagint occurrences: in Job 15:33, Isa 28:1.4 (as again in Lk 16:17; 1 Pt 1:24; James 1:11) the word is used of a fading petals of a withering flower; and in Rom 9:6 it is applied to the Word of God. In classical Greek it

50 St. THERESE OF LISIEUX is quoted as having said: “Everything is grace, everything is the direct effect of our Father’s love, difficulties, contradictions, humiliations, all the soul’s miseries, her burdens, her needs, everything, because through them, she learns humility, realizes her weakness. Everything is a boon, because everything is God’s gift. Whatever be the character of life or its unexpected events, to the heart that loves, all is well.”

51 Cf. *Amoris Laetitia*, nos. 111-118.

indicated a bad actor being hissed off the stage; hence, *agápē* will have “its part to play even on the stage of eternity.”⁵² Whereas prophecy, speaking with tongues, and deep knowledge, are bestowed on the Church only until Christ’s parousia, love out-wears everything, it will suffer no cessation whatsoever, in fact, it simply cannot drop out of existence.

This selfsame teaching is articulated one more time at 1 Cor 13:13, where Paul concludes that “now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love (Νυνὶ δὲ μένει πίστις, ἐλπίς, ἀγάπη, τὰ τρία ταῦτα· μείζων δὲ τούτων ἡ ἀγάπη; *Nunc autem manet fides, spes, caritas, tria haec; maior autem ex his est caritas*.)” These three are also known as the theological virtues, infused into the soul through divine grace, and denoting by synecdoche the whole of Christianity; they are three fundamental graces, not like the charisms that are granted cumulatively. While various authors took νυνὶ δέ in a temporal sense, of continuance in the present age, this must be considered inaccurate since the apostle expected the charisms to discontinue only at the Lord’s return (cf. 1 Cor 13:8ff), and subsequently could not have labelled merely the triad of faith, hope, and love as what was now remaining. On the contrary, it signifies in the case of faith and hope their stable continuance as opposed to the sporadic, and not their eternal perpetuation. That is reserved to love alone, as the dynamic subjoinder μείζων δὲ τούτων (*maior autem ex his*) avows. After pausing at “these three” (*tria haec*), linguistically augmenting the force of the argument, Paul chooses this comparative of μέγας to convey *agápē*’s higher value among these three. The basic meaning of this adjective regards the intense measure, yet also the degree of rank and dignity: love is forever greater, literally outstanding and exceptional.⁵³ Love is the greatest, because it is the root of the other two; we believe only in that which we love; we hope only for that which we love. Additionally, *agápē* excels because it relates to our neighbor, while faith and hope regards mainly ourselves. It is also the greatest because faith and hope are human, but love is divine, or better even, “God is Love” (1 John 4:8.16). Moreover, love is the greatest because faith and hope can only work by love, and only show themselves by love. Accordingly, love is the unmatched perfec-

52 Cf. SPENCE, H. D. – EXELL, J.S., eds., *The Pulpit Commentary*, vol. 8, Hendrickson: Peabody, MA 1985, under 1 Cor 13:8.

53 Akin to the theological theme *Deus Semper Maior* postulated by St. ATHANASIUS (*De Incarnatione Verbi*, ch. 16), and quoted by St. AUGUSTINE (*Expositions on the Psalms*, Psa. 63), which maintains that God is always greater than human attempts at understanding; God’s existence and presence remains an inexhaustible mystery which can never be fully grasped by created beings such as angels and humans. Their knowledge will always be partial and limited (see 1 Cor 13:12b, “Now I know only in part”).

tion. All of this moral worth and fruitfulness naturally applies to the Christian fellowship as primarily lived during the eucharistic love-meal. Love is the force of nature, as it were, that prevents those *agápae* from turning into something narcissistic or spurious. It is the clearest mirror of Christ present in his Church as “the incarnate love of God.”⁵⁴

It is absolutely safe to say that if the church at Corinth and elsewhere had implemented Paul’s *agapéc* vision, then this “most touching institution of the apostolic age” would have lasted through the centuries as “a triumph of Christian equality and fraternity, a vivid representation of Christ’s last supper on earth, and a symbol of the feast which is to reunite the elect around the throne of God.”⁵⁵

CONCLUSION

After having applied to the love-feast the litmus test of *agápē* as a primal virtue (cf. 1 Cor 13), now is the time to draw some ecclesiological conclusions. Taking into account Paul’s instructions in 1 Cor 11:17-34 and 1 Cor 13, what crystallizes at this point is that he combines quite practical advice with profound spirituality. On the one hand he expects those who participate in the eucharistic *agápē* to be patient and courteous in waiting for one another; he demands *agapéc* thoughtfulness in considering ourselves equal brethren before the Lord, overcoming societal disadvantages. This is very practical advice, indeed. On the other hand, the apostle reminds us of the spiritual side of celebrating the Lord’s supper: to “assemble for the better”, that is, advancing in faith and virtue, to promote unity, to keep the Lord’s Supper sacred and in focus, to achieve salvation of our souls, to resist carnal appetites and selfish desires, expressing reverence for the Church and respect for the brethren, and to live in a most dignified way that deserves honor and praise from others. Paul teaches a progression from inward to outward, from sober self-judgment (1 Cor 11:27-32) to reciprocated gestures of charity reverencing Jesus’ sacramental presence at the Eucharist (1 Cor 11:33-34). In fact, *agápē* in its unmatched superiority (12:31) and perfection (13:8.13) remains the paramount virtue to be practiced, the crowning gift and grace, the highest thinkable norm for love-feasts.

When Paul reiterates the phrase “coming together” no less than five times, he cannot possibly have ignored the hue of nuptiality that it encompasses, as well as the idiomatic tincture of journeying: to be a member of the *agapéc* Church for him signifies to be in a bridal relationship with our Covenant God,

54 Cf. Pope BENEDICT XVI, 2005 Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est*, nos. 12-15.

55 PRAT, F., *The Theology of Saint Paul*, vol. 1, The Newman Bookshop: Westminster, MD 1952, p. 122.

and be on the way as a pilgrim Church, Church militant and *Ecclesia pressa*. As a theological corollary we are now in a position to say that given the elemental connotation of the ecclesial “coming together”, the bespoken directives in 1 Cor 11:17-22.33-34; 13:1-8.13 ought to be understood as a microcosmic summary of Paul’s conception of the Church, his apostolic ecclesiology in a nutshell.

As a final outlook, let us consider some wholesome ways in which we in our days could return to Paul’s wish for a sacred *agápē*, keeping in mind that “love is labor!” (cf. 1 Thess 1:3, τοῦ κόπου τῆς ἀγάπης, *laboris caritatis*). This toil is at the same time the necessary crucible guaranteeing its authenticity.⁵⁶ For one thing, we are reminded of the many opportunities to practice love in the form of fraternal charity and giving (*Caritas*); this charitable activity is ultimately a manifestation of Trinitarian love through the Church as a “community of love.”⁵⁷ Secondly, although the early Christian *agápae* may have all but vanished, the ecclesial meaning of *agápē* endures. Why not revive the custom of a love-gathering in parishes that used to have such a tradition? or, by the same token, why not further cherish and promote some form of an *agápē* meal perhaps following a main parish Mass (coffee & doughnuts)? Thirdly, Paul’s thoughts on *agápē* should also be an incentive for us to think of the brothers and sisters in the Church foremost as “most beloved” in Jesus the Christ, our Master and Brother (cf. Heb 6:9, ἀγαπητοί, *dilectissimi*).

In closing, our comportment surrounding the Holy Eucharist will continue to be a reliable gauge, as it were, showing forth our communal love for and heartfelt comprehension of our Mother, the Church. May we live up to Saint Paul’s eucharistic spirituality as the ecclesial lodestar, and rest assured that until the Lord comes back to this earth in glory, “coming together” in *agápē* will be the touchstone of the life and holiness in his beloved Church.

56 Cf. PENNA, R., *Paul the Apostle, Wisdom and Folly of the Cross, A Theological and Exegetical Study*, vol. 2, The Liturgical Press: Collegeville, MN 1996, pp. 185-200.

57 Cf. BENEDICT, *Deus Caritas Est*, Part II.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	40
1. Historical overview on <i>agápae</i>	41
1.1. Apostolic custom.....	41
1.2. Patristic age to modern times	43
2. “Coming together”, a paragon of the Church.....	46
2.1. Communal advancement.....	48
2.2. Living in unity	48
2.3. Primacy of the Lord’s Supper	50
2.4. Patient courtesy.....	52
2.5. Save our souls.....	53
3. Rhetorical questions as a further ecclesial benchmark.....	54
3.1. Gathering to celebrate the sacrament	54
3.2. Highest respect for the Church.....	55
3.3. Agapéic thoughtfulness.....	55
3.4. Worthy of praise	56
4. Love-feasts through the prism of <i>agápē</i>	57
4.1. Agápē is superior to other charismata.....	57
4.2. Transecting agápē as virtue	58
4.3. Agápē is the greatest perfection	61
Conclusion	63