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LOVING: A CHARACTERISTIC OF THE JESUIT GRAD AT GRAD

by Father Michael Sehler, S.J.

Good morning. I am happy to have this opportunity to speak to you this morning about LOVING, one of the characteristics of the Jesuit graduate at graduation.

When I was a freshman at Gonzaga Jesuit high school in Washington, D.C., we students were encouraged to read the works of Jesuit Father John Powell. In one of his books, Father Powell wrote: "We should never leave this world without having the people we love know that we love them."

Now I don't come from a particularly demonstrative family. We don't make regular declarations of our love, accompanied by long hugs. In fact, we don't do hugs, and we do very few kisses.

So I took Father Powell's advice as a personal challenge.

At the time I was a Freshman, an aunt of mine was working in Switzerland, and I had an uncle who was teaching in Los Angeles. So, I wrote them both letters, and told them that I loved them.

Neither responded.

Next was my mother. I stayed home one Saturday night and, with my heart pumping and my stomach churning, I approached my mother after dinner, while she was watching the news on television.

"Mom, I have something very important to tell you."

My mother, not taking her eyes from the screen, said casually: "Oh, yes..?"

“Mom,” I said, “I’ve never told you this before, and I need to say it tonight.”

As she slowly turned off the TV and faced me, I noticed a slight trace of alarm in her expression: “Yes, . . . what is it?”

I summoned up all my courage, and came straight out with it.

“Mom, I just want to tell you that I love you.”

And such was her relief that my wonderful Irish-American mother replied: “Well, I should hope that you do!”

And quickly turned the TV back on.

There were no hugs and kisses, no violins playing, no statements about how long Mom had been waiting to hear one of us children talk of our love for her. As I trudged back to my room, I thought that I would never take John Powell’s advice again!

My aunt and uncle each wrote to my mother, asking if something was wrong with Mike. Everyone concluded that it was just a phase I was going through.

I hope it’s a phase that I never get over . . .

The word, “love” has become overused and trivialized in our secular culture. “I love New York . . .; I love my dog . . .; I love pizza . . .; I love my I-pod.”

There is a real difference between genuine love and romantic being-in-love.

When we are romantically in-love, we can’t think of anything else but the beloved. When all is well, we can’t get enough of romantic love; it’s almost like a chemical addiction. We take temporary leave of our senses. We’re flying!

Genuine love, however, isn't what we hear about in the love songs: "I can't live without you . . . First time ever I saw your face . . ." Those are being-in-love songs. They're about "romance," the thump-thump of the heart, I-can't-get-you-out-of-my-head-kind-of-love. Those songs are very dramatic, and in many cases, they are often pretty self-dramatizing. It's Romeo and Juliet time, West Side Story time, soap-operatic, love-drunk time.

Don't get me wrong. There's nothing wrong with being-in-love. It's a totally splendid feeling, and anyone who gets through life, without having been swamped by it, enthralled by it, steamrollered by it, is surely impoverished. In fact, the heady wine of being-in-love is absolutely essential. Who would dare get up in front of hundreds of people and vow personal responsibility for another person, in sickness and in health, till death do them part, unless he and she were a bit intoxicated with the heady wine called being-in-love?

Being-in-love can burn very hot, but it doesn't burn very long. Being-in-love, then, is a marvelous place to VISIT, but we can't LIVE there very long. Reality creeps in. There's nothing wrong with being-in-love, just in confusing it with genuine love.

Genuine love isn't a matter of strong feelings; it's a matter of strong, steady fidelity. In fact, genuine love is not a feeling at all; it's an act of the will that takes over when the feelings fail, when the beloved may be, for the moment, not even likeable.

Real love, genuine love, is most often very un-dramatic, unlike the ferocity of being-in-love. Real love often goes unnoticed. Think of a parent or a relative whom you admire.

Real love is cleaning-up-my-room love, taking-out-the garbage-love, giving-my-parents-an-honest-day's-academic-work, -in-return-for-their-sacrifice-love. Real love is respecting myself and others; real love is extending my comfort zone in the service of another, when I may not feel like it, when it may be inconvenient, when it may be annoying, when it's risky, and may involve disappointment or rejection.

I could sometimes offer my father pretty stiff resistance when, on a Saturday night, he would deny me the use of the family car or impose a curfew that I thought unreasonable. I would have some harsh things to say about his paternal competence.

But now I can imagine him having said to himself, at least in his mind: "Yeah, well, I don't like you very much right now, either, but I do love you, and I'm willing to put up with your anger for the moment, if this will keep you from getting hurt."

That's real love, the real deal.

We can be grateful, too, that Jesus did not say: "You shall like your neighbor as yourself." He would have been asking the impossible. Even the people we spontaneously and easily like and love have nasty moods – or we run into them, when we're in a nasty mood.

But we all know people who do love spontaneously and freely, and they seem to be people who have schooled themselves – or been schooled – to forget their momentary priorities, and to think of others. The absolutely essential first step is to be sensitive and to notice others. If we don't do that, there's little chance we're going to care about them, or to reach out to them.

The satisfaction and the joy that come from loving are well worth any risk.

Thank you for your good attention.