

Part 32: Self-Centredness

Begin with a few minutes of silence to draw yourselves to be fully present for this time together. Share some of your reflections and times from the week.

Freedom to love and accept ourselves

Jesus' command that we 'love our neighbour as we love ourselves' carries far-reaching consequences for all our relationships. We are to love others in the same way, or to the same measure, that we love ourselves. This raises questions like:

- How much do we, in fact, love ourselves?
- Is there a danger that we may love ourselves too much?
- What if we have very little love for ourselves?
- What if our self-love is based on conditions of performance and acceptability?
- How does the way I love myself affect my ability to love others?

Many of us have a cultural view that frowns on self-love. One must not appear to others to be loving oneself 'unduly' or thinking a lot of oneself. Much of this is a reaction to people who are self-centred, vain, conceited, self-opinionated or selfish. This response is understandable but carries the danger that pure or good self-love be condemned by the same stroke.

The epidemic of low self-esteem and weak self-love which pervades the Church at present is evidence of the effectiveness of this general condemnation of all self-love.

If one judges the worth of a person or object materialistically, by their marketable value, one will see faults or weaknesses as lowering that value and therefore as something to be hidden. Thus begins the cycle of masking or hiding one's apparent faults and flaws, and promoting what seem to be good points. Some areas are seen to be unacceptable and are rejected, whereas others, which are pleasing, are enhanced and emphasised.

In this way, we can easily end up loving those parts of ourselves that are generally acceptable while spurning the areas which are not, and which cause us shame or embarrassment. We may also notice that we make more use of our 'nicer' sides, enhancing our looks or our knowledge or anything else we see as a strength. If there is little that we are comfortable with in ourselves, we may well find ourselves to be critical and judgemental with others. The standards we have used on ourselves are those we impose on them, so that they too are found wanting.

Some common reactions to one's unacceptable sides are:

1. **Self-rejection:** 'I'm no good; I can't get anything right; I'm a failure; nobody can love this mess that I am, not even God.' (This may be inverted pride.)
2. **Criticism and judgmentalism with self and others:** 'Nobody is good enough.'
3. **Pretence:** Masks, falseness, superficiality, relating only to externals. If I avoid that side, no one will see it.'
4. **Increasing oneself:** 'If I have power, money and influence, I can't be rejected for my failings, I can control my friends and my destiny; no one can hurt me.' This is one cause of self-centredness. 'If I am not ok, I must pull things to myself; make myself the focus of everything,



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then I will be acceptable because my weaknesses will be hidden.' So at root, selfishness is trying to give oneself what has been denied the self: real self-love and self-respect.

5. Working for acceptability: Compulsive working to earn rights and acceptance which will, on balance, enable one to pass the test. Workaholism, good deeds for society and self-giving for any needs that arise are all symptoms of inadequate self-love.

6. Self-improvement projects are good in themselves but, when entered into to avoid or cover one's weaknesses, they are not.

Exercise

Take 20 minutes considering your relationship with yourself and try to discern which areas you feel comfortable with and which you do not.

- See if you can find any reason why each is so.
- How much of ourselves do we love and how much do we not?
- Which parts make us feel good as we reflect on them and which do we not accept, or feel need 'sorting out' or changing?

With the negative areas, try to imagine what you fear will happen if they get out of hand. Do this prayerfully and gently. The object is to explore what binds us, not to cause ourselves more anxiety or pain.

Journal and share with the group what you wish to. As you pray **during the week**, reflect with God on different experiences you live through and look at what they are saying about your self-love.



Sergio Milandri has a Masters in Personal Formation and has been a relationship mentor in South Africa for over 25 years. He and his wife, Elizabeth, live in Hout Bay, Cape Town, and run the Sans Pareil Retreat Centre from there.

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