I wish to suggest that the history of love in the Western world takes its origin from two suppers. One is the supper which Jesus shared with his apostles the night before his death on the cross. The other was a famous supper held at Athens in the house of Agathon four centuries before Jesus. Many knowledgeable people have noted the affinity between these two suppers. The supper in ancient Athens is recorded for us in the Symposium of Plato, the first explicit discussion of love in Western philosophy and literature. The dinner guests are trying to define love. There is, for example, much talk about homosexual love. Phaedrus emphasises virtue and self-sacrifice. Pausanias distinguishes between vulgar and sublime manifestations of love. Alcibiades identifies love as yearning or ardent longing. Erymachus, a physician, stretches the meaning of ‘love’ into ‘attraction’ or even ‘harmony’. Socrates describes love as wisdom and so we have ‘philosophy’, the Greek word which means ‘love of wisdom’.

When we go from Athens to Jerusalem, consider the guests who share the supper with Jesus of Nazareth: There is no artist, no philosopher, no physician, no statesman, no one with celebrity status. We find instead twelve men some of whom were fishermen, a tax collector, and a traitor named Judas Iscariot. They lived on the margins of Jewish society. Most of them were unfragrant fishermen; Matthew, however, was an exception, but as a tax collector, he would not have been popular among the people.

Returning to Athens for a moment, it becomes clear that one of the immense debts which we owe to ancient Greece is reflected in this discussion on love. Greek has many words for love: storgé, for example, is love expressed within the family both the nuclear and extended family; philía, for example, is love which characterizes friends. Eros has a wide range of meanings for it signifies romantic love, esthetic love, carnal and spiritual love and, finally, agapé, which often translates as brotherly love.

Hence, when we respond to his invitation and enter the cenacle with Jesus, when we break bread with the Apostles as we are about to do this evening, we find ourselves faced with that marvellous manifestation of love expressed by John the Evangelist: ‘He gave them the uttermost proof of his love’ (Jn. 13:1 R. Knox). Here the Greek word agapé takes on the New Testament meaning: self-sacrificing love.

In the first verse of Jn 13 we read: ‘He now showed his love for them to the end’. Augustine is quick to tell his listeners that the phrase ‘to the end’, overreaches the death of Jesus and the events of Good Friday. That is to say, this phrase ‘to the end’ does not designate death as the terminus of life. According to Augustine, this phrase lacks any temporal or chronological significance. Its meaning rather is ontological or metaphysical. Jesus showed his disciples the fullest measure of his love. The bishop of Hippo puts it this way: ‘Perish the thought that he whose love for us did not end with death should end his love with death’. (Tr. Jn 55.2).

Augustine interprets the entire New Testament in three words by taking the text of John in his First Letter (ep. 1/Jn 4:8 and 16) ‘God is love’ and he turns this text around by saying ‘Love is God’ (en. Ps 99. 6; ep.1 Jn 9:10); and ep.1 Jn 10. 4; s.156. 5). He does this several times both explicitly and implicitly. And he does this with the three Latin words for love: amor, dilectio, and caritas, always however, employed in a scriptural sense (cir. dei 14. 7).This is a startling ‘double inversion’. ‘God is love : love is God’, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus the Christ. In other words, all true love has something of God in it. This was the basic message of Pope Benedict’s first Encyclical Letter, Deus Caritas Est, on New Year’s Day 2006. It is no accident that eros is, in its deepest dimension, a longing or ardent yearning for the divine.¹ Eros, like New Testament Agape, becomes elevated and

redeemed. ‘Your love must migrate . . . change your love . . . the only things that make good or bad lives are good or bad loves’. 2 ‘Christ came in order to transform love’. 3

The reception of Pope Benedict’s Encyclical Letter was overwhelmingly affirmative. However, the Pontiff’s positive estimate of eros does not go far enough. Unlike Augustine, Benedict did not seize this splendid opportunity to highlight the potentialities of eros for reaching maturity and cultivating holiness in both celibate and married life. That is to say, the Encyclical did not do justice to the fullness of Saint Augustine’s thoughts on this matter. ‘Love could not have been more highly commended to [us] than to have called it God’ (ep.1 Jn 8.14) Augustine tells us . . . . He continues: ‘The more joyfully I speak of love, the less I wish this epistle [of John] to reach its end’ (Ibid.) . . . . And he concludes with this thought: ‘God had an Only Son (Unicum), but not wanting him to be alone (unum), [God] adopted us so that [the Son] would have sisters and brothers to possess with him life everlasting’ (Ibid.). 4

There is another Greek word which connects Athens with Jerusalem. The word is logos. It signifies human speech, the word or words by which we express our inner thoughts. Logos likewise stands for these inner thoughts themselves or reason itself. In many parts of the world today reason appears to be in short supply. In ancient Greek philosophy reason inevitably generates inquiry, argument and dialogue. There is much truth in the observation: ‘Reason which is deaf to the divine is incapable of entering the dialogue of cultures’. 5

So much for love and reason: the third and last component of this equation is faith. Jerusalem stands for Judeo-Christian faith. There is a quatrain of long-standing by Phyllis Mc Ginley:

How odd
of God
to choose
the Jews.

Pope John XXIII said of all Christians that we are Semites spiritually. The opening verse of John’s Gospel (Jn 1:1) reflects Greek thought. The pre-existing Word of God becomes incarnate in Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God. Whereas the Hebrews believe in Jahweh, Christians take their name from Christ, the Anointed One. These three elements thus form a tripod upon which Christians rest their case: love, reason and faith.

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2 s. Denis 14. 2 ; Misc., I, 67 = s. 313A: Amor tuus migret . . . muta amorem . . . non enim faciant bonos et malos mores, nisi boni vel mali amores.
4 Tr. Jn 2. 13 expresses the same thought: Unicus natus est, et noluit manere unus. ‘He was born unique and refused to remain one alone’.
5 Pope Benedict at the University of Regensburg.