

At our fall festival a couple weeks ago, one of the biggest attractions was the auction. People bid on a variety of items from afghans to lemon meringue pie. The sale sends lots of people home happy. I walked in on the auction this year when the bidding was furious. The auctioneer's call was like music. I stopped to say hello to one parishioner when I noticed someone else across the room. I raised my hand to wave at her when my partner grabbed my arm and shoved it down. "Careful, Father," he said, "you almost just bought a dollhouse." He was right. Auctions have their own vocabulary, and if you want to attend one you have to guard your gestures.

Gestures are tricky the world over. When I studied Spanish some years ago, my teacher gave me an entire session on gestures in his country. Gestures are tricky in every language, including Spanish and auctions, but they are trickiest in the language of love.

Love has many gestures: touching, kissing, making love; and an endless list of charitable acts--visiting the sick, sheltering the poor, and so forth--that without physically touching a person still touch the heart.

When Jesus gave us the two great commandments--love God and love your neighbor--he did us a great favor. But it also seems like he left something out: What are the appropriate gestures to use to show love for God and our neighbor. It's confusing to know when to touch, and how much.

Part of the confusion comes from the English language. We use the word love in many situations: We love peanut butter, we love pinochle, we love the homeless, we love our family, we love our friends, but some friends we love differently from others. Often we hear it's OK to go all the way with someone if you love them. Well, what is love? We love our parents. We love the elderly. We love the dead. Maybe if English had several different words for love it would be easier to figure out.

The Church has consistently taught that sexual love belongs in marriage. It's there where two people love each other so much that they make a commitment, and open their home to children. In that way the total gift of their bodies becomes a symbol of the total gift of their lives. The Church believes that to make love outside of marriage is to use the wrong gesture for the occasion--like waving to a friend at an auction.

Jesus is wonderfully clear when he says the greatest law is to love. But we still need to figure out the appropriate gesture for showing love. There are plenty of appropriate gestures, and it's good to explore them. If we are to build the city of God, the cement which will secure it is love. It will grow deep within us when we use it well.