

Unconditional love

By Father Joseph Breighner

There's a story told of a doctor greeting an elderly patient, who had an extremely attractive woman with him. The doctor said to his patient: "You seem to be doing extremely well." The patient replied: "I just did what you told me to do the last time: 'Get a hot Momma, and go crazy!'" The doctor replied: "I said no such thing! I said you had a heart murmur, and to take it easy!"

In our society, we routinely refer to extremely attractive people as "hot." Recently, however, I got a whole new insight into that term. In his April 2 column in America, Peter Feldmeier told a very moving story.

A priest had been invited by a man to come to his home for dinner. When he arrived, he noticed that the man's wife was badly scarred on her face, arms, and hands. Later, when the priest was alone with the man, he asked what had happened. The husband explained that, years earlier, they had had a house fire. The man grabbed the 5-year-old, and thought his wife had the 3-year-old. When they got outside, they realized that the 3-year-old was still inside, in the midst of a blazing inferno. The wife ran back in, found the child crouched behind the toilet, threw her coat over the child, and carried her out. In the process, the wife was badly burned.

The priest expressed his sympathies, but the man replied: "The whole ordeal forced Rachel and me to rely on God totally. And we've learned to love each other with a depth we never knew we had. When we were married, we were barely Catholic; now our faith dominates our lives. We've never been happier or more in love. And every time I look at her I see not only my beautiful wife; I also see my beautiful hero, who saved our baby's life."

I think that story transforms the meaning of the word hot!

No matter how "hot" any of us may be in the world's use of the term, that will all change. Age, accidents, misfortunes and so on can render us not so hot. That may be

the moment when true love begins.

In romantic love, most of us first fall in love with the body. We fall for the attractiveness of someone. That's a very conditional love. "I will love you as long as you stay attractive, as long as you excite me." When the excitement is gone, so often the relationship goes with it. This is often how life is lived on the level of the ego - the level of mind-body! The mind and body are extremely limited, and so are most of their activities.

The level of the Spirit, however, is the level of unlimitedness. This is the level that Christ invites us to live on. We still have our minds and bodies with all of their needs and limitations. But we recognize that we are so much more than them. We now have the capacity to see life through the eyes of Christ. On the level of the Spirit, we live with the power and love of Christ himself. As St. Paul said so well: "It is now no longer that I live, but Christ lives in me". That's not just a "good line" to quote from Paul. It is who we are - the presence of Christ.

On the level of the spirit, we can love with unconditional love. We love someone as he or she is. We love without expecting return. We even love those who don't love us. To be in this state is to be in the state of constant joy and peace. To be in this state is to live in God, and to live as God! It's the only love truly worthy of the name love.