
Ferrari Oreste

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URGET NOS

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INTRODUCTION

The three theological virtues. Only Love will remain

Christian life is an ongoing relationship with God, our Creator and ultimate goal. However, God's vastness makes it challenging for us to fully grasp what it means to be in communion with Him.

Saint Paul's letter to the Romans brings us encouraging news: God's eternal plan is for us to be conformed to the image of Jesus (Romans 8:29). This transformation occurs on two levels: 1) From God's side, as He has made us His children; 2) From our side, when we live in a manner worthy of this calling by emulating Jesus.

In our daily lives, we must balance faith—understanding who God is and who we are—with practice, which dictates how we should behave as a result. We are driven by an innate desire for the infinite, drawing us towards Him. Yet, we also face numerous challenges and obstacles posed by this world and an increasingly atheist society, which moves away from evangelical values. Our many passions lead us into a constant struggle between good and evil, between wanting to do right and not always knowing how. So, what tools should we employ in this spiritual battle?

Saint Paul presents the three theological virtues as instruments for the new life, an armor that allows us to fight the spiritual battle and emerge victorious.

These three virtues, faith, hope, and charity, come from God and ensure that our whole being is oriented towards Him, because God is their source and their object. To explain it a little better we could say that they come to us through Jesus Christ, who is the full revelation of the Father, the source of faith, the manifestation of the Father's love, the source of charity, and the way to the Father, the source of hope—in short, Christ is our way, our truth, and our life.

The Bible is filled with texts showing Christian life based on the three virtues.

The three virtues are essential for making proper use of the freedom bestowed upon us by God. They are also crucial because God's grace within us operates through these virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Thus, to lead a fulfilling spiritual life, we must thoroughly comprehend these virtues. Specifically, Faith provides the clarity to perceive reality and distinguish good from evil, helping us avoid being enticed by false illusions and temptations; Hope fuels our enthusiasm and resilience against despair during difficult times; Charity drives our actions, serving as the supernatural motivation behind everything we do, and giving us the strength to surpass our limitations.

Since theological virtues are rooted in God, the best way to nurture them is through prayer. We must foster harmony

with God through prayer and cultivate goodness through acts of charity. In doing so, the Trinity resides within us.

During this retreat, I want to place special emphasis on the virtue of charity. While faith and hope originate from God and are directed towards Him, charity is God Himself (1 John 4:8). Consequently, charity serves as both the driving force and ultimate goal of all other virtues. As Saint Paul states, this virtue endures eternally because living in charity means dwelling in God, which is the essence of Paradise.

In the Greek language, there are 4 words used to explain the English word "Love." The first, Eros, represents physical, sensual attraction; the second, Storghé, characterizes bonds within families: the love of parents towards children or vice versa. The third, Philia, is pleasure, interest, and any type of attraction, even spiritual, but purely human; the fourth, Agape, however, is pure and selfless giving. In all ancient Greek literature, the term Agape, is used very little. Saint Paul and Saint John, however, use it every time they refer to God. We, of course, speaking of the virtue of love refer to this 4th term.

In the Old Testament, God is depicted as just, vengeful, and powerful. Over the centuries, through contemplation on their history, people have gradually come to better understand who God is. Some passages in the Old Testament already offer glimpses of this understanding: Exodus 34:5-9 portrays God as faithful love; Hosea 11 compares God to a mother who cannot forget her child or a husband who cannot abandon his

unfaithful wife.

The New Testament introduces a leap of faith with God revealing Himself in Jesus. Here, God is depicted as the Trinity, and love is characterized in a Trinitarian way: He is the Father who first loved us freely; He loved the world so much that He sent His beloved Son; the Son offered Himself for us. The Father's love is a pure gift, while the Son's love is characterized by acceptance and obedience. He embraces the Father's plan and fulfills His will completely. The incarnation, particularly the passion and death of Jesus, represents a self-emptying process, technically called Kenosis, where God lowers Himself to elevate us. The love of the Holy Spirit manifests the very action of God, as everything occurs through the Holy Spirit.

To comprehend the Trinity, one must start with Love.

Love cannot remain confined; it always extends towards another, giving life and all of itself. For this reason, the Father generates the Son. These two persons are in perfect communion and communication, which becomes real and alive in the person of the Holy Spirit. Naturally, this Trinitarian love has been communicated to us, drawing us towards itself. Here, the three virtues come into play as essential instruments to respond to God's call.

Faith is the source or motivation for doing or accepting something; hope provides the strength to do it and to persevere despite difficulties; charity is the act of doing it and the manner in which it is done.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, at number 1828, says: *"The practice of the moral life animated by charity gives the Christian the spiritual freedom of the children of God. He does not stand before God as a slave, in servile fear, nor as a mercenary seeking a wage, but as a son who responds to the love of the one who 'first loved us' (1 John 4:19): Either we turn away from evil out of fear of punishment and are in the disposition of a slave; or we are captivated by the attraction of the reward and are similar to mercenaries; or it is for the good itself and for the love of the one who commands that we obey... and then we are in the disposition of children."*

In Christ, we can take the necessary steps to return to our original harmony, but we must shed our old selves, bound by sin, and embrace the new selves by accepting the spiritual battle. This spiritual struggle is facilitated through the sacraments, which are privileged channels of grace that must be embraced with conviction if we truly wish to align with our beliefs. Consider how often we attend Holy Mass merely to fulfill the Church's precept or adhere to the community's schedule, neglecting a personal encounter with our Savior; think about how often we approach the sacrament of confession without a genuine desire for change.

To combat a life void of reflection, we need prayer and meditation to strengthen our faith. To counter a discouraged life in perpetual crisis, we must renew our trust and devotion to God: hope. To oppose a life centered on selfishness and personal interest, we must imitate Jesus: charity.

Because of God's love, we can see His image in others. We were created in His likeness, and we also see the image of Christ, who became one of us to redeem us. Each of us is precious in God's eyes, and for each of us, He died and rose again. We cannot waste or reject what is precious to God. His love helps us restore our relationships, which have been damaged by sin. Within us, there is a strong division between selfishness on one side and love on the other. Saint Paul said, *"I see what is good and I want it, but then I choose what is evil."* God's love gives us the strength to overcome this internal conflict.

We have acknowledged that the Father's love created us. Unlike any earthly father, God's love is infinite and can do everything. Nothing can oppose this love, not even death (Romans 8). We have experienced the love of the Son through His sacrifice for us, even though we did not deserve it. Love is not merely words; it is demonstrated through actions. The love of the Holy Spirit resides within us, as He dwells in us from the moment of our baptism.

For personal reflection:

- Do I feel an inner desire to pursue holiness and strive for more, or am I simply content with going through my daily routine and fulfilling basic obligations?

- What is the nature of my relationship with God? Is it purely formal, or do I experience moments of intimacy and dialogue? Am I genuinely aware of His presence within me, or is it just a verbal affirmation?
- How do I approach making daily decisions? To what extent are my choices influenced by prayer and the Gospel?
- How do I cope with life's unexpected events and challenges? Do obstacles diminish my fervor, or can I turn them into opportunities for spiritual growth?
- Are there times when I feel alone, powerless, or unable to move forward?
- What graces has God bestowed upon me recently, and what is He asking of me through these blessings?
- Can I discern when I act out of genuine love versus when I am motivated by self-interest?
- When was the last time I hesitated to say yes to God, and what held me back?

If God is love, then, who are we?

Saint John is a profound theologian of God's love. In chapter 3 of his Gospel, he provides a sentence that encapsulates God's entire plan of salvation: "*God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but have eternal life.*" God created us with a specific purpose, entrusted us with creation, but saw it falter due to our sins. God did not despair and immediately initiated a plan of redemption that unfolds throughout the Old Testament and reaches its climax with the arrival of Jesus. Hence, the entire Bible is summarized in this phrase.

To read the Bible correctly, we must keep this in mind. The history of salvation is nothing else but the fulfilment of God's nature, a God who loves His creation so deeply that He fully commits to its redemption, even to the extent of giving us His Son. This understanding is crucial to interpreting the Bible.

When we imagine God as a distant and just figure who punishes us for the sake of justice, tallying our actions on an abacus to reward good deeds and penalize mistakes, we are far from understanding the true nature of God. The Old Testament was written with this mindset, but its authors had not yet encountered Jesus Christ. However, we should know better, since we have come to know Him.

The definition of the true essence of God is found in the First

Letter of Saint John: *"God is love."*

Throughout the Bible, there are countless references describing various attributes of God, often using adjectives. For example, *"God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."* However, it is only in the book of Exodus that we find God's name, when He appears to Moses in the burning bush and declares, *"I am who I am."* On other occasions, while speaking with Moses, God refers to Himself as *the living one*. This interpretation aligns with the meaning of the name YHWH, which can be translated in English as *"the one who is"* or *"the one who is living."*

The sentence of the letter of John, instead, is a clear definition of the nature of God.

Let's hear what Pope Benedict XVI says about it:

"God is love; whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him" (1 John 4:16). These words from the First Letter of John express with singular clarity the center of the Christian faith: the Christian image of God and also the consequent image of man and his journey. Moreover, in this same verse, John offers us, so to speak, a concise formula for Christian existence: "We have come to know and to believe in the love that God has for us." We have believed in God's love — thus the Christian can express the fundamental choice of his life. At the beginning of being a Christian there is not an ethical decision or a great idea, but the encounter with an event, with a Person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.

This is the center of the Christian faith; in this we know the image of God, and since we have been created in His image, it is only in this way that we can know the true image of man. (Deus Caritas est, 1).

This is the center of the Christian faith; in this, we know the image of God, and since we were created in His image, it is only in this way that we can know the true image of man. Then he continues:

In a world where the name of God is sometimes associated with vengeance or even the duty of hatred and violence, this is a message of great relevance and very concrete significance. (Deus Caritas est, 2).

You recognize, now, the significance of this topic for us. Reflecting on charity isn't just about enhancing our work in the apostolate or deepening our understanding of the charism our founders bestowed upon us; it is fundamentally about discovering who we are, what gives our lives meaning, and what enables us to attain that profound inner joy—like the feeling of finally being home after a long absence.

We are surrounded by a world that, slowly but inexorably, is erasing God from its language and environment. It would be interesting to compare the analysis of the modern world made by the Second Vatican Council with the document *Gaudium et Spes*, which analyzed the progress of secularization, atheism, and the consequent loss of moral and evangelical values, with the analysis made by Pope Francis, 50 years later, in the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii*

Gaudium. The latter, even if indirectly, makes us understand that the fears expressed by the bishops at the Council, not only came true but did so to a much greater extent and speed than expected. Yet both documents carry out this analysis with a positive undertone; just look at the titles: “Joy and Hope” (*Gaudium et spes*), and “The Joy of the Gospel” (*Evangelii Gaudium*).

Pope Benedict gives us a warning: for today's world, it is essential to present God as Love, but there is a language problem. What people today understand by the word love has nothing to do with what we mean when we speak of God. For ordinary people, love is connected to pleasure, personal satisfaction, eroticism, and so on. So, to avoid problems, people in the Church, prefers to use the word Charity, although even this is often confused. For many, the word charity is synonymous with alms giving, that is, exercising generosity towards a poor person. For this reason, Benedict XVI dedicates various numbers of his Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* to explain the different meanings of the word love. In this book, I will interchange the two words Love and Charity, but what I mean will always be Agape, that is, pure, selfless love that has its source in God Himself.

God is Love, this is His nature and His being. Why is it important to talk about it today?

Because we are in a world that no longer knows how to recognize the meaning of life. People seek the purpose of their lives in personal satisfaction, in a career, thus placing

themselves and material things at the center of everything, which is exactly the opposite of love.

It is a matter of "ultimate" meaning, or of the purpose of life. Ephesians 1 says that we are destined to be sons in love. Genesis 1-2 tells us that we are created in the image of God, with the necessity of relationship because God is relationship, a relationship with one similar to Him. The similarity is not being exactly the same but complementing each other. Relationship indicates the capacity to love.

This is what gives meaning to all creation, especially to human beings.

Man is not simply an object of God's love but becomes a partner, a "you" with whom God dialogues and relates. Man, with his freedom, can also reject love, and God, precisely because He made us free and made us partners, respects our freedom and our rejection, but He remains faithful because He cannot deny Himself. So, even after sin, He always gives us the possibility to convert and return.

The reason for our love, therefore, is in the fact that the Father loved us first and gave His Son for us, and the fact that the Son loved us to the point of giving His life for us. Those who are loved and feel loved by the Lord cannot help but love their neighbor.

It might come naturally to say: "All these things are beautiful but are on paper, or if you prefer, are in heaven, but when it comes to practical application, it is almost impossible to live them; they are too high." We have to remember that the word

“Charity” derives from the Greek “Kharis”, which means grace/gift. Love is a gift that we must always implore from the Lord; it is an idea of radicality that is always before us, and therefore we must not be discouraged but put ourselves in an attitude of continuous growth. We must, though, avoid two extreme mistakes: 1) believing that it is impossible; 2) expecting to reach it all at once and once and for all.

If we sincerely put ourselves before Christ, our smallness comes to light, and in Him, we continuously find the stimulus for ongoing conversion.

We must look to Jesus to imitate Him and base our spirituality on His example. We are called to incarnate the life of Jesus, at least what we understand of it, in a way suitable to our position and mission, responding to the needs of the society in which we live. In short, we are called to bring to the world our personal experience of Christ.

The nature of God is love. Defining God as love means that:

- Everything He does is motivated only by love;
- Everything He says is based only on love;
- Our likeness to Him must be analyzed starting from love;
- Our relationship with Him is based only on love;
- Everything He has prepared for us and asks us to do is only to love.

How far we are from the image of God that was often presented to us in the past, of a God who gives us graces only if we ask for them and punishes us if we disobey Him.

To say that God is omnipotent, but at the same time that His nature is love, means that He can do everything, but only if it is included in love.

If God created us free, it is because without freedom there can be no true love. But freedom is what has allowed man to reject God. At that moment, man proved to himself that he is more powerful than God because he can choose whether to love or hate, whether to accept or reject, but God can only love and offer love. So, we can say no to God, but God cannot say no to us. The more we love, the weaker (in a human sense) we become.

For personal reflection:

1. How do I feel God? How could I describe Him? Who is God for me?
2. What does it mean for me to be made in the image of God?
3. What is the style of my prayer?
4. When I look at the problems of the world and see how the evil is spread around, what do I feel? Where is God in all this?

WHAT DOES JESUS SAY ABOUT LOVE?

We were created by Love, to love. John, in his gospel, tells us what this truly means. The pinnacle of Jesus' life, and the entire history of humanity, is in the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The account of these three days covers almost half of John's Gospel. John introduces this moment, which he calls the moment of glory, with a very solemn and significant introduction: *"Before the Feast of Passover, Jesus, knowing that His hour had come to pass from this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, loved them to the end"*. (Jn 13:1)

Therefore, the passion and death of Jesus are nothing but the ultimate point of His love. This act of love that is about to begin is introduced by a concrete demonstration: He rose from supper, laid aside His garments, girded Himself with a towel, and began to wash the feet of His friends. The Master becomes a servant. Then, to ensure they understood what He had just done, He added: *"If I, the Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them."* Here we have an interesting detail that no one notices: after finishing washing the feet, He puts on His tunic again, but it is not

mentioned that He removes the apron, a sign of the servant. Even when He returns to being the Master, Jesus remains the servant, because His teaching is based on love.

Now begins the great farewell discourse, Jesus' final testament, which revolves around two interconnected themes that continue to recur, in the circular Semitic way of speaking: The new commandment and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

"This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." This is a central phrase of the entire Gospel, the core of all Jesus' teaching, the new way to reinterpret all the commandments of the Old Testament. In the synoptics, the commandment is translated as *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself."* It is essentially the same thing. The synoptic command is more formal, based on Old Testament phrases (Dt 6), to say that we must dedicate ourselves completely to God to worship Him because He is God, and the sentence from the book of Numbers that says we must put ourselves at His disposal to help our neighbor.

John goes much deeper; we do not love out of respect for God, but we do so following His example, because we want to be like Him. Immediately after, there is: *"Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends."* Naturally, Jesus is speaking of Himself, of the fact that He will soon be captured and will give His life for our salvation. But if

we look at the phrase from a logical-literary perspective, we might ask: What does it mean to lay down one's life for friends? Why should this be the highest commandment? In theory, it is much more difficult and therefore more meritorious to love enemies than friends; Jesus Himself said: *"If you love only those who love you, what reward do you have?"* (Mt 5:43). So why does Jesus use the word friends? It seems to contradict what we call pure love, seeking the lost and forgiving enemies. So, is love greater for friends or for enemies?

I find an answer by posing with another question: Can we truly love our enemies? Understand me well; I do not want to go against the Lord's commandment. The question is: who is an enemy? An enemy is someone I fight against. If I fight, I do not love. But if I love him, he is no longer my enemy. This is the key to understanding Jesus' message and being prophets in our way of loving: We are called to transform enemies into friends, in other words to change hatred into love. Jesus had no enemies, except for the devil, whom He rebuked severely. Everyone else He forgave and died for. We are all His friends, part of His family, and He gave His life for all of us. If He had died for us without loving us, His sacrifice would have been useless. Sometimes people make me laugh when they come to confess and say: "I try to forgive that particular person, but I can't forget what he did to me." I always answer: "thank God you can't forget; otherwise, you could not forgive." Forgetting is a selfish act: you want to erase a person from your life and

memory. How can you then love him? Forgetting is selfishness; forgiving is true love. You must remember what happened and purify it with the blood of Christ, handing it over to Him on the cross. Jesus explained this to us during his last supper, a few hours before His death. So, if you feel pain, say to Jesus: "If this causes me suffering, then I want to suffer on the cross with You. Lord, I forgive him as You forgave those who crucified You."

When I present the vow of chastity to my novices, I say that the center of the vows is to be able to love everyone in the same way, through the love of God. But practically speaking, can I really love everyone, or is there someone I could avoid—someone who makes me feel sad every time I think of him? Whatever happened in our lives, no matter how bad or painful, carries with it some graces from the Lord. Trials and persecutions can teach us much, but, only when we review them with love, can we obtain the fruits of those graces. If we look at those moments with resentment or a sense of vengeance, we only deepen our wounds and increase the pain.

We have said that the commandment Jesus left us is: "*Love one another as I have loved you*" (John 13:34). Then he adds: "*By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another*" (John 13:35). In his first letter, John gives us a practical application: "*Let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth*" (1 John 3:16-19). "*If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who*

does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen” (1 John 4:20).

Jesus knows that He is about to leave His disciples and wants to prepare them to continue their mission without His physical presence. He knows that the group is already wounded due to Judas' defection who disappeared from the upper room, but, now, they have to take up a demanding task: to change the world. In a few days, their work will be to announce to the whole world the beauty of God's face, the good and loving God, and they must carry this message not only with words, but especially with actions, loving as He loved, even their enemies. These disciples feel weak and fragile, and He is about to leave them. How will they be able to fulfill this mission?

The recipients of John's gospel are the Christians of the communities in the region of today's Turkey. We know them from the book of Revelation. John writes to them declaring himself *“your brother in the tribulations.”* They are suffering and do not know what to do. In this situation, John sees that the Master's words can be helpful.

If these values were relevant to them, they are also relevant to us today. Often, we feel isolated because those around us have very different life principles from ours. When we talk about chastity, poverty, love, service, forgiveness, etc., what do people understand? They think we are irrational because the world's logic greatly differs from that of Jesus. In such situations, it is crucial to let the words of the Master resonate

within us and provide us with answers.

Let us continue with the words of Jesus.

To love means to be like Him, with Him. So, He adds: “*Remain in My love,*” it is the only time that Jesus asks us to love Him. It might seem like a selfish phrase since He taught us pure and selfless love. The meaning of Jesus’ words is: do you want to remain united with Me, share My life? Love! because My life is nothing but love.

But how do we love? By putting His word into practice.

“*If you love Me, you will keep My commands.*” The concept of love here is “agape,” which signifies selfless love—one that prioritizes the happiness of others over oneself. This verb epitomizes the life of a disciple of Jesus. Those who do not love merely exist; they do not truly live. The verb “Agapao” appears 259 times in the New Testament, more frequently than in all of classical Greek literature combined. In Jesus’ discourse (John 13-17), it is mentioned 27 times. Highlighting these numbers emphasizes the importance of this verb for Jesus. This love is not the same as the emotional love felt by lovers; it is about actively seeking ways to help and support those who suffer. But why does Jesus ask for this agape for Himself (if you love Me)? This is the first time He speaks in this manner. What does it mean to love Him? It is not a selfish request; otherwise, He would have used the verb “Erao”. It means that when making our life choices, we must “tune in” to Him as a lover would, striving to conform as closely as possible to the beloved. This is what He asks of us: to align

ourselves with His way of living. How much are we willing to entrust to Him in our lives? Jesus has placed everything on selfless, unconditional love (agape).

"If you love Me, you will keep My commands." It can seem surprising that a lover would speak of "commands" or orders. Unfortunately, many Christians view religion as a series of commands to follow. They believe they are Christians just because they go to Mass, confess, and follow the Ten Commandments. If that is all they do, is not true religion; it is fetishism, and it is dangerous because it can deceive us and prevent us from experiencing the true joy that comes from a relationship with God. It also hinders our growth into mature individuals. Jesus seems to say: you will keep My commands not by striving or achieving perfection, but only if you love Me, that is, if you strive to be one with Me in feelings and actions. The commands that Jesus speaks of, are meant to be understood in a context of love, not a master-servant relationship. Jesus calls us to "harmony," not to "mandatory" orders; it is about maintaining a heart disposition in a lifestyle where we can express our love. Human obedience keeps a person in a state of subjection, while consistency with His teachings, and likeness to His identity, keep us in harmony with Him. Jesus seems to say: If you love Me, observe My life and become like Me. Thus, the key to the whole discourse is not to be just or perfect, but to love. It is not about lifting ourselves from our poor condition by striving not to make mistakes anymore. No! It is to start from love, and everything

else will follow, because by loving Him, we allow ourselves to be guided by Him, and breaking away from vices and mistakes will naturally follow as a consequence.

In truth, Jesus gave only one commandment, during the same supper, and He called it *“a new commandment”*: *“Love one another. By this, everyone will know that you are My disciples.”*

But if He had said there was only one commandment, why does He now speak of following *“my commandments”* (plural)? This one commandment has many facets, many different expressions depending on the different situations in which it presents itself, and in each of those situations, the inner voice of our conscience tells us what we must do. We must follow this inner voice.

But is this inner voice something subjective? How can we be sure it tells the truth? To this question, Jesus responds by introducing a new person: the *“Paraclete.”* The word *“Paraclete”* is the Greek equivalent of what in Latin is *advocatus*, that is, one who is called to defend us from whoever attacks us. Jesus speaks of *“another”* Paraclete because He was the first. Now there is another one. What is this Paraclete's protective mission? The adversary is the one who takes life from me, who does not want me to live as a true man, the evil one who expresses himself with the world's mentality and does not want me to live as Jesus lived. The mission of the Paraclete is to free me from this wrong influence.

This Paraclete will be faithful, *“will be with you forever.”* Who is He? The Spirit who has been given to me and reminds me

of Jesus' teachings. He tells me: congratulations, you have been a true man, you have followed what Jesus would have done, you have not followed the mentality that would have led you to turn in on yourself.

Jesus defines Him as *"the Spirit of truth."* He is truthful, not in the sense that He does not tell lies, but that He leads us to be "true" men. Those who follow the mentality of the world cannot know this Spirit. The world says that man must learn to know the truth through his efforts, his research; And how many compromises people do to twist the truth to accommodate their interest. Here, Jesus reminds us that the truth is a gift that reaches us even where I cannot reach by myself, it must be given to me. The knowledge of the truth is not the result of analysis or speculation, but the acceptance of someone.

A little earlier, Jesus had said: *"I am the way, the truth, and the life."* How often in conversations do we feel that the other person doesn't understand us? What does it mean to understand? It means to open up and allow the other person to connect with us. Understanding is a gift that we receive, and the challenge in accepting it is not about being brilliant, but being simple and open.

Now let's take another step forward: *"If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word, and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him."*

When we strive to live like Jesus, that is when we love, the Trinity itself comes to live in us. Attention! This presence is

true, real, just like that of the Eucharist. When we love, it is God Himself who loves in us; our words, our actions, everything is influenced by His presence.

This is a very beautiful phrase but above all a very important promise. It is not just about knowing that the Father loves us; we already knew this because we know that God is love. Perhaps we are not very convinced that God loves us, but at least in theory, we know it. But here we have another verb: *"We will make Our home with him."* God not only loves us but dwells in us, He is inside us. Moreover, Jesus spoke of Himself and the Father, hence the plural, but then a few lines later He says that the Holy Spirit will come to stay with us. We are bearers of the Trinity. I want to repeat it again, because perhaps we have not yet understood the depth of this phrase. Here Jesus does not say that God loves us from the outside, follows us, watches what we do, and maybe gives us a hand, sends us a little gift from time to time like a friend who lives in another country and occasionally comes to drink coffee at our house. No! Here there is much more. Here it is clearly said: We will come and make Our home: the Trinity makes its home within us, establishes itself there full-time, becomes the master, and from now on, He carries things forward.

John had already used this verb "dwelling" in chapter 1 when he says that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. From here you can understand what it means: Jesus became one of us, took on our nature, shared everything with us: joys, sorrows, struggles, hopes.

A little earlier He had said: In My Father's house, there are many rooms, I am going to prepare a place for you. Dwelling includes stability, sharing, presence. We are bearers of the Trinity at every moment, just as we are bearers of the Eucharist that we received during the Mass. This means that at any moment of the day, wherever we are, whatever we do, we are not alone; He is with us. And all this is nothing but the appetizer because the best will come when we go to dwell with Him, to share His nature and life. Do you think about the consequences of this phrase? Think of all the times during the day we act as if God did not exist, as if everything we do depended only on us. Think of the times when we complain because things do not go as we would like and maybe we think that God has forgotten us. But God had said: *"Even if a mother forgets the child she bore, I will never forget you"* (Isaiah 49:15). So maybe it's not that He is not with us, but that we do not let Him work.

The Gospel, however, indicates a prerequisite for this presence: *"If anyone loves Me and keeps My word"*. Love is the key to the house and it is in our hands, He gave it to us, and we can use it to lock Him inside or outside or maybe lock Him in a closet, or we can use it to open the doors and leave them wide open.

I want to underline two phrases from the synoptic Gospels that help us understand how this love for God can become practical, after all, He Himself said that the best way to love Him is to keep His word. The first is when, speaking of the two

commandments of love (Matt 22:37-40), *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself*, Jesus adds that *the second* (love your neighbor) *is equal to the first*. In another passage, also in the Gospel of Matthew, we have the parable of the Final Judgment: there He says, *"Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of Mine, you did for Me."* This is what it means to let God dwell in us, this is how to make Him active, operative: by loving those around us and loving them in the small things of each day, like giving a glass of water, making a visit, etc. We do not need to be heroes, scientists, or saints to practice this kind of love; we just need to live the present moment consciously. When we begin to love, with small but concrete gestures, we will begin to feel His presence within us, and we will recognize Him by the gift He brings us: peace. *"I leave you peace; I give you My peace. Not as the world gives, do I give to you."* And here there would be a whole other sermon to give. Just one word: when a child is attached to his father, he faces all dangers with courage, not because he thinks the danger is gone, but because he knows that Dad is there and Dad is stronger. Among the many falsehoods that the world, today's society, feed us, there is that of peace as a reality resulting only from repression, overprotection, barriers, the use of force to frighten the enemy, comfort, and convenience at any cost. This peace that lasts only as long as a madman restarts the war cannot be true. Jesus' peace is not the absence of something bad but the presence of something

good, or rather Someone. We are not among those who say that peace means the absence of problems or struggles, but rather among those who know that God is there and, in the end, He will win and always win in love.

Let's go back to the discourse on the Holy Spirit. Speaking of His coming, Jesus calls him "*another Paraclete*" because He was the first. Now He must go so that the new one may come. But why this exchange? To remove those space-time limits that the incarnation had placed on Jesus. He, being human, could not be in two different places at the same time; while He was sleeping at night, He could not know what was happening in the world; He could not continue forever. Now, with the coming of the Holy Spirit, God can be present at every time, in every place, in every person.

What are the tasks of this Spirit? We have already mentioned the task of accompanying us; then there is the task of protecting us from everything that would detach us from God. This mainly refers to the lie, which is the devil's most powerful weapon.

Let us be careful that the Holy Spirit cannot protect us from the wrong choices we deliberately make, but through our conscience and His Word, He indicates where the truth is. That is why, at the beginning, He recommended being faithful to His word. And now He adds: "*He will guide you into all the truth.*"

Let's take a very practical example. We are in a society with many messages, confused and contradictory. If a Christian

decides to live according to the Gospel, he often finds himself facing the mentality of many people, ideas, and often even doubts, that invite him to make opposite choices. “Why bother? Don’t waste time on those things, have fun! Take advantage, no one sees you! Everyone does it! What’s the harm?” etc. The world has lost the sense of values, sacrifice, good and evil, but the Gospel remains and so does our conscience, and there the Holy Spirit speaks to us. He gives us the courage to be faithful, to make difficult choices. It is clear that to make the work of the Spirit effective, we must get used to confronting ourselves with the Word of God, read it, and question its relevance in our lives. Additionally, we must get used to listening to our conscience. Today’s society is the society of noise, of sounds. People are afraid of silence and as soon as they enter the house, they turn on the radio or television; as soon as they start praying, they feel the need to fill the prayer with formulas. People are afraid to ask themselves “what do I need to change in me?”

For personal reflection:

- Do I feel God's presence within me?
- When I think that He is inside me, what do I feel? Joy, guilt, embarrassment, enthusiasm?
- Am I aware that my vocation is to love and that its practical implementation is to serve?

- When I feel inspired to do something good, am I ready to respond, or do I let myself be taken by doubts and laziness?
- If I have to make important choices, do I let myself be inspired by the Gospel or do I reason only with my head?

THE FULFILMENT OF LOVE

We have gone through all of Jesus' teachings on love in the Gospel of John.

Now we must climb to Calvary, because there the future of humanity is at stake, but above all because there, love reaches its peak.

I want to dwell for a moment on two phrases of Jesus. The first is "*I thirst!*", the second is "*Woman, behold your son.*"

The first might seem to be a simple human cry of a person who is about to die and needs a bit of relief. However, the saints have always read this phrase as a spiritual cry; Jesus thirsts to do the Father's will. A few hours earlier, in the Garden of Gethsemane, He had asked the Father, if possible, to take this cup away from Him, but then submitted to the Father's will: *Not My will, but Yours be done*. And now He wants to drink that cup to the last drop; now His greatest desire is to be faithful to His Father and to save everyone, even those who, as the Gospel says, can offer Him only vinegar or gall. Christ suffers in the body, but He suffers much more in the spirit because He sees how far men are from the love of His Father, and so His physical suffering becomes the instrument to quiet this longing desire. Here we are not dealing with masochism but with love at the supreme level.

You know that Mother Teresa of Calcutta chose this phrase as

the motto for her congregation. At the origin of her choice to leave the Loreto convent to go to the slums was precisely this phrase that she heard from the lips of a poor person asking for help. It was not simply a poor person; it was Jesus from the cross asking for her help to carry forward His plan of love. Now Teresa had to continue this mission by taking on the fate of thousands of poor people because it was there that she could meet the Christ to whom she had consecrated her life. Allow me now to read you a page from our founder who, twenty years before Mother Teresa, commented on this phrase in the same way.

“See and love in the world nothing else but the souls of our brothers. Souls of little ones, souls of the poor, souls of sinners, souls of the just, souls of the misguided, souls of penitents, souls of those who rebel against the will of God, souls who rebel against the Holy Church of Christ, souls of degenerate children, souls of wretched and perfidious priests, souls subjected to pain, souls white as doves, pure angelic souls of virgins, souls fallen into the darkness of the senses and the low beastliness of the flesh, souls proud of evil, souls greedy for power and gold, souls full of themselves, who see only themselves, lost souls seeking a way, sorrowful souls seeking refuge or a word of pity, souls screaming in the despair of condemnation, or souls intoxicated by the ecstasy of living truth: all are loved by Christ, Christ died for all, Christ wants all saved in His arms and on His pierced Heart.

Our life and our entire Congregation must be a hymn and a holocaust of universal brotherhood in Christ. To see and feel Christ in man. We must have within us the profound music of charity. For us, the central point of the universe is the Church of Christ and the focus of the Christian drama, the soul.

I feel only an infinite, divine symphony of spirits, throbbing around the Cross, and the Cross drips for us drop by drop, through the centuries, the divine blood shed for each human soul.

From the Cross Christ cries "I thirst." A terrible cry of thirst, which is not of the flesh, but a cry of thirst for souls, and it is for this thirst for our souls that Christ dies. I see nothing but a heaven; a truly divine heaven, for it is the heaven of salvation and true peace: I see nothing but a kingdom of God, the kingdom of charity and forgiveness where the whole multitude of peoples is the inheritance of Christ and the kingdom of Christ.

We all experience moments of desire to do something more for God, the desire to be better, more active. Then we recognize our incapacity, our weakness, and everything stops there. We often experience various types of suffering: illnesses, old age, defeats, misunderstandings, disappointments; and all these things that make us suffer are yet another reason to leave our relationship with God aside. Instead, Jesus from the cross today tells us the exact opposite. It is with our sufferings that the relationship with God

becomes strong; it is by uniting with Him on the cross, with our crosses, that we become faithful Christians.

Now let us come to the second phrase: *Woman, behold your son.*

The account of the passion according to Mark would make us think that Jesus, at the climax of His mission, was left alone. John, however, emphasizes that Mary and John were there with Him.

This passage from the Gospel of John is the continuation of that of Cana. These are the only two times Mary appears and again Jesus calls her "*woman.*" Think about it, John does not speak of the Annunciation, nor of the episodes related to the birth or childhood of Jesus but only of Cana and the cross, despite the fact that he is the disciple who lived with Mary after the Resurrection "*and the disciple took her into his home.*"

This is the hour spoken of at Cana and referred to in the book of Genesis after the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden. Mary, the Woman, the mother, is there with the Son to crush the serpent's head.

And how does she participate? What is her part? John Paul II in the Encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* has this expression: "*Suffering deeply with her Only Begotten Son and associating herself with a maternal heart to His sacrifice, lovingly consenting to the immolation of the victim she had generated, Mary faithfully kept her union with her Son to the cross.*"

Suffering with the Christ who suffers, accepting this suffering

with love. Deep suffering, because dictated by the union of love, but acceptance because faith tells her that this is the path chosen by God for the salvation of many, including those who at that moment are the primary cause of this suffering. Here the mystery of suffering unfolds. Christ on the cross suffers on one hand because His body suffers: the wounds, the body losing its ability to endure, etc. But He also suffers, and even more than in the body, because He sees that while He is offering everything to save everyone, there are people who may not have this salvation because they stubbornly reject His offer of love.

Mary, as a mother, would have wanted to be on the cross herself, and die in place of her son, but the suffering she feels is no less than his. Jesus tells her that now it is her turn to continue his mission, according to the pact they exchanged at Cana.

We consider Mary as “co-redemptrix,” but she is only so if she enters into the mystery of this second suffering of Christ, the most intimate, the deepest, that only she can understand, having shared the entire plan of her son over so many years of closeness and sharing. So, when the son entrusts humanity to her, “*Woman (collaborator of the plan), behold your son,*” she takes on the mission with the concern that nothing is lost of that gift her son is making at that moment. Now she feels the desire that everyone, as much as possible, come to accept the redemptive passion of Jesus. I imagine Mary walking through the streets of Jerusalem, or the whole world, looking

at people and saying to herself: "my son wants to save this person too." The poor, the sick, the rejected, but also and especially the sinner, the blasphemer, the rebel, become the object of her interest, her care, her love, is to find a way to break into their hearts so that they accept Christ. I don't know if you've seen the film "The Passion of the Christ." After the scourging, they take Jesus away, Mary manages to enter the place and sees the blood of her Son on the ground. She runs, takes a cloth, and begins to gather that blood. Nothing should be lost of the blood shed by her son. A beautiful image of Mary's place in that great mystery.

Elizabeth had said: "*Blessed is she who believed,*" and this beatitude is fully realized right there where the pain is tearing her apart but does not crush her.

Mary would have thought again about those words as well as the angel's words when speaking of Jesus he said, "*He will be great and God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign forever.*" Contradiction? We humans would say yes. No, instead! if accepted with faith. Her human nature reminded her then of Isaiah's words when he spoke of the innocent servant condemned for the sins of many. How inscrutable the words of God are, how inaccessible His will is. At that moment Mary participates in the stripping of her son. He is stripped of his clothes and little by little of life, she is stripped of the honor of being a mother, of the attachment to all that was humanly left of their relationship.

The culmination of the scene, not told in the gospels but

represented by many great artists, is when they take Jesus down from the cross and she, the mother, takes him in her arms. Here there is the entirety of human passion, but also the death of it. Mary encloses in her arms the man and the God and hands over to God the man to whom she was so attached, in a supreme act of renunciation to remain identified with him only in the mission, in divinity. The words of Job resonate: *"The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."* I don't know if you've ever had the chance to see the Pietà sculptures by Michelangelo. Without a doubt, you know the one in the Vatican, considered the most perfect sculpture ever. Well, it was sculpted at the age of 24, at the beginning of his career, but many years later he sculpted three more. Critics define them as unfinished works, but Michelangelo did not leave them unfinished because he did not have the ability to finish them or because he did not like them, but because he understood that he could not give perfect human forms where the destruction of humanity was celebrated. Mary loses the perfection of human feminine beauty and through the pain that deforms her, she becomes similar, united, almost one with the son she supports. In fact, in one of these sculptures, there is God the Father supporting both Mary and Jesus, and beside them is the young John representing humanity as a witness to this fusion.

John Paul II also says: *"This perhaps is the deepest "kenosis" of faith in human history. Through faith, the mother participates in the death of the Son, in His redemptive death; but, unlike that*

of the disciples who fled, it was a much more enlightened faith. On Golgotha, Jesus through the cross definitively confirmed Himself as the "sign of contradiction," foretold by Simeon. At the same time, there were fulfilled the words He had addressed to Mary: "And a sword will pierce your own soul too.""

Lumen Gentium says: *"The knot of Eve's disobedience was untied by Mary's obedience;"*

We too, with our faith, are saved, but with the union to the sacrifice of Christ, we can save others. We must make this mystical vision of Mary our own, seeing in each of her children the one whom her "Son" wanted to save.

Do you now understand the meaning of the dialogue between Mary and Jesus at the wedding at Cana? John Paul II says: *"What profound understanding was there between Jesus and His mother? How to explore the mystery of their intimate spiritual union? But the fact is eloquent. It is certain that in that event, the new dimension, the new sense of Mary's motherhood, was already clearly outlined... In the Johannine text, however, the description of the event at Cana outlines what concretely manifests itself as new motherhood according to the spirit and not only according to the flesh, that is, Mary's solicitude for men, her going to meet them in the wide range of their needs and necessities... Mary places herself between her Son and men in the reality of their deprivations, indigence, and sufferings. She places herself "in the middle," that is, as a mediator not as a stranger, but in her position as a mother, aware that as such she can – indeed "has the right" – to present to the Son the needs*

of men."

It is as if after every one of our prayers Mary said to Jesus: remember how much we suffered on Calvary for this poor child of ours? Do we want to waste what we did there?

Recapitulating, what is the teaching of Mary for us? Love is:

1) Climbing Calvary with her, accepting trials, difficult moments. Not letting ourselves be blocked by fear but guided by Faith.

2) Letting ourselves be bathed by the blood of Christ that falls, drop by drop, from the cross and purifies us, teaching us to accept with love defeats, misunderstandings, slanders, sufferings. These are the moments where we purify ourselves, making us more like Him.

3) Taking the rest of humanity with us and with it descending from Calvary to re-enter the world and there support it with Faith, compassion, love so that nothing of what Christ has redeemed with His blood is lost.

For personal reflection:

- Mary, at the foot of the cross, is in an attitude of union, silence, and adoration. What is my attitude in moments of trial, especially those I do not understand?
- Do I feel the desire to move forward, to be faithful, or do I easily get discouraged?
- Do I feel the desire to help save others, even if they hurt me?

SAINT PAUL: To become one with Christ

Although the fundamental texts of the theology of charity in the New Testament remain those of Saint John, Saint Paul was the first to write about God as love. The texts of John represent the central treatise of the mystery of salvation, but these texts were written around the years 90-100, while Saint Paul, already in the years 50-60, speaks of Christ's love as the secret of our success as followers of Christ. There are many reflections that Saint Paul makes on love; let us try to see what the center of Saint Paul's Theology is and how it helps our reflection on charity.

I chose as the title of the exercises the phrase from the second letter to the Corinthians: "*the love of Christ compels us.*" It is a text that indicates that what Saint Paul does, he does not for personal motivation but for a mystical union with Christ. The word "*compels*" does not indicate a sense of obedience but an inner drive; not an external command but a mystical union. Saint Paul has lived so deeply in his mystical union with Christ that he feels transformed by Him. For him, being a Christian does not mean following instructions. One of his great battles was the primacy of grace over obedience to the law. On this subject, he even wrote two letters to say that the law alone cannot save; it is only through faith in Christ that one is saved. Following Christ only to put His commandments into practice would put us back in the same situation as our ancestors in

the Old Testament, nullifying the Incarnation of Christ. But Saint Paul did not act because he was following a doctrine, but because he felt a strong desire to be “one” with Christ.

The life and apostolic action of Saint Paul cannot be explained by obedience to the Torah; that was the old Saul, the persecutor. In a passage from the letter to the Galatians, he says: *“It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me,”* so he feels transformed by this union with Christ. In the letter to the Philippians, he writes: *“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted Him.”*

The best way Jesus demonstrated His divinity, was by renouncing it, to put Himself at the level of the humans whom he loved, accepting to serve, to suffer, and to die for them. The fact that God exalts Him indicates that if the nature of God is love, then He finds glory only in loving. The Incarnation is nothing but the supreme expression of God's love for us, and His death and glorification are the logical consequence of the realization of this nature. Therefore, Saint Paul is right to say: *“It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”* We are not followers of a book, but of a person who loves us, and since we feel loved, we want to give all of ourselves for her. The rest is just a consequence.

Saint Paul's letter to the Corinthians, in chapter 13, explains the practical implementation of the commandment of love. Charity is patient and kind and humble and does not give up, etc.; they are all ways of saying that when a person loves, he does not withdraw, does not step aside, does not give up, but goes on until he can accomplish things, because love is more important than everything. *"If God is for us, who can be against us? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation or distress... etc.?"* (Romans chapter 8). Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ who lives in us.

Saint Paul asks us: And what do you live for? What drives you? What is the engine of your life? What do you seek to accomplish in your life? How much space is there for Christ and God in your life? It is only by giving space to Him that you will find your true nature, because we were created in the image of God, and the image is being capable of living in the love that is the nature of God Himself.

Christ, with His redemptive action, has inserted us into the Trinitarian dialogue. With baptism, we become part of the mystery of God's very being. In Hebrew culture, the name expresses the very essence of the person. We have been baptized in the name of the Trinity, that is, we have been inserted into the Trinity itself. Therefore, if the nature of the Trinity is love, loving is being, even before acting. Being immersed in the Trinity means conforming to Christ Himself. This is the meaning of Saint Paul's phrase: *"The love of Christ compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and*

therefore all died. And He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for Him who died for them and was raised again” (2 Cor. 5:14-15).

There is a strong danger in us Christians, and it is thinking we are self-sufficient. We believe in God but act as if God had no influence on us, and therefore we transform our love into purely human love. Often, we think that loving means doing something for the other. Love, however, is a relationship, and a relationship is always a two-way process, giving and receiving, aimed at achieving unity. Love is an art that is learned little by little, but starting from God's gift. Scripture teaches us that even before we realize it, God pours out all His gifts upon us. *“In Him, He chose us before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight in love,”* (Eph 1:4). Therefore, the foundation of our action is God Himself. But this does not exclude constant commitment on our part, as God respects our freedom.

Here arises a question: Should I love God or my brothers first? How should I behave if the two things are against each other? Theoretically, the question might seem far-fetched, but in many religious communities, a similar question arises when we are in church praying, and someone rings the doorbell: should we answer or not?

As we become aware of the meaning of having God within us, we will experience deep joy, gratitude, and a sense of duty in responding to this gift. God's love permanently resides within us. When we seek God and His joy, we must first seek within

ourselves. At the same time, if we want to increase our knowledge of God, the best way is to begin to love.

Let's now take a more complete excursus of Saint Paul's quotations.

1. The first phrase is taken from Eph. 1:10 *"To unite all things in Christ"* Recapitulating all things in Christ. Our founder chose it as the motto of his spirituality.
2. Another phrase we have already seen is: *"The love of Christ compels us."* We chose it as the title of our course.
3. In the first letter to the Corinthians, chapters 12 and 13, we have the theology of charisms and charity. This text is fundamental, and we will dedicate an entire chapter to it.
4. His analysis of the world's situation is presented in the letter to the Romans in chapters 7 and 8. We will also dedicate a chapter to these.
5. The Christian lifestyle derives from the theology of Kenosis and the humility of Christ expressed in Phil. 2.
6. There are also many passages that help us have a clear idea of the importance of the cross of Christ for our spiritual life. Let's remember a few:
 - a. Col 1:24: *"Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh, I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of His body, which is the church."*
 - b. Gal 2:20: *"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me."*

- c. 2 Cor 4:8-10: *"We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies."*
- d. Phil 1:21: *"For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain."*
- e. Col 3:1-3: *"Since you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God."*
- f. Phil 3:7-9: *"But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith."*

Other quotations from Saint Paul on love can be found in the appendix of this book, in the chapter on community life.

Allow me a small quotation from the writings of my founder, Saint Luigi Orione:

"The 'To restore all things in Christ,' which was the cry of Saint Paul, the Apostle, and the program of our Congregation, we must apply it first to ourselves; first renew ourselves in Christ, then renew others. We will not renew others in Christ if we are not renewed in Christ, in

His holy love and with His holy grace, which will surely not be lacking” (Letters of Don Orione II. Christmas 1934).

Union with God and the ability to abandon everything to Him are possible only through prayer and the effort to conform to Christ, which is more than following Him. This means becoming one with Him, it means saying with Saint Paul: *“I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me”* (Gal 2:20). Leading a life of sacrifices and accepting all controversies are the most suitable way for our purification, to ensure that what we do, we do not do it for ourselves but for God. Here we can use another passage from Saint Paul when he says: *“Have this mind among yourselves, which was in Christ Jesus”* the divine Kenosis of Christ who humbled Himself to become the last.

For personal reflection:

1. During the day, do I let myself be inspired by the Word of God that I heard during Holy Mass?
2. If Jesus were in my place, would He do things as I do?
3. How much effort do I make to be like Jesus and change my character and attitudes to be more “Christian”?

TWO HYMNS OF ST. PAUL ON LOVE

Let us take some time to meditate on the two Pauline hymns to love. You might say: But we know there is one hymn to love, the one in 1 Cor. 13. You are mistaken, there is also a second one that we should actually consider the first, and we find it in chapter 8 of the letter to the Romans. Let's start with this latter one.

Romans 8: Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?

Chapter 8 of the letter to the Romans represents a pinnacle in the world of religious and spiritual literature. In the first seven chapters, Paul makes an intellectual and theological effort to explain to his readers that human nature is enslaved by its fragility, but it is also enslaved by the structure the Jews had built for themselves with the law. It was supposed to help them find God, but instead, it had trapped them in a series of rites that had cooled their hearts and numbed their will. Chapter 7 reached its highest point in the statement: *"I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do... For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue*

me from this body that is subject to death?" These are very strong and pessimistic phrases that seem to stem from a desperate heart, but instead, they are the preparation for the leap of faith, joy, the solution to all problems.

Now Paul lets himself go to poetry, as if suddenly finding himself freed and immersed in a new, beautiful, and serene world.

This chapter opens immediately with a peremptory statement: *"Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus... What the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering."* Our destiny, once we have been conquered by Jesus, is adoptive sonship: we are brothers of the Son, invited to sit at the very table of God. All who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

It is within our misery that redemption and sonship find the ground to take shape. This can happen because *"if indeed we share in His sufferings in order that we may also share in His glory"* (The mystical sharing we talked about in the previous chapter).

At this point, we must be silent and listen carefully because we might hear the groan of those around us who suffer because of the current situation. Listening to reality is an important foundation of charity. The arrival of sin in the world has produced destruction and suffering in all creation, and if we pay close attention, we can hear three types of

“groan,” three expressions of this suffering. Who produces them?

First of all, nature, creation. Nature, as if it were a person, is subjected to man from the moment of creation, distorted and suffering from the beginning because of man's sin, enslaved by his whims, devastated, polluted, and rendered sterile by selfishness. Man acts as a dictator, despising the original plan of creation and breaking the harmony of creation. (This topic has been well developed by Pope Francis in his encyclical “*Laudato si'*”).

It continues to degrade and groan but does not give up because it has something to look forward to and holds onto the hope that a new era will open, the time when man will be freed from this condition of sin and then it too will be liberated. Creation, on the day of glory when the image of the Son of God will be visible in man, will have its share of glory and freedom: it will resonate in unison with the glory of man in a way that remains mysterious to us.

Therefore, creation groans, not in despair, but in impatience, or rather, in labor pains, as Saint Paul calls them, because it knows, it feels, that its slavery will cease and that its pains give birth to a different world, truly made for man in friendship with God.

The second groan is that of man. The more he immerses himself in the noise of wild, unrestrained life that seems to guarantee him joy and power, the more he feels inwardly empty, realizing that these external things do not satisfy him.

They are temporary, fleeting, unstable, and deceptive, while he is made for something higher, eternal. Then his groan is that of someone who calls for liberation from decay and the slavery of sin, knowing that all this is possible in Christ. Here we find the famous phrase: *"In hope, we were saved."* It inspired Pope Benedict's encyclical: *"Spe Salvi,"* but also the theme of this Jubilee year. God, with His grace, has allowed us to experience, at least in part, the beatitude to which we are destined, so ours is a groan of impatience, of waiting for the adoption to sonship to be fully realized in us.

But we also have a third groan, and this is the groan of God Himself, that is, of His Spirit. Does God suffer? Physically no, but He is a Father, a loving father who sees the suffering of His children and can't wait to free them so that He can fully embrace them. The distance caused by our weakness is insurmountable for us, but *"the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us through wordless groans."* Here it is all poetry, we seem to see the man kneeling, shamefully stammering some words of forgiveness and the Holy Spirit whispering in the Father's ear something only they can fully understand, a language still too distant for us, limited by selfishness, but which fully expresses the very nature of God, His being Love.

And here begins the second part of the chapter, the canticle of the love of Christ.

Just as the Spirit does not abandon us in our ignorance and

intercedes on our behalf, so Christ does not abandon us in our sin and intercedes for us. Here are the words: *"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him."* (Faith and charity united). Without a doubt, difficulties and problems are connected with our mistakes, our incapacity, but we can never doubt God's healing action in every situation. Our elders used to say that God writes straight on crooked lines. Trials and sufferings purify us, make many of our false securities fall; mistakes make us humble; losses make us understand what is important. None of Christ's sufferings went to waste, so it is with ours if lived in Christ. Now we have a hymn of liberation. We know various of these hymns in the Bible. In the book of Exodus, we have the hymn of the people of Israel proclaimed after crossing the Red Sea and seeing their enemies overwhelmed by the waters; then we have Psalm 126: *"The Lord has done great things for us,"* perhaps written to celebrate the return from the slavery of Babylon. However, this hymn in the letter to the Romans represents the highest point because the liberation we obtain in Christ is definitive. *"If God is for us, who can be against us?"* Let us not forget that God gave His Son for us; how could He deny us anything else we need?

The language used by Paul, besides being highly poetic, is inspired by legal language. We are in a trial, and Paul speaks of judgment and condemnation. For centuries we have represented God as a judge who sends the wicked to hell because of their sins and the righteous to heaven for their

good works. Paul's perspective is very different: God is the one who justifies, who gives everything. The judge is Jesus, and He judges from the cross. Can He then condemn those for whom He died to save? He who intercedes for us and justifies, can He accuse? *"In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us."*

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" Here Paul lists problems and difficulties he experienced in his apostolate and that we too will experience in our lives if we follow the Lord with sincerity and courage. They cannot diminish the love God has for us. If I am sick, it does not mean that God loves me less.

It is interesting to see how this list is composed entirely of external things; in fact, it is only our lack of faith that can weaken our fervor, only we can harm ourselves.

Then, to give more strength to his statement, he repeats the list of possible obstacles we will encounter on our path towards union with God, and this time, he includes even positive things: life, angels, powers, etc., because everything can become an obstacle and temptation if opposed to God.

Many religious people, while living the three vows, face a subtle challenge. It can be easily said that they have never committed any sin against them, but at the same time, they have never lived them as a true consecrated person should.

It is also true that if a person takes seriously the challenges posed by the commandment of love and his vocation, he will surely have to face struggles, renunciations, oppositions, and

sometimes even persecutions.

We know the Gospel passage about Jesus' agony in the garden of Gethsemane. The inner spiritual struggle of Jesus, which also manifests physically, derives from the confrontation between the desire to be faithful to His mission and the many emotions that He felt as any human person. He knew He would die, and He was afraid; He strongly desired to remain on earth to continue His work; He probably also felt the doubt of having failed in His mission. Surely, in that moment of prayer in the garden, all these ideas passed through His mind. In the end, it is His love for the Father that allows Him to perform the last supreme act of obedience and accept the idea that the project must continue.

This is the meaning of Paul's words: *"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: 'For Your sake, we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

From the lows of the world and its fragility, described in the first chapters, we have risen to the heights of the Trinity. We followers of Christ must focus here, allowing this infinite love to enter and fill our hearts. If we are full of God's love,

“EVERYTHING” will go well, but if we detach ourselves from Him and go our own way, “EVERYTHING” will become an obstacle.

For personal reflection:

- What are my weaknesses (physical, psychological, moral, spiritual), and how do they affect my spiritual and apostolic life?
- How do I feel when I have to face defeats, mistakes, criticisms?
- What are the gifts (abilities) that the Lord has given me? Am I using them to increase my communion with Jesus, or do they sometimes become a cause of division, quarrel, misunderstanding with others?
- What is the main engine, the source of the strength that drives and sustains me in life and in this vocation?
- Do I hear the groans of suffering from the world and those around me? What do I feel like doing to come to their aid?

1 Corinthians 13: Love in practice

What we heard in Romans 8 is truly beautiful and inspiring, but then we return to practical, daily life, and the poetry loses its vigor. Paul responds to our uncertainties with the second hymn to charity, the most famous one.

Saint Paul starts with an argument that allows us to situate ourselves in the truth of things. A purely human love is not yet the virtue of charity. Saint Paul says: I could distribute all my possessions to the poor and give my body to be burned, but if I do not have charity, it benefits nothing.

It is not a matter of the quantity of what we do, but of quality. However, the flip side of the coin is also true: One cannot say that he truly loves God if he does not love his neighbor. This does not mean that the love of God passes only through works, but there is always the risk that the love of God, if not authentic, becomes evanescent, an alibi.

Saying that our love originates from God the Father means that it carries a reflection of His creativity. Imitating Him means bringing these characteristics into ourselves. Let me explain with a question: Do we believe in an Omnipotent God or a God who is “Omnipotent Love”? It might seem like a wordplay. However, if we say that God is omnipotent, we immediately think of someone who can do whatever he wants. We think of some tyrant who, if he wants, can destroy the universe with a snap of his fingers. But if we say He is “Omnipotent Love”, then He can do everything that is

consistent with His essence of love and nothing outside of it. Then, in a certain sense, we could consider ourselves stronger than God because we could refuse to listen to Him and welcome Him; He is obliged to respect our choice, but He can never abandon us and stop loving us. His omnipotence lies in the fact that in any situation we find ourselves, even the worst, He will always find a way to save us and restore us to full dignity, if we allow him.

Let us see some characteristic of the love of the Father, that often find difficult to apply to our way of loving.

God loved us first; the initiative was entirely His. How many times, faced with the possibility of helping someone we instead say: If he asks me well, if not... .

Love is free: it is not the response to a merit of man. Instead, we say: He does not deserve it... .

Love is kind: it looks only at the good of the beloved. Instead, we ask: Can he pay me back or not... .

Love is merciful: it is willing to forgive, understanding despite man's infidelities and lack of responses. Instead, we seek revenge.

Love is universal: it does not make any kind of discrimination. Instead, we say: To my friends, yes, to the others no... .

Love is eternal and faithful: God cannot take back His word. Instead, we say: Once is fine, but the next time... .

Saying that our love is a reflection of the love of the Son means that it must be set on acceptance and obedience, so love will be free of all pride, self-sufficiency, and indifference. We,

instead say: I'll take care of it, step aside... everyone must see me and praise me for this.

Saying that our love is a reflection of the love of the Holy Spirit means that it is set on communion, because the Holy Spirit is the communion between the Father and the Son. This communion helps us overcome all conflicts, divisions, incomprehensibility, and dispersion. Where there is a break, there is the desire to mend; where there is coldness, one feels uncomfortable.

This is the perspective in which the letter to the Corinthians is placed.

If we analyze the characteristics of love indicated by St. Paul in chapter 13, we can understand them only if we consider our love as a participation in God's love in us.

As we said above, we must say that if I have science but am without charity, I am nothing; even if I have faith or the ability to understand or prophesy, if I do not have charity, I am nothing. Even if I have the generosity to give everything, but without God's participation, I am nothing. Why is that? All these gifts are good and valuable, they are a participation in God's gifts, but given our imperfect nature, they are participated in an imperfect way and will disappear when they are no longer needed.

Love, however, is not a gift from God, but it is God Himself; it is not participating in a gift, but living in God Himself and therefore will never end. That is why in verse 10 it says that when perfection comes, all that is imperfect will disappear.

Let us keep in mind that this chapter is inserted in the discourse regarding the charisms that God gives to each of us for the community. They must therefore be subjected to charity to be true; otherwise, instead of bringing us to God, they make us proud, haughty, envious. Instead of creating harmony among us, they create division.

Charity is patient: it knows how to wait, it is farsighted, it knows how to tolerate, endure.

Charity is kind: it looks more at the good than at the bad. It uses indulgence, it knows how to put itself in the other's shoes.

Charity is not envious: It knows how to give itself instead of putting itself at the center. Therefore, it does not sadden itself for others' good but rather enjoys it.

Charity does not boast, it is not puffed up. It does not constantly draw attention to its merits. There is no boasting if one takes into account that everything we are and have, we have received it.

Charity does not lack respect: It is not invasive, it does not exploit others, but takes them seriously, recognizes their merits and roles.

Charity does not seek its own interest: Selfishness is the opposite of love because it judges for its own good and sets its own utility as the criterion for choice.

Charity does not get angry. Our anger is a lack of control over passions and stems from pride. Once again, it means putting oneself at the center.

Charity does not take into account the wrongs received. It is capable of forgiveness. Forgiving does not mean forgetting or even approving the wrong, but not letting the wrong influence one's behavior and judgment. (Rom. 12:21, overcome evil with good).

Here one could introduce a long discourse on forgiveness. It serves first of all for me, not for the other. I am the one who needs to know how to forgive. The other might not even know that I am angry with him, whether I forgive him or not, or he might already be dead or distant. Nothing changes in him if I forgive or not. But it is my heart that is agitated and anxious, if I do not know how to free it with a true gesture of forgiveness.

Charity does not rejoice in injustice but rejoices in the truth. It has no ulterior motives. It means committing to everything that is true and good, fighting all forms of oppression and injustice in society. It means not making room in our lives for the kingdom of the devil.

In conclusion, Saint Paul says that charity covers all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. It means that those who live by charity approach the facts of life with a great, magnanimous heart, knowing how to take upon themselves the mistakes of others, as Christ did. They know how to offer all to the Lord for the very good of those who do wrong. This means repaying evil with good.

These all seem like logical and easy things to implement, but they are not. I have experienced it many times when, during

the years as a novice master, I invited my novices to two months of practical reflection on this chapter. Every week we would take one of the characteristics listed above, comment on it, see how it could help our lives, and then commit to living it in practice. The following week, before moving on to the next phrase, we would do an analysis: How did I manage to put Paul's suggestion into practice? Most of the time the answer was: "Nothing! I forgot about it." At the moment of having to apply patience, meekness, understanding, forgiveness, etc., my emotions get the better of me, so I get angry, respond badly, and seek my own justice.

We have insisted many times on the fact of not putting oneself at the center. Man is in continuous relationship: relationship with God, with others, with oneself, with nature. If these relationships are based on charity, they take him out of himself toward others; if they are based on selfishness, they lead him to close in on himself. As a consequence, in relating to God, I risk imitating the Pharisee's prayer; in relating to others, I become a dictator; in relating to myself, I become a narcissist and delude myself.

The Word of God shakes us by showing us ideals that are opposite to those toward which our sinful nature inclines.

We must make ourselves a concrete program of charity, identifying what our main defects are, to correct, where our jealousy, envy, selfishness, etc., point to change.

We must start with a serious examination of conscience and aim for concrete charity there.

For personal reflection:

1. When analyzing things, how much am I influenced by human knowledge, and how much by the wisdom of God?
2. How quickly do I react to life situations? How much does my faith in God influence them?
3. How do I feel in front of others? Superior, better, righteous, more expert?
4. How much do I let myself be taken by morbid curiosity and the desire for gossip?
5. How much trust do I have in God's mercy? Do I think I deserve it?

LUKE: LOVE AS MERCY

The parables of mercy

In the Gospel of Luke, chapter 15, we find three interesting parables that concern the mercy of God.

1) **The lost sheep** (Luke 15:3-7)

The subject of the parable is clear: it is Jesus' preferential love for the poor, sinners, and the unfortunate. The lost sheep is not a victim abandoned by society or one that could not walk as fast as the others and therefore fell behind. It is probably the worst, the rebellious, the hotheaded one who wanted to do things its own way, who doesn't care about the community and its rules. But the good Shepherd turns to it, leaving the others alone temporarily.

Jesus is giving a reason here why he spends time speaking with sinners and goes to eat at their houses. In our time, the lost sheep represents the hotheaded, those who despise everything or want to break everything, the homeless, the drug addicts.

2) **The lost coin** (Luke 15:8-10)

Immediately after, he adds another parable. This time it is a coin that gets lost. We cannot blame the coin itself; we simply observe that the owner makes an effort to find it, even sweeping the entire house.

If previously we could talk about sinners who had strayed away, now we can simply talk about people who are distant.

Perhaps someone excluded from society because they are second-class, not good enough, or productive enough. God's attitude towards them does not change. These, on the other hand, are the cold ones of today, the children of atheism and consumerism. They are the majority of our young people. But also, the excluded, the refugees or the marginalized, the victims of racism and indifference.

3) **The loving father** (Luke 15:11-32)

The two parables say something important about God and His relationship with the distant, but they cannot be considered complete without the third, that of the Prodigal Son, or better yet, the Loving Father.

Here, it is the son of a good family who goes into crisis and needs independence; the father lets him have the experience. In those times, it was normal for a son to decide to try his luck elsewhere. But the lack of experience and discernment drives him make wrong choices. He lets himself be taken by the easy life, by getting by without particular effort, and thus be more subject to temptations. This leads to complete failure. Moving away from the father's house, one finds oneself with nothing. Fortunately, there is always a hint from God that makes us return, even if only based on human reasoning. It is only hunger and need, that make him accept to commit more, even in the worst job: taking care of impure animals. It is still hunger that makes him long for home, where even the servants have plenty of bread. So, he returns, but he no longer has love for the father: "At least I'll have bread to eat", "*Treat*

me as one of your servants". But he is resurrected by love to love. He was truly dead, because he no longer loved and believed he could no longer love. Those who knock on our door probably do so out of hunger or other needs, but they must find God with us.

We remember that in this chapter, Luke is talking about God's gratuitous love for sinners, so from the son, for the moment we cannot expect anything more than this.

The father still has the initiative. He does not wait for the son to speak, does not ask for explanations, only gives him love. The inner remorse and the humiliation the son is willing to submit to, are already sufficient punishment. The father restores his dignity. This is a father who sees him when he is still far away because he has never lost hope that he would return. He is his son; he cannot end badly, despite everything. So, there is a celebration again. In the Gospel, there is always a celebration for conversions, and there is food (cf. Matthew, Zacchaeus, the Prodigal Son). The topic Jesus is trying to address is the capacity to accept people for what they are, renounce judging, stop making useless comment of the like "I told you so!".

Up to this point, the parable is identical to the previous ones: There is someone who gets lost, is found, the Father's initiative, the final celebration. Here, however, comes the central point that makes the difference: the reaction of the older brother. He is perhaps the worst figure: he does not recognize the situation. Instead of loving, he invokes justice.

He feels he is right. Not only is he a good, hard-working, obedient, capable person, someone you can trust, he has no sins and therefore cannot be compared and placed next to the sinner who did nothing to deserve this celebration. Even the father is unjust; he never gave him even a young goat. He represents the Pharisees, but also those who go to church but feel they own the Church, the religion, and perhaps even God Himself. After all, "God cannot think differently from me". They are willing to criticize the pastor who wastes time with others instead of taking care of them, who, after all, are the ones who do everything in the parish. Often we have experienced the prodigal son, now we must be careful not to experience the older brother. We have experienced the father's love that fills us with his gifts every time we return. Be careful that when we lock ourselves in our false securities and sense of justice, when we feel strong for our purely human reasoning, we can come to find faults even in God. "God is unjust, why do I have this illness when I have done nothing wrong?" "Why does it always go well for those who cheat and never for the honest ones like me?" and so on. How many things do we have to recriminate against God?

Once again, it is the father who takes the initiative, goes to the son, does not judge him, invites him, explains to him, opens the door to his heart.

The Gospel does not say how it ends, because the story repeats itself every day. There will always be prodigal sons in the Church who want to return, and there will always be "wise

men" who, from the height of their wisdom, will have a thousand excuses to reject them; and God will always have His work cut out to make both understand that His love is completely different and greater.

Let us remember that the chapter began by saying that Jesus tells the three parables precisely to the Pharisees who criticized him for going to the sinners, so they are precisely the center and focus of Jesus' discourse.

What we must learn through these reflections is to let ourselves be guided by the logic of love, to let ourselves be filled with this love that burns all our miseries.

Love as attention to the poor. The rich man and Lazarus

Also in Luke, there is another parable that should make us reflect: the parable of Lazarus and the rich man. (Luke 16:19-31) This is a very delicate parable because it lends itself to many interpretations with a political color and could therefore be used wrongly. I will try to stick to the text.

What is the meaning of wealth? Most people today would say that one can accumulate goods as much as they want and do whatever they want with all their riches, as long as they remember to help with charity those who have not managed to accumulate anything. According to this interpretation, the rich man would have only committed a sin of omission, that

is, not having helped Lazarus.

What does Jesus say about it? In the previous chapter, in the parable of the dishonest steward, Luke indicated what the true use of material goods is: sharing. In this parable, he continues the argument.

The first character we meet is the rich man. He does not have a proper name; he is simply "rich." No sin is mentioned, it is not said that he stole or was dishonest. Perhaps he also went to the synagogue, prayed, and so on. Not even Abraham reproaches him for anything, he only says, "*you were rich on earth, now things are different.*"

He was probably just a clever, capable man who knew how to invest his goods well, and, according to the mentality of the time, everyone surely called him "blessed by God."

He was dressed in purple, red. Purple was the wealth of Tyre and Sidon, and clothes like that cost a lot. The dress indicates how we want to appear in the eyes of others, how we want to be considered. In the Old Testament, the dress is always a metaphor for the moral attitude of the person. The New Testament also has many similar expressions: "*Clothe yourselves with virtues,*" "*clothe yourselves with Christ.*"

This man was dressed in the ephemeral, in things that will rot in the future, nothing will remain. If you take away wealth from this man, what remains? Not even his name remains, as if he did not exist.

Which dress do we appreciate?

What does this man fill himself with? He stuffs himself with

splendid foods. It seems he lives to eat, to satisfy his gluttony. Jesus often participates in banquets but not as a place to overeat but as a place to talk to people in a more familiar manner. He proposes a banquet where the host is God.

So, to recapitulating, our "rich man" is a person who is not doing anything wrong.

The second character is Lazarus. He has a name that means "God is my help." Usually, we know famous people, the rich, the powerful by name; the poor are unknown, they are just numbers. In Jesus' parable, only the poor have a name, and it is a name that testifies to God's closeness.

What did he do? He stayed at the gate and was content with the bread crumbs. At that time, there were no forks and knives; people ate with their hands, so to remove the grease or dirt from their hands, they used pieces of bread, especially the soft inner part, that were then thrown to the dogs. Lazarus feeds on this, just like the dogs.

What good did Lazarus do? We know nothing about it, we only know that he is poor. He might be so because he was unlucky, or sick, or maybe even because of his fault: who knows how many mistakes he made in life to end up like this. But there is also a third character: God. He does not appear directly, but his thoughts are referred to by Abraham. Being the father of the Jewish people, Abraham is the most authoritative voice to know what is right or wrong. What does God think of this situation, which is also today's situation, where 1% of the people possess more wealth than the

remaining 99%?

Sooner or later, the time comes when all parties end. We said it in the parable of the dishonest manager, but also remember the parable of the rich man who, after an exceptional harvest, wants to build new warehouses to enjoy a long life of abundance. Today's parable says that this man ended up in torment; it does not tell us why; however, there are some impressive details in the story. It is the only time Jesus talks about the underworld with torments. Jesus is telling a parable, a story with a meaning; the details are not information on how things will happen but images to make us reflect on the topic of the day, which today is the use of wealth. "*The rich man opened his eyes,*" finally! He had never opened them before and had never seen the poor man, he sees him now, but it is too late. If the rich man had not kept his goods to himself, but had given them to Lazarus, now he would have been welcomed by him.

"*Now there is a abyss between you and Lazarus.*" There was already one on earth, but now it can no longer be bridged. Even today there are many abysses in society between rich and poor, young and old, tycoons and unemployed, healthy and sick, etc. This chasm must be filled here because God's goods are not only sufficient but even abundant, but they must be used to fill the gaps of the society.

The message of today's parable is not a recommendation to give alms but tells us that God cannot stand these gaps. It is not a sin to be rich; the sin is not making an effort to fill these

abysses.

Unfortunately, we know well that today's market laws do not leave us room for negotiation on how to use our wealth, and God's banquet where everyone can participate and celebrate ends.

Abraham appears as one without a heart. The rich man asks to send Lazarus to speak to his 5 brothers. They are the whole people of Israel, represented by the 5 books of the Torah. Abraham denies permission.

Instinct does not lead us to give, but to retain; what can heal us? The rich man thinks that a miracle would be enough (like making a camel pass through the eye of a needle). Abraham says: a miracle will not help, not even an apparition, but the Word of God. It is the word of God that can make us understand the destination of the goods of the earth.

It is not easy to be Christians and if we are consistent, we are required to go against the mentality of the vast majority of those around us, but above all, we are asked to go against the inner impulses that each of us has in front of things. Let's at least start by opening our eyes to see who is around us as God sees them.

The question we must ask ourselves is: Which side am I on? On the side of those who seek to accumulate good or those who distribute what they have? How aware am I of the people around me, and how willing am I to give up what is theoretically mine to meet them?

For personal reflection:

- Do I believe in God's mercy?
- When I approach confession, do I truly feel sorry for my sins and the desire to change?
- Have I ever complained to God because some sinner is luckier than me?
- Do I realize the needs of the people around me?

LOVE AS KEY TO UNDERSTAND EVERYTHING.

The new commandment

Let's move on to the Gospel of Matthew. Here we find the famous definition of the most important commandment of the law: *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself."* (Matthew 22:37-39).

In the time of Jesus, the Old Testament was considered the law given by God. This was to be obeyed to ensure His protection and blessing. This was really a complicated matter. There were too many laws, more than 600, and because of this, in a society mainly made up of illiterates and with few available writings, it was impossible for anyone to know them all. There was, in short, a great confusion. So, it was important to know which is the most important law to at least satisfy God a little. There were masters who became champions of one law or another, and those who followed them felt justified. Some placed ritual purity as the fundamental law because it was necessary to give us access to God and to places and times of prayer. Others, however, considered the observance of the Sabbath as the basic law, since it was the only law that even God had observed. There was the phrase quoted by Jesus, taken from the book of Deuteronomy, *"You shall love the Lord*

your God with all your strength, with all your mind, with all your soul" (Deuteronomy 6:5), but it was not considered a law in itself, but the basic reason for how to apply all the other laws. Even today, every good Israelite repeats this precept continuously. So, when Jesus quotes this passage to the scribe who had asked him the question, he did not make a particular discovery, but is making it clear that the importance of a law is not so much in executing it or not, but in how it is executed, since this indicates the sincerity of life.

The real novelty brought by Jesus, however, lies in the fact that he immediately adds: "*and the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.*" Jesus was asked to say what the first precept was, if he added the second, there is a particular reason. It lies in that small adjective that introduces the phrase "is like."

This word "like" is the same used in the book of Genesis on the occasion of the creation of man, where God says, "*Let us make one who is like us*" and in doing so he made us partakers of his nature. But it is also the word used in the letter to the Philippians where, in describing the mystery of the incarnation, Paul says: Christ humbled himself by assuming the condition of a servant and becoming "like men." We know that Christ was fully human in everything except sin.

In Matthew's presentation, Jesus is telling us that the love of God and the love of neighbor are closely linked, indeed they are one and the same.

In Christ, the love for the Father, that is, doing His will, and

the love for men, that is, saving them, are one and the same. We are called to be children of God by imitating Jesus Christ. Even for us, there cannot be a love for God without love for man, and vice versa, there cannot be love for man without love for God. Naturally, this is true only if we speak of true love and not substitutes. If we separate man from God, it is not clear what the value and dignity of man are and therefore what the reasons for loving him are. A social work in favor of man, if separated from God, does not lead to true promotion and always ends in conflicts and class claims. The love of God is not only the origin but also the reason and foundation of the love for neighbor.

Love as instrument for our salvation: The final judgement (Mt 25).

A couple of chapters later, Matthew reiterates, indeed deepens this discourse by presenting us with the parable of the final judgment. We are in the midst of the eschatological discourse: What must we do to meet God? When will we meet Him?

The parable is very solemn and written in the typical language of those times, used when giving speeches on public occasions in the presence of an important person like the king or one of his envoys.

At the end of times, Christ will come to judge the world. We should not expect a great event involving the whole world at

once. Each of us will meet Jesus at the moment of our death, that is, the moment of our passage from earthly life to eternal life. There we will be judged for how we lived our earthly life. What is the criterion of judgment that God will use that day? On what basis will I be judged? Love.

Jesus tells us that He is already here now among us and therefore we can meet Him now, without waiting for our death. Consequently, we receive judgment at every single moment, with every action we take. If we are capable of recognizing His presence, we already participate in the eternal beatitude that we will fully and eternally live after death. He explains this by saying that He is present in each of the brothers we meet who need our help. The question we must ask ourselves is: do we know how to serve others?

The images He uses to describe these encounters represent very simple and everyday situations, small actions that each of us can do many times every day: giving food, giving a drink, visiting, hosting, clothing. To make the image more vivid and understandable, Jesus divides people into two groups that He distinguishes with the words: blessed and cursed.

If you pay attention, the categories of people helped or not are 6, the number that represents imperfection, the lack of something, while each category is mentioned 4 times (I was ... and you gave me; when did we see you and give? I was and you did not give me; when did we?), a number that indicates human completeness (the divine one is given by the number 7).

The cursed are those who did not recognize Him and therefore did not act. I am convinced that if they had known that in the person in front of them was Jesus, they would have behaved very differently. When we have to deal with people, we always make distinctions between important people, whom we treat well, and those who are not important, whom we often ignore. Our behavior is driven not by love but by interest.

Even the blessed, in the parable, do not seem to have recognized Jesus, but they act with love and service; they are not driven by the importance of the people they deal with, but by their need. In them, there is no interest or personal advantage, but true love.

Therefore, the criterion of division is not dictated by knowledge, but by love.

If eternal beatitude consists in sharing the nature and life of God, which is pure love, every time we perform an act of love we anticipate this beatitude, while every time we refuse to love we lose that opportunity. Then Paradise and hell do not start after our death but already now. We believe that doing good is an investment for the future, but it is already a gain for the present. Simple knowledge, theoretical preparation, and even the perfect organization of a work done on paper are not sufficient, if not accompanied by an attitude of love by those called to implement the project.

This story, in itself, is not a parable but the concrete explanation of the two previous parables. The question from

which Jesus' discourse started was: how can I enter eternal life? The first parable, that of the virgins, said you must be ready and have oil in the lamp. What is this oil that must burn in the lamps and allows some girls to enter and others to remain locked out? In the second story, that of the talents, the question was: "how should we use the talents he gave us to enter?". The first story focused on the object, while the second on its use. Moreover, in both stories, it was emphasized that the bridegroom or king was absent and delayed in returning. Now the king has returned and things are made clear: the object (let's call it oil or talents) is love and the way to use it is to give it freely to everyone.

At the end of times, Christ will come in His glory. A question: when? It is not up to us to judge or organize; we must always be ready. I believe that none of us will see the end of the world but each of us will have to face his own death, and that is the moment when we find ourselves before Christ.

He will divide people as the shepherd does with sheep and goats. I think that here Jesus does not want to make any specific judgment on the two animals, but since a good part of the people listening were either shepherds or at least aware of the shepherds' customs, He uses a scene clear to all. Nights in Israel can be cold, sheep suffer from the cold and therefore must be brought inside, while goats do not suffer from the cold but suffer from the stale air due to the smell of their bodies and therefore must be kept outside.

What is the criterion for the choice of inside or outside? This

is the heart of the three stories together. It is such an important message that Jesus repeats it 4 times to make sure we understand it well: charity.

The one who speaks is the king seated on the throne, but we know well that for Jesus the throne of His glory is the Cross, that is the moment when the Father glorifies Him, the one on which Pilate had written "*the King of the Jews*," and of which He Himself had said: "*When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to me.*" Well, Jesus' criterion of judgment is this: be my imitators, I gave everything for you, at least you try to give a little for others who are the place where I live, the place where you must meet me.

Let's pay attention to some details of this charity:

1- It does not speak of quantity. He does not ask how many poor you have helped, nor how much money you have given; He does not ask us to be perfect in our lives. Here He refers to small things, a glass of water, a dress, a visit to prison or the hospital, things possible for anyone, even the poorest. So, it is not about focusing on doing but having a simple life attitude, living as Christ would live at that moment.

2- It does not even ask if the person receiving our gift deserves it or not, whether they are related or not to the giver by friendship or kinship. "*And they will ask: When did we see you?*" So, it speaks of free charity.

We are once again faced with the paradox of the Christian message that goes against all human logic and calculations of efficiency and profit. Nowhere in the gospel does it say that a

structure like the big modern hospital is automatically better than the small Caritas center you have in your parish. It is true that more people pass through there than through your center, but this alone is not an index of charity. It is not up to me to decide the fruits of love. Love bears fruit where we do not even think and reaches people we do not even imagine. The important thing is that I am living as Jesus lived, even if in my small, very limited way.

There is a great temptation among Christians called the "Savior syndrome." It corresponds, in the civil field, to the "omnipotence syndrome," that is, thinking that I have to do everything myself and that what I do not do or do not see the direct results of, no one else can do. The Lord is the only Savior of the world and the only one who knows the best way to save each one. We are small instruments, and He asks us for the small gestures of every day, but from all of us: no one is exempt from loving, because there is no kingdom of God without love.

The secret of true love is not so much in the success of our works but in the fact that by loving we become like God, instruments in His hands and this is also our reward.

Let ourselves be involved in the logic of love.

One last curiosity. After this passage, the story of the Passion of Jesus begins immediately. The narration of Jesus' public life had begun with the beatitudes, where the hungry, thirsty, persecuted, poor were proclaimed blessed, here the same become the key so that we too enter into beatitude. Matthew

1-4 tells the stories of infancy, Jesus enters history as a persecuted, poor, rejected, exiled person. Then it says blessed are the poor, etc. Matthew 25: The poor make others enter the kingdom of heaven, and then Jesus becomes the persecuted poor again.

The key to understanding Jesus' life and the key to the Kingdom of God lies in poverty, whether we live it ourselves or help others to live it in a dignified way.

For personal reflection:

1. What is my daily simple charity?
2. How many people have I refused to help just because they appeared unworthy?
3. When I do good to another, do I realize that I am the first to benefit from it?

LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR

"The charitable activity of the Church is a manifestation of Trinitarian love." (Deus Caritas est 19)

Love, by its very essence, is inclusive and meant for all. In the Old Testament, love was often confined to one's own people, while outsiders were excluded and even viewed as a threat. Jesus, however, transforms this perspective completely. Through the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10), He illustrates the true law of love. The legal expert began with a restrictive question: *"Who is my neighbor?"* Jesus responds with a story that dissolves such boundaries. In the parable, He refers simply to "a man," without specifying nationality—any individual, by virtue of being human, is deserving of care and compassion. This parable teaches that our responsibility to show love and charity extends to everyone we encounter. The priest and Levite, by prioritizing religious duties over compassion, demonstrate how even acts of worship can become excuses to neglect love. Their neglect renders their actions hollow and hypocritical, while the Samaritan—a foreigner—becomes the true example of love in action.

Moreover, Jesus shifts the focus entirely. Instead of asking who qualifies as a neighbor to love, He challenges us to become the kind of neighbor who shows love. It doesn't matter who stands before us; what matters is our commitment to extend love to them. The danger lies in paying

lip service to the idea of universal love while building barriers in real-life situations, with excuses like, "That's not my responsibility" or "I have other priorities." To become a neighbor means stepping into another's world—stooping to their level, sharing in their struggles, and addressing their needs. It's not about observing or helping from a place of superiority; it's about recognizing our shared humanity and treating those we help as equals. True love is not about playing the role of a benefactor; it's about being a genuine friend.

Let's look at the verbs used by Luke:

"He saw him": recognizes the value of the man he meets, the face of Christ in him.

"He felt compassion": In Greek, compassion means to suffer together, to feel the same emotions.

"He approached": He comes out of himself to concretely go towards the other, he bends over the other, sacrificing his time and his pride and offering his availability, his resources. He does not abandon the person but also takes care of his future.

From this parable, we must learn to combine the universality and proximity of love. For God, universality is perfection; for us who are limited, it can become an abstract concept. It is easy to love in theory those who are far away and whom we never see. This universality must find its concreteness in every person we meet, without discrimination. Therefore, universality is realized in proximity.

The question from which the entire dialogue between Jesus and the scribe started is: "*What must I do to have eternal life?*"

The purpose of the universality of our love, of our becoming neighbors, is eternal life.

The final phrase "*Go and do likewise*" provokes us not to stop at words. Becoming a neighbor means sharing, loving as oneself, helping the neighbor to regain his dignity, to walk on his own legs to become, in turn, a Samaritan for others.

Since every person is different from the other, our way of relating to them will also be different from one another. But every man, as such, is deserving of fraternal charity because every man is my brother, of any race or nation. Then we say that fraternal charity is vast because it must reach all men.

The foundation of fraternal love is in faith, in believing that Christ died for each of us and for each man; believing that every man is created in the image of God and has been called to be a child of God.

When man looks only in an earthly way, little by little, he begins to seek only his own satisfaction, and this leads to all the perversions we know.

Man's dignity does not derive from his qualities but from the very fact of being a man.

For this reason, fraternal charity is without preferences. If there is a preference to be made, the Lord indicates it in those who at first glance have no reason to be loved. The word "poor", in the Gospel indicates precisely that person who does not arouse any attraction in others and is therefore neglected.

We go from the classic beggar to the marginalized, from the physically ill to the mentally ill, to the handicapped, from the ignorant to the elderly or newborn. These are the people most in need of love.

The mother loves all her children, but if one is sick or more in need, she turns her particular love to him. Among the messianic signs left by Jesus, we have the healing and evangelization of the poor. Finally, Jesus says: "*If you make a banquet, do not invite the rich and those who can repay you...*". Allow me, at this point, to quote chapter 2 of the letter of James because it presents very concretely the need to be consistent with what we preach. James is the first bishop of Jerusalem, an apostle, and also a cousin of Jesus, given that his mother and Our Lady were sisters. He presents us with a very practical aspect of the Christian faith. For James, living the faith and loving is the same. The first action to which he directs his attention is to eliminate all favoritism. These must have been very strong in the Church of Jerusalem. Favoritism should not exist, and if they must be made, they must also be based on love, which means meeting those who are more in need. For example, if I only have one piece of bread and have to choose to whom to give it, to someone who eats three times a day or to someone who hasn't eaten in two days, I can show favoritism to the hungry one. In the example brought by James, it is immediately evident that he speaks of favoritism based on selfishness (how much can I take from that person), on external appearance (that one seems powerful or rich),

therefore on fear or false respect. They are all thoughts founded on inner weakness and not on values, therefore, they are not worthy of God. When we make distinctions between people, without noticing, we reveal our own nature.

The curious thing is that in James's time, the problems of the nascent Church were all caused by the rich and powerful, politicians, Pharisees, etc. So, the favoritism created harmed the community even more. God has chosen the poor. The value of a person does not lie in what they have or in their position, but in the fact that they are created by God and are in communion with God. Faith makes a person rich because faith actualizes the nature of people. The heirs of the Kingdom are those who love God.

The last sentence is a bit mysterious: *"Judgment will be without mercy against those who have not shown mercy; mercy, however, always prevails in judgment."* If you base your actions solely on practicing laws and rules, they become important and become the yardstick of value for things. But in the end, who will be able to observe the law 100%? So, acting this way, we put ourselves in a situation of being condemned or failing. If, instead, the yardstick is mercy, (the way a mother sees, who has all the love and concern for her child, therefore patience, joy in seeing growth more than results, looking at the heart and intentions rather than the action itself), then this attitude will also be applied to our mistakes.

There is a very dangerous psychological illness that often

strikes religious people: perfectionism. Perfectionism prevents us from being free. It is not based on any common sense or intelligence but only on the fear of making mistakes and therefore being judged, punished, not appreciated, etc. Those who live with this attitude have already condemned themselves because no one is capable of being perfect. Moreover, we lie to ourselves when we say that others reject or judge us based on our mistakes. By saying so, we start not from the reality of others but from our own inner weaknesses. This way, we will never build a community, nor will we have a serene relationship with people.

For James, faith and love are inseparable, and true faith must consequently lead to fruits of love. James likely heard the echoes of Paul's preaching (Galatians and Romans), in which it is said that only faith saves us. It might seem that there is a contradiction between the two. In reality, this contradiction does not exist, and James is probably correcting a misinterpretation of Paul's message. Paul speaks of the opposition between faith and adherence to the law. James himself said that the true law is the law of freedom (not that of Moses), a law based on love. Therefore, James does not want to diminish the value of faith but makes it clear that true faith is understood only starting from love. Paul himself, in 1 Corinthians, said that in the end, only love will remain and that this is the safest and most perfect way to reach God. Thus, both fight against the rigorism of a law applied without heart but to the letter, and both emphasize that only union with God

(in faith, which consequently means love) is the way to salvation. Paul analyzes the matter from a theoretical point of view, James from a practical one.

To clarify this point better, James poses an interesting question: *"Do you believe that there is only one God? Even the devil believes that."* Here is the example of a faith lived at the level of the mind alone, without emotional involvement. Both Paul and James cite Abraham as an example of a person who was justified by his faith. It is true that Abraham first had faith, but then his faith led him to very concrete works, to the point of wanting to sacrifice his own son. Therefore, faith and love must go together as two inseparable parts of the same reality. The ultimate point of this fraternal charity is love for one's enemies. This goes beyond love for the poor not only because it has no attraction but especially because there would be a thousand reasons for so-called "justice" to deny our love. "He must pay for all that he has done to me; he searched for it, I cannot do anything about it." Here, the motivations of faith must intervene. Despite all his mistakes, he is still a human being, a child of God, and to save him, Christ sacrificed himself. On the cross, Jesus prays for those who crucify him; He asks us to love our enemies. Saint Paul says that it is already difficult to find someone willing to give their life for a righteous person, let alone for sinners. (Romans 5:6). The reasons for loving a sinner are not in sympathy or convenience, nor in the fact that he recognizes his fault and apologizes. The only true reason lies in faith in what God has

done for him and, thanks to this, in the hope of his conversion. He seeks the right way and moment to save him; who knows if He has chosen us as His instruments.

In loving all men, naturally, we can have people with whom communication is easier, more congenial, with whom we can share ideas and projects, values, ideals, etc. This particular type of love that we commonly call friendship can never contradict the characteristics of fraternal love, that is, it cannot be selfish or narcissistic; rather, it must be a greater stimulus, an opening towards others.

Naturally, an even greater bond exists within the family, where the bond of marriage or parenthood, sonship involves a greater commitment to being faithful to this love. However, even this love cannot go against the characteristics of true love; indeed, as the Church teaches us, within the family, we have the greatest example of God's love for His people.

Charity is directed towards all people, so the first thing to do will be to respect everyone's rights, and this we call justice. Justice is always linked to charity, even if charity goes far beyond. We can say with one word that justice is the minimum measure of charity. With justice, we go beyond the good of individuals; we look at the very structures of society in which the person is inserted.

A double mistake to avoid is that of liberalism, which believes that everything is based solely on the individual, or collectivism, which believes that everything is structure and that individuals are simple puppets. Instead, as Christians, we

must find the balance between the person and their social relations, the good of the individual, and the good of the "we." Loving the neighbor in this way, that is, on a social level, means striving to impact those structures that create situations contrary to individuals. Limiting oneself to giving alms or charity without acting on those structures that reduce man to having to beg, is reductive.

This type of social commitment also includes politics. Today, there is a need for Christians to enter all spheres of society, not to secularize their message, but to become the leaven of society itself. Paul VI defined political commitment as: "A demanding way of living the Christian commitment in the service of others" (OA 46). John Paul II says that without the commitment of this political charity, the structures of sin, in which private interests are looked after, and not the common good, become rigid against man himself (SRS 36).

In social commitment, care must be taken not to linger at a level of pure efficiency. Charity is always something theological. The true liberation of man must bring him closer to God. It is a fact that in many more developed countries where social structures seem better but the spiritual aspect is weaker, there is a higher level of suicides, drugs, etc.

As Paul VI says, charity must give a soul supplement to society.

Our commitment must be to form a common consciousness of justice and charity and, above all, to form the people who will have to carry forward this social commitment.

Finally, there is charity towards oneself. Jesus reiterated the commandment of the Old Testament: "*Love your neighbor as yourself.*" Often we stop at the first part, the neighbor, taking for granted that everyone loves themselves. Other times, if we think about loving ourselves, we believe that it is not true love because loving oneself is selfishness, which is the opposite of love. Love is by its nature diffusive, that is, it looks outward. So, what did Jesus mean, and how is it possible to truly love oneself? To love means to want the good of a person, so we must want the true good of each of us. The true good, not the passing choices dictated by pleasure or desire. The true good for every man is to fulfill himself, to become a mature person, to grow in all those qualities that God has given us, that is, to follow the vocation He has given each of us. The gifts He has given us must be put to good use if we do not want to remain frustrated people. Furthermore, we must defend our health, both physical, psychophysical, intellectual, and spiritual. We must say no to all those daily choices that can harm us, take us away from God, and from being truly ourselves.

In all this, great care must be taken not to fall into the opposite excess, becoming health-conscious, placing health above God. Above all the gifts that God has given us are naturally those supernatural: His grace, the possibility of participating in eternal life.

Loving oneself, therefore, means valuing all these gifts received from God, but to do this, we must also die to ourselves in everything that is negative, die to our purely

human visions.

Special attention must be given to our becoming saints. For this, Saint Augustine said: "Love and do what you want." Holiness is living in union with Christ, fulfilling our vocation as human beings and children of God, and it is the best way to love oneself.

For personal reflection:

1. Can I recognize the needs of the people around me? Do I feel compassion? Do I move to do something, or do I make many excuses to remain still?
2. When making choices, how much am I influenced by external appearances?
3. Do I know how to respect the rights of others, even if this will lead me to have to give up something?
4. Do I create favoritism? Are there people I treat differently? Why?
5. Do I take care of my physical, mental, spiritual health?

JESUS AND THE POOR

What did Jesus' public life consist of? He tells us himself when, in the synagogue of Nazareth, after reading the passage from Isaiah: "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me and has sent me to announce the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the prisoners and joy to the afflicted,*" (Is 61:1-2; Lk 4:16-30), he adds: "*Today this word has been fulfilled.*" Therefore, his life was preaching and action in favor of the unfortunate. In this, he causes disruptions in society because he goes against the parameters of the well-thought.

But who are the poor?

In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus is presented as poor, having nowhere to lay his head, and he sends his disciples without coins in their belts. His action to rehabilitate the poor class starts from sharing life.

In the Gospel of John (6:5-7) we have the multiplication of the loaves; we see that Jesus refuses to resort to money to help the hungry. He prefers to use a boy's lunch to show that it is not the amount of money but sharing that solves the problem of poverty and indigence. The fact that when Jesus asks where it is possible to buy bread for the crowd, Philip calculates how much it would cost to buy bread, indicates that they had at least some money. (In the episode of the Samaritan woman, the apostles had gone to the city to buy food. Jesus'

provocative proposal to buy bread is discarded not because it is strange but because of the enormity of the required sum). Jesus accepts the boy's offering. The poor share what they have with the poor. Jesus takes it from his hands and distributes it. He also shares with the poor. Surely the boy had gone to offer something for Jesus, not for everyone; he did not think of the miracle.

John's intention in presenting this miracle is to give a sign that introduces the reality of the Eucharist. Christians should learn to move from sharing the Eucharistic supper to sharing material life. Nowadays, in our society, the poor, the homeless, the drug addicts, etc., are increasingly marginalized so as not to disturb the serenity of those who are well off. Fortunately, there are associations that care about them. The story continues with the words of Jesus. "*You will always have the poor with you,*" but this provocation should reach all Christians and call them to true sharing.

Another marginalized category at the time of Jesus was that of the Samaritans. For historical and religious reasons, they were considered enemies, heretics, dangerous, and therefore to be avoided.

Jesus is determined to break the barriers of hatred. Not only is the person he meets at the well of Shechem a Samaritan, but also a woman and, moreover with an irregular marriage life. By stopping to talk to her, Jesus accepts contamination. All this scandalous overturning of religious customs occurs through a simple dialogue, a sign of the simplicity of God and

His actions. In one stroke, Jesus breaks down the wall of four discriminations: gender: speaks with a woman; puritanism: speaks with a sinner; race: speaks with a Samaritan and finally with an entire Samaritan village; political/religious: tells them that it will no longer be necessary to go to the temple but will suffice to worship in Spirit and truth.

Even the divisions over what is sacred are overcome "*in truth, the time has come when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship God, but in spirit and truth.*" From now on, religion can no longer be a cause of division because the reference point will no longer be a place but the salvation given by Jesus.

Here we should ask ourselves where this teaching of Jesus has gone, considering that precisely in the name of religion, we have waged many wars and continue to create divisions and hatred. Starting from this position of separation, the Samaritans become an excellent example for Jesus to attack the inconsistency of the Jews and to make it clear that the salvation he brought goes far beyond the borders of Judea.

Today, Samaritans could be considered all those who are victims of geographical, linguistic, or religious marginalization. Divisions between North and South, East and West, Protestants and Catholics, Muslims and Christians, non-Europeans and Europeans. Christians should have the courage to immerse themselves in these situations of marginalization.

The last category I want to analyze is that of women. What

novelty did Jesus bring in his relationship with them?

First of all, let's take a brief look at the condition of women in Jewish society at the time of Jesus.

The society was patriarchal, which means that the power of men was absolute. The girl was under the authority of her father until marriage, which usually occurred very early. If the father died, authority passed to the eldest brother, not the mother. When she got engaged and married, she came under the husband's tutelage. She could not appear in public unless completely veiled.

It was disdainful for a man to speak publicly with a woman, and if he found himself needing to do so, he had to have witnesses with him. Rabbi Jose ben Johanan of the first century said: "Do not speak much with a woman, neither with your wife, nor much less with your neighbor's wife." "He who lingers to speak with a woman brings evil upon himself and will end up in Gehenna."

Consequently, women had no public rights: she could not divorce her husband but could be easily divorced by him; her testimony in court did not count, she was not even called; she was not required to attend the synagogue to pray or to fulfill the law, as she might be impure due to her menstrual period. In the temple of Jerusalem, there was a courtyard reserved for them, and they could not access the men's courtyard.

Every pious Jew recited this prayer three times a day: "Blessed be God who has not made me a Gentile, ... who has not made me a peasant, ... who has not made me a woman,

because a woman is not obliged to observe the commandments."

Naturally, noble or high-ranking women allowed themselves to escape these restrictions.

Her task within the house was to oversee ritual purity in food and sexual matters. Her tasks outside the home were to grind grain and draw water from the well.

This helps us understand the scandal of the disciples when they see Jesus talking to a woman at the well.

The initiative to restore the Samaritan woman's dignity comes from Jesus: he provokes her by asking for a drink. The woman's astonishment is perhaps mixed with a bit of fear. This is a Jew and, moreover, not very observant; he could have ulterior motives. The discourse on that strange water gradually opens the way to deeper communication. It is still Jesus who gives a twist to the conversation: "*Go call your husband.*" This might seem more reassuring but becomes much more embarrassing because she is forced to admit her irregular situation and because Jesus demonstrates he already knows the situation. Admitting her situation so openly certainly shows a woman disdainful of public opinion, but at the same time, a religious woman who grasps the prophetic aspect of Jesus' knowledge. She now shifts the conversation to a more religious level. Feeling discovered but simultaneously respected in her intimate life gives her the confidence to speak and listen. The barriers have collapsed. The astonishment and perhaps admiration increases when

she sees that Jesus knows how to go beyond the law to reach the core of religion: "*The Father seeks worshipers in Spirit and truth.*"

Jesus' phrase: "*The Messiah is he who speaks to you*" gives the final blow. She is now won over, has become a disciple, and as such abandons everything. The jar left at the well clearly shows a break with the past and her situation, and she becomes a bearer of the good news, inviting everyone in the village to go to Jesus.

Another example are Martha and Mary, sisters of Lazarus. They live in his house, so they are not yet married. The house must be quite wealthy, both from its location and from how the environment is described. It appears that along with their brother, they were disciples of Jesus, even if not among those who walked with him. Nevertheless, Jesus willingly visited them.

A first episode occurs on the occasion of Lazarus' illness and death. They send word to Jesus that Lazarus is ill, a gentle request for help that Jesus seems to ignore. For this, Martha will say: "*If you had been here, my brother would not have died,*" even though this moment of anguish does not diminish her faith: "*But I know that even now, whatever you ask of the Father, He will grant you.*" Martha is the example of Christian faith, completely directed toward Christ, the Son of God, and the Savior of the world. With Mary, the discourse is shorter and ends with Jesus' tears. Martha revealed the divine aspect of Christ, while Mary showed the human aspect. Now the two

sisters disappear to make way for Jesus to perform the miracle.

A second episode occurs a few days later when there is a banquet in their house, probably to thank Jesus for the miracle.

Here Mary again demonstrates that she is the loving and attentive disciple, anticipating Jesus' entire destiny. She anticipates the washing of the feet and anoints them with myrrh, foreshadowing his death and burial. The woman's attitude is shocking. For the Jewish mentality, it was reprehensible for a woman to wash a man's feet at a public banquet; she also dries them with her hair; only street women appeared with loose hair, and then she uses a very expensive perfume, equivalent to 10 months' wages for a laborer. Even if the family was rich, that money could have been used for the poor, as Judas says. Mary breaks all the barriers that subject women to men to give space to her love for Jesus.

Finally, we have Mary Magdalene. She was one of the women at the foot of the cross. She probably went down to Jerusalem with Jesus and the other women for Passover.

We find her at the tomb (John 20). She was driven there early in the morning by her fervent love for the Lord, and when she sees the stone rolled away, she is immediately worried that they have taken him away. Only when she hears herself called by name does she recognize him, like the sheep who hears and recognizes the shepherd's voice (John 10:4). She wants to embrace him and never let him go, but the Lord prevents her

and sends her to the brothers. Mary is thus described as a disciple and envoy of the Lord. Naturally, all this goes against Jewish custom. Who would have believed the testimony of a woman?

Summarizing Jesus behavior with women we could say:

First of all, we note the singularity and transgressiveness of Jesus' behavior, which breaks all patriarchal schemes.

The woman is no longer confined to the house but goes out and travels with Him around Palestine.

Moreover, she knows how to act and behave independently of men.

She also takes on responsibilities and apostolic actions.

Finally, there is perfect communication between men and women without mutual fears or mistrust.

The woman, freed from marginalization, can unleash her faith and love, her dedication and identification with the person and mission of Jesus, and thus can rediscover her true identity in the new Christian community.

This path of women's liberation, begun by Jesus, has found a long and difficult road to follow over the centuries. Until a few years ago, demands for equal rights had harsh responses in society.

For personal reflection:

1. In our apostolate, do we pay more attention to the poor or the rich? To those who truly need help or to

those who already show good results?

2. Do we seek success, or do we give more importance to people?
3. Do we seek the support of powerful people, or do we trust in God's Providence?

LOVE AND FORGIVENESS

One of the most important aspects of love, perhaps the highest, is forgiveness. Forgiveness has been discussed by everyone—philosophers, psychologists, not only people of religion—and everyone agrees on its necessity.

Forgiving is difficult; when we try to forgive, we feel an internal force pushing us not to do it. It's as if the head says: you must do it, but the rest of the body says no. So why forgive?

First and foremost, because it is Jesus Himself who invites us to do it and because He Himself has done it. Additionally, it is part of our nature. We were created in the image of God, who is love, and therefore only when we love do we fulfill ourselves and achieve the inner peace and satisfaction we seek so much. Every act of anger, resentment, revenge, every form of violence distances us from God and thus from our happiness.

Finally, we forgive because we love God. The person in front of me who has hurt me is a child of God; Christ died on the cross for him, regardless of whether he deserves it or not. If we love God, we want to do the same as He does and contribute to the success of His work.

What do psychologists say about this? Psychology states that anger, guilt, and the pursuit of revenge ruin inner peace and mental health. Forgiveness can help heal, reduce stress, and overcome depression. It helps us free ourselves from all

negative forces, such as resentment, fear, and vengeance.

Many philosophers have also spoken about the necessity of forgiveness. I find it interesting to cite a German-American philosopher: Hannah Arendt. A Jewish woman born in Germany, she grew up during the period between the two World Wars and had to flee first to Switzerland and then to the United States due to the persecution of Jews by the Nazis. There, she continued her career as a philosopher and a teacher of politics. In her reflection on what happened during the world wars, she wrote several books on totalitarianism and the political actions of fundamentalist individuals, racism, and so on.

She says forgiveness is an act of liberation; it is one of the human abilities that allows us to counteract the irreversibility of actions (from the book *"Vita Activa"*). Forgiveness does not replace justice but goes beyond—it concerns the person, not the act they committed. Forgiveness offers the possibility of a new beginning and shows that we are different from what we have done. In politics, she applied it especially when during the trials against Nazi leaders, after the war when, she wrote about the crimes of totalitarianism, and the atrocities of conflicts. She also acknowledges, however, that forgiveness is a difficult act of freedom and therefore cannot be imposed on others. Finally, she says we must remember that I need to forgive, far more than the other person needs my forgiveness. As for us, we can say that the process of forgiveness is difficult also because we often have mistaken ideas about what

forgiveness truly is.

Here are 10 points we need to be clear about:

1. **Forgiving is not forgetting.** Forgiving and forgetting are two different things: forgiving is an act of the heart that we can achieve through a long internal process; forgetting does not depend on us. No matter how hard we try, we cannot erase the memory of what has happened. It would be wonderful to wake up one morning as if nothing had happened or to tell ourselves, “From today, I must no longer remember the wrong done to me!” Unfortunately, scientists have not yet invented an eraser for part of our brain—and I say, thanks God for it! Forgiveness is an act of love; how can I love if I forget? Forgetting is an act of selfishness, while forgiving is an act of love. Wanting to forget a serious wrong, is like expecting a wound not to leave a scar. Sometimes the memory hurts so much that we remove it from our conscious mind as a defense mechanism. But removal does not mean deletion; sooner or later, something may bring back the memory of the harm, and we will face pain that has not yet been overcome. Forgiveness can make the memory less painful, even though it remains.
2. **Forgiving does not mean enduring without reacting.** Our first duty to ourselves is to defend ourselves. If someone threatens us or another person with a weapon, our priority is to disarm them.

Misinterpreting Jesus' words about turning the other cheek, some think: "If I must expose myself to harm again, then I can't forgive." It's legitimate not to want to suffer harm again. If someone continues to suffer without reacting, instead of feeling virtuous for leaving and forgiving, they might ask whether they are trapped in a toxic relationship they cannot escape.

3. **Forgiving does not mean reconciling.** If reconciliation means being hurt again, it's right to avoid it. Forgiveness is possible without reconciliation, while reconciliation requires forgiveness. We may forgive in our hearts, wish the person well, and feel no resentment, but it may not yet be appropriate to meet or clarify things if the other person is not ready.
4. **Forgiveness does not require apologies or the presence of the other person.** We can forgive even if the person who hurt us does not admit it, is unwilling to change, or is no longer present in our lives. Forgiveness comes from a choice of the heart and doesn't depend on the other person's acknowledgment or participation. Jesus forgave those who were crucifying Him, though they likely did not hear or accept His forgiveness.
5. **Forgiving does not mean giving up justice.** Some forgive serious crimes without wishing for the perpetrator's release from punishment. For instance,

one can forgive a family member's murderer without desiring that they stop serving their sentence.

6. **Forgiving does not mean compromising on values or showing weakness.** Forgiving someone who betrayed trust or fidelity does not mean abandoning those values. Forgiveness incorporates deeper values like compassion and understanding. It's a profound journey that requires inner strength.
7. **Forgiving is not an act of superiority.** Forgiving to feel superior to the person who hurt us is far from true forgiveness. Forgiveness is not about denying the harm done or devaluing it; it's about respecting oneself and understanding that we are all interconnected.
8. **Forgiving is not a way to atone.** Some may think, "Since I've made mistakes too, I'll forgive to be forgiven." While the Lord's Prayer may inspire this idea, forgiveness is much more: it's a supreme act of humanity tied to our essence as humans.
9. **Forgiving cannot be just a religious obligation.** Forgiving because it's "right" or because God commands it is insufficient. Forgiveness must come from freedom and awareness. The Gospel encourages forgiveness to lead us to fullness in life, generating true vitality.
10. **The ability to forgive is not innate.** Forgiving is not like having blue eyes or wearing a size 38 shoe.

Forgiveness, like love, is something we can choose to integrate into our life's path. It's not easy, but it is a transformative journey.

From all of these, we understand that, as mentioned above, forgiveness is not an act but a long process that leads to a deep inner transformation. It is not a single event; it is a life choice that must be renewed every day.

Forgiveness is a process that benefits the one who forgives more than the one who is forgiven. This does not mean that as soon as I express my forgiveness, everything is automatically resolved. The other person might not accept my forgiveness or may be absent. The wounds I carry within me will not be erased; they remain even after forgiveness, but now I have the strength and motivation to accept them and ensure they no longer harm me.

Forgiveness does not mean rejecting reality or becoming estranged from it; rather, it transcends reality and allows us to see beyond. Only in this way can we speak of true love. That is why it makes little sense to ask someone who has just been hurt whether they will be able to forgive the person who harmed them; forgiveness is the result of will, but it needs time and processing to mature.

How to Achieve Forgiveness?

The process of forgiveness involves four phases:

1. The phase of awareness;

2. The phase of decision;
3. The phase of understanding and compassion;
4. The phase of deepening.

Each phase is crucial. After going through all of them, forgiveness can shift from being a sporadic act to becoming an attitude. But every time the difficulty and opportunity to forgive arise again, forgiveness must be renewed by revisiting the four phases—more fluidly, but still deeply and in a transforming way.

Phase 1: Awareness

The first step is to connect with your experience and emotions, primarily the pain and anger stemming from the lived experience. You must acknowledge the offense received and perceive the suffering and discomfort it caused. Recognize and accept your emotions, without denying them. Pain, anger, and sadness are important; we cannot pretend they don't exist. We should not judge them but express them healthily, perhaps by talking to a friend.

Understanding what forgiveness means, and why you need it, is essential. You cannot achieve forgiveness by pretending nothing happened or minimizing your pain. Forgiveness focuses not on the action committed by the other person but on the individual themselves and, indirectly, the relationship you have with them. The closer they are to you, the more their offense hurts, but it also makes it more important to apply love.

Welcoming unpleasant emotions into your life is never easy,

but it is crucial to go through the pain. It should not be rejected, denied, or suppressed. Compared to luminous emotions like joy and surprise, pain and anger are uncomfortable. But all emotions have a purpose, and to embrace their message, we must consciously go through them.

Phase 2: Decision

Every journey begins with the decision to start, and like every decision, the choice to forgive must be free and conscious. Nothing and no one can force us to make this choice—not ourselves, others, moral values, or religious beliefs. Different people or factors can encourage us, but the decision must ultimately be ours.

Since forgiveness is neither renouncing justice nor erasing pain or reality, the decision to forgive must have strong motivations—psychological but especially spiritual—and must transform into a practical choice. We must choose to forgive, not merely accept the idea of having to forgive.

After discussing it with a friend, it might also be helpful to talk to someone more experienced, such as a spiritual director, a counsellor, or a psychologist. We need to take our time—not to avoid thinking about it by doing other things, but to reflect and pray deeply.

Phase 3: Understanding and Compassion

Remember, there is no forgiveness without love. Forgiveness requires courage and compassion. We must deeply understand the meaning of compassion.

In Latin, we use the word “misericordia,” which means having a poor heart (just like the first Beatitude). In Hebrew, the word is “Rahma,” which refers to the mother's womb and the feeling she has for the child she carries. In Greek, compassion means to suffer alongside the other.

We need to learn to put ourselves in the other person's shoes—not to excuse their actions but at least to understand objectively why they acted as they did. This process is called empathy (entering into the state of mind of the other).

This understanding begins intellectually, develops emotionally as empathy, and finally transforms into a spiritual act of transcendence. On the cross, Jesus says, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

Phase 4: Deepening

Now that I have managed to forgive, I take the reverse path. Drawing from the faith that has strengthened me and that I can transmit to others, I now observe the positive emotions it produces in me.

In sharing these positive emotions with others, what do I feel within myself? Peace, serenity, a sense of brotherhood, and so on. I identify reasons that support this process. It is a task for intelligence.

This sharing isn't necessarily directed at the other person. As mentioned earlier, they may be absent or reject my offer. But I also need to communicate it to myself to convince myself of what I've accomplished. Using logical convictions, I can

solidify the process I've undergone. What are the beneficial consequences of my forgiveness? What do I feel now?

Forgiving oneself.

Forgiving oneself is one of the most difficult yet most important forms of forgiveness. A mistake made, due to the negative reactions it causes within me and the automatic thoughts that follow, always create the belief that I am inherently that kind of person. Forgiving oneself is difficult because it means challenging this self-image, which, even if negative, gives me the impression of knowing where I stand—a certain sense of security. Embarking on a path of change means stepping into the unknown, exposing oneself to the risk of further mistakes and potentially even greater suffering.

Forgiving oneself, accepting that one is not perfect, means accepting vulnerability and the fact that, at times, one will suffer. Those who do not accept mistakes or acknowledge their errors often fall into perfectionism. Perfectionism is not an ailment of intelligence—everyone knows they are not perfect and that they will eventually suffer—but rather an instinctual issue. One tells oneself: even if I am not perfect, at least I make no mistakes; at least the suffering that will come is not caused by me and will be less severe. This approach, typical of those who act instinctively, focuses not on building the future but on protecting the present. Instinctive people (rebellious, passive, lazy, perfectionist) are not concerned

with quality of life but merely with survival.

Forgiving oneself means acknowledging one's errors, which opens one up to the possibility of criticism, punishment, or rejection. Many prefer not to think about it, erasing their mistakes from memory and starting over as if nothing happened. This process is neither logical nor emotionally rewarding. It takes away the joy of living.

Forgiveness becomes possible starting from an experience of forgiveness that God has already granted us at some point and from the very nature of God. Jesus welcomed sinners but confronted those who believed they were without fault. He succeeded with the weak but failed with the powerful.

Forgiving oneself means believing in the value of one's weakness and in God's action. It means not limiting oneself to focusing on wrong actions but placing them in the broader context of one's life, nature, and history. We must experience God's forgiveness through confession and feel that what God wants us to do is to imitate Jesus. Just as He forgave me, I too must forgive myself. Finally, we must learn from our mistakes. What do these mistakes teach me?

What Did Jesus Say About Forgiveness?

- **Matthew 6:12** – Jesus teaches us to say in the Lord's Prayer: *"Forgive us our offences as we forgive those who have offended us."*
- **Luke 15:11-32** – The parable of the prodigal son: the father's forgiveness for both sons.

- **Matthew 5:43** – *“Be merciful as your Father is merciful.”*
- **Matthew 18:21** – *“How many times must I forgive? ... Seventy times seven.”* These words are followed by the parable of the unmerciful servant who cannot forgive his companion despite having been forgiven much more himself.
- **John 8** – In the episode of the adulterous woman, Jesus says: *“Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.”*
- **Matthew 16 or John 20** – Jesus, entrusting Peter with the responsibility of leading his brothers, gives him the authority to loosen bonds.
- **Luke 23:34** – From the cross, Jesus forgives His executioners.
- It is good also to remember the episode of the book of Geneses when Joseph forgives his brothers and teaches them that through their crime God was able to save the whole family of Jacob (Gen 45:1-8).
- Finally we have the forgiveness Stephen gives to those who are stoning him (Acts 7:60)

How to Reconcile Forgiveness and Justice?

Through fulfilling God’s will, because God is just. Here, we must clarify the meaning of the word “justice.” Since childhood, we have believed that justice is synonymous with vengeance. In civil terms, justice often relates to those who commit offenses and must pay for their mistakes and

damages caused; hence, justice is often tied to courts, prisons, or alternative programs.

In the Bible and religious language, justice means that everyone receives what they rightfully deserve but in alignment with God's creation plan. True justice occurs when a person is enabled to meet their Creator and fulfill the purpose for which God created them. Thus, when the Old Testament says that God is Just, it means He is faithful to His nature and His plan. Referring to someone as "Just," like St. Joseph, means that person is God-fearing, respectful of His greatness, and strives to always do His will.

Now, we know God's plan is one: that everyone is redeemed by the blood of Christ and can attain unity with the Creator, purified by Christ's sacrifice on the Cross. Therefore, there is no justice without love, and justice has nothing to do with punishment or retribution. Forgiveness, not vengeance, represents true justice because it restores the sinner's dignity as a child of God, damaged by sin. It is difficult to forgive those who harm us, but God's grace can give us the strength we need.

Personal Reflection:

- Who am I unable to forgive? Why?
- What emotions and thoughts arise when I think about that person and what he did to me? Are these thoughts reasonable?

- What can I do to overcome the thoughts and emotions that hold me back?
- When was the last time I felt the deep joy of being forgiven by God or someone else?
- Am I at peace with myself, or are there aspects of me that I cannot accept?
- Am I convinced that I am a beloved child of God and that Christ died on the cross for me?

LOVE AND COMMUNITY LIFE

The bond that ties people within the family is a bond of blood. But family is not the only environment where I can have particular bonds to other people. We could call those bonds elective, because they are chosen. This is the case with religious communities or various associations, volunteer groups, etc.

We will deal particularly with religious communities, but most of the aspects can be applied to all other associations and groups.

In this environment, it is necessary to live a harmonious relationship to avoid false alibis that would lead us to throw ourselves too much into the apostolate, which, if not motivated by true reasons would result not effective, because it does not testify to the unity desired by Christ.

The criterion for creating this harmony is the vocation that God gives to each of us. Each one must love according to his state. The love that a nun gives to the sick is necessarily different from that of any nurse. We are not talking about better or more effective, but different because the nature of the one who loves is different.

Saint Paul, in the letter to the Ephesians, says that charity must be true, that is, it must respect the hierarchy of values, it must be transparent, that is, not tied to interests,

consequential, and orderly.

Before entering more specifically the topic of community life, we must remind ourselves that:

- The purpose of religious life is to follow and imitate Jesus Christ and continue His mission.

- At the time of choosing the twelve apostles, the evangelist says that *"Jesus chose twelve of them, so that they might be with Him and also to send them out."* Here we see the foundation of religious life: communal life and apostolate. From the sentence we can notice the priority given by the Gospel to being with Him. One might think that this refers to prayer, and undoubtedly it does, but considering that it speaks of the concrete life of Jesus, one cannot hide the specific preferential relationship with what was becoming His community.

We can say that when looking at people, Jesus sees people to love, save, glorify, and value, but when looking at the twelve, He sees something more, He also sees collaborators, those who share His mission and will continue it. The relationship with them is therefore always special.

At a certain point, Jesus will not fear leaving the crowds to focus on the twelve (John 6); often, He leaves everyone to withdraw to a deserted place to pray, and there the twelve find Him. Often, after speaking to the crowds, when He withdraws to the house with the twelve, He continues and deepens the discussions (e.g., in the parable of the sower in Matthew).

Jesus said: *"Where two or three are gathered in my name, there*

am I.” It is the same Jesus of the Eucharist, with the same presence to be taken just as seriously. The only condition: to be united in His name.

Is it possible? Yes, because Jesus himself made it possible. The presence of Jesus gives us the strength to do things that we would never do alone.

Saint Francis de Sales says: “One can be a good religious even without singing in the choir, without wearing the habit, etc., but one cannot be without making the vow of poverty and living in common.”

Why are religious called to live in community?

- 1) Because this is the life of God (One in three persons).
- 2) Because Jesus wants His disciples to be like this “*That they may be one as you are in me and I in you.*”
- 3) Because this is how the first Christians lived. (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32).
- 4) Because this is the way to make Him present and thus make our consecration true.

Perfectae Caritatis 15 says: “*The community is the gathering of brothers who persevere in prayer, in the communion of the same spirit nourished by the doctrine of the Gospel, the Liturgy, and especially the Eucharist.*”

To see how to live in community, we must look to Jesus and His community (the apostles).

In the book of Acts, we read: (Acts 2:42-47) “*They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone,*

and many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day, the Lord added to their number those who were being saved."

(Acts 4:32-37) "The whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power, the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need."

We see here the main characteristics of every religious community: Formation, fraternal love, prayer, sharing, simplicity of heart, joy.

Jesus lived this way with His disciples, taught them to live this way, and required that they continue to live this way. Let us not limit Jesus.

This lifestyle was certainly not easy even for the disciples, but by setting community life on love, things can be easier. In fact, when Jesus wanted to put Peter at the head of the community, He only asked: "*Do you love me?*" and nothing else (John

21:15-19). We have already explained earlier that in the Greek language, the verb to love can be translated in 4 different ways. In this passage of the Gospel, John plays on the third way, "phileo," which indicates human love and which I will conveniently translate here as "to care," and the fourth, "agapao," which indicates pure, divine love and which I will conveniently translate here as "to love." It is interesting to see how Jesus reduces His request and adapts to Peter's smallness: Do you love me? Yes, I care for you; Do you love me? Yes, I care for you; Do you care for me? Yes, I care for you. What kind of love must we give? Perfect love? That is the ideal, but even our love full of defects is enough.

Only love is important in religious life, but love is Jesus.

My actions matter if they are done by Jesus (What would Jesus do in my place?) and for Jesus, not out of my pride.

We are all called to become children of God, but we have decided to do it together.

What sometimes prevents me from relating to others? Judgment.

We criticize in the other what we have not been able to accept in ourselves.

The first act of love is to accept ourselves as a gift from God. Until I accept the negative in me, I will not know how to love. There is a beautiful prayer, also transformed into a song, that says: "I know your miseries, your struggles, your nothingness, I know that you are vile and that you often fall, yet I ask you to love me. If you wait to be perfect, you will never love me; I

want the love of your poor heart, so listen: love me as you are, as you are I want you, because as you are I love you.”

To love, we must know how to accept others as a gift from God, despite their mistakes. The word “To correct” comes from co-regere, “to bear with,” that is, to bear the other’s burden together.

Another difficulty of community life is the diversity of interests and roles. Sometimes we think that sharing our apostolate with the community makes it less effective, but we must remember that every type of apostolate is for the community and in the name of the community, even if I am the one acting. This already happened in Corinth, one of the communities founded by Saint Paul. 1 Corinthians 1:10-13 shows the divisions among those people. Paul responds: “*Is Christ divided?*” The union of apostolate is important and is achieved when we place Christ as the purpose of our being. In chapters 12 and 13, he shows how the diversity of ministries becomes the richness of the body of Christ, as are all the individual members, because there is one Lord who works everything in everyone.

For example, a mother cannot abandon her children who need her to help other children, nor can a nun neglect community duties in the name of the apostolate, unless is the community itself that sends her. These things create division, not unity. Instead, it will be necessary to educate the people in your family or community about the need to make sacrifices to help others, and these sacrifices may mean that

sometimes the mother or nun will be absent to help others. Often, we might think that structures bind us and prevent us from being effective in the apostolate or can become an excuse not to go to the poor: it will be necessary to review the structures, the planning, etc. to make them transparent, but then it is from there and from respecting the decisions and commitments made that we must start for the apostolate. Our vocation is first of all to belong to God, then to the Church, to the Congregation. These bonds that are created when we join a religious family are even stronger than those of blood, as Jesus says when referring to His disciples: *"My mother and my brothers are those who do the will of my Father."*

If Peter wept and returned after betraying Jesus, it was not because he understood what he had done, but because he loved Jesus. In fact, even Judas understood the mistake he had made, but he did not have the courage to return. Often, we do not understand what other community members do or think, but the driving force of everything must be love and esteem. Let's be honest: If I feel feelings of resentment or anger or non-acceptance towards any member of my community, it is only my fault. He may have made all the mistakes in the world, but I have all the reasons and possibilities to continue loving, esteeming, and accepting him. Often, however, I don't do it because there is something hurt in me, pride, fear of losing something, fear of admitting my weaknesses, etc.

To enhance communion among us, there are many small aids. Often, we find ourselves reasoning in our mind, analyzing the

mistakes of others, especially of superiors; let's ask ourselves: What matters for my growth is what the superior says or how he says it (whether he is grumpy, angry, or smiling)? Is it useful to do it or if he also does it? Is it for our good or our convenience?

The letters of Saint Paul are full of indications in this regard: Romans 12:5-21: *"For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.*

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written,

"Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Philippians 2:1-5: "If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus."

Colossians 3:12-15: "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful."

Ephesians 4:1-3: "I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

The psychoanalyst Erich Fromm in his famous book: "The Art

of Loving” says that often our young people (and not only them) confuse love with the loved object, as if love depended entirely on something external; instead, love is our attitude, our ability to enter into relationships. Many engaged couples believe they prove their love by showing they love only one person and not others, but this is a contradiction. Love cannot be closed. Loving is an art and therefore is learned with effort and practice towards everyone.

Leo Buscaglia, an Italian-American educator, writes: “If you love someone, your goal is to wish that they become everything you are, and you will encourage them every step of the way. You do not progress separately; you progress together, holding hands, without merging. You are a unique person; you cannot merge with another. You must never grow in the shadow of another. Find your light and become great and wonderful and splendid as much as possible. If you want to learn something about love relationships, you will find it difficult. Surely, love relationships can bring suffering. Being together and having to give up something can cause suffering. But you can learn from suffering. It irritates me to see that in our society no one wants to suffer. [...] Never let a day pass without seeing something beautiful in those around you. And tell them! Here is what it means. It means sharing joy with people. When you see something beautiful, go and tell them. What is difficult about this? These are opportunities that happen every day, and we do not take advantage of them. Let’s start with those around us. Teach them self-respect, and

ensure that everyone has their beautiful compliment that day. They tell me: "But all this is artificial." It is not true, if you think about it. Do not tell me that the people around you do not deserve a compliment every now and then. What is artificial about this? We must be careful not to carry our addictions and preconceptions with us; otherwise, we will only see ugliness. We only see what we project. You are God's gift. So, be born! Come out. Free yourself from all those ideas that defeat you, the ideas about others that prevent you from feeling close to them. Learn to trust again. Learn to forgive. Learn to believe that I am more like you than different from you."

In the discourse of the Last Supper, we have the guarantee of success if we commit ourselves to love. Jesus says indeed: "*If anyone keeps my commandments, my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.*" This is the guarantee of success, but we must seek it within ourselves. Naturally, the discourse of the Last Supper is made for all Christians, not only for religious people, but there is chapter 17 in which, praying to the Father, He says: "*I pray for them, not for the world, but for those you have given me... I have taught them all things... none of them is lost except the son of perdition.*" He is praying for His disciples. The center of this discourse is: "*Keep them in your name, that they may be one as we are one.*" The model of unity in communities is the life of the Trinity.

The document Vita Consecrata, in no. 41 says: "*In the history*

of the Church, the life of communion lived by Christ with His disciples has always been the example and model to look to for reinvigorating one's life. Now religious communities must provide the same style of model. Community life must reflect on earth the life that exists in the Trinity in heaven. Continuously promoting fraternal love, in the form of community life, consecrated life has shown that sharing in Trinitarian communion can help change human relationships and create new types of solidarity." *"Keep them in your name."* Another way to live community love is to remain in His name, which means to do everything in the name of God, and allow God to keep us in His name. Once we were taught to make the sign of the cross before every action we did. Jesus is telling us that religious communities must be a sign of the Trinity for the world and must find their reason for being in the Trinity itself. *"As you sent me into the world, so I send them into the world; for their sake I consecrate myself, so that they too may be consecrated in the truth."* Then Jesus moves on to speak of all believers: *"I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in me through their word: that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe."* Our unity and the life of our community can only be based on mutual love, in imitation of God's love, and it is the only way to convert the world. We cannot define community as the house where we eat and sleep; otherwise, it becomes a hotel, but it must become the space illuminated by God where we experience His presence

as the risen one, remembering that we experience the risen one by passing through the cross. The document *Vita Consecrata* in no. 42 says: *“Among the disciples of Christ, there can be no true unity without mutual and unconditional love that demands readiness to serve others generously, a desire to accept them as they are without judging them, and the ability to forgive them seventy times seven. In community life, therefore, it must be in some way evident that fraternal communion, more than an instrument for carrying out a specific mission, is a space illuminated by God where we experience the presence of the risen Lord.”* What are the necessary instruments to achieve this communion? Eucharist, confession, prayer. Then the community succeeds to the extent that it gathers around the Eucharist, confession, and common prayer.

Relationships are the real problem of today’s man. Before sin, there was a perfect relationship: Man-God, man-man, man-creation. Sin breaks these relationships and introduces fear, selfishness, concupiscence, greed, etc. In the crucified Christ, these relationships are restored. It is up to us to accept the suffering of Christ within our relationships to make them true. VC 43 says: *“Everyone must contribute according to the role they hold and the charisms that God has given them.”*

I conclude with a story: Once a good nun entered a moment of crisis. It happens to everyone, even the saints, to have moments of crisis. So, she went to her superior and asked if she could talk. The superior replied: “Not now, later, because

I am very busy with my apostolate." So, she went to the vicar, but she was also too busy with the apostolate to have time to listen to the poor sister's nonsense; and so on, all the nuns seemed to be very busy, and no one had time to share. So, the nun went to the police station and said to the commissioner: "Please, could you put me in prison for a while?" Naturally, the policeman was surprised, but given the nun's insistence, he agreed and, of course, informed the prioress of the convent. Scandalized, the prioress immediately ran to the prisons, followed by all the other sisters. Upon arriving at the cell, they asked, "Sister, what did you do? Why did they put you in jail?" The good nun replied very simply, "Reading the Gospel, I found that among the works of mercy recommended by Jesus is visiting the imprisoned. Now you have the opportunity to listen to me while continuing your apostolate." We hope that no member of our community needs to go to prison to receive our attention.

For personal reflection:

- We have chosen to live in community. Have I understood the importance of this choice?
- What should I thank God for regarding my community?
- What do I need to repent of regarding my community life?
- What can and do I want to do to ensure my community is a better response to God's plan?

APPENDIX 1

FROM THE MAGISTERIUM

Benedict XVI

In the year 2006, Pope Benedict XVI dedicated his first Encyclical letter “Deus Caritas Est”, to Love. Let see some excerpts.

1. “God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (1 Jn 4:16). These words from the First Letter of John express with remarkable clarity the heart of the Christian faith: the Christian image of God and the resulting image of mankind and its destiny. In the same verse, Saint John also offers a kind of summary of the Christian life: “We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us”.

In a world where the name of God is sometimes associated with vengeance or even a duty of hatred and violence, this message is both timely and significant. For this reason, I wish in my first Encyclical to speak of the love which God lavishes upon us and which we in turn must share with others.

2. God's love for us is fundamental for our lives, and it raises important questions about who God is and who we are. In considering this, we immediately find ourselves hampered by a problem of language. Today, the term “love” has become one of

the most frequently used and misused of words, a word to which we attach quite different meanings. Even though this Encyclical will deal primarily with the understanding and practice of love in sacred Scripture and in the Church's Tradition, we cannot simply prescind from the meaning of the word in the different cultures and in present-day usage.

7 ... Yet eros and agape—ascending love and descending love—can never be completely separated. The more the two, in their different aspects, find a proper unity in the one reality of love, the more the true nature of love in general is realized. Even if eros is at first mainly covetous and ascending, a fascination for the great promise of happiness, in drawing near to the other, it is less and less concerned with itself, increasingly seeks the happiness of the other, is concerned more and more with the beloved, bestows itself and wants to “be there for” the other.

The element of agape thus enters into this love, for otherwise eros is impoverished and even loses its own nature. On the other hand, man cannot live by oblation, descending love alone. He cannot always give, he must also receive. Anyone who wishes to give love must also receive love as a gift. Certainly, as the Lord tells us, one can become a source from which rivers of living water flow (cf. Jn 7:37-38). Yet to become such a source, one must constantly drink anew from the original source, which is Jesus Christ, from whose pierced heart flows the love of God (cf. Jn 19:34).

14. Here we need to consider yet another aspect: this sacramental “mysticism” is social in character, for in sacramental communion I become one with the Lord, like all the other communicants. As Saint Paul says, “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor 10:17). Union with Christ is also union with all those to whom he gives himself. I cannot possess Christ just for myself; I can belong to him only in union with all those who have become, or who will become, his own. Communion draws me out of myself towards him, and thus also towards unity with all Christians. We become “one body”, completely joined in a single existence. Love of God and love of neighbour are now truly united: God incarnate draws us all to himself. We can thus understand how *agape* also became a term for the Eucharist: there God's own *agape* comes to us bodily, in order to continue his work in us and through us.

17 Acknowledgment of the living God is one path towards love, and the “yes” of our will to his will unites our intellect, will and sentiments in the all- embracing act of love. But this process is always open-ended; love is never “finished” and complete; throughout life, it changes and matures, and thus remains faithful to itself. *Idem velle atque idem nolle* —to want the same thing, and to reject the same thing—was recognized by antiquity as the authentic content of love: the one becomes similar to the other, and this leads to a community of will and thought. The love-story between God and man consists in the

very fact that this communion of will increases in a communion of thought and sentiment, and thus our will and God's will increasingly coincide: God's will is no longer for me an alien will, something imposed on me from without by the commandments, but it is now my own will, based on the realization that God is in fact more deeply present to me than I am to myself.[10] Then self- abandonment to God increases and God becomes our joy (cf. Ps 73 [72]:23-28).

19 - The apostolate in the Church is a consequence of the Trinitarian love.

25 a) The Church's deepest nature is expressed in her three-fold responsibility: of proclaiming the word of God (kerygma-martyria), celebrating the sacraments (leitourgia), and exercising the ministry of charity (diakonia). These duties presuppose each other and are inseparable. For the Church, charity is not a kind of welfare activity which could equally well be left to others, but is a part of her nature, an indispensable expression of her very being.

28.

...

b) Love— caritas—will always prove necessary, even in the most just society. There is no ordering of the State so just that it can eliminate the need for a service of love. Whoever wants to eliminate love is preparing to eliminate man as such. There will

always be suffering which cries out for consolation and help. There will always be loneliness. There will always be situations of material need where help in the form of concrete love of neighbour is indispensable.[20] The State which would provide everything, absorbing everything into itself, would ultimately become a mere bureaucracy incapable of guaranteeing the very thing which the suffering person—every person—needs: namely, loving personal concern.

...

This love does not simply offer people material help, but refreshment and care for their souls, something which often is even more necessary than material support. In the end, the claim that just social structures would make works of charity superfluous masks a materialist conception of man: the mistaken notion that man can live “by bread alone” (Mt 4:4; cf. Dt 8:3)—a conviction that demeans man and ultimately disregards all that is specifically human.

31. So what are the essential elements of Christian and ecclesial charity?

A) Christian charity is first of all the simple response to immediate needs and specific situations:

We are dealing with human beings, and human beings always need something more than technically proper care. They need humanity. They need heartfelt concern. Those who work for the Church's charitable organizations must be distinguished by the fact that they do not merely meet the needs of the moment, but

they dedicate themselves to others with heartfelt concern, enabling them to experience the richness of their humanity.

B) b) Christian charitable activity must be independent of parties and ideologies.

C) c) Charity, furthermore, cannot be used as a means of engaging in what is nowadays considered proselytism. Love is free; it is not practised as a way of achieving other ends.

Pope Benedict further developed the discussion of love in two other documents: the Apostolic Exhortation "Sacramentum Caritatis" (2007), at the end of the synod dedicated to the Eucharist, and the Encyclical "Caritas in veritate" (2009).

Pope Francis: Dilexit Nos

Pope Francis also wanted to dedicate an encyclical to love, titled "*Dilexit Nos*," He Loved Us. It was published on October 24, 2024. In it, Pope Francis addresses the theme of human and divine love reflected in the Heart of Jesus Christ. Throughout the document, Pope Francis delves into the importance of the heart, not only as a physical organ but as a symbol of the intimate and spiritual center of the person and of Jesus Christ. The central point is the unconditional love of Jesus Christ and the importance of the heart as a symbol of this love. He invites us to rediscover the heart in our spiritual and human relationships, criticizing modern phenomena such as individualism, consumerism, and the superficial pace

of contemporary life. The heart is presented as the deep unifying center of each person and of society, urging us to live authentically and in communion with God and with others. Below is an analysis and summary of the key points of the encyclical:

1. Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ

The title of the encyclical, *Dilexit Nos*, comes from the end of chapter 8 of St. Paul's Letter to the Romans:

"What will separate us from the love of Christ? Will anguish, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword? ... No, in all these things we conquer overwhelmingly through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:35, 37-39).

2. The power of the heart in a fragmented world

The pope critiques what he calls the "liquid" nature of contemporary life marked by superficiality and consumerism. He says *"we find ourselves immersed in societies of serial consumers who live from day to day, dominated by the hectic pace and bombarded by technology, lacking in the patience needed to engage in the processes that an interior life by its very nature requires."*

"Amid the frenetic pace of today's world and our obsession with

free time, consumption, and diversion, cellphones and social media, we forget to nourish our lives with the strength of the Eucharist,” he adds.

In contrast, he writes, the heart represents the “*profound unifying center*” for each person and for society. The encyclical quotes Pope Benedict XVI, who said:

“Every person needs a ‘center’ for his or her own life, a source of truth and goodness to draw upon in the events, situations, and struggles of daily existence. All of us, when we pause in silence, need to feel not only the beating of our own heart, but deeper still, the beating of a trustworthy presence, perceptible with faith’s senses and yet much more real: the presence of Christ, the heart of the world” (Angelus, June 1, 2008).

3. The cross as the ultimate expression of Christ’s love

The encyclical states that “*the pierced heart of Christ embodies all God’s declarations of love present in the Scriptures.*”

Pope Francis writes about how great consolation can be found in contemplating the heart of Christ in his suffering and self-surrender even to death for our salvation.

“Our sufferings are joined to the suffering of Christ on the cross. If we believe that grace can bridge every distance, this means that Christ by his sufferings united himself to the sufferings of his disciples in every time and place. In this way, whenever we endure suffering, we can also experience the interior consolation of knowing that Christ suffers with us,” he says.

The pope adds: “*As we contemplate the heart of Christ, the*

incarnate synthesis of the Gospel, we can, following the example of St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus, 'place heartfelt trust not in ourselves but in the infinite mercy of a God who loves us unconditionally and has already given us everything in the cross of Jesus Christ.'"

4. Love as a missionary impulse

Pope Francis also writes about *"the communitarian, social, and missionary dimension of all authentic devotion to the heart of Christ,"* adding that Christ's heart not only leads us to the Father but also *"sends us forth to our brothers and sisters."*

"Jesus is calling you and sending you forth to spread goodness in our world," he writes. *"His call is one of service, a summons to do good, perhaps as a physician, a mother, a teacher, or a priest. Wherever you may be, you can hear his call and realize that he is sending you forth to carry out that mission."*

Pope Francis also encourages parishes to focus less on structures and bureaucracies as means of evangelizing, warning against *"communities and pastors excessively caught up in external activities, structural reforms that have little to do with the Gospel, obsessive reorganization plans, worldly projects, secular ways of thinking, and mandatory programs."*

The encyclical points to the missionary examples of saints like St. Thérèse and St. Charles de Foucauld. By returning to this Sacred Heart, he writes, Catholics can find a renewed energy to address social and spiritual challenges through love.

The pope writes about how the fire of the Holy Spirit fills the

heart of Christ, quoting St. John Paul II's letter on the 100th anniversary of Pope Leo XIII's consecration of the human race to the divine heart of Jesus: *"The heart of Christ is alive with the action of the Holy Spirit, to whom Jesus attributed the inspiration of his mission."*

5. Acts of reparation to the Sacred Heart of Jesus

In the encyclical, Pope Francis discusses the Catholic tradition of making acts of reparation to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, writing that *"reparation entails the desire to render compensation" for the injuries inflicted on the Lord who is love.* *"The reparation that we offer is a freely accepted participation in his redeeming love and his one sacrifice,"* he explains. *"Acts of love of neighbor, with the renunciation, self-denial, suffering, and effort that they entail, can only be such when they are nourished by Christ's own love. He enables us to love as he loved, and in this way he loves and serves others through us."*

"Sisters and brothers, I propose that we develop this means of reparation, which is, in a word, to offer the heart of Christ a new possibility of spreading in this world the flames of his ardent and gracious love," Pope Francis said.

6. Saints and the Sacred Heart

In *Dilexit Nos*, Pope Francis shares insights from the saints and frequently cites the magisterium of his papal predecessors. He describes how St. Charles de Foucauld "consecrated himself to the Sacred Heart, in which he found a

love without limits” inspiring his austere life in imitation of Christ, and how St. Thérèse placed her trust in the Sacred Heart’s infinite mercy.

He also points the reader to the spiritual experiences of St. Margaret Mary Alacoque, who experienced a remarkable series of apparitions of Christ between the end of December 1673 and June 1675.

In the first apparition, Jesus told Alacoque: *“My divine heart is so inflamed with love for men, and for you in particular, that, no longer able to contain in itself the flames of its ardent charity, it must pour them out through you and be manifested to them, in order to enrich them with its precious treasures which I now reveal to you.”*

Francis notes how Pope Leo XIII called for the world’s consecration to the Sacred Heart in response to the secular challenges of his time and Pius XI regarded the Sacred Heart as a *“summa”* of the experience of Christian faith. He also describes how St. John Paul II presented the growth of this devotion in recent centuries as *“a response to the rise of rigorist and disembodied forms of spirituality that neglected the richness of the Lord’s mercy”* and *“as a timely summons to resist attempts to create a world that leaves no room for God.”* The encyclical also draws on thinkers like novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky and German philosopher Martin Heidegger to highlight the heart’s wider human relevance.

7. The wounded heart of Christ as a wellspring of peace

and unity

As modern society faces what Francis calls a “wave of secularization” and division, he sees “the heart” as a source of unity.

“It is only by starting from the heart that our communities will succeed in uniting and reconciling differing minds and wills, so that the Spirit can guide us in unity as brothers and sisters. Reconciliation and peace are also born of the heart. The heart of Christ is ‘ecstasy,’ openness, gift, and encounter. In that heart, we learn to relate to one another in wholesome and happy ways, and to build up in this world God’s kingdom of love and justice. Our hearts, united with the heart of Christ, are capable of working this social miracle,” he writes.

The pope affirms that “the wounded side of Christ continues to pour forth that stream which is never exhausted, never passes away, but offers itself time and time again to all those who wish to love as he did.”

Pope Francis offers a prayer in the encyclical that the wounded world may regain its heart, writing: “*In the presence of the heart of Christ, I once more ask the Lord to have mercy on this suffering world in which he chose to dwell as one of us. May he pour out the treasures of his light and love, so that our world, which presses forward despite wars, socioeconomic disparities, and uses of technology that threaten our humanity, may regain the most important and necessary thing of all: its heart.*”

APPENDIX 2

THE SAINTS. TO BE LIKE CHRIST

Who are the saints?

Holiness involves living a life that reflects God's love and grace in daily actions. It's not about performing extraordinary acts, but about being in communion with God and translating this into concrete actions in our daily lives. "[God] *chose us in Him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless before Him. In love...*" (Ephesians 1).

It is right, therefore, to look to them as inspiration for a life lived in the discovery of God's love.

Each saint has wonderful writings about love, and naturally, it would be impossible to cite them all. I'll limit myself to a few inspiring excerpts.

The saints of active life

Saint Augustine

- *My love is my weight; it takes me wherever I go. Who truly praises, if not one who loves sincerely? One loves the Lord less if they love something along with Him without loving it for His sake. By loving our neighbor, we purify the eyes of our hearts to reach the vision of God.*
- *"God loves each one of us as if there were only one of us."*

- *"As love grows within you, so does beauty. Because love is the beauty of the soul."*
- *"What does love look like? It has the hands to help others. It has the feet to hasten to the poor and needy. It has eyes to see misery and desire. It has ears to hear the sighs and sorrows of men. This is what love looks like."*

Saint Vincent de Paul

- *"Charity is the soul of all virtues."*
- *"God loves the poor, and those who love the poor."*
- *"We must be like the rays of the sun, which shine and warm everything without getting dirty."*
- *"Charity is superior to all rules, and everything must refer to it."*
- *"We must love God, my brothers, but love Him at our own expense, with the work of our hands, with the sweat of our brows."*

Saint Teresa of the Child Jesus

- *"Love is repaid only with love."*
- *"Your love has anticipated me since my childhood, it has grown with me, and now it is an abyss that I cannot fathom."*
- *"I see no trace of my sins: in a flash, love has burned*

everything!"

- *"My life is but an instant, a passing hour. My life is only a day that is fading and fleeing. Oh my God, You know that to love You on earth I have only today!"*
- *"Love for Love."*
- *"In the heart of the Church, my Mother, I will be love."*

Don Guanella

Saint Luigi Guanella was a priest and founder, known for his profound spirituality and his commitment to the weakest. Charity was at the center of his life and teaching. Here are some quotes from Saint Luigi Guanella about charity:

- *"The greatest gift God can give us is an all-consuming love for God and for our neighbor."*
- *"The fervent love of God produces a warm affection of charity towards our neighbor because the love of God is not separated from the love of neighbor."*
- *"We cannot end it, as long as there are poor to be sheltered, needs to be provided for."*
- *"The world, as the common folk would say, is always half to buy and half to sell. Let us always have our hearts in our hands, to show it to those who must care for and perfect it."*

Mother Teresa

Mother Teresa of Calcutta is still considered an example of true love, an inspiration for many Christians and non-Christians. Her profound commitment to charity and love towards the most-needy has attracted thousands of men and women who have dedicated themselves in her five congregations to follow her example.

- *"We will never know how much good a simple smile can do."*
- *"There is no worse poverty than not having love to give."*
- *"What matters is not how much we do, but how much love we put into what we do."*
- *"Love does not live in words, nor can it be explained in words."*
- *"True love must always hurt."*
- *"Not all of us can do great things, but we can do small things with great love."*
- *"What we are doing is just a drop in the ocean. But if that drop were not in the ocean, I think the ocean would be smaller because of that missing drop."*
- *"Never travel faster than your guardian angel can fly."*
- *"I am nothing but a little pencil in the hands of God. It is He who writes."*

Charles de Foucauld

Charles de Foucauld was a French monk and mystic known for his profound spirituality and his commitment to living among the poorest. His reflections on love and charity are particularly intense and meaningful.

- *"When we are able to suffer and love, we can do much, more than we could in the world."*
- *"Love can do everything. It accomplishes many things that tire and wear out those who do not love."*
- *"Prayer is all the better when the eyes of the soul are full of love."*
- *"Let us love God because He loved us first."*

Don Orione

"The splendor and divine ardor do not incinerate me but temper, purify, and elevate me, expanding my heart, so that I wish to embrace all creatures with my small human arms to bring them to God.

I wish to become spiritual food for my brothers who hunger and thirst for truth and God; I wish to clothe the naked with God, give the light of God to the blind and those longing for greater light, open hearts to the countless human miseries, and become a servant of the servants by distributing my life to the most needy and forsaken; I wish to become the fool of Christ and live and die in the folly of charity for my brothers! Love always

and give life singing Love! Strip myself of everything!

Sow charity along every path; sow God in every way, in every furrow; always sink infinitely and fly ever higher infinitely, singing Jesus and the Holy Madonna, and never stopping. Make the furrows luminous with God; become a good man among my brothers; always lower and extend my hands and heart to gather faltering weaknesses and miseries and place them on the altar, so that in God they become God's strength and greatness. Jesus died with open arms. God, who lowered and sacrificed Himself with open arms. Charity! I want to sing charity! Have great pity for everyone!"

"Let us open to many people a new and divine world, bend with charitable sweetness to understand the small, the poor, the humble. We want to be fervent with faith and charity. We want to be living saints for others, dead to ourselves. Every word of ours must be a breath of open heavens: everyone must feel the flame that burns our heart and the light of our inner fire; find God and Christ there. Our devotion must not leave people cold and bored because it must be truly full of life and filled with Christ. Follow Jesus' steps to Calvary, and then rise with Him on the Cross or die of love with Him and for Him at the foot of the Cross. Have a thirst for martyrdom. Serve the Son of Man in men. To conquer for God and win others, we must first live an intense life of God within ourselves, have a dominant faith within us, a great ideal that is a flame that burns and shines -

renounce ourselves for others -, burn our lives in a stronger sacred idea and love. No one who obeys two masters - the senses and the spirit - will ever find the secret of winning souls. We must say words and create works that outlive us. Mortify ourselves in silence and in secret. We must be saints, but such saints that our sanctity does not belong only to the worship of the faithful, nor stay only in the Church, but transcends and throws into society so much splendor of light, so much life of God's love and of men, that we are more than the saints of the Church, the saints of the people and social health. We must be a deep vein of mystical spirituality that permeates all social strata: contemplative and active spirits «servants of Christ and the poor». Do not give yourself to the vanity of letters, do not let yourselves be inflated by worldly things. Communicate with brothers only to edify them, communicate with others only to spread the goodness of the Lord: love Christ in everyone; serve Christ in the poor; renew Christ in us and restore everything in Christ; always save, save everyone, save at any cost with redeeming passion and redeeming holocaust. Great souls and great and magnanimous hearts, strong and free Christian consciences that feel their mission of truth, faith, high hopes, holy love of God and men, and that in the light of a great faith, great, precisely «of that» in Divine Providence, walk, without stain and without fear, through ignem et aquam and even among the mud of so much hypocrisy, so much perversity, and dissoluteness. Carry with us and deep within us the divine treasure of that Charity which is God, and even if we must go

among the people, keep in our hearts that heavenly silence that no noise of the world can break and the inviolate cell of the humble knowledge of ourselves, where the soul speaks with the angels and with Christ the Lord. The time that has passed, we no longer have; the time that is to come, we are not sure we will have; so we only have this point of time, and no more. Around us, there will be no lack of scandals and false modesty of scribes and Pharisees, nor malicious insinuations, nor slanders and persecutions. But, oh my children, we must not have the time to «turn our heads to look at the plow», so much does our mission of charity urge and push us, so much does the love of neighbor burn us, so much does the divine burning fire of Christ consume us. We are the inebriated of charity and the fools of the Cross of Christ Crucified. Above all, with a humble, holy life full of good, instruct the small and the poor to follow the way of God. Live in a luminous sphere, inebriated with light and divine love, of Christ and the poor and celestial dew like the lark that rises, singing, in the sun. Our table should be like an ancient Christian agape. Souls! Souls! Have a great heart and the divine folly of souls!"

Love as a Rule of Spiritual Life and Asceticism

I want to dedicate a small chapter to two great saints for the particular contribution they brought to the discourse of God's

love. With them, we leave the field of charity to delve into mysticism.

Saint Teresa of Avila: The Mystic Marriage

Saint Teresa of Avila uses much more poetic words to describe this intimate union with God. She speaks of a Spiritual Marriage with our Lord, where the soul always remains at its center with its God. The union can be symbolized by two wax candles, whose tips touch so closely that there is only one light; or, the wick, wax, and light become one, but the single candle can be separated again from the other and the two candles remain distinct; or the wick can be extracted from the wax. But the spiritual marriage is like rain falling from the sky into a river or stream, becoming one and the same liquid, so that the river and the rainwater cannot be divided; or it resembles a stream flowing into the ocean, which can no longer be separated from it.

She then explains how this intimate union of a soul can also benefit others in the Church: From the bosom of the Divinity, where God seems to always hold this soul tightly, streams of milk flow, comforting the servants of the castle. I think He wishes that they somehow share the riches the soul enjoys; so, from the flowing river where the small stream is engulfed, some drops of water flow from time to time to sustain the bodily forces, the servants of the bride and the Bridegroom. We are all called to unite with Jesus Christ and in Heaven, we

will fully achieve that union for all eternity.

At the same time, we can also strive to anticipate that union while we are still on earth.

This type of mystical marriage is not something easy and often requires a lifetime before someone can unite with God in this way.

While most of us will probably never experience such a union, we are invited to enter more deeply into the Inner Castle and die to the world, so that we can live more fully in Jesus Christ.

Saint John of the Cross

On the same wave, but with different language, we find Saint John of the Cross, who was a disciple of Saint Teresa. In his works, such as "The Dark Night of the Soul" and "The Ascent of Mount Carmel," he describes the soul's journey towards divine love as a detachment from worldly things and a profound inner transformation. He emphasizes that this journey involves suffering, humility, and a deep desire for God.

Saint John of the Cross believed that through this dark night, the soul was purified and prepared to experience the "Spiritual Marriage," where it becomes one with God in a mystical union. His writings are full of rich images and metaphors that convey intense spiritual experiences and the ultimate joy of being united with divine love.

To understand why Saint John gives much importance to the

dark night, we must remember the experience he had during many years of imprisonment when his confreres tried to convince him to renounce the reform of Carmel.

For him, the soul that walks in love neither rests nor tires.

Love, as a conscious decision, is forged through tribulations and sufferings, never despairing of its end - Heaven. When a soul advances through such struggles, it understands at an unspoken but deeply intimate level that God's love sustains it. It is God within the soul that gives it light, allowing it to sit in the silence of darkness. God grants it strength to face adversities and the ability to persevere in unwavering hope. He invites us to strive to keep our hearts in peace and not let any event of this world disturb them. We know, in fact, that everything must come to an end.

APPENDIX 3

TEXTS FROM THE SECULAR WORLD

From a letter of Albert Einstein to his daughter Lieserl

There is a beautiful letter attributed to Albert Einstein, the authenticity of which has never been proved. It is supposed to have been written to his daughter Lieserl, the first daughter of Einstein with his wife Mileva Maric, born before they were married. Little is known about the life of this girl. She was given in adoption so never lived with her real parents. The letter has been supposedly donated to a museum together with many other letters, by the stepdaughter of Einstein after the death of her father.

... “When I proposed the theory of relativity, very few understood me, and what I will reveal now to transmit to mankind will also collide with the misunderstanding and prejudice in the world.

I ask you to guard the letters as long as necessary, years, decades, until society is advanced enough to accept what I will explain below.

There is an extremely powerful force that, so far, science has not found a formal explanation to. It is a force that includes and governs all others, and is even behind any phenomenon operating in the universe and has not yet been identified by us.

This universal force is LOVE.

When scientists looked for a unified theory of the universe they forgot the most powerful unseen force.

Love is Light, that enlightens those who give and receive it.

Love is gravity, because it makes some people feel attracted to others.

Love is power, because it multiplies the best we have, and allows humanity not to be extinguished in their blind selfishness. Love unfolds and reveals.

For love we live and die.

Love is God and God is Love.

This force explains everything and gives meaning to life. This is the variable that we have ignored for too long, maybe because we are afraid of love because it is the only energy in the universe that man has not learned to drive at will.

To give visibility to love, I made a simple substitution in my most famous equation.

If instead of $E = mc^2$, we accept that the energy to heal the world can be obtained through love multiplied by the speed of light squared, we arrive at the conclusion that love is the most powerful force there is, because it has no limits.

After the failure of humanity in the use and control of the other forces of the universe that have turned against us, it is urgent that we nourish ourselves with another kind of energy...

If we want our species to survive, if we are to find meaning in life, if we want to save the world and every sentient being that

inhabits it, love is the one and only answer.

Perhaps we are not yet ready to make a bomb of love, a device powerful enough to entirely destroy the hate, selfishness and greed that devastate the planet.

However, each individual carries within them a small but powerful generator of love whose energy is waiting to be released.

When we learn to give and receive this universal energy, dear Lieserl, we will have affirmed that love conquers all, is able to transcend everything and anything, because love is the quintessence of life.

I deeply regret not having been able to express what is in my heart, which has quietly beaten for you all my life. Maybe it's too late to apologize, but as time is relative, I need to tell you that I love you and thanks to you I have reached the ultimate answer! “.

Your father Albert Einstein

Love

(from the book “The Prophet” by Khalil Gibran)

Then said Almitra, Speak to us of *Love*.

And he raised his head and looked upon the people, and there fell a stillness upon them. And with a great voice he said:

When love beckons to you, follow him,
Though his ways are hard and steep.

And when his wings enfold you yield to him,
Though the sword hidden among his pinions
may wound you.

And when he speaks to you believe in him,
Though his voice may shatter your dreams as
the north wind lays waste the garden.

For even as love crowns you so shall he crucify
you. Even as he is for your growth so is he for
your pruning.

Even as he ascends to your height and caresses
your tenderest branches that quiver in the sun,
So shall he descend to your roots and shake
them in their clinging to the earth.

Like sheaves of corn he gathers you unto himself.
He threshes you to make you naked.
He sifts you to free you from your husks.
He grinds you to whiteness.
He kneads you until you are pliant;
And then he assigns you to his sacred fire, that
you may become sacred bread for God's sacred
feast.

All these things shall love do unto you that you
may know the secrets of your heart, and in that
knowledge become a fragment of Life's heart.

But if in your fear you would seek only love's peace
and love's pleasure,
Then it is better for you that you cover your
nakedness and pass out of love's threshing-
floor,
Into the seasonless world where you shall laugh,
but not all of your laughter, and weep, but not
all of your tears.

Love gives naught but itself and takes naught but

from itself.

Love possesses not nor would it be possessed;
For love is sufficient unto love.

When you love you should not say, "God is in my heart," but rather, "I am in the heart of God."

And think not you can direct the course of love, for love, if it finds you worthy, directs your course.

Love has no other desire but to fulfill itself.

But if you love and must needs have desires, let these be your desires:

To melt and be like a running brook that sings its melody to the night. To know the pain of too much tenderness.

To be wounded by your own understanding of love;

And to bleed willingly and joyfully.

To wake at dawn with a winged heart and give thanks for another day of loving;

To rest at the noon hour and meditate love's ecstasy;

To return home at eventide with gratitude;

And then to sleep with a prayer for the beloved in your heart and a song of praise upon your lips.

FINAL PRAYER

**Holy Mary,
Mother of God,
you gave the world its true light,
Jesus, your Son –
the Son of God.
You completely surrendered
to God's call
and thus became a source of goodness
flowing from Him.
Show us Jesus.
Guide us to Him.
Teach us to know Him
and to love Him,
so that we too
may become capable
of true love
and fountains of living water
in the midst of a thirsty world.**