

Word of Life October 2015

We can be like the first Christians and replicate their dramatic effect on society around them, if we live like them. For this we must focus on the Gospel's core message and love one another in the power and the style of Jesus.

'By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another' (Jn 13:35).

Here we have the badge, the mark, the typical brand of Christians. Or at least it ought to be, because Jesus saw his community in this way.

A fascinating text from Christianity's early centuries, the *Letter to Diognetus*, recognizes that 'Christians cannot be distinguished from the rest of the human race by country or language or customs. They do not live in cities of their own; they do not use a peculiar form of speech; they do not follow an eccentric manner of life.' They are ordinary people, just the same as others. And yet they have a secret and it allows them to influence society profoundly, becoming as it were its 'soul' (see chs 5-6).

It is a secret that Jesus passed on to his disciples shortly before dying. Like the ancient sages of Israel, like a father for his child, so too he, the Master of Wisdom, left as his legacy the art of knowing how to live and to live well. He had taken it directly from the Father: 'I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father' (Jn 15:15), and it was the fruit of the relationship between them. It consisted in loving one another. This is his Last Will and Testament, the life of heaven that he brought to earth, which he shares with us so that it can become our very own life.

He wants this to be the identity of his disciples, who should be recognizable as his followers by their mutual love:

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Are Jesus's disciples recognized by their mutual love? 'The history of the Church is a history of holiness' wrote John Paul II. Nonetheless 'history also records events which constitute a counter-testimony to Christianity' (*Incararnationis Mysterium*, 11). For centuries, in the name of Jesus, Christians have fought endless wars with one another and their divisions continue. There are people who still today associate Christians with the Crusades, with the Inquisition, or who see them as the defenders to the bitter end of an outdated morality, and as opposing the progress of science.

It was not like that for the new-born community of the first Christians in Jerusalem. People admired the communion of goods they practised, the unity that reigned among them, the 'glad and generous hearts' that characterized them (see Acts 2:46). In the Acts of the Apostles we read that 'the people held them in high esteem' so that more and more 'believers were added to the Lord, great numbers of both men and women' (Acts 5:13-14). The living witness of the community had a powerful attraction. Why today are we not known as people who stand out because of their love? What have we done with the commandment of Jesus?

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Traditionally, in Roman Catholic circles, the month of October is dedicated to mission, to reflecting upon the command of Jesus to go into all the world and proclaim the Gospel, to pray for and support those who are in the frontline. This Word of Life could be a help for all to put into focus the fundamental dimension of every Christian proclamation. It is not about imposing faith on others, nor proselytism, nor a self-serving handout of aid to the poor so that they will be converted. Neither is it primarily a matter of the challenge to defend moral values or a firm stand against injustice and

war, even though such stances are a duty the Christian cannot evade.

Before all else the Christian proclamation is a witness of life that every disciple of Jesus must offer personally. People in the modern world 'listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers' (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 41). Even persons hostile to the Church are often touched by the example of those who dedicate their lives to the sick and the poor and who are ready to leave their homelands, going far away to the toughest places and offering help and solidarity to those in most need.

But above all the witness Jesus requires is that of a whole community which demonstrates the truth of the Gospel. It must show that the life he brought really can generate a new society, where we live genuinely as brothers and sisters, helping and serving one another, collectively attentive to the most fragile and needy.

The life of the Church has seen these kinds of witness, such as the settlements for indigenous peoples built by Franciscans and Jesuits in South America, or monasteries with the townships that grew up around them. Today too ecclesial Movements and communities give life to little towns of witness where it is possible to see signs of a new society, the fruit of Gospel life, of mutual love.

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Without abandoning our homes and the persons we know, if among us we live that unity which Jesus gave his life for, we can create an alternative way of living and sow seeds of hope and new life around us. A family that every day renews their will to live mutual love in a practical way can become a ray of light in the mutual indifference of a housing block or a district. An 'environmental cell', in other words two or more persons who agree to put into practice the demands of the Gospel with total commitment – in the field of their work, at school, in local government offices, in administrative buildings, in a prison – will cut through the logic of the struggle for power and create a collaborative atmosphere that favours the birth of true fraternity, a fraternity previously unhoped-for.

Did not the first Christians behave like this at the time of the Roman Empire? Is not this the way they spread the transformative new life of Christianity? In our own day it is we who are the 'first Christians', called, as they were, to forgive one another, to see each other as always new, to help one another – in a word, to love one another with the intensity that Jesus loved us, in the certainty that his presence in our midst has the strength to draw others too into the divine logic of love.

Fabio Ciardi