

(English translation)

Castel Gandolfo, 1 November 2002

Some Characteristics of Love of Neighbour

Dear brothers and sisters, or sisters and brothers, I welcome you to our congress with great joy. May the Lord bless this congress, guide it and make it bear excellent fruit for all of us participants.

In my opinion, this theme is very, very important if we want to build that brotherhood among us and among many. It is so badly needed in the world today. ...

We are dealing with loving our neighbour, that love found in many different religious and cultural environments in the form of mercy, benevolence, compassion, solidarity. For us Christians this love for our neighbour is not just a human feeling. Enriched by a divine spark, it is called charity, agape, love with a supernatural origin.

To talk about love, I will start with my experience and I will share with you how the Lord drew our attention to love ever since the beginning of our Movement.

When God called me to consecrate my life to Him forever, that calling was so fascinating, unique and sublime; I was giving myself completely to Him. That God who was the immense one, infinite love, had taken me to Himself, and I never would have wanted any person or thing to interrupt the enchantment of that personal conversation with the Lord. For example, if someone were to have told me that day that a big Movement was going to be born, it would have destroyed something divine in me, which cannot be described. This is my impression.

God soon clarified to me nevertheless, that loving Him also implied being in relationship with my neighbour. It meant loving every brother and sister in the world out of love for God.

What the Qur'an says in this regard is also beautiful.

“Such is God’s promise to His servants who believe and do good works. Say: ‘For this I demand of you no recompense. I ask you only to love your kindred’” (Qur’an 42:23).¹

Led by the painful circumstances of the war, we directed our love to the poor at the Movement’s beginning. And this was a school for us! We were not used to loving in the supernatural sense of the word. At the most, our care and concern reached those closest to us, or our friends. Instead, urged on by the grace of God at this point, we dedicated our attention to all the poor in the city, trusting in God and His providence.

We tried to get them to come to our homes and eat with us. We met them on the street, and gave them what had been collected. We visited them in the poorest slums and tried to take care of them with medicine as well.

At first, we focused our love on the poor because we thought that we could love Jesus through them. He had said, “Each time you did these things to the least of my brothers, you did it to me...” (Mt 25:40). The poor were also the centre of attention for all the others attracted by our new life and it was spectacular to see tons of God’s providence arriving in the form of produce, clothes and medicine!

When a few hundred people were already living like us at a certain point, it seemed that the Lord was asking us in particular to become poor in order to serve the poor and everyone.

That was the day we made what was called “the bundle”. Each one put what they felt they did not need in the middle of a room in the first Focolare: a coat, a pair of gloves, a hat, even a fur coat I remember. In fact, we were fascinated by the stupendous page about the first Christians, when they were

¹. Qur’an 42:23. Translated by Bausani. The first meaning of the term “kindred” (*qurba*) indicates a relative, a member of the tribe, but it can acquire a broader meaning: “Love for the tribe can be extended to love for all humanity, because all human beings are brothers and sisters as descendants of Adam. “*The meaning of the Holy Qur’an*”, Abdullah Yusuf Ali, ed. Amana Publications, Beltsville, Maryland, 1989, p.1253, note 4560.

just one heart and one soul in Jerusalem, and no one called his possessions his own because they had everything in common and no one among them was in need (see Acts 4: 32,34).

No one among them was in need. This was the great plan opening up in front of us – to be achieved among ourselves first of all, and with all those following us. That is why the first girls gave everything. God had already called them to give themselves completely in the Focolare. Others instead gave what was not absolutely necessary. And those who had little or nothing, put their own needs in common. This is how the communion of goods was born. Then it grew all the way to today's Economy of Communion program.

As far as I know, this love for the poor is also very much felt in Islam, which commends almsgiving a lot, to the point of *zakat*, one of Islam's five pillars; almsgiving is often praised in the Qur'an which threatens hell to the one who "...did not care to feed the poor" (Qur'an 69:33-34)². It defines the good man as the one who, out of love for God, "gives away his wealth to kinsfolk, to orphans, to the helpless, to the traveller in need and to beggars, and for the redemption of captives" (Qur'an 2:177)³.

Going back to the early times of the Movement, since love always produces light, we focolarini think that it may have been because of this love shown to the poor that we quickly understood something. We understood that our heart had to be open not only to them, but to all people without exception.

In fact, God asked us both then and now to always try to move towards universal brotherhood in the one God Creator of everyone. Consequently, it means loving everyone without exception, like God who sends sunshine and rainfall on the just and the unjust (see Mt 5:45). So there is no choosing between a nice person and an unpleasant one, between the beautiful or the ugly, a person from my country or a foreigner, white, black or yellow, European or American, African or Asian, Christian or Jew, Muslim or Hindu... Love does not know any kind of discrimination.

We have also found this faith in the love that God brings to those He created in many brothers and sisters belonging to other religions, starting with those which go back to Abraham.

Loving everyone as a result, without exception; loving our brothers and sisters individually and together; loving our neighbours one by one and having the highest respect for each people therefore. This leads to a radical change in mentality, this leads to a revolution.

The earth would already be like heaven if everyone were to do just this.

Loving everyone, even our enemies. In fact, the Gospel urged us to have this measure of love. It asks us to pray for our own persecutors (see Mt 5:44).

But we find similar demands in the Muslim tradition, like this beautiful verse from the Qur'an for example:

"Good and evil deeds are not alike. Requite evil with good, and he who is your enemy will become your dearest friend" (Qur'an 41:34)⁴.

Then there is another characteristic of love that the Lord taught us, and it may be the most demanding, the most difficult of all. It means taking the initiative, being the first to move, not waiting for the other to take the first step to love.

Maybe God did not push us to love all our brothers and sisters right away at the beginning of the Movement, in order to teach us to love this way. Instead, He directed us towards the needy as I said, to love the poor, the sick, prisoners, orphans, in other words people who couldn't take the initiative in loving, but who were waiting for our love.

Besides everything else, this is God's approach. He did not wait for us to love Him. But He has always shown us in a thousand ways that He is the first one to love us.

². In the translation of A. Bausani, *Il Corano*, Milan 1996, p.440.

³. *Ibid*, p.20.

⁴. *Ibid*, p.354.

The first Focolare had an actual experience which was an application of this “being the first to love”. It was not always easy for a group of girls to live love radically, especially at the beginning. We were like other people, even though we were sustained by a special gift from God, in order to begin the Movement. Dust could settle on us as well, on our rapport with one another, and our unity could wilt. That happened for example upon discovering others’ faults and imperfections. When there was judgment, the flow of reciprocal love got cold.

We thought of making a pact among us to counter this situation one day. We called it the pact of mercy. We decided to see our neighbour in a very new way when we met him or her each morning (in the Focolare, at school, at work...), really forgetting his blemishes, her defects, covering everything with love.

This meant approaching everyone with this complete amnesty in our heart, with this universal forgiveness.

Everyone took this strong commitment together. It helped us to always be the first to love in imitation of our merciful God who forgives and forgets. We are now sure that the Movement would not even have made it from Trent to Rovereto, which is a half-hour away, if it were not for this daily pact of forgiveness. Practically, the Movement would not have had the energy needed to spread.

The Qur’an says: “Let them pardon and forgive. Do you not wish God to forgive you? God is forgiving and merciful” (Qur’an 24:22)⁵.

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⁵. *Ibid*, p.254.