

(English translation)

Rocca di Papa, 6 December 1973

The Harsh Side of the Gospel*

A new experience

Last summer was a rather special one because of the suffering that God had planned for me personally and as a consequence- because of unity- for some who were with me.

We have always said that suffering and love must be kept secret, whereas the light that comes from our experience must be given.

I believe that what has happened in these past months is of fundamental importance for us. In fact, I feel that God wanted to highlight a part of His Gospel which we had not yet considered in depth.

To make a somewhat exaggerated analogy, I would compare the sufferings experienced so far in the Movement with what Mary felt when Simeon prophesied that her soul would be pierced by a sword (Lk2:34). This summer's sufferings on the other hand, are more comparable to the suffering of Mary when, desolate at the foot of the cross, she experienced that pain which had been prophesied.

The trials that the Lord has sent to us have been varied, one after the other, one right on top of the other, persistent and without respite. I would like to communicate one of these to you, one which affected me personally, for the sole purpose of helping you if you should find yourselves in a similar situation.

Leaving an incomplete Work?

The painful circumstances were such that at times I feared I could no longer continue to serve the Work of Mary as I had tried to do up until then. I won't go into the reasons why I was so worried. The fact is that accepting a suffering of this kind was extremely difficult for me.

The main reason was this: being far from you, I ascertained more than ever the immense beauty, grandeur and power of the Movement to which up until then, with the grace of God, together with you, I had given life. But, at the same time, I saw the frailty of its structures which we had contemplated since 1954, but which had not yet been fully tried out and were not yet fully in action.

I was well aware that each one of us, and I above all, must always say that we are a "useless and unfaithful servant," especially in the face of a work of God. Nonetheless, having had the desire, the longing in my heart for years to bring about the implementation of the Movement as God had shown it to me, it also seemed to me that He Himself wanted me to continue to serve it.

I struggled for quite some time with this trial. For me, it meant living Mary Desolate, that is, losing the Work of God, the work of which God in a certain way had made me the mother. But it wasn't a simple matter: I wanted to accept the will of God of losing everything, but this was in sharp contrast with my will.

During those moments I felt as if the Ideal life within me had to undergo a change.

I had lived this life for years as a divine adventure (certainly not without sufferings) in which, along with you, I affirmed that I hardly had a will of my own because my will was God's will. It had seemed to me that my heart was in unison with His, each time that He had manifested His will.

Now this was no longer true.

* This text is the fruit of a spiritual experience lived out by Chiara Lubich in 1973, when, physically struck by a very painful herniated disc and spiritually struck by other sufferings, she began to deepen on a new dimension of the Gospel. The text is in conversation form as it was originally addressed to some delegates of the Movement and it was kept that way.

Who could explain this strange feeling? Who could tell me that I was a Christian and a focolarina in this situation too?

Jesus' example

One day, Jesus spoke to my heart and He enlightened me in an amazing way with regard to His words: "Father, all things are possible to you, remove this chalice from me! However, not my will, but yours be done" (Mk 14:36).

Had He, too, called on the omnipotence of the Father so that the cross of the passion would be taken from Him? But wasn't Jesus God and therefore one with the will of the Father? Hadn't St. Paul said, in reference to the sacrifice of Jesus: "Lo, I have come to do your will, O God" (Heb 10:5-7)? Yes, but in the face of what awaited Him, His will as God-Man emerged in all its strength. He clung to the fact that for the Father all things were possible, but in the end, He submitted to His Father's will.

These words gave me peace. Indeed, they were a breakthrough in our understanding of a part of the Gospel which we had not yet sufficiently emphasized.

Another aspect of the Gospel

In reality, Jesus forsaken has always been present in our spiritual life, but God, in order to draw us to Himself, I think, focused our souls at the beginning (and this is what He does with all those who begin to live the Ideal) on love, on His promises which we see fulfilled, on the certainty of obtaining what we ask for because we continually see it verified, on the faith that moves mountains.

Now I was beginning to realize that there was something else in the Gospel. And one by one other phrases similar to that one sprang to mind:

"Now my soul is troubled..." (Jn 12:27);

"And He began to be greatly distressed and troubled; and He said to them: 'My soul is very sorrowful, even to death'" (Mk 14:33);

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Mt 5:4);

"Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh" (Lk 6:21);

"And when He drew near and saw the city, He wept over it..." (Lk 19:41);

and at the death of Lazarus, "Jesus wept" (Jn 11:35).

I also remembered that Jesus called Peter "Satan" when he rebuked Him for speaking of His future end, and that it was written of Jesus: "He will be delivered to the Gentiles, and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon; they will scourge Him and kill Him..." (Lk 18:31-33).

Was there, then, a harsh side of the Gospel that we, too, as Christians had to live? Did it mean that not only homes, places or little towns like Loppiano, where joy shines out from every face, could bear witness to the Gospel?

Could people who are troubled, suffering or in tears also bear witness to the Good News?

Would we some day perhaps have to ask over and over again for a long period of time without ever receiving what we are asking for? Yes, all this was true.

The harsh side of the Gospel.

Jesus who cries out His abandonment, which isn't resolved in joy- like our trials when we accept them- but which finishes in death.

Mary who feels her heart pierced by a sword, but her Son who is God doesn't take it from her. On the contrary, He allows her to reach the climax of suffering, to contemplate the death of the One whom she loved more than herself.

The harsh side of the Gospel.

After all, Jesus had always told us: "If anyone wants to follow me... let him take up his cross" (Mk 8:34)- the utmost atrocity, of which the cross is a symbol.

Jesus had always told us, but we had not yet understood it well enough.

This was the moment. The moment to understand the most obvious truth that Christ brought on earth: that His kingdom is not of this world; that we must rise to enjoy with Him the eternal kingdom through the suffering borne well here on earth; that nothing here is of value except that which we do for the next life; that even something as splendid as a work of God is not God, and therefore, we must detach ourselves from it and abandon it to Him, if this is His will.

Towards the fullness of joy

And so, take courage! Let's not cut the Gospel in half. May the harsh side of the Gospel (harsh to our nature) not stop us, but give us new impetus, confident that God will not fail to give us His grace, not even in the most tragic moments.

Of course, this almost "revelation" of suffering predicted in the Gospel in this way, will bring to our hearts more seriousness, less enthusiasm, even for the beautiful, Ideal things here on earth. But it will not impede the fulfillment of Jesus' promise: "May they have the fullness of my joy within them" (Jn 17:13). Perhaps this fullness is something we have not yet experienced. The Gospel is an abyss.

May God still give us time to penetrate its depths here in this life, if it is His will.

Let us promise Him once again that we want His will and not our own.

And let us cry out, even if in tears, in distress, in fear, that still now and always in every circumstance, we believe in Love, in that Love which embraces the earthly life and the eternal one with a single arch.

And may Mary, our Mother, help us in our weakness.

Chiara Lubich