

Rome, 10 August 1990

Word of Life

‘Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law’ (Rom. 13:8).

In the preceding verses (Rom. 13:1-7) Paul refers to what we owe the civil authorities (obedience, respect, paying taxes etc.). He stresses that this debt should also be paid in a spirit of love. Of course, such a debt is easily understood, all the more so because if we neglect it, we are penalized by law.

On this basis, Paul goes on to speak of another debt, one that’s a bit more difficult to understand. It is our debt, following the instructions Jesus left us, towards every neighbour. It is mutual love in its various expressions: generosity, thoughtfulness, trust, mutual esteem, sincerity and so on (see Rom. 12, 9-12).

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This Word of Life emphasizes two things.

In the first place, love is presented as a debt, that is, as something we cannot be indifferent to, something we cannot put off. It is presented as something pressing on us, spurring us on, leaving us no peace until it is satisfied.

It’s like saying that mutual love is not an ‘extra’, the result of our largesse, whose strictures we can set aside without incurring any legal penalty. This Word urges us to put mutual love into practice on pain of betraying our dignity as Christians called by Jesus to be instruments of his love in the world.

Secondly, this Word of Life tells us that mutual love is the moving force, the soul and the goal of all the commandments.

It follows that, if we want to do the will of God well, we cannot rest content with a cold and legalistic observance of God’s commandments. We must always keep in mind the goal that God sets before us through the commandments. So, for example, to live well the commandment not to steal, we cannot limit ourselves to not stealing, but we ought to be seriously committed to eliminating social injustice. Only like this will we demonstrate love for our neighbour.

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How should we live the Word of Life for this month?

The subject of love for our neighbour, which it puts before us once again, has infinite shades of meaning. Here we pinpoint one in particular that would seem to be suggested in a special way by the words of the text.

If, as Paul says, mutual love is a debt, we need to have a love that is the first to love as Jesus was with us. It will be, therefore, a love that takes the initiative, that does not hold back, that does not delay.

Let’s do this in the coming month, then. Let’s try to be the first to love each person we meet, we speak to on the phone, we write to or we live with. And let’s love in a concrete way, knowing how to understand the other, foresee the other’s needs, be patient, trustful, persevering, generous.

We will notice that that our spiritual life takes a qualitative leap, to say nothing of the joy that will fill our hearts.

Chiara Lubich