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Living for love – ecumenical insights

Chiara visited Germany in 1998, from 1st November to 13 December, spending time at Aachen, Münster, Augsburg and then in Berlin at the invitation of the Evangelical Church community. In her address, part of which is published below, Chiara points to the law of love as the master key to unity among Christians and to dialogue with all people of faith.

The plain fact is that if we Christians now, at the dawn of the third millennium, take a good look back at our 2000 years of history and particularly at the last millennium, we cannot fail to be saddened by what we see: a painful succession of misunderstandings, arguments and conflicts. These have caused many rips and tears in the “seamless robe of Christ”, which is His Church. And whose fault is this? Without doubt, countless historical, cultural, geo-political, social factors have played their part But could it also be due to a weakening among Christians of their characteristic unifying bond of love? I think so.

In fact, when we try to address the painful situation we find ourselves in, we must keep in mind the guiding principle of our common faith: God Love who calls us too to love. In these our times it is God Love who, in some way, must return once more to reveal Himself also to the Churches we are part of. It's true that we can't really know how to love others unless we have experienced being deeply loved ourselves, unless all Christians are convinced of how much God loves us.

He loves us as individual Christians and also as Church. He loves the Church in so far as it has been faithful to God's plan for it, but also – and herein lies the wonder of God's mercy – He loves the Church even when it has not corresponded to that plan and has allowed divisions to occur, as long as now it is seeking for full communion with the other Churches. This is the consoling conviction that led John Paul II, trusting in the One who can draw good from what is bad, to reflect: “Could it not be that the divisions have also been a way which has led and is leading the Church to discover the many treasures contained in the Gospel of Christ and in the redemption he brought about? Perhaps such a wealth would not have come to light otherwise.”

So, belief in God who is Love, also for the Church. But if God loves us, we cannot remain inert in the face of such divine benevolence. As true sons and daughters, we must respond to His love with love, individually and as Church. Perhaps we can say that the Churches over the centuries may have hardened somewhat within themselves against the relentless tide of indifference, of misunderstanding, if not of actual hatred between them. So now we need a supplement of love in each one; we would need, in fact, a whole tidal wave of love to invade all Christianity.

Love towards the other Churches is what we're talking about here, together with mutual love among the Churches: a love that enables each one to be a gift for the others, so that it is possible to hope in a Church of the future which is one, in which one alone is the truth, expressed in many ways, observed from different perspectives, made even more beautiful by the variety of interpretations.

It's not that any of the Churches would have to “die” (as some may think), rather each one will have to be “reborn” in unity. And to live in this Church of the future, in full communion, will be such a wonderful, miraculous reality, that it cannot fail to be noticed by the whole world.

The mutual love we are talking about, is only truly evangelical and therefore valid, if it is lived out to the measure indicated by Jesus: “Love one another – He said – as I have loved you. No-one has greater love than this, to give your life for your friends.” (Jn 15,13). And how did Jesus die? In His passion and death, Jesus suffered the agony in the garden, being scourged, the crowning with thorns, the crucifixion ... and then the culmination of His suffering expressed in His cry: “My God, my God, why

have you forsaken me?" (Mt 27,46). This, according to theologians and mystics, is His deepest trial, His darkest hour.

So from this, it would seem that if we are to take up the goal of building full communion in mutual love, it will be necessary for us today to contemplate this particular suffering and to find ourselves in it. It makes sense. Because if we look at Jesus, who offered Himself as a remedy for the sin of the world and for the division of mankind separated from God and hence divided among themselves, He could not achieve this mission without experiencing in Himself that profoundest separation: of Him – God from God, feeling Himself abandoned by the Father.

Jesus, however, re-abandons Himself to the Father – “Into your hands I commit my spirit” (Lk 23,46) – and in so doing overcomes that infinite suffering and brings mankind into the heart of the Father and into a reciprocal embrace. And if that is how things are, it’s not hard to see Him as the brightest star to guide us along our ecumenical way; to see Him as the pearl we need to find in order to enter into the Kingdom.

It would seem that an ecumenical effort may be truly fruitful in proportion to how much those working on it are able to recognise in Jesus crucified and forsaken who re-abandons Himself to the Father, the key to understanding every disunity and to rebuilding unity. Effective ecumenism calls for hearts that are touched by Him, crucified and forsaken. Hearts that do not flee from Him, but understand Him, love Him, choose Him and know how to recognise His divine face in every disunity they meet. Hearts that find in Him the light and strength not to get stuck in the chasm and trauma of division, but rather to find ways of going beyond and finding healing, all possible healing there.

In this way we can see how mutual love activates unity. Before being nailed to the cross, before experiencing abandonment from the Father, Jesus, in a long prayer for unity, asks: “that all may be one” (Jn 17,21). Now unity, when lived, itself produces an effect which is another important impulse to a living ecumenism. I’m referring to the presence of Jesus among a group of people, among a community. As Jesus said: “Where two or more are united in my name, I am in their midst” (Mt 18,20).

Have we really thought about what this means? Have we experienced it? Jesus present among a Catholic and an Evangelical who love one other; Jesus among Anglicans and Orthodox, among members of the Armenian and Reformed Churches ... Jesus Himself! What peace this gives, what light this presence of His shines on our ecumenical journey. And let’s also recognise that Jesus in our midst is a gift which can ease the burden of waiting for the time when we will all be united in the eucharist.

We also need a great love for the Holy Spirit, Love Personified. Jesus gave us the Holy Spirit when he breathed his last on the cross and filled the newly-born Church with the Spirit at Pentecost. It is the Holy Spirit who binds in unity the Persons of the Holy Trinity, and the Holy Spirit is the bond between the members of the mystical Body of Christ.

When considering the reconciliation of Christians, let us not forget the figure of Mary, who – in the Council of Ephesus, a Council we share – was proclaimed Mother of God, Theotókos. And precisely because she is Mother, Mary can do a great deal for unity.

This is what I wanted to share in communion with you all.

I know, from my own experience, that if we all live in this way, there will be exceptional fruits. And, as we intuitively grasp, there will be above all one particular effect: by living these various aspects of our Christianity together, we will experience, now in our own time, a certain way of being a single Christian people, that could be – together with all the other forces inspired by the Holy Spirit for today’s ecumenism – an effective agent towards full communion among the Churches.

It will be like activating a new dialogue, in addition to the dialogue of charity (here we remember Athenagoras), in addition to theological dialogue, and that of prayer. This will be a dialogue of life, a dialogue of the people, of the people of God. I have seen this dialogue in action, I have seen the reality of this people of God, of this people of God journeying together.

I cannot forget a meeting when I was in London with 2,000 people from different Churches, all

living in this way: God love, love Him, love one another, Christ present among us, overcoming all difficulties and traumas with love for Him crucified and abandoned. And we found ourselves as one people. I turned to the person beside me, an Anglican, and said: “Who could separate us from this love?” with this Anglican sister of mine who lives the same life as me. No-one would be able to remove Christ present among us.

So there is this other dialogue, a dialogue which could not be more urgent or timely if we accept the lesson of history that sure ecumenical progress will only be made if and when the people are involved. In the past there have been Councils which made decisions to unite the Churches, but nothing happened because the people had not been involved, they were just not interested. So this dialogue will help to uncover with greater clarity the great patrimony we all share: baptism, the Scriptures, the early Councils, the Fathers of the Church.

We are eager to see this people emerge, a people which is already appearing in different parts.

But here and now – in this magnificent church – why don’t we Christians unite ourselves in these ideas to such an extent, that whereas we walked in as members of different Churches, we walk out as one Christian people, ready to die for one another?

What an amazing fruit. I think of how the Holy Trinity may be looking on us, seeing the Trinity’s own way of being among the different Churches: one Church for the other, one Church being a gift for the other, two Churches that no-one could ever put asunder because they are made one by the presence of Christ among us.

Let’s keep this presence of Jesus among us. He is the hope of the world. He is the One to bring us ahead in a truly fruitful ecumenism. He will let us see miracles in this field. Those who complain that ecumenism is moving too slowly are wasting their breath. With Jesus we will conquer the world!

Also, if we Christians love one another in this way, we could gain additional light to discover the presence of “seeds of the Word” in other religions. Meaning, a certain light of the Word present also in other religions, a certain light of truth also in other religions. And this discovery can lead us to getting closer to the faithful of these religions, to an increased understanding, and finding ways to establish a certain relationship of mutual love with them.

Christian love can also help in the dialogue with those who are without belief in God, because they have such a wealth of values in their heart, which Jesus can appreciate as he too is man.

And if we live this dialogue, we may find the possibility of making a positive contribution to the dialogue among peoples. And to the unity of mankind with nature because “creation awaits the revelation of the sons of God” (Rom 8,19), that is of sons and daughters who know how to love.

Let’s make the effort, starting now, to live as Jesus wants. Earlier Dr Kruse told us that the Gospel is simple. And that’s so true! But it’s also challenging: to love everyone, to be the first to love, to love the others as ourselves, to see Jesus in everyone, to love our friend and our enemy, to love German and Italian, to love Buddhist and Catholic, to love everyone.

Let’s give it a try. It leads to happiness! This is our experience.

Let’s make the effort to live like this. Truly nothing could be more urgent for today’s world than a strong current of love, if we are to hope for the civilisation of love that the third millennium expects from us.