

(English translation)

Paderborn, Germany, 12 June 1999

Show Us the Father

Here we are gathered together with our Archbishop and with all of you, especially young people. We hope to spend this time together joyfully, loving one another so that Jesus may truly be present in our midst, not only in the Eucharist, but also spiritually present in the midst of us all.

The title of my talk is a little strange, rather enigmatic. It is: “Show us the Father”. What does it mean?

As our Archbishop said before, “Show us the Father” is the request that Philip the Apostle made to Jesus. You know that Jesus had always spoken of the Father, orienting everyone to him. Now Philip was curious, he wanted to know, he wanted to get to know this Father. So we too will try to say something about the Father. ...

As you may know, I belong to a Movement, the Focolare Movement, one of those Movements to which the Holy Father assigned a place in the Church last year. ... He said: “You are an expression of the charismatic aspect of the Church. What does this big word “charismatic” mean? It means that the Church is not only – as some still think, and as people thought before the Second Vatican Council – formed only by the Holy Father, the bishops, priests, religious, etc. These people undoubtedly represent the Church, they are first in representing the Church.

But there is another part too, to which we also belong, and it is the so-called “charismatic” aspect. More simply, the ones who are part of this charismatic aspect of the Church are all the new, wonderful Movements that have risen up in the Church. And these Movements are fruits of a “charism”. But what is a charism? Now I’ll explain to you what a charism is.

A charism is a light which the Holy Spirit gives to a person He plans to make the founder or foundress of something new in the Church. Usually, it is a light, a belief which already exists in our patrimony of faith, but the Holy Spirit makes you understand it better, with greater light. Indeed, at times, he underlines ideas for you which are part of our patrimony in the Church, and which are useful to humanity in that particular moment in history.

Such a light came to me too one day, for many others, even though I was a poor young girl like many of you might feel you are, because also in my case, He wanted to give life to a new Movement in the Church.

I remember that during those years in Trent – I don’t know if you are familiar with this city in the northern part of Italy – I remember that my faith was a source of joy for me. At the same time, however, I became aware of some contradictions within myself and also outside of myself, in the Church, at least in the Church I knew. They were contradictions which you also might notice in and around you in Christian environments.

Why is it, I asked myself, that the faith of us who call ourselves Christians is often reduced to this: to going to Mass on Sundays, and that’s all; Mass on Sundays, if we go. And then I wondered: why do we say our prayers with so many distractions, if we say them, and in any case, only prayers in which we ask for something? Isn’t God the God of every day, of every moment of our day? And, if we turn to God in prayer, isn’t it something serious?

And I asked myself: is it enough for people of the Church, whom I loved very much even then, to say prayers in a singsong voice without heart and soul, to deliver parcels to the poor without love, to dress and keep their houses without a certain sense of harmony? I wondered: besides being Goodness and Truth, isn’t God also Beauty, Harmony? And isn’t his Son the most beautiful among the sons of men?

I asked myself: isn't the apostolate to which we dedicated ourselves for only one hour a week, too little, like one activity alongside many others? Aren't the things of God more important than all the others? And why has the word "sermon" become synonymous with boring and unpleasant discourses?

I asked myself another very important question: Isn't it strange that when we visit a Christian nation we do not find it to be notably different from non-Christian nations?

While I felt oppressed by these distressing impressions, something happened: the Holy Spirit manifested Himself. I don't remember exactly when, but His subtle light entered in and enlightened my soul on many truths of our Christian faith.

I'll tell you about one episode. I was teaching at the time. One day when I was in the classroom, someone knocked on the door. It was a priest who called me out of the room. I had great faith in the Church and in priests. I saw them as men of God. I believed this. He asked me - he had probably noticed that I went to church - he asked me if I could offer an hour of my day for his apostolic activities.

Since I saw him as a man of God, I replied: "An hour? I'll offer the entire day!"

Struck by such youthful generosity, he asked me to kneel down, he blessed me, and he said something to me which is very important: "God loves you immensely!" I took these words as if they had come from God himself and they filled my soul like a blinding light. "What," I thought, "God loves me immensely?" Well, yes, if he said it, it means that God loves me immensely. I repeated it to myself and to my first companions in the newly-born Movement. Heavens, I said, God loves me immensely! God loves you! God loves all of you immensely! ...

God is Love.

Today, my dear young people, perhaps God wants to manifest himself to all of you too, even through these poor words of mine, for what he is. You might not know this yet. If so, become fully aware of this, deeply convinced and grateful. In this way, everything in your life will change, just as everything changed in ours, not only in the face of positive events, but also during the hardships of the war, because this took place during the war. We were convinced that behind every event there was always a precise design of God, the will of God. We had only to discover it. In fact, for those who love Him, God makes everything converge toward good. I remember that despite the war, we always had a smile on our faces.

Naturally, the people around us were unaware of this. Instead, thanks to God, we believed in his love. So this was the new discovery of our life. And then we began to understand many words of Scripture which we had never understood before, which had never struck us before.

We noted that God manifested Himself as Love in the Hebrew Scriptures as well. For example, we found written: "Zion said, 'The Lord has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me.'" And the Lord responds: "Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb?" And the Lord continues: "Even should she forget, I will never forget you. I've carved you in the palm of my hand" (cf. Is. 49:13-15). ...

Let's consider now what Jesus says, who undoubtedly brought a very great innovation. How does he see the Father's love, how does he manifest it to us, how does he describe the Father's love to us?

For example, he says: "Look at the birds in the sky; they do not sow or reap, they gather nothing into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not more important than they?" As if to say: just imagine what I would do for you if you would only believe in my love. Or: "Why are you anxious about clothes? Learn from the way the wild flowers grow. They do not work or spin. (...) But I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was clothed like one of them" (Mt. 6:26-29). In other words: imagine what I would do for you if you would only believe in my love.

But the parable of the prodigal son gives us an even better understanding of the love of God. You know this parable so I won't repeat it. I will make only one small observation.

We can imagine that the father of the prodigal son must have been very busy: he had to look after his farm, the farm workers, the family. But his main attitude was one of waiting. Who was he waiting for?

The son who had left home. He would climb up to the tower of the house and look out across the fields far into the distance....

The Heavenly Father does likewise with us. Dear young people, imagine, if you can, God's divine, most sublime and dynamic Trinitarian life, a very intense life, not the way we sometimes think of it. Imagine how committed he is in upholding creation, in finding places for those who arrive in heaven. And yet, do you know what he does first of all? He waits. He watches. For whom? For us, for me, for you, especially if we happen to be far from him.

One day, that son, whom the earthly father loved so much and waited for, after squandering all he had, decided to return home.

The father embraced him, dressed him with expensive clothes, put a ring on his finger and prepared the fattened calf for a celebration....

What should we conclude? That he wishes to see his son completely new. He doesn't want to remember him as he was before; and not only does he forgive him, but he even forgets his past. This is the love for him expressed in the parable. And this is the Father's love for us. If we return to him after having been a little naughty, he embraces us, he forgives us. But what is extraordinary is that he forgets. This is the love of the Father; a similar love cannot be found here on earth.

I recently saw a documentary film. Perhaps some of you have seen it. It presented and examined in detail a famous Rembrandt painting portraying the Father of that Gospel narration welcoming his son who had returned home. It is very beautiful in every detail. But what is most striking are the father's hands. That artist had an idea: he made one of the father's hands rather sturdy, strong, like the hand of a man; whereas the other is delicate, gentle, slender, like the hand of a woman. Of course, it wasn't like this, but the artist portrayed it in this way. What did the artist want to say? That the love of the Father is both paternal and maternal. And this is the way we should think of him. We find everything in the Father – Father and Mother.

But in what way did the Father, who is Love, show us his love? This is what he did - you know it, it is repeated often, but we never understand it enough. He decided, together, in the Most Holy Trinity, to send his Son on earth for us; he really took the initiative in loving! And so Jesus came on earth; Jesus, who is nothing other than the very image of the Father. He is his expression, his splendour, his beauty, the beauty of his love. In fact, when Philip asks Jesus: "Show us the Father," he replies: "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn. 14:9).

And we know to what extreme Jesus' love arrived - we'll never understand this enough – to the point of dying for us, but not only in the way we sometimes think. On that cross he suffered a death which went far beyond physical death. Remember that everyone abandoned him. But he wanted to make the greatest sacrifice out of love for us. He had the impression that even the Father had abandoned him. But he believed just the same in his love, and through this particular suffering of his passion, he saved us.

Then you know that he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, but he didn't leave us alone. He filled the earth with his presence because of his great love for us. ...

We can find him in the Eucharist in all the churches. We can love him in every neighbour – think what an advantage I have to be able to love 1,500 brothers and sisters; we can listen to him in our Bishops; we can delight in his spiritual presence among us; we can discover him in the Scriptures.

God, God, God. God present everywhere in the world because He is Love. I remember that at that time, we were practically the only ones who underlined this reality of God as Love. This re-discovery of ours was confirmed a little later.

In fact, a few years later, in 1968, in commenting the creed, Paul VI described God in this way: "He is the one who is...and he is Love. Now, this more explicit definition of God coming from the lips of a Pope, and our life, could signify a revolution in the world, a renewal of the Church, and everyone else as well.

Because it is one thing to know that God exists, and it is another to feel that you are loved by God in every moment and situation. Everything changes. You feel a new courage! I don't know if you have ever experienced this, probably not everyone, but engaged couples, mothers, fathers, will understand what I am saying. For example, when a young girl knows that she is loved, her life changes; everything around her seems to be beautiful, every little thing acquires value. She herself is inclined to be more good-natured, more understanding towards others. This is true. Well, infinitely stronger is the experience of a Christian who acquires a deeper understanding of the truth that God is Love. ...

Chiara Lubich