

(English translation)

September 2002

## Word of Life

**Forgive your neighbour the wrong done to you; then when you pray, your own sins will be forgiven (Ecclus. 28:2).**

This Word of Life is taken from one of the so-called deuterocanonical or apocryphal books of the Bible. It was written between 180 and 170 BC, by Jesus Ben Sirach, who was a wise man and a scribe, teaching in Jerusalem. What he taught followed a theme dear to the whole of the Wisdom literature in the Old Testament: God is merciful to sinners and we should imitate his way of behaving. The Lord forgives all our guilt because he 'is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love' (Ps 103:8). He closes his eyes so as not to see our sins (see Ws 11:23), casting them behind his back (see Isa. 38:17). Indeed, writes Jesus Ben Sirach, since he knows how small and wretched we are, he 'increases his forgiveness.' God forgives because, like any father or mother, he cares for his children and so always excuses them, covers over their faults, gives them trust and never tires of encouraging them.

But as he is father and mother, it is not enough for God to love and forgive his sons and daughters. His deep desire is that they should treat one another as brothers and sisters, that they should get along with one another, care for one another, love one another. Universal fraternity – that is God's great project for the human race. Fraternity stronger than the inevitable divisions, tensions and grudges that worm their way in between us with such ease because of our misunderstandings and mistakes.

Families often fall apart because they don't know how to forgive. Long-standing hatreds keep alive the divisions between relatives, between social groups, between peoples. At times there are even some who teach others not to forget the wrongs done to them, to nurse their wish for revenge... And a deafened resentment poisons the soul and corrodes the heart.

Some imagine that forgiveness is weakness. It isn't. It's the expression of extreme courage, true love, in its most genuine form because it is the least self-interested. 'If you love those who love you, what reward do you have?' says Jesus, because anyone can do this. But you must: 'Love your enemies' (see Mt 5: 43-47).

We too are asked to learn from him and have the love of a father, the love of a mother, a merciful love for whoever we meet during the day, and especially those who slip up. And of whoever is called to live a spirituality of communion, in other words Christian spirituality, the New Testament asks still more: 'Forgive each other' (Col. 3:13). Mutual love demands almost a pact among us: to be ready always to forgive one another. Only like this can we contribute to building universal fraternity.

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These words don't only invite us to forgive; they remind us that forgiveness is a necessary condition for us to be forgiven. God listens to us and forgives us in the measure that we know how to forgive. Jesus himself warns us: 'The measure you give will be the measure you get' (Mt 7:2). 'Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy' (Mt 5:7) Indeed, a heart hardened by hatred isn't even capable of recognizing and accepting God's merciful love.

How shall we live this Word of Life? Certainly by immediately forgiving anyone we're not yet reconciled to. But this isn't enough. We must scour the most hidden corners of our hearts to eliminate

even the merest indifference, lack of kind feeling, every attitude of superiority, of not caring towards anyone who comes our way.

Still more, we must take preventative measures. And so every morning I look with new eyes upon those I meet – at home, in school, at work, in the shops – ready to overlook anything unpleasant in how they do things, ready not to judge, to give them trust, to hope always, to believe always. I approach each person with this total amnesty in my heart, with this universal pardon. I don't remember their failings at all, and cover over everything with love. And throughout the day I try to make up after some rudeness, or impatient outburst, by saying sorry or showing friendship. In place of an attitude of instinctive rejection of the other, I try to put an attitude of complete welcome, of mercy without limits, of total forgiveness, of sharing, of attentiveness to the other's needs.

And then I too, when I offer my prayer to the Father, and especially when I ask forgiveness of my failures, will witness my requests being heard. I will be able to say with complete trust: 'Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.' (Mt 6:12)