
“SEE HOW THEY LOVE ONE ANOTHER!”



It is quite fantastic to realise that from the very first home-based catechetics meeting the children of Level Two are introduced to the first Christians who formed together one heart and one soul. “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ instruction and the communal life, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” We read this at the very beginning of the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 2:42). This ideal lived by Jesus’ closest friends has continued on through the centuries, through time and space, and we are quite surprised to realise that we ourselves experience similar friendly relations in our own groups and communities. Robert Lebel has a beautiful song about this: *“As others see you I would like them to exclaim in amazement: See how they love one another! See how happy they are! And they shall see the likeness of God in all that you are. By seeing all that you do, they shall know that God is with them.”*

THE EIGHTH DAY

The first Christians lived in communion, they lived together in friendship. They shared their belongings with one another, and they helped the needy. They shared. They would gather together to hear the apostles talk to them of Jesus. They prayed together and celebrated the risen Jesus together. The eighth day became a very special day: it was the day on which was celebrated the Great Event of the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the fulfilment of Jesus’ promise to send the Holy Spirit. The people recalled what Jesus had done and said, and what he had asked his disciples, especially to love one another as he had loved them. The community would break bread together in memory of him. This is not to imply that everything always happened harmoniously, in unity, and peace. No, the community quickly realised that it needed moments of forgiveness and reconciliation. The friends soon realised that they remained a fragile bunch and that without the constant aid of the Holy Spirit, the community would not hold much longer. The *Acts of the Apostles* makes exciting reading. The book is filled with life. The Good News of the Resurrection is preached, the message of the Lord is proclaimed, and communities are established. Even in the midst of the gravest concerns, in the very middle of persecutions, life continues: in just a few years, Jesus’ message was announced from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. What came from God could not be stifled, it could not be stopped by humans: Love is stronger than death! The Sunday assembly implied solidarity, wonder, and gratitude.

BASIC ELEMENTS

The *Acts of the Apostles* list the elements that are basic to all community life: fellowship and faith, celebration and commitment. The *Acts* tell us how the people held all things in common, to ensure that no one went without. Then there was the ordination of the first deacons to look after service to the poor: we probably tend to forget these last two aspects of community. We can see from the community’s involvement that the simple fact of belief in the Risen Christ brought about changes in attitude and behaviour. Not only did the poor quickly grasp the meaning of Jesus’ message, but the Christians themselves were committed to love and serve the poor. Jesus had told his disciples; “I was hungry and you gave me to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me to drink, I was sick and you visited me...” (Mt. 25:35-36). Jesus identified with the poorest of the poor, the rejected of society, with the excluded: “As often as you did it for one of my least brothers, you did it for me” (v. 40). So much kindness, affection, and mercy... Throughout the Church’s history the saints have reminded us of the early Christians’ life ideal. Among those saints who have reminded us of the life ideal of these first Christians there is Mother Teresa. In our milieu we have individuals, parents, educators, and pastors who have shown concern for the poor; today they continue with the poor to struggle against poverty and injustice. It is appropriate that we acknowledge them. Others will recognise us as friends of Jesus by the love we have for one another.

A NEW COMMANDMENT

It was Saint John who reminded us of God's greatest commandment. In his Gospel, his three Letters, and the *Book of Revelation*, John does not cease repeating Jesus' watchword: "Beloved, we, for our part, love because God first loved us. If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. One who has no love for the brother he has seen cannot love the God he has not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: whoever loves God must also love his brother" (1 Jn. 4:19-21). And John quickly adds: "The love of God consists in this: that we keep his commandments – and his commandments are not burdensome because everyone begotten of God conquers the world" (1 Jn. 5:3-4a). In reporting to us the very words of Jesus, John insists on Jesus' command: "Love one another as I have loved you" (Jn. 15:12). The little word "as" indicates the degree of love we must have. "*Like him, to set the table, like him, to put on the apron, getting up each day and serving with love, like him!*" (Robert Lebel).

IN THE SPIRIT OF JESUS

To live the command of Jesus, to live the love of Jesus, today, is to really live in the Spirit of Jesus. It means speaking to Jesus in prayer, as he himself conversed simply and trustingly with his Father: "I offer you praise, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because what you have hidden from the learned and the clever you have revealed to the merest children. Yes, Father, you have graciously willed it so. Everything has been given over to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father and no one knows the Father except the Son – and anyone to whom the Son wishes to reveal him" (Lk. 10:21-22). What a wonderful prayer! In the deep intimacy we would like to share together, it is proper to express our gratitude to the Father for giving us his Son and for revealing to us today the secret of His love for each and everyone of His beloved children. It is with joy and gratitude that I proclaim: "This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you. Anyone who loves me will be true to my word, and my Father will love him; we will come to him and make our dwelling place with him. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Live on in my love. Holy Father, may they all be one, as you, Father most holy, are in me and I am in you; protect them with your name which you have given me" (Cf. Jn. 16-17). The love of God has really been poured into our hearts, through the Spirit of Jesus.

+ François Thibodeau

+ François Thibodeau, C.J.M.
Bishop of Edmundston

« From A Bishop's Journal » (542) (25 May 2004)