

## 15. Loving with the love of Christ

“If I do not wash you, you have no share with me” (Jn 13:8). If we do not let ourselves be loved truly by Christ as He loves us, we cannot share his love, we cannot abide in him, and hence express him. Express him how? Jesus says: “Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another” (Jn 13:34).

Often we reduce the commandment of brotherly love to a “copy and paste” where we try to attach something from the example of Christ or of the saints to our life. We notice quickly that something does not mesh, that something does not work. Where is the mistake? In the end it is Peter’s, the mistake of saying yes based on our own powers: “I will give my life for you!”

When Jesus says, “Abide in my love,” deep down he reveals the secret for not falling into the willfulness that presumes to follow Christ just as laws and commandments, or fine examples, but not through the gift that He gives us of himself, that gift that the Holy Spirit continues to pour out in the Church and in each of us. *The point, in fact, is not just to love like Jesus, but to love with the love of Jesus.* Christ does not just say, “Abide in love,” but, “Abide in *my* love.”

If loving meant simply copying Jesus, Peter would have succeeded in giving his life for Him as he had affirmed he would. He would have been able immediately to wash the disciples’ feet without having to wait to understand later on what Jesus was doing. Jesus knew that the symbolic example that he was giving by washing their feet could not be followed before his death and resurrection, before Pentecost. By dying for us on the Cross, Jesus was not, so to speak, “limited” to loving us: he granted us his love, he granted us his heart as source and subject of His charity in us, through us.

For this reason, when he tells us, “Abide in my love,” he anticipates the new reality that, starting with the Death and Resurrection, Ascension and Pentecost, there will be for us, forever, that which enables us to love as we have never loved, as we have never been able to love without Christ. The whole Christian life is for receiving this grace, for living out this charity. And all the vocations in the Church are for living this out, in the thousand facets of the one and universal love of Christ. And all the ministries in the Church are for encouraging this grace, through the word, works, prayer, self-offering, sacrifice, all that a ministry requires and implies.

When Peter found himself facing Jesus, that morning on the shore of the sea of Galilee, Jesus no longer told him, “You will understand me or follow me later on.” By now everything was accomplished and Peter could enter into the gift of his life through the gift of Christ’s life. Hearing himself asked, begged, three times – because beggars insist until they get what they desire – “Simon, son of John, do you love me?”, Jesus brought Peter to the point of being aware that he did not have in himself sufficient love for loving Jesus, and to love him more than everybody else, as Jesus asks him the first time (cf. Jn 21:15). Jesus was asking him for an infinite love that Peter already knew he did not have. Something like a void was created in him, and that emptiness, now, Jesus could fill back up with the Holy Spirit, with His love, what

He received from the Father. With this poverty of heart, Peter now could abide in the love of Christ, without having to worry about producing it himself. He could abide there because the humble self-knowledge produced by his denial, but especially by Jesus's pardoning him without any other conditions than love, allowed the love of Jesus to take him within itself to bring him also where humanly he would not have wanted to go: to the martyrdom with which "he was to glorify God" (Jn 21:19).

From that point on, all that Peter will be and will do will express the love of Christ. Now Jesus could entrust him with everything for everyone, because he granted him to abide in His love for all. It is in this way that Jesus can entrust His mission to Peter, like to all the apostles and disciples, the mission that He has already completely fulfilled, loving to the end: "Feed my sheep!" (cf. Jn 21:15–17). The whole mission of the Church is that of feeding the sheep for whom the Good Shepherd has already given his life (cf. Jn 10:11), so that they "have life and have it more abundantly." These sheep are the whole of humanity, because Christ has given his life for all. Peter and all the pastors of the Church (which include all the baptized, each called to be a shepherd for the flock of Christ in one way or another) will not be able to feed the flock except in the love of Christ, specifying Christ's love in each environment and situation, transmitting it with their life, with their love, the love of Christ for all humanity.

This means something fundamental: no one goes off on mission without abiding in the love of Christ. Without abiding, one does not walk, does not run. For this reason, then, Jesus, after asking Peter to feed his sheep, tells him right away how he can depart by abiding with Him, in Him, in His love. He tells him, "Follow me!" (Jn 21:19, 22). One does not abide in the love of Christ without following him. That is, without always being with Him, at each step. Because the love of Christ is really the love of Christ, *His* love. And love is not some vapor that remains in the air even after the source has passed. More than being a question of learning, following is a question of communion, of intimacy with the Lord, of relationship, of listening, of asking, an embrace.