

*Study Theme for the Year Leading
to the 2006 Lourdes Gathering*

**“Who do people say I am?”
On the Road to Discovering Christ**

Mark 8: 27

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STUDY THEME PRESENTATION

Why was this verse from the Gospel chosen as a study theme which will, step by step, bring us during the coming year to our next International Gathering? There are many reasons for this choice. Each one of you could perhaps find some others. But the most deciding one is that the times in which we are living require us to experience an *awareness of our faith* so that we want to live fully in our faith, according to what we are called for as humans, believers and team members.

Indeed, modern man and, even more so, the believer, is called to a deep-felt authenticity. He is asked to answer for his faith; to do so, he must come to a heightened awareness of it. Jesus himself calls us to an understanding of faith, on our critical minds as adult believers. It is Jesus that urges us to be open, to listen, to seek, to share and to enter into dialogue. It is Jesus himself who questions us in order to make us understand that only a faith that we are willing to put to scrutiny can permit us to be welcoming, to listen, to recognize the Word of God and those of men. *Knowledge and strength* will be the rewards of our undertaking and the goal at the end of our path.

Jesus asks his disciples: “Who do people say I am?” The disciples do not seem to understand the question. Jesus insists: “Who do you say I am?” The answer is simple and clear: “You are the Messiah”. And yet, more than 20 centuries after that day, the question is still current and important for each one of us. It is a question that spans human history. To answer “You are the Messiah” is not enough, because our answer calls for a conversion in our lives and for real commitment to following Christ. Therefore, before giving our answer as

a person of faith: “You are Christ, the Son of God”, one needs to become fully aware of its dimensions.

The goal of this study theme is thus to propose an experience of reflection and prayer based on a more personal question: who do "I" say I am? What am I after in my life? What do I think, what do I say, what do I do to give meaning to my life and solidity to my faith? Only then can I listen with a clear mind to the question put to us by Christ: “Who do you say I am?” and to answer with the same clarity: You are the Everlasting. You are “*my shepherd; I have everything I need. You let me rest in fields of green grass and lead me to quiet pools of fresh water. You give me new strength. You guide me in the right paths*” for you are Christ, the Son of God (from Psalm 23 (22), 1-3).

HOW IS OUR STUDY THEME ARTICULATED?

There are three key sentences in our Gospel passage which are the cornerstones of our journey: two questions and an answer, all very clear, plain, essential and, at the same time, radical:

Who do people say I am?

It is a relevant question that Jesus puts to us even today. Who is Jesus for most people in the world today? ... Many do not know him. For others, he is nothing more than a historical figure. For the great majority, he is of no interest.

Who do you say I am?

It is the question Jesus puts to every one who has been baptized, that is to all those who have formally accepted him as Christ. But, among them, there are persons of different categories: a) the indifferent: those who are unaware of the importance of salvation (a vast majority); b) the ritualists: those who strictly follow the rituals and who sometimes have a kind of magical or even superstitious (popular religiosity) approach to religion; c) the committed: those Christians who are well aware that Christ brought salvation to the world and who are in a personal relationship with Him.

You are Christ, the Son of God

That was Peter’s answer. The quest that this study theme proposes is to invite you to a personal reflection to discover who Christ is for you. In any case, one must not forget the answer Christ gave to Peter, as found in the reading from Matthew: “*Good for you, Simon*

son of John. For this truth did not come to you from any human being, but it was given to you directly by my Father in heaven.” (Matthew 16: 17). Therefore, we encourage you to grow in faithfulness in prayer throughout this year, asking the Father through Jesus Christ and the intercession of Mary that *“you may have the power to understand how broad and long, how high and deep is Christ’s love ... – although it can never be fully known – and so be completely filled with the very nature of God”* (Eph 3:18-19).

During the first three meetings, we will explore and expand on the meaning of doubt, of anxiety and on the search for meaning to life. We ask ourselves the question put to us by Jesus, “Who do you say I am?”, “what am I searching for?”, “what do I desire?”, “where am I going?”, “what do I want to be and become as a human?”

The fourth meeting will help us understand our identity as a human being, my “me”, is given to me and intended for me by God, *“because your names are written in heaven”* (Luke 10:20; He 12:23). It is impossible to separate what I am as a man or a woman from what I am as a creature of God: I am part and parcel of God’s design for all creation.

Finally, the three last meetings will bring us to be men and woman of faith (all the more so as teams and team members) in the service of the Church and of the world, in a deliberate and conscious way.

We are dealing with a verse of the gospel that seems to us, men and women of the third millennium, of startling relevance, because it is a verse that speaks to us in the first person, so that we may develop a clear answer on the meaning of our life and of our faith. The one who is asking us the questions is Christ himself: with him, we cannot pretend, side step the issue, pussyfoot or make believe. Facing Christ who calls out to us, we can only accept the challenge of the quest. We can either bury ourselves in silence or start entering into dialogue, with ourselves, with others and with Him. If we embark on the journey of discovery, we must do it seriously and in a responsible way, because the face that appears before us is the one of Christ himself who looks us directly in the eye and asks: *“Who do you say I am?”*

To Reflect on the Word of God

Several readings are suggested for meditation on the word of God. We could perhaps choose one of them and meditate on it all during the month during our daily prayer.

At each monthly meeting, the communal prayer could be based on one of the suggested readings

First Meeting

Man in Search of Someone Offering Meaning to His Life

All through his existence, a human being searches for the deeper meaning of his life. In the history of mankind, different cultures have put forward theories and projects that might afford satisfying answers. But the truest answer is the one each person must find within himself or herself – a long and in depth search leading to the creature meeting with his Creator.

Search for Meaning to One's Life

Every human being searches for meaning to his life. What is the purpose of living? That is a question that we all ask ourselves sooner or later, a question present at every important stage of our life, in the face of each decision demanding we commit ourselves, a question from which we cannot escape, a question that constantly spurs and leads us on.

What are most of us looking for? What does each of us desire? No doubt that we are all, in one-way or another, searching for happiness and peace. One has the impression, all the more in a world ridden with contradictions, conflicts, injustices and disorders, of being bewildered and wishes to find a “shelter” where to look and find a little peace. But in this frantic search, we end up by going from one experience to another, from one situation to another, from one “mentor” to another, without ever managing to get to our end.

In fact, every life has its meaning and each individual must explore inside himself and on what is going on in his life, to look for and find his answers.

There are those who do very simple things and others who do very intricate ones. What counts is that meaning must not be given for utility, for success or for achieving one's goal. Because the meaning and the values of the things and of the deeds that make up our days lie in what they reveal of our mind and in what sense they give us and bring to our lives. So it is that the daily care that a mother has for her children is no less important than the work of a head of state in the service of his country.

In our search for meaning, we sometimes risk taking away meaning from things that have one; we also risk, on the contrary, inventing or give a meaning to meaningless things. In that there is always a balance to be found. But if because of our culture, of our economy or of our political system, we put in place conditions of a life without meaning, then we will not be able to complain that our life has no meaning, and we will not be able to look elsewhere, in the Church, in politics, in work, in success, in happiness, in pleasure, for answers to the foremost question we ponder deep inside ourselves.

Seeking Answers

Every human being looks for basic answers to the question: “What is life’s purpose?” because “... *unlike animals, whose future lies in their past, since it has been determined by nature, man, a being of free-will and therefore master of his destiny, is not determined by his Past; he is able to cast himself into his future; and, most of all, he is able to draw the plan of what he intends to be, of the ideal and of the type of man he hopes to arrive at. That is what he always did throughout history. The different civilizations that followed one another - Greek, Roman, Christian medieval civilization and modern civilization - [...] all have carried forth an ‘agenda for mankind’ and as much can be said of the contemporary civilization. But there is a difference: whereas civilizations of the past, mainly homogeneous, proposed a sole agenda for mankind, the modern and contemporary civilization, essentially pluralistic from an ideological and cultural point of view, offers on the contrary numerous and diverse proposals, from which stem different and contradicting plans for the future. Among them, the three most outstanding are the following: the technological agenda, the consumerist agenda and the libertarian agenda*”.

a) The Technological Agenda

“This agenda is one of man and of the world strictly governed by scientific rationality, where nothing is left to chance, nor to imagination or whim, but where everything is determined and scheduled by computer, in order to do away with mistakes and economical wastes, social disorders and suffering [...]. This agenda relies absolutely on science – which can, it is believed, solve all problems of industrial growth – and which relies, above all, on human reason”.

b) The Consumerist Agenda

“In this agenda, man is seen as a being who has always new and ever increasing ‘needs’. That is why it is proposed to satisfy them by producing material goods of ever better quality to be consumed in ever-greater quantities. The ideal this agenda strives to accomplish

is to bring about a society of material well-being, a society of possession, in which each person must dispose of what it takes to answer all his needs, basic ones as well as those artificially induced”.

c) The Libertarian Agenda

“In this agenda, man is seen as a being of ‘desires’, although these desires are repressed by society and its laws, by morality and its ‘taboos’ and by religion and its commands. It is therefore proposed to free man from any ‘oppressing law’ and from any ‘repressive morality’, in order to enable him to enjoy his right to freedom and, most of all, his right to be free from any form of oppression or alienation. With this in mind, it is hoped to build a society of freedom, which is a society in which everyone is free to satisfy his ‘needs’ in the way he finds best”.

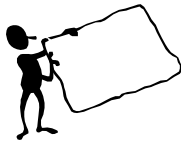
“These ‘agendas for mankind’ are found in today's culture and greatly influence our contemporaries. The underlying idea of liberation they have given them a particular appeal. Modern day man is bent upon being free from any conditioning and from any form of constraint, be it of social, economic, moral or of religious order. Free of suffering, free of needs, free of fear. It just happens that all these agendas for mankind claim to be liberating. But are they really? Instead of liberating man, do they not rather risk tightening old bonds and bringing on new ones?”¹.

In one way or another, we are embedded in these three agendas for civilization while at the same time sharing values of each of them, more perhaps of one or of the other. However, to be honest, we do not feel fulfilled. So it is that we come to be faced with another experience, which perhaps happens to many of us: the feeling of being lost, of living in the short-term or on unstable ground, in so far as any ideology or any undertaking is concerned. Around us, everything seems so without foundation or meaning, to the point that we feel pushed either to run away as an answer to our anxiousness or to always ask ourselves more and more questions about the meaning of our life. That can end up in a negative attitude that leads us to live as having given up, powerless. But that can also be the occasion for us to take the gifts of our intelligence and of our freedom back into our hands and to choose the road we deem will be the most fruitful for our lives.

The question then is not to choose a manner of living as a human being according to one agenda or to another (technological, consumerist or libertarian), but rather to understand the real meaning of what it is to be a person and to want to become one.

¹ Raffaele Sacco, in *L'Observatore Romano*, May 2003

What is at stake is simply an “agenda for humanity” having as goal that every human being become an authentic person. But is such an agenda possible? To fully get there, is not a whole lifetime required?



For Reflection on Human Words

The following readings show, each in their own way, the deep need for a person to find meaning to his life in the midst of this world, according to the agenda for civilization he is involved in.

Marianella Garcia Villas, from El Salvador, lawyer, member of Parliament and Chair of the El Salvador Human Rights Commission, murdered March 13 1983, during the civil war in her country:

- *The meaning of my life is to be a small component in the life of my country's people. My story is but one part of the story of all the people of my country; I am an ordinary woman. But in El Salvador, ordinary persons are not safe from danger: they are without means of defence. In El Salvador, ordinary persons die, are often put in prison; they are made to disappear, they are murdered. In El Salvador, but also around the world, the poor, who are the most ordinary people, do not die of old age but of poverty.*

Luigi Pintor, Italian statesman and layperson, who says to be a non-believer:

- *In a whole lifetime, there is nothing more important than to bend over so that someone else may be able, by holding you by the neck, to get back up.²*

Don Carlo Molari, theologian and team spiritual counsellor:

- *There are many signs that show that it is possible to influence in a positive way the course a person takes. One must be able to recognize them, to foster them and to spread them around, so that hope may take root. The first sign of hope is a thirst for interior life and a quest for the spiritual. Spiritual pursuit is on the rise in our age. Passionate search for human kindness can be explained by the fact that man is truly called to happiness, to a well-being and to mastership of creation. Such a calling has necessarily something to do with this spontaneous hope that brings man to find as much joy as possible in life. But to do so demands to [...] abandon for good the tendency to achieve more gain. That is a frontier that may not be crossed without rediscovering the inner richness of people. It requires a strong renewal of interior*

² L. Pintor, *Servabo*, 1992 (translated from the French text)

life. [...] Only a solid interior life can help to keep going in the fight against the current. For modern man, the crucial question is to know if there is an absolute and permanent answer to his historic expectations, or if, on the contrary, he can live by being satisfied with partial, temporary and tense-laden answers. Some do not succeed in overcoming this and fall apart. Others look for shelter in fundamentalism, which is nostalgia for the highlight moments in their pasts. Others keep on advancing because they continue believing in their illusive reasons. Others still, because they have met God and are driven by their theological hope. Those are different ways of practicing hope by being involved in a more or less perfect way in an active spiritual life.³

An 18 year-old young man:

- *To the image of Christ that I am taking time to look at. I would like to meet you. I would so like to see your eyes when Magdalene was crying at your feet. I would like to see your hands when your disciples recognized them at the instant you broke the bread. I would like to hear your voice as fascinated crowds arrived on purpose from far away listened to you. It must have been great. I would like to see your face as you forgave for the hits you were getting. But most of all, I would like to talk to you if it was only for an hour, to drown you with questions on all the things that I do not know, the ones that I am doubtful about. I would like to know what you think of Brahms or Guccini, D'Annunzio, Marx ... of me.*

Father Henri Caffarel⁴

- *In my mind, there is no doubt that desire for the absolute is a thirst for God that is ingrained in every human being. This thirst can even be what defines him: by his very nature, man is famished for God and hungers for Him. That is why I was telling you and I repeat to you: the real problem is not between you and your husband but between you and God. Find God, give yourself up to Him, and your life will be changed ...*

³ C. Molari, *Un passo al giorno*, 1985 (translated from the French text)

⁴ Henri Caffarel, *Aux Carrefours de l'amour*, p. 26-27



For Reflection from the Word of God

John 4: 6-15

Jesus, tired out by the trip, sat down by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw some water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink of water." (His disciples had gone into town to buy food.) The woman answered, "You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan – so how can you ask me for a drink?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered, "**If you only knew what God gives and who it is that is asking you for a drink, you would ask him, and he would give you life-giving water.**" "Sir," the woman said, "You don't have a bucket, and the well is deep. Where would you get that life-giving water? It was our ancestor Jacob who gave us this well; he and his sons and his flocks all drank from it. You don't claim to be greater than Jacob, do you?" Jesus answered, "Whoever drinks this water will get thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring which will provide him with life-giving water and give him eternal life." "Sir," the woman said, "Give me that water! Then I will never be thirsty again, nor will I have to come here to draw water."

From Psalm 36 (35) 7-11

"How precious, O God is your constant love!
 We find protection under the shadow of your wing.
 We feast on the abundant food you provide. ;
 You let us drink from the river of your goodness.
 You are the source of all life,
 And because of your light we see the light.
 Continue to love those who know you
 And to do good to those who are righteous.
 Do not let proud men attack me
 Or wicked men make me run away."

Questions for the Individual and for the Couple



From a purely human point of view, without making reference as such to our faith, which can also screen our misgivings and our fears, let us try to be sincere and answer:

- *Do I as an individual, and as part of a couple, experience a feeling of being worried and troubled and ponder deep inside ourselves: what is the meaning of our life? What is the purpose of living?*
- *What spiritual answers did we come up with? With the help of whom and of what?*
- *To whom and to what do I give importance in my daily life? How do I give proof of my choice of values? Who am I really? What do I expect of myself?*
- *What set of values have we chosen to live by together as a couple and what do we do to prove it?*



Sharing, Searching and Understanding Together as a Team

- *How many times are we aware, in response to questions that come to us from the bottom of our hearts, that we find answers we are unable to really endorse?*
- *What stops us, in our minds and hearts, from accepting the Truth and really beginning to experience the conversion we aspire to?*
- *What obstacles, in and around us, make our progress more difficult?*

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And thanks for the thoughts and ideas of Raniero La Valle and Marianella Garcia.

Second Meeting

***MANKIND WISHES FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE FOR THE
WHOLE UNIVERSE***

We are all looking for peace but too often, we are not living in peace. Maybe we are mistaken about peace: we want a gentle and calm peace whereas true peace is the fruit of a constant undertaking to conquer it.

Jesus, our master, gave us his peace: a true peace which must not ignore the values of justice and of forgiveness.

Peace

« Pursue peace, look for It. » (Ps 34:15). *Shalom*, the word of the original Hebrew text; it is peace like a richness, well-being, prosperity, integrity and therefore implies nature as human, not disfigured, not violent, not oppressed, but completely reconciled. It is the total realisation of God's « dream », a God of life, for whom peace and life cannot be separated. This peace does not happen by itself; one must look for it, discover it, learn it, and pursue it. Pursuing it does not mean reaching or obtaining it, but striving to reach or obtain it. The undertaking to search for peace « here and now » must be constant: those who live waiting for the Kingdom, herald its peace; they make themselves servants and builders of peace; they offer and welcome peace. And yet peace will never be permanent: every step forward and every success is only a small seed, a simple brick, a sign. History, personal or general, proceeds and goes forward only at the cost of continual shatterings and reconstructions; it is not static, but dynamic: that is why peace which is obtained one day can never be stable or permanent.

Usually, we associate the word peace with something static: We have a rest in peace, we do not fight in peace; we can sit down in peace but we do not take part in a gathering in peace. We consider peace as the absence of conflict, however for us Christians, peace is a gift from the Spirit and it is not a static state of rest or relaxation, but something much more engaging. Peace is a conquest, a step, an engagement; it is a continual challenge whereas conflict remains an inevitable element of the life we have to live in a constructive and positive manner. Jesus leaves us his peace and urges mankind to conquer peace; the coming of Christ on earth is a message for the people of good will, for the pastors and for the most

humble; the resurrection of Christ brings peace to the frightened apostles and gives them, together with peace, the strength needed to proclaim the Good News. And blessed are the builders of peace!

In the past, in our churches, there was nothing more pleasant for people to hear than talk of peace; it seemed that to close the gap between war and peace they only needed a little good will. Things got more complicated when we took notice of Isaiah's words « Peace is the fruit of justice.» (Is 32: 15-20).

Justice

Since we have started to represent peace in conjunction with justice, talks on peace have not only become shakier but they have made us understand a number of things:

- there will never be peace as long as the goods of the earth are so unjustly distributed;
- war is not only the din of cannons or the atomic or biological explosions but also the existence of such a violent economic system even if it is suffered in resigned silence;
- the absurd situation is that in the world, there not only are the rich and the poor but that the rich always become richer at the expense of the poor who become poorer;
- the dividing line between peace and war is not so much between East and West as between North and South, between the rich countries and the third world, so deeply sinking in debt and on the brink of ruin.

Without any doubt, faced with the thousands of acts of public and private violence happening every day, each one of us feels like an accomplice to war and as if he were poking its hotbeds.

« If we do not have the courage to say that if arms must not be sold they should also not be produced, that the politics of the blocs are unfair, that erasing the Third World's debt is only a discount on what we owe to two thirds of the world, that the logic behind unilateral disarmament is similar to that of the Gospel, that active non-violence is a criteria of Christian practice, that certain aspects of conscientious objection are signs of a greater love for the earthly city ... if we do not have the courage to say all that, we will remain smoking candle-ends instead of being Pascal candles. » (Don Tonino Bello, bishop).

Justice goes together with peace and has with it a constant and dynamic relationship. Justice and peace look after the well-being of each one of us and that is why they ask us for law and order and for truth. When one or the other is threatened, both become unsteady; when justice is injured, peace is also ruined. John-Paul II's passionate appeal resounds

strongly in our hearts: « There is no peace without justice and there is no justice without forgiveness.»

If peace is a gift we receive at the same time as forgiveness, peace is therefore and most importantly a fruit of justice, because justice gets rid of the causes of conflict and allows us to be free to express ourselves. Without justice it will never be possible to speak of peace. As long as the goods of the earth are so inequitably divided, as long as the rich will become richer and the poor always poorer, the peace about which we talk will only remain a pale shadow of the true peace of Christ.

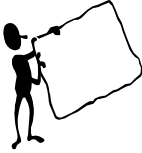
On this matter, we couples and Christian families, we team members, have the duty to raise our children in an atmosphere of justice and peace and to create in them Christian values and attitudes so that we can contribute efficiently to the peace and justice of the world. We have to fight against the trend of violence spread by the media. At the same time it is important to instil in our children a sense of critical conscience towards the negative values presented.

Peace and Justice in an indissoluble unity

« Love and faithfulness will meet, righteousness and peace will embrace »: this verse from Psalm 85 (86) associates two important concepts of marriage with peace and justice: love and faithfulness. This simple sentence makes us understand that justice is an integral part of the conquest of peace. In every human community, starting from the family and going all the way to international relations, lack of justice makes the clarity of the relationship and its dignity impossible; mistrust settles in, abuse and discord, conflict and war become inevitable, predictable and in some cases even a required consequence to keep on feeding a deeply unfair system. We cannot say « peace be with you » to another human being if he or she lacks the basic necessities of life.

« Peace on earth, a deep longing of human beings of all times... », thus starts John XXIII's encyclical « Pacem in terris »; today many are the human beings who being part of the people of goodwill, independent of faith and race, fight together for a world that is more just and more peaceful, starting from the couple and the family, to get to the nations and the peoples.

*« If you want peace in the world, you need to make peace in your country,
if you want peace in your country, you need to make peace in the towns,
if you want peace in the towns, you need to make peace in the families,
if you want peace in the families, you need to make peace within yourself ».*



For Reflection on Human Words

Li Tien Min

- *It does not matter who you are: man or woman, old or child, workman or farmer, soldier or student or tradesman; it does not matter what your political or religious creed is; if you are asked about the most important thing for humanity your answer should be: before, after and always peace!*

Baden Powell

- *In what concerns the biggest problem of the world's peace, it seems to me that before we manage to suppress arms, before we can make promises in treaties, before we build palaces where the peace delegates can sit, the first step is to get the young generations of all countries to allow themselves to be guided in everything by an absolute sense of justice. If mankind had made of that sense of justice an instinct that directed their behavior towards all questions in life to the extent that they examined impartially all problems from the two opposing points of view, before accepting one or the other, then when a crisis between two countries happened to arise, they would more readily recognize what is right and adopt a peaceful solution, which remains impossible as long as their mind is used to seeing war as the only solution.*

Tonino Bello, bishop

- *The Bible often evokes the embrace of peace and justice in a similar way to that of a mother and her child or to that of two lovers. Peace is the fruit of justice says Isaiah in a magnificent passage [...], we can easily understand that for a large number of God-fearing people that fairly recent biblical discovery of the tie between peace and justice is hard to comprehend.*

Martin Luther King

- *« We will never have peace on this earth as long as mankind everywhere does not realize that the end is never to separate the means, because the means represent the ideal in power whereas the end represents the ideal in action; and one cannot get to a good end with bad means, in the same way as one cannot get a good tree from bad seeds. It is curious to see that all the great military geniuses of the world have spoken of peace. The ancient conquistadors who killed to establish peace, Alexander, Julius Caesar, Charles the 1st, and Napoleon, all wished, in words, for a peaceful order. If you read "Mein Kampf" attentively, you will discover that Hitler insistently maintained that everything he was doing for Germany was to establish peace. And the eloquence of those who rule the world today, is magnificent when it comes to peace: every time we drop bombs on North Vietnam, President Johnson speaks of peace. Where is the problem? All these people speak of peace as a distant objective, an end to which we will get one day or another; but*

we know that sooner or later we will have to consider peace not only as an objective, but as the means by which we can reach the objective itself. We have to get to a peaceful end by peaceful means.»



For Reflection from the Word of God

John 14: 21-29

« Whoever accepts my commandments and obeys them is the one who loves me. My Father will love whoever loves me; I too will love him and reveal myself to him.» [...] « Whoever loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and my Father and I will come to him and live with him. Whoever does not love me does not obey my teaching. And the teaching you have heard is not mine, but comes from the Father, who sent me. I have told you this while I am still with you. The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and make you remember all that I have told you. Peace is what I leave with you, it is my own peace that I give you. I do not give it as the world does. Do not be worried and upset; do not be afraid. You heard me say to you: I am leaving, but I will come back to you. If you loved me, you would be glad that I am going to the Father, for he is greater than I. I have told you this now before it all happens, so that when it does happen, you will believe.»

Psalm 85 (84): 8-14

Show us your constant love o Lord
and give us your saving help.
I am listening to what the Lord God is saying;
he promises peace to us, his own people,
if we do not go back to our foolish ways.
Surely he is ready to save those who will honour him,
and his saving presence will remain in our land.
Love and faithfulness will meet;
righteousness and peace will embrace.
Man's loyalty will reach up from the earth,
and God's righteousness will look down from heaven.
The Lord will make us prosperous,
and our lands will produce rich harvests.
Righteousness will go before the Lord
and prepare the path for him.

Questions for the Individual and for the Couple



- *What does « making peace» mean to us?*
- *What are the movers of forgiveness in our relationship as a couple?*
- *How do we understand justice within our couple; when are the times when we experience a feeling of injustice in our relationship?*



Sharing, Searching and Understanding Together as a Team

- *How do we manage our conflicts and our disagreements as a couple and as a team?*
- *Are we able to ask for forgiveness and to accept the forgiveness, which comes to us from the other?*
- *Which paths do we follow to educate on the values of solidarity and justice?*
- *How do we, in our daily lives, try to react to the imbalance of wealth in the world around us?*

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Third meeting

THE UNIVERSAL SCOPE OF FAITH

Our faith is founded on Love and true Love is only possible if it applies to all human beings of all times, of all cultures, of all religions. Sometimes our zeal as believers leads us wrongly to restrict our love to our brothers and sisters in the faith, whereas the Lord was clear: he came to save all human beings.

We must therefore live out our faith in an open and universal spirit, to be able to broaden our horizon and to recognise the value of ‘otherness’, that is to say, to see the face of Christ in every “other” person.

The value of otherness, basis of Ecumenism

The century that we have just left behind is the century in which we have seen for the first time a tentative approach to an unavoidable awareness of otherness, of the stranger at the very heart of various communities in society. It is the century in which the inescapable necessity of dialogue has become established. After centuries in which the “different” was understood in a negative sense – or, at any rate, as creating distances – the recent decades have taught us that we cannot be content with tolerating diversity, but that it has to be shared by accepting the ‘mystery’ of ‘the other’, even if he/she is an enigma to us.

There is indeed, in any stranger, an enigma that waits to be interpreted so as to become a ‘mystery’ and a lesson in life. Dialogue is the living space for those who have discovered their full “solidarity” within the one and only human family, while respecting its different identities. We must therefore get used to considering ‘the other’ and ‘otherness’ as an opportunity for communion and not as an excuse for exclusion.

Are we really talking of ‘truth’ if we propagate it by violence or if we are motivated by contempt for the person who is different? “Truth, divorced from love, is not from God but

becomes an idol to be neither loved nor adored”, wrote Pascal. The New Testament teaches us that we must promote truth in charity. This means beginning with a friendly acceptance of ‘otherness’ that leads us to accept the ways of others - and this applies in the religious context. Indeed, truth is not a jealously guarded possession that we can cling to exclusively nor, worse still, one we can use as a weapon against others. No, Truth is a Person who owns us, for the Christian belongs to the Lord since he has been immersed in His death and resurrection.

Unity of faith as opposed to division of faiths

In the course of recent decades, Christians have begun to find intolerable the divisions that, for many years, have marked their history - divisions that have led to hatreds, splits and wars in contradiction to the call of Jesus to be “one”. Among Christians who are convinced that everything must be done to restore a unity of faith, an increasing number accept a diversity of ways of believing in the one Lord. The unity sought after during this fruitful period for ecumenism, is definitely not against anyone. This unity must not mean uniformity but a pluralistic unity in which the Churches mutually recognise each other as real sisters and put themselves at the service of one another.

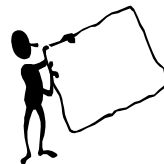
For Christians, to be united, to be in communion, is not either a question of strategy nor a search of the necessary power to oppose ‘others’: the non-Christians who have admittedly become more numerous or aggressive. No, Christians are united because, to follow the Lord Jesus means to practice the commandment of mutual love, to serve others - especially the poorest and weakest - and to forgive time and again and therefore repeatedly to take initiatives of reconciliation. But that is not all. During these recent decades, we have gradually realized that our towns are becoming more and more pluralistic. There is now a multiform ethnic mix of cultures and religions that deeply challenges our identity and security. To “*have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you have*” (I P 3: 15) has become an almost daily requirement to which we must respond by real attitudes of listening and welcome. We must avoid cultivating a hankering for a time when our world was automatically Christian or harbouring sterile resentments that feed arguments based on hostile logic.

Are we fomoters of divisions?

We must be careful since divisions are often between ourselves: not only between theologians, churches and religions, but also in our hearts. In the name of faith, we even run the risk ourselves of being fomenters of divisions through insensitivity and lack of understanding. We are, on the contrary, called to live in our period, confident that God will not abandon it. Since time immemorial, God has chosen the stranger – whatever his religious situation – to make himself present in human history, even in original and mysterious ways.

God calls us in Jesus and invites us to be witnesses of reconciliation every day so as to heal the great rifts in the world, in our daily life, in our environment: the rifts that separate men from women, one ethnic group from another, one community from another, me from others, my family from other families, some Christians from other Christians, Christians from Jews, Jews from Muslims... We constantly come across these rifts: our home has its rifts and so has our workplace. We are called to heal them through love that does not sharpen differences but knows how to accept and value them.

Peace is none other than “friendliness in differences”. In a ‘pluralistic’ time, among different people of different faiths, we must endeavor, as Christians, to listen genuinely, to welcome kindly and to help freely and unselfishly. Like the early Christians, this will be our distinguishing mark and our way to proclaim Christ.



For Reflection on Human Words

Enzo Bianchi – founder of the monastic community of Bose

“In the People of God, among ordinary Christians and in spite of appearances, one feels ever more deeply that the object of meeting other Christians – no longer as heretics or schismatics – but as brothers walking alongside us towards the unity willed by the Lord, is a Christian ‘characteristic’ and no longer a matter of observing proprieties orchestrated by the Churches for strategic reasons. Matta el Meskin, the great contemporary Coptic monk, reminds us that, the more Christians are faithful to the Gospel, the more easily they meet and achieve unity and communion. They do so precisely in their Lord, guided by the Spirit in the daily application of the Gospel.”

Brother Roger - from Taizé

“At this beginning of the 21st century, we face an urgent task: to make reconciliation effective. On the long journey of the Ecumenical vocation, dialogue and theological research are indispensable. But, if after so many years of searching, we do not succeed in reaching the goal, weariness sets in and credibility is lost. Where are we to rediscover the impetus of the ecumenical vocation? I think then of the light cast by Pope John Paul II in his first encyclical “Redemptor Hominis”. In it, the Pope clarifies an essential evangelical reality that allows one to understand the catholicity that Christ brings: “Christ has, as it were, united himself to all humanity”. Human beings are not united to Christ without their personal response; but Christ, on the contrary, is mysteriously united to every human creature. By these remarks, the Pope opens the door to reconciliation.

Christ is communion. He did not come to create a new religion, but to allow a communion in him, the one and only communion that is the Church. And I have in mind also the truly evangelical words spoken by Pope John XXIII in January 1959. Speaking of the Council he was about to start, the Pope said: “We shall make no historical judgment. We will not try to know who was wrong and who was right. We will say only: let us be reconciled!” Whatever our weak points, one of the most pressing demands of the ecumenical vocation is to bring reconciliation where there are rifts, whether ancient or very recent. Some references to past history, recalling serious past events, can be enough to provoke opposition, even hatred sometimes. The recollection of humiliations and wounds can be passed on from one generation to the next. We will never be sufficiently conscious of the fact that, without forgiveness, the human person has no future.”

Ecumenical Charter, No. 3 (2001)

To go towards one another.

We must look again together at the history of Christian Churches in the spirit of the Gospel. It is marked by numerous positive experiences, but also by divisions, hostile attitudes and even armed conflicts. Human mistakes, lack of love and the frequent misuse of faith and Churches to serve political interests have seriously damaged the credibility of Christian witness. Ecumenism for Christians begins henceforth by the renewal of hearts and by the readiness to penance and conversion. The ecumenical movement has already brought about progress in reconciliation. It is important to acknowledge the spiritual gifts of the various Christian traditions, to learn from one another and thus to receive gifts from one another. It is particularly necessary for the future development of ecumenism to bear in mind the experiences and expectations of young people and to encourage their participation within their capabilities.

D. Bonhoeffer

There is an experience of exceptional value which is to have finally learnt to look at the great events of world history from the ‘lowest’, that is to say from the point of view of the

⁵ Interview of Brother Roger with the director of the review « Evangelizer » of Bologna.

⁶ D. Bonhoeffer, *Resistenza e resa, Queriniana, Brescia, 2002, p.74.*

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excluded, the ill-treated, the weak, the oppressed, the victims of scorn - in a word, from the point of view of those who suffer. They will have been fortunate if, in time, bitterness and resentment have not corrupted their heart. Therefore, if we look with fresh eyes at big and small things, happiness and misfortune, strength and weakness; if our ability to perceive greatness, humanity, the law and mercy has become freer, more incorruptible, if furthermore, personal suffering has become a good key, a fruitful basis on which to understand the world in contemplation and action - all this is personal good fortune. It all depends on our response to the necessities of life in all its dimensions and in our acceptance of life with an eye for greater satisfaction the basis of which is to be found elsewhere than in the ups and downs of life.



For reflection from the Word of God

Saint John's Gospel

Before passing from this world to his Father, Jesus prayed thus:

"They were yours and you give them to me, and they have kept your word. Now at last they have recognized that all you have given me comes from you for I have given them the teaching you gave to me, and they have indeed accepted it and know for certain that I came from you, and have believed that it was you who sent me. It is for them that I pray. I am not praying for the world but for those you have given me, because they belong to you. All I have is yours and all you have is mine, and in them I am glorified. I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep those you have given me true to your name, so that they may be one like us." Jn 17: 6-11

First Letter of Saint John 4:15-16

"Anyone who acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God remains in him and he in God. We have recognised for ourselves, and put our faith in, the love God has for us. God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him".

Letter to the Hebrews 13: 1-2

"Continue to love each other as brothers, and remember always to welcome strangers, for by doing this, some people have entertained angels without knowing it".



Questions for the Individual and for the Couple

Coming into contact with 'difference' is a daily experience that is not always thought through and built upon. Let us try to ask ourselves:

- *Differences in religious faith remain a serious problem for the Christian world. Christians and Muslim, Catholics and Orthodox. Much progress remains to be done to achieve a true religious dialogue and a genuine ecumenical initiative. In my opinion, are we walking in the right direction?*
- *Where we live, we often meet people who do not believe or hardly at all. What is my attitude towards them? Presumption and superiority or respect and dialogue?*
- *As Christians, we consider our good attitude towards other people as self-evident. The reality that faces us is sometimes quite else. Have I experienced direct contact with 'difference', for example with an immigrant of another culture? How have I reacted to it?*
- *Marriage is the state of life in which there is a deep and raw face-to-face encounter with another, with someone different from me. What useful means and what resources from our married life, do we know how to call upon to deal with our differences?*



Sharing, Searching and Understanding Together as a

Team

How often do we find that, in questions that touch us deeply, we find answers with which we are not able to identify?

- *What prevents our mind and heart from welcoming the Truth and from really undertaking the way of conversion to which we all aspire?*
- *What obstacles in us and around us make this journey more difficult?*

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Fourth meeting

INDIVIDUAL VOCATION: “ MY NAME IS WRITTEN IN HEAVEN ”

The Lord asks us: “ Who do you say I am? ” We can not answer in a conscious and committed way if we do not follow the road that leads us to our own maturity, if we do not ask ourselves: “Who am I? What am I searching for? What do I want? ” To build one’s personality, it takes a whole life, for it is only at the end of the journey that we will have fully accomplished God’s design for each one of us.

Then alone will we be able to recognize our names that have been written in heaven since the first day of creation.

Building our Identity

Who am I? Do I really know myself as I am deep inside? Such are the questions we ask ourselves along the roads of our life, in particular in times and circumstances of terrible ordeals, when the way we react, the way in which we behave and the very core of our being are called into question, when plans and expectations we had for the future run into obstacles or failures.

It is a very old question that all persons find down the road they are going. In ancient Greece, on the front of a temple, one could read: “Discover who you are”, an official request to walk down the most difficult path, the one necessary to understand one’s own identity, one’s own name.

With the passing of time, as we experience our most deciding moments, these questions surface again, because what we are never established for good. Over time, we build our identity on events we live, according to meaningful people we meet, joys and sufferings we live.

At our birth, we are indeed but a promise to be fulfilled, something all in the making. In our early childhood, we are granted the gifts of love and affection of those who are at our sides, beginning with our parents. Cuddles, warmth, food, attentive answers to our basic needs are crucial in laying the foundation of our identity.

Such a pattern does not end with early childhood. It must follow through teenage years, youth and throughout life, until the very end: we are always in need of love to maintain our balance.

At every step of our life, we indeed attain our maturity and, in some degree, thus acquire our identity from the support, the love, and the positive experiences of people we meet, the gift that others are for us.

The question “Who am I”, is never answered for good, because we are creatures of relationships which cause us to grow from day to day.

All we have to do is to welcome the gift of love and of life bestowed unceasingly on us by others, throughout meaningful experiences and encounters which, in the end, play a role in drawing up the outline of our identity.

The Lord of history comes to our aid and never stops giving us life in the love and the gift of those who love us. God is always there in our life by the attention and care He grants us through those who greet us, forgive us, lend us a hand, listen to us. *“No one has ever seen God.”* It is only in the men and women who are able to project His goodness that He inspires and makes Himself present among us and builds up our life, our identity.

To be Named by Him

The greatest temptation is therefore to resort to: individualism by which one claims to follow one’s own way in complete autonomy, boasting that one needs to depend on no one else to live. That is a strong temptation, by which we are often driven to say words we consider irrevocable and deny the wisdom of others: “That is how I am made up. I won’t change my mind or the way I behave.” That is to refuse insight brought on by encounters with others; we shut ourselves out from words or deeds of love coming from others, which could change something in us. That would be the greatest blow to our personality. To refuse to let someone else, someone who loves us, lend us a hand, which could make a change in us and have us go in a different direction. That brings to mind the words of Peter to Jesus when he washed his disciples’ feet: *“Never at any time will you wash my feet!”* And the answer of Jesus: *“If I do not wash your feet, you will be no longer my disciple.”* (Jn 13: 8)

We will live in happiness when we will be deeply grateful for the gifts God sends us in those who love us and when we will be convinced that we are not at the root of whatever good there is in us, since everything was given to us: our abilities, the tenderness we show to others, the amount of disinterest we act with; those are all graces that God has granted us through those who, from the way they love us, have shown us how to love.

On the other hand, we cannot either consider the gifts we received as our own treasure, our own possessions. We are called to ourselves become gift for others, as they have been and are for us.

For us, all Things are Gifts

Our personality did not come into being at our birth. At that moment, it was but a promise of what would fully and authentically come into bloom. The goal is to succeed one day, at the end of our life, to have disclosed our identity. On the road of growth leading to the complete fulfilling of our destiny, God keeps on being a gift to us, in the events of our life. He is to us a caress in the hands of those who love us, who hug us, who hold us up, who share our sorrow, who listen to us, who always call on us, in their kinfolk voices and manners, to have confidence in what life has to offer.

If on the road leading to our maturity we have been given and have shared the gifts of love and life, by making room for love and by removing from our way everything that is not useful and that is an obstacle in the path to meeting God, we will end up by attaining the identity to which we have been called since the beginning of time.

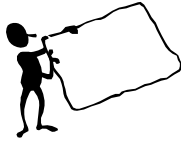
The name “child of God” is the identity to which every man or woman is called. Such an identity will mean intimacy with God, an exclusive and unique love relationship for each of us.

“To those who win ... I will give a white stone on which is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it.” Rev 2: 17

The road to human maturity, in search of one’s identity, can then be a thrilling adventure, in which we are mostly asked to let ourselves be loved, to accept the gifts of others who are passing on God’s gift to us, or better still, who are giving God as gift itself. We will be the temple of the living God if we try to let ourselves be transformed, to share our feelings, our troubles and our joys with our close relatives, if we try in our turn to be givers of consolation to others, brokers of peace, justice and mercy. *“Whoever loves me will obey my*

teaching. My Father will love him, and my Father and I will come to him and live with him.”

John 14: 23



For Reflection on Human Words

Etty Hillesum, a young Jewish woman from Holland, who died in Auschwitz in November 1943; a passage from her letters suggesting that one can become source of light if one carries it all everywhere one goes⁷:

- *Yes, I am greatly distressed but, all the same, I often happen in the evening, when the gone by day has sunken deep down behind me, to gently stroll along the barb wire and to always feel springing from my heart – I can not do anything about it, that is the way it is, it comes from a basic force – the same incantation: life is something wonderful and great; after the war we will have a complete new world to build and, in answer to each new severe demand, each new cruelty, we must come up with a little bonus of love and kindness to be conquered upon ourselves. We are allowed to suffer, but not to perish from suffering. And if we escape from this ordeal safe and sound in body and soul, in soul mostly, without bitterness, without hate, we will also have our say after the war. [...] The main artery of my life already extends very far beyond me and reaches another world. It seems that present events and those to come have already been accounted for somewhere within me, that I have already digested them, already lived them and that I am already working to build a society that will succeed the present one. The life that is mine here in no way undermines my source of energy – my physical condition surely deteriorates a little, and one sometimes sinks into deep gloominess – but one gets stronger and stronger in the center of the soul. I would like it to be the same for you and for all my friends. It has to be so. There is so much more to live for and to do together. That is why I cry out to you: hold on strongly to your inner ground once that you have mastered it and, above all, do not be sorrowful or desperate when thinking of me, there is really no reason to.*

Davide Maria Turoldo, theologian, poet and priest of the Servites of Mary:

- *Alone, we are always more lost and desperate, and You, without us, you are a poor God, apart and useless: that is why you are always more similar to us, to the least of us, humble God, frail, lost, come to experience our complete weakness. Always less God the All-powerful. Always more the God of mercy and of forgiveness. That is true almightiness: succeeding in forgiving us, keeping on forgiving us and making all things pure, redoing creation in a way that will be worthy of You and that will also be the royal dwelling of this creature with which, Lord, you have forever been madly in love.*

⁷ A letter to Johanna and Klaas Smelik and others, Westerbork, July 3 1943, in Etty HELLESUM, *Une vie bouleversée suivie de Lettres de Westerbork*, French translation by Philippe Noble, Seuil, 1988/1995, p. 287-288 (translated from the French text).

Arturo Paoli, priest of Charles de Foucauld's Little Brothers of Jesus, living in Latin America since 1959, where he shares the life of the poor and the meek. The following short commentary invites us to tackle the march toward our identity in encounters with the most humble in history:

- *The clearest example is most likely the parable of the Good Samaritan, as told by Luke in chapter 10. The Samaritan is a merchant; that is the purpose of his trip: he intends to sell, to earn much, to use his profits for very precise purposes. All his world, be it affective, economical, political or of relationships, is centered around this focal point. The wounded man at the roadside strips him, kills his vital self. While the priest and the Levite keep on being themselves and consider the accident from their own standpoint, the Samaritan does not argue, he is struck dead by a picture, by an unforeseen encounter. And so he is made to decide how his trip will continue: what will he do, how will he spend his money, where will he go with the wounded man. A man at death's doorstep has him change his life: he aids the merchant and turns him into a neighbor, that is to say someone for whom he is responsible ...*

In this lies the paradox: it is only by taking on the "the sins of the world", by becoming responsible for others that men or women will be free of their inner anguish. That is what Jesus proposes. Because anguish is transformed into love.



For Reflection from the Word of God

Matthew 6:25-34

On the mount, Jesus said: *"Do not be worried about the food and drink you need in order to stay alive, or about clothes for your body. After all, isn't life worth more than food? And isn't the body worth more than clothes? Look at the birds flying around: they do not plant seeds, gather a harvest and put it in barns; yet you Father in heaven takes care of them! Aren't you worth much more than birds? Can any of you live a bit longer by worrying about it? And why worry about clothes? Look how the wild flowers grow: they do not work or make clothes for themselves. But I tell you that not even King Solomon with all his wealth had clothes as one of these flowers. It is God who clothes the wild grass – grass that is here today and gone tomorrow, burned up in the oven. Won't he be all the more sure to clothe you? What little faith you have! So do not start worrying: 'Where will my food come from? or my drink? or my clothes? (These are the things the pagans are always concerned about.) Your Father in heaven knows that you need all these things. Instead, be concerned above everything else with the Kingdom of God and with what he requires of you, and he will provide you with all these other things. So do not worry about tomorrow; it will have enough worries of its own. There is no need to add to the troubles each day brings."*

From Psalm 139 (138) 1-18, 23-24

*Lord, you have examined me and you know me.
You know everything I do;
From far away you understand all my thoughts.*

*You see me, whether I am working or resting;
You know all my actions.
Even before I speak,
You already know what I will say.*

*You are all around me on every side;
You protect me with your power.
Your knowledge of me is too deep;
It is beyond my understanding.*

*Where could I go to escape from you?
Where could I get away from your presence?
If I went up to heaven, you would be there.
If I lay down in the world of the dead, you would be there.*

*If I flew away beyond the east
Or lived in the farthest place in the west,
You would be there to lead me,
You would be there to help me.*

*I could ask the darkness to hide me
Or the light around me to turn to night,
But even darkness is not dark for you,
And the night is as bright as the day.*

*You created every part of me;
You put me together in my mother's womb.
All you do is strange and wonderful; wonder that I am.
I know it with all my heart.*

*When my bones were being formed,
Carefully put together in my mother's womb,
When I was growing there in secret,
You knew that I was there – you saw me before I was born.*

*The days allotted to me
Had all been recorded in your book,
Before any of them began.*

*O God, how difficult I find your thoughts;
How many of them there are!
If I counted them, they would be more than the grains of sand.*

When I awake, I am still with you.

*Examine me, O God, and know my mind;
Test me, and discover my thoughts.
Find out if there is any evil in me
And guide me in the everlasting way.*

Questions for the Individual and for the Couple

Think about our individual progress in order to name, to begin with, the gifts we received from those who, in our lives, were most meaningful by their presence; and ask ourselves what were the most important changes that occurred for us and for which we are grateful:



- *I think of the persons and meaningful encounters that were important in my life. What did they bring me? With what treasures did they leave me? What changes did they mean for me?*
- *What am I grateful for?*
- *What gifts and positive strengths do I discover in myself today?*
- *Am I aware that the gifts I received from others are now made available?*
- *Looking at a snapshot of one of our first meetings as a couple, what do we see that has changed in the way each of us makes others welcome?*



Sharing, Searching and Understanding Together as a Team

- *Taking into account the progress we have made in achieving our identity, what are the bad habits or manners, the fears that we still see in our lives?*
- *What do we think we have to change in us in order to grow and progress as children of God?*

What aid may I expect from you to advance in a spiritual way? And what help may I offer you?

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Fifth Meeting

***THE CALL TO BECOME A COUPLE: AWARENESS OF THE
CONJUGAL VOCATION***

All children who are born, are, at the moment of coming into the world, called at the same time, to become men or women who achieve their plans, their vocations for their entire lives.

The call and the answer to the sacramental « yes » of marriage is also a vocation to be achieved day by day, step by step, hour by hour.

Love is a great force that pushes us to create and to build relationships; conjugal love is the relationship above all else, it is set on reciprocity and it is called to establish a permanent union.

The call to be a person

No one is by him or herself alone, the « *raison d'être* » of their own life: life is the result of a call to be. We have not decided by ourselves to be conceived as unique and irreplaceable human beings; we have not asked to be born. But after having sojourned nine months in a state of total well-being, where everything was given to us without having to ask, we have been born in a complete union with our mother, attached by an umbilical cord which brings food and breath and leaves none the less our identity in abeyance, while we are waiting to become.

Those who – for a variety of reasons – establish, from the moment of their birth, a poor and insufficient relationship, particularly with their mothers but also with both parents and the other adults in the family circle, find themselves with such an uncertain identity, that they continually have to ask for « permission to live » and are in relationships that do not allow them to have a free and autonomous life. In those cases, building an identity and establishing adult relationships are much harder.

On the contrary, those who receive the free gift of love become progressively aware of the identity given to them and make it their own. Finally the young adults– when they manage to form their own well-balanced *identity*, to accept fully *otherness* and *differences*, to accept that *relationships* are necessary as sources of blessings of life – these young adults perceive the call to meeting with the other ones as based on mutual gratitude and reciprocal

calls to the fullness of life. It is the purpose of a marriage vocation to look for a *different self* who can give us what we are missing, someone who can be for us a strong, significant and efficient image of the *totally Other who is God*.

In that particularly crucial phase of life the path of the vocation matures, the call to the encounter with the other one becomes clearer. And if we call *vocation*, the choice of a life in search of God and for the service of the community, we must therefore accord the same dignity of *vocation* to the search for that other one, similar but completely different, with whom we can establish an absolutely intimate relationship, which involves us wholly.

The call to become a couple

Love is that great force which pushes us to get out of ourselves, to look for the relationship, to form the relationship. The time when one *falls in love* is a period of enormous emotional intensity; it creates a determined dynamism which brings us to come out of ourselves and to push away the temptation of selfishness. The progressive discovery of the other one thus becomes an adventure full of satisfaction that marks the beginning of the aspiration and the vocation to becoming a couple. However this first phase of love has to be succeeded by a calmer and more constructive form of relationship, the edification of the *couple's plan*, the definition of a stable and faithful *union*.

Philia, friendship, is the first form of relationship outside of the family, the first step towards building our personal itinerary, our life project tied to someone we have chosen. Friendship is the first aspect of a love relationship, a form of knowledge and exploration of the mystery of the other one. Like all the stages of love, in the relationship of a well-balanced couple, this one is destined to last the whole life, to become a sharing of the centers of interest, a *complicity*.

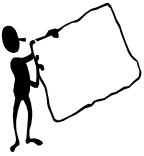
Eros, the physical attraction towards the other, is a very powerful factor in the relationship, with an efficiency and a creative strength capable of generating a powerful energy. Out of all the aspects of love and communication it is the only one to be exclusively specific to the couple, to the point of being a necessary part of it. The ethical basis of the *eros* is its very nature as a relationship strength: *eros* is intrinsically good and fertile if it is a *factor of the conjugal relationship* leaning towards *communion*; it becomes immoral if it is outside or even worse, against the relationship, also in the conjugal relationship itself.

If we have learned to choose, to practice discernment, not to allow ourselves a too easy living, to form our minds to make plans, we must also base the couple's relationship on a *plan for two*, a plan which begins from our *charismas*, a *global plan of fertility*, open to the generation of children, to the welcoming of children not born from ourselves, and which will bring generously our presence in society and in the church community; a couple plan to be renewed from day to day, paying attention to the signs of the times, to the challenges that current events and history throw us, a plan that we would aim to engrave in the *Father's mysterious Plan*.

The foundations of the conjugal relationship.

The conjugal relationship relies on the basis of *reciprocity*. Our need for relationship is based precisely on our need to get an answer, to be stimulated, to allow ourselves to be penetrated by love. A couple's relationship is therefore built mutually on a plan for two. However limitations threaten us. We are marked by suffering when we fail in a formulated plan – because every man-made plan is always beyond the requirements of life (Is 55,8-9) – marked by the failure, from which life itself can and must be reborn, in the same way that the Church was born when everything seemed lost, at the foot of the cross. Thus, love for the partner, while increasing and living in reciprocity, must take on the characteristics of *unselfishness*, of the *agape*, of the *eternal union*. (Eph 5:25-32).

To live the life of a couple in the awareness of a call to the relationship and therefore to life, like a vocation in search of God who talks to us through the other, such is the very first condition that makes marriage a sacrament, that is an outward sign, full of the meaning of the existence of a Love which is the source and origin of all human love.



For reflection on Human Words

Erri De Luca, a Jewish layman, has presented a metaphor of life for two, through a description of a mountain climbing:

➤ *There are two of us: on the rock face, two is a lot more than twice one. I start on the lower steps of the steep climb, I get out of breath on the slimy holds, I attach the rope to everything that is in front of me, even a wooden wedge which has been there for fifty years. I overcome the obstacles, she follows me, she makes headway in agility. Out of a dangerous passage, she seems more reassured. She joins me. We are in a broken chimney which appears to have no end, steep and narrow. I climb through the ledge avoiding her head: we pull apart from each other once again to untangle the rope which has become tangled between us; we are the same animal which worms its way, pulls apart, wraps itself around a cramping and then slips towards the top. At the top of the chimney, she loses a hold, her foot slips, she clings on, her nerves tense and the words «hold on tight » escape from her mouth; of course I am holding on tight but she does not need it; she does not even need the rope, she finds her hold by herself. We are going straight to the top where the rock face is on an angle and it is harder to see where you are climbing to... We look at each other, our faces streaming. We have nearly made it, even if we are still unable to see the top. We are two, the opposite of one and of its arrogant solitude.*

Adria and Piero Gallo, teams couple, tackle the theme of the vocation of life as a couple and the duty of the couple to generate new vocations:

➤ *The Movement of Teams of Our Lady has helped us to become, as a couple, a place where our vocation has matured, in helping us essentially to become a couple. We are not born a couple, we become one. To become a couple is the fruit of a permanent formation goal, which can never be achieved. What we call the couple dangers are always threatening us: the assimilated couple, which tends to obliterate the personality of each of the two, the exploiting couple, which sets out to take advantage of the benefits coming from the help brought by the other, the profiteering couple which uses one to satisfy the needs of the other, the closed couple which tries to build a family solely attached to its own interests and deaf to the needs of the religious community, the world and history. The testimony of such couples cannot inspire any development of a vocation. On the other hand, movements of conjugal spirituality (for us of course Teams of Our Lady) help the spouses to follow the path of a couple's vocation.*

The couple begins on the path of a couple's vocation when each one of the spouses takes charge of the other one's vocation, respecting and then highlighting the other one's differences, furthering their development without thwarting them but in stimulating their full potential. That is how the couple starts to experience the path of its vocation and in living it that way, bears witness of it to their children...

The couple, sacramental sign of the Alliance between God and his people, original nucleus of the family, small domestic church where the spirit of its proper communion shines, favours for its children the path of their vocation, including consecrated life. It bears witness to the life of a community, that small church where care and unselfish love reign, where attention is paid to the weakest and impoverished members, where the spirit of service for the world and the community of believers is developed. Specific ministries get taken care of, in order to create a community of baptised members, which is a priestly community, a sign of hope and salvation for the whole world.



For reflection from the Word of God

1 Samuel 3: 1-10

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. And the word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision. At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim, so that he could not see, was lying down in his own place; the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down within the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was. Then the Lord called, « Samuel! Samuel! » and he said, « Here I am! » and ran to Eli, and said « Here I am, for you called me. » But Eli said « I did not call you; lie down again. » So he went and lay down. And the Lord called again, « Samuel! » And Samuel arose and went to Eli, and said « Here I am, for you called Me. » But Eli said, « I did not call, my son; lie down again. » Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. And the Lord called Samuel again a third time. And he arose and went to Eli, and said « Here I am, for you called me. » Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, « Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak Lord, for thy servant hears.' » So Samuel went and lay down in his place. And the Lord came and stood forth, calling as at other times, « Samuel! Samuel! » And Samuel said, « Speak, for thy servant hears. »

The Song of Songs 2: 8-9, .10-14; 8: 6-7

The voice of my beloved
Behold he comes
leaping upon the mountains,
bounding over the hills.
My beloved is like a gazelle,
or a young stag.
My beloved speaks and says to me:
“Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away;
for lo the winter is past,
the rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth,
the time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtledove
is heard in our land.
The fig tree puts forth its figs,
and the vines are in blossom;
they give forth fragrance.
Arise my love my fair one and come away.
O my dove in the clefts of the rock,
in the covert of the cliff,
let me see your face,
let me hear your voice;
for your voice is sweet,
for your face is comely.”
Set me as a seal upon your heart,
as a seal upon your arm;
for love is strong as death,
jealousy is cruel as the grave.
Its flashes are flashes of fire,
a most vehement flame.
Many waters cannot quench love,
neither can floods drown it.
If a man offered for love
all the wealth of his house,
it would be utterly scorned.



Questions for the Individual and for the Couple

- *Am I conscious of the fact that my identity has its roots in the relationships lived in my childhood? Did I receive free love? which has given me « permission to live »? Which are the shadows and the bright points of my identity that I can see as fruits of my life in my family of origin?*
- *In the search for my partner, did I receive a call to otherness, a path towards a vocation? When we got married, were we conscious of answering a call?*
- *In the continual development of our couple's vocation which dangers are we facing? Are we able to be for the other, the image of the Other? Are we able to show the other, the face of God?*
- *Conjugal relationship feeds on reciprocity, but leans towards being free, towards unselfishness. This progression, towards conjugal spirituality, implies that we go beyond our individual plans and that we place ourselves with confidence in the love of God. What roles do reciprocity and unselfishness play in our own personal and couple's experience?*



Exchange, look for, and understand together in

teams

- *How have friendly exchanges in teams helped us to become conscious of our conjugal vocation?*
- *Has team life modified or enriched our conjugal relationship?*
- *In the social and parish circle in which we live, is anything being done or should anything be done to favor a formation and progression to the vocation of marriage, so that engaged couples manage to plan their couple's relationship as a conjugal union in the Lord and commit themselves to a harmonious development of a relationship of philia, eros and agape?*

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Sixth meeting

OUR INDIVIDUAL ANSWER AND OUR ANSWER AS A COUPLE

Marriage is an ongoing sacrament fuelled by the love of the spouses and by God's presence in our lives. The "I do" of our wedding does not become outdated overnight; it must rather be a daily commitment all through married life. Therefore, it is required to be better aware that continued training is needed to fully accomplish what it is to be a couple; to give life abundantly, beyond the biological, so as to become, as a couple, ministers and witnesses of God's love in the social and church surroundings in which we live.

Marriage, an Ongoing Sacrament

Just as the desire to live together in an exclusive and faithful relationship grows from the love of a couple, so is the choice of the sacrament of marriage the answer to a specific calling: to feel oneself fully taking part in an eternal Covenant, in a total confidence to a Love and a Mercy always offered. And marriage is a sacrament, a sign, having a real connection with the covenant always renewed between God and his people.

Too often though, mostly in these past years, one has had the tendency to make a confusion between the *sacrament* itself – which can only be an ongoing process, lasting the whole life of the spouses and often continuing to be active in memory beyond their death – and the *ceremony celebrating it*, in which vows are taken by the couple and by the community, but which in no way erases the power of the sign that the couple's union represents.

Other special events or public celebrations can be meaningful in the life of a couple: wedding anniversaries, baptisms of children, and liturgical celebrations with the renewal of wedding vows. But the liturgy of a couple's life and therefore of marriage is a more secular liturgy, more domestic and day-to-day than religious, public or festive. When a couple invites friends to dinner and shares their meal with them, they celebrate marriage as a sacrament of hospitality; spouses who take part together in the life of society and of the church and witness that communion is possible are celebrating the sacrament of marriage; tired spouses who sit up at the bed of their children bear witness of their love and thus celebrate the sacrament of

marriage; spouses who listen to each other, who are open to each other, who reveal their truest self to each other, who share their life in communion and in the physical harmony of their bodies are actively celebrating the sacrament of their marriage. The altar of this sacrament is not abstract and metaphorical; it is rather the kitchen table around which the family is gathered together, the bed in the room where the spouses celebrate their love.

Ongoing Training

If marriage is an ongoing sacrament that calls on the Love of God throughout the couple's life, the time of preparation to marriage offered to engaged couples is therefore altogether insufficient. Spouses are required to follow a route demanding an ongoing training; to advance in a truly progressive way but in one that can by no means ever be considered completely over.

Church pastoral practice is known to pay more attention to the celebration of sacraments than to ongoing training, depriving spouses of needed support. Movements such as the Teams of Our Lady are precious in the help they provide to spouses, offering to accompany them with progressive and demanding formative ways, on a road of **ongoing training**, in the direction of **perfection** and with the benefit of a welcoming small group community.

The Fruitfulness of a Couple

It goes without saying that training is not an end in itself; it is rather a process that necessarily results in fruitfulness.

When one speaks of a couple's fruitfulness, one spontaneously thinks, first of all, of their *biological capacity* to procreate children. To beget offspring would seem to be an obvious and natural occurrence in the life of a couple. Up until the beginning of the 20th century, life expectancy was so short that life as couple (conjugal relationship) often ended up in being the same as procreating and educating children, to the point of entertaining the ambiguity that such was the only purpose of being both together. Now that life expectancy has become far greater, it has become more obvious that conjugal life involves different stages, all tied together in a process of *permanently building a vital relationship*, a communion that is the final goal of life as a couple and that shines forth and gives life in different modes of fruitfulness: not only by the procreation of children, but also by generous *openness* of the family through *adoption* or sponsorship; by tactful and constant *support* to

old aged and dependent parents; by *social and ecclesiastical fruitfulness* through which a couple “exports” in society and in the Church its way of being open to others, is able to listen and enter into dialogue, achieves enriching sharing experiences and, beyond individual profit, chooses the common good, as by second nature. The couple does not stamp out an individual’s purpose but it requires that common goals and choices be clearly established. Each couple, according to its background and particular life circumstances, will be able to establish its own and original **fruitfulness purpose**.

Fruitfulness: a Gift to Pass On

Being conscious that we are a small component of creation makes us aware that life does not in fact begin with ourselves; all we can do is pass life on. What is expected of a couple is not to be prolific, but rather to become a fruitful soil. It is God and his Word that are fruitful (Is 55: 10-11) but, in accordance with the law of the Incarnation, the Word will only come to achieve its fruitfulness when it falls in the good soil of history, bearing abundant fruit when times are accomplished (Luke 8: 5-8.11-15). So it is with the couple: it is the love of God, the love that unites the spouses that is fruitful. In turn, the couple becomes fruitful when it is able to grow in a concrete way, by the love with which it is full and which makes it bloom. The world is in dire and pressing need of fruitful couples. We must feel compelled to become a good soil and to receive with open arms the ever more rich gifts that life bestows upon us. We are asked in an ever more demanding way to unconditionally receive these gifts, so that humankind accepts today the most exciting challenges, takes advantage of yet unknown possibilities for relationships, communion, prosperity and peace, and at the same time faces up to the most frightening dangers that, for the first time, jeopardize our very presence on the planet.

Couples as Ministers

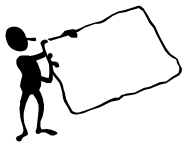
Between the couple and the church community, there must exist a **reciprocal relationship**. The community must bear witness to the faith it has in the couple; the couple must share the gifts it has with the community and, in its midst, grow in their particular charisms. Married laypersons have a particular *ecclesiastical fruitfulness* mission to play. The couple’s part in witnessing the faith and evangelization goes beyond the support – truly precious – that it can lend to those who have chosen *celibacy for the Kingdom*, by offering

them the warmth of family links and enriching sharing experiences. The couple has its own evangelisation mission, in which it enters with its own charisms, in line with the tradition launched by the first Christian couples (Ac 18:1-3,11,18-21,24-28).

The couple can fulfill its own ecclesiastical mission by being witnesses of the values they hold, hospitality, mercy and consideration for differences; a Church community willing to fully acknowledge a couple's values would be able to succeed in fully sharing pastoral responsibilities.

Fulfilling our conjugal vocation does not then only consist of living together with the love of God as nourishment, but it implies being able, from this love, to foster and to sustain many other forms of life arising, as a matter of fact, from conjugal love.

Revisiting our experience in the light of God's Word, conceiving a theology of the couple grounded in the very experience life as a couple, living our married life as a specifically sacramental vocation, answering God's calling with a constant "Yes" to his love that invites us to explore always new horizons: those are ways to fulfill our vocation as a couple.



For Reflection from Human Words

Mercedes Gomez-Ferrer recalls, in her book *Une voix de femme (A Woman's Voice)*, p. 83-84, the reasons that prompted her to undertake with Alvaro the Teams of Our Lady journey and to commit themselves during many years to do their best in several fields of service in the Movement:

- *There were two things we were looking for in Teams: first, to understand our faith life together and more deeply – we did not want to progress separately; second, to find happiness as a couple.*

To tell the truth, it was quite a human circumstance that made us decide to take the step. One Sunday, the family was all gathered at a home in the country. We knew that a particular couple in our family belonged to the Teams of Our Lady. While waiting for mealtime, this couple left the others to go for a little walk in the orange trees in bloom. They were walking hand in hand. Alvaro and I, then a young engaged couple, were also walking behind them, at a good distance. All of a sudden, they stopped and hugged themselves with passion. I was astonished by this striking sign happening after 5 years of wedlock and I remember having thought that maybe Teams of Our Lady had something to do with the fact that their love relationship had been kept so strong ... Most important things in life are sometimes as simple as that.

***What have the Teams of Our Lady brought us?** We found two things that we were searching for: to grow in our love and to go deeper into our faith. But we also found something else, the importance of which we had not seen at first: the need for mutual help on our faith journey. It is not possible for a human being to advance in isolation. Neither can a couple. Evangelisation is done in a community, for the Gospel is a road to life. In a community, we acknowledge our limits and our talents, we learn to advance in a different step than our own, not to judge others forever, to find a balance between the progressive and the conservative, to discover the friendly face of the priest, to be more realistic without losing faith at the same.*

In short, for having experienced it, we have been able to better understand that the Church is a community of communities.

Excerpt from the *Second Wind*, a reflection document produced following the 1988 Lourdes Gathering:

- 3.1. *Teams are like a spiritual **training** school for couples. We come to Teams not only to deepen our knowledge of our faith, but also to learn to exercise human and Christian discernment, using our hearts as well as our minds, in our search for a greater coherence between our faith and our life.*

Our discernment can be nourished in several ways: by reading and discussing the study topic as a couple and as a team; by reading Teams' publications; by attending sessions and retreats; and by keeping abreast of the orientations that the Movement periodically proposes. Our search as individuals, as a couple and as a team is rooted in the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, in a deepening prayer life, in hearing the Word of God, and in a correct interpretation of the signs of the times.

To train and educate us, Teams question us, help us understand God's plan for us as a couple, and call us to adapt our conjugal, family and professional life to fit Gospel values. Two goals remain to be pursued by the Movement: to afford a better insight into the Christian significance of man's and woman's work as it relates to God's plan, and to shed light on the relationship between private and public ethics.

- 3.2. *[...]There are three important ideas to keep in mind while making use of these spiritual means.*

- ***Graduality:** The Lord takes hold of us wherever we are. We do not need to rush ahead or try to "skip a grade". All we need is a sincere desire to progress from our present situation.*
- ***Personalization:** Each person, as well as each couple, moves forward at a particular pace. The obligations should not serve to discourage us but, on the contrary, they should inspire and assist us our whole life long.*
- ***Determination:** Any long-term effort, be it marriage or personal prayer life, requires determination. We cannot experience an ongoing conversion unless*

we are determined to take our wishful thinking about progress and express it in tangible ways that will change our lives and shape us little by little.

4.1. [...] Let's be inventive and contribute as best we can to these initiatives that indicate a desire to forge ahead. The Movement will thus be able to respond to real aspirations, and couples will not feel the need to look elsewhere.

*Our Movement has always been concerned with educating its members and has always given reference points and criteria for discernment. While couples remain responsible and free, they still need support in their search to understand the Word of God in relation to the signs of the times. This calls for **ongoing training** and for a day-by-day search to enable them to express the realities of faith in modern terms.*



For Reflection from the Word of God

Acts 18:1-4, 18-21, 24-26

Paul left Athens and went on to Corinth. There he met a Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, who had recently come from Italy, with his wife Priscilla, for Emperor Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, because he earned his living by making tents, just as they did. He held discussions in the synagogue every Sabbath, trying to convince both Jews and Greeks.

Paul stayed on with the believers in Corinth for many days, then left them and sailed with Priscilla and Aquila for Syria. Before sailing from Cenchrea he had his head shaved because of a vow he had taken. They arrived in Ephesus, where Paul left Priscilla and Aquila. He went into the synagogue and held discussions with the Jews. The people asked him to stay longer, but he would not consent. Instead, he told them as he left, "If it is the will of God, I will come back to you." And so he sailed from Ephesus.

At that time a Jew named Apollos, who had been born in Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent speaker and had a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the Way of the Lord, and with great enthusiasm he proclaimed and taught correctly the facts about Jesus. However, he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him home with them and they explained to him more correctly the Way of God.

Romans 16:3-4

I send greetings to Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in the service of Christ Jesus; they risked their lives for me, I am grateful to them – not only I, but all the Gentile churches as well. Greetings also to the church that meets in their house.

Mark 6:6b-7

Then Jesus went to the villages around there, teaching the people. He called the twelve disciples together and sent them out two by two. He gave them authority over the evil spirits and ordered them, “Don’t take anything with you on the trip except a walking stick – no bread, no beggar’s bag, no money in your pockets.

***Questions for the Individual and for the Couple***

- *As you live your marriage as an “ongoing sacrament”, do you see the answer you give to God’s calling to love as a lifelong witnessing to the fact that human love is possible and capable of being the sign of God’s Love?*
- *When we got married, did we establish our “fruitfulness purpose”? If our answers to God’s calling lie in the fruit our love is able to produce, what measure of fruitfulness do we consider we have achieved? At the present stage of our life as a couple, to what kind of fruitfulness do we feel we are called to?*
- *What have the Teams of Our Lady and their formative ways brought us in helping us give an answer to what our conjugal vocation calls us to?*



Team *Sharing, Searching and Understanding Together as a*

- *What do we expect of the Teams of Our Lady and their formative ways at the present stage of our life as a couple and as a team?*
- *While being faithful to the founding Teams of Our Lady charisms, in what way should the formative ways evolve so as to be able to properly answer the needs of modern day couples?*
- *What ministerial duties would you be able to take on? Does your team help you practise discernment? Does it encourage you to be available for a service*

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Seventh meeting

WELCOMING THE OTHER TO WELCOME THE LORD

Our desire to know God, to pray to him, to enter into intimate contact with him can only be fulfilled by meeting Christ. Christ gives us God; Christ is God. When Philip the apostle asked Jesus: “*Show us the Father*”, Jesus replied: “Whoever has seen me, has seen the Father” (John 14, 8). The Lord God comes constantly close to us through his Son and we can truly meet him every time that, in welcoming a brother or sister or anyone else who is our neighbour, we recognise in his/her face the face of the absolute Other: the face of God.

Man who was originally created in the image of God is indeed not like God, but he has something of His essence. He takes us back to God because, from the beginning, he is the image of God who is relationship.

Indeed, human beings discover themselves from the moment that another human being welcomes them. They cry with joy when they discover that they are not alone, that there is near them someone like them. Human beings, therefore, only find, recognize, become and develop themselves in relationship with God and others; solitude, on the other hand, is spiritual and physical death.

Relationships accustom us to self-giving by which human beings find and express the fullness of their being and of their existence; through this they learn to see life as a gift and as something that does not belong only to them, but also to someone else who gives life its full meaning.

We are born out of the mystery of the loving encounter of other persons who have given us life; and we remain alive thanks to the air we breathe through our lungs. This air is not only a natural and vital element, but is also, symbolically, sustenance for our soul, our heart and our mind.

God, the absolute Other, also lives in a welcoming relationship - not only in relation to humanity - but also within himself. He is Father, and also Mother as Pope John Paul II

reminded us. He is Son and is such a powerful and mysterious Love that this Love is personified in the Spirit.

Philip asked Jesus: “*Show us the Father*” and Jesus replied: “*Whoever has seen me, has seen the Father*” (John 14:8) To see Jesus, the man Jesus, the Son of God, means to see God. It means that, in our human nature, we have the possibility of entering into the strong and happy Trinitarian relationship.

One of the “Muslim sayings about Christ”, included in an issue of the international theological review *Consilium* (2003) says: “*Jesus met a man and asked him: ‘what are you doing?’ The man replied: ‘I am consecrating myself to God’. Jesus asked him: ‘Who takes care of you?’ ‘My brother’ replied the man. Jesus said to him: ‘Your brother has more devotion to God than you have’.*”

To seek God without paying attention to human beings is to follow a false historical, religious and spiritual track. We do not come to God if we shut our eyes to the needs of our neighbor. Jesus reminds us unequivocally of this in the story of the last Judgment. When have we seen Jesus? When we have met and welcomed the sick, the prisoner, the hungry and the thirsty.

When does night end?

A rabbi was in the habit of asking his disciple: “When does night end and day begin?” The disciple would give various unsatisfactory answers. Finally, disheartened, he would leave it to his master to reply. And the rabbi would say: “When you see in someone else the face of your brother, it is then that night ends and day begins”⁸

We should look into each other’s eyes more often. The world loses a little of its night and receives more light from the sun each time people succeed in accepting each other, their qualities and their poverty. This is only possible if we meet and look in the depth of each other’s souls.⁹

Every encounter between two human beings is born of a gaze, but for this gaze to be authentic, it must happen in silence. A torrent of words, cascading violently and noisily, or even delicate and evocative words will never replace the magic of a silent gaze.

⁸ Jewish traditional fable.

⁹ Gianfranco Ravasi, *L’Avvenire* – 4th February 2003.

From fear to trustful welcome

It is fear that prevents us from knowing our capabilities, from growing and living fraternally. We can be afraid of other people, but also of God when he leads us along unknown paths. Think of Mary's fear in the presence of the angel when he asked her to become the Mother of God. It is from fear of the other that all obstacles to meeting others arise. Because of fear of the other, Christians often forget that God became man and wants to save all men without distinction of race or religion.

When we share a particular moment or situation with someone else, we become able to pierce through his/her outward appearance. Too often, we stop on the surface of things and of people and are unable to discern what they conceal. We do not find the treasure hidden in the other.

Through the face of man we see the face of God

Through the face of man we see the face of God. The Lord normally comes to us in our liberty and makes himself present to us through our response to the seemingly unremarkable events and happenings of our daily life. This is how he realises his plan for us, rather than through our own, more or less enlightened and changing plans, thoughts, imagination and feelings. Events are coloured by definite human beings and their history. As Christmas reminds us, "God was made flesh" and entered physically in human history in order to be with us. Christianity is an incarnated religion that believes in a God who became a poor infant in a cave in Judea; and was crucified as a criminal in a town where the Jews believed that God dwelt - a God that seemed a very different God.

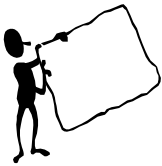
If we believe in the incarnate God, we experience a type of friendship that becomes 'communion', a Christian communion. It creates a new world, different from all other. Our faith becomes 'flesh', the Body of Christ that can be seen and 'touched' by all in every environment - even in apparently most hostile and distant environments. How wonderful this is, when we think of it! When we come together, it isn't only Tom, Jane, Dick and Harry that we meet, but Jesus, because he is present in our communion. This is the way the Lord has chosen to meet human beings, more so than through courses on the Bible or theology, or through someone's eloquence, or wisdom, or personal qualities or moral integrity, but through communion with those who find themselves in Him who makes himself present and allows himself to be encountered in all circumstances.

Our closest 'others'

The first book of the Bible reveals to us that marriage is a state in which 'otherness' manifests its greatest capacity to develop. Indeed, in the couple, in married love, we live out daily the encounter with the 'other' and with differences.

For many couples also, there is an 'other' par excellence, the child. The Bengali poet Tagore¹⁰ reminds us "every child that is born brings us the good news that God is not yet tired of human beings". Children also remind us that, through them, God tells us that he wants to love us in a special way. They also tell us a lot about ourselves: they are the mirror of our limitations and sometimes of our failures and frustrations. They are like arrows thanks to which we fly through space and time to arrive where we would not arrive in a single lifespan.

Are they not innumerable those who show us the face of God? On how many faces do we not see Christ's words: "Who do you say I am?"



For Reflection on Human Word

From "The mango tree"

Indian popular spirituality (for Indians, paradise is inconceivable without mangos).

- *An elderly man is digging in his garden: "What are you doing?" someone asks him. "I am planting a mango tree", he replies. "Do you imagine that you will eat its fruits?" people remonstrate. But he replies: "No, I will not live long enough to taste its fruits, but others will. As for me, all my life I have eaten fruits of trees planted by others".*

St Ambrose, bishop of Milan in the 4th century

- *Your children's best interest will be what they have chosen themselves. Do not dream of transferring your own desire on to them. It is enough that they know how to love the good and avoid evil and that they should abhor telling lies. Do not take it on yourself therefore to plan their future; be proud rather that they launch themselves into their tomorrow, even if they seem to forget you. Do not encourage naïve ideas above their station; but if God calls them to do something great and wonderful, do not be the obstacle that prevents them taking off. Do not take on yourself the right to make decisions for them, but help*

¹⁰ Rabindranath Tagore, Bengali poet, thinker and teacher (1861-1941), Nobel Prize for literature in 1913.

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them to understand that they must decide and must not be surprised if what they like requires efforts and, sometimes, even suffering, for one cannot bear living for nothing.

It is the esteem they hold you in and the esteem in which you hold them - more than your advice - that will help them. They will be helped by deeds they witnessed at home more than by a thousand overwhelming recommendations. [...] All the talk in the world on charity will teach me no more than my mother's invitation to a starving beggar to come into the house; and I know of no better example of manly virtue than when my father took the defense of a man wrongly accused. May your children live in your house in a wholesome atmosphere that puts them at ease and encourages them to leave home because it instills trust in God and the taste for a life well lived.

Arturo Paoli

He was a little brother of Charles de Fourcauld, born in 1912 in Lucques in Italy, who spent the greater part of his life in Venezuela, Argentina and Brazil, sharing the hard life of the poor and underprivileged.

- *Think of a man who, in the course of his pilgrimage through the world of men, took on all the misery that he encountered and who could not give an answer to the question: 'why so much destitution?' to the point of becoming hardened and of distancing himself from the God of his regular prayers. One day, suddenly and unexpectedly, a devouring fire entered the desert of his soul. This, as yet, nameless fire bound him in the tightest of bonds making him obedient and passive and at the same time dragging him towards Others. He could no longer give it the name of the God he had prayed to all his life. This fire is the God who comes down, who seeks out, who sent him back to others. The other is his religion, his love of God, his obedience to God. 'Here I am' were the last words he said before being consumed by the fire.*



For Reflection from the Word of God

Matthew 25: 34-40

“Then the King will say to those on his right hand: ‘Come, you whom my Father has blessed, take as your heritage the Kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you made me welcome, lacking clothes and you clothed me, sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to see me’. Then the upright will say to him in reply: ‘Lord, when

did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and make you welcome, lacking clothes and clothe you?’ And the King will answer: ‘In truth I tell you, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me.’”

Prayer

“Naked Prayer” by Juan Arias

I too, Lord, would like to make my prayer to you, a prayer of only one word: ‘others’. It is not out of generosity; it is a vital need. Without others, I am dead; I am a dream, a shadow, I am nothing. It is others who best reveal to me the reality of whom I am, me. It is they, my God, and they are part of me.

Among others, Lord, there are those who sleep, those who despair, those who are hungry and there are slaves also. I want to be, for them, a cry, hope, bread and freedom. There are some among them who are thirsty for justice and faith in every human act. I want to take their hand and walk with them without asking questions. [...]

They are in my boat; they dream of the same shore, even if all people do not give it the same name; they speak the same language: the language that seeks to free every human being from all forms of slavery. If there is one in my boat whose eyes are already alight with the light of the risen, I will eat with him the first fruits of life. The sunset will merge with the dawn; we will no longer see the difference between the sun and the snow, and even the figs will be Eucharist. Then, we shall truly be You.

But why is all this as it is? And why, Lord, have I done all this out of my own necessity and desire? For my part, I commit myself to invent every day new ways of doing better; but I would like to offer others the possibility of asking me what they would like me to do to help and free them.

I would like, Lord, never to lack the courage to keep my door always open to all human requests in support of human development. I feel then that, only thus, will the hope of my development have meaning and that I will be able to ask you for it without blushing.



Questions for the Individual and for the Couple

- *What are our dominant feelings: fear, withdrawal into self, trust, welcome...?*
- *Who has welcomed me, even up to a point? Whom have I been able to welcome, even up to a point? Whom did I not welcome? When did I not know how to be accepted?*
- *What persons have welcomed us as a couple? What persons have we welcomed, as a couple?*
- *And especially, have I / we seen the real presence of the Lord in the other person that I / we met?*



Sharing, Searching and Understanding Together as a Team

- *What do we think of our children's current situation and future? What is our aim in educating them?*
- *How do we feel we are accepted individually and as a couple in our team? How do we welcome other team members? And how do we welcome others who are not team members?*
- *How does our team make real its faith in Jesus of Nazareth, Christ, Son of God, Savior of the whole of humanity? How do we proclaim it?*
- *Will tomorrow's human being succeed in being a human being "for" others, a human being with a responsibility towards all human beings living on our planet?*

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Eighth Meeting

“Who do people say I am?” – “You are the Christ, the Son of God”

If we accomplish the journey to human maturity, if we grow to the fullness of faith, then we will be able to answer Jesus' question: “*And you, who do you say I am?*” with complete awareness, firmly and with assurance: “*You are the Christ, the Son of God*”.

We cannot find the answer we are looking for in an idea but in a living person, Jesus Christ, Savior of all humanity, model of life for every human being. The answer we seek, the one that gives meaning to everything we experience in life, is Christ who loved us first and who asks each one of us to love, nothing less.

AS WE END OUR WORK OF REFLECTION...

We have made a journey of reflection through which, we too, sought to answer Christ's question: “*Who do you say I am?*”

We have asked ourselves questions as a couple and as a team, to find answers that would give meaning to our faith, to our married vocation and to our way of living. We have seen and understood that an ever-increasing number of people live today in a climate of great uncertainty, due to rapid transformations in a society that has lost the reassuring stability of earlier times. These transformations have been financial - with ever more marked and worrying disparities - and social and civic, as well as moral and religious.

This uncertainty gives rise to insecurity and fear for ourselves (what will become of me?), for our children (what will happen to them?) and, paradoxically, for the past (did I get it wrong and, if so, how?). Following a long work of reflection in the course of this year, the fundamental questions affecting humanity seem bound to remain unanswered. Why am I living? Where do I come from and where am I going? Is there a possible future elsewhere? And is there really a future in the hereafter? And especially, what meaning, what significance has my life?

Looking around us, we see ever more clearly that the family, which was for centuries a factor of stability, is now in crisis. We see tension between parents and children who will not learn from past experience. We see sexual relationships that are not experienced as loving relationships. We see confusion between the roles of men and that of women who have, at least partially, achieved their emancipation. Finally, we see tension within the couple. Furthermore, parents seem to have abandoned their role as educators, precisely because they lack faith in the life they have lived and are currently living. Young people look on marriage with apprehension.

Many throughout the world ask themselves whether past customs and traditions are of value to civilization, to social relationships and as an anchor, or whether they are a legacy of past situations that are no longer relevant. But, in reality, is all this as negative as it sounds?

There is an answer...

In this negative outlook, we can discern ever more clearly an answer that is able to bring about a revolution in the life of the believer. This answer is not found at the level of ideas, but in a living person: Jesus Christ.

It is he who reveals the mystery of the evolution of the cosmos and of each one of us. This mystery is that, at the root of this evolution that took thousands of years and that led to the appearance of man on earth, there is a creative Power: God the Father. He not only brought man into being, but - going much further - established with him a fundamental and intense loving relationship through the incarnation of his Son who shared the human condition "*but without sin*" (Heb 4: 15). Furthermore, by his Resurrection, the Son has revealed the fullness of life to which all human beings are called.

Thus Christ is at the centre of the believer's life, not only as the one who reveals the mysteries of God but also as a model and Savior.

Jesus Christ is the model of a life that is worth living, a life full of meaning. He has the answer to all desires for greatness, goodness, eternity, infinity that are at the heart of human beings. He saves us even if evil continues to exist in us and in the world, even if trials and suffering affect us closely, even if we know that our life ends with death. He saves us because his mercy shows us that sin is forgiven, because he teaches us that suffering and trials are not our permanent destiny and especially, he saves us because he rose from death!

GOD DOES NOT SAVE US WITHOUT US

“God who created you without your help will not save you without your help” (St Augustine). To look on Christ as the model for human beings, willed and desired by God, entails the will on our part to follow him by adopting the characteristics that make him a great teacher of life, even among non-believers. For believers, these characteristics are not those of the man who, during his life on earth, two thousand years ago, left an indelible imprint, but those of the man-God, living today, yesterday and always, who is continuously at work (*“My Father still goes on working, and I am at work too”* John 5: 17), in order that the life of all human beings may be divinized in a way that goes beyond the limits of time.

Jesus Christ became what we are so that we might become what he is - such is the teaching of the Fathers of the Church. *“Jesus Christ became man in order to divinize us”* (St Athanasius); *“Man is a creature, but a creature that has received the command to become God”* (St Basil of Caesarea); *“As God became man, so man became God”* (St Cyril of Alexandria); *“We are divinized by Jesus Christ”* (St Gregory of Nazianzen).

But whereas God’s work, through Christ, in the Holy Spirit, never fails, our frank, vigorous, sure and deliberate response, on the contrary, may fail. This response consists in our effort to be like him. *“He remains the one who loved us first, who looked upon the creature drawn from nowhere, so that it might freely participate in the divine plenitude; a creature called into existence, not only to love, but to be loved in its turn. These two directions of love – descending and ascending – unite and merge; the one comes down like a ray of light, the other rises like a jet from a living spring. Both testify to the miracle of love proclaimed by the Apostle John; henceforth we are children of God”*¹¹

MAN’S ESSENTIAL RESPONSE

Let us say again that man’s response to the miracle of divine love is necessary. Since we have a model, the response consists in imitating this love, in trying to embody in one’s life the characteristic features of Jesus that we know through the Gospels.

It is first and foremost unconditional love. Jesus has given us some example: when he “sat at table with publicans and sinners”, when he forgave the woman caught in adultery and told her not to sin anymore, when he gently led the Samaritan woman to look into her life

¹¹ Myrrha Lot Borodine (see Bibliography).

and, in so doing, renewed it. But let us consider the characteristic features of Jesus that particularly meet our needs today:

➤ Jesus Christ serves out of love: *“The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many”* (Mt 20: 28).

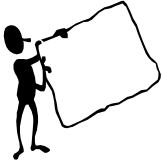
➤ He is a teacher who speaks with authority: *“And his teaching made a deep impression on them because, unlike the scribes, he taught them with authority”* (Mk 1: 22). His authority came from the fact that he proclaimed the Truth and offered a system of values spelled out in the Beatitudes and which he exemplified by his life.

➤ Christ is not tied to norms, to customs and even to the Law that he came to ‘accomplish’. He does not reduce relationship with God to a body of rites to be observed, but makes it consist in a conversion of heart: *“Repent and believe the Gospel”* (Mk 1:15).

➤ He welcomes everyone; he comes out to meet all and sundry. Around him, we breathe a family atmosphere and he invites us today to a sociability that is opposite to individualism which is a sign of selfishness, of lack of openness to others and which is contrary to the values of the human heart.

To be fully alive, it is essential for us to be open and welcoming to all, to put ourselves at the service of others, to be credible by living in accordance with the Gospel, to free ourselves from the constraints and conditioning of the world but not from the law of love, from openness and from welcoming every human being. When we are totally imbued with the law of love, we are totally free; free of the fear and insecurity that spreads among human beings; free furthermore because, paradoxically, we are totally at the service of others.

Through loving our fellow men and women, we will confirm our love for the Father and will no longer be afraid of being asked: *“Who do you say I am?”* because we know that Christ loved us in the first place and expects only one response from us: that of Love.



For Reflection on Human Words

Enzo Bianchi, a monk of the Bose Community

Why did God become man?

The question of God's motive in becoming man, which has constantly reoccurred in the course of centuries of Christianity, has received only one fundamental answer in the East and in the West, but under two distinct, though not contradictory forms. In the eastern tradition, St Athanasius' words became accepted: "God became man that man may become God", that is to say so that man may know the way to "theosis" or divinisation. Whereas in the West, more stress has been laid on the salvation accomplished by God in Jesus: "God became man to save man".

But if one goes deeper into both answers, I am convinced – and I hope no one will be scandalised by it – that the answer can equally be expressed as follows: "God became man that man may become truly man!"

Yes, God became man in Jesus of Nazareth to show us the true man, the man truly in his image and likeness, and thereby to teach us to live fully to the point of knowing - I make bold to say - not only days full of joy, but even of glory. Moreover, this is the meaning of the incarnation as it is presented especially in the fourth Gospel: "The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory" (cf. John 1:14).

Christian Duquoc

Christian Duquoc sees Jesus in a particular light, namely as Son. To be God as Son does not blot out who he was: Jesus of Nazareth. On the contrary, it is in his humanity and historical context that he manifests himself to us as "Son", so much so that we cannot encounter him in his divinity if we put his humanity, as it were, 'in parenthesis' or if we forget who he was. What is original in Jesus - and what we constantly ignore - is that he should be Son of God in a way that is not only a spiritual closeness to God, but rather a mysterious identity with the very reality of God, without this identity obliterating his historical life or making it of no consequence. On the contrary, if he is acknowledged as Son then, because of the Resurrection, it is not in spite of his life on earth, but thanks only to it that we can understand the meaning of his divine Sonship.

He is Son of God, neither in the exercise of a power that reduces his adversaries to nothing, nor in the majesty of a Judge who guarantees justice, nor in the unimaginable glory of God striking holy fear, but in a personality, an authority, a human freedom, and in forgiveness and bias for the outcast. What matters is that God should be recognized precisely in these latter things and not in irresistible power, holy fear and in the established order. The reality of God is not accessible to us in itself; it becomes visible to us in a human face: that of the Son, Jesus"¹².

¹² Christian DUQUOC, « Jésus homme libre » (Jesus a free man) CERF 1975 p 124,125.

Jean Allemand

*"Christ is the incarnate Word of God, who became one of us. Throughout his life, by his teaching, his actions, his passion and death, he is Word of God to humanity. Christ is the total, definitive, irreplaceable Word that expresses God to perfection. The Word of God is not primarily a text but a Person."*¹³

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For Reflection from the Word of God

John 6: 32-40

In Capernaum, "Jesus answered them: 'In all truth I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, it is my Father who gives you the bread from heaven, the true bread; for the bread of God is the bread which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world'.

'Sir, they said, give us that bread always'.

Jesus answered them: 'I am the bread of life. No one who comes to me will ever hunger; no one who believes in me will ever thirst. But, as I have told you, you can see me and still you cannot believe. Everyone whom the Father gives me will come to me; I will certainly not reject anyone who comes to me, because I have come from heaven, not to do my will, but to do the will of him who sent me. Now the will of him who sent me is that I should lose nothing of all that he has given to me, but that I should raise it up on the last day. It is my Father's will that whoever sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and that I should raise that person up on the last day'."

¹³ "Prier quinze jours avec le Père Caffarel" (Praying a fortnight with Father Caffarel) – Jean Allemand – P78

Isaiah 55: 1-11

“O come to the water all you who are thirsty;
 though you have no money, come!
 Buy and eat; come, buy wine and milk without money, free!
 Why spend money on what cannot nourish
 and your wages on what fails to satisfy?
 Listen carefully to me,
 and you will have good things to eat
 and rich food to enjoy.
 Pay attention, come to me;
 listen and you will live.

I will make an everlasting covenant with you
 in fulfillment to the favors promised to David.
 Look, I have made him a witness to peoples,
 a leader and lawgiver to peoples.
 Look, you will summon a nation unknown to you,
 a nation unknown to you will hurry to you
 for the sake of Yahweh your God,
 because the holy one of Israel has glorified you.

Seek out Yahweh while he is still to be found,
 call to him while he is still near.
 Let the wicked abandon his way
 and the evil one his thoughts.
 Let him turn back to Yahweh
 who will take pity on him,
 to our God, for he is rich in forgiveness;
 for my thoughts are not your thoughts
 and your ways are not my ways,
 declares Yahweh.
 For the heavens are as high above earth
 as my ways are above your ways,
 my thoughts above your thoughts.
 For, as the rain and the snow
 come down from the sky and do not return
 before having watered the earth,
 fertilizing it and making it germinate
 to provide seed for the sower and food to eat,
 so it is with the word that goes from my mouth:
 it will not return to me unfulfilled
 or before having carried out my good pleasure
 and having achieved what it was sent to do.



Questions for the Individual and for the Couple

Answer the same question as below.



Sharing, Searching and Understanding Together as a Team

At the end of our work of reflection this year there is only one question on which to reflect individually, as a couple and as a team:

- *If Christ met us today and asked us: “Who do you say I am?” what would be our answer?*

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