

BROTHERLY LOVE

BIRTH OF BROTHERLY LOVE IN THE PRIMITIVE CHURCH

To become a child of God through faith in Jesus Christ is to be born into the family of God and to learn to live together in faith with brothers and sisters.

This is not easy at first sight, but not impossible with the help of the Lord.

The practice of brotherly love is the engine of a happy church, radiating peace and joy.

This is the atmosphere in which the church began.

In Jerusalem, on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended upon 120 disciples of Jesus Christ gathered in a large room, the upper room, where all of them by common consent persevered in prayer. The noise attracted a large crowd to whom Peter announced that Christ, the Messiah, had died and risen for the forgiveness of sins. About 3,000 people accepted the message and were converted. One of the marks of this change is their perseverance in... fellowship.

What an extraordinary change! These thousands of Jews, many of whom were staying in Jerusalem, coming from many nations, put all their goods in common. The spiritual revolution is such that they gather in the temple every day to praise God. They form a large community, gather in one place, and go from house to house taking their food with joy and simplicity of heart. Many miracles and wonders are performed by the apostles. Every day, new souls are saved and added to the church by Jesus. (Acts 2:37-47)

The church is born and grows. Everything is wonderful despite the opposition of the religious leaders. The multitude of those who have believed are one heart and one soul. There is not one needy person among them (Acts 4:32-35). Brotherly love is perfect.

Then an incident occurred: there were murmurs in the church about widows being neglected in the daily distribution of food by the apostles. Seven men, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, are appointed to replace the apostles and calm returns to the church. (Acts 6: 1-6)

When brotherly love is a reality in the community, there is victory over human failings.

Persevere in BROTHERLY LOVE.

(Hebrews 13:1)

THE TRUE VALUE OF THE WORD "LOVE"

The word "love" has been so overused that it has lost its beauty and purity. To rehabilitate it in its true meaning is a necessity in the biblical framework.

The study of the texts of the Holy Scripture which emphasize its divine origin is indispensable for a better understanding of what Christ expects from his disciples when he says

"I give you a new commandment: LOVE one another". (John 13:34)

The verb "to love" is used in our French language about everything. We say for example "I love my son and I love my cat"...

In English, there are two different verbs: "love" and "like". One is about people: "I love my mother". The other one is about things: "I like jam".

In Greek, the language used to write the New Testament, there are four words that can be translated by the word "love":

Erôs: passionate love, desire of the senses.

Storgê: family love, natural tenderness based on blood ties.

Philos: friendship, to be kind to someone, an object of sentimental affection.

Agape: love in the noblest, strongest sense, most often used to express divine love, virtue that leads to doing or desiring the good of others. This word is sometimes translated as "charity" in some versions of the Bible.

Because of the possible confusion between "charity" and "alms", we will speak essentially in this biblical booklet about "BROTHERLY LOVE" according to the Bible.

THE SOURCE OF BROTHERLY LOVE

Brotherly love has its source in God, as the apostle John teaches us in his first epistle:

"Beloved, let us love one another; for LOVE IS OF GOD".

and then he adds: "...and we have known and believed the love that God has for us. GOD IS LOVE." (1 John 4:7 and 16)

To save us from our state of perdition, God has manifested his love.

"This love consists, not in that we loved God, but in that He loved us and sent His only begotten Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." (1 John 4:10)

At the beginning of the book of Genesis, it is written that God created man in His Image (Genesis 1:27). Now, God is love and this image has been destroyed since the existence of the first human family.

A simple sentence tells this drama from the first pages of the Bible:

"Cain threw himself on his brother Abel and killed him." (Genesis 4:8)

Since then, how much blood has been shed, how many battles, wars, wickedness! In spite of this image of God's love torn by man, it is written in the gospel of John (3:16):

"God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life."

Through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross, man can regain the image of the God of love.

Therefore, the apostle John exhorts us to practice brotherly love towards one another:

"Beloved, IF GOD SO LOVED US, we must also love one another; God dwells in us." (1 John 4:11-12)

This duty to love cannot be achieved by man alone, in his own strength. This means that it is impossible without faith in Jesus Christ, as the apostle Paul expresses it to us with these words:

"Let Christ dwell in your hearts BY FAITH; that being rooted and grounded IN LOVE, you may know the LOVE OF CHRIST, which surpasses all knowledge." (Ephesians 3:17-19)

Walk in BROTHERLY LOVE after the example of Christ who loved us.

(Ephesians 5:2)

FAITH AND BROTHERLY LOVE

Faith and brotherly love are inseparable. They are the two pillars of the church of Jesus Christ. One does not go without the other.

"I will show you faith by my works" says the apostle James in his epistle (2:18).

Faith is dead in itself, he points out, if it does not result in works; and those works, he adds, consist of fulfilling "the royal law: you shall love your neighbor as yourself." (James 2:8)

Living faith is the lever of brotherly love, according to Galatians 5:6.

It can mean helping brothers and sisters who lack clothing, food, heating, and the necessities of life. (James 2:14-16) These acts of mutual aid, help and sharing with the poor are only one facet of brotherly love.

Indeed, what would brotherly love consist of for the poorest, who have nothing to give to their neighbor? Love of the other is not only the love of the rich towards the poor, but also the love of the poor towards the rich.

The works of faith are seen in the practice of brotherly love, which is not only expressed in humanitarian aid, of which there is a long list: houses for the elderly, boarding schools for poor children, centers for the homeless, help for earthquake or flood victims in Third World countries, soup kitchens, etc. These social works are not all the result of faith in God, although they are very commendable. They are only one facet of love for one's neighbor. The dimension of brotherly love goes beyond acts of generosity.

Here is an example: At the beginning of the Second World War, my father was responsible for the Venice Bridge in Reims, a swing bridge over the canal. Nearby, two workers were operating a pump that supplied air to the diver, nicknamed Nénès, who was repairing a breach at the bottom of the canal. Suddenly an alarm sounded. Bombers were approaching the city. Immediately, taken by panic, the workers abandoned the pump to take shelter, leaving Nénès at the bottom of the water... Fortunately, my father saw the scene. He realized that Nénès was going to die of asphyxiation, for lack of air. He ran to the pump, risking his own life. The bombs were beginning to explode and, despite the danger, he began to operate the pump with all his strength, repeating with faith this text from Psalm 91: "Let a thousand fall at your side and ten thousand at your right hand, you shall not be hurt." Thanks to his courage and love, he saved Nenes from certain death.

Brotherly love is not the means of salvation, but it is the proof, the evidence.

It is by means of faith that we are saved. Salvation is a gift from God (Ephesians 2:8). Faith allows us to receive this gift of forgiveness, of new and eternal life in Jesus Christ.

"To all who have received Jesus, the Word made flesh, to those who believe in his name, he has given the power to become children of God." (John 1:12)

We are not saved by works but to do good works... (Ephesians 2:10), the common thread of which is brotherly love.

This is God's commandment here: that WE BELIEVE in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, AND LOVE ONE ANOTHER." (1 John 3:23)

These three things remain, FAITH, HOPE, LOVE, but the greatest of these is LOVE.
(1 Corinthians 13:13)

BROTHERLY LOVE IN THE CHURCH

Human beings have an innate need for love, from childhood to old age. This love manifests itself in different forms, through maternal, paternal, filial, conjugal and fraternal love.

Brotherly love in the church should be the main sign of the reality of faith in Jesus Christ.

Unfortunately this is not always the case... The failures have many causes. It is easy to say: I love my brother, I love my sister... but when disagreements arise, brotherly love is quickly tarnished.

Because of human weaknesses, it is not surprising to see the many exhortations addressed to Christians by the apostles to stimulate the practice of brotherly love. The apostle Peter tells them:

"Be full of brotherly love." (1 Peter 3:8)

If brotherly love were really lived in its fullness, the apostle would not have thought it necessary to insist on the need to be full of it to characterize the relationships between Christians in the churches to which he addresses his epistle.

Brotherly love should in principle be reciprocal. Each member is called to behave in the same way towards the other. It must be admitted that this reciprocity does not always exist. Sometimes we are

disappointed by ingratitude, misunderstanding. The apostle Paul himself says, "May I, in loving you more, be loved less by you." (2 Corinthians 12:15)

In principle, we easily love those who love us. "So do the Gentiles," says Jesus. He taught in his Sermon on the Mount to go beyond that.

"If you only greet your brothers, what are you doing that is so extraordinary? Do not the Gentiles also do the same?"

Then Jesus invites his disciples to do what it is not customary to do:

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy,' but I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who abuse you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven, for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust." (Matthew 5:43-47)

To love those who do not like us, who are unsympathetic to us, is very difficult; to love those who are hostile to us and who do us harm, is almost impossible.

If Christ asks us to enter into a higher dimension than our usual way of loving others, it is because this is possible for those who have faith in Him.

He appeals to our will and offers to help us, provided we remain in communion with Him. This is what he clearly teaches in the Gospel of John, at the beginning of chapter 15:

"As the branch cannot of itself bear fruit unless it remains attached to the vine, so neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me and I in him bears much fruit, for WITHOUT ME you can do NOTHING."

He adds, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Remain in my love... This is my commandment: LOVE one another as I have loved you." (John 15:9-12)

Christ's teaching to his disciples has brotherly love as its essential basis.

When a scribe asked Jesus, as he was walking through the temple in Jerusalem, "Which is the first of all the commandments?", Jesus answered:

"This is the first: Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is the only Lord, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. And this is the second: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment than this." (Mark 12:28-31)

The first commandment does not go without the second, for "He who loves God also loves his brother." (1 John 4:21)

The flawless implementation of the second commandment requires strength from Jesus, since He Himself says, 'Without Me, you can do nothing.'

The strength to love our neighbor as Christ asks us to do is not in us but in Him.

In Madrid, in a room full of Gypsies, a sudden fear seizes them. They had come to hear one of their own, the young evangelist Alfredo, who had arrived from Barcelona to preach the Gospel to them. Suddenly, a gypsy who had once killed Alfredo's father in a fight enters. A deathly silence hangs over the audience. Before becoming a Christian, Alfredo had declared that if he returned to Madrid, he would avenge his father and kill the man who had murdered him. He sees the murderer enter. He stops his sermon to address him with these words: "I had sworn to come back to Madrid with a gun to kill you, now look what I have in my hand...", and he raises his Bible high. He adds: "Sit down and be at peace." Alfredo had obtained through Christ the strength to love his enemy.

The local church should be a model of brotherly love. It is not always so, as the apostles sadly observed: "I fear that when I come, I shall not find you such as I would like," said the apostle Paul to the Christians in Corinth. "I fear to find quarrels, jealousy, animosities, cabals, backbiting, slander, pride, troubles..." (2 Corinthians 12:20)

This is surprising and it is easy to understand why the exhortations to practice brotherly love are abundant in the letters addressed by the apostles to the churches of the first century and of which here is a list:

"For brotherly love, be full of affection for one another." (Romans 12:10)

"Have in you the sentiments that were in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 2:5)

"Have the same feelings toward one another." (Romans 12:16)

"May God grant that you may have the same feelings toward one another." (Romans 15:5)

"Therefore welcome one another as Christ welcomed you, to the glory of God." (Romans 15:7)

"Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of Christ." (Ephesians 5:21)

"Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another." (Ephesians 4:32, Colossians 3:13)

"Bear one another's burdens and so you will fulfill the law of Christ." (Galatians 6:2)

"bearing with one another in love." (Ephesians 4:2)

"Pray for one another." (James 5:16)

"Love one another FERVENTLY WITH ALL YOUR HEART, you who have been regenerated." (1 Peter 1: 22-23)

Since faith is dead without brotherly love, should not every Christian, according to these exhortations, ask himself these questions:

Do I truly love, with all my heart, my brothers and sisters in the church? Am I full of affection for them?

Do I have for them the feelings that were in Jesus Christ? Do I welcome them as Christ welcomed me?

Am I good to them? Do I carry their burdens? Do I bear them? Do I pray for them?

A self-examination is sometimes necessary to know where our level of brotherly love stands.

In the engine room of a large factory, it is impossible to look into the large boiler to see how much water it contains. But along this boiler is a small vertical glass tube that serves as a level. The height of the water in the small tube indicates the height of the water in the large boiler. When the tube is half full, it is half full; when it is empty, it is also empty. It indicates the level, it is the proof.

The examination of our brotherly love allows us to measure the value of our faith, and the measure of our love for God.

"Examine yourselves to see if you are in the faith, test yourselves," says the apostle Paul. (2 Corinthians 13:5)

Because of their human weakness, sometimes Christians are tempted to behave like pagans. That is why the apostles felt it necessary to remind those who have become "new creatures" through faith in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15), what they should not do.

Here are some of their exhortations:

"Do not return evil for evil, or insult for insult." (1 Peter 3:9)

"Let us no longer judge one another." (Romans 14:13)

"Do not lie to one another." (Colossians 3:9)

"Take heed that no one renders to another evil for evil." (1 Thessalonians 5:15)

"Abhor evil." (Romans 12:9)

"Let no one conceive pride in favor of one against another." (1 Corinthians 4:6)

"LOVE DOES NO HARM TO A NEIGHBOR." (Romans 13:10)

If, on examining yourself, you realize that your attitude toward your brothers is contrary to brotherly love, you must confess it to the Lord in the privacy of your room and ask for His forgiveness.

If you do, know that "the Lord is faithful and just to forgive you and to cleanse you from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9)

Then ask him to "pour brotherly love into your heart by his Spirit" (Romans 5:5), and say to him:

"Lord, teach me, help me to love others as you have loved me!"

THE CHURCH, AN ASSEMBLY OF BROTHERS AND SISTERS BOUND TOGETHER BY BROTHERLY LOVE

The church is not only an assembly, that is to say a group of people having faith in God and in Jesus Christ, it is an assembly that is consolidated and built up in brotherly love, as it is written in Ephesians 4:15-16:

"That professing the truth in love, we may grow in all respects into Him who is the head, Christ. From Him, and through all the bonds of His care, the whole body, being well coordinated and forming A SOLID

UNION, draws its increase according to the strength that suits each of its parts and builds itself up in LOVE."

This assembly is composed of Christians with many differences. There are strong and weak, rich and poor, diverse cultures and habits, easy and difficult characters, etc. However, all have the same faith, the same hope, but not necessarily the same spiritual stature, hence the need for the establishment of servants of God for the spiritual improvement of each part of the assembly. This can only be done in LOVE.

Feeling loved by our brothers and sisters in Christ helps us to remain and grow in faith and to realize that we belong to the same body, the same assembly of Christ.

Each Christian, whether newborn in the faith or spiritually mature, is a living stone joined to all the other stones of the building. All have the responsibility to build each other up in brotherly love to "FORM A SPIRITUAL HOUSE." (1 Peter 2:5)

One of the dangers in building the church is division, isolation.

– "We are a small group and it is wonderful how much we love one another." This was said by Christians separated from their church for causes of incompatibility, disagreement on secondary and trivial points having nothing to do with the doctrinal truth well taught by the spiritual leader. They loved each other, but did not love or support each other. The assembly was dislocated because of the lack of brotherly love.

Having understood this, they returned to each other and renewed their brotherly affection.

Sometimes it doesn't take much to shake the building when brotherly love for all is lacking.

"The church is a body. It has many members," said the apostle Paul to the Corinthians whom he exhorted in these words:

"Let the members take care of one another; those members of the body which seem weaker are needed; you are its members, EACH FOR HIS PART." (1 Corinthians 12:12-27)

When brothers and sisters are bound together by the ropes of brotherly love, the church forms a strong unit. Let's be careful not to cut them. By doing so, we damage the testimony we are to give to glorify Christ who tells us:

"By this all will know that you are my disciples, IF YOU HAVE LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER." (John 13:35)

THE TONGUE

An instrument of edification or destruction of brotherly love

The Lord spoke of the importance of WORDS as an expression of what is in the heart. He said:

"Don't you understand that everything that goes into the mouth goes into the belly and then is cast out into the secret places? But what comes out of the mouth comes out of the heart, and that is what defiles man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slander... It is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks." (Matthew 15:17-20 ; 12:34)

The heart is the source from which only good words should normally flow when it has been regenerated by divine grace.

The importance of the tongue, and therefore of speech, is taught to us by the apostle James in chapter three of his epistle:

"The tongue is a small member, and it boasts of great things. The tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members, defiling the whole body and setting the course of life on fire. It is full of deadly venom. By it we bless the Lord our Father, and by it we curse men made in the image of God. It must not be so, my brothers. Does the spring bring forth from the same opening sweet water and bitter water?"

There are two gnawing worms that destroy the harmony in a church, carried by the tongue: they are slander and calumny.

BACKBITING consists in saying bad things about one's neighbor in order to harm him or her, or simply to point out his or her faults in order to tarnish his or her image in the eyes of others.

In conversations bordering on slander, we sometimes hear people say, "I don't judge, I observe." As Jesus advises us, let's be careful not to only notice the evil in others, but let's also look within ourselves. "Why do you see the mote that is in your brother's eye and do not see the beam that is in your eye?" he said. (Matthew 7:3)

There is a proverb that says, "Your tongue is in a wet place, be careful that it doesn't slip!"

So let us be wise to put into practice this exhortation of the apostle Peter:

"Above all, let us have ARDENT BROTHERLY LOVE for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins." (1 Peter 4:8)

SLANDER is a very serious fault that can break a life, destroy peace, joy, harmony between brothers. To slander is to speak falsely of one's neighbor, to report facts or words contrary to the truth.

To avoid spreading such lies, Jesus and the apostles warned us:

"Do not receive any accusation except on the testimony of two or three witnesses." (1 Timothy 5:19)

"Every matter will be settled on the testimony of two or three witnesses." (2 Corinthians 13:1)

Jesus Himself gave us the steps to follow when a brother has sinned. Instead of spreading the news, He recommends that we take the brother aside:

"If your brother has sinned, go and rebuke him between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take two people with you so that the whole matter may be settled on the statement of two or three witnesses." (Matthew 18: 15-16)

This instruction, applied within the framework of brotherly love, would avoid many slanders, the spreading of false news.

"Brethren," says the apostle Paul, "if a man is caught in any fault, you who are spiritual, set him right with a spirit of gentleness." (Galatians 6:1) He does not say to spread the fault!

DISPUTES, when they arise, are often at the root of unkind words, self-control can avoid an exchange of violent words that hurt. So this is what the apostle Paul says:

"Let no evil word come out of your mouth, but if there be any good word, which shall edify and impart grace to them that hear it." (Ephesians 4:29)

One day, a Christian gypsy, insulted by another unbelieving gypsy, felt the desire to respond viciously.

The unbeliever has just hurled at him the most insulting word among his people, "Eat your dead!"

Dominating his urge to hurl back even more hurtful words, the Christian says to himself, knowing that it is impossible, "Lord, give me five minutes' permission to take my revenge."

Being a true disciple, he obviously did not get permission except to respond with love and gentleness to his enemy.

When the brotherly love that comes from God is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5), contention cannot take place.

Storms sometimes come unexpectedly. Someone misjudges you, insults you, and here you are ready to respond to the bad guy with harsh words when it is possible to explain yourself with gentleness. That is why it is necessary to be ROOTED IN BROTHERLY LOVE, as it is written in Ephesians 3:17.

Unshakable brotherly love should be in us like an inexhaustible spring.

In America, at the back of a streetcar, after work, workers pile up. One of them unwittingly steps on the foot of a well-known and once very mean black boxer. Everyone expects him to react violently. Nothing happens and someone says to him, "You don't hit him..." And the boxer, now a Christian, replies, "How could I, since now Christ lives in me."

The spirit of contention should not be in a church, for the apostle James says (3:16), "where there is bitter zeal and a spirit of contention, there is disorder and all kinds of evil deeds."

Two brothers had lived together for a long time without anything ever irritating them against each other. One day, one said to the other: "Let's try to quarrel like other men do!"

- But I don't know how to quarrel," said the younger one.

- Here," said the elder, "I'll put this jug down here. I say that it is mine. You answer that it is yours, and here is the quarrel."

So they put the jug on the table in the middle of the room and one began and said to the other:

- "This object is mine!

- I believe it is mine," said the other.

And his brother, immediately moved in his heart, answered:

"Well yes, it is yours, you can take it!"

So the brothers separated without having managed to quarrel.

I remember an incident in a church where I was the pastor. There are Christians who make a habit of standing either at the front or at the back of the meeting room. There was a Christian woman who liked to sit at the front and always in the same chair. One Sunday morning, another Christian woman, unaware of this fact, arrived before the sister and sat in her place. When the Christian with the assigned chair walked over to her chair, she exclaimed loudly and indignantly, "You took my chair!" This could have turned into an argument if the other had not kindly apologized, while going to sit one row over.

Sometimes it takes so little to break the link of brotherly love and exchange ugly words. So let us always keep our eyes on Jesus.

"He left us an example, that we might follow in his footsteps, he who, when reviled, did not revile..."(1 Peter 2:21-23)

"Walk in love after the example of Christ who loved us." (Ephesians 5:2)

The example of the Lord Jesus is not always followed and love is sometimes veiled IN HYPOCRISY, as in this case:

Three sisters spend their afternoon together at the home of one of them. They talk about their impressions of some of the sisters in the church and point out their faults, then they pray and have a cup of coffee with some cookies. They are convinced that they are practicing perfect sisterly love. Suddenly, they saw another sister coming toward the house through the window. - Ah, what a beard!" said one, making derogatory remarks about her and running the back of her hand over her cheek. - "Oh, that I don't like her!" says another.

Each one goes about her slander with pleasure. The door opens. The unloved one enters. Immediately, what joyful and boisterous exclamations:

- "Be welcome! We are happy to have your visit! What good wind brings you?"

This double talk masks a spiritual bankruptcy that we dare not admit to ourselves. Loving without hypocrisy is sometimes difficult, hence this exhortation, "Let brotherly love be without hypocrisy." (Romans 12:9)

Many judgments, criticisms, do not have the fragrance of brotherly love and provoke wounds and tears in sensitive people.

After a long absence, arriving from trips, some Christians receive a visit from brothers and sisters in Christ the very next day. Good words are exchanged, and during the conversation, one of the sisters discreetly runs her finger over a piece of furniture and picks up some dust. It seems to be no big deal, but then word spreads that Sister X is not keeping her house clean and her furniture is covered with dust.

Instead of spreading such words, wouldn't it have been fraternal to propose to the one who had just returned from a trip, "You must be tired, sister, if you want, I'll help you with your cleaning!"

This kind of criticism is not uncommon, hence the importance of this recommendation: "Do not speak ill of one another, brothers." (James 4:11) Let's also remember this verse from the Bible, "If anyone wants to see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil." (1 Peter 3:10)

FORGIVENESS

There are beautiful stories in the Bible of forgiveness and reconciliation between brothers.

Esau had conceived hatred against his brother Jacob to whom he had given his birthright in exchange for a plate of lentil soup. Jacob, having learned that his brother wanted to kill him, fled to his uncle Laban, beyond the Euphrates. Twenty years later, he returned to the land of his father Abraham, with his two wives, his two maids, his eleven children and many herds of goats, sheep, oxen, camels, donkeys and cows. He sent messengers to Esau, his brother, to warn him of his arrival. He came to him with four hundred men. Frightened and fearing vengeance, Jacob bowed to the ground seven times until he was near his brother. Esau ran to meet him. He threw himself around his neck and kissed him, and they wept. (Genesis 33)

Later, Joseph, one of Jacob's sons, is envied by his brothers who throw him into a cistern and then sell him to Ishmaelite traders, descendants of Abraham and Hagar, his Egyptian servant. Taken to Egypt, Joseph is enslaved and imprisoned. Then, he is miraculously elevated by the Pharaoh to the position of Prime Minister and put in charge of the whole country of Egypt. His faith in God remains unshaken. He leads the country with wisdom according to divine dreams. During a period of famine, his brothers came to buy wheat that Joseph had stored in silos during times of plenty. Joseph recognized them, tested them and then revealed himself to them, saying: "I am Joseph, your brother, whom you sold to be taken to Egypt. Now do not grieve that you sold me to be brought here, for it was to save your lives that God sent me before you." Then Joseph embraced all his brothers with tears. (Genesis 45)

These moving stories of forgiveness and reconciliation are demonstrations of brotherly love.

The best example of forgiveness is given to us by Jesus. One of the words he spoke on the cross to his executioners is a prayer of love: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34)

The forgiveness of all our faults, all our offenses against God, all our sins, is granted to us in Christ. "God has forgiven us IN CHRIST." (Ephesians 4:32)

It is not written, God will forgive us. His forgiveness is not projected into the future. Those who believe in Christ receive it here on earth and now. For this it was necessary that Christ shed his blood on the cross because: "Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness." (Hebrews 9:22)

One day, a Pharisee asked Jesus to eat at his house. When Jesus sat down to eat, a woman of ill repute came up to Him and stood at His feet. She wetted them with her tears of repentance and wiped them with her hair, then anointed them with perfume, which she had filled in an alabaster jar. The Pharisee watched the scene and was very shocked. He said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who and what kind of woman is touching him; he would know that she is a sinner."

He judged her and condemned her. According to him, she had no right to approach Jesus.

But Jesus said to the woman, "Your sins are forgiven you. Then those who were at the table with him began to say within themselves, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?"

To the Pharisee who had welcomed him to his table, Jesus remarked, "Her many sins have been forgiven because she loved much. But he who is forgiven little loves little." (Luke 7:36-50)

We know that Peter denied his Master three times. When the cock crowed on the third denial, the Lord turned and looked at Peter who was sitting by the fire that was lit in the middle of the courtyard of the high priest's house. This look upset Peter who immediately went out and wept bitterly. (Luke 22: 61-62)

Later, Jesus showed himself to his disciples a third time after his resurrection, this time at the Lake of Galilee. On the shore, he had prepared for his disciples, who had returned from the miraculous catch, some grilled fish and bread. After they had eaten, Jesus asked Simon Peter three times, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love me?" (John 21:15-17) Jesus could have said to him, "Peter, withdraw, go away, I exclude you from my presence, you are not worthy to serve me, you are a renegade," but he simply asks him to love him.

"We also love Jesus because he first loved us," as the apostle John reminds us. (1 John 4:19)

This merciful attitude of Christ toward all who come to Him for the grace of forgiveness is expressed in that beautiful word He spoke, "I will not cast out him who comes to me." He always welcomes the repentant sinner and does not condemn him. Here is another example:

While he was in front of the temple in Jerusalem, some religious leaders brought a woman caught in adultery before him and placed her in the middle of the people who had gathered to see what would happen. According to the moral laws of Moses, the woman and the man were to be put to death by stoning (Leviticus 20:10), but only the woman was brought to be stoned. Harassed by the religious people's questions, "Moses said... You what do you say?", Jesus did not answer their questions but said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you cast a stone against her first." Stooping down, he began to write with his finger on the ground. When he got up, only the woman was left. All of them, accused in their conscience, had withdrawn because "All men have sinned" (Romans 5:12); Jesus Christ, the only one without sin, could have taken the stone, but he said to the woman, "I do not condemn you; go and sin no more." (John 8: 1-11)

He says this because "He has the power to FORGIVE SINS." (Matthew 9:6) Is it not written, "Whoever believes in Him receives by His name THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS." (Acts 10:43 and 26:18)

Writing to the Christians in the city of Colossae, the apostle Paul said to them, "Christ has forgiven you... likewise, forgive yourselves." (Colossians 3:13)

For those who believe in Jesus, forgiveness is a given and it is now their duty to in turn extend forgiveness to the one or ones who have offended them.

Forgiveness for small things is easy enough, but when we are falsely accused, slandered, insulted, persecuted, beaten, it requires being filled with the love of God poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit to bring about reconciliation. (Romans 5:5)

The application of forgiveness is asked of us by Jesus himself:

"When you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, FORGIVE, so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses." (Mark 11:25)

Having been forgiven by Christ who has given us grace for all our trespasses (Colossians 2:13), we can only imitate his example if we claim to be his disciple.

I remember a moving scene of reconciliation between two men at a Gypsy convention in eastern France. Once, during a fight, a gypsy had been violently hit by a 120 kg giant. The victim converted to Christ, then the culprit. Both came to the gathering. When they arrived at the camp, the giant walked towards the one he had hit. His victim had already arrived with his caravan. Slowly they walked towards each other, each wondering if the other had really become a child of God. About fifty men had quickly gathered around them, ready to intervene to separate them if the fight started again. Suddenly, when the two former enemies were near each other, they embraced and cried like children.

Brotherly love had replaced malice and hatred with forgiveness and reconciliation because these men had become brothers through faith in Jesus Christ. They possessed the capacity to love with the love that God had poured into their hearts through the Holy Spirit.

This is not a unique case, but sometimes our forgiveness is tied to restrictions like these:

I forgive you, but I don't want to see you anymore...

I forgive you, but I will never forget...

I forgive you, but don't do it again...

Christ asked his disciples to grant total forgiveness, without condition except repentance: "If your brother has sinned, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him." (Luke 17:3)

He turns human data on its head to make clear the unlimited dimension of forgiveness with these words, "And if he has sinned against you seven times in one day, and seven times he comes back to you, saying, 'I repent,' you will forgive him." (Luke 17:4)

To the apostle Peter who asked him, "How often shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Will it be up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I do not say to you until seven times, but until seventy times seven times." Then he told a parable with this very important conclusion that everyone must forgive his brother WITH ALL HIS HEART. (Matthew 18:21-35)

If each member of the church puts into practice what Jesus says, and forgives his brother or sister WITH ALL HIS HEART, he becomes a subject of blessing for himself and for others.

"Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, FORGIVING ONE ANOTHER, just as God in Christ forgave you." (Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13)

THE LAW AND BROTHERLY LOVE

It is written, "Sin is the transgression of the law." (1 John 3:4) Since "All men have sinned" (Romans 3:23), all have therefore transgressed the law!

But which law is it? What is the law?

According to the teaching of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew (22:40), all THE LAW and the prophets depend on these two commandments:

"You shall love the Lord your God and you shall love your neighbor."

To love God and neighbor, that is THE DIVINE LAW.

This is also what the apostle Paul explains in his epistle to the Romans:

"He who loves others HAS FULFILLED THE LAW. For the commandments: You shall not commit adultery, you shall not kill, you shall not steal, you shall not covet, and all the others that there may be, are summed up in this word: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no harm to a neighbor, SO LOVE IS THE FULFILLMENT OF THE LAW." (Romans 13: 8-10)

And he even makes it clear in his epistle to the Galatians that "ALL THE LAW IS FULFILLED in one word, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Galatians 5:14)

It is easy to understand that, if to fulfill the law is to LOVE, the transgression is to NOT LOVE.

This shows that in the eyes of God, the greatest thing is FRATERNAL LOVE.

Our duty is to seek it, because without it we are nothing. (1 Corinthians 13: 2-13; 14:1)

We must differentiate the law of love from the ceremonial and religious laws such as circumcision, Sabbath observance, etc... practiced by the Jews as indicated in the Old Testament.

On the other hand, there are RULES OF CONDUCT necessary to help put brotherly love into practice and avoid hurting our brothers. The apostle Paul was aware of this and wrote to the Christians in Rome:

"Beware lest your freedom become a stumbling block to the weak... If any food (meat sacrificed to the idols of this age) offends my brother, I will not eat meat." (1 Corinthians 8: 9-13)

He even said that to grieve a brother over a food issue is a lack of brotherly love. (1 Romans 14:15)

There are practices to do or to avoid, depending on the country and the community, so as not to scandalize the brothers and sisters.

For example, in England, America and the Anglo-Saxon countries, drinking a glass of wine or beer is a serious offense. It offends them. In Calabria, in the south of Italy, the brothers do not wear a tie because for them it is a sign of worldliness. In India, it is customary to leave one's shoes at the entrance to the church, probably because God asked Moses to take off his shoes in front of the burning bush in the desert.

Having traveled to forty-four nations and seen many different customs in the churches, I have respected them as long as they did not alter the fundamental doctrinal truths of the Bible. The observance of these rules is a mark of love to those whose non-observance would scandalize them.

However, the law of God is not made up of precepts based on the ordinances and doctrines of men (Colossians 3:20-24). It is summed up in one word: LOVE. This love concerns both God and our neighbor, as the apostle John reminds us: "If anyone says, 'I love God,' and does not love his brother whom he sees, how can he love God whom he does not see? And we have this commandment from him, He who loves God, let him love his brother also." (1 John 4: 20-21)

**Let us not love in words and with the tongue,
but IN ACTION AND WITH TRUTH.**

(1 John 3:18)

LOVE, FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT

From the moment of conversion, the Holy Spirit works in us an interior transformation, a birth to a new life animated by love for God and neighbor. The fire of this first love (Revelation 2:4), which should never be extinguished is presented by the Bible as "THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT."

To make this clear, the apostle Paul emphasized the contrast between the sinful nature he called the flesh, and the new way of living that the Holy Spirit produces in the one who believes in Jesus.

There is a conflict, he says, between the flesh and the Spirit, but he adds, those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh, that is, they no longer practice "the works of the flesh," a list of which appears in Galatians (5:19-21). Here are some of them: "The works of the flesh are enmities, quarrels, jealousies, animosities, disputes, etc..." These are forms of sin, transgressions of God's law to love.

In order not to practice them, the apostle Paul invites us to " WALK IN THE SPIRIT " (Galatians 5:16).

Walking and living by the Spirit is characterized by a fruit: THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT. "The fruit of the Spirit is LOVE, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, temperance" (Galatians 5:22). This fruit can be compared to a bunch of grapes or a diamond with nine facets.

In 1 Corinthians 13, brotherly love is presented in two aspects:

LOVE

What it is	What it is not
What it does	What it does not do
It is patient	It is not envious
	It does not boast
It is full of goodness	It is not puffed up with pride
It never perishes	It does not do anything dishonest
It excuses everything	It does not seek its own interest
It believes everything	It does not get irritated
It hopes for everything	It does not suspect evil
It endures all things	It does not rejoice at injustice

Does our brotherly love fit this description? If we can answer yes, it is because we are truly walking according to the Spirit. God sees us and knows if we are applying the teaching of his Word.

It is said that a young man once went to one of the richest merchants in New York City and asked for a job. He was asked to come back the next day. In the afternoon, while walking along Broadway, he saw a poor old lady, an apple seller, who had just been run over with her basket by an omnibus. He ran to her, helped her up, picked up her apples, put them back in the basket, and walked on. The next day he returned to the merchant's house and was immediately accepted as a worker. Soon after, he learned that the boss had seen him while he was performing this act of kindness. Favourably impressed, he had given him the position that twenty others had requested.

God also sees our acts of kindness and he also sees what we call our 'shortcomings.'

God sees us, but we must not forget that those around us observe us and discern the reality of our brotherly love, as the following texts confirm:

"Timothy has given us good news of your faith and of YOUR BROTHERLY LOVE" (1 Thessalonians 3:6)

"Epaphras has told us of what FRATERNAL LOVE the Spirit animates you with." (Colossians 1:8)

"As for FRATERNAL LOVE, you yourselves have learned from God to LOVE one another, and this you also do toward all the brethren... But we urge you, brethren, to ABOUND MORE IN THIS LOVE." (1 Thessalonians 4: 9-10)

Let us be the subject of good news about the fruit of the Spirit, for this is the essential in the testimony:

"Above all, CLOTHE yourselves with LOVE, which is the bond of perfection." (Colossians 3:14)

THE JOY OF LOVING

Being loved by others is not enough to be happy because "there is more happiness in giving than in receiving", said Jesus. (Acts 20:35)

The fact of loving brings happiness that translates into inner peace and a satisfaction of being pleasing to God.

Let us be sowers of brotherly love, "doing good to reap in due season." (Galatians 6: 7-9)

The English pastor Wesley said:

"Do all the good you can,
by all the means you can,
in all the places you can,
and whenever you can."

"He who knows how to do good and does not do it, commits sin," says the apostle James in his epistle. (4:17) He thus transgresses the law of loving.

On the other hand, the happiness of loving lies in the desire to do to others whatever we would like others to do for us, for this is the law and the prophets, says Jesus. (Matthew 7:12)

This happiness can go as far as sacrifice. Indeed, "There is no GREATER LOVE than to lay down your life for your friends." (John 15:13)

Without going that far, it is said, "This one would give even his shirt."

Some people sometimes perform very beautiful acts of generosity, of kindness, but we must be careful not to fall into the imbalance that would consist in depriving ourselves, in going beyond our possibilities, to the point of being helped in our turn. (2 Corinthians 8:13)

The justice that results from brotherly love must be practiced with wisdom within the Church.

For the happiness of living with brothers and sisters in brotherly love to be unclouded and lasting, not the slightest evil root must be left in the heart. To allow the good seed, the vegetables and the flowers, to grow without being choked, the noxious weeds must be uprooted from the garden. Likewise, if there are dispositions, attitudes contrary to brotherly love, they must be eliminated.

Here are recommendations from Paul (in Ephesians 4:31), "Let all bitterness disappear from among you." It eats away at the heart and makes one bleed.

"All animosity." This is an inner tension causing arguments.

"All anger." Getting angry, and sometimes over little, gives access to the devil and breaks brotherly love.

"All clamor." Blaming by shouting, grumbling all day long creates a tense atmosphere conducive to argument.

"All slander." Saying untrue things about others hurts and destroys fraternal harmony.

"Any kind of malice." Not just hitting with the fists but with the tongue.

The apostle uses the word "ALL" every time because normally, brotherly love cannot coexist with everything that is evil. It must be sincere (1 Peter 1:22) and unchangeable (Ephesians 6:24).

When I was a young pastor of twenty years, there was a tramp in the church who had been converted. Poor, but well dressed, he participated in the life of the church.

I used to shake hands with the church members at the end of the service. Once, my mother called out to me and asked, "Did you say hello to the brother over there?", pointing to the bum.

"Yes mom, I did!", I told her. She made sure that both the poor and the rich were treated fraternally, equally and sincerely.

She was right because brotherly love should never make any distinction, any preference.

A Jewish legend tells that the prophet Elijah came one day to the door of a rich man who lived in a very beautiful and luxurious house. Dressed in rags, he asked for hospitality. The rich man sent him away, cursing and insulting him.

A few days later, Elijah appeared again at the door of the large and sumptuous villa, dressed in splendid bright clothes. The rich man did not recognize the beggar and let him in with great honors, inviting him to sit at the table. He offered him a glass of his best wine. Elijah took the cup and poured the contents on

his clothes, pretending to be clumsy: a second time, then a third time, the cup was filled again and spilled on the beautiful clothes. To the dismayed rich man, Elijah remarked, "Yesterday I came dressed in rags and you rejected me. Today I have come richly and you have welcomed me. In reality, you did not receive me, but my clothes. So it is only natural that the wine you offered me should go to them." Then Elijah disappeared.

The lesson is that brotherly love is not about appearance.

The happiness of love does not consist in loving only those who please us.

To love the other is also to be tolerant, to accept him as he is, which does not mean to tolerate sin, mistakes, faults, but to be respectful of the other, to understand him, to help him if necessary and to pray for him.

When each Christian puts into practice the commandment to love his brother to the extent of the love that Christ has for us, the church flourishes in peace and joy. It forms an oasis of happiness, as in the days of the first church in Jerusalem, where the multitude of those who believed were one heart and one soul. (Acts 4:32)

LOVE NEVER FAILS.

(1 Corinthians 13:8)

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