

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.” (Jn 13:34)

These words were said during the Last Supper. Jesus was at table with his disciples and had just washed their feet. A few hours later he would be arrested, condemned to death and crucified.

When time is short and the end is approaching, the most important things are said, and a person’s “last testament” is left.

St. John’s Gospel does not give an account of the institution of the Eucharist during the Last Supper. In its place is the washing of the feet. This sheds particular light on our understanding of the new commandment. Jesus first does something and then teaches, and for this reason his word has authority.

The commandment to love one’s neighbor was already present in the Old Testament: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18). Jesus highlights a new aspect of this, which is reciprocity. In fact, mutual love is what creates the Christian community and makes it stand out.

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The roots of this commandment are in divine life itself, in the Trinitarian dynamic in which the Son of God has enabled men and women to share.

Focolare founder Chiara Lubich illustrated this by using an image that can enlighten our understanding. “When Jesus came on earth... he came from heaven. Just like migrants, who go to a distant country, adapt to their new environment, they also bring their own customs and often still speak their own language.

“In a similar way, Jesus adapted to life on earth but—because he was God—he brought the life of the Trinity on earth with him, and that life is mutual love.”

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Here we enter into the heart of Jesus’ message, and this takes us back to the newness of life that was experienced in the first Christian communities, which can still be the hallmark of all our groups and associations today.

In an environment where reciprocity is a living reality, we understand the meaning of our existence, we find the strength to go on in times of pain and suffering, we are supported through the inevitable difficulties of life, and we experience joy.

We face so many challenges every day: the pandemic, polarization, poverty and conflict. Let us imagine for a moment what would happen if we were able to put this Word of Life into practice in our daily lives. We would see new opportunities opening up, and the plan for humanity would unfold before our eyes, giving hope.

Nothing is stopping us from reawakening this life in ourselves and rekindling relationships of fraternity that extend throughout the world.

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Marta is a young volunteer who helps prisoners to study for university exams. “The first time I stepped inside the prison, I met people with fears and frailties. I tried to build a relationship with them that was firstly professional but also friendly, based on respect and listening.

“I soon realized I was not only helping the prisoners, but I was also being helped by them. Once when one of the students was preparing for an exam, someone in my family died, and my student’s conviction was confirmed by the court of appeals. We were both in a very dark place.

“During the lessons I could see how much pain there was inside him, which he was able to share with me. Bearing the weight of that pain together helped us to move forward.

“When the exam was over, he came to thank me, saying that he could not have done it without me. While one life in my family had ended, I felt I had saved another. I realized that reciprocity makes it possible to create real relationships of friendship and respect.”

Letizia Magri