

Ugo Borghello

THE CHALLENGE OF LOVE

Why be a Catholic from an early age

with an introduction by Cardinal Giacomo Biffi

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INTRODUCTION
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It isn't easy to escape from the blind frenzy that afflicts and in some ways almost overwhelms our often disjointed life nowadays.

Stopping to reflect on ourselves and fully accepting the grace and responsibility of being human, can therefore be even more difficult than in the past; and the only ones able to do this are those brave souls who dare to challenge the arid and empty dogmas pronounced by the many "prophets of nothing".

Today as always, however, anyone who honestly chooses this path must soon realize that it is impossible to deny or to avoid the problem of salvation. The need for salvation is something that every human being carries indelibly within him. We'll need to be saved from evil, which assails us from without but whose roots we also find within ourselves; to be saved from fear and uncertainty, from falsehood. And in each of us there is the burning need to be saved from the sense of insignificance - a terrible presage of death, which makes everything seem vain - which can poison the most noble effort and the most gratifying achievement, the most hard won growth and most yearned for beauty.

The problem of salvation is the problem of truth and of meaning: there really is, in a phrase used repeatedly in this book, "an immeasurable problem of love".

In the soul of those familiar with Church prayers, these words will recall Psalm 42 "Abyssus abyssum invocat": "deep calleth unto deep". The depth of the human soul, a mystery in itself, by its very being invokes an infinite abyss which can fill it with meaning. It shouts out its great need and at the same time its boundless hope, in the innate knowledge that only love can be a full and final answer to its plea.

Those who believe have the gift and fortune of knowing that there is an answer to the prayers sent Heavenwards by man and by history, whether consciously or not: Jesus Christ, our one Redeemer.

This is a universal answer, for everyone and for every age, and for every age of man: an answer which is really "catholic" in the fullest sense of the word.

It is an answer which is especially significant for young people; Christ, and his wondrous perfection as a man and in his utterly divine mystery, is still and always a great winner of hearts, and it is in the hearts of young people, not yet closed and hardened by the bitter experience of life, that He finds greatest response.

The intention of this work is to help young people to encounter Christ, or joyfully and with legitimate pride to recognize the inestimable grace and consequences for their lives if this encounter has already taken place.

I should to express to the Author my gratitude as a pastor, and my cordial hope that the passion evident on every page for the salvation of the young and for their Savior be rewarded with a rich harvest.

Bologna, June 22, 2000

Giacomo Cardinal Biffi
Archbishop of Bologna

PREFACE

We shall return to the title and subheading, with their quiet provocation, at the end.

This book offers a new way to confront faith, taking as a starting point a profound examination of our everyday life and the questions we all secretly want to ask. Often the Bible does not illuminate because we ask the wrong questions, and ignore the real questions of the heart. Giving answers to those who ask no questions is like sowing stones.

If we look around us we see so much youthful enthusiasm which deserves a future full of hope and which is in danger of suffocating in the nihilistic emptiness of current culture. It isn't easy for a young person to take a panoramic view of all the hope, philosophies and promises of history, especially recent history, and to realize that they have all passed from fashion, although not always doing damage as they go.

Why are there so many different ideas, which govern the life and destiny of mankind? Everyone thinks that he is right, but if this is so, everyone else must be wrong. *Behind this lies a huge problem of love which needs to be "redeemed"*, healed by a pure spring, so that we can realize our yearnings, otherwise it causes suffering for itself and for others.

There was a man (the historical proof is beyond scientific doubt), the son of a Middle-Eastern carpenter, who offered himself as the innocent source of a redeeming love, a stream of living water which quenches the thirst for eternal love. He said unheard-of things: "Never man spake like this man" (John 7:46), things that no man in his senses can say. And he revolutionized history. The son of a carpenter who claimed to be the son of God and who had himself crucified for his obstinacy. A poor fool, a vagabond who paid for his folly with death. Or was he?

If we study the immeasurable problems of love that condition us, Jesus' words become the light of our life. Faith gives new divine horizons but at the same time illuminates the great problems of man. Nowadays it is more necessary than ever not only to study the Scriptures, but also to study man in order to understand the beauty of the answer revealed. Someone pointed out that Christ's words have a beauty that goes beyond human beauty, and hence reason is led to believe that Jesus is the son of God.

We shall consider three steps which we must be aware of if we are to make the right decisions for our lives: firstly, understanding the nature of the evil which assails us - falsity, malaise - as a problem of immeasurable love. Secondly, discovering how real the love of Jesus Christ is, unique in the history of man. Finally, the gift of love, which saves our hearts and human relationships, is something that we must see as partially realized on earth, with different bonds. Love can act only inasmuch as it creates strong bonds, thinking it is not enough nor is mere sentiment. "Jesus Christ? A man with a great future" said an English journalist during an interview. Is it possible to think of the future, it is not difficult to understand that only Jesus Christ can sustain our bonds of love in the face of eternity. But not without the Church.

CHAPTER 1

AN IMMEASURABLE PROBLEM OF LOVE

Some time ago I met a University student, nearing the end of his course. It was easy to make friends and so I felt able to ask: "Do you pray?" His ready reply was meant to be disarming: "Why should I pray? I am twenty-four, and about to get an excellent degree. I have a girl friend and lots of friends, I play a lot of sport, I can ask my parents for all the money I need. Tell me, why should I pray?" "The answer will be a little roundabout" I said, "you will need to be patient and to open your heart and be ready to change your ideas and your life. Prayer is the song of the soul, a song that may be sad or joyful, the 'new song' in the Christian faith, but you can't understand the need for prayer unless you know the labyrinth of your heart."

Many people come to a priest because they are distressed, insecure, often in despair. Kierkegaard sums it up well in *Repetition*: "I am at the end of endurance. Life disgusts me, is without savor, with neither salt nor sense. Even were I hungrier than Pierrot I could not bring myself to swallow the explanations offered to man. Where am I? What does 'the world' mean? Why has no one called me? Why has no one taught me the rules and customs, instead of driving me along as if I had been bought by a slave merchant? How did I become a partner in the huge company they call reality? Why must I be a partner? Isn't it optional? And if I really have to be, where is the manager? Who can I complain to? After all, life is a debate; can I ask to have my views put on the agenda? If we have to take life as it comes, wouldn't it be better to establish just how it comes?" These words may seem very far from the first example, but the two positions are not so very different. His girlfriend broke off their five year engagement just as they were about to get married, and he was prostrated for about a year with feelings similar to those expressed by Kierkegaard. His happiness depended on the unreliable opinion of a girl.

With all the obvious limitations, the clearest example that can be given of Heaven, of salvation, of the full and everlasting happiness we all seek, is the moment when love blossoms between two young people. In Spain they say "*mira como se contemplan!*" - see how they look at each other! True happiness makes us ecstatic, it stops time. And this example points up the abyss of anguish that each of us tries to cross by a flimsy bridge. And anguish is the most striking example of a life which is not saved; it is almost a foretaste of hell, although this should not be understood as saying that human love means you have heaven in your heart, nor that suffering anguish means that you are destined to perdition. It is simply a way to understand that we are all prey to anguish and we all need salvation, on earth and in eternity. A specialist in human love says: "Love which is not returned leads to deep anguish. Love becomes a prison, everything seems colorless and meaningless. Sadness takes hold of the heart. There are neither plans nor hope."¹ This is more or less what Kierkegaard describes.

Falling in love and being left: different fates which do not depend on our will alone. The freedom and will of another person are involved, and we can't make them guarantee our happiness. Hence, although we are created for great love, we *are exposed to anguish*. And this is true not only of human love. Children, friends for teenagers or young people, work or social responsibility all give great meaning to life but are all still at the mercy of the freedom and will of others. If a relationship breaks down, great pain is felt. Someone who is very sure of himself, with many achievements and good relationships, may suddenly break down in the face of serious illness, failure at work, false accusations, being left by his wife, betrayed by her husband, a son or daughter on drugs, a girlfriend going off for no reason, because of a breakdown in relations in his reference group. All these things can and do happen - not that we would wish them on anyone. I do say this not to frighten people but to make them aware of the perhaps hidden fears that condition human life and relationships. Only someone who can look fearlessly into his own heart can see the risks and hopes of life and can aspire to true happiness, which begins here on earth and is for everybody.

In order to understand why and how Jesus Christ is the only Redeemer of the world, *we must first understand why we must be saved*. "Salvation" in its fullest sense; not just for eternal life (its principal meaning) but also the

1 E. Rojas, *Remedios para el desamor. Temas de hoy*, Madrid, 1990, p. 6

responsibility we all have towards the salvation of others, towards real love here on earth, towards a more dignified life for man, saved from evil, from human selfishness, from the deceitfulness that creates discord in the heart of each of us, in families, at work, in society, in the church itself, and between nations. We cannot think of gaining eternal salvation for ourselves without thinking of our fellows. On the other hand, doing good is not in itself enough if our heart is not in it, if our heart is not saved by the innocent gift of Christ. Salvation cannot be put off till tomorrow: an eternal future must start on earth. Jesus said: “And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren or sisters, or father or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name’s sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life.” (Matthew 19:29): we must understand the meaning of “an hundredfold” or we are in danger of relegating salvation to a paradise seen as some sort of wonderland, while we sow hell on earth.

Of course we will be understood only by those who recognize that man is intrinsically in need of salvation. Those who think that everything is fine, that man can be happy and escape death by his own efforts will smile at what we say. But these latter are not truly happy, and we can see how they react and blame others for their own foolishness, thus filling the world with discord, strife, and unhappiness.

We can start from the words of John Paul II in his first encyclical: “Man cannot live without love. He cannot understand himself, his life has no sense, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not meet love, if he does not feel it and make it his own, if he takes no active part.” (*Redemptor Hominis*, no. 10).

We see at once that these words are true but we are less likely to look at them squarely and ask ourselves how this is possible, how far they concern us personally, what is meant by love, etc.. The trouble is that ‘love’ immediately makes us think of beautiful human and necessary horizons, but in terms of personal private feelings, emotional rather than objective and solid. The bond of love concerns other people too; someone who doesn’t know how to love is a problem for everyone else. From the time of the Greeks, philosophy has had little time for love; it has followed rationalist paths or rebelled against these and turned irrational, pragmatic, romantic, mystic, hedonistic, etc. And yet the theme of love keeps cropping up, above all in literature, in the cinema and in certain philosophies. In theology of course it is a central theme, but is treated only in its divine aspect. Where existential love is taken really seriously is in psychology. The various schools, in their very various ways, see personal relationships as crucial to the well-being or otherwise of the individual. Many people feel intuitively that *the heart has its prison, which reason cannot open*, but they do not understand the root cause. The *ultimate slavery* chains can be broken only by the Word of God, the Word that for the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews “is quick and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12). What we are going to say will take account of the various schools of psychology, but more importantly of revealed Scripture and the experience of relationships with thousands of people. We must of course be brief and be accessible to everyone.²

The indispensable approval

From the very beginning, God reveals the essentially social nature of mankind: “it is not good that man should be alone” (Genesis 2:18). A Neapolitan proverb says: “you can live without knowing why you live, but not without knowing who you live for”. If you question people as to the meaning of life, you can get some rude replies. But if you could question people’s hearts: “who do you live for?” you would discover (strong) bonds, with parents, family, friends, boyfriends and girlfriends but also relationships at work, social roles, in political circles and voluntary work and, lastly, in the Church. Everyone has a “name” which defines his unique and free nature, and needs a “surname” to identify him to others. With the onset of adolescence, the paternal surname is no longer enough and the heart must find a wider-ranging surname among friends and in the social group. Why is there so much misunderstanding between parents and children? You would think that if people loved each

² For a deeper examination of the theme, see U. Borghello, *Liberare l’Amore. La comune idolatria, l’angoscia in agguato, la salvezza cristiana*. Presentazione di B. Forte, Milan, Ares, 1997³, which shows how the deeply existential theme of love is common to all men and casts light not only on psychology and philosophy but also on many ramifications of theology, and offers a fresh reading of the Gospel which is closer to the responsibility of man in the new millennium.

other, life would be great for everyone, but the need for peer approval nowadays is so urgent that it can cause rifts that parents often find incomprehensible.

Ricoeur distinguishes between “others-from-me” and “others-for-me” - only the latter make up the essential community, an area of solidarity which allows the heart to feel it is recognized and to find a meaningful image. Without this recognition we fall into anguish. We cannot live without sharing our lot with someone. *Man needs re-cognition or con-sensus from others, more than the air he breathes.* Emargination is felt to be a condemnation, it fills us with fear, *being excluded makes life empty.* Even those who insist that they have no need of success or recognition, those who declare their individualism, are really shouting out to the world that they don’t need anybody. And this too is a form of self-affirmation, by showing people that you are above their opinion of you, but these individualists, too, really depend on a successful image. Individualism is a cry to the world for recognition *by others*, as a unique being, as a person. Man recognizes himself only if he is re-cognized by others. He respects himself only if others respect and admire him. St. Augustine could say: “there is no one who does not love, but one wonders what he loves” (Sermon 34). The question of love comes into the very definition of a person, as his “name” and “surname”, as existing for himself and existing for other people. In our own words, the whole “surname” issue may be defined as the quest for an *indispensable approval*. The vitality and force we find in John Paul II is due to the fact that he has recognized man’s congenital need for love, and that from an early age he took seriously St Paul’s invitation to choose “a more excellent way” (cf I Corinthians 12:31), the primacy of fraternal charity. He repeatedly says that if we do not give ourselves to others, we will not find ourselves.

The root of the problem can easily be seen in young people. Adolescence brings a profound need for recognition from people other than parents and to show the world that we exist. If we have friends who value us, life is wonderful; if not, it becomes intolerable. Young people usually have some friends, because this is an absolute necessity for them all; so it’s easy to find someone who needs you too. This is not in itself a bad thing, in fact, it is good and necessary and part of God’s design. But it is easy *to create a group with its own symbolic code, its own moral laws, which acquires the force of a church.* “Church” is the right word, because this bond is stronger than physical life, stronger than the instinct of self-preservation, and so becomes a spiritual reality which takes the place of the necessary bond with God as a source of love. In fact, we all, young and old alike, live in a “secret church”, which externally may have more or less substance, but which conditions all our important choices and our way of thinking. We believe our choices and thoughts are free, but in fact, “we are chosen”, not consciously by others but by the relationships that have been formed. Even an atheist intellectual, for example, cannot do without his readers or followers. Then we “freely” and profoundly convince ourselves that the ideas of the group or of our cultural area of reference are what we have thought for ourselves. In reality, these ideas are what give recognition in the group and let us have successful personal relationships within it. Once more, we find ourselves facing the issue of the *indispensable approval*. It may happen that four young people who are all mad about discos have very superficial conversations, feeling sure that they are much more intelligent than their parents or their teachers, or even than the Pope, because these ideas are listened to by the “essential people” in their group (this is not meant to be a sweeping criticism of discos or of the individuals who frequent them).

Many people think that everyone is motivated by selfishness, by the desire to possess material goods, by pleasure. This does happen, but is in fact subordinated to the question of love, even when this is set on its head as self-love. The prodigal son of the parable wants to claim his inheritance so as to become his own master, and no longer be a son. He then squanders all he has and ends up a slave. Man cannot be his own master. Either he is a son or he becomes a slave. Because there is always the question of love. Behind the gift there is the giver; behind the inheritance there is the father-figure. We can illude ourselves, perhaps by bartering our father’s love for the approval of our companions in riotous living (the prodigal son was obviously tempted by others to reject the rules of his father and accept theirs), and we can believe that we will acquire the gift of making ourselves free. But if we break the bond with our father, with the living source of the gift, we are left empty-handed. It’s like cutting down a tree the better to pick the fruit. There will be no more fruit. The possessions of this world should always make for loving relationships. When he came to his senses, the young man missed his father’s house. Salvation is not a matter of removing the evils of this world, but of passing from the slavery of depending on the recognition of man to being a son of God.

In the past, teenagers sought friends of their own age, but the *indispensable approval* was that of adults. There were minor rebellions or changes and the elders of every age have always cried: “how times have changed! who can understand these young people nowadays?” but the expectations of the elders prevailed. Today the expectations of older people are still important; for some young people they are predominant. Yet something has happened which makes it seem that times really have changed. Today more than ever before we might say: Who can understand these young people? But this is not said so often as before, a sure sign that the grown up world is already part of this break with tradition.

The great change was given concrete form by the youth movements that emerged in 1968. Months and months of sit-ins, away from their families, caught up in a heady adventure together with their peers, riding high and being mentioned in newspapers headlines, they effectively shifted the approval that mattered from the old to the young. This self-government of young people, with the flaunted break with so many long-standing customs, especially sexual ones, won them apparent freedom from parents, teachers and priests, and this caused radical changes in many things. Parents had to give a lot of ground in order to get their children back home. From that time on, girls in particular have changed; their conquests have been both positive and negative but they do not have enough critical consciousness to see this.

Later, it became obvious that young people could not find jobs and so some returned home. As their parents had, and have, turned a blind eye to certain things, this means that now many young people live off them for years. But the question of *approval* is still unclear (what do other people expect of young people?); and so other questions of future plans, human love, family responsibilities, etc.. *If peer group approval prevails this can cause great confusion, which is difficult to cope with*, because it can give rise to unpredictable “secret churches”, which may cause problems, both for young people themselves and for society. The outcome may be very positive, but there may also be many wasted lives. Human love is more fragile and there are unbearable burdens of suffering. It is incredible to see the force of *peer approval* in some middle schools, amongst 12-year old boys and, especially, girls. The growing atmosphere of permissiveness sets them off, but at that age how can they possibly cope with strong emotions, sexual relationships, relationships of all sorts, without breaking down? It is essential that they grow up gradually, that they move smoothly from parental *approval* towards social *approval*. In Christian groups there is more likely to be a proper balance, because the Church includes every sort of relationship.

After the political season of ‘68, *peer approval*, together with total promiscuity, increased the autonomy of each group. Before this total promiscuity between boys and girls, young people would organize themselves to do things - politics, sport, art, etc.. Now they just hang around together, they talk together about themselves and about absent members of the group. They play a lot of music - a way of being together without other problems. They might go for a pizza or to a disco but just so as to be together. They seem to be proof against anything; and so they are, so long as the group is in harmony and relations within it are good. *When he is a success within his group, a young person feels euphoria, freedom, trust*; like a man who is successful at work. Your peers do not require any special talents, they accept you as you are, they don’t criticize, while adults are always criticizing, they are never satisfied, they check on your homework, your school results, your shortcomings and your responsibilities.

I am well aware that there are many exceptions, perhaps among the readers of these words. But we must always consider the overall situation, which is that more and more young people do nothing but hang around together. Sandro Onofrio, a writer and teacher who died recently, in a posthumously published book, *Class Register*, describes his students in a school on the outskirts of Rome. This was occasioned by a theater matinee when the students “didn’t move a muscle from start to finish.” He remembers his own school days when after less than an hour at the theater the children all ran wild, for the simple reason that little boys can’t stay still for more than an hour. “The same old story - but there is something new, something different [...]. They were silent, they didn’t move, just as they are in class. And yet their minds are completely absent. My classmates could create havoc in the classroom with games of football played with a ball of paper, but they would also sit open-mouthed for a whole hour listening to our Italian teacher read a story. My students mostly sit with their elbows propped on the desk, their heads on their hands, their eyes half shut, from 9 till 1. Indifferent, apathetic, indolent. And they are not so very different outside school. They have no interests, no passions, not even the burning

passions typical of adolescents.” (p. 69). The problem is partly due to the fact that in the outer suburbs young people are more likely to live entirely in and for the group, and when relationships between group members break down the individual is left with a deeply tragic sense of emptiness and uncertainty.

Today the greatest problem that can arise among young people is this *excessive trust in the group and the resulting crisis when these fragile bonds break down*. So then they look for security at home, from their ever available parents, until they are well over thirty, with a total lack of plans for the future and of faith in themselves. Today these new “churches” have shallow roots and drag great numbers of young people down towards existential failure. According to sociological surveys, about a third lose their generational links (aimless lives, without love, but there is still hope of love being reborn); another third get by, with difficulty. This all goes to show that selfishness our own is much more subtle and deceptive than any of us might imagine. We are in fact coming close to the “region of dissimilitude”, as St Augustine calls it, that is the fundamental disorder brought about by original sin. *If human beings retreat from the fount of divine love they do not renounce infinite love: as they absolutely cannot live without it, they instinctively seek it in others. This is the prison of the heart, because it leaves one in the power of man.*

Enlightened thinking has tried in every way to deny original sin, but it cannot make us happy except through success over others, through power (and certainly not through pure reason). No one can deny the malaise that afflicts the human heart. This malaise, which is only in small part due to external circumstances, divides the hearts of even those who only wish to love and understand each other, such as married couples, parents with their children, or Christians within the church community etc.. If they understood the deepest feelings of their hearts they would avoid so many scenes, so much unpleasantness. But it’s difficult for parents to understand the forces driving their children’s hearts, and vice versa. So for petty reasons we may badly hurt those dearest to us. And things are even worse in less close relationships.

The most subtle form of selfishness is compatible with great heroism and generosity, even unto death. Everyone in the world is, in fact, ready to die for someone else, otherwise their heart would feel that it wasn’t important to anyone and would lead to suicide. A woman who has aborted a second child is capable of dying for the first. Here the greatest apparent generosity coexists with great selfishness. There are fathers who are always tired and uninterested at home but for whom at work no sacrifice is too great. Some young people beat up people of a different race but would risk their lives for their group. Throughout history, all over the world, young men have gone off to war and many have died. Why? Apart from conscious motives, certainly no one can go on living in a country among friends and acquaintances, if he has deserted and let others die in his place. It is always *indispensable approval* that determines life and death.

Where do people find the strength for such sacrifices? Everyone will think that this will be coherent with one’s ideas, but in fact people die for very different ideals. A terrorist who is ready to die for his ideas, would soon behave very differently if he discovered that his own people had betrayed him; and he would change his ideas too! *Behind it all, there is still an unresolved problem of love.*

It is true that today many young people, in rich countries, lead comfortable lives, but we can still find that *they are ready to make great sacrifices if the group requires it*. Just as it is said that young people today are amoral or have a subjective morality. In fact they always follow the strict rules of the group. Just look at their sexual behavior: “if you won’t go all the way, you’re a nun”; “you’re just a scared kid” is what every teenage girl has said to her (and not just by a boy who is trying it on) in a group which is not based on Christian values. They will not tolerate any positive differences, which might create regrets and scruples. Of course, nothing is imposed by force, but the conditioning of the group, stronger even than death, manages to “even down” almost all the members. There is little moral subjectivity, even among older people; there are new conformities. In general, you will find the ten commandments behind the various cultural fronts. But it is also true that the *indispensable approval* conditions morals, even if only as to what gives significant power within the reference group.

It should be remembered that *approval* works in many different ways. Many young people dislike the herd, even they do not escape the need for approval. Many are strongly drawn towards the future, towards the expectations of their elders, towards success. There are very able young people on their way up. Young intellectuals. And there are, especially, groups of young Catholics, full of vitality and future promise. There is every sort of experience. Sometimes the “secret church” seems to be disappearing, but it hides behind social

achievements that a young person cannot ignore. A young person who intends to make a name for himself in the new economy will accept a thousand sacrifices and a code of behavior dictated by the success he so longs for.

Considering extreme cases (in the newspapers everyday), we can reflect on the hidden force of this *indispensable approval* and on how great the problem of love is, even in a seemingly normal case. There was a significant example in Connecticut in 1995 when one day four girls were taken to the ER after attempting suicide. Shortly afterwards, five more arrived. At fifteen, it isn't easy to kill yourself by slashing your veins, and the doctor managed to save them all. Then he asked why they had done something so stupid. Fifteen teenage girls had made a pact: if one of them died, they would all die. One of their number, who was probably depressed, had tried to kill herself; the three who were with her had at once copied her and when the other five heard the news, they followed suit. American psychologists have tried to offer explanations, mostly blaming the restricted world of small-town America. In fact, they weren't really any different from other girls; but one of them with a bit of charisma and leadership had proclaimed their credo, their strength "if we're always together, even in death". If one teenager kills himself, he's certainly depressed; if more than one does, there is almost sure to be a problem of *approval*, in the end a problem of love, which is stronger than physical life, because it takes the place of the fount of divine love in a narcissistic way. This explains the mass suicides of certain sects: they were not fanatics but unfortunate people who had found *approval* in a barbarous sect. And it explains the growing phenomenon of gangs of youths who kill each other. If one person shoots, he must be mad; but if several do, *approval* lies behind it.

It is the lack of an indispensable approval that generates also pathologic impulses such as those who lead apparently normal kids to become schoolmate killers and to transform from time to time a quiet school day in a massacre".

This is also to a large extent the explanation for the spread of drugs among young people: it is in its way a problem of love! It is quite incredible how many "pills" are being pushed nowadays. This explains juvenile crime: if a group of kids are playing in an alley and one of them arrives with a stolen purse and some money, he feels like a god; and the lowliest member of the group can't wait to do the same in order to gain the respect of the group too. *Theft and crime also arise from an unresolved problem of love.* And this is why so many young people, having gone to catechism to prepare for Confirmation, soon give up going to church on Sundays; they are afraid of being mocked by their friends. This also explains the so-called atheism of many young people; if for example they frequent Marxist circles they think they are atheists, because otherwise they wouldn't feel worthy of their companions. The party may leave its members free to follow a religion if they want to, but this means little, given that *the need for approval conditions their thoughts and makes them resistant to other arguments.*

Our analysis is often complicated by the fact that the *indispensable approval* can take various forms. The heart of a young person relies on the freely available *approval* of his parents, along with that of his peers. Meanwhile, his heart readies itself for other forms of *approval* in the future, through work or marriage, and if the premises are good he will enjoy a deep sense of security. If one of these pillars of *approval* should show a crack, he will suffer for it but can still lean upon the others.

Crisis point is reached should two other equally valid forms of *approval* come into direct conflict. Generally, there is no conflict between parental *approval* and that of a boyfriend. But should there be, it is very painful for the girl. Conflict can also arise between a Christian life and a group which mocks religious practices; between ties of friendship and political commitment; between parental *approval* and that of friends that the parents don't like. One day a father asked me to speak to his 16-year old son, who had said that he could understand young people who committed suicide. The boy came to me. "Your father tells me you have problems, but before you tell me about them, tell me what you do on Saturday evenings." "This is the problem," he said. "My friends were so awful that I couldn't stand being with them. I have a few other friends I've played music with, but my father doesn't want me to see them because there are always drugs around in these circles." I was able to say to him: "You must solve this problem for yourself, but if you like I'll give you a hand; give me your word you won't take drugs, not even to try, and I'll talk to your father and make him see that this is a real problem for you." The problem was solved, because the father realized how much his son needed *peer approval*. Generally it is difficult to put ourselves in other people's shoes, simply because we all have different idols.

Idolatry as the reverse of love

Man's worth comes from his bonds, bonds of love or of servitude (apparently free). In Genesis the serpent says to Eve: "Ye shall be as gods" (Genesis 3:5). The temptation is idolatrous, to put oneself in the place of God; but if you look carefully, you should add "god for somebody" - that is, recognition from others. No one thinks of making himself God, but everyone, except saints, wants to be seen as indispensable to someone. We do not wish to be the image of God, but we do need to have someone in our image, and we take great pain and make sacrifices in order to exalt our own image in others.

If the greatest bond is not God, it is clearly transferred onto others and we take great care to achieve what will give us success in their eyes; these achievements can be exaggerated and become idols. The idol is an aspect of life through which I try to gain someone's *approval*: maybe something positive, with relative value, such as work, family, the apostolate; or it may be something bad that those involved can experience with a religious passion. This shows that *no man can really be an atheist: it is always idolatry*, because there is no getting away from many bonds, especially from absolute ones. *The opposite of religion is not atheism but idolatry.*³

Given that all of us, Saints apart, act idolatrously, we should be happy to find ourselves going in a positive direction. But it is necessary to desire conversion, and to seek it, otherwise we remain in a state of mediocrity which can, when necessary, defend itself with sin and ill will. We all know the example of the crowd shouting to Pilate: "Crucify him". They were people like ourselves, ready to follow the Messiah with enthusiasm "Hosanna, hosanna" they had cried just a few days before. But when it became necessary to defend Jesus by standing up to their leaders (who were "stirring up the crowd") rather than risk losing anything, they were ready to condemn an innocent man. And that is how all the leaders of this world, including Hitler and Pol Pot, have always been able to call on lesser leaders and cheering crowds - ordinary people - who were ready to carry out the most wicked of orders.

For the idol, which represents others' approval, people will make any sacrifice, because *indispensable approval* is an immeasurable problem. Heraclitus already saw this when he acutely remarked: "It is difficult to fight against desire because it will buy what it wants at the cost of the soul." Where there is an idol, that is the achievement that guarantees the right image in the eyes of others, that which is small and relative - what others might consider a mere pebble - becomes absolute and as huge as a mountain. For a wife, her husband's being half an hour late is a mountain: he doesn't love me, he thinks only of his work; for the husband this is a mere pebble. If a boy doesn't notice that his girlfriend is wearing a different dress, she takes it as a sign that he doesn't love her, whereas for him it is a mere trifle. We should know that a relationship with a boyfriend/girlfriend is not guaranteed to last, but the teenager who is dumped by his girlfriend thinks that his life is at an end whereas if he leaves her he feels free and she is in despair.

Then there are what we can describe as "all-encompassing idols": an interest in sports, culture, games, supporting a team, computers, etc. which are given an absolute position (the adjective idolatrous indicates an attention which is owed to God or to sacred things rather than to very limited phenomena). Generally this comes about because in a personal victory or in the victory of one's favorite team the heart finds an achievement which is significant in the eyes of others; the same is true of personal goals and possessions which often enrich the person and make him capable of great things. Perhaps those around us will notice that we exaggerate, but without realizing that they too probably have equally strong desires and equally limited contexts. It is easy to see when others exaggerate, without realizing the origins of this. A powerful form of idolatry which is common among young people is "the look". From the outside, exaggeration is apparent; yet they can spend huge sums on dressing to follow the group or the fashion. This difference in values often caused arguments within the family or within a group of friends. If the craze is for positive or harmless things, like following a team or playing games or, even more so, for acquiring things like computers, those around us should be patient and we in turn should be able to laugh at ourselves a little, and then no real harm is done.

³ In fact idolatry is present in everybody, in that we need salvation. But some atheists even deny God rationally by putting forward other absolute values. Feuerbach, for example, who persuaded Marx and millions of others that God is a projection of man who suffers to create a perfect image of himself; this does not in fact remove the problem of the absolute and of God, it only shifts onto generic man, who does not exist, who will one day re-acquire his due perfection, leaving real men, who do exist, without any real hope, in exchange for hope founded on nothing. All the most injured atheists have always committed the error of shifting the absolute onto parts of the real.

The conditioning of reason

Each of us thinks he's always reasonable and perhaps this is so, but not where *existential approval* reigns. There, we generally reason more with our hearts than with our heads. Reason is always able to examine objective truth, especially in areas where the problem of *approval* does not arise, but it must pay a high price to the need for recognition. It is enough to observe a family quarrel to see that good sense flies out of the window, as does common sense. The heart forces the head to think of what will give a bit of significant power, even if this is generally an unconscious process. Thus *we can see people who are convinced of the most diverse things*: believers and non-believers, of the left and of the right, with far out slang and fashions; some whom you would describe as serious types, others on the fringes of society. Young people who study late into the night (because the *approval* they seek comes from academic success) and others, perhaps their brothers or sisters, who think of nothing but music or clothes, because the disco is where they seek *approval*. Parents distinguish between "good" and "bad" children but the problem is really still the same although the solution each has found may be different. *Everyone who finds success in his "secret church" is sure he is right and that he knows better than other people*. If a thief brings off a big robbery, this gives him standing in the eyes of his fellow thieves, his heart tells him he is the greatest philosopher in the world, the one who understands life better than anyone else. And so we have seen people give their life for the most varied ideas, for revolutions or for terrorism, for bravado or for valid causes.

This creates difficulties in communicating with young people, even for those with years of experience in dealing with such problems because the conditioning of the reference group gets in the way: not just the individual's specific group of friends (which can vary a lot) but also the advisor's own group; he too is conditioned. If a young person feels misunderstood, as frequently happens, he will take refuge in the certainty of the group, which gives the impression that outsiders don't understand. Dialogue between generations is easier when values are shared, as can be seen in active church circles.

If Nietzsche was right about one thing, it was that behind every philosophy there lies the philosopher's desire for power. If properly understood, this insight is profoundly true: the need for recognition within a "secret church" leads to using one's head to achieve success amongst those who must recognize one. Even the Enlightenment thinkers have always been part of a "secret church", that of the Jacobins, the Kantians, the Hegelians, the liberals, etc. right up to our own times. No one can live the Enlightenment dogma "trust only in your reason" because no one looks for abstract truth, but for happiness, and *happiness is experienced only if one is well received*. Kant has never made anyone happy, except for those who have written books about him, and so achieved a certain success. Writing books is one of the forms of idolatry most certain to make one feel recognized by others. And as long as the books meet with some success, the author is sure he speaks the truth. Success exalts him, makes him feel free, "happy" (this is really only satisfied pride), and he thinks that this "happiness" is due to the truth of what he has written. In reality, it is due almost entirely to his success.

Given that the formal play of ideas is infinite (just as with seven notes we can make millions of songs, with just a few ideas we can build an inordinate number of theories), it is very easy to believe that one knows more than others and to have others approve this idea, so illuding the originator as to the goodness or value of his idea. *Approval* gives enormous value to what it rests on and makes us quite uninterested in other ideas or theories that may be much more valid. And thus are created "islands of thought", with a small number of followers (this is today's world of conferences on absolutely anything) who wonder at how everyone else can be so obtuse as not to be interested in what they think or write.

Have you ever considered the fact that there have been thousands of philosophical or sapiential recipes for happiness, for interpreting the world, and they have all turned out to be extremely inadequate? Let us repeat: *everyone thinks he reasons correctly and is equally convinced that many others reason wrongly*. Can you suppose that someone on the political right will allow himself to be persuaded by the reasoning of someone on the left, or vice versa?

If we look carefully, we will see that so many of the battles between secularists and Catholics, between right and left, between innovation and tradition, are real battles of religion, full of absolutes, where there is an apriori assumption of being in the right, and this *prejudice* is not open to discussion; this is true of both sides, although it does not mean they are both equally right. *The heart will not give way on its fundamental prejudices, otherwise it would have to leave its "secret church" and so lose approval*. This is why it so difficult to build together a really democratic society, based on a culture worthy of man, which we can all explore together. Our

hope is that if we recognize our own conditioning, we might become more understanding toward others, more democratic!

Even Christians run the risk of belonging to a concrete church purely in order to have *existential approval*, using reason in function of their belonging. But we shall return to this after clarifying some other important points.

One possible reaction on reading these pages might be to decide not to belong to any group, and to think for oneself. But this is not possible, as should be understood from the arguments offered. And it would not even be a good thing, because a strong bond of love is part of God's design for man. The problem consists in being aware of the existence of a strong bond which conditions our way of thinking. If the bond has valid content, we should thank God for this. Otherwise, problems and even tragedies arise, and it will be easier to seek conversion, by frequenting other company.

Certainly, *ideas and choices are not all equivalent to each other, and this sets a great cultural task for Christians, together with all other men of good will, to help young people make socially valid choices and avoid great suffering.* We shall see that only Jesus Christ has the word of eternal life. In Him is found the Truth of Love, that is the love that sets us free, as Jesus himself says. *He who resolves the problem of the heart will also find freedom from conditioning, by the objective use of reason. The truth of love also brings love of truth.* The great tradition of Catholic rationality (no one has ever defended reason as the Catholic tradition has) has continuity, has always been able to recover common sense, which is not ordinary feelings, or good sense, but innate rationality, common and universal, and which allows us to get on with people of all races and traditions, and is able to provide objective certainties, as John Paul II said recently in the Encyclical *Fides et Ratio*. But even more, the Christian regains objective reason in the lucid atmosphere of the Revelation. *Just as it is misleading to think that we are among those who always use reason objectively, it is equally harmful to think that there is no objective difference between good and evil, between truth and falsehood.* This is the problem of the quest for meaning, which should go together with the quest for truth that underlies it, for oneself and for others. He who is successful does not have doubts as to the meaning of life, but he may be far from the path of truth. Even among Christians it is easy to place too much emphasis on the quest for meaning within the community (the living community fills life with meaning and significance), and to neglect objective truth. It is of course love that provides meaning, but this is valid only if it is true love, according to divine plan.

What we have said so far will help us to understand that it is difficult to distinguish good people from bad, and we must never judge people. The problem of good and evil is different; today we are too inclined to confuse not judging others with the freedom of everyone to give his own interpretation to good and evil. In fact, the objective problem of truth, of good and evil, of morality, is still of utmost importance, for the good of us all. If, out of a need for *approval*, I do good, others benefit from it. If, for the same deep and unconscious reason, I am prompted to do evil (without of course recognizing it as such), others will be hurt. For a Christian it is clear that two things must be borne in mind: the conditioning of original sin, which we see in the problem of *fundamental approval*, and personal responsibility towards others, as established by the divine commandments, which are inscribed in the human heart, but which are also divinely revealed and present in the individual conscience, in the best social or religious traditions and, in a more explicit and harmonious way, in the Church. These considerations on good and evil as objective values are of the utmost importance, although we cannot develop the subject here where the aim is to see how we are to be saved.

Real or presumed freedom

The prevailing culture manages to be fairly confused about freedom. Our analysis will show that *freedom is always in the debt of love.* In reality, being free does not mean being able to choose what you want. There is of course this aspect, which is always been called "freedom of will"; the classic authors, however, recognize this as the lesser part of freedom, an instrumental and ephemeral part. It is the lesser part because real human choices destroy the possibility of choosing. A young man is free to choose the girl he will marry, and vice versa, but this is a fleeting moment. He will be really free, for all his life, if he has chosen well. True freedom is found in a happy life. In Heaven, there will be no more choices, but we will be completely free. When someone is happy, he feels free. Were he to choose again, he would make the same choices: this is freedom! You can be free even in prison, if you have been imprisoned for a noble cause.

But happiness stems from love and this brings us back to our basic conditioning, with its illusions. Freedom holds many illusions. From what we have said, it is clear that if we are to be happy, we must be well received by others, we must affirm our image before others. We are ready for great sacrifices in order to obtain this recognition, sacrifices apparently freely made. In fact, we've said that in order to achieve the success that gives meaning to our lives in the eyes of others we are ready for anything and even death. *So long as we have power over others, or can hope to have it at any cost, we feel profoundly free.* It is hard to realize that this is a problem of love. The son who invokes freedom to his parents is in fact bound by the laws of others but he seeks these laws freely and submits to them freely because only in this way can he obtain the recognition of his friends.

Saint Augustine distinguished between *libertas minor* (freedom of choice) and *libertas maior* (for he who has chosen well). But he concluded his study of good by saying: *libertas est caritatis* - freedom is of love. Our analysis explains this problem in depth and throws light on the so-called proclamations of freedom of a world that knows cruel or subtle forms of servitude. It is alas frequent among young people that we find not freedom but the herd instinct, not personality but conformity. True freedom is linked to true love, of friendship, of betrothal, of the church. Together with one's "surname" one needs to give one's "name"; we need to hold on to the personal freedom of not doing together with others what we would not do by ourselves. *The idea of personality* in the conformity of so many groups of young people is linked to an outstanding personal aspect which distinguishes each one from the uniformity of the group: that girl is plain and fat, but she's nice and is good at telling jokes. That one is the prettiest. Yet another is embarked on a promising career, etc.. So each of them feels they are not just sheep. However, there is a lot of "bleating in chorus" if you consider the behavior of young people in various parts of the world. There is a great sameness. It has been called "the republic of the young". Having different talents is not the same as having a real personality, because important decisions are still left to the group. And if a petty leader suggests throwing stones from motorway bridges, there is the risk that the rest will follow, so as not to forfeit *approval*. This recalls a rather sad definition of conformity, which is however true of many young people: "all the same and all stupid". This is not intended as a generalization, however; many young people are more free. A group can however easily feel they are "alternative" when they are in fact all in the same boat.

The real problem of love lies in the quality of the bonds of love. Freedom is real relationships, rather than a spiritual gift. We can choose because it would not be given without this personal responsibility; but only if we choose the bond with man together with the bond with God will there be true freedom. *Since Christ, freedom is radical*, as we shall see. *But true radicalness must come from the love brought to us by Christ.* This is why St Paul can say: "Christ hath made us free" (Galatians 5:1) or "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty" (2 Corinthians 3:17). The Israelites were a people born from freedom; God delivered them from the yoke of Egypt; but he freed them for a Covenant, for a bond of new love, to be a new people. And even more so than in the case of Israel, freedom is innate to Christians; Christ, as we shall see, came to deliver us from the heavy yoke that bound our hearts and of which we are about to speak; but He delivered us for a new and eternal Covenant, for a limitless bond of love, with God and with men.

The greatest servitude

In the past, in the village community, the significant ties were recognized by everyone. Everyone had his own niche in the extended family of the country village. If a barn caught fire, the whole village rallied round to help. If someone died, everyone prayed and gathered in the dead person's house and then at the funeral. Everyone took part in preparing for and celebrating festivals.

Today we live in a secular society where not everyone recognizes the same values. Significant ties take many, often informal and unfamiliar forms. A group of teenagers might be influenced by those who fish any old idea out of the melting pot of the prevailing culture: this will become their group credo, with varying emphasis, varying awareness. The culture that is around us directly influences the group rather than the individual. If illegal immigrants landing on the Italian coasts are featured in TV newscasts, a Girl Scout will be moved to acts of solidarity; a naziskin will be moved by racist feelings. The tragedy is that the latter's ideas are conditioned purely by chance encounters with other boys, which turned into a new sort of group solidarity.

This same boy (with some exceptions, due to other types of conditioning - family, tradition, religion, which fortunately still exist and may prevail) may end up thinking in a certain way simply because he has met up with a certain group. This is why young people are so unlikely to listen to good advice that doesn't come from the

group. Not for nothing, is it said that a young person is mature when he can listen to good advice even if it comes from his parents. Centuries of hard-won civilization can be lost in just a few days by a group of young people with no roots (and no plans for the future! only those who have roots, who have a good past, can plan for the future). This may be real decadence.⁴

If the need for *indispensable approval* leads to membership of a negative group, great and often irreparable damage is done, because it is not easy to break away by force of reason. If a Mafioso wants to leave his clan, he loses his “fatherland”, his “family”, his “church”. And this is the tragedy for those who turn state’s evidence and is why the Mafia law of silence has been maintained for decades. The heart does not allow new ideas if it does not first feel itself received into another existential community, and this is particularly true for young people. Thus we can understand that only strong and vital communities of faith can attract people towards the real salvation that is Christ.

Among adults, *indispensable approval* depends on a “strong” social group around them, but where the idols they refer to, the things that guarantee the esteem of others and which become absolutes, thus displacing the need for God’s love, are almost always the classic ones: work for men, husband and children for women. Today women have acquired a very different image, but are susceptible to less easily managed idolatries, with the result that the family and engagement to marry have become very precarious. According to the sentence passed on Adam and Eve, men and women feel prized by others if they become indispensable to somebody, through work (men) and through being loved and bearing children (women). And we shouldn’t smile at the mention of Adam and Eve because, if you think about it, here is the greatest distillation of Hebrew wisdom, divinely inspired, on a series of human problems which give rise to a real meta-history, - a sort of metaphysics of history - which we cannot pause to examine here. On this basis, when a man has a family which depends on the fruit of his labors, thus making him indispensable, and his work goes well, he feels at peace with the world (it is easy to see that for a man success at work is his life, failure is worse than death). His idol is intact and his heart feels recognized and respected. If his health holds up and his wife doesn’t throw him out (this is becoming increasingly common and really destroys a man’s life) he may live for many years without feeling any need for salvation. The same is true for a woman if she feels loved by her man (with all the problems that we cannot go into here⁵), if her children grow up healthy, if she has the satisfaction of work, of friendship, if her health is good and she has a little money. In these circumstances, she would probably laugh if you told her she needed to be saved. *But brief experience of hard times is enough to show up the profound wretchedness of the man without a living faith.*

Certainties based only on human approval are precarious; they are all destined to end, if only with death; and above all, they depend on the will of others (anyway, in the case of human approval we cannot speak of true happiness but only of satisfaction or security). It is not difficult to reflect on the precariousness of a sense of security which depends on the will of others or on chance. It is true that each of us, with the help of family, school or friends, tries to build sufficiently solid bases that will ensure the success necessary to make us feel fulfilled in the eyes of others. It is true that we instinctively seek the success that is close at hand, without getting involved in risky ventures that can more easily lead to failure, and thus to feeling excluded and forgotten by others. But it is also true that *nothing that can guarantee our existential image in the eyes of others depends on ourselves alone*. Everyone should visit a hospice or an old folks home, at least once in his life: it would help to make us realize what may await us. Only real love resolves the question of the whole of life and also of death. When success is over, we are left dim-witted, empty, despairing. Only the more gifted and perhaps more fortunate few can pursue new goals right to the end of their lives. This doesn’t mean that they learn how to love.

4 As an acute observer said, “decadence is like fleas in a lion’s pelt; they get worked up among themselves and say: what on earth is the point of a lion?” Young people, who have achieved great dignity through the growth of the monogamous, indissoluble family, in a human love that has a divine dimension, say to each other “what’s the point of getting married in church?”; they remove God from their love relationships without realizing that they are destroying themselves.

5 Those who would like a deeper understanding of human love amongst young people and in the family, with the problems posed for human love by various types of idolatrous conditioning, in order to give themselves a better chance of a successful marriage, can read U. Borghello, *Le crisi dell’amore. Prevenire e curare i disagi familiari*, Edizioni Ares, Milan, 2000².

In fact, everyone has their hidden insecurities, we never find anyone who is perfectly sure of himself. Even the most dignified and haughty people clearly lack self-confidence: why should a man be aggressive if not to prove something to others? For many people, their last refuge is anger, almost as if to protest that they have a right to something better from their fellow men, or from that God that they leave to one side. When the source of frustration is other people, one can feel animated by a desire for revenge, which is the hope of showing others (and here we return to the point, although usually we don't even see it like this) that we can make them pay for what they have done to us, but it is clear that this is not a good way of life. Here we glimpse an explanation of the devil: an angel in need of infinite love who lives a tragic surrogate of this love, by trying sadistically to subjugate mankind.

If things are so, it is easy to imagine the abyss of deceit and falsehood that is all around us. Oriental masters who come to the West and see the most idolatrous society that has ever existed on earth say: "And those are the people the Messiah saved?" We pay them millions so that they will grant us a little peace, with their (lotus-flower) exercises, their yoga and their transcendental meditation which should lead to inner emptiness, because this is how their method works (in reality, for many of them too the secret mechanism is still the *approval* of the group that recognizes them). In the nineteenth century, which was no worse than our own as regards idolatrous deception, Tolstoy could say: "Men die of thirst two feet from a spring, without daring to approach it. We only need to have faith in divine teachings; if all of us who are thirsty go to the spring, we will discover the perfidy of our leaders and the childishness of our sufferings. Only then will we know how close salvation is. Thus would be dispelled the terrible falsehood in which the world flounders." Deceit and falsehood are the problem, especially for young people. We must realize, as Einstein said, that our culture has brought us to the highest perfection of the means and the greatest confusion of the ends.

I must make it clear that I am not using these arguments to persuade of the necessity of faith. Faith is not for warding off the hard knocks of life, but for a Love which is life. And in any case only those who have Life, who are genuinely in love, can face up to any vicissitude that life can offer with a "redeemed" heart, as we shall see in the next chapter.

Now we understand more clearly that *our greatest servitude consists in depending on the opinion and will of men*. We live on the edge of the abyss; the heart of each of us is conditioned by fear of failure, of not existing for others. Just think of what happens when we make a bad mistake: we are agitated, we look for an alibi and all sorts of excuses. And perhaps it is something we have completely forgotten a few hours later. But if the mistake is more serious we feel anguish. If three young people are killed in a car accident and one who wasn't driving survives, this latter will grieve for his dead friends but will continue to live a happy life; if the only survivor is the driver, his life will change, he will be overwhelmed by feelings of guilt, by anguish, by feeling himself accused by the parents of his dead friends.

Depending on the will of others for survival prevents real love, real dignity. A major triumph can give the impression of a wildly successful life, but it doesn't last long and costs us dear; sooner or later we will end up back in mediocrity, generally in rage and anguish.

It isn't even enough to do good to others, in order to guarantee the authenticity and beauty of our own life. Mother Theresa of Calcutta entered our hearts not because she tended the poor (there are many thousands of voluntary workers who help the needy), but because they loved her! Because the dying in the streets of Calcutta, despised by everyone, for her were full of dignity, just like Jesus Christ. If one of us should come down in the world in the eyes of other men and should meet a Mother Theresa of Calcutta, he would feel "saved" in his heart, fully respected not only in his illness but also in his human frailty. The world needs these saints who make themselves the mediators of the salvation of Christ. We can be optimistic. Christ came to save the world, and the more empty it is of values, the more space there is for his gift of innocent, redeeming love. These "precious jewels" are more common today than in the past, especially among women, in families, and in the Church. But we must understand the existential, everyday aspect of our "servitude" in order to see that Christian salvation is absolutely necessary.

Saint Paul wrote to the Romans: "For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abbà, Father" (Romans 8:15); this gift of redemption, that of divine filiality, makes us feel loved, intimately recognized, with the same life as God - divinized! - from on high,

by the Father. He who has a Father has a guaranteed fount of love, he has a “strong” bond that does not depend on others and on the fear that these others may withdraw love. The spirit of the slave, according to Saint Paul, is that which depends on success - without despising honest success, the good we can do, the talents that God has given us. But we must guard against depending only on others. God wants fraternal love; but it will not be real fraternal love if we do not recognize ourselves as sons of God: “He that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad” (Matthew 12:30).

CHAPTER 2

WHY JESUS IS THE ONLY SAVIOR OF THE WORLD

Many young people who have followed me this far, attracted by an approach that is new but which they can recognize, will now find themselves faced with the answers of faith. These answers will seem very appropriate if the root of human problems has been grasped, but they require an opening up to the supernatural gift, to grace. The language too will change, and will require a minimum of familiarity with the gospel, or at least a willingness to accept someone who can help them appreciate such language.

And there is another reason for requiring a bit of effort from those who are capable of it. I was in a rather poor suburb, with young people hanging around everywhere. My first reaction to the thought of addressing them with the ideas in this book was self-irony, but also great pain. Ignorance and the lack of will to emerge from it become an apparently insuperable wall, an obstacle to any intellectual, moral, social or professional redemption. But I could see very clearly that everything stems from *peer approval*. And there came to my mind John Paul II's words to young people, when he said that they have a special grace for the good of society. We adults can talk, teach, and preach, but it is the comment of one's peers that is law. Only other young people who are ready to explore and to live a constructive form of solidarity, which might attract those who will never rescue themselves from a group where ignorance is something to boast off (and this also applies to a group that pursues the refined pleasures of high society) will be able to open for these latter the path of hope. But this will require effort, generosity and cultural depth. It will require an "extra-effort" for the soul, in the shape of sapiential and moral growth, which today's culture does not encourage but which must always accompany any sort of instrumental growth, any sort of material progress, because otherwise these advances become the occasion for even more potent forms of idolatry.

Let us turn to the title of this chapter. If the reader already has a faith which is lived in Christ, as a true man and a true God, he will probably think it unnecessary for us to demonstrate that He is the true and only savior of the world. To start with, someone who has faith will think that the difference between Christ and Confucius, Buddha, Mahomet, etc. is the very fact that the latter are not God, and so are among the men who must be saved. For those who have faith, authority lies in Peter's very clear words after Pentecost: "Neither is there a salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:2). In his message to young people for the 2000 Day of Youth, John Paul II writes: "What marks out the Christian faith from other religions is the certainty that the man Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God, the Word made flesh, the second person of the Trinity come into the world. This is the 'glorious belief of the Church right from the beginning'".

But it is clear that today many people do not have faith in the Word made flesh and are indifferent to the assertion that Jesus is the only savior. But everyone can reflect on the roots of our servitude and on the need for salvation, as we tried to do in the first chapter. On this basis it is easier to understand that only Jesus is the bearer of an innocent and therefore redeeming love. Faith is still required to believe that Jesus is the Word made flesh, and to live divine filiation and a life inspired by the Holy Trinity. This understanding, however, will make it easier to desire and to ask for the gift of faith.

Another premise. When we think of eternal salvation, which is utterly crucial, we should remember the teachings of Vatican Council 2: "Those who through no fault of their own are ignorant of the Gospel of Christ and his Church, but who sincerely seek God, and under the influence of grace try to carry out the will of God made known to them by the dictates of conscience, they may obtain salvation" (Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, 16). But such salvation through ignorance, which God makes possible thanks to His mercy, which tries to save everyone, still means that one loses the best part of earthly life, that is, the personal encounter with Jesus of Nazareth and the opportunity to learn to really love others. And yet it is true that many people are Catholics more in name than in fact, and that many non-Christians can be more upright than them, but still the marvelous encounter with Christ can happen only within the Church.

The revelation of God-Love

To the man who is sick for love the God of love immediately announces salvation. He immediately sows the seed of hope, even if it will take a long time for this new and unprecedented gift to bear fruit. As St Augustine points out, from the first word to the last the Holy Scriptures speak of nothing but the love of the Father for man. The Old Testament reveals many flashes of divine mercy. However, there is still no real contact with the *ontological* gift (that is, with a real bond and not just a benevolent intention) of divine love. The relationship is still basically sacral, through institutions and the Law, unable to defeat idolatry, because still tied to the “tribe” of Israel, to a specific people who set themselves apart from others.

Christianity as the revelation of God-Love. The core message is: “God is Love” and in this message - with the real gift that comes with it - there is salvation from all evil and the elevation from the desire for happiness to the blessedness of the trinitary communion. “No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him” (John 1:18). Angels cannot communicate with men, or at least not in a way that men can clearly understand: man requires that everything should pass through his senses in order to achieve spiritual knowledge. This, as we can see from the words quoted, is why the Son was incarnated, to speak to us in human terms, through words and deeds (as far as the cross!), of the love of the Father and of the plan by the Holy Trinity to found a new covenant with us, in shared communion with Him (communion in the name of the Holy Trinity is the archetype of significant communion, the true and eternal fount of the *indispensable approval*).

Jesus who died and rose again enters into living communion with us through the work of the Holy Spirit, whom “the world cannot receive because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him for he dwelleth with you and shall be in you”. But Jesus goes on: “I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you. Yet a little while, and the world seeth me no more; but ye see me: because I live, ye shall live also” (John 14:17-19). There is a clear parallel between the world that does not know the Holy Spirit and does not see Jesus on the one hand, and on the other the true disciples of Christ who know the Spirit and see Jesus present for ever among us and in us. Christianity is not the teachings of a master who died a holy death, nor a moral code like the Koran. It is a present Christ, the Friend who dies for me, the only Redeemer with his innocent love which gushes from the inexhaustible fount of the Trinity, filling my needy heart to overflowing with a love which I seek in everything I do in life. We become “consorts”, with true spousal love. This encounter with the truth, which is Christ himself, happens in no other religion and makes Christianity a new life, in love.

Jesus says that only the Holy Spirit can convince the world of sin (cf John 16:8). Usually our conscience manages to convince us about sins in the plural, about transgressions. We don’t need the Holy Spirit to be convinced that stealing is not right. But sin in the singular, the prison of the heart, is revealed only by the warmth and light of the Holy Spirit. Until we really see how narcissistic and selfish our heart is we can never understand the nature of salvation. In fact, these two sorts of knowledge go together. And so we are convinced of sin to the same extent as we discover the immensity of the love that God, in Christ, has for us. So there is no risk of being pessimistic, discouraged or too severe with others.

We speak of “spousal” love and the “ontological” gift. Let us try to explain. Spousal means that strong bond that we all need: sharing our lives with others. We shall see that this can happen in a redeeming way, with true freedom, only in the Church. We speak of the ontological gift in order to distinguish redeeming love, which creates a true bond between us and God, through our being, from the many interpretations there can be of love - on a sentimental or spiritual level, or as a matter of esteem. Loving children is one thing, having one is another; loving the poor and helping them when one can is one thing, but sharing their lot is quite another (espousal). When Saint Paul says: “And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us” (Romans 5:5), he is not speaking of a God who regards us benevolently from on high and offers us some favors: he is speaking of a love *poured* into our hearts, of the gift of the Holy Spirit, third member of the Holy Trinity, who has been *given* to us.

We are faced with the ontological gift, in being, which largely corresponds to *sacramental life*. Many of us often do not understand the value of the sacraments instituted by Jesus Christ. It is fundamental to realize that this is something extremely important for salvation in the faith. Jesus himself, at the height of his revelation, in his last words at the Last Supper, as recounted by St John, says: “And I have declared unto them Thy name, and will declare it: that the love wherewith Thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them” (John 17:26). This is

the great motif for the Word becoming flesh and dying for us, showing in words and deeds his plans of having us always in communion in the name of the Holy Trinity. In these words we see the intra-Trinity bond between the Father and the Son - the Son, Jesus, wants there to be the same bond between us and the Father and also between us and Him. This is why John Paul II said, years ago, that the devil doesn't mind us believing in the God of creation or in the Omnipotent God. It is the Covenant he will attack. In other words, if we believe that God created the world, and judges the good and the bad, this does not lead us to discover the love that God has for us - there will always be a little place somewhere among the good, perhaps in a corner, and we go on living in idolatry. This trick works even better with the Omnipotent God, who is always the most popular. We go to Him to ask favors, thinking of ourselves and not of His love for us. But the devil attacks the God of the Covenant, the God who loves the sinner and shows him his mercy, and establishes a new and eternal pact by which He himself engages to give his whole life to the egoist, in a true bond which makes us His sons, with the life of the Word made flesh. One will not know what Christianity is unless one is well aware of the Covenant.

At the Last Supper, Jesus opened his heart in a way that is clear from the text, and said: "As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you: continue ye in my love. If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in His love. These things have I spoken unto you, and that your joy may be full. This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you" (John 15:9-12). In *Il mistero della carità*, J.M. Perrin comments: "There is everything in these words: the limitless love of God, which gives entrance to His truth and the magnificent demands and the reality of our vocation. He who understands these words will know all there is to know about Christianity, he who savors them will know the sweetness of the heart of God, he who lives them will be a faithful disciple of Christ".

It is true that in the face of man's greatest problem, salvation lies in being able to believe these words. *Full joy* is only that of heaven, of Paradise; yet Jesus has promised it to us here on earth. This incontainable joy is part of "abiding" in the love that Jesus has for each of us.⁶ But, inasmuch as we are entrapped in idolatry, these words do not become conscious life in us, and redeeming love, even in the real presence of the sacraments, remains "dormant", so to speak (*caritas remissa*), inactive at a conscious level therefore at the level of real life; talking about it is still mere theory, cold catechizing. *We must distinguish between the mind, which can abstract, and the spirit, which is life.* A real prayer is needed if the Scripture is to become the life that involves the whole person, physical aspect included.

"As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you" - a life of contemplation will not suffice to penetrate the richness and the profundity of the love the Father has for the Son and yet, "so" are we too loved. In that "as" and that "so" lies not only the radical and definitive solution to the sin that weighs on every heart, there is also the gift of the love "which passeth knowledge" (Ephesians 3:19) and gives us the bonds and the riches of a Trinity-inspired life. "How" does the Father love the Son? In a limited way perhaps? Or momentarily? Perhaps he has a thousand sons and loves them all without distinction? No, He has an only Son. And "so", in the same way, exclusively and with all the divine "force", each of us is always loved. God's love for us is in the singular, original for each one of us. This is the great difference compared to the "God of the tribe", who protects the group, in idolatry, even when the content of this is positive.

A Christian will probably start from the first commandment: "Love God with all your heart". But this can ruin his spiritual life and leave it sterile! It is like starting from a trunk that has no roots. The commandment requires the gift that precedes and sustains it. Why should I love God? Because He loves me first. If I were to start from my love for God, my love would be small, because my heart is small, even when I love with all my heart. Whereas *if I start from his love I enter into the ocean of mercy; I understand that his love is infinite even*

⁶ Incidentally, we can note that no man can say, nor even imagine, these words of Jesus, especially a Jew (there are however many things that Christ said that no wise man could say). No saint nor any wise man in all the world has even remotely considered offering himself as the salvation of others. And yet as the text says, these words are the closest to the needs of the human heart: they correspond perfectly to what is most sought after, it is life that is at stake. Now, if I eat an exotic fruit and see that it has a stalk, I can deduce that it has grown on a tree. As this is not a photo or a word, but a fruit which assuages my hunger, I have no doubts as to its provenance, even if I have no idea of what the tree may be like. *If here we find ourselves faced with the words that can nourish me and be my salvation and I know that no man can speak these words, I have a very strong "proof" of the existence of God and the divinity of Christ.*

when I err, even for a sinner like me. I understand that God cannot love another, however saintly, any more than he loves me, with all my selfish faults. And this brings the liberating joy of knowing oneself to be loved.

When Jesus, who came to reveal the Father's love, speaks directly of how the Father loves us, He puts great emphasis into his words. To Nicodemus he says: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son" (John 3:16). This "so loved" is a passionate way of speaking. In the same way, at the last supper: "For the Father himself loveth you" (John 16:27). He gives an amazing example: "The very hairs of your head are all numbered" - no mother can say this.

Man needs love: "He that loveth not his brother abideth in death" (I John 3:14) - his great servitude is that he does not transcend the ego to grasp the fount of love. If he seeks this fount within himself, in his own works or in others, he will be deeply disappointed, slave to a need he cannot satisfy - his love will remain in chains. For this very reason, much of our salvation and all the work of evangelization depend on the essential conviction that God loves us. The Good News, the word that saves, is the word that makes us aware of being "beloved of God" (Romans 1:7). Hence, John Paul II can say, in his apostolic exhortation *Christifideles laici*: "Man is beloved by God. And this is the simple and overwhelming announcement for which the Church is in man's debt. The word and the life of each Christian can and must make this announcement resound: God loves you, Christ came for you, for you Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life (John 14:6)" (no. 34). If the Church cannot somehow put me in touch with the ontological gift of true love, it fails in its mission. John Paul II adds that "this announcement holds the new evangelization that old Europe and the whole world are waiting for." If the Gospel is Good News, if it is news, it is so only inasmuch as it reveals the God-Love. Too many Christians, as we have seen, still live "under the law" - they pursue God-protected success. *But the New Testament has brought about the real revolution: it is possible to live on love.* And so it requires us only to learn to love others, because Love has been revealed and given to us. It is no longer just the protection offered by strong social relationships, but love for man, even for the enemy, in the Kingdom of Christ.

Only the Holy Spirit can 'convince' us of this love. St Thomas says: "The Holy Spirit itself is the New Testament, it brings about love in us, the fullness of the laws" (Comment on the Epistle to the Hebrews, 8:10). It is the New Law, the law written in the heart, as promised by the prophets; the law that is perfectly wed to freedom, because it is dictated only by love given.⁷

For better understanding the passion of Jesus⁸

There is an aspect of Christ's love for us which is not always well brought out. Only if we understand what sort of evil afflicts us, if we understand that our hearts absolutely cannot live without feeling profoundly recognized by others, can we know better the nature of Jesus' redeeming death. Generally we stop at the agony of the crucifixion - tremendous agony, because crucifixion does not damage any vital organs and one actually dies of the terrible pain. But in the face of the atrocities that we see on our TV screens daily, in the face of so many unjust deaths, people today are less affected by the idea of dying on the cross. When we consider Jesus' anguish in Gethsemane, and his sweating blood (which can be explained only by acute fear, which breaks the capillaries) we think of the fear that can humanly be felt in the face of being condemned to such a horrible death.

⁷ In order to understand properly what is meant by the law written in the heart it is necessary to understand how the idol teaches the heart and makes it "free" to do whatever is necessary to achieve success. A girl in love is "taught", there is no need to bid her to do whatever is necessary for her betrothal. A man in relation to his work, with the sacrifices and meticulous attention needed, is "taught". The same is true of a mother who bears a child. She will do so many things, even sacrifice herself, quite freely and without being bidden. Peer groups at once "train" young people, who very soon know how to behave according to the symbolic code of the group. And what happens with idols with a positive content also happens with perverted idols, which explains the harshness of so many men, the cruelty of war, the ruthlessness of criminals. If we fully understand this, we glimpse by contrast the splendor of a true Christian life, which sets us free and "trains" us to true love, for the good of all. Not for nothing does the most important prophecy of the Old Testament, which promises a New Covenant, say: "I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbor, and every man his brother (...) for they all shall know me" (Jeremiah 31:33-34). Jesus takes up this prophecy: "It is written by the prophets: 'And all shall be taught by God'". The Holy Ghost "teaches" and moves freely to love.

⁸ This section is rather newer than the usual catechism, but it is of great relevance in order to understand the redeeming response of Christ to the abyss of human malaise.

And yet, many of the martyrs who died on the cross, sang as they died. It cannot have been the prospect of death in itself, however painful, that made Jesus more faint-hearted than many martyrs. What most people fail to grasp is the significance of crucifixion in Hebrew theology at that time. In spite of the *Book of Job*, at the time of Jesus the prevailing theology saw divine punishment for known or unknown sins behind all misfortune or suffering. Thus lepers were considered sinners and were cast out, made to live outside towns and villages (this was also a healthy requirement, but for the Jews it was first of all a religious one). On reading the Gospel we often find this attitude towards the sick, the maimed and the lame: “What evil have they done?” Well, then, those who were hung or crucified were considered accursed and excommunicated by God himself: “He that is hanged is accursed of God” (Deuteronomy 21:23). In the Epistle to the Galatians, St Paul says: “Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree” (Galatians 3:13).

For St Paul it is clear what anguished Jesus in Gethsemane: the Messiah wanted to suffer “in sinful flesh” (cf Romans 8:3; Hebrews 2:18), that is, as we sinners suffer when our “church” rejects us and we fall into despair, to the point of suicide. Jesus was not condemned by his enemies, but by his religious leaders, by the custodians of the Law God gave to Moses. If he dies on the cross, it is a clear sign that God himself curses him and casts him out, decreeing his exclusion from the *approval* of the people of God.⁹ It is not easy to identify with the human sentiments that Jesus felt at that moment: “my soul is exceedingly sorrowful unto death” (Mark 14:34). But nor is it totally beyond us. Although the immense importance of the Passion cannot be reduced to existential experience, neither can it be left out of it. We can sense something of this if we think of what can happen to any of us: if it is a question of defending those dear to us, we’re all prepared to risk our lives. We often read of young people or family members who have died in the mountains in an attempt to save a companion. A year ago, ten miners died in Belgium trying to rescue a companion who was trapped; he survived and they died. Everyone on this earth, even the most selfish, has a strong bond with someone which could, if necessary, bring them to death: everyone. Incredible but true. But the problem arises when we are judged negatively by “our people”; this is hard, even unbearable. We mostly fear to disappoint these “others-for-me”, or, worse still, to be rejected by them.

St Luke is the evangelist who, like St Paul, knows very well the real drama of passion of Jesus. It is in his Gospel that we hear Jesus say: “For I say unto you, that this that is written must yet be accomplished in me. And he was reckoned among the transgressors” (Luke 22:37). Before his people and their leaders, Jesus appears to be the greatest of transgressors, with divine backing. Unlike the two thieves, who have killed or stolen gold, He wanted to steal the heart of Israel, its hope, its messiahship.

This is all familiar to theology, perhaps a little less so to catechesis. But a conclusive study also concerns the Resurrection and Jesus’ Ascension into Heaven. Jesus did not present himself before the Synedrion after his resurrection. Perhaps we instinctively think that in fact he showed himself sufficiently to some Jews (apostles and disciples), and snubbed his enemies. But they were not really his enemies, they were those who had to vouch for his messiahship. His appearances after Easter are fleeting, often strange, and frustrate the apostles’ desire to use them as proof before the chief priests. And with the Ascension ends any chance of human redemption, any chance of victory. In Jesus, *human approval*, to put it into the terms we have used here, has been checkmated, the despair of conclusive defeat. Ascension must be seen, from a human perspective, not as a moment of glory (the glory to which Christ ascends is that of the Trinity), but rather as *damnatio memoriae*. It prevents human redemption and conclusively sanctions the opprobrium for Jesus in the future history of Israel. Just as happened in Rome - still today we can see decapitated statues or memorials where the name has been chiseled away to obliterate the name and the memory of some unfortunate person. Jesus humanly experienced the despair that we sinners feel in the face of our destiny of perpetual shame - this is why he sweated blood in Gethsemane! Only by understanding the nature of the Ascension can we understand the nature of the Resurrection and the radicality of the Cross. When St Paul sees the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, he understands thanks to the Spirit that the “accursed” according to the Law was really the Blessed of God. Only he had not sought redemption before the Synedrion, nor had he presented himself in the public marketplace (a moment would have sufficed, and they would have proclaimed him Messiah). As the human outcome of his adventure among men he had chosen the

⁹ As Ratzinger clearly demonstrates, there is a theological design in the death of Christ. The leaders and the people of Israel are no more guilty than are other men. We must understand both the universal importance of Redemption, which relates to all peoples, and the labyrinths of the human heart, its falling into sin and the way trodden by Christ. Cf J. Ratzinger, *La Chiesa, Israele e le religioni del mondo*, San Paolo, Milan, 2000.

destiny of conclusive defeat, the exact opposite of what Saul pursued with great zeal and all his might, that is, recognition on behalf of his people, vouched for by God, what the Jews sought in success.

Some people express surprise when they compare the serenity with which Socrates faced death, with the despair of Jesus in Gethsemane. But there is a huge difference between one who dies for a cause, with the support of his followers, and one who dies cast out from his own land, his own church, his own home. We are all ready to die for the cause, and we all have a cause, even although most of us are unaware of it. Socrates died consistently with his ideas, before his followers. His cause was not Athens but his sapiential role in Athens. Jesus, by contrast, espoused the human condition to the extent of making himself capable of suffering like us: “in sinful flesh”, that is, for the consequences of desire. In Him, of course, there is neither original sin nor that desire that causes such terrible selfishness in us. But He can experience the acute suffering we experience when desire is frustrated. If it were not so, he would be too far from our existential condition to be able to be our savior. Jesus dies for a divine cause, which, however, allows the human suffering of he who dies rejected by his own people. Jesus does not fear physical death; at least, he is no more afraid than our martyrs and heroes who die for their own cause. But he feels the scorn, the rejection of the people, which was vouched for by God, according to the law. And that was his final destiny on earth, even although now, in the faith of countless nations, we find it difficult to understand his human destiny of self-sacrifice. Jesus took upon himself the greatest separation from the fount of love (“My God why have you forsaken me?”) because his filial love crossed every abyss of the heart and found again the Father of us all, the Father of sinners.

On the night of Easter, it was an immense joy for the apostles to see Jesus once more, after the huge disappointment of the cross. They probably thought that within a few minutes there would be the great official recognition on the part of the Synedrion. But this was not a Christian joy. It was still a Jewish joy, the rediscovery of the messiah lost upon the cross; the re-discovery of the power that had built up around the messiah. A great satisfaction, but certainly not a heart which is freed, saved - it was not yet a true love. Only the gift of the Holy Spirit was to change their hearts, making them understand that on the cross Jesus gave forever every human joy, every sort of esteem, every sort of justice - all that we fear losing the most. And he did it for me! This means that *the resurrection is the proclamation of God's love for man, and the divine seal on a total giving of himself to man*. The resurrection does not make up for the total defeat of Jesus before his people. We are the product of a gentile culture, which is very far from the Jewish perception, and we tend to consider the resurrection Jesus' final victory, which made up for his physical suffering. However, six hundred years later, in the Talmud, Jesus is still referred to as “He who was hanged”, the accursed of God. The rejection by his people has never been reversed.

Had Jesus shown himself in public after his resurrection, we would have had the greatest idolatrous satisfaction of man on earth. The people of Israel could have boasted off following the great messiah, the invincible, the immortal, and exploited the divine power against their enemies and for an unparalleled administration of the laws. But this is not redemption. If the Jews could understand (but this requires the Holy Spirit, as for us) that Jesus rose again to divinely glorify human nature, and not to make man master of the divine power, perhaps they would then realize the anti-idolatrous promise they still have. They might understand that, according to the promises made to them, they are still destined to receive a love which heals every sort of selfishness, every division, every judgment of man against man, every Babel, every personal disheartenment. And they would help us, we who are still largely “gentiles” and pagans, to embrace the faith with all our heart and to abandon the thousand idolatrous illusions with which the West has filled the world.

“He loved me and gave his life for me”

Everything becomes revolutionary and beatifying (redeeming) when, inspired by the Holy Spirit, we manage to live on this faith in a way that involves the whole person. Not a notional faith, nor simply a catechism where I learn that Jesus died for mankind, but the vital discovery that Jesus died for me! And he rose again for me! He is here with me: “Lo, I am with you always, even until the end of the world” (Matthew 28:20). This statement is repeated, in various forms, at the last supper as recounted by John.

St Paul can say: “I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20). St Paul had not known Jesus on earth - he could not realize that Jesus had died for him in the same way that one of his apostles might after three years of sharing his life. Yet, his faith is clear: “For me!”. *The Devil knows very well that the Word was made flesh and died for mankind - but he cannot say: for me*. He knows the

whole catechism by heart but he cannot say that it all happened for him, whereas each of us can say with complete certainty that God created the world and sent the Word to die for us. And Jesus rises again and makes himself Eucharist for each of us. The Gospel is the word of life for me, just for me! Every word in the Gospel is pronounced by God, by Christ, today, for me!¹⁰ In his first encyclical *Redemptor hominis*, John Paul II exhorts us to reflect upon redemption - only in this way will we discover the value that our life has for God, which will fill us with amazement at ourselves as well as with gratitude and praise for Him. He adds: "This amazement justifies the Church's mission in the world, even, and perhaps even more so, 'in the contemporary world'" (no. 10). It is as if to say that if liturgies, priests, theologies and catechisms, etc., cannot manage to excite a bit of amazement at how much we are loved (luckily they can) the Church would fail miserably in its aim and would have no point except for a certain organization of human matters.

If a young person reflects a little on how he depends on the opinion of others, how sensitive he is to recognition or failure in the eyes of his friends, how he exults in human love or how he is cast into despair if he is left, he can see something of the servitude of his own heart and can get a glimmering of how blissful it is to live in the love of Christ, entirely for him. In his *Letter to Young People* written in 1985, John Paul II emphasizes the very personal look that Jesus gave the rich young man: "Jesus looked on him and loved him". I wish you to experience such a look! I wish you to experience the truth that he, Christ, looks on you with love. He looks on everyone with love. The Gospel confirms this again and again. We can also say that Christ's "loving look" contains almost a summing up and a synthesis of all the good news" (no. 7). Here, too, saying that the Gospel can practically be summed up as feeling loved also means that if we do not feel the personal love of Jesus for us, we thwart redemption in its historical aspect".¹¹

We will not live in Jesus' personal love for us unless we sincerely desire to reciprocate with all our heart. Half-measure Christianity not only does not exist but, as Kierkegaard said, is the greatest nonsense one can utter. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, during the Synod of European bishops, four young people who had attended the

10 A true account of persecution in China highlights the value of this very personal faith. In the early Fifties when the Communists seized power in China, a young Catholic University professor was imprisoned because he refused to denounce his bishop as an enemy of the state. Before he was sent to a prison camp they let him see his wife, in the hope that she might persuade him to sign the denunciation. But his wife whispered to him: "Thank you for making this choice!" Her proud look gave him the courage to stick to his decision. Two years later they sent him home in the hope that he would join the "patriotic" church. He was able to see his fifth child and beget the sixth, before being sent back to the prison camp for his refusal. Once again, his wife gave him her support: "Let us trust in God! Our lot is to live to the full the life that we are given." In 1970, on a Spring day, the loudspeaker called him to the camp infirmary. He was given an injection. After that, he was no longer the same. He quite visibly started to waste away. He asked to see his wife for the last time and she found him near to death. Trying hard not to break down in tears, he gathered all his remaining strength and said: "I know I am about to go home to He who has made me happy till now. I am dying, Theresa. And I so want to hold out for a few more days, I want to meet our God on Good Friday. It has always been a very important day for me - the memory of God who even gave me his Son so that I might understand how dear I am to him. To our children carry the joy that I feel for them. I am grateful for this life, I am grateful for all I have received. *Above all, I am grateful to know that Jesus died for me and that I have loved him. It has been worth it.*" He died in the early afternoon on Good Friday. Theresa got the news a month later, but she already knew.

11 Many still consider Sunday Mass as a precept and use the excuse of freedom and authenticity as a reason for not going, especially among young people. They do not understand that the precept is a fruit of spousal love - no boy has ever made his girlfriend wait for him in vain in the name of his freedom to be with his friends. He knows very well that if he didn't show up he would make the other person suffer and he would become untrustworthy and incapable of marriage, since no-one could ever know when they could count on him. In the same way a young person doesn't stay out all night without telling his parents, lest they worry - he knows they would go looking for him in all the local hospitals and police stations. Skipping Sunday Mass is much worse. Jesus is worth more than your parents waiting for you to come home or your girlfriend waiting for you to show up: "He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10:37). He is worth more and asks for much less. He who doesn't go to Mass makes Jesus suffer. Everything is clear when you have a living faith: I believe in God who loves me and sent his Son to die *for me!* I believe that Jesus is waiting for me, together with my brothers, on Sundays, to celebrate the liturgy together, unless illness or a serious reason stops me. If we understand that this is an appointment of love, it is easy to see that just going to Sunday Mass is not enough. We can say that faith shows its effects on our life when a Christian also keeps other appointments with Jesus, especially in the form of personal meditation. Otherwise we have mere duty, without love.

World Youth Day in Czestochowa were asked what young people wanted from their pastors. In essence, this is what a Portuguese girl said: “When I was young I sought freedom as the world offers it and I felt increasingly empty. I found it when I found Christ and the bonds of love in his Church. Obedience to the Church makes me feel free. This is why we ask that our pastors should give us all of Christ. Not an abridged version as some priests do - for fear of losing the young - but a real Christ. A half-measure program might be appealing at the time, but after a year one is tired of it.”

In our response to Christ we must always remember that we are selfish and relapse into sin, into our self love. If we recognize this with humility, we can always appeal to Jesus’ mercy. The great discovery is divine forgiveness - Jesus goes beyond personal forgiveness when he asks the Father not to exact justice but to show His mercy even towards those who crucified him. Infinite forgiveness. Our sins and selfishness are reason for the Father to show unprecedented for-give-ness. This is forgiveness as the heart of the new Covenant. *Our sins are our greatest claim for belonging to Christ* - I have come not for the healthy but for the sick, not for the just but for the sinners, for the “lost sheep”, Jesus often says. When we lose our way, we discover that Jesus came for the lost sheep. When we are at fault, we discover the Savior - I do not judge you. To say ‘I do not judge you’ is to say ‘I do not condemn you, I do not separate you from me when you have sinned. To me, you are worth what I am worth’. Jesus goes so far as to say to an adulteress that she is worth as much as him, as the Son of God incarnate, as the perfect man.

All this perfectly fits in with our freedom and responsibility, with our commitment to do good, to rise again every time we fall into error, with the joy of being loved with our sins and with our ever more concrete and active desire to respond with good to Christ’s love. It is the joy of seeing Jesus who has not wearied of my sins, that puts wings on my feet and makes me act for the good. If this does not happen, it means that with all our sins we have not encountered Jesus, but only a very convenient and selfish “do-goodism”. It is necessary to recognize our sins and duly confess them in the sacrament of reconciliation, so as to leave them behind us and cherish good. We can always admit our sins, even several times a day, even though we may confess them only from time to time, if they are not mortal sins. The important thing is that each time we should be sincere. We must never feel discouraged and never cease fighting for the good. In fact, Jesus says to the adulteress: go and do not sin again, calling evil “sin”. That woman was saved by love and most certainly changed her way of life.

Forgiveness reveals the heart of God. Only an in-depth theological study of the Holy Trinity can encourage hope in the millennium that has just begun. Our whole approach to the issue of salvation rests on the Trinity-based origin and destiny of our lives. *The core of the revelation is the Covenant, that is, the Father’s design to have us as sons, born to divine life, with the same bond of love that the Son has with his heavenly Father.*

Before tackling any human problem, it is necessary to recall that in this design is the motive for everything God has willed. God, in revealing, acts - he reveals his design to have us as His sons, family, and he carries out this design. Loving genuinely, living in the faith in Christ who loves me and gave all his life and his powers for me, living full of hope, without fearing life and death, without fearing failure, working together for a culture of love where we thank God for the beauty of life - this is salvation, which begins from our earthly life. Nothing on earth is perfect, but this is salvation. Otherwise we would be prey to despair, only sure of success vouched for by others, hence just for a few moments, feeling a joy that is not true joy, born of love, but one born of satisfaction, with a subtle exploitation of even the most beautiful sorts of love such as between a man and a woman. There is no alternative between salvation and the servitude of the heart. *There is a great qualitative difference between a heart that is saved and a heart that exults in being recognized as a sort of god for someone else* (also because success creates addiction, just like drugs).

A little note on the existence of God

Today’s culture suggests strange and vague ideas about the existence of God. Excuses and uncertainties rise when the time to chose comes. It must be kept in mind that so long as the meaning of life is on the side of success, people are always sure they are right. A young man who is doing well may be impervious to the question of God. What makes the issue of God inescapable is suffering - and most certainly not to conclude that “God does not exists, otherwise why would he make children suffer”. It is precisely because children and adults often experience great suffering that it is not enough for some intellectual to say that God does not exist. Life

must have meaning in every circumstance, otherwise for many people the earth becomes hell. When the miracles of love become apparent in so many of those who suffer, then it can be easily inferred that an infinite love offers infinite meaning. It would be better to fall back on plain common sense, and realize that throughout history any claim countering common sense sooner or later go out of fashion. Meanwhile, is it easy to seek refuge in agnosticism - which avoids choosing against God, and exempts people to commit themselves to living in a consistent way (or only consistently with the laws of the group!). With a little common sense, it will be easy to realize that agnostics are always wrong. I say this although I am quite aware that agnostics often include those who claim to be believers, at least judging from their behavior, and that those who profess to be agnostics are often eagerly searching truth and open to dialogue with everyone. The earthly state, it seems, always draws a veil over God, which can easily lead to agnosticism. It is clear, however, that God either exists or does not exist. How can Norberto Bobbio say that he is not interested in the issue of existence beyond death? Such a statement only makes sense as it supports his image as a critical thinker. One can believe that everything comes to an end on earth, but one cannot say that the issue in itself is devoid of interest. It is, actually, the only truly important issue, unless one prefers the temporary and fragile existence that is recognized by fellow men. Even so, however, the question is still a fundamental one.

We have mentioned above various paths that necessarily lead to God.¹² The fundamental theme of this book shows that the question of love is greater than the instinct of self-preservation, and so than physical life. This implies necessary bonds, full of absolute significance. It shows that in fact no one can be an atheist because each has his own form of idolatry, his substitute for divine recognition. Each has his rights. Most of all, each has his "church". We have tried to show that as we have need of profound recognition, only if it comes from God does such recognition not condemn us to the servitude of being at the mercy of the will of others.

But there are many other roads that lead to God, not with rationalist constraint, as if God could be known by the human mind, but by simple reasoning. Sooner or later, the atheist must abandon reason. It is in no way true that science shows that we can do without God. It is more reasonable to say "the world was created" rather than to say "I don't know how it came about". One reason is that this assertion concerns not only the beginning (which we can never know completely), but above all the cause, the origin of this beginning and of its realization, the same then as it is now. Evolutionism does not explain the emergence of form. The form of bodies is neither corporal nor spiritual, except in man. As language cannot be explained by language (Wittgenstein proved this), so form always emerges from matter - a cat is a cat, and this cannot be explained only by atoms.¹³ It is not very rational to say that everything is explained by electrons, protons and neutrons. It is not easy to use them to explain self-consciousness, freedom, love, sight, sexuality or a bird's wings which use the air without having anything materially in common with it. The perfections of creation are beyond imagination and do not depend on chance. Chance and necessity (or perfection) happen together in every material phenomenon, and necessity cannot be reduced to chance as the materialists would like, in a purely voluntaristic way. Nor can we expect to demonstrate the existence of God with science. We can only say that, with God, everything is more

12 Especially notes 3 and 6; also note 14.

13 The exaltation of forms and essences led to rationalist philosophy, which is very abstract especially from Descartes on. There have been vitalist or merely functional, anti-formal and anti-metaphysical revolts against this philosophy. Form and essence are not everything. Reality is immensely richer. Only the discovery of the philosophical basis employed by St Thomas, the *act of being*, has paved the way for a renaissance of metaphysics, but few are yet aware of this. The act of being is not irrational, because it establishes the truth and rationality of everything. Truth, for example, before it is of the essence, is a transcendent of being. St Thomas' *five proofs of the existence of God* acquire particular force on the basis of the metaphysics of the act of being. Being as an act is not existence, nor is it to be confused with what is real, nor with the common esse. It rests on its own perfection, it realizes different realities with different sorts of perfection, while existence is the same for everything that exists. It is not easy to conceive of the act, and in fact being, as an act, is ineffable. And God - pure act - is even more ineffable. Apart from the act of being, substantial forms have their fundamental consistency. Without going into metaphysics, still at a scientific level, every material phenomenon happens in conformity with the laws of dynamics, and these laws know no change. Evolution therefore cannot explain everything. Antonino Zichichi manages to demonstrate how such laws are universal. He describes them as the language of God to decipher the creation. But in more concrete terms we can see that a boy discovers he has a mustache when he is about fifteen, but clearly since his conception there has been a hidden form, which was waiting for the molecular complex to evolve to the point when it should emerge.

reasonable; without God, nothing is reasonable. With the same conviction let us say that we cannot demonstrate mathematically that Mozart's music is beautiful, that it is better to be in love if you marry, that friendship exists, but to assert the opposite is much less reasonable.

It has been said: in the twilight, he who says that light exists is right. God leaves us in the twilight because he needs to sustain our historical freedom, otherwise love would not flourish. It is light enough for anyone who seeks sincerely, and dark enough for anyone who doesn't want to, not to see anything (and we should remember that it is easy to use reason to support the prejudice that moves the heart). Of course a confirmed skeptic will retort that from these words it can be deduced that believing is the same wanting to believe. But if anything, it is easier to sustain the opposite: not believing and wanting not to believe. There are less rational cavils. Dino Segre, who was a violently anti-religious writer in the '30s but later embraced the Catholic faith, said: "Be careful, be careful not to take certain 'reasons' of skeptics too seriously. I was one of them and I can assure you that these reasons don't really exist. Don't let yourselves be impressed by high-sounding phrases; I was a master of these and I know how there is often nothing but insecurity and emptiness behind them". We are often dismayed by the arguments used against the Church, "the enemy of science", "it wants to submit our consciences to an impossible standard of morality in order to maintain its power", and things like that. But there are more intelligent arguments. It is true, for example, that prayer cannot be directly related to protons and electrons, but with evolution the brain does emit these sensations. It is useless to say that animals do not know holidays, while men, even atheists, cannot do without them, and that there is no sign of evolution in this; they will say it is a question of neurons. The film *The devil's advocate* has a whole series of witty, skeptical jokes: feelings of guilt exist only because we believe in God; morality is the result of the sadism of God, who amuses himself by setting impossible rules. John Milton, the devil, says: "Kevin, I want to tell you a little secret about God. God likes to watch. He is a voyeur with a sense of humor. Just think for a moment - he gives man instincts, he gives you this extraordinary gift, and then what does he do? (I swear that he does it purely to amuse himself, to get himself a bit of advertising) he makes rules against everything! Look, but don't touch; touch, but don't taste; taste, but don't swallow. He has you hopping from one foot to the other, and what does he do? He kills himself laughing, because he is a moralist, a great sadist, an absent landlord, that's what he is. And we are supposed to worship him? No, never!". In a last attempt to defend the divinity, Kevin, the man, says: "What about love?". John Milton: "Overvalued. Biochemically, it's no different from bingeing on chocolate".

I don't think it is necessary to refute the attacks on morality - it only takes a little love, after all (and for self-love, for *peer approval*, what sacrifices would we not make?). The - apparently witty - attack is on love. It is true that when a girl (and also a boy) falls in love, in her brain there takes place a storm of electrical discharges and chemical changes, and this is much more than if she were to stuff herself with chocolate. A storm that could also be produced chemically, with the appropriate pill. But I do not think that the boy she loves is just a virtual image that is able to cause electrical discharges within the girl. Thus God is not a virtual image for man, given that everything in human life acquires significance, hope or love only from the divine fount.

The crack about a sadistic God also becomes an easy slogan - if it was God who gave us our senses, we should use them without interposing prohibitions. However, it should be easy to understand that every aspect of reality is part of a greater design, and the God who gave us eyes to see also gave us eyelids to close them. But the real problem is still the basic one: if the group justifies it, the slogan lends acritical support for thinking ourselves reasonable and silencing our conscience or our worried parents. The well-known story of "the emperor's new clothes" is very instructive. If a "strong" cultural area is created, we can manage to justify everything. It is quite clear to common sense that abortion is murder, but if a lot of people say it is not, selfishness becomes progress.

Every atheist or skeptic has his image in the eyes of others to defend. If someone were to convince him that God exists, he would find himself without a "church", without a "home". And is this not also true of believers? It is, but we must bear in mind two things: the great tradition of Catholic rationality throughout the centuries, which has always confronted ideas, and especially Revelation. It is precisely because we cannot reason to the bottom of things, given the prison of our love-stricken hearts, that we must allow ourselves to be penetrated by divine light, by the Word. Abstract reasoning is not enough. Numbers are abstract, neither material nor spiritual, they are immaterial. It is the spirit that lives of love and cannot be reduced to the mind that abstracts. And it is in the spirit that life and eternal life are staked.

The existence of God is not actually an article of faith; common sense and innate reason are enough. The whole of human being is conditioned by the transcendent. Faith becomes involved when it is a matter of the incarnation of the Word, of his resurrection, of the sacraments - especially the Eucharist - of the Trinity, of divine filiation, of the beatific vision in Heaven. Faced with the resurrection of Jesus, for example, we cannot use the same arguments that serve to make us understand that God exists. And yet, with all the scientific data that we have to hand, with the historic testimony of the apostles, with the problems of man and of his relationships, etc., we can say, in this case too, that it is more reasonable to believe in the resurrection of Jesus (so far from scientific reasoning) than not to.

CHAPTER 3

THE CHURCH IS NECESSARY

Salvation - justification, in New Testament terms - is given quite freely. It is the love of God for man the sinner, who is unworthy of such regard.

Yet Jesus does ask us for one thing in exchange. He asks us to show to others some shadow of the Father's mercy, some of the feeling in his heart for mankind: "Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy" (Matthew 5:7). At the Last Supper, when the profundities of Love are revealed, he repeatedly asks us, in exchange, to observe his commandments, which he often sums up in just one: "This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you" (John 15:12).

The commandment of Jesus

A seed is a gratuitous gift for barren earth. But as soon as the seed is given to the earth, it takes moisture, salts and fertilizer from it, and multiplies itself a hundred times. In the same way, the gift of love is for everyone, but requires a response of holiness; commitment on our part; moral coherence and responsibility towards others. Jesus sums all this up in one commandment: "These things I command you, that ye love one another" (John 15:17), and makes it clear that this is a "new commandment" (John 13:34). It is also new in respect of the universal "love thy neighbor as thyself". It is not enough to see another self in other people. In others we must also see the dignity of the Son of God. "Love one another as I have loved you". Jesus repeatedly explains that to love in this way is to observe all of the law. It is like saying: they have given you so many precepts (just think of all the precepts of the Jews); I give you only one, because if you observe this one, you will be inclined to observe the others when love requires it. St Paul echoes this very clearly: "Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law [...] love is the fulfilling of the law" (Romans 13:8-10).

As this is a "new commandment" it is also the fruit of the Holy Spirit, as is the resurrection of Jesus: something really new, after creation. How can we love one another as well as "I have loved you" without the Holy Spirit? It should however be clear that where there is not the fruit of brotherly love, all the rest is not redeemed, is not Christian, although it may be virtue, justice, good works. "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:35), and by nothing else. If we think of the Trinity, rather than an "I" that loves "the others" there is a "we", a real family, "consorts". The father would not be the father if he were not all in the son. Spousal love is essential to the person.

A heart which is saved does good. Mankind has however an earthly responsibility which conditions its eternal destiny. Christian salvation allows the flowering of true love, family and social relationships in the authenticity of a true love. All this for the joy and the significance of the individual, for the edification of the family and the sacrality of human life, for historical responsibility towards others, given that in Heaven there is only brotherly love, like compassion and like mercy. The Gospel says that it is compassion that will count at the last judgment - who saw me when I was hungry ... - or (and always) forgiveness. "Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive every one that is indebted to us" (Luke 11:4) - which is St Luke's version of the more famous words of St Matthew "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Matthew 6:12) which tell us more clearly that this is the key to Heaven. God will treat our sins exactly as we have treated our fellow men with regard to their errors, faults and sins: "With the same measure that Ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again" (Luke 6:38). *Other people's faults are an opportunity for me to learn to love, and so they are a boon to those who understand that life on earth, in history, is given to us in order that we may learn to love others.* "For if ye love them which love you, what thank have ye? for sinners also love those that love them" (Luke 6:32). And in the end Jesus will say to us: if you have used the sins of others in order to learn to love them more, I shall use your sins to give you more of heaven, multiplying your act of mercy some twenty thousand times (this is the difference between the ten thousand talents and the one hundred *denarii* of the famous parable of the two debtors). But if you have spoken ill of others, or judged ill of them in your heart, I too shall judge you deserving of Purgatory (here too the

consequences of our actions are multiplied by twenty thousand). The numbers of course are not meant in the mathematical sense, but as an echo of evangelical logic. Jesus talks of the hundred to one that is given to he who gives up something for Him, while it seems appropriate that the reward be much greater for he who does good to his fellow men. This too is something we find again and again in the Gospel. When Jesus speaks of the love of God and fraternal love, he always ends by emphasizing the latter. Of the Lord's prayer, for example, he comments only on the "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (cf. Matthew 6:14-15); another excellent example is the parable of the good Samaritan.

In every way Jesus shows us that within the new and eternal Covenant there is a central place for everyone. How many times do we have to forgive? Peter asks for a limit. But Jesus immediately says: seventy times seven, that is, always. Forgiveness is infinite. In the same way, he sets no limit to judging others, and says to the adulteress: I do not judge you. In Christianity it is not a universalistic love, a cosmopolitan love, but love for each one, with the impossibility of denying mercy to anyone. *If one single person is excluded from the love of Christ, everyone is excluded.* A moment's reflection is enough to understand this - a source of light cannot leave wavery areas of shadow.

We shall never sufficiently understand how true and conclusive it is that *men are on earth to learn to love one another*, in the truth of Christ. History, freedom, responsibility are all given to us in order that we might learn to love one another. If our choosing God were in question, perhaps we could do without history, as happened with the angels. But the angels have no brothers to take to Heaven - each is of a different sort, a race apart, but we cannot go into it here. We on the other hand have sons and brothers; each of our fellows is the responsibility of all the rest. St Paul says this quite clearly: in order to see Jesus it would be better for me to die at once, but I think that I must stay here to edify you. Earthly history exists so that we can see to the salvation of others! There is a sort of joke that makes this plain. A man dies, presents himself to St Peter and asks about his eternal destiny. St Peter puts all his details into the computer and the screen shows Paradise. "They tell me that in Paradise all wishes come true." "Of course" replies St Peter. "I have one wish before I enter Heaven - to have a look at Hell." "We'll go there at once." He takes a big key and opens an enormous door. They go into a marvelous room - bright, beautifully decorated, with a long, narrow table heaped with every sort of delicious food. Round the table there are emaciated, anguished, silent people, each holding two chopsticks, a meter and a half-long. The demons watch to make sure that nobody cheats by holding the chopsticks half-way down. And all are in despair. "Let's go, I understand everything". They enter Heaven - same room, same decor. Same table, loaded with all sorts of good things. The people are plump and chatter happily but they too have chopsticks and there are lots of little angels who make sure no one cheats. Heaven is a game with rules and God makes sure they are observed. "What's the difference?" the man asks at this point. "Wait and you'll see" St Peter replies. And in fact he soon sees someone pick up some food with his chopsticks and offer it to the person opposite.

Some people comment on this story and say "I see. If I spend my life solving my own problems, it's hell; if I spend it solving the problems of others, it's paradise." Anyone who makes this discovery and puts it into practice has learned to live. Only someone who can make other people happy can be happy himself. On the World Day of Youth in Manila in 1995, at a Mass for five million, John Paul II said: "The vocation of loving, seen also as an opening up towards our fellow human beings and as solidarity with them, is the most fundamental of all vocations. It is the origin of all the vocations of life."

When Jesus says: "By their fruits ye shall know them" he is speaking not so much of works of mercy, as of mercy itself. He is speaking of the fruits of the Holy Spirit, which St Paul lists in the Epistle to the Galatians: "But the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, long suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith" (Galatians 5:22). It must always be clear to everyone that there is no charity without works of charity. It must however be even clearer that there are works of charity without real charity. In fact St Paul also says: "And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing" (I Corinthians 13:3). There is genuine love which can be seen in the quality of an interpersonal relationship, and there is a lot of idolatrous generosity, of self-affirmation. There is no real need to fear idolatrous selfishness (which seeks love for itself), if this leads us to do good; it happens to everyone. The real problem comes when the need for *indispensable approval* leads us to do evil and makes us believe that we are justified in this.

In any case it is important to understand the difference and to seek the gift of the spirit which can convert us. The ancients distinguished between covetous love and benevolent love - the former is prompted by what each of

us gains from a relationship with others. The latter, however, means being able to put ourselves in someone else's shoes and to desire his good. As the former is full of sacrifices and attentions, it is easy for us to think that we are capable of love. In fact, since original sin, it is only with the Holy Spirit that one can make a real gift of oneself to others. *The guarantee of our love must come from other people.* Jesus entrusts the visibility of his love to the visibility of ours, towards one another and towards everyone. We must therefore learn the great lesson of St Giovanni Bosco: *loving isn't enough, other people have to be aware of it.* A mother always loves her children, but often they are not aware of it - when she is short-tempered, or overfussy, or expects too much. What is needed is affection, and smiling patience, even when this is difficult. Only this shows a noble soul.

If we think about it, our investigation of the heart that has an absolute need of love, which conditions the use of intelligence and so prevents us from easily recognizing objective good and evil, also makes it possible for us to be much more understanding of others and to really live the new commandment. If I cannot manage to turn away from my idol, towards God and other people, by my own efforts (you must try it to see what it is like), how can I think that others should change just because I want them to? Perhaps from the outside I can see that their values are misplaced, and I see the injustices that result, but I cannot expect them to listen to me. I can only love them more, with real patience, because I cannot judge them, knowing that they do what they can and that only being part of a community with a living faith can lead their hearts, with the help of the Holy Spirit, towards the divine truth of life. Given, too, that almost everyone experiences a thousand sorrows *and is sure that others are to blame, if we understand the conditioning of the heart we will be more serene and stop blaming anyone else for our unhappiness.*

Learn to love. This is the great adventure, the great task that gives meaning to life, to the very last breath. He who decides to live for this aim will never retire - no illness will make him useless, and the culmination comes with death, with the ultimate gift of his own life to God and to others. Among the many accounts of heroic martyrdom in the century that has just concluded, there is a true story that underlines the divine efficacy of heroic charity. A child of about ten knocks at the gate of a prison in Moscow, with a rose in his hand. He asks to see the captain, who is a pitiless tyrant. The prison is full of Christians, whom he tortures in order to find out where the underground printing press is. A soldier goes to tell the captain, who asks "Who is he?" "He didn't say." As it is a child, he lets him in. "Today is mother's birthday and father has taught me to give her a rose on days like this, but she is in prison because you put her there. Father is in prison too, because you put him there. I live with Grandmother and she teaches me to pray and say that we Christians must not only forgive our enemies, we must love them too. So that's why I am here, to love you. And the rose that I can't give to mother, I give to you." He hands over the rose and goes away, leaving the captain dumbfounded. For a month, the man tries not to think of the episode, but he cannot and so he resigns his post and becomes a Christian. He is suspected, followed, discovered and imprisoned. It might have been expected that the Christians in the prison would have set on him, but they didn't. They welcomed him into their midst. Shortly afterwards he died, as a result of the ill treatment that was particularly vicious towards him. But he had kept a diary with his testimony to the heroism of the many Christians he had tortured. This is the power of merciful love.

Salvation and the Church

Everything depends on the fact that *for Jesus it is absolutely necessary that our fraternal love be visible*, a visible ecclesial bond: "By this all men shall know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:35). The Word was made flesh in order to reveal the love of the Holy Trinity to man. If man neither sees nor hears, he cannot understand. But now this visibility is entrusted to us. *If it is true that the real love which saves the human heart can come only from Jesus Christ, it is also true that each of us, in our desperate search for approval, needs to "see" social recognition - only in the Church can these two bonds be found together.* Each of us needs to be drawn inwardly to Christ by the visibility of Christian love. The heart is drawn to it, just as many people are drawn to any other sort of significant relationship. With the difference that the Church draws the heart, offers it human recognition, in order to guide it towards Christ and the Trinity. The Church is the *icon* of the Trinity. The difference between an icon and an idol, between a sacred image and a fetish that will appropriate divine power, is that the icon opens towards mystery and invites one to go beyond itself, is transparent and ready to disappear. Whereas the idol is a mirror in which to seek oneself and a reassuring power. The same religious image can be seen as something sacred, sacramental, or at the level of idolatry. Thus a Catholic group or a local church can open up towards the Trinity - something that sects and all other groups cannot do! - but they can also

be experienced as places in which to find one's own reflection, to find *the indispensable approval*, as happens in all other existential areas of reference.

It is not possible to receive the heart of the risen Christ, the living temple of redeeming love, without the visibility of his Church, so long as this is the visibility of a love found nowhere else. Hence the importance of the "new commandment". *Without the visibility and the human dimension of ecclesial love, we cannot be aware of the presence of Christ among us.* If we believe that the risen Christ is present among us, this must be apparent from a special bond to be seen among us. St John says: "No man hath seen God at any time. If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us" (I John 4, 11-12). But this visibility of the new commandment requires that we be aware of and experience in a concrete way the special bond that unites us in Christ, and this happens only in the individual church - *the universal Church is a communion of communities.* One can be a Christian in Ephesus or Corinth, in Jerusalem or Alexandria with various differences and the one essential content. The Church is the visible aspect of the Kingdom of Christ. **Its Catholic nature is the common element of a universal people.** For this very reason it is not made up of collectivized individuals, but of free persons, called to embrace the faith and to personal choice by a bond of love which is communion - the people of God, "local church", an ecclesial path that is well-defined and "strong", that is with significant bonds. What matters is that every people recognize itself in Christ, celebrate the Eucharist and the other sacraments and accept the canon of the Holy Scriptures and the Petrine ministry, as a ministry of unity and charity, the ten commandments and a few other things. In this way, in every local church, there is present the whole mystery of the Church, together with the other local churches, and also through the primacy that Jesus assigned to Peter. The new and eternal Covenant, apart from being an inner bond with God in Christ, is also the communion of peoples.

Given that no one can live without love, without a strong central bond in a united human community, it is only with an ecclesial bond that salvation from the greatest servitude can be found, as we have already seen. Only the Church offers *approval* from on high, in Christ, and unites on high the various communities and so can give true peace, both of the heart and in human relationships, open to all men.¹⁴ In addition, the individual churches can do what no human community can - they draw the heart as does any significant group, but in order to open it towards heaven, far above the community itself. Other human communities are always and necessarily sectarian, they force a truth according to the consensus within the group. They may have positive and pacific motives, but they can also create, sometimes mortal, enmities with other "confessions", with other "secret churches".

14 When we hear talk of strong bonds, we may fear fundamentalism. But apart from realizing that fundamentalism can come about only if absolute value is placed on erroneous truths, this is overcome at its roots when absolute value is founded in love, as in true Christianity. In his book *Così parlò Bellavista*, Luciano De Crescenzo says that the world is divided between Platonists (absolutists) and Epicureans (relativists), and chooses to place himself among the latter. One may rightly fear that the fanaticism of an ideology might make an abstract part of truth into an absolute value as happened with Nazism and Communism, and as we can see in various Islamic fringe movements, but also in many theories and sects. However, man cannot live without belief and without feeling drawn towards an end that is greater than himself, towards a future with real hope. There is always an absolute idea. Even those who preach tolerance as the highest value become intolerant towards those who think differently. Tolerance is very important, but not absolutely so - partly because it teaches young people that values are indifferent, as we cannot convey values without being less than tolerant. The problem cannot be resolved by excluding all absolute values but by putting absolute value in its proper place, that is, in love. Only love, in absolute terms, does not become intolerant, because tolerance is a virtue of love. This too is a practically irrefutable proof of the existence of God. Only God's infinite love can fill the uneasy need for an absolute that man has within him, as St Augustine so synthetically expressed in *Confessions*: "Thou made us, oh Lord, for Thee, and our heart is uneasy until it rests in Thee".

Even Catholic groups or individual churches may be sectarian, usually without realizing it,¹⁵ but they have within them the seeds of recovery from this which can allow a holy life, real love, the true dream of the heart. Every Catholic group is centered around Christ, who belongs to everyone and not just to that group (Jehovah on the other hand is a group invention). They use the Gospel, which is the same for everyone and cannot be re-written in any other way. Every Catholic context is centered upon the Eucharist and the other sacraments, on devotion to Mary, Mother of God and our Mother. They all recognize the Pope as the common father, Christ's vicar on earth. This all means that the most important content of any Catholic group is not a one-off product made by that group, but a common gift, superior to all others, that unites in the only Church, in Heaven, notwithstanding any special features. This still does not guarantee the sanctity of the individuals, but does offer ways to sanctity, as Christian sanctity, in the germinal form that is given to us here on earth is the sole guarantee of authenticity, of a saved life, of true life, of true love. At the same time, it enables us to go beyond our own limits, to open up our hearts to non-believers, in pacific coexistence.

Not by chance have people whose *approval* has fixed upon the search for divine truth at all costs landed up in the Catholic Church. This is what happened with Newman. A fine example is Scoth Hahn, in the book *Rome Sweet Home*. As a good Presbyterian, he believed in the objective truth of Holy Scripture and was moved by an irresistible desire to get to the very bottom and not to stop at a traditional reading. And he landed up in the Catholic Church. We realize that here arguments and conflicting interpretations may arise over these very subjects. We prefer not to insist on them and to leave space to intuition prompted by the Holy Spirit.

In any case, this is not intended to be a complete picture of the need for the Church in order to live the Christian faith. Ecclesiology is immense. Here we try to offer one more argument, one which is very important, in order to understand how the innocent love of Christ can be encountered, really and consciously, only in his church. As regards salvation for example, we should remember Christ's words to Peter: "Simon, Simon, behold Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou are converted, strengthen thy brethren" (Luke 22:31-32). If we are all convinced that we are in the right or that we read the Word of God correctly, how can we emerge from this confusion? Confusion is a powerful weapon of the Enemy. The Gospel itself shows us the way - Peter is given help to illuminate the truth that saves, the truth that unites in Love. We must not then be surprised if the *profound approval* that binds in various churches manages to condition even the reading of such explicit words of Jesus. Just think of how the Jews and Christians read the same words of the Old Testament with such deeply different interpretations. And nobody is to blame, although it is still important that we progress in Truth.

Celibacy and matrimony

We have said that salvation, in the sense of a true love that is stronger than any fear, as a sign of happiness destined to be for all eternity, happens only (and does not necessarily happen) within "strong" Catholic communities. By this expression I mean those contexts of faith where "discounts" on the Gospel are not looked for. Where celibacy and matrimony flourish. Celibacy, here put together with virginity, is a clear sign of the presence of the risen Christ and of the creative and potent action of the Holy Spirit. Where there is celibacy there is also a 'front-line' faith - monks, nuns etc.; priests, who in giving themselves to celibacy are called on to make a strong profession of faith; and, as a particular gift of the Spirit to our times, in the ecclesial context that emerged in the course of the last century, where it can be most clearly seen that celibacy, particularly if taken as an expression of the radical nature of baptism, rather than as a particular sort of consecration, is a spur for all

15 As I discussed at length in my book *Liberare l'amore*, even among Catholics there is much idolatry, the search for approval not from Christ but from the group. At this level, Catholic groups have in their favor only the fact that objectively they are on the right path, and that eventual conversion is made much more likely by the fact that they need to change neither the group nor the path. It is not at all easy to convert intellectually, and to undertake a path by yourself, leaving behind you all your old friends and their inappropriate approval. So many young people abandon the faith because they have fallen in with non-observant company! Many do not "convert" precisely because their heart says "no", realizing that they would have to accept "excommunication" from the "secret church". A Catholic group, (I say "group" but I mean the very various range of ecclesial bodies) is therefore a positive path. We have seen how it is always better if the search for approval takes place within a positive context. In this sense, the non-Christian world religions certainly offer many positive values and often pacific coexistence.

Christians, even for those called by God to matrimony (which for Catholics is a sacrament and part of a divine design in Christ).

Those Christian who enter a religious order or are members of well-defined groups will always be the front-line. There are however other paths, other ecclesial contexts which emerged in the last century, or even properly organized parishes or dioceses inspired by Vatican Council II etc., which make possible a radical bond in Christ, without any remarkable social change. As a start it can be enough to have good spiritual direction, with a priest who believes in our aspiration to a holy life and counts on us for the apostolate in Christ's name.

Along with celibacy, we have also described marriage as a sign of living faith. In the Western world, nowadays, the family is undergoing its greatest crisis ever, with a degree of suffering and despair worse than that caused by natural disasters and even by many wars (without wishing to belittle the evils of war). Wherever a Christian lifestyle exists, strong and open to every sort of vocation, in celibacy and in matrimony, the family shows a much greater strength than that generally found in the rest of society. A statistic that should make us all stop and think is the average number of broken marriages in Western society: 30-40%. Wise people used to say that for every family that breaks up another two are in trouble. Today this can no longer be said for the simple reason that this would bring the total number to over 100%. But we can suppose that at least as many again are in trouble. And that gives us some 70-80% of the population who suffer deeply, which nothing can make up for. It is useless to say, in the great hypocrisy of our culture, that the important thing is to break up without too much fuss, or that the children suffer less like this than if they see their parents fighting all the time. In fact the children suffer much more, and if anything the only advice to be given is not to fight in front of them. As for the couple themselves, one of the two may feel freed of a burden, but certainly not for a more genuine love, but out of pure selfishness. The other partner is always mortally wounded. The one who is left feels life die within them and no rationalizing by others can bring them peace.¹⁶ Many young people, realizing the risk of failure, prefer to cohabit before marriage, more out of fear than for convenience's sake. They do not realize that this makes the problem worse - irresponsible cohabitation is certainly not a trial of marriage, precisely because of the question of responsibility for the lives of others for all one's life, which is an essential aspect of marriage and which cannot be experienced outside it.

But if we look at confirmed Christians, we find a marvelous situation. Leaving aside any sort of apologetics, and looking only at the facts, we can see that there is only one single case of marital breakdown for every one- to two-hundred families! Less than 1%, especially if both partners have an equally strong faith. If we count a few other cases of difficulties, we may arrive at 2-3%. The other marriages are good, are wonderful, with a lot of children and a really impressive show of human strength. Even sickness or poverty are faced up to in growing love and turned into adventures. A handicap is not a tragedy, but a chance for everyone to show concentrated attention and affection. These statistics should be enough to open our eyes to the efficacy of Christian salvation even within the heart of human history, and not only in the afterlife.

The reciprocal fecundity of celibacy and matrimony should make us reflect on the beauty of Christian morality and of sexuality in the context of love. Some people think that Christian morality asks too much. In reality we should notice carefully how each self-contained group has its own insistent demands and exacts much harsher sacrifices (even suicide, as we have seen), with an appearance of freedom. *In fact, in order to win the indispensable approval people will do anything.* Everyone thinks that he makes only the sacrifices he chooses to, but in reality he makes a lot and they all come back to the thin wire that binds his heart to the approval of others. At times, certain Christian groups may, from the outside, appear too demanding. Certainly, there are different sorts of sensibility, and the Church is rich in different possibilities. A profound respect for spiritual choices and the joy of seeing faith bloom on paths different from one's own is a part of catholicity. But as regards concrete requests, it is impossible to judge from the outside - a strongly Christian lifestyle will win the heart, as a simple and necessary alternative to the many "secret churches". When we feel loved we also feel free to respond, cost what it may. It is also true that if one loses the impetus of love, everything will seem unnecessarily complicated. Perhaps at this point one will see a primacy of institutions over people and go off in disgust. As T. S. Eliot puts it, saying that he learned this from Dante: "Take away love and you will create hell". But if the bond of love really is in Christ, according to the new commandment he gave us, what St Augustine said will prove true: "love and do what you will", freely wanting what Christian love asks of us.

16 See n. 1, ch. 1

Christianity and other religions

Moses gave the Law of God to the tribe of Israel. Jesus give the New Law, the New Covenant, to sinners. Christianity is the nation of sinners, which God loves. It is not longer one tribe against another, guided each by their own gods, no longer one people against the others - but *a people which includes everyone, as long as they are sinners, that is, everyone, as there is not a man on earth who is not wrapped in his own selfishness, which makes him slave to the opinions of others and so in need of salvation.* Original sin is a reversal of love. St Paul says: "For God hath concluded them all in unbelief, that He might have mercy upon all!" (Romans 11:32) and to the Galatians he writes: "The Scripture hath concluded all under sin" (Galatians 3:22). The universal nature of the claim to be part of the Kingdom maintains the variety and diversity of different peoples. Christian universality is no abstraction because it respects various traditions and different cultural expressions. At Pentecost Peter spoke in Aramaic and each heard his own language - this is a stupendous image of the new and definitive people of God.

The natural propensity to love, in overturning the sin that lurks in the depths of our hearts, binds us closely into little "peoples", into so many "tribes", even in such a very secular world. These "churches" are not all the same. Some are positive and allow, if not a really redeemed life, at least a positive one. In general, the best are those with religious features. But it must be clear that the non-Christian religions are not all the same, although they may all fulfill their confessional task of giving a conscious and powerful sense of belonging to many people.

Buddhism might seem to be an exception, as it is based on a knowledge that may appear strictly personal - becoming indifferent to everything in order to overcome the idolatry of success, of possessions, of the recognition of others. Buddha understood much about original sin and tried to deprive it of the lifeblood upon which it fed. However, he too does not escape the conditioning of sin. The idea that illuminated him, Nirvana, absolute indifference, is in fact a very powerful idea. He immediately gathered around him five old companions from their monastery, instructed them and sent them out to spread his idea. For him, and these five, a church was immediately formed, a strong bond. And it is thus for all Buddhists, in all ages. Even in the West, in our own times, where the current mentality is diametrically opposed to that of Buddhism, it is successful because it created *areas of approval* - all you need is a bit of transcendental meditation, a bit of yoga, a bit of indifference to the many superfluous goods that surround us, and you can feel that you have entered into the heart of an elect group. This is what drives people towards Buddhism, as it drives them towards New Age ideas and to any other sect or religion, but also towards groups of social, musical, political, etc. orientation. Of course, we repeat, what these groups require of us is not the same - Buddhism for example is more sublime than many others. Religions guarantee a great sense of solidarity and hence give a sense to life with their strong, significant bond. But we remain at the mercy of human *approval*, like Saul among the Hebrews - he had to be pre-eminent to have success in religious practices, in order to gain the *approval* of his people. God wants to save everyone to eternal life and accepts ignorance as an excuse, called on by Jesus on the cross. In the end, through the purification of Purgatory, He will save, thanks to his mercy and the fact that he sees into our hearts so much better than we do. He recognizes the goodwill that lies hidden behind every sort of *approval*, which is much more powerful than the ability to tell good from evil. God will and can save well beyond baptism with water, and sees the baptism of desire in the labyrinths of the human heart, which thirsts after love. This, however, does not mean that it's all the same, that all religions are equal and that it is not of immense importance to know and to practice the ways of salvation here on earth, for one's own good, on earth and in heaven (which will not be of the same intensity for everyone), for the good of those near to us and for the good of all mankind, who await the testimony of the sons of God in order to know and enjoy the beatifying presence of salvation.

Although Protestant communities are closed within themselves and thus cannot fully redeem the heart in its perverse need of idolatrous love, they base themselves on the Holy Scriptures and so in some way start to overcome the group (and this possibility is the passage to salvation, to the gift of the innocent love of Christ). We must however ask how it is possible to read the same text, even a revealed text, with a different idolatrous preconception of its meaning, which prevents a real engagement with heaven. The Protestant experience has shown how easy it is to split off and to think oneself the bearer of the only valid reading of the Bible. No Catholic saint has ever dreamed of claiming to be the only one to have fully read the Gospel. But this is what Luther thought - a strong and even valid light convinced him that he was right but he really closed himself in idolatry and went so far as to divide the Church (I do not wish to ignore the responsibility of the clergy, nor to

oversimplify the problem). This view should not be taken in an anti-ecumenical sense - Catholics too are involved with subtle forms of idolatry (in fact only the saints allow redeeming love to enter). I use it only to emphasize that Protestants are on a road that may lead to salvation but only with a strong sense of ecumenism, directed towards true catholicity, which can overcome the concrete and historical forms of the institutional Church, but cannot ignore it (just think of Taizé). Catholics too must be catholic, which is not easy and will engage them in true ecumenism. We have already said that catholicity united many sorts of ecclesial reality, very different one from the other, many “peoples” with different languages, so long as everyone knows the language of the Spirit.

On embracing Christianity some must leave their “secret church” because it is perverse or negative - atheism, racism, class struggle, Satanism and so on. But many other loyalties can substantially be respected. Africans can dance in liturgical celebration (this dancing has a great cultural and traditional content), just as other peoples can maintain traditions and rites that are compatible with Christian faith. In this sense, Christianity is called to be the true universal people, although not in the cosmopolitan sense of Enlightenment thinkers or of the economic globalization of our own times.

Many new sects have sprung up, especially in Latin America, but also here among us - Jehovah’s Witnesses, for example - and this is due to the fact that many traditional Christians have never experienced a “strong” bond with the Church or a concrete path to follow, but only a moral obligation to external acts. As other social bonds have weakened (the village, the extended family, large families, etc.) many people feel humanly attracted by a close-knit group which may offer attention and a warm welcome, but certainly not salvation. All over the world, these sects have multiplied. Each thinks it possesses the truth, but none leads to salvation.

Let me repeat that here we are not talking of eternal salvation - which God accords on looking into the heart of each of us - but rather of awareness here on earth of what redemption is and being able to consciously experience its joyous fruits and the efficacy of good for others. *Not only the saints will be saved, but only the saints will understand why God created the world, allowed evil to exist, and gave us freedom, historical responsibility, and family and social bonds.* Many people justify atheism or agnosticism by pointing to the sufferings of children. But where there is love, where the family can respond to suffering with even deeper bonds, we can at once see that physical suffering brings its own redemption, that it promotes love and happiness. What a lot of wonderful examples there are! But the ultimate support is the love of Christ on the cross, who became ours with the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. At the same time it is true that many who do not belong to the Church will be saved, not however by their own merits but through the redemption of Christ, through the gift of the Holy Spirit. After a careful study of this theme of salvation through the Church, Cardinal Giacomo Biffi points out that the refusal of this certainty by non-Catholics and also the silence of some Catholics can be explained by the possibility that the Church too has become idolatrous, has become an absolute. But, looking at the Church as ever centered in Christ, the true bearer of salvation, we can certainly say that “if ‘ecclesiality’ is in its proper and fullest meaning an intimate relationship with Christ, then it becomes clear and rewarding to say that belonging in some way to the ‘*Christus totus*’ is, rather than a condition, a substantial feature of our salvation”.¹⁷

Only a strong ecclesial bond in the Holy Spirit can redeem the heart of man, idolatrously closed within his group. Even John Paul II’s asking forgiveness for sins committed by Christians over the centuries is an indicator, as was the intention of real catholicity, of a true, vibrant universality. It shows the reality of a universal love, no abstraction, which binds us in God and redeems us from our selfish and self-referential or narcissistic ties. In Christ it must be possible to dream of true, deep, lasting, universal reconciliation. St Paul can say that Christ is our peace, because he is able to reconcile the Jews with the Gentiles: “For He is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; [...] for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby. [...] For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father” (Ephesians II, 14-16; 18). Still today we can see how difficult it is to break down the wall between Jews and Palestinians, who are

17 G. Biffi, *La sposa chiacchierata. Invito all’ecclesiocentrismo*, Jaca Book, Milan, 1998, p. 73

ruled by a tribal God and not by the all-comprehending Trinity. So long as our God makes war on another we are locked into a tribal God. This can happen to Catholics too but this does not change the fact that true peace is founded in Christ alone.

What to do next?

So far, we have already given some particular indications to the reader. Let's just remind a few of them.

First of all, our thesis emphasizes for everyone the need for a greater cultural, social and ecclesial responsibility. This requirement is finalized at creating youth centers capable of leading the inevitable issue of the quest for the *indispensable approval* towards better contents. Moral responsibility can never be reduced to "what concerns my own behavior and attitude, period". On the contrary, it must be able to realize whether it is generating approval around us and, in this case, how much of it.

Talking direct: youngsters, don't fool yourselves! You have got no chance whatsoever to live your life as if you could do it without external influences. It would be like conceiving the possibility to marry yourselves! However, it holds true that everyone is indeed as unique as he or she is loved by God in a fully original and personal way.

Moreover, God entrusts everyone with a task; each individual is supposed to discover his or her vocation: a divine task that represents the only and true life secret, the issue by which everything makes sense. This is, of course, a personal task, even though its ecclesial implications make it so important for the good of the whole mankind.

Since we know that other people influence our behavior and attitude far more than we tend to realize and admit, it is good for our conscience that we entrust it to either a very good group or an equally efficacious spiritual direction. We have seen that Jesus sent Saul, who had already been converted, to Damascus as soon as he asked Him what to do next. The first step to live a faith-based life is always an ecclesial step. Parents' favorable attitude can exert a crucial and decisive role, as their kids turn 11 or 12, in order to stimulate them to spontaneously enter a good and sound youth group.

Meeting other people, in its deepest meaning, makes sense only if there is a connection with an equally deep interior life. It is demanding, and it requires that we offer part of our own time to pursue assets such as contemplation, God's Word, liturgy, sacraments. Our boundaries of love are both as authentic and worth as our own existence is vitally rooted in the Person of Christ. According to the Gospel interpretation, Jesus used to pray at least two hours a day, despite He "needed" to pray much less than us, since His divine Person lived in an intrinsic and eternal dialog with the Father and the Holy Spirit. However, being also a human person, as such He felt the "need", the obligation, to stop His current daily activities in order to temporarily focus His whole attention on the Father.

Regardless on the way the ecclesial boundary gets ultimately realized, it is necessary to pay particular attention to a couple of issues: friendship and the "new commandment".

The lack of true friendship is striking. The huge need for friendship makes it natural that most young people tend to make friends, but very few of them know how to build up friendship. It is necessary to learn how to build up new friendships in any state of life and to defend friendship whenever any sort of struggle arises. It is necessary to move the first steps and to repeat them as many times as required in order to either abolish or diminish the useless friends' suspects, misunderstandings, lacks of attention or of physical presence, etc. The ability to build up such a friendship must be directed far beyond the routine group of friends and the conventional ecclesial boundaries; quite the opposite: it must remain wide open towards all predictable and unpredictable directions. As for the "new commandment", the whole paragraph devoted to it should suffice at clarifying its take-home message.

First rule within the ecclesial group: never establishing relationships with same-age friends only. It is crucial both to receive positive influences from older people and to succeed at positively influencing younger kids. All in all, a young person cannot limit his or her own potential to just get ready to receive from others. He must become a factor per se, a positive factor within the society; this goal will be achieved as much as he or she will

become a person who cares about others in any kind of environmental situation: apostolic, cultural, professional activities and the alike.

Each young individual has to cultivate his own "first name", his own indispensable intellectual autonomy, based on life ideas, good readings, art interests, sport activities, etc, but based especially on whatever sort of serious, personal, professional responsibility. In the long run, this very fact will become decisive for the personal fate. You should become capable of envisioning moral as the tool that binds all passages of our life as well as us with all the other people. In particular, the issue of sexuality needs to be dealt with starting from a deep and open look at subjects such as life, family, society. The innate moral sense endowed into the human heart might represent a reasonable starting point to get oriented, provided the person is aware of the fact that the indispensable approval can, more often than just "at times", force the spontaneous rationality towards its own sad advantage. To prove this concept, it suffices to verify that each group is characterized by its own moral, always partially different from that of other groups. This, of course, despite each group thinks to be the only owner of the only right moral. In this respect, nobody can ultimately pretend to ignore John Paul II's words to two million youngsters during the year 2000 Jubilee in Rome. He invited them to fight hard against the difficulties deployed by today's world to mock first and then knock down the concept of engagement chastity. Experience teaches that as same-age members of a good ecclesial group believe in this very aspect of the Pope's teaching, all of them will experience how easy it becomes to live this commandment and to pave the way of a long-lasting love.

The first and foremost problem of today's world is the intrinsic weakness of all love boundaries, particularly within the family. This fact sounds even more tragic as compared with the wonderful results obtained in the same field within good, solid, ecclesial groups. Among the several issues that have to be taken into account to better understand the youth's future, this one is truly preminent. Final advice: learn to spiritually fight with sincerity, humility, realism and optimism. Sincerity, in order not to be led into the temptation of changing the truth when we make errors that are contrary to it. Humility, in order never to get discouraged, since we must be aware that both sinner salvation and good come from God; we just need to get fully aware of our weaknesses and bring them to our Savior. Realism, because as we rejoice in the knowledge of being loved even as we make mistakes, we cannot escape the need for developing Conclusion

a sincere and operational desire to contribute less and less to make the cross of Christ heavier; in other words, we should help Him carrying the cross by both sinning less and being better. Optimism, because as we sin thousands of times, it takes that we also raise up each and every time: over and over again, being aware that all this is not a fake, since God is with us and is omnipotent. If our recurrent good proposals are worth zero and all we do is ultimately an orizzontal row of zeros, He is the number "1" on the left of that row: the total is a progressively increasing number that smells of Heaven.

The take home message

We now have all the facts we need to draw our conclusions.

The three chapters are *three cornerstones* to make us aware of life and faith, to choose a life which is authentic and open to every sort of future.

Firstly, everyone must recognize the levels of self-love in his heart, which, as the word itself says, is love, but love set on its head - how he reacts in success and in failure; how he fears lack of recognition by others or the loss of their respect, or the rejection of human love; what sacrifices he is prepared to make in order to achieve the guarantee of *the indispensable approval*. We should discover what sort of "secret church" we belong to. Even those who think they have no group in fact have strong ties with friends or those whose esteem they will enjoy in the future.

All this makes them slaves to circumstance, and even more to the will of others. Everyone is on the edge of an abyss of fear, which opens up when the significant bond is broken. Even if success is lasting it does not guard against mediocrity and leaves us exposed to dread of failure.

The problem of love is more profound and omnipresent than all the other problems of human life. Only a gift of love that is not at the mercy or the will of others can give trust and freedom to the human heart.

And so we pass to our second point.

The revelation of God-love occurs only in Christ.

Only if I feel loved by God in Christ, if I know God-love, can I establish social bonds without the servitude of depending on others for fundamental meaning in my life.

Only I feel fully loved, humanly and divinely, can I open myself to hope and optimism in the face of whatever life may bring, knowing that should I fail, which is always possible, I will have the great consolation of being able to share in the passion of Christ, thus purifying and increasing my capacity to love.

The third point considers the fact that we are part of history, we live with others and so conditioned are we by our deep need for recognition, we will never be able to do without the acceptance we find in a reference group. This makes the Church indispensable as a community of communities, as a powerful bond that can give human meaning to the life of each of us but which is also open to the gift from Heaven. This is part of God's design, which does not intend us to be alone and points to fraternal love as the real task of human history.

Although we all have a "secret church" it is only the one with a capital C that can truly resolve the problem of life and love.

The time has now come for Christian truth, for the bond of freely given, conscious, personal love between man and God, between man and man, in Christ: Christian sanctity. This is the gift that must be sought from the Holy Spirit, throughout our lives. In the 1930s, when sacral bonds still held fast but the seeds of secularism were already at work, the blessed José Maria Escrivá - a prophet of our times - proclaimed to the world: "A secret. - A loudly proclaimed secret: these world crises are the crises of saints" (*Cammino*, no. 301). We must not think of a sanctity that separates from the world, that makes different, but simply a real desire for love, which is the gift of grace, and constantly renews this desire both in the heart and in fraternal reciprocation, open to everyone. Bernanos said: sanctity is an adventure. In fact, it is the only adventure. Anyone who has glimpsed it, even once, has penetrated the secret of the Church. But who takes the trouble to be holy?

Now it is easier to justify the deliberate provocation of the title. Why Catholic and not simply Christian? Today the tendency is to use the term "Catholic" less and less. It seems almost "theologically incorrect". In reality a vague sort of Christianity is useless. The Church and the pope are a point of reference even for those who do not recognize themselves in them. But the main point is the question of salvation - only a bond of love that is not locked inside one's reference group can save the human heart from fear, and this can only be found in Catholicism. It is not enough to belong to a "secret church" which is positive and enduring; this does not offer a true hope that can stand up to possible rejection by the human community, and so will not be a true joy, a gift for others. Redemption is a gift of love, from heaven, which heals the fear of the heart and accepts us for all eternity.

And so we justify the words "be Catholic", which should be interpreted as a necessity and not just something nice and expedient. A necessity for anyone who wants to find true humanity after that terrible overturning of the human heart that we call "original sin" or *mysterium iniquitatis*, whose features we have described and which is the immeasurable problem of love set on its head. But, more especially, it is a necessity for anyone who wants to understand the true condition of man in God's eternal design (a design whose aim is to have us all in communion within the Holy Trinity). Secularized society very easily comes up with new forms of *approval*, but these are ephemeral. Culture erodes bonds, although in reality subjectivity is only presumed and never possible. It is true however that a society that wants to call itself morally neutral, even if each group has its own very strong morality, in the long run creates uncertainty and instability, to the point of depression.

And finally we come to the third provocation: why "young people"? We know of marvelous conversions in the declining years. We know the parable of the workers called to work in the vineyard at the last hour, who were paid as much as those who came at the first hour. The good thief fills us with hope. Death can bring great clear-sightedness. But it is also true that these are very limited cases. For everyone like Ernst Jünger who accepted the sacraments at the age of 101 after long consideration, there are many who turn to the priest on their deathbeds, but only when the fear of death has overcome the fear of losing the esteem of friends - atheists or non-believers, or Marxists, or Free Masons. If human *approval* "compels" (the right word) us not to practice the Christian faith, only when this *approval* finally falls away, can we properly remember eternal life. But the risk is that we are converted by fear, not by truth. What's more, there may not be the time or the opportunity to think properly at the end. And even if there is, there will follow the infinite sadness of having wasted our life on earth, which was made for us to learn to love others with the heart of Christ and to make our contribution of a noble and

responsible life to building the Kingdom, to drawing many people to Christ, to the great benefit of civilization too.

For all these reasons I feel I must declare that for man there is no real and valid alternative to belonging to a community of “strong faith”, which can take very many different forms, from monasticism to a life of the greatest simplicity in the world, and includes a sincere love for humanity, work, friendship, art, games, especially among young people, voluntary work, etc.. Today the traditional village no longer exists, so there is an even greater need for *a conscious choice of faith from an early age*. If a teenager’s heart is stolen by other groups, there is no telling where his life will end up, although future conversion cannot be excluded (for some). *The future is for those who freely bind themselves to Christ, and acknowledge and know the power of fraternal love experienced within an ecclesial context that spills over into society.*

We have tried to offer a concrete and existential explanation verifiable by anyone who looks around himself with a minimum of attention, of the great message that the Church, through Vatican Council II, has offered to all mankind in the second half of the 20th century. A message which, at a distance of several decades, is increasingly visible in the affirmation of a universal call to sanctity and in the structure of the Church as a communion of communities.

At this point it will also be clear, however, that it is not necessarily in itself enough for young people to be in a Catholic setting with a living faith. Actually, the great majority of Catholics do not live a more real love than any other valid religious group. Salvation lies in Christ within his Church, but it is necessary to be in this church with a living faith in Christ and animated by the Spirit. Faith can be practiced as a religion, through ritual, without seeing the face of the risen Christ who loves us, with the scars of his cross. An apologue of the early years of Christianity reminds us of this, and can give us an idea of how necessary it is to go beyond the visible group with a personal faith in Christ. The story goes that in the early days of Christianity, a man went to a hermit. Master - he said - tell me something: why is it that so many people leave their homes to come into the desert to pray, and then most of them go home again? You see, - replied the man of God, - it’s like when a dog sees a hare; he starts running and barking as loud as he can. When the other dogs hear him barking and see him running, they set off to join in the uproar and run and bark as well. But they haven’t seen the hare, and so when they get tired, they stop. But the one who has seen the hare doesn’t stop until he catches it!

As Jesus loves you, exclusively, you must love Jesus personally, in the closeness of friendship. Your Jesus, not the vague figure that belongs to everyone. Even having seen how absolutely necessary the ecclesial bond is, so that I would say that Christian sanctity cannot come about without the Church, in bonds of love, I must say with equal certainty that no one can love and sanctify himself in my stead or in yours - in love, group conformity is not enough. There is a primacy of spiritual life, as Jesus explains to Martha, which requires the profound bond of prayer. Ideas, doctrine, even the group, are not enough - what is needed is inner life, the life of the spirit, which is not an abstraction like mathematics or philosophy, it is life. It involves the will, desires, intentions, hopes, memory and, above all, the intellect, the *intus-legere*, which sees into things deeply, which can contemplate and leads to profound moments of spiritual life. If the seed of grace does not find the furrow of prayer, of the life of the spirit, it will not bear fruit.

To conclude, let us return to the title: *The challenge of Love*. This is love with a capital L, which comes from God and challenges the world, not in order to provoke but to save. It is a challenge not to mankind but to evil. The innocent love of Christ challenges the darkness of the heart, the thousand fears of man. It challenges the obstinacy that ruins so many families, the ambition that turn work into a war. It challenges selfishness, presumption. It challenges the misplaced pleasures that give rise to wild mass-selfishness. It challenges the innumerable struggles for power and ethnic or racial hatred. It challenges illness and death. Love requires freedom, and this is why God had to allow so many ills caused by the selfishness of man. If the ill is merely physical, the strong love of a family or of a community with a living faith will transform it into an adventure. There are so many examples of this. The problem is the evil caused by human pride. This is the great challenge - Love does not fear any evil, because it is much stronger. We must however remember that our idol will obtain any sacrifice, even that of life. Otherwise we are indeed left in the rhetoric of a love that overcomes death, but only because the words sound well.

God wagered Satan that Job would remain faithful to Him, even without any earthly reward. And Job - without knowing this! - proved Him right. We know more: Jesus staked not only his physical life, but honor, esteem and reputation, he submitted to a supreme injustice, which includes all the injustices in the world,¹⁸ and proved the Father right as to the victory of Love. Everything is born of Love - God is love! In Love there is everything, in freedom, in joy, in beauty, cost what it may. This is the great challenge from heaven. Modernity staked everything on the ability of reason to make man happy. It was an illusion. It failed in the relationship of love amongst men. The new millennium is born ready vaccinated against many illusions of human reason and the ensuing wave of despair, selfishness, pan-sexualism, etc., as substitutes for the happiness that is wanting. But the new millennium will not necessarily accept the great challenge of love, of meaningful relationships, of the individual who defines himself in freedom and in love. Christians have a great responsibility to bear witness to Love with a life that sanctifies itself and offers visible fraternal bonds which the world does not know. If for Christians the second millennium saw the growth of eucharistic faith, the presence of Christ in the sacramental and liturgical gift, this new millennium will have to open up visibly to acknowledge the presence of Christ in our brothers. It will have to demolish every sort of judgment of others, every barrier of race, culture, religion, or wealth, starting with our neighbors.

Christian rebirth in baptism is first of all a birth into Love, for an earthly life of deep understanding. The world will have to see that one can be reborn by understanding and that Love is stronger than what divides us, stronger than any sort of selfishness, stronger than any fear.

18 Injustice is the difference between what I am owed and what I am given - if I deserve an A in an exam and I get a B, I feel unjustly treated. To Jesus was owed every human and divine honor, and he was numbered among criminals, the worst in Israel. The gap between what is owed and what is given defines every sort of injustice.

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