

IX. THE DIGNITY AND FREEDOM OF THE PERSON - BASIS FOR COMMUNITY

“In obedience to our Lord, it is our duty to develop on earth the values of human dignity, brotherhood and freedom” (G.S. 39).

All religious living must be based on the dignity (personal worth) and the freedom of the person. Without this foundation, there can be no authentic religious life, for the Gospel is about human dignity. It is very important that our community life be based on faith in God, and on a belief in the worth of every person. (cf. Div. Mis. 6).

THE DIGNITY OF THE PERSON

God has affirmed each one of us. His first word to each of us is a word of affirmation — our own existence. We can say truly, with St. Paul: *“In Him we live, we move, we have our being.”* (Act. 17, 28). We can be sure He believes in us, for He is continually creating us out of love. It was He who put us together:

*“It was you who created my inmost self,
And put me together in my mother's womb;
For all these mysteries I thank you;
For the wonder of myself, for the wonder of your works. You know me through and through
From having watched my bones take shape
When I was being formed in secret,
Knitted together in the limbo of the womb.
You had scrutinized my every action,
All were recorded in your book.”* (Ps. 139, 13-16).

God really knows each one of us as we are without labels or categories:

*“Yahweh you examine me and you know me, You know if I am standing or sitting,
You read my thoughts from far away,
Whether I walk or lie down you are watching, You know every detail of my conduct.
The word is not even on my tongue,
Yahweh, before you know all about it.
Close behind and close in front you fence me round,
Shielding me with your hand.”* (Ps. 139, 1-6).

God really loves each one of us as we are. — We all know this with a sort of cerebral knowledge, but to be really convinced of this in your whole being, to be able to base your whole life on the truth of His **unconditional** love is a tremendous grace :

“I have called you by name, and you are mine”... “You are precious in my eyes and I love you” (Is. 43, 1 and 4). *“I have branded you on the palm of my hand.”* (Is. 49, 16).

He has addressed these words personally to each one. This is the source of confidence for all of us — His **unconditional** love. What I am trying to say is that the foundation for the dignity of the person is God's choice of each person. God has put His stamp on us. He has made us in His own image and likeness. He has somehow put His own richness in each one of us. As an Irish poet once put it: *“The image of God is multiplied but not monotonous — no man need be mediocrity if he accepts himself as God made him, for God only makes geniuses!”* Each one of us is a Divine Mystery. Each one of us is a person, a centre of thought and love, each one is a temple of the Spirit of Love. There are so many

defences we put up as we seek to love and to be loved. We have all sorts of masks we put on, in case we won't be loved, as we seek to be affirmed. Underneath all the externals, a gracious God is present, a God who loves us. This is the source of our dignity — it is another way of expressing the doctrine of the Sacred Heart.

God's love is not based on our human qualities. God's love is not based on our response. We do not need to deserve His love. We do not need to earn His love — God's love for each one of us is based on nothing that we do. In radical love He has bonded Himself to each of us. He could never take His love back. He could never close to us His open Heart. We have His love, not because we are especially worthy of love — it is because His Heart belongs to each one of us that we are basically good and worthy of love.

Perhaps, we have been brought up on another (rather Pelagian) spirituality? What was important was not God's love for us, but our love for God. A direct contradiction of the Gospel : “*This is the love I mean*”, says St. John, “*not our love for God, but God's love for us... We ourselves put our faith in God's love for us.*” (1 John 4, 16). This is the spirituality of the poor man — as the Psalmist says : “*I trust in the goodness of God for ever and ever.*” (Ps. 51). The vital truth then is that God loves me. We cannot induce that love, we cannot deserve it.

Each one of us then is a unique being, present with all our gifts and our life histories, with everything we have ever experienced. We came from particular families, each with our own special history; each of us with a certain education, each with skills and abilities we have acquired. Each of us with our limitations and inhibitions. We are in this particular place, in this community, at this moment in history. We did not choose to exist; our existence was given to us. The real reason for our existence is to be found at a depth far below that at which ordinary events take place. You have been given to yourself in a mysterious way; try to understand and experience and reverence your being as a living reality — realize how rich you are, how much God has given you. In fact, it is impossible to overestimate the worth of anyone.

Each one has his/her own unique mission in the world, a mission no one else can perform. Each one of us is irreplaceable — we have our own particular experience of God's love to bring to our particular world — the love that comes from each one's personality, with each one's own particular warmth. In God's Providence, we have our own network of relationships, of people whom we are called upon to love. To the extent that we do not fulfill our mission, the whole world will be diminished, and God's Kingdom of Love will not be fully realized.

It is therefore important that each one of us have a belief in self, and a belief in our mission to love.

This **acceptance of self**, based on God's love (and not on our virtue, competence, achievements) — this sense of one's own worth and mission despite our sinfulness — enables us to be happy, to be who we are. It gives us a great respect for ourselves, and a corresponding respect for other people. St. Thomas Aquinas says : “*The origin of friendly relations with others lies in a friendly relationship to oneself... the sinner fails not so much in loving himself, but in failing to do so.*”

A great strengthening of this sense of our worth will come from reading God's word, through which He is constantly affirming us in our being. We need to grow more and more in these convictions so that we have **a constant sense of being loved by God**. Our ability to love is very much linked with faith in self (a faith based ultimately on His love). Being aware that we are loved sets us free, and it enables us to accept others too. It makes us capable of loving, and this is the real power of the Christian — so essential for community — the power to love, the power to forgive. Belief in yourself, in your own uniqueness, in your own dignity, eliminates comparisons with other people. We are neither better nor worse than each other — we are unique. Each has his/her own contribution to make. We complement, enrich each other. We are not in competition with each other. To accept this enables us to eliminate envy, jealousy, hatred. We recognize the gifts of all. One loves the others as other than

oneself — each with their own gifts which enrich, rather than threaten us. It is only when we accept ourselves, that we can accept others.

One who believes in self can be for others. Only if we accept and possess ourselves, can we give ourselves to others. The real support is to **be** with and for others, to be the kind of presence in the lives of others that inspires faith and confidence in them. We cannot give each other a greater gift than our faith and trust. We all need the affirmation that springs from our awareness of God's love, but also the affirmation that comes to us when others love and trust us. Unless we believe in ourselves, we cannot reveal ourselves. The first thing God did when He loved us was that **He revealed Himself**. Love is not just sharing our possessions, sharing our knowledge, our wisdom, our services — love is above all sharing ourselves. This we cannot do unless we believe in ourselves — we will be too afraid/ ashamed — this is why it is so fundamental (for the formation of real community), to build it on faith and reverence for persons. Otherwise, we will not be able to communicate with each other in any real depth. Love is a gift. We can give each other this support. We can understand, stand under each other. We can put our faith in each other (literally!) by sharing. Paul VI stated that *dove is the genius of the apostolate*. » We can convert each other, by loving each other with His love ! Our ministry begins in the community where — we love, accept, support, listen to, respect, reverence each other, set each other **free**.

THE FREEDOM OF THE PERSON

The dignity of the person demands that we respect his/her freedom. Christ came to set us free. Every Christian then must be a promotor of freedom, and every Christian community must be a place of freedom. “*Only in freedom can a man direct himself to goodness*” (G.S. 17). So, if we are not free, we cannot be good. “*Human society thrives in an atmosphere of freedom.*” (P.T. 35). This also includes the religious community. “*Mans dignity requires him to act out of conscious and free choice, as moved and drawn in a personal way from within, and not by blind impulses in himself or by mere external constraint.*” (G.S. 17).

“*Where the Spirit is, there is freedom.*” (II Cor. 3, 17) — for it is the Spirit that enables us to love, and freedom flourishes in an atmosphere of love. Thus, in any community in order to bring about the freedom of the children of God, there must be an atmosphere of openness to the Spirit. The Spirit always comes through the Word, and so we are back again on the Word of God nourishing our dignity, and nourishing our freedom. “*If you make my word your home, you will indeed be my disciples, you will learn the truth and the truth will make you free.*” (Jn. 8, 31-32). That is one of the big functions of prayer — that the Spirit would take over in our lives, and enable us to break out of the shackles of fear and mistrust, so that we can 'be' for each other.

We are all imprisoned in so many ways. We live in our little private dungeons, only faintly tapping at the walls trying to get out. Our tapping is not audible on the outside. But we are afraid and we are locked in, above all by our prejudices, which inhibit our freedom. Sometimes, we are imprisoned also by loneliness, by suffering, by ignorance, by fear or by concupiscence. All these are obstacles to our freedom. “*Love casts out fear.*” Love sustains, love heals, love is an agent for personal growth and freedom.

The religious community, according to Vatican II is supposed to be “*a school of love*”, a place where people learn to love. The love of God and of the members is enkindled in all, and from that religious community it extends out to whomsoever the community influences or effects. This then is the mark of a religious community — it must be “*an outstanding community of love*” where people will grow in an atmosphere of affirmation and genuine warmth. In fact, in Evangelica Testificatio Pope Paul VI made what I regard as one of the most important statements on the religious life when he said that the real strength of religious life, as it advances from day to day, is the bond of friendship among the brethren (cf. E.T. 39). We must then do everything possible to build up the bond of friendship and

trust among the brethren. As external controls diminish in the religious life, it is most essential that we become more and more bound to each other by the bonds of love.

Friendship and love are so linked with freedom that we can treat them together. Our prejudices enslave us, and so it is fundamental, if we are to create an atmosphere of freedom in a community, that in the Spirit of Christ, we become less and less judgemental. I refer, of course, to condemnatory judgements. “*I judge no one*”, says Christ — “*Judge not and you will not be judged*”... “*He doth not judge by appearances*” — We judge people by whether they are wearing the habit or not, whether they have their hair cropped or whether it is long ! “*Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.*” “*Judgement is mine*”, says the Lord. God alone is the searcher of hearts. “*Neither will I condemn you.*” “*No matter who you are, if you pass judgement you have no excuse. In judging others, you condemn yourself.*” (Rom. 2, 1).

To judge no one is very difficult in practice, but let us never be condemnatory in our approach to any person. Rather, we must accept people with God's love in our hearts — accept each other unconditionally — not categorising each other. That is what judgement does — “*He is conservative,*” “*he is liberal,*” etc. We should respect everyone's personal freedom: “*All the faithful, clerical and lay, possess a lawful freedom of enquiry and of thought, and the freedom to express their minds humbly and courageously about those matters in which they enjoy competence.*” (G.S. 62).

With the love of Christ, we accept others as God accepts them. We accept them **unconditionally**. We free them from the threat of external evaluation. I speak of a whole new way of relating to people, the way to which we as religious are called to witness.

“*Charity is patient, is tolerant, does not judge, Love excuses.*” These must not be just words for us. It is a way of life, an attitude, the Spirit of Christ in our approach. “*Authentic freedom is an exceptional sign of the divine image in men.*” (G.S. 17). We must create communities in which this deep respect for the person is primary, communities that give ample scope to the individual, where people are trusted. It is more important to stress that each person should be his own true self than to emphasize that a team must be formed. When we really help each person to become himself authentically, we indirectly stimulate community life. Of course, there will be abuses — but ‘abusus non tollit usum.’ Love is, after all, a free response — and a good community of brothers, sensitive, caring and forgiving, will have its own attractiveness.

This kind of community, based on the dignity and freedom of the human person, is built, not by men but by God. It is not possible without God's grace. For, we trust other people and we don't; we are communal persons and we are not; we like some people and we don't ! To realize that trust can fail, but to accept that trust can be built up again, that **with Christ everything is forgivable**, that is not the way of the world. Erich Fromm points out that the world accepts (at best) what he calls the philosophy of fairness — “*I'll give you what you give me, I'll love you if you love me.*” That philosophy is alien to the Gospel message which lays down no conditions to love. *If you love those who love you, what merit have you, even the pagans do that... Love your enemies... do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you..*” (cf. Mt., ch. 5). This is costly, non-selective love. This love is to be the distinguishing sign of the followers of Jesus. We believe it is possible because Jesus Christ has gone before us and said: this is the way. We believe not in our own powers, but in the power of God's love to overcome all tensions. We believe that trust can fail, but that it can be rebuilt, that in dying, new life is generated. Christ is the sign — Christ is the guarantee that good conquers evil, that love can destroy hate, that life triumphs over death. Although Jesus died, we see beyond the crucifixion to the resurrection. He rose again, as a life-giving Spirit. That Spirit gives us the power to be in a whole new way. His is the life we want to live, the life of the risen Christ. All our communities must testify to that life and love of Jesus — it is a love that the world does not understand, a love which demands tremendous self-giving, a love which is its own asceticism.

It is a **love that reconciles**, a love that creates true brotherhood and unity. In the very process of loving in this way, we make God present... “*where there is charity and love, there is God.*” In the

words of the Vatican Council : *“The Primitive Church provided an example of community life, when the multitude of believers were of one heart and one mind, and found nourishment in the teaching of the Gospel and in the Sacred Liturgy, especially the Eucharist. Let such a life continue in prayerfulness and a sharing of the same spirit. As Christ's members, let each carry the other's burdens. For thanks to God's love poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, a religious community is a true family gathered together in the Lord's name and rejoicing in His presence... Brotherly unity shows that Christ has come, and from it results great apostolic influence.”* (P.C. 15).

This kind of community is a reflection of the Divine Community — a community which doesn't come from structures, but from the Persons of the Trinity and the relationship between them. This relationship is one of mutual understanding and love, which is a sharing of persons. We too are called to be one with each other —

- *“that they may be one, as Thou, Father, in Me and I in Thee.”*
- *“that they may be one that the world may be converted.”*
- *“that they may be one that the world might know that I come from the Father.”»* (Jn. 17, 21-23).

This is the vision of Christ Himself for us — that our communities might be visible signs of His love and unity. We must see ourselves as **promoters of unity**, of warmth, of unconditional love in our communities, so that they can be visible, observable spectacles of unity in love. Our communities are **communities of service**. The first service we have to offer is the service of unity, based on the mutual respect for the dignity and freedom of each person.

There are many ways of living in communion. There are no predetermined models. (cf. G.Ch. 1982). That is why it is important for us to clarify the essential values we wish to preserve, live out and develop. Only then can we apply them to our situation in creative ways.