

Bridging every division

# Creating space for diversity

Chiara Lubich

*This Focolare Word of Life commentary was written by the author in December 1986 and still resonates powerfully today. It offers us a key for addressing the multiple polarizations in ecclesial, political and social spheres as well as in our communities. It is no accident that Chiara Lubich speaks of this Gospel passage as "one of the most challenging points of the Christian message . . ."*

***'Welcome one another, then, as Christ welcomed you, for the glory of God.'* (Rm 15:7)**

This Word of life puts fraternal love back into motion in our souls. But why was this heartfelt desire expressed by the Apostle Paul? The diverse cultural and religious traditions of the members of the early Christian communities could create difficulties that impacted harmony and unity. The communities and their members that arose from the Greco-Roman region came partly from Judaism and partly from paganism. Because of this, there could be biases and prejudices towards one another, especially around interpretations of certain laws of worship. And this was the case in the Roman community to which Paul was writing.

To overcome these difficulties, Paul finds no more effective means than the example of Jesus, who welcomed those coming from Judaism and those from paganism without distinction. Having embraced the Gospel and been redeemed by him, they now formed one new people together. And Christians need to learn how to welcome one another, even those coming from very different mindsets, just as Jesus did.

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The Gospels show Jesus with an attitude of boundless acceptance during his earthly life. He welcomes everyone, especially the least, the helpless and the marginalized. The reason that sinners and those far from God turn to Jesus is because they feel fully welcomed by him.

But it is especially during the Passion that he shows us his infinitely welcoming love that goes beyond all misunderstandings, ingratitude and betrayals. He forgave us and welcomed us with immense love.

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Jesus showed us that to love means to welcome the other as he or she is, just as Jesus welcomed each of us. It is welcoming the other, with all their preferences, ideas, flaws, and diversity.

It means creating space for another within us, clearing from our hearts every judgment and tendency to refute another. One could say that this is among the most challenging parts of the Christian message because it goes against our wounded nature.

We are so different and at times selfish and closed towards others. We are instinctively inclined to distance or reject another because we see in him or her a possible danger to our autonomy, comfort or even our very existence. These attitudes lie at the root of the crimes against humanity occurring today: conflicts, wars of all kinds, racial marginalization, abortion, euthanasia, etc. . . . to name only a few clearly visible ones.

Jesus was sent by the Father to save all humankind and reunite the family of God's children. He accomplished this by welcoming each of us as we are. In welcoming this impoverished and sinful humanity, Jesus destroyed hatred and tore down all that separates us. He brought a new force into our world, the only force capable of guiding us to overcome our divisions and thus give great glory and joy to the Father.

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How can we live this Word of life? By welcoming our neighbor with all of his or her rights (rights to life, work, just wages, housing, freedom, etc.) and needs (for respect, justice, understanding, affection...). This Gospel phrase asks us to welcome the newly conceived child in the womb, to welcome the elderly, the sick, the poor, the handicapped, the outcast, and those different from ourselves. It calls us to welcome even our adversaries and "enemies".

This Word of Life also tells us that we give the greatest glory to God by striving to accept our neighbor. In this way we lay a foundation for fraternal communion. Nothing gives God greater joy than true unity among people. Unity attracts Jesus' presence among us and transforms everything. Let us approach each person with a desire to 'welcome' them wholeheartedly and with the hope of establishing - little by little - a relationship of reciprocal love.