"Go and learn the meaning of the words: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice'
(Mt 9:13; cf. Hos 6:6)

Above all, love

Every year the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is held in many parts of the world from January 18–25. Elsewhere it is celebrated at Pentecost. This year the phrase chosen for the Week of Prayer is: "This is what Yahweh asks of you" (Mic 6:6–8). Chiara Lubich used to comment on the biblical phrase each year. To continue this contribution of hers, we propose one of her commentaries on Mt 9:13 (comparing it with Hos 6:6), which can help us deepen our understanding of the proposed Word.

"Go and learn the meaning of the words: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice' (Mt 9:13; cf. Hos 6:6).

Do you remember when Jesus said these words?

While he was having dinner one day, some publicans and persons of ill repute (generally scorned as sinners by the public) came and sat at the table with him. As soon as the Pharisees noticed this, they asked his disciples: "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" Upon hearing this, Jesus replied:

"Go and learn the meaning of the words: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice'."

Jesus, by quoting a phrase from the prophet Hosea, shows that he likes the idea it contains. In fact, it is the norm that he himself follows. It expresses the primacy of love over any other commandment, over any other rule or precept.

This is Christianity: Jesus came to say that in your relationship with others — men and women

— God wants, above all, love from you and that this will of God has already been announced in the Scriptures, as the words of the prophet Hosea show.

Love is the program of life for all Christians, the fundamental law of their actions, the criterion of their behavior.

Love must always take precedence over other laws. Indeed, love for others must be the solid basis on which a Christian can legitimately put into practice all other precepts.

"I desire mercy, not sacrifice."

Jesus wants love, and mercy is one of its expressions.

He wants Christians to live in this way above all because God is like this.

Jesus is telling us that God is first and foremost a merciful God, a Father who loves all, who makes the sun rise and the rain fall on the good and the bad.

Because Jesus loves everyone, he is not afraid to stay with sinners, and by doing so, he reveals to us who God is.

If God, then, is like this, if Jesus is like this, shouldn't you too nurture the same sentiments?

I desire mercy, not sacrifice."

"Not sacrifice."

If you don't love your neighbor, your worship will not be pleasing to Jesus. He does not accept your prayers, your attendance at Mass, your offerings, if they do not come from a heart that is at peace with everyone, a heart rich with love for everyone.

Do you remember the very incisive words of his Sermon on the Mount? "Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Mt 5:23–24).

These words tell you that the worship most pleasing to God is love of neighbor, and that must be the basis even of worshipping God.

If you were to offer a gift to your father while you are angry with your brother (or your brother is angry with you), what would your father tell you? "Make peace with your brother first; then you can come to offer me whatever you like."

But there is something more. Love is not only the basis of Christian living. It is also the most direct way to stay in communion with God. It has been affirmed by the saints, witnesses of the Gospel before us, and it has been experienced by Christians who live their faith: if they help their neighbors, above all the needy, their devotion grows, their union with God is strengthened, and they feel that a bond exists between them and the Lord. This is what gives most joy to their lives.

"I desire mercy, not sacrifice."

How can you live this new Word of Life?

Do not discriminate against people nor encourage it among the people who come in contact with you; do not leave out anyone, but offer to everyone as much as you can give, in imitation of God the Father. Patch up small or big disagreements that displease heaven and embitter your

life. As Scripture says (Eph. 4:26),"Do not let the sun set on your anger."

If you act in this way, all that you do will be pleasing to God and will remain in eternity. Whether you are working or resting, playing or studying, whether you are with your children or taking a walk with your wife or husband, whether you are praying or making sacrifices, or fulfilling those religious practices that suit your Christian vocation, everything, everything, everything will serve as prime matter for the Kingdom of Heaven.

Paradise is a house that we build here and dwell in there. And we build it with love.

Chiara Lubich

Each month a Scripture passage is offered as a guide and inspiration for daily living. This commentary, translated into 96 different languages and dialects, reaches several million people worldwide through print, radio, television and the Internet. Ever since the Focolare's beginnings, founder Chiara Lubich (1920–2008) wrote her commentaries each month. This one was originally published in June 1996.

This monthly leaflet is a supplement to Living City , the Focolare magazine (livingcitymagazine.com). People's life experiences as they put the monthly sentence into practice can be read in Living City or in books published by New City Press (newcitypress.com).

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Read more:

Lubich, Chiara. Neighbors: Short Reflections on Loving the People Around Us , New City Press, 2012.

Lubich, Chiara. "Mercy over sacrifice," Only at Night We See the Stars , New City Press, 2002, p. 78.

Ruggiero, Vincent Ryan. The Practice of Loving Kindness , New City Press, 2003.

Next month:

February 2013

"We know that we have passed from death to life because we love our brothers" (1 Jn 3:14).