

**“Encourage one another and build up each other.” (1 Thess 5:11)**

St. Paul was writing to the Christian community he founded in Thessalonica. He was not able to visit there anymore, having had to escape from the city due to serious difficulties and persecution.

However, through his letters, he continued to accompany the people with love, and indeed he praised them for their constancy and perseverance in faith. They had become exemplary witnesses!

Paul knew that the community was asking very deep and existential questions. What happens to us after we die? If the Lord is coming back soon, how can we prepare ourselves adequately for his final coming?

Paul did not answer them with norms they should follow, but made a profession of faith instead: Jesus gave his life out of love for all humanity and is risen from the dead, thus opening the path to life for all people.

To prepare for his return, Paul advised them to put the Gospel into practice in everyday life, to continue working honestly and build a sense of family in the community.

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Paul had experienced this firsthand: the Gospel makes the seed of goodness that God has placed in the human heart sprout and grow.

This is a seed of hope, which grows through our personal daily contact with God's love and bears fruit in mutual love. It spurs us to resist the bad seeds of individualism and indifference that cause isolation and conflict, and instead to share one another's burdens and encourage each other.

This is a simple Word of Life that we can all understand and put into practice; yet it can revolutionize our personal and social relationships.

It is a valuable piece of advice that helps us rediscover the fundamental truth of being brothers and sisters, which underlies many cultures. This is expressed by the principle of Ubuntu in Bantu philosophy: “I am what I am because of who we all are.”

This thought guided the great Methodist leader Nelson Mandela in his political work in South Africa. He said, “Ubuntu doesn't mean that people should not think of themselves, but rather

they should ask, 'Do I want to help the community around me?'"<sup>1</sup> Mandela's consistent and courageous work brought about historic change in his country and a great step forward in civilization.

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How can we live this Word of Life?

In a commentary on the September 2004 Word of Life, Focolare founder Chiara Lubich wrote: "By trying to grow in mutual love in our families, in our work environment, in our communities, church organizations, parishes and so on. This Word of Life asks us to have an ever-greater charity that knows how to overcome the lack of generosity and the various barriers that derive from the subtle selfishness within us all.

"It is enough to think of particular aspects of love, such as tolerance, understanding, mutual acceptance, patience, willingness to serve, mercy toward the real or presumed shortcomings of our neighbor, sharing material goods, etc. in order to discover many opportunities to put the Word of Life into practice.

"Clearly, then, if there is an atmosphere of mutual love in our community, its warmth will inevitably spread to others. Even those who do not yet know the Christian life will be attracted and, almost without realizing it, they will easily become involved and feel part of this family."

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This spirit is what led a group of doctors, nurses, psychologists and other medical specialists to help disadvantaged people in their city Palermo, Italy. "We are a group of doctors and health workers from various Churches," they said. "The words of the Gospel urge us to see all people as our brothers and sisters, especially those who are ill but have no access to adequate treatment.

"Our patients include people who have very serious illnesses, as well as some who are addicted to gambling and the internet. We see these people in a professional capacity in our own workplaces, thus enhancing the services of the clinics already present in the area. To maintain contact and share the various needs, we have created a WhatsApp group, a Facebook page and a network of email addresses.

"Although it started recently, our group is already very active. We work a great deal with the immigrant population, in particular the Ghanaian Adventist community in Palermo, which is a large and joyful group. Our contact with them enables us to experience the joy of helping one another as brothers and sisters who are children of one Father."

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<sup>1</sup> From "Experience Ubuntu"; interview by Tim Modise, May 24, 2006. <https://le-citazioni.it/autori/nelson-mandela/>.