

February

Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God (Rom 15:7).

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The apostle Paul wanted to go to Rome on his way to Spain, and he sent a letter to the Romans before he arrived. Through their countless martyrs they were about to give witness to the sincerity and depth of their devotion to the Gospel, but among them, just as elsewhere, there was no lack of tensions, misunderstandings and even rivalries. In fact, the Christians in Rome came from a variety of social, cultural and religious backgrounds. There were some who came from Judaism and others from the Hellenic world and the ancient religion of Rome, perhaps from Stoicism or from other oriental philosophies. They brought with them their traditions of thought and ethical convictions. Some were called 'weak', because they followed particular rules about eating, being, for instance, vegetarians or complying with calendars that indicated special days of fasting. Others were called 'strong' because, free from these kinds of conditioning, they were not bound by food taboos or specific rituals. To all of them Paul made the urgent invitation:

Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

Before this point in his letter he had already spoken about the issue, addressing first of all the 'strong' and inviting them to 'welcome' the 'weak', 'without quarrelling over opinions'. Then he says that the 'weak' in turn should welcome the 'strong' without judging them, since they are 'acceptable to God'.

Paul, indeed, is convinced that each one, even amid the diversity of opinions and ways of behaving, acts for the love of the Lord. There is no reason therefore to judge those who think differently, and even less to scandalize them by behaving arrogantly and with a sense of superiority. Instead, what is necessary is to aim at the good of all, at 'mutual edification', that is, the building up of the community, its unity (see Rom 14:1-23).

It is a matter of applying, in this case too, the great standard of Christian life that Paul had recalled shortly before in his letter: 'the fulfilling of the law' (Rom 13:10). No longer 'walking in love' (Rom 14:15), the Christians in Rome were lacking in the spirit of fraternity that ought to animate the members of every community.

As a model of mutual welcome, the apostle proposes Jesus dying on the cross when, instead of pleasing himself, he took upon himself our failings (see Rom 15:1-3). From the height of the cross he drew all to himself, and he welcomed the Jewish John together with the Roman centurion, Mary Magdalen together with the criminal crucified by his side.

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In our Christian communities too, even though we are all 'God's beloved' and 'called to be saints' (Rom 1:7), there is no lack, just as in Rome, of disagreement and contrast between different cultures and ways of seeing things that are often poles apart. Often the clash is between traditionalists and innovators (to use language that is slightly simplistic but readily understandable), persons who are more open and others more closed, interested in a more social or a more spiritual form of Christianity. The divergences are fed by political conviction and by differences in social background. The current fact of immigration is present in our gatherings for worship and further in our various church groups, bringing diversity of culture and geographical origin.

The same dynamic can be seen in effect in the relations among Christians of different Churches, but also in families, in the workplace or in the political arena.

With it creeps in the temptation to judge those who don't think like us and to feel ourselves superior, in a sterile conflict and mutual exclusion.

Paul's model is not uniformity that flattens everything out, but a communion among contrasts that enriches. It is not by chance that the two first chapters of this very letter speak of the unity of the body and diversity of its members, and of the variety of gifts that enrich and give life to the community (see Rom 12:3-13). His model is not, to use an image taken from Pope Francis, a sphere where every point is the same distance from the centre and where there are no differences between one point and another. The model is of something many-faceted with surfaces that are different from one another and not symmetrical, with particular characteristics that maintain their originality. 'Even people who can be considered dubious on account of their errors have something to offer which must not be overlooked. It is the convergence of peoples who, within the universal order, maintain their own individuality; it is the sum total of persons within a society which pursues the common good, which truly has a place for everyone.'^[1]

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This Word of Life is a pressing invitation to recognize the positive that exists in the other, at the very least because Christ gave his life also for that person you feel inclined to judge. It is an invitation to listen, letting go of your defence mechanisms, to stay open to change, to welcome diversity with respect and love, to manage to form a community that is both plural and united.

This word has been chosen by the Evangelical Church in Germany to be lived by its members and to be light for them throughout 2015. If, at least in this month, the members of various Churches were to share it, this would already be a sign of mutual welcome.

Like this we could give glory to God together with one voice (Rom 25:6), because as Chiara Lubich said in the Reformed cathedral of St Pierre in Geneva: 'Our world today asks each one of us for love; it asks for unity, communion, solidarity. And it also calls upon the Churches to recompose the unity that has been torn for centuries. This is the reform of all reforms which heaven is asking of us. It is the first and necessary step towards universal fraternity with all men

and women of the world. The world will believe, if we are united.'^[2]

Fabio Ciardi

^[1] *Evangelii Gaudium*, 236

^[2] Chiara Lubich, *Living Dialogue*, London 2009, pp.43-44