

November Word of Life

‘That they may all be one’ (Jn 17:21).

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This is the last, heartfelt prayer that Jesus spoke to the Father. He knew he was asking the thing closest to his heart. God, indeed, created humanity as his family, to give it every good thing, sharing his very own divine life. What do parents dream for their children if not that they should care for one another, help one another, live united with one another? And what saddens them more than seeing their children divided by jealousy or money matters, even to the point of not speaking to each other? God too has dreamt from all eternity of a family of his own, living united as children in a communion of love with him and with one another.

The Bible’s dramatic origin story speaks to us of sin and of the progressive break-up of the human family. As we read in the book of Genesis, the man accused the woman, Cain killed his own brother, Lamech took pride in his exaggerated vendetta, Babel generated misunderstanding and the separation of peoples... God’s project looked like a failure.

Nonetheless, he did not give in and with determination sought the reunification of his family. The story begins again with Noah, with the choice of Abraham, with the birth of the chosen people. And so it goes on, to the point of deciding to send his Son to earth entrusted with a great mission: to gather into one family the separated children, to welcome the lost sinners into a single fold, to break down the walls of separation and the hostilities among peoples, to create one new people (see Eph 2:14-16).

God does not cease to dream of unity, and for this reason Jesus asks it of him as the greatest gift he can implore for all of us – ‘Father, I pray

That they may all be one.’

Every family looks like its parents – so too the family of God. God is Love not only because he loves what he creates; but he is Love in himself, in mutual giving and communion, lived out by each of the three divine Persons with the others.

Therefore when God created the human race he made it in his image and likeness and he impressed upon it the same capacity for relationship, so that every person may live in mutual self-giving. A more complete version of the words in the prayer of Jesus that we want to live this month, in fact, says: ‘that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us.’ The model for our unity is nothing less than the unity that exists between the Father and Jesus. It seems impossible, so profound is it. It is, however, made possible by that ‘As’, which means also ‘*Because*’. We can be united as the Father and Jesus are united *because* they draw us into their own unity, they give it to us as a gift.

‘That they may all be one.’

Precisely this is the work of Jesus, making all of us one, as he is with the Father, one single family, one people. To do this he made himself one of us, took upon himself all our divisions and our sins, nailing them to the cross.

He himself pointed out the way he would take to bring us to unity: ‘And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself’ (Jn 12:32). As the High Priest had prophesied, he had to die ‘to gather into one the dispersed children of God’ (Jn 11:52). In his mystery of death and resurrection, he has gathered up all things into himself (see Eph 1:10), has recreated the unity broken by sin, has remade the family around the Father and has made us again brothers and sisters of one another.

Jesus has completed his mission. What is left now is our part, our participation, our ‘yes’ to his prayer:

‘That they may all be one.’

What is our contribution to fulfilling this prayer?

In the first place we have to make it our own. We can offer our lips and heart to Jesus so that he can continue speaking these words to the Father and with trust we can repeat his prayer every day. Unity is a gift from above, to be asked with faith, without ever growing tired.

More than this it must be constantly at the forefront of our thoughts and wishes. If this is God’s dream, we want it to be ours as well. Periodically and before every decision, every choice, every action, we can ask ourselves: does this help to build unity, is it the best thing to do to bring about unity?

And finally we ought to run to wherever disunity is most evident and take it upon ourselves as Jesus did. There may be friction in our family or among people we know, tensions in our neighbourhood, disagreements at work, in the parish, among the Churches. Never shy away from dissension and incomprehension, never be indifferent, but take to them our love that becomes listening, attention to the other person, sharing in the pain that results from that open wound.

And above all live in unity with whoever is open to sharing Jesus’s ideal and prayer, without giving weight to misunderstandings or contrasting ideas, but content with ‘what is less perfect in unity more than what is more perfect in disunity’, accepting the differences with joy, indeed considering them riches for a unity that is never a reduction to uniformity.

Yes, at times this will put us on the cross, but it is precisely the way Jesus chose to remake the unity of the human family, the way we too wish to walk with him.

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