

September Word of Life

‘For though I am free with respect to all, I made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them.’ (1 Cor 9:19).

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This month's Word of Life is taken from Paul's First Letter to the Christians of Corinth. He is in Ephesus and through these words he tries to provide a series of answers to the problems that had arisen in the Greek community there. Corinth was a cosmopolitan city and a great commercial centre, famous for the temple of Aphrodite, but also well known for its proverbial corruption.

A few years earlier, the recipients of the letter had converted from paganism to the Christian faith thanks to the apostle's preaching. One of the controversies that divided the community concerned whether they could eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols according to pagan rituals.

Emphasising the freedom we have in Christ, Paul introduces an extensive analysis on how to behave when faced with certain choices and, in particular, dwells on the concept of freedom.

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Since Christians know that ‘an idol is nothing at all in the world, and that there is no god but one’ (8:4), whether or not they eat meat sacrificed to idols becomes indifferent. But the problem arises when Christians find themselves in the presence of those who do not yet possess this awareness, this knowledge of the faith, and therefore, their attitude could scandalise a weak conscience.

When knowledge and love are at stake, for Paul there is no doubt: the disciple must choose love even to the point of renouncing his own freedom, just as Christ did, who freely made himself a servant out of love.

It is essential to be attentive towards ‘weak’ brothers and sisters, those with more fragile consciences and who understand less. The aim is to ‘win’ in the sense of making the good and beautiful life of the Gospel reach as many people as possible.

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As Chiara Lubich writes: *‘If we are part of the body of Christ, if we are one in him, discord and conflicting thoughts divide Christ. ... If ... among the first Christians there was a danger of*

breaking agreement, they were advised to surrender their own ideas in order to maintain charity. ... So it is the same today: even if we are convinced that a given way of thinking is the best, the Lord suggests to us, at times, that in order to save charity with all, it is better to set aside our own ideas. The less perfect in agreement with others is better than the more perfect in disagreement.

Although this bending rather than breaking may be painful, it is a very effective attribute and is greatly blessed by God. It guarantees unity according to the most authentic thought of Christ, and as a consequence appreciates its value.

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The experience of the Vietnamese Cardinal François van Thuân, who spent thirteen years in prison and nine of them in total isolation, bears witness to the fact that when love is true and disinterested, it elicits love in response. During his imprisonment, he was assigned five guards, but the leaders decided to change this group every fortnight because the men were being 'contaminated' by the bishop. They finally decided to leave the same group with him otherwise he would have 'contaminated' all the guards in the prison. He recounts: 'At first the guards did not talk to me. They only answered yes and no. ... One night a thought came to me: "François, you are still very rich, you have the love of Jesus in your heart; love them as Jesus loved you." The next day I began to love them more than before. I tried to love Jesus in them, smiling, exchanging kind words with them. ... Little by little we became friends.'

While he was in prison, his jailers helped him to make a pectoral cross from small pieces of wood and an iron chain. He continued to wear this till his death as a symbol of their friendship.

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