

October Word of Life

“For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.” (2Tim.1:7)

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The letter from which this Word of Life is taken is sometimes considered to be St. Paul's spiritual testament. The apostle is imprisoned in Rome and awaiting sentence when he writes to Timothy, a young disciple and his co-worker in charge of the complex community of Ephesus.

The writing contains recommendations and advice addressed, in particular, to Timothy, but applicable to every member of the Christian community both yesterday and today. Paul is in chains in prison because he has preached the Gospel and he wants to encourage the disciple to face trials and to be a safe guide for the community even though Timothy is rather afraid of persecution and hesitant because of the difficulties involved in his ministry. It is not in the nature of Paul and Timothy to suffer because of the gospel, but such witness is possible because it is based on the power of God.

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Paul wants to bear witness to the gospel. For him it is clear that it is not talent, ability or personal limitations that ensure or hinder the ministry of the Word. Instead, it is the gifts of the Spirit - power, love and self-discipline - that guarantee the power of witness. Love, placed between power and self-discipline, seems to play a role of discernment; with self-discipline expressing the idea of being wise and ready, faced with any situation. Timothy, like disciples from all ages, can proclaim the Gospel with power, love and self-discipline, even to the point of suffering for its sake.

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We too may have felt the temptation to become discouraged in living and bearing witness to the word of God and we may have been unsure about how to deal with certain situations.

Chiara Lubich helps us to understand where to draw strength during such times: *"We must appeal to the presence of Jesus within us. The best attitude is not being passively resigned to the situation and feeling blocked by it but going outside ourselves and taking up what is required by God's will: it means facing the duties to which our vocation calls us and relying on the grace of Jesus within. So, it is important to look and act outside of ourselves. Jesus himself will develop in us the virtues that we need in order to bear witness to him in carrying out the task that has been entrusted to us."*

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Power, love and self-discipline are three virtues of the Spirit that are obtained through prayer and the exercise of faith.

Father Justin Nari, from the Central African Republic, his confreres and about one thousand Muslims were taking refuge in a church as they tried to escape from the reprisals of war. They received death threats and, on several occasions, the militia leaders who were besieging them asked Father Justin to surrender. However he continued to dialogue with them in the hope of avoiding a massacre. One day they showed up with forty litres of petrol and threatened to burn everyone alive if he did not hand the Muslims over to them. "With my confrères, I celebrated Mass for the last time," recounts Father Justin, "and there I remembered Chiara Lubich. I asked myself what she would have done in my place. She would have stayed and given her life. And that's what we decided to do." After Mass there was an unexpected telephone call: the African Union army was passing through the region and was in a nearby town. Father Justin ran to meet them and together they returned to the parish: it was just thirteen minutes before the ultimatum expired, thirteen minutes that saved the lives of all those people and avoided bloodshed.

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