

# **"Love, the supreme rule for fraternal correction"**

In his 3 November general audience, Pope Francis continued his catechesis on Saint Paul's Letter to the Galatians, speaking about "walking according to the Spirit."

11/03/2021

*Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!*

In the passage from the Letter to the Galatians we have just heard, Saint Paul exhorts Christians to *walk according to the Holy Spirit* (cf. 5:16, 25), that is a style: *to walk according to the Holy Spirit*. In effect, to believe in Jesus means to follow him, to go behind him along his way, just as the first disciples did. And at the same time, it means avoiding the opposite way, that of egoism, of seeking one's own interests, which the Apostle calls the “desire of the flesh” (v. 16). The Spirit is the guide for this journey along the way of Christ, a stupendous but difficult journey that begins in Baptism and lasts our entire lives. We can think of it as a long excursion on the mountain heights: it is breathtaking, the destination is attractive, but it requires a lot of effort and tenaciousness.

This image can be helpful to understand the merit of the Apostle's words “to walk according to the

Spirit”, “allow ourselves to be guided” by Him. They are expressions indicating an action, a movement, a dynamism that prevents us from halting at the first difficulties, but elicit confidence in the “strength that comes from on high” (*Shepherd of Hermas*, 43, 21). Trodding along this way, the Christian acquires a positive vision of life. This does not mean that the evil present in the world disappears, or that the negative impulses of our egoism and pride diminish. Rather, it means that belief in God is always stronger than our resistance and greater than our sins. And this is important: to believe that God is greater, always. Greater than our resistances, greater than our sins.

As he exhorts the Galatians to follow this path, the Apostle places himself on their level. He abandons the verb in the imperative – “walk” (v. 16) – and uses the indicative “we”: “let us

walk according to the Spirit" (v. 25). That is to say: let us walk along the same line and let us allow the Holy Spirit to guide us. It is an exhortation, a way of exhorting. Saint Paul feels this exhortation is necessary for himself as well. Even though he knows that Christ lives in him (cf. 2:20), he is also convinced that he has not yet reached the goal, the top of the mountain (cf. *Phil.* 3:12). The Apostle does not place himself above his community. He does not say: "I am the leader; you are those others; I have come from high up on the mountain and you are on the way". He does not say this, but places himself in the midst of the journey everyone is on in order to provide a concrete example of how much it is necessary to obey God, corresponding better and better to the Spirit's guidance. And how beautiful it is when we find pastors who journey with their people, who do not get tired – "No, I am more

important, I am a pastor. You...”, “I am a priest”, “I am a bishop”, with their noses in the air. No: pastors who journey with the people. This is very beautiful. It does the soul good.

This “walking according to the Spirit” is not only an individual task: it also concerns the community as a whole. In fact, it is exciting, but demanding, to build up the community according to the way indicated by the Apostle. The “desires of the flesh”, “the temptations”, we can say, that all of us have – that is, our jealousies, prejudices, hypocrisies and resentments continue to make themselves felt – and having recourse to a rigid set of precepts can be an easy temptation. But doing this means straying from the path of freedom, and instead of climbing to the top, it means returning down below. In the first place, journeying along the way of the Spirit requires giving space to grace and charity. To

make space for God's grace. Not being afraid. After having made his voice heard in a severe way, Paul invites the Galatians to bear each other's difficulties, and if someone should make a mistake, to use gentleness (cf. 5:22). Let us listen to his words: "Brethren, if someone is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Look to yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ" (6:1-2). Quite different than gossiping, like when we see something and we talk behind the persons back about it, right? To gossip about our neighbour. No, this is not according to the Spirit. What is according to the Spirit is being gentle with a brother or sister when correcting him or her and keeping watch over ourselves so as not to fall into those sins, that is, humility.

In effect, when we are tempted to judge others badly, as often happens, we must rather reflect on our own weakness. How easy it is to criticise others! But there are people who seem to have a degree in gossip. Each and every day they criticise others. Take a look at yourself! It is good to ask ourselves what drives us to correct a brother or a sister, and if we are not in some way co-responsible for their mistake. In addition to giving us the gift of gentleness, the Holy Spirit invites us to be in solidarity, to bear other's burdens. How many burdens there are in a person's life: illness, lack of work, loneliness, pain...! And how many other trials that require the proximity and love of our brothers and sisters! The words of Saint Augustine when he commented on this same passage can also help us: "Therefore, brothers and sisters, whenever someone is caught in some fault, [...] correct him in this way,

gently, gently. And if you raise your voice, love within. If you encourage, if you present yourself as a father, if you reprove, if you are severe, love" (*Discourse 163/B 3*). Love always. The supreme rule regarding fraternal correction is love: to want the good of our brothers and sisters. It takes a lot of time to also tolerate others' problems, others' defects in the silence of prayer, so as to find the right way to help them to correct themselves. And this is not easy. The easiest path is to gossip. Talking behind someone else's back as if I am perfect. And this should not be done. Gentleness. Patience. Prayer. Proximity.

Let us walk with joy and patience along this path, allowing ourselves to be guided by the Holy Spirit. Thank you.

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