

Go and Do Likewise (II): One Heart and Soul

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Right from the beginning, Christ's disciples lived in a relationship of both spiritual and material communion. In the Acts of the Apostles we read that *they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers* (Acts 2:42). All who believed were together and had all things in common (Acts 2:44). And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts (Acts 2:46).

This attitude also spurred the first Christians to undertake acts of solidarity with the brethren and people around them in need. The Acts show us their care for orphans and widows, the distribution of material goods to the needy, and even miraculous healings. Just as

Jesus had dedicated a large part of his ministry to healing the paralyzed, the blind and lepers, to raising the dead, feeding the hungry and freeing the possessed, so too his disciples, moved by the charity of the Holy Spirit, endeavored to imitate Christ's merciful heart and to recognize Him in the poor, the sick and prisoners.

As the Church matured and expanded, it incorporated care for the material and spiritual needs of men and women in a more organized way. Saint Justin, around the year 150, describes the Sunday gathering of the faithful at Mass. The assembly begins with prayers and reading from the apostles or prophets, followed by an exhortation by the person presiding over the liturgy and prayers. The bread and wine are then offered and after the consecration distributed to those present. And finally, what we would now call a collection takes place:

“those who have the means and want to do so, each one according to their free determination, give what they see fit. And what is collected is delivered to the presider, which he distributes to orphans and widows, to those in need due to illness or other causes, to those in jail, and to foreigners passing through.”^[1] Later on, this individual attention was given material expression in institutions such as hospitals, orphanages, schools for families without resources, and universities.

A call to care

Pope Francis and his predecessors insist that we not remain indifferent to those who are most in need and urge us to create social structures that help the disadvantaged to develop their lives with dignity.^[2] But why should I take care of the poor or, if I am poor myself, those who have more needs than I do? To be a

consistent Christian, isn't it enough that each one's personal and private life be upright before God? But Benedict XVI insists that "worship pleasing to God is never a merely private act."^[3] Indeed, "union with Christ is also union with all those to whom he gives himself. I cannot possess Christ just for myself; I can belong to him only in union with all those who have become, or who will become, his own."^[4]

Genesis shows us, at the beginning of mankind's history, God's concern for "the other": "Cain, where is your brother Abel?" Cain's response, "Am I my brother's keeper?" rejects this responsibility and tries to cover over the guilt of his murder (cf. *Gen 4:9*). God's question to Cain, Pope Francis says, shows that we cannot "justify indifference as the only answer" and opens the door to "creating a different culture that guides us to overcome enmities and care for one

another.”^[5] Here we see the two great temptations that we often face with respect to our neighbor: the coldness of indifference and the exacerbation of our personal differences with them.

Adam, Christ and all humanity

The social, relational dimension of the person has been tarnished in recent decades, especially in some cultures, by individualism, consumerism and the weakening of human bonds.

This wasn’t the case in the early Church. The Jewish mentality preserved by the first Christians differed from ours in one key aspect: for them, Adam (and above all Christ, as the second Adam) was not only a singular man, but also a collective being who contained, in his body, all humanity. In its Semitic meaning, man does not “have” a body, but “is” a body.^[6] In Hebrew, the term *basar*

means flesh, but also a living being – animated flesh – and a human being, including the soul. It is used in Holy Scripture with different meanings, and in Greek it is translated as both *sark* (flesh) and *sôma* (body). The Hebrew meaning includes the unity between human beings by their shared nature and mutual relationship. That is why Eve is “flesh of his flesh” with respect to Adam. On the other hand, *sôma* refers only to the individual, and in this sense the distinction is emphasized: more than “we have the same flesh (nature),” it has the meaning of “my flesh (and, therefore, my life) is distinct from yours.” The West has inherited the second interpretation.

When Sacred Scripture speaks of Adam, it is also referring to the entire human race contained, in some way, in his body. “The whole human race is in Adam ‘as one body of one man,’”^[7] the Catechism teaches, citing

Saint Thomas Aquinas. Hence every good act of any of its members strengthens the unity of the whole body and every infidelity, in contrast, breaks it apart, causing the division of humanity. Original sin, committed personally by Adam, becomes universal, as is the salvation won by Christ. Paul speaks of the “old man” that is in each of us because we belong to the human race, which is buried with Christ in baptism when we are reborn to a new life in Him.^[8]

In those first centuries, the Fathers of the Church viewed humanity as a whole, as a single body. They realized that Adam’s sin implicated all men and women. “We all bear his name,” says Saint Irenaeus of Lyon.^[9] We all share the same human nature passed down to us from our first parents, deprived of its supernatural gifts. “We all left Paradise together with Adam, who turned his back on it,” Saint Ephrem writes.^[10] Christ comes

to restore lost unity to the body of Adam and reunite the human race. Christ overcomes the divisions set up in Babel. In Christ we receive the Holy Spirit, so that even while speaking different languages, Christians can understand each other, in a new Pentecost.^[11]

The Church, the Body of Christ

Jesus' words addressed to Saul on the road to Damascus are striking: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (cf. *Acts 9:4-5*). The Risen Jesus identifies his disciples with Himself, and Saul understands that such a close union exists between Jesus and the Church that persecuting the disciples means persecuting Jesus himself. This identification of the Church with the Body of Christ entails that, if I identify myself with Christ, and my fellow believers also do so, the union

between us is a much stronger bond than in any human institution.

As a good Hebrew, for Paul the notion of body referred to a unity that transcends the individuality of a man. In Christ, “by the nature of the body that He has made his own, the whole human race is contained there in some way.”^[12] By becoming incarnate, Christ not only took on an individual human body, but in some way assumed all of us in his body. This is how Christ makes his salvation available to all humanity; all men and women are called and enabled to form part of his Body, the Church. The Church is catholic or universal not because she is spread over all the earth; she was already catholic on the day of Pentecost.^[13] The Church is catholic because her truth is addressed to all humanity, which forms a single body, that of Adam, torn apart by sin.

From here stems the inalienable social dimension of the Church, which is organically one. It is a body, the Body of Christ (cf. *1 Cor 12:27*), and not a federation of local assemblies. That is why if a member of the Church suffers, the others suffer with him.^[14] Thus we will understand what it means to be a Christian in a true and full way to the extent that we make this social dimension of the Church our own and live in accord with it. But when we ignore it, we stop showing others the true face of the Church.

The temptation of rejection

Although we understand this reality (that we are all brothers and sisters as descendants of Adam, in our human nature, and as part of the Body of Christ, which is the Church, by baptism), in our daily life we often fail to recognize the others as such. Sometimes it is a first impression

made by someone that distances us from them; other times, it is a judgment resulting from a repeated experience. The effort to defend the truth can make us react harshly or sarcastically towards someone, or the weaknesses and errors we see in the lives of others can bother us. Among Catholics, legitimate options can end up turning upright, good, committed people into enemies on opposite sides, whether because of the way they participate in Mass, or the choices related to the education of their children, or the authors they like to read. It can even become hard for Christians to forget that what unites us is much stronger and deeper than what could be a cause of division: character defects, ways of reacting to a moral or social evil, differences of opinion on the best way to evangelize, political opinions, etc.

C. S. Lewis expresses this in a very graphic way in his well-known book *Screwtape Letters*. The experienced devil explains to the apprentice how even the visible Church can be turned into a “temptation” by which we Christians let ourselves be carried away with astonishing ease. He gives some examples, filled with wit and good humor, of how the “patient,” a recent convert, finds it hard to understand the treasure of “communion in diversity” even during liturgical ceremonies: “Your patient, thanks to Our Father Below, is a fool. Provided that any of those neighbors sings out of tune, or have boots that squeak, or double chins, or odd clothes, the patient will quite easily believe that their religion must be somehow ridiculous.”^[15]

In this sense, human fraternity itself can teach us a lot about relationships between Christians. It is a universal experience for those who have

siblings that, despite possible confrontations, the presence of an external problem (bullying, the illness of one of the parents, the death of a loved one) usually has as an immediate reaction that of forgetting about minor conflicts, which give way to support, affection and defending one another. People at opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of their ideas also sometimes come to recognize the humanity of the other person precisely for reasons of this type: because their husband is sick with cancer, because they have lost their job, because their daughter was born prematurely. These situations, in which we face deep human suffering, are often the occasion for us to open our eyes and see that “we are jointly responsible for taking care of the world, establishing relationships founded on charity, justice, and respect, especially overcoming the disease of indifference.”^[16]

Personal responsibility for everyone's salvation

By considering humanity as a unity, Christianity also inherits from Judaism its communal conception of salvation.^[17] In other words, faith is not reduced to “an individual decision which takes place in the depths of the believer’s heart. By its very nature, faith is open to the ‘We’ of the Church; it always takes place within her communion . . . those who believe are never alone.”^[18] Other men and women are part of our own life and also become part of our own personal responsibility, since we all form part of the same Body. They are brothers or sisters we are called to watch over, to be reconciled with, to love. Being a Christian is not reduced to the individual conscience of each faithful.

Our personality will be all the stronger the more solid our

realization is of belonging to the Body of Christ. We cannot fall into the easy excuse that it is the Church, as an institution, that is responsible for watching over our brothers and sisters in need, through its charitable or educational organizations, and that my responsibility as a baptized person is only to bring forward my own life and that of those closest to me. “Not a single soul – not one! – can be a matter of indifference to you,” Saint Josemaría said emphatically.^[19]

The way we understand the faith, also in its social dimension, directly affects our actions. Considering our own life apart from others is not consistent with the social dimension of the Church, of the humanity Christ has assumed in his own Body.

This has a number of very practical consequences: Do I feel responsible for others, that they be happy, and

feel welcomed and understood, accompanied on the path towards Christ, the Way, the Truth and the Life? When defending my opinions, do I always do so with a demeanor and tone that recognizes the other person in his or her humanity? Do I see in others brothers and sisters in the common endeavor to build up the Church?

A strong family

The lack of unity in the Church, whether due to indifference or disagreement, can remind us of the tower of Babel. This time the problem does not necessarily occur between neighbors, but perhaps on social networks, through publications in the media, attacks from anonymous accounts or writings that ridicule other ways of thinking, etc. After two millennia of the Church's expansion and growth, some aspects have been

strengthened (theology, pastoral care, evangelization), but we also find divisions, often within the same community. Among those who prefer one way or another of celebrating liturgical acts, or those who vote for different political parties or those who defend different ways of carrying out evangelization, the banner can be raised claiming “this is the truly Catholic option.” Saint Josemaría warned: “It seems to me that I hear Saint Paul crying out, when he says to the people in Corinth: is Christ divided? Has Paul by chance been crucified for you, or have you been baptized in his name, so that you can say: I am of Paul, I of Apollo, I of Cephas, or I of Christ?”^[20]

The wounds in the body of Christ hurt us, because they fracture what is most intimate to the Christian identity: we are called to be members of a Body, living stones in building up the Church, and the

mission of evangelization is damaged by divisions among those who should be joyfully working together.

Therefore the Church frequently reminds us that we are called to be “forces of unity within the Body of Christ. With great humility and trust, let us ask the Spirit that every day we may strive to grow in the holiness that will make us living stones in the temple that He is raising up right now in the world. We have to be authentic forces of unity; let us forgive the offenses suffered and control all feelings of anger and confrontation.”^[21]

By caring for others, we strengthen the Church and all humanity. Above all, we contribute to building up the Church, making possible its mission of bringing Christ’s message to those around us, as the first Christians did: *they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness (Acts 4:31), for the company*

of those who believed were of one heart and soul (Acts 4:32).

^[1] Saint Justin, *I Apology*, 67.

^[2] Cf. Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 116, 137, 168-169, 179, 183, 186.

^[3] Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum caritatis*, 83.

^[4] Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, 14.

^[5] Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 57.

^[6] Cf. *Rom* 12:4-5; *1 Cor* 10:17; *1 Cor* 12:13.

^[7] Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 404; cf. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de malo*, 4.1.

^[8] Cf. Francis, Audience, 9 May 2018; *Eph* 4:20-24.

^[9] Saint Irenaeus, *Against the Heretics*, III, 23, 2.

^[10] Saint Ephrem the Syrian, Hymn 49.

^[11] Cf. John Paul II, General Audience, 29 July 1998.

^[12] Cf. Hilary of Poitiers, *In Mt IV*, 12.

^[13] Cf. Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism*, 37-38.

^[14] Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 7.

^[15] C. S. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, ch. 2.

^[16] Fernando Ocáriz, “Enlarging the Heart,” in *Be to Care*, 29 September 2022.

^[17] Cf. Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism*, 46.

^[18] Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, 39.

^[19] Saint Josemaria, *The Forge*, 951.

[20] Saint Josemaría, *Letter* no. 4, 19 (1 Cor 1:13).

[21] Benedict XVI, Homily, 19 May 2008.

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