



## **Bishop Guy's Chronicle**

### **You shall love the Lord your God...and your neighbour as yourself!**

Since my ordination to the priesthood in 1989, I have had the opportunity to meet and help many people in spiritual accompaniment or during confessions. In this ministry, I sometimes felt powerless in front of that person, because the sufferings or traumas that had scarred his life and broken his heart seemed, at first sight, irreparable or almost impossible to dislodge.

Most of the time, I was facing people who didn't really like themselves. Because of the pain and rejection experienced over the years, they had lost much of their self-confidence, their love for others, and even their love for God. And a process of forgiveness in view of a possible liberation was certainly not envisioned at the beginning of our consultations. We had to proceed gradually before we could reach that point! The following observations may help you when you face such problems.

**First consideration:** Attentive listening before proclaiming the Word of God.

How can we slow down the wounded person's unbraked racing locomotive, laden with despair and discouragement, fuelled by hatred and aggression towards their perpetrator? Injured people are often unable to forgive when they come to us seeking help for the first time. They just haven't gotten to that stage yet.

In a helping relationship, the first step towards lasting healing is to listen very attentively. We need to model ourselves on the attitude and behaviour of our risen Lord: consider his discrete approach to the disciples of Emmaus, disheartened as they are by the latest turn of events. He begins by asking a question to connect with them, pretending not to know the subject of their conversation. He is now in listening mode. An empathic and attentive listening mode. The time to talk will come later.

Step two: It's our turn to speak. But what do we say? And how should we say it? Should we simply say to the person who is suffering, as we often do, "I'm going to pray for you!" and then walk away as if nothing happened? The answer is no, you shouldn't. This is the time to catechize, to use the Word of God to reveal to the wounded person that Jesus came for the little ones, the abandoned, the sinners who have fallen into addictions by way of compensating for the pain they are experiencing. He came into our world to heal us and free us from the clutches of the

evil one who is nothing more than a merchant of illusions so that we could have abundant life!

Then, with reference to the Word of God, it is important to remind the person that God not only prefers the poorest but that he loves us all in a preferential way. That is to say in a very personal and intimate way as if each one of us were the only child he possesses and treasures infinitely. And because he is God, he is capable of loving us in this way, of loving one and all at the same time and in a preferential way! Parents who have given birth to many children know that it is possible to love each one of their children at the same time. But in this case, one cannot add: "in a preferential and infinite way like God."

To support the seriousness of such a revelation of God's infinite love for his creature, one need only open the Holy Scriptures. They bear witness to this in many passages. I will restrict myself to a single one: Ephesians 1:1-23. Let the most curious among you check out its contents. It's a precious treasure that can convince even the most skeptical who find it difficult to believe in God's infinite love for them.

Here is the case of a 38-year-old woman I met one day during one of my parish missions. On Monday evening, the second evening of the mission, before the dismissal of the faithful, I propose to the participants to come and pick up a Word of God placed in baskets. There were around a hundred different words that I had chosen and carefully cut out. I invite them to make an act of faith before they take it, given that it is the living Word of God.

The young woman walks up, picks up a Word, goes back to her seat, reads it, and suddenly starts crying. While the faithful were leaving the church, she came to me and showed me the Word she had taken. She cries even more! I wonder what the heck is causing her to shed so many tears. So I read the Word. It is so beautiful! Then I say to her, "But why are you crying? This Word is so comforting."

She tells me she was adopted when she was a little girl. She adds that she had very good adoptive parents who loved her dearly and she loved them back. But at the age of 18, she decided to undertake a search to find her birth mother. She always wondered why her mother abandoned her at such a tender age. Eventually, she found the place where she lived, worked up her courage, and came ringing the doorbell.

Her mother comes to the door and asks curtly what the purpose of this stranger's visit is. The young woman says, "Are you Mrs. X?" "She replies yes, I am." And the daughter replies: "Mom, I am your daughter." Then the mother responds: "Well I don't give a damn!" And she slams the door in her face.

Poor young lady. She left so hurt and broken after that encounter that she began to hate and detest her birth mother. That night, she confides to me that she has felt a “lump” in her throat since the painful event. She was only 18 years old at the time, and was now 38! Twenty years crying and hating her mother who had rejected her a second time!

But that night, after explaining everything to me, I understood why she was crying so much. She was crying with joy, because the Word of God said this:

*“Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget, I will never forget you. See, upon the palms of my hands I have engraved you. Your walls are ever before me.” (Is 49:15,16)*

How powerful and transforming is the living Word of God! Let us use it, let us give it to people who are suffering or who are looking for meaning in their lives. Let us not be afraid to share it with them and with faith.

**Second consideration:** it is not in the nature of love to give only half of itself.

No one can fully blossom and say that he or she is interiorly free if he or she has not first recognized and assumed the fact that he or she needs others to reach full physical, psychological and spiritual maturity. “No one is an island,” said the English poet and preacher John Donne in the sixteenth century. We depend on others. We need them to grow and develop as human beings. But it is not always easy to convince a suffering person to return to the path of trust in himself and in others, especially if his heart has been broken by betrayal, infidelity, or painful rejection.

After a painful separation and divorce, a woman said to me, “I will never love as I have loved! Being betrayed or abandoned pains your heart too much.” And if we ever enter into a relationship again, the fear of reliving such an experience can lead us to be overly cautious of the other person. To avoid these possible wounds of the heart, how many men and women have told me that they have made it clear to the other person that they want to preserve a good part of their autonomy and independence? The limits are now set to prevent another heartbreak! The barricade of the heart thus begins to form from the first encounter and true love and sincere affections are all filtered and predetermined by reason.

We then believe that we are freer and more autonomous after having expressed this state of mind, taking advantage of the benefits that this kind of relationship gives us, where we do not give ourselves entirely to the other. But in reality, without noticing it, our heart begins to harden and barricade itself as a result of living this way. It learns to no longer express certain feelings of love in case this revelation would lead

to a reciprocal emotional attachment, which would risk plunging the soul back into a wound similar to the one felt in the past when the relationship was broken.

It is worth remembering here that true love cannot be shared only halfway. "If you haven't given everything, you haven't given anything yet!" says the proverb. Giving half a caress, giving half a handshake, half a smile or half a kiss does not make anyone happy or satisfied.

"The measure of love is to love without measure!" said the great St. Augustine. A half-open heart is either hypocrisy or a search for personal satisfaction that hardly takes into account the interests of the other. Can we then speak of true love? No. And this type of relationship, as you can guess, will rest on a weakened foundation in the long run. At the first storm, "the house founded on sand collapsed," says the Evangelist Matthew in ch. 7:24-27.

You might reply that it is easy to talk about total love and to say out loud that we are created this way, whereas pure love is hardly attainable here on earth. And you are absolutely right! For time always brings its share of trials and unforeseen events, such as the waves of the sea that slowly but surely erode the reefs and coastlines. But I will answer this objection by saying that only the grace of God can succeed in raising it up and keeping it in such a state. When purely human love is clothed with divine love, everything becomes possible and achievable.

**Third consideration:** the indivisible link between faith in God, faith in our neighbour, and faith in myself.

Too many people-including Christians-have very low self-esteem. Morbid guilt easily settles in the heart of one who has just fallen or experienced some kind of failure. And then discouragement settles in close proximity. But where does this negative self-perception come from? It comes from rejection and contempt, from the lack of confidence that parents may have awkwardly instilled in their children by not believing enough in their human or intellectual capacities and abilities. Or again, because their children suffered from isolation and indifference from those close to them, because they were considered sick or crippled, too fat, too small, too ugly, too ignorant, and so on. And they came to lose self-confidence.

This lack of self-confidence inevitably leads them to a lack of trust in others, and even worse, to a lack of trust in God's true love for them. We feel unworthy of His love because we have learned from childhood that we do not deserve to be loved by others. How unfortunate! A long and difficult road lies ahead of us when it comes to regaining our self-confidence.

I will conclude with a word from the Gospel of St. Matthew:

*"THE LORD OUR GOD IS ONE LORD; AND YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND, AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH.' The second is this, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOUR AS YOURSELF.' There is no other commandment greater than these." (Mk 12:29-31)*

Dear friends, let us keep trust in the infinite love that God has for each one of us. Let us believe in his inexhaustible mercy! Let us make a vow together never to give in to discouragement when we lack confidence in ourselves. Despite our frequent falls or faults, let us dare to return to God with humility by holding out our children's arms to him in trust. Let us give Him the joy of being able to hold us in his fatherly arms; that He may embrace us lovingly while he whispers in our ears, "My child, know that my love for you is infinitely greater than what you will ever be able to give me in return! But don't let that stop you! Always trust in me, trust in your neighbour and trust in yourself," and "my faithfulness and my love will always be with you." (Ps 89)