

Chapter 7

Chapter VII lists and deals with the works and activities carried out under the banner of Salesian Youth Ministry. The word of Jesus chosen to introduce this chapter affirms that the disciples who provide this ministry are able to do so in light of, and because of, their having been chosen, in advance, for it: those who bear fruit are the ones who have been chosen by the Lord. If, therefore, we Salesians “carry out our mission chiefly in such works and activities as make possible the human and Christian education of the young [...] in difficulties (C. 42), it is because Christ has chosen us “to bear fruit” (Jn 15:16) in this way. It is sobering and demanding to profess that our apostolic institutions are the fruit of a personal predilection of the Lord, Jesus Christ.

***“I chose you...
to go and bear fruit”
(Jn 15:16)***

In Jn 15, Jesus continues his long farewell discourse, “on the night in which he was betrayed” (Jn 13:21-30; cf 1 Cor 11:23-26), developing the idea of “abiding” in him as the form and style of life for his disciples. After introducing the metaphor of the vine and the branches (Jn 15:1-8), Jesus now clarifies that the abiding of which he speaks is not some kind of pietistic inertia, nor the fruit of one’s own initiative (Jn 15:9-16): abiding in him requires that his disciples keep all his commandments, that their love be expressed through prompt obedience and that they be witnesses of joy. Since this commandment is born of God’s love for us, it also defines the mutual love we must have for each other. This love, demanded by him who was its exemplar, has no limits because Christians must be prepared to give even their own life for their friends. Whoever obeys is not a servant but a friend of the Bride Groom. Nothing can give greater joy. A Christian who does not feel loved will struggle to give love and be happy. We are the beloved of God not because we invoke his name or because we desire him; we are his beloved when we do his will and love others with our whole life, without limits.

In those days, Jesus said to his disciples,

“⁹As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

¹²“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵I do not call you servants^[a] any longer, because the servant^[a] does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. ¹⁶You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”

I. REREADING THE TEXT FOR UNDERSTANDING

The evangelist explains theologically the symbol of the vine (Jn15:1). Abiding in Christ (Jn 15:4) is understood as abiding in his love which finds its origins in the love of the Father (Jn 15:9-10). The importance of this discourse is affirmed on two occasions (Jn 15:7,16). The paragraph ends with a double reference to the Father as the one who loves (Jn 15:9) and who commissions (Jn 15:16).

Love, the origin and principle of the Father-Son relationship (Jn 3:35; 5:20; 10:17) is the reason and frame of reference for the relationship that needs to exist between Jesus and his disciples (Jn 15:9). The Father is the source of the love which Christ has for his own; that love is, in reality, a reflection and imitation of that love with which Christ knows that he is loved. Abiding in that love relationship, which unites two divine persons, is achieved through concrete obedience (Jn 15:10) as was modelled by the Son towards the Father. This principle which holds for Christ also holds for Christians: to love is to observe the commandments (Jn 14:15, 21, 23). The parallel structure which expresses this formula makes for a bold affirmation: to observe the will of Jesus, which is made concrete in his commandments, is to love him. Christ abides in the love of the Father, because he keeps his commandments. This goal which Christ has already perfected is the goal for which Christians must aim; the Son's success in achieving it is the motivation for believers to pursue it.

The joy, albeit messianic, which Jesus felt because he was obedient and loved, becomes the undivided patrimony which he promises to his faithful disciples (Jn 15:11). Even after Christ physically leaves his disciples, Christians will be able to maintain their joy to the extent that they love one another: the obedience they owe to Jesus is identical with the love they must show each other (Jn 15:12; 13:34); joy derives from living together fraternally until the Lord returns. The measure of this fraternal love, which is not an option but a command of the Lord, is not subject to arbitrary definition by any disciple: its norm and measure is none other than the love modelled by Christ. *To surrender one's life echoes the voluntary death assumed by Jesus (Jn 15:15, 24)*. This love, however, "is distinct from that love with which human beings love each other" (St. Augustine): for as long as they live, Christians must love their brothers and sisters to the point of losing their life should love require it (Jn 15:12-13; 1Cor 13:3). The willingness to do the Father's will includes this willingness to give one's life for one's friends. The joy derived from this obedience will never disappoint, even in the face of death.

Jesus' bold declaration that his disciples are his friends is unique in the NT (Jn 15:14; 11:11) and is not a later Christian insertion to the text. Friendship depends not so much on the obedience of the disciple, as on the obedience of the Master (Jn 13:1; 17:26). Let us not forget that the johannine Jesus has already given his life for those whom he loves; *the indicator of friendship is not positive sentiments for someone, but the willingness to give up one's life for them*. One abides in Jesus' friendship who remains a faithful disciple, that is, who loves even to the point of dying for his friends. (cf Jn 13:36-38; 21:15-19).

As intimate disciples of Jesus (Jn 15:15), the disciples know their Lord's intentions. Whereas servants receive orders, friend exchange confidences and intimacy. This new relationship which Jesus establishes with his disciples is rooted in the disciples' participation in the Master's plans, in their knowledge of his programme, and in the sharing of confidences (cf Jn 17:26). It is not rooted in a natural equality between Jesus and his followers, nor in a decision previously taken by the disciples. The initiative was not theirs; even though the relationship requires reciprocity, there is no equality; the disciples had been chosen and sent, selected and appointed by Jesus with the task of bringing to the whole world "fruit that will last", that is, love for each other and being heard by the Father (cf Jn 15:16). Not only did Jesus choose them for this task, he also "constituted" them for it, that is, he empowered them to fulfill effectively the responsibility he entrusted to them and to yield

the harvest that he expected (cf Jn 15:2 which states that God prunes the fertile branches so they bear more fruit!). Beloved to Jesus, they are no longer servants, they are no longer in the dark, they are fully aware of their task to love one another (Jn 15:17). The privilege of receiving love imposes the duty of giving love; only one who has experienced love can be expected to give it. *For the beloved, loving is not a duty imposed from without but a yearning to be satisfied from within.*

II. MEDITATING THE MESSAGE & APPLYING IT TO LIFE

Had we not grown so familiar with the command to love our neighbour, it would indeed strike us as awkward, uncomfortable and unbearable. How could Jesus be serious when he says, *“This is my command, that you love one another”*? Is it reasonable to expect us to love our neighbour? As we mature through life, are we not inclined to ignore this command for fear of being disappointed yet again by our efforts to keep it? Do we really expect strangers to love us? Do we not expect them to be indifferent? Is it not difficult enough to love appropriately those who love us, even when we have promised to do? Young lovers promise – or demand - that their love be forever. If already we struggle to love a relative, a friend, or an acquaintance, how can Jesus’ command us to love a stranger or someone we may not even like?

The answer to these questions begins with remembering a basic truth: we must love each other because we have been loved first. *“As the father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love”*. Before Jesus sent us out seeking neighbours to love, he first came in search of us, he came close to us, he chose us in love: *“you did not choose me, but I chose you (Jn 15:16)*. By taking the initiative of coming close to us and choosing to love each of us as unique persons, Jesus made it easier for us to fulfill his will: the only thing we must do is remain in his love. *“Is it love that impels one to observe the law, or is it observance of the law that generates love?”*, mused St. Augustine. His response: *“One who does not love has no reason to observe the law... We do not keep God’s commands so that God might love us, because, if he did not already love us, we would be incapable of keeping his word at all”*. God did not choose us because we were already good; God loves us that we might become good.

Herein lay the roots of our incapacity to love. We do not know how to love, and we do not believe it is possible for others to love us, because deep down we do not believe that God loves us, nor do we believe that he ever could. We do not bear fruit because we do not feel chosen. Either because we do not understand or accept his way of loving us, we deprive ourselves of experiencing what is already ours: God’s love. Whoever does not feel loved will be incapable of loving. Because we believe ourselves to be unworthy of God’s affections, we dare not even consider it possible to produce the fruit he expects of us.

Christian disciples know they are loved by Jesus. They know how to remain in his love by allowing themselves to trust the love of their Friend-Master who gave his life for them. Embracing Jesus’ will and desire as their own, they do not stray from his demands; they do not lose heart before the admittedly onerous command of loving their neighbour as Jesus loves them. To our contemporaries who are so sceptical of altruistic love, so suspicious because of promises broken and responsibilities neglected, and yet so thirsty for genuine love, Christian disciples must be convincing witnesses that Christian love, that love which Christ demands of his own, is possible. If we as Christians, who know that Jesus literally “loved us to death”, do not testify to this love, who will? *It is not about knowing if we will be able to love our neighbour; it is about knowing that Jesus who loved us first wants us to love each other: you will be my friends if you do what I command.*

Friendship with Jesus is nurtured, then, through obedience to his will, as utopic or unrealistic as that may seem. Jesus finds his friends among those who obey him. Before we accuse God of any lack of love towards us, we would do well to search our hearts for any lack of obedience towards him. What are – and how are – our works of charity? *How can one expect God to honour one’s own desires if one shows no appreciation for the will of God?* Is it logical to expect God to show interest in one who has deliberately been disinterested in the will of God? A friend is recognized by his or her willingness

to respect the will of the other. When we doubt God's love for us and accuse him of giving us new reasons every day to question his goodness, we are confessing our own disobedience.

This truth is tested in the crucible of experience: the unfaithful friend or lover is the one who is typically most suspicious of the beloved's fidelity. The same dynamic operates in our relationship with God: *our own infidelity makes us suspect God of being unfaithful. Our inability to love our neighbour prevents us from experiencing God's love for us; like a bad friend, we justify our indifference towards God by blaming him of being indifferent towards us. Why is it that those who are most obedient to God are also those who are most certain that God is their cherished friend?*

Let us welcome, therefore, God's open invitation to experience his love for us each and every day: *"if you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love"*.

It is not enough, therefore - even though it is a lot - to fulfill God's will in order to feel loved by him. Jesus distinguishes between the friend and the servant: both do what is expected of them, both execute the master's orders; but only the friend is privy to the master's reasons, only the intimate confidant knows his lord's heart and not just the lord's commands. It is possible that we are more or less obedient, and still never seem to feel that we are friends. *The obedience which Jesus asks of his friends is not blind; demanding yes, servile, no. Jesus does not transform his friends into servants; his love does not turn them live like servants who do all that the master asks without knowing why it is necessary. Jesus has no interest in surrounding himself with people who are educated but who obey him only for fear of disobeying him.* Jesus is not an implacable taskmaster, he is a best friend: he desires our lives and our obedience to him because he has already given his life and obedience for us. He seeks friends whose trust in him is so strong that they will risk living in the freedom of a friendship that is beyond doubt or reproach.

The fruit of obedience to God is fraternal love and the fruit of fraternal love is the boundless trust in the God who loves. We cannot know what we are missing if we waste our time on so many distractions that have nothing to do with the fulfillment of God's will: *our projects don't last, our words are ignored, because they are disconnected from the will of God.* Can we risk living in the love of God by loving those whom God loves? Nothing could prove more precious than this, because one who shows one's neighbours the love they deserve can always be sure of God's love in return. This in turn would delight God because if we allow his love to dispel our indifference and hatred towards others, we will be secure in our friendship with his Son and be worthy of his Love.