



# **Love your neighbour as yourself - how do we/I deal with conflict**



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We have received a number of contributions, questions and concerns about these issues. They are questions and doubts in the face of painful situations that surprise us every day.

**For me this commandment to love my neighbour is the most important in my faith and at the same time a great challenge.**

It seems important to me because in the Catholic Church it is related to the Eucharist. It is the commandment of love and we fail to put it into practice.

Catholic and Protestant teachings, it seems to me, are not very clear in explaining how I should love myself. Nor is it clear how important I should be in my relationship with others, with society or with human beings living on the other side of the world.

Do I have to care less about myself than about others, the others, my fellow human beings?

How far does solidarity go?

Is love for myself less important than love for others or for the common good?

How much do we have to sacrifice in order for a group/society to function?

What do we ourselves have to do to make the world more loving?

*'Love your neighbour as yourself'*. This commandment is primary in the Christian faith - one of the most important, and we may even think it is correct, but do we know what it means and do we consciously try to live it?

*Do I love myself, do I protect myself, what if I don't, can I love if I have not received love, do I accept myself with my weaknesses, and do I accept other people's weaknesses, why should I love my neighbour?*

*Sometimes I hate someone, how can I love them? ... and if I do:- Who is my neighbour: friends? enemies? all the people in the world? do I have responsibilities towards others? do I see myself as a member of groups that can contribute to positive coexistence?*

*What do I do when I am hurt, repressed or feel anger and hatred towards a person or group that hurts me and others?*

*Do I want to be a loving person? What expectations do I have of myself? Do I want to be loved by others? Do I do something to be loved?*

*What would a world look like in which people loved each other a little more?*

**Others have insisted on how I should act in conflicts, because violence does not always equal conflict. But conflicts can be very varied, so that they may end in violence.**

Family relationships are often strained - we seem to have forgotten our loved ones and what it meant to love our neighbour. From this come conflicts, arguments, aggression, even within our families.

Then we ask ourselves what is my attitude in conflicts: do I become aggressive, am I trying to listen, to understand or do I automatically separate myself from others?

*Aren't there situations in which it is better to distance myself, so as not to get into violent relationships?*

We saw during the Covid lock-in that many people spent time on the internet, trying to find those responsible for the problems around us and many became accusatory by spreading all kinds of documents through the internet, without any verification.

If we spend too much time on social networks, with groups that think like us, don't we get used to being with like-minded people, and therefore we lose contact with people who have different points of view and so we do not compare or discuss the alternatives?

Aren't we sometimes, because of our upbringing, our habits, under the influence of a group-think that prevents us from communicating with other people who are different from us? This leads us to ways of relating where love for others is absent.

In schools, we are also surprised by the increase of serious situations where there is harassment of certain groups of children who have to change schools.

*How can we put into practice in these conditions the commandment of Jesus to love our neighbour as ourselves? To pray to the Lord to bless our enemies? To allow ourselves to be corrected by our siblings? Are we ready to receive such correction? Under what conditions to speak, under what conditions to keep silent?*

As you can see, these are vital questions, which we all have and which sometimes distress us.

We have been taught that we have to love God above all things and our neighbour as ourselves, but *all our neighbours? Who loves me? Do I not deserve to be loved? Am I not worthy of being loved? and ... how do we members of a pacifist group manage personal or collective conflicts?* Not an easy matter.

It is a long series of questions that affect us and we do not know how to react.

We, the Companions of St. Francis, have been around for a long time, almost a hundred years. It seems that new generations are not coming in, we are older, society has changed radically. Our utopian ideals of solidarity and fraternity are in regression in our countries and doubts can haunt us. Is that pacifist freshness of reconciliation, so difficult between young French and Germans in the early years, that expansion of the Companions of St. Francis all over Europe and attempts to be present in Algeria and Vietnam by the French Companions, the rapprochement between young people of different Christian confessions and even non-believers attracted by the very human and simple and austere personality of St. Francis, now history? Is our belonging to the Companions of St. Francis worthwhile today?

*Love your neighbour, yes, but who loves me?*

**So there are two questions we ask ourselves:**

- Who is my neighbour with whom we have to be a companion?**
- How do we resolve conflicts today as members of a peace movement?**

## A.- WHO IS THE NEIGHBOUR?

Jesus is asked what is the first commandment (Mt 22, 34-40). And he answers:

*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.. . v.38 This is the greatest and first commandment.*

And then he adds what the second is, without being asked. v.39. *And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbour as yourself. 40. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.*

He tells us: there is no single primary commandment, it is complemented by the second which is equally important.

The pillar of his faith is Yahweh and the neighbour on the same level. God and the neighbour above all things. This one, the one who is close to us, the other, is like me, is another me whom we must love and cherish with the same intensity as we love Yahweh or I love myself. He is another me, he is a brother of the human family whose father is Yahweh, without discrimination of categories, races, beliefs, wherever he is from and wherever he comes from. This is Jesus' new interpretation of the Jewish Law. The second commandment has the same importance as the first, says Jesus. They are, so to speak, two firsts.

In the new era that Jesus inaugurates and which he calls the Project of God he goes a step further to make his statement clear. When Jesus is asked who is my neighbour to be loved with a love similar to the love we owe to Yahweh, he answers with the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10,29ff). His hero is a Samaritan one of the group who had even intermarried with the gentile Assyrians, when Samaria was invaded by them and had accepted non-Jewish cultural and religious customs, and were therefore judged by the Jews as being outside the Law and the Temple.

A Samaritan Jew, therefore a heretic, who had deviated from the Law and the Prophets, lends a hand to the wounded and half-dead traveller who had been assaulted by bandits and was lying on the road.

Earlier a priest of the Law and a doctor of the Law had passed by the wounded traveller on the same road, but they avoided approaching the unfortunate man. The Samaritan heretic felt sorry for him as a person and took care of him, dressing his wounds and taking him, at his own expense, to a lodging where he could rest and heal .

At the end of this story Jesus does not ask who the neighbour is. (In this case presumably the wounded man.) Jesus, instead, asked who of the three who passed by on the road became a neighbour to the wounded man - who became a neighbour to the helpless man. Jesus invites us to become neighbours to those who suffer, to the wounded and abandoned, to draw near to them. And Jesus corroborates this (Mt 25) by saying that when you gave food to the hungry, clothed the naked, welcomed the stranger... you did it to me. Or when you denied water to the thirsty, drove out the stranger, did not visit the sick or those in prison or abandoned in the street, and did not care for them, you rejected me. The 'others' are the face of Yahweh God.

Jesus made himself close to the blind, to the paralysed, to the destitute. Jesus for Christians is Yahweh who became human in Bethlehem, close to humans in order to announce a different kind of life. Jesus recommends shortly before his death: *love one another, love one another as I have loved you. Our God is 'the other.'* In the 13th century he took in the homeless who came to him, and restored abandoned hermitages to house the sick.

Remember that Francis of Assisi welcomed the homeless of the time in the Portiuncula of Assisi and embraced the cursed lepers who abounded in his country and stripped himself of his clothes to clothe the unclothed to the point that often the people, on seeing those first followers of his (Franciscans), expelled them from the villages as just more destitute people.

When Pope Innocent III granted Francis an audience where Francis could explain his intention to create a community of Little Brothers to serve the beggars, they had to wait for several days at the Vatican gates because the Vatican guards believed that they were just other poor people begging at the doors of the church and they were thrown coins by those who went out or entered the Vatican Palaces.

## **B.- CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

Conflicts are not necessarily negative, they are part of life and can be an opportunity to grow and learn from them. Sometimes they can end in violence between individuals or groups if physical force, moral pressure or weapons are used.

The causes of conflicts are very varied: struggle for power, being above the other, economic ambition, differences of opinion, lies and rumours, jealousy, differences in generations, cultures...

**Attitudes** that are usually adopted in the face of conflicts:

1.- PASSIVITY AND FLIGHT. This is when people affected by a conflict keep quiet or pretend they are not affected by the problem and talk about something else. They repress their emotions, they choose the path of passivity or avoidance. This attitude occurs when the person is not able to cope with situations, does not possess negotiation skills or lacks the courage to face reality. This does not solve the problem.

2.- PHYSICAL OR PSYCHOLOGICAL AGGRESSION. Reacting violently, threatening, defending oneself by attacking the other person to make them shut up. This does not solve the conflict, it makes it worse.

3.- DIALOGUE TO FIND SOLUTIONS. It is listening to the other person; it is about understanding their point of view, expressing feelings mutually, looking for solutions by both sides giving in.

4.- DISCREET WITHDRAWAL. If all the resources for dialogue are exhausted, the attitude of giving in and withdrawing is assumed.

Think about:

- Which of these four attitudes do you most often take?
- What attitude do you usually take spontaneously when you have a problem with someone?

**Suggestions** for conflict resolution:

- 1      Remain calm, listen to each other's reasons.
2.      Keep positive thoughts. Use affirmative words when you speak. No reproaches.
- 3      Remember that the other person may have an opinion that is as legitimate and reasonable as yours.
- 4      Give in willingly on something so that both parties are satisfied.
- 5      Avoid judgements or accusations about the other person's way of being, thinking or behaving or about their character.
- 6      Always maintain a certain sense of humour.

In order to comply with these proposals we must bear in mind that:-

- \* We tend to focus more on the defects and limitations of others than on their qualities, especially if they are members of our family and our environment. This generates mistrust and enmity.
- \* When we recognise our own limitations, it is easier to understand or excuse the limitations and shortcomings of others. Jesus called hypocrites those people who look at the speck in the other's eye and do not notice the log in their own eye preventing them from seeing. St. Augustine told his community in the 4th century never to speak ill of anyone without the person concerned being present.
- \* Valuing others does not prevent us from not recognising their mistakes, but rather, in spite of them, we can highlight their qualities and virtues. This attitude is typical of people with a noble heart and makes us truly more human. Do the exercise or experience of thinking about people you dislike and try to discover the positive in them and their qualities.

**Finally** meditate on the following sayings of Francis of Assisi and others that are related to conflict:

“Where there is charity and wisdom, there is neither fear nor ignorance. Where there is patience and humility, there is neither anger nor vexation.”

*St Francis of Assisi*

No one is to be called an enemy, all are your benefactors, and no one harms you. You have no enemy but yourself.

*St Francis of Assisi*

We have been called to heal wounds, to rebuild what has fallen apart and to bring home those who have gone astray.

*St Francis of Assisi*

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is offence, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy.

Do not quarrel among yourselves and with one another, but try to recognise, saying humbly, ‘I am an unprofitable servant’.

To be amused at looking for faults in others is proof enough of not caring enough about one's own faults.

Have patience with all things, but above all with yourself.

*St. Francis de Sales*

Let us strive for the serenity to accept the inevitable, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to distinguish one from another.

*Reinhold Niebuhr*

## CLOSING WORDS

Being a neighbour to others and coming to terms with our conflicts are two vital and difficult tasks.

Jesus of Nazareth and Francis of Assisi showed us the only way to a truly human and fraternal future world.

This consumed their lives. And we Companions of St. Francis can be happy to accompany them in this task.

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