**5th SUNDAY OF EASTER (YEAR C)**

Acts 14:21b-27; Ps 144; Rev 21:1-5a; Jn 13:31-33a, 34-35

**COMMENTARY**
*The Newness of Love*

After the Good Shepherd speech last week, the Gospel of this fifth Sunday of Easter brings us back to the Upper Room to listen to Jesus’ last words to his disciples before his Passion. It is the beginning of the so-called *Farewell discourse* of Jesus during the Last Supper in the Gospel of John. The context, therefore, makes the teaching He left to his own even more significant, almost like a spiritual testament. This is particularly true with the brief instruction we have just heard, which Jesus wanted to impart before all other things. It is therefore necessary to return to the mystical atmosphere of that evening, to listen carefully to His every word, so that we may understand the full significance of the recommendation on love Jesus left to his disciples, who are called to continue his mission in the world.

1. *“I give you a new commandment” – The Two Aspects of Newness*

Why does Jesus define his commandment of love as new (“I give you a new commandment: love one another”)? It will never be superfluous to clarify and deepen what this newness consists of. We know that in the Old Testament it is already recommended to love God with all one’s heart and to love one’s neighbor as oneself (cf. Dt 6:4-5; Lev 19:18). Jesus himself put these two recommendations together into a single reality, when answering the question of his interlocutors concerning the first commandment, that is, the most important one of the Law. It is therefore a precept already asked by God of his people. Nevertheless, Jesus now emphasizes that his word is a new commandment. From the context of his words, at least two aspects seemingly indicate the newness.

Firstly, the newness consists of the measure of love, which will be Jesus himself. In fact, he explains it immediately further: “As I have loved you, so you also should love one another.” As we have seen from our previous comments for the Sacred Triduum and also for the last Sunday of the Good Shepherd, this love of Jesus is beyond measure, even until the Cross, offering his own life for the love of his “sheep”, and enduring adversity, misunderstanding, death. This love, as he himself affirms in the Last Supper, is the greatest one: “No one has greater love than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn 15:13) (“friends”, here in the sense “loved ones”). And his disciples are now asked to love one another, following their divine Master.

If the above-mentioned thought is often underlined in various comments, the second aspect, that of newness, seems little contemplated. Namely, Jesus declares his commandment new, because it is the foundation of the new covenant founded on his sacrifice. As the ancient law was connected with the covenant on Sinai between God and his people, now the new law, which is inaugurated with the new covenant in the blood of Christ on Calvary, will have this new commandment at its heart. Humanity enters the era, in which, as we heard in the second reading, “The One who sat on the throne said, ‘Behold, I make all things new.’” (Rev 21:5a). In other words, the commandment is new, because the covenant is new, as the authoritative exegete Raymond Brown explains. It is no coincidence that Jesus’ teaching is given precisely in the Last Supper in which he institutes the Eucharist, the bloodless rite of the new covenant in his death. And it will not be accidental that Jesus gave the commandment of love to his own after proclaiming openly the hour of his “glorification” and departure. It is therefore necessary to enter into the reality of the new covenant of Jesus; indeed, it is necessary to immerse oneself totally in his death and in his blood, as in baptism, to understand correctly and live intensely the new commandment that he gave to his intimate disciples, the most faithful ones. (We recall that Jesus began this *Farewell Discourse* after Judas Iscariot had went out).

From this point of view, the love recommended here is not just a moral imperative. It is, above all, a gift flowing from the source of divine grace of the new covenant. Every disciple is called to live always in Jesus and in his love for us, in order to be able to love others, not according to human logic, but *as he loved us*. Here, we now understand the touching insistence of Jesus during that Supper: “As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love.” (Jn 15:9).

2. *«Love one another» - The Three Dimensions and a Particular Accentuation of Christian love*

The love Jesus recommended to his own in that intimate moment of the Last Supper reflects all of his teaching on the subject. Moreover, it reflects his whole life which was a great fulfillment and realization of divine love. Overall, we can see the three dimensions of the love taught and practiced by Jesus, who revolutionized the world.

There is, firstly, the universal dimension of Christian love: loving everyone, making oneself close to all the needy, like the Good Samaritan in the parable of the same name, without closing oneself in one’s own social or ethnic group. Secondly, the love Jesus taught also includes the extreme action of loving even the enemies, those who harm us, who “complicate our life”. Finally, as we have in today’s Gospel passage, Jesus recommends mutual love among his disciples. And it is precisely on this last dimension that Jesus placed particular emphasis at the beginning of his *Farewell Discourse*.

The emphasis on mutual love between Jesus’ disciples must be grasped in all its strength, for a correct understanding and the right implementation of his teaching. In fact, in just two sentences, Jesus repeats three times: “Love one another”. As if that were not enough, he will return to the theme later in the *Farewell Discourse* (cf. Jn 15:12), after having invited the disciples to remain in his love for them. So, we can glimpse here the heart of Jesus, all worried about whether his disciples continue to love one another, after he departs “from this world to the Father” (Jn 13:1). This is now the *only* focus on love that the disciples will have to practice. The teaching here is not about the universal boundless love, nor about the heroic love for enemies, but only about the mutual love between the disciples of the one Master.

Obviously, it is not a recommendation of an exclusive or, worse still, closed love (between the members of the same group). The love Jesus teaches is always inclusive. However, just such inclusive love now asks: how is your love for your brothers and sisters in Christ? O Christian, disciple of Christ, if you are ready to love all humanity, indeed all your enemies, as the Master recommends, why don’t you also love those who are Christians like you, disciples of Christ like you? Why don’t you love your brother or sister, as Christ loves them, going beyond the law of antipathy / sympathy, differences of opinion, difficulties of character, offenses against you? (Why don’t you have love for those with whom you may attend the same church, with whom you approach the same Holy Communion?). *Kyrie eleison*!

Therefore, the insistence on mutual love between Christians is very relevant even today, as it was so already yesterday and the day before yesterday, so much so as to cause such great concern for Jesus. Perhaps it is necessary to pray ever more strongly to Christ, the source of Love, for the grace of brotherly love, of unity in love between us, Christ’s disciples. This will be the hallmark of the new life in the new covenant. It will also be fundamental to genuine Christian witness in the world, as Christ has revealed to us.

3. *«This is how all will know that you are my disciples»*

The revelation of Christ on brotherly love between the disciples in reference to its “missionary” impact is very interesting. In the light of what has been meditated above, the disciples’ mutual love actually reflects that of Jesus for them, which, for its part, reflects the love of God the Father for and in Jesus. The disciples therefore do nothing but communicate to all the primary love of God, now revealed in Christ. With this in mind, the apostle John wrote to the members of his community: “No one has ever seen God. Yet, *if we love one another, God remains in us, and his love is brought to perfection in us*” (1 Jn 4:12).

It is therefore precisely the divine “communional” love, which must now shine forth in the community of believers, precisely to make the presence of God and Christ “tangible”. Not the miracles performed, nor the greatness of charitable actions, nor the powerful preaching, but the simple communion of love that one must have for the other in Christ, will be the distinctive sign of Christians in the world and at the same time the strength of attraction to Faith. For this, Jesus himself prayed to the Father insistently for the unity and love of his disciples of all times before the Passion according to John’s Gospel.

Let us not tire, therefore, of listening again to this touching prayer of Christ, the same one already mentioned at the end of last Sunday’s meditation. Let us listen to it now in the perspective of the new commandment of love, to ask God the Father together with Christ for the grace to love one another, as he has loved us:

“[Father] I pray not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me. And I have given them the glory you gave me, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may be brought to perfection as one, that the world may know that you sent me , and that you loved them even as you loved me. (...) Righteous Father, the world also does not know you, but I know you, and they know that you sent me. I made known to them your name and I will make it known, that the love with which you loved me may be in them and I in them.” (Jn 17:20-23, 25-26).

*Useful points to consider:*

**JOHN PAUL II,** Apostolic Letter On the Permanent Validity of the Church’s Missionary Mandate, ***Redemptoris Missio***

15. The kingdom aims at transforming human relationships; it grows gradually as people slowly learn to love, forgive and serve one another. Jesus sums up the whole Law, focusing it on the commandment of love (cf. Mt 22:34-40; Lk 10:25-28). Before leaving his disciples, he gives them a “new commandment”: “Love one another; even as I have loved you” (Jn 13:34; cf. 15:12). Jesus’ love for the world finds its highest expression in the gift of his life for mankind (cf. Jn 15:13), which manifests the love which the Father has for the world (cf. Jn 3:16). The kingdom’s nature, therefore, is one of communion among all human beings-with one another and with God.

The kingdom is the concern of everyone: individuals, society, and the world. Working for the kingdom means acknowledging and promoting God’s activity, which is present in human history and transforms it. Building the kingdom means working for liberation from evil in all its forms. In a word, the kingdom of God is the manifestation and the realization of God’s plan of salvation in all its fullness.

23. (…)John is the only Evangelist to speak explicitly of a “mandate,” a word equivalent to “mission.” He directly links the mission which Jesus entrusts to his disciples with the mission which he himself has received from the Father: “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you” (Jn 20:21). Addressing the Father, Jesus says: “As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world” (Jn 17:18). The entire missionary sense of John’s Gospel is expressed in the “priestly prayer”: “This is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (Jn 17:3). The ultimate purpose of mission is to enable people to share in the communion which exists between the Father and the Son. The disciples are to live in unity with one another, remaining in the Father and the Son, so that the world may know and believe (cf. Jn 17:21-23). This is a very important missionary text. It makes us understand that we are missionaries above all because of *what we are* as a Church whose innermost life is unity in love, even before we become missionaries *in word or deed*.