

On reading Carlos Mraida's paper "What future for the Church – a God of relationships", I was particularly blessed by his whole exposition of the tri-unity of God. Three persons, one nature. This "threesomeness" speaks of the diversity which is essential to the establishing of relationships. The three persons are ONE because they engage with one another, live with one another and exist for one another. I would like to take as my starting point the following statement: "The persons of the Godhead subsist in relationship, which means that they do not HAVE a relationship but ARE relationship, because God is love. Love is His very essence. Hence a series of statements which explain the mystery of God's unity, how three distinct and different persons comprise one single God.

In Genesis we read that God created man in His own image. But: *The Lord God said, "It is not good for man to be alone"*¹ God does not make man a solitary being but places at his side another person who is not exactly the same. The mystery of unity in diversity already appears at the creation! By establishing the institution of marriage, God is already pointing man towards the objective of unity, establishing that *"the two shall become one flesh"*¹. It is significant that, quoting this, in his Letter to the Ephesians Paul emphasises the importance of the unity between Christ and the Church, calling this a *great mystery*¹. Writing to the Corinthians, he explains that *he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with him*¹. This mystery is further clarified when we discover Jesus' expectations expressed in His prayer for us, when He describes the process of this mystery: *that all of them may be one; as you, Father, just as you are in me and I in you. May they also be in us so that the world might believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am.*²

What can bring us to complete unity is "the glory of God", the very essence of the nature of God. Because God is relationship, our fellowship with Him cannot but produce relationship, a relationship of his same essence and nature.

I find absolutely amazing the sequence in this prayer: *as you are in me and I in you, they also in us... I in them and you in me...brought to complete unity... and that the world might believe.* This "being in one another" speaks to me of the depth of the concept of relationship lived out and intended by God, of the capacity to "put yourself in someone else's shoes", to identify oneself with others. In his prayer for us, Jesus does not ask for power nor success. Neither does he ask for victories, nor protection from persecution, but only that we be preserved for the evil one and completely united! This is anything but a superficial unity: *that they be one, just like us*². A high-profile unity, solid and eternal, permeated with the Father's very essence and glory. This is a request that still seems to us to be unattainable, almost utopian, when we look at the history and the condition of the Church. But Jesus knew He had transferred to his disciples the glory, the nature, the heart and the essence of the Trinity itself. And if Jesus considers it possible, it must be so!

We all know the pious justification given by many: *but we are already one... in spirit! The invisible Church is already ONE.* But, until recently, only a few made any effort to work towards this prayer increasingly becoming the Church's primary purpose. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus teaches us the ethics of relationships. At the end of his discourse he concentrates on the possible problems, conflicts and abuses in relationships. We all know his teaching on this matter. And he concludes: *"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good... Be perfect therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect"*³. The key is to be found in the statement: *"I in them and you in me"*. Paul describes this process in a masterful way: *Christ in you, the hope of glory. We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ*⁴. And he adds that the various ministries are given to build the *unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fulness*⁵ of Christ⁶.

Another interesting statement in "A God of Relationships" is that in the outworking of love there are three elements: the one who loves, the beloved and the love uniting them. The fact that God, even before the creation of the world, should have chosen to adopt us as His sons⁷ speaks to us of His nature being relational and familial. This explains why Jesus teaches us to call him Father, Dad, and introduces himself as the "Son of God" and why later on he calls us his brothers!⁸ Brothers grow up within a family and their reference point are their parents who are concerned to bring them up with their same values. Good parents produce good children, and their relationships will be a real blessing. And we have the best parents in the universe!

¹ Gen 2:18, 2.24; Eph 5: 31-32; 1Cor 6:17.

² John 17:22-23.

³ Matt 5:44-48.

⁴ Col 1:27,28.

⁵ Note **perfect, completely**: Gr. Pleroo; pleroma = complete, filled, full, close to a full measure.

⁶ Eph 4:13.

⁷ Eph 1:5.

⁸ Rm 8:29.

We are all deeply aware of the devastating effects of sin in human society compared to this glorious divine project. We also understand the reason why Satan concentrates all his efforts on preventing God from reproducing His essence in human beings. They would become like Him! And it would mean Satan's final defeat. That is why he has always attacked everything in this world that expresses any kind of unity. Hence all the wars, the ethnic and racial hatred, family quarrels and attacks on peaceful co-existence. The Church itself has been and continues to be under attack from the forces of division present in our day, finding it hard to change the "worldly" mindset of its members.

As was already proposed during the AFI Consultation in Chile, I believe it is urgent to put together a detailed, practical apostolic agenda, aimed at radically "transforming" the mentality of the Church in our days. The priority must be to make each man and woman a disciple of Jesus. Someone who is to be baptised must understand he becomes not just a believer, but a disciple of Jesus! Perhaps we should even change the terminology we use in speaking of members of our churches, no longer calling them "believers", "members" or "the faithful" but... "disciples" – in order to give everyone a sense of God's project and path for their lives: *Christ in you, the hope of glory...every man **completely mature in Christ***⁹. The objective of our evangelism must be to bring people to Christ and make them disciples who can bring others to Christ⁹, because only disciples can express the essence of Christ in their lifestyle and have His heart for "others" – whoever they may be.

Another consideration. We are all capable of loving, but human love is limited to our families (and today often not even that!) and the deserving. It tends to be a somewhat static love. God's love, on the other hand, is a dynamic love, which flows, is ever fresh, matures, is lasting, giving of itself and pouring itself out. In the measure in which we faithfully maintain our fellowship with His Spirit, this same love will flow in us. *And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us*¹⁰. Without God's love flowing through us, like the electric current in electrically powered machines, it is not possible to have solid, lasting and deep relationships. Relationships, even between good Christians, tend to continue mediocre and vulnerable. Over and above the superficial slogans exalting the new birth or the baptism in the Holy Spirit, there must be a visible, real and miraculous transformation within that does not fizzle out in a few days, but thanks to the revelation of God's relational nature produces a discipleship process bringing each person increasingly to reflect that same nature – a process that takes effort and commitment.

The strongest, most credible and evident sign of the Holy Spirit's presence in us can only be the demonstration of love, of His love – love for God and for the people He loves. The visible sign of the coming of the Kingdom of God is the ability of ordinary human beings to love everybody as Jesus did, whoever they are, saints or sinners, to see each individual with God's eyes; a readiness to put them first, before our priorities, our rules, our traditions, our programmes, our natural inclinations, interests and commitments. This is the fruit of our salvation! And this does not come from us, but is the gift of God!¹¹ By grace we are saved from the domination of our **ego**, our flesh, the law, prejudices, rules, etc., to be able to love our fellow men.

For decades we have measured the presence and action of the Holy Spirit mainly by the degree to which His gifts are evident. Although we have also emphasised that the gifts are "works of grace" proceeding from love (1Cor. 14 follows 1Cor. 13), we have continued to measure the fulness of the Holy Spirit by the evidence of the gifts rather than the quality of our relationships. But *anyone who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen*¹². Therefore, before seeking for the gifts, we must cultivate our fellowship with the Holy Spirit.

The grace evident in the church in Jerusalem is an important warning: *All the believers were of one heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was with them all*¹³. Intimacy with God and intimacy with the brethren led them to be able to minister with great power in the same "spirit of Christ".

Our mission is without doubt, as stated in our "mission": "In the Spirit of Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit, to reconcile the lost, to reconcile Christians, to reconcile the world"¹⁴.

In the first place we need the heart, the essence of the Spirit of Christ, and then the power of the Spirit in order to reconcile the lost to God, Christians among themselves and the world with the Church. When we speak of reconciliation we must mean quality relationships marked by integrity, loyalty, courtesy, respect, honour and faithfulness. This is a big challenge because it calls on not just our own ability, but that of God in us. It is essential to make fellowship with Him the priority in our agenda, our time and our commitments. Intimacy with Him is the most precious thing we have or can share, because only when we are filled with Him can we feel and teach what He has given us in the Scriptures JUST AS he feels it and communicate His heart. Intimacy with Him allows us to teach others

⁹ Rick Warren

¹⁰ Rm 5:5.

¹¹ Eph 2:8.

¹² 1Jn 4:20.

¹³ Acts 4:32.

¹⁴ Mission Statement of the Evangelical Church of Reconciliation.

how to live intimately with Him. From Him, from this God of relationships, unity and love, our identity and our ministry will continue to become ever clearer: *I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who will do according to what is in my heart and mind*¹⁵. We need to be sure of who we are and where God is taking us. A clear vision is a basic condition for raising up and motivating new leaders¹⁶ in line with God's heart and His very essence. The time is ripe for establishing right priorities. *He who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in Spirit.*

"Leadership" – and I would add "Apostleship" – "is the ability to put others to work to reach a common objective"¹⁷. Our responsibility is therefore highly demanding. If we are fathers, we have the privilege and, yes, also the responsibility, to equip our Isaacs and prepare our Jacobs better, so that they can lead the church and better express the essence and nature of Christ himself. Today we live in a confused and disintegrating world, or as Carlos has put it, a world full of orphans. The Church must be able to plant the Gospel in the experience of people here and now, before our generation slips into an eternity without God! "He who is unable to plant the Gospel in each individual's experience, is putting at risk the very future of Christianity"¹⁸.

We need to move on to the operational phase. "Step-by-step planning is the necessary path to move from vision to reality"¹⁶. We must work at perfecting our relationships, learning how to work together, heart to heart. We need to invest time in developing quality relationships which can be a demonstration of how to build a relational church.

"Leaders – apostles – not only know what to do, but do it! To be successful one must define the goal, stay focused on that goal, assemble resources, get equipped in order to reach that goal, associate with solution-oriented rather than problem-oriented people, not allow obstacles to stop us or make us change direction, and embrace mistakes as opportunities to learn precious lessons to add to our pool of wisdom"¹⁷.

I believe that AFI is the right workshop for realising what I have just said. Only if we ourselves – despite the objective limits of geographical distance and different languages, traditions and cultures – learn to live out our relationships "in the Spirit of Christ", expressing the very character of God, can we influence and instruct the various ministries in our cities and nations so that they too can experience what we are experiencing, and teach it to their children. Fathers who become a reference point for their children and their children's children. Fathers who make their contribution so that the Father's Kingdom may come and His will be done here on earth as in heaven. Fathers who reflect, as Jesus did, the glory of the Father in a society in which orphans are multiplying at an alarming rate – orphans, slaves, the desperate. These are all creatures whom the Father loves and desperately wants to reach and bring back to Himself. We need "a partnership between God who creates and men who work"¹⁹. We need to become, here on earth, a visible, reproducible reflection of the Triune God, perfect in unity, in which Christ can be seen in us and each in the other!

¹⁵ 1Sam 2:35.

¹⁶ Bill Hybels, *Courageous Leadership*.

¹⁷ Rick Joyner, *Leadership*.

¹⁸ Kirkegaard.

¹⁹ Miroslav Volf (Contemporary theologian, Yale University).