

EQUIPES NOTRE-DAME INTERNATIONAL

STUDY TOPIC FOR THE YEAR 2014/2015

“Discerning the signs of the times”



SUMMARY

Introduction	p 3
By To et Zé Moura Soares, Responsible Couple for the International Leading Team	
Presentation of the Study Topic	P 4
First Meeting	P 5
Looking positively at the world	
Second Meeting	P 10
Looking at the world in the making	
Third Meeting	P 15
Building a civilisation based on love	
Fourth Meeting	P 21
Respect for the human person	
Fifth Meeting	P 26
The poor beloved of God	
Sixth Meeting	P 31
Being there for others	
Seventh Meeting	P 37
Being a disciple of Christ today	
Eighth Meeting	P 43
The universality of Christ's message	
Ninth Meeting	P 49
Summing up	

Presentation of the year's topic: "Discerning the signs of the times"

Following the XI Gathering in Brasilia, the International Leading Team sent a Letter to all the members of Equipes Notre-Dame inviting them, with the strength of Love, to go courageously into the whole world "*daring to live the Gospel and giving rise to rivers of living water*".

In fact, Father Caffarel wanted couples in Equipes Notre-Dame to be witnesses of the sacrament of marriage as a path to Love, Happiness and Sanctity, to be signs of hope and yeast for the Church and the world.

To accompany us on this journey, the topic chosen for the year 2014-2015 "*Discerning the signs of the times*" proposes that we should ask ourselves questions about current trends in the world, about the place and the role attributed to mankind today, about the meaning and dignity of life, in the light of the Gospel:

Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path. Ps 118(119), 105

The Word of God, the source of wisdom and dynamism, will be the starting point of our reflection. Let us be touched, challenged, shaken up by this Word which Pope Francis describes as having "*liberating power, power to renew*". Returning to the origins of our Faith is the surest way of recognizing in the events we live and in the pressures that we encounter, the true signs of the presence of God and his plans for us. Only a Faith-filled perspective that is conscious of suffering in the world, but filled with Hope, can contribute to the creation of a world where the Love of God will reach its fulfilment.

This topic is made up of eight chapters:

- Looking positively at the world
- Looking at the world in the making
- Building a civilization based on love
- Respect for the human person
- The poor beloved of God
- Being there for others
- Being a disciple of Christ today
- The universality of Christ's message

Each chapter hinges on the Word of God which is accompanied by a brief commentary; a general presentation of the subject; and three texts each proposing an approach to the question.

For the purposes of deepening this year's topic as much as we can, we have suggested some ideas to follow reflectively to enrich each of the parts of the Team's meeting: pooling, sharing, prayer and discussion of the topic. Ideas are similarly suggested for the Sit Down.

A "common theme" will delineate this journey, and will be put to you at each meeting: "*How do listening to the Word and the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit help us to discern meaning within the subject, and to find responses that correspond to the signs of the times?*"

Each chapter ends with a psalm. Discerning the signs of the times is a beautiful path to follow. It leads us to admire God's love, to live it and bear witness to it.

Discerning the signs of the times

First meeting

Looking positively at the world

I – Word of God

“Be a blessing for all people”

God said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your kindred and your father's house for a country which I shall show you; and I shall make you a great nation, I shall bless you and make your name famous; you are to be a blessing! I shall bless those who bless you, and shall curse those who curse you, and all clans on earth will bless themselves by you.' So Abram went as Yahweh told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran. Abram took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had amassed and the people they had acquired in Haran. They set off for the land of Canaan, and arrived there. Gn 12: 1-5.

Abraham's attitude in this passage makes of him the Father of and a model for believers: he listens to God and obeys him without any hesitation, confident in the promise that is made to him, despite its apparent improbability.

This confidence Abraham showed in the Love of God is considered in Chapter I of the Encyclical *Lumen Fidei* as the founding deed of Faith: *“The word spoken to Abraham contains both a call and a promise. First, it is a call to leave his own land, a summons to a new life, the beginning of an exodus which points him towards an unforeseen future. The sight which faith would give to Abraham would always be linked to the need to take this step forward: faith “sees” to the extent that it journeys, to the extent that it chooses to enter into the horizons opened up by God’s word”* *Lumen Fidei* N°9

II - Presentation of the chapter “Looking positively at the world”

Discerning the signs of the times means wanting to understand in today's world what is a sign of God's presence.

Christian faith relies on confidence in God's Love and therefore in his Word. God has the power to transform the world. Hope lies at the heart of our Faith. .

In his Discussions with Father Spadaro SJ Pope Francis puts us on guard against all forms of defeatism or pessimism: *‘Lamentations that denounce a “barbarous” world end up giving birth within the Church to a wish for order that is taken to mean pure conservation or a defensive reaction’* *Etudes*, October 2013.

If we want to contribute to the "coming of the Kingdom", we have to accept the need to change our perspective on the world, to revisit some of our judgements and to modify some of our behaviors. Witnessing to God's love means agreeing to search for others who are not like us; witnessing to God's love means wanting to understand those things in our contemporary world that are signs of his presence; it means joyously announcing the Good News. Jesus did not come to make life easy; he came to bring fire to the earth. Being a Christian means to risk exposing oneself to that fire with confidence.

The Preface to the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (chap 1, 17) itself remarked: *“the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel. Thus, in language intelligible to each generation, she can respond to the perennial questions which men ask about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of one to the other. We must therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live....”*

III - Documents for reflection

Scrutinizing and interpreting the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel

To carry out such a task, the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel. Thus, in language intelligible to each generation, she can respond to the perennial questions which men ask about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of the one to the other. We must therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live, its explanations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics. Some of the main features of the modern world can be sketched as follows.

Today, the human race is involved in a new stage of history. Profound and rapid changes are spreading by degrees around the whole world. Triggered by the intelligence and creative energies of man, these changes recoil upon him, upon his decisions and desires, both individual and collective, and upon his manner of thinking and acting with respect to things and to people. Hence we can already speak of a true cultural and social transformation, one which has repercussions on man's religious life as well.

As happens in any crisis of growth, this transformation has brought serious difficulties in its wake. Thus while man extends his power in every direction, he does not always succeed in subjecting it to his own welfare. Striving to probe more profoundly into the deeper recesses of his own mind, he frequently appears unsure of himself. Gradually and with greater clarity, he lays bare the laws of society, only to be paralysed by uncertainty about the direction to take.

Never has the human race enjoyed such an abundance of wealth, resources and economic power, and yet a huge proportion of the world's citizens are still tormented by hunger and poverty, while countless numbers suffer from total illiteracy. Never before has man had so keen an understanding of freedom, yet at the same time, new forms of social and psychological slavery make their appearance. Although the world of today has a very vivid awareness of its unity and of how one man depends on another in needful solidarity, it is most grievously torn into opposing camps by conflicting forces. Political, social, economic, racial and ideological disputes still continue bitterly, and with them the peril of a war which would reduce everything to ashes. True, there is a growing exchange of ideas, but the very words by which key concepts are expressed take on quite different meanings in diverse ideological systems. Finally, man painstakingly searches for a better world, without a corresponding spiritual advancement.

*Interpreting the signs of the times in
the light of the Gospel to respond to
the perennial questions of mankind*

Influenced by such a variety of complexities, many of our contemporaries are kept from accurately identifying permanent values and adjusting them properly to fresh discoveries. As a result, buffeted between hope and anxiety and pressing one another with questions about the present course of events, they are burdened down with uneasiness. This same course of events leads men to look for answers; indeed, it forces them to do so.

Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* – Introductory Statement

Seeing God acting in this world

...We can say that, for a certain number of Christians and even of theologians, before the Second Vatican Council there was a sort of divorce between the logic of Revelation and Faith, and the logic of the development of the world. However, what the Council wanted above all else was to look at this world from a new perspective, not to condemn it, but to become aware that the Spirit of God, which has been at work since creation, continues to act in this world and to produce fruits for the good of mankind. None of this causes the faults of our world, nor men's errors nor their sins to disappear. But it does enable us to become more aware that in human experience there occur real forces, on which we can rely to build a better world.

This perspective, this loving look at the world, was one of the basic insights of Vatican Council II. This loving look at the world also entails a certain way of understanding mankind. The oldest of you, or those who have read a lot, may remember that right after the Second World War some currents of thought could not contemplate affirming mankind without denying God. The relationship with God was seen as necessarily involving a sort of mutual destruction: if God exists, mankind does not; and if mankind exists, God does not. This hellish logic pervaded our societies and constituted a sort of permanent conflict between the progress of humanity and progress of faith in God. The Council wanted to make it clear that this conflict was an artificial construct. It had been developed by people who had engaged in reflection, who had proposed their theory, but it did not correspond to the reality of the universe.

Man is in the world because God wanted him to be, and God wanted man so that he should be his partner. And this partnership between God and man relies essentially on the capacity that each man has in himself, to choose and to live in freedom. It is because man is free that he can become God's partner... It is because man is free that he can respond to God. We cannot make humanity progress in its relationship with God if we do not keep working at developing this liberty, at eliminating what prevents it from existing, at building the conditions for a free choice in human

*God wanted man so that he should
be His partner in the world* existence.

That is the great initiative, the great insight of Vatican II, which was taken up again in the Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* ... This Constitution, together with all the texts of the Council, has engaged us once and for all in a relationship of dialogue with the world, and not in a relationship of condemnation of the world.

Cardinal André Vingt-Trois, Archbishop of Paris to the Bishops of France March 2012

Living with God's eyes

« There was once an old man sitting at the entrance to a town in the Middle East. A young man approached him and said to him: 'I have never been here; what are the people who live in this town like?' The old man answered him with a question: 'What were the people in the town you came from like?' 'Self-centred and wicked. That's precisely why I was so happy to leave', said the young man. The old man answered: 'You will find the same people here'. A little later, another young man approached him and put exactly the same question to him. 'I have just arrived in this region; what are the people in this town like?' The old man replied in the same way: 'Tell me, sonny, what were the people like in the town you just left?' They were kind, welcoming, and trustworthy; I had good friends there; I was very sorry to leave', answered the young man. 'You will find the same here', replied the old man. A merchant who was watering his camels not far from there had overheard the two conversations. As soon as the second young man had gone on his way, he remonstrated with the old man: 'How can you give two completely different replies to the same question put by two people?' 'Whoever opens his heart also changes his view of others,' replied the old man. 'Everyone carries their universe in their heart.'»

... We see what we see from the perspective of who we are. Above and beyond some of life's realities that are complex and sometimes very painful, there are women and men whose life is a nagging complaint. Then there are those women and men who go through life with a degree of gentleness. We are all, women and men, affected by our respective stories. What is most important is to find on our journey people who take us by the hand and lift us up when we stumble. They are the visible sign of the presence of God at the heart of our humanity. They lead us to what we should see, and above all to live life differently. In fact, through our hearts, our view of the world is transformed completely since faith, hope and love are the eyes with which we advance on our journey as believers. So seeing with God's eyes, involves looking at the world with faith, in other words, always having confidence in the other; recognizing that even if it happens that he becomes lost, he can recover and walk upright again on his life's path; get a grip on himself and get back on track; find his bearings in order to walk. So we have this confidence in human beings despite their weaknesses.

Then again, living with God's eyes, means looking at the world with hope. Hope would leave our hearts forever if there were no signs to tell us that sometimes a human being needs time to make his own discoveries and grow through his failures and disappointments. ... Love enables us to respect the personal journey of each human being, even to keep him company should he err, and above all to rejoice when he returns to being himself. . Love is always tinged with compassion and so it makes possible the capacity of living a life of forgiveness or better still, reconciliation. In this way, having faith, hope and love, enables us to look at the world differently, since each one of us carries the universe in his heart. Amen

Philippe Cochinaux, O.P.

IV – Suggestions for the Sit Down

Our relationship as a couple with today's world: hope, distress, withdrawal?

What does "following Christ" mean for us, as an individual, as a couple: difficulties and joys we have experienced

Practising looking at our spouse in a faith-filled way every day: an opportunity for forgiveness, for listening

V – Running the meeting

Suggestions for reflection during sharing

Events experienced in the past month in Christian hope; events experienced with a temptation to withdraw into oneself

What signs of God's presence have we noticed in our lives?

Prayer

God said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your kindred and your father's house for a country which I shall show you; and I shall make you a great nation. I shall bless you and make your name famous; you are to be a blessing! I shall bless those who bless you, and shall curse those who curse you, and all clans on earth will bless themselves by you. Gen 12: 1-3

Faith "sees" to the extent that it journeys, to the extent that it chooses to enter into the horizons opened up by God's word"

Vatican Council II Lumen Fidei N°9

Sharing : Some suggestions

Prayer, a source of communion with the world and schooling in hope. Have we any examples?

In what circumstances has reading the Word helped us to look at others and the world we live in, from a faith-filled perspective?

Is our Rule of Life likely to free us from our daily world-weariness and blindness?

Discussion of the topic – Some suggestions

How has listening to the Word and the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit helped us to discern this topic, and find responses appropriate to the signs of the times?

Conflict between humanity's progress and progress of faith in God: is this an artificial construct?

What relationship should we construct with the world we live in: listening, dialogue? Should we condemn it? What action should we take? What concrete impact should this have on our lives?

How and in what respect do faith, hope and love transform our view of the world?

Psalm 18a

The heavens declare the glory of God
the vault of heaven proclaims his handiwork
one day conveys it to the next day
one night to the next hands on the knowledge.
No utterance at all, no speech
not a sound to be heard
but from the entire earth the design stands out
this message reaches the whole world.
High above, he pitched a tent for the sun,
who comes forth from his pavilion like a bridegroom
who delights like a champion in the course to be run.
Rising on the one horizon
he runs his circuit to the other
and nothing can escape his heat.

Discerning the signs of the times

Second meeting

Looking at the world in the making

I – Word of God

“For the whole creation is waiting with eagerness for the children of God to be revealed”

“Indeed, I believe all that we suffer in the present time is nothing in comparison with the glory which is destined to be revealed for us. For the whole creation is waiting with eagerness for the children of God to be revealed....with the intention that the whole creation itself might be freed from its slavery to corruption and brought into the same glorious freedom as the children of God. We are well aware that the whole creation, until this time, has been groaning in labour pains. And not only that: we too, who have the first-fruits of the Spirit, even we are groaning inside ourselves, waiting with eagerness for our bodies to be set free. In hope, we already have salvation; in hope not visibly present, or we should not be hoping -- nobody goes on hoping for something which is already visible.” Rm 8:18-24

Here we have a magnificent hymn that sings of Christian confidence in God’s love. In a single breath, Paul leads us powerfully from *“suffering in the present”* towards the heights of *“the glory of the children of God”*. Waiting, groaning, liberation, aspiration, labour pains... This profound impulse of faith leads to the only solid reality: we are children of God! What we are will be revealed: the signs of the Spirit flourish. We are developing.

This hymn of hope adjusts our view of the world of mankind, but also of creation which is the common lodging place of humanity.

II - Presentation of the chapter “Looking at the world in the making”

Discerning the signs of the times means considering the transformations of the world as stages in its development in which God calls us to participate.

God created the world but its creation is not finished, it is on-going and we should participate in its completion: *“God freely willed to create a world in a state of journeying towards its ultimate perfection.”* CC 310*. He gave man the responsibility of *“filling the earth and subduing it”*. Gen 1:26-28

Man’s capacity to transform the world, closely corresponds to God’s plan. *“The norm of human activity is this: that in accord with the divine plan and will, it harmonize with the genuine good of the human race, and that it allow men [...] to pursue their total vocation and fulfil it”* *Gaudium et Spes* 35, 2. Science and technology are valuable resources to make human progress easier; but we have to be on our guard, as St Paul warns, lest a *“spirit of vanity and malice [...] transforms into an instrument of sin those human energies intended for the service of God and man”* (*Gaudium et Spes* 37,3).

The freedom man has been gifted with, implies that he has *“the possibility of choosing between good and evil”* CC 1730/1732*. However, human nature since original sin, is weakened and inclined towards evil. Giving birth to the Kingdom of God, as St Paul tells us, cannot come about without suffering and difficulties. The spiritual struggle against all the forms of evil is inescapable. Every manifestation of decadence contains in itself the beginnings of a new reality. If we resign ourselves or remain passive, we refuse to be *“collaborators with God.”* Cor 3:9. Every man has his part in promoting the common good, depending on the position he holds and the role that he plays.

“God who created you without you, will not save you without you.” St Augustine

* CC: Catechism of the Catholic Church

III - Documents for reflection

Helping nature to flourish along the lines intended by God

460 *Man, then, must never forget that “his capacity to transform and in a certain sense create the world through his own work ... is always based on God's prior and original gift of the things that are”.*[965] He must not “make arbitrary use of the earth, subjecting it without restraint to his will, as though it did not have its own requisites and a prior God-given purpose, which man can indeed develop but must not betray”. [966] When he acts in this way, “instead of carrying out his role as a co-operator with God in the work of creation, man sets himself up in place of God and thus ends up provoking a rebellion on the part of nature, which is more tyrannized than governed by him”. [967]

If man intervenes in nature without abusing it or damaging it, we can say that he *“intervenes not in order to modify nature but to foster its development in its own life, that of the creation that God intended. While working in this obviously delicate area, the researcher adheres to the design of God. God willed that man be the king of creation”.*[968] In the end, it is God himself who offers to men and women the honour of cooperating with the full force of their intelligence in the work of creation.

*God offers man the honour of
cooperating with all the strength of
his intelligence in the work of
creation.*

472 *In recent years pressing questions have been raised with regard to the use of new forms of biotechnology in the areas of agriculture, animal farming, medicine and environmental protection. The new possibilities offered by current biological and biogenetic techniques are a source of hope and enthusiasm on the one hand, and of alarm and hostility on the other. The application of various types of biotechnology, their acceptability from a moral point of view, their consequences for human health and their impact on the environment and the economy, are the subject of thorough study and heated debate. These are controversial questions that involve scientists and researchers, politicians and legislators, economists and environmentalists, as well as producers and consumers. Christians are not indifferent to these problems, for they are aware of the importance of the values at stake. [1001]*

Extracts from the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church (SDC)

What does progress mean for man and what room does it leave for his freedom?

22. ... First we must ask ourselves: what does “progress” really mean; what does it promise and what does it not promise? In the nineteenth century, faith in progress was already subject to criticism...If technical progress is not matched by corresponding progress in man's ethical formation, in man's inner growth (cf. *Eph* 3:16; *2 Cor* 4:16), then it is not progress at all, but a threat for man and for the world.

*If technical progress is not
matched by progress in man's
ethical development ..., it is not
progress*

24 a) The right state of human affairs, the moral well-being of the world, can never be guaranteed simply through structures alone, however good they are. Such structures are not only important, but necessary; yet they cannot and must not marginalize human freedom. Even the best structures function only when the community is animated by convictions capable of motivating people to assent freely to the social order. Freedom requires conviction; conviction does not exist on its own, but must always be gained anew by the community.

b) Since man always remains free and since his freedom is always fragile, the kingdom of good will never be definitively established in this world. Anyone who promises the better world that is guaranteed to last for ever, is making a false promise; he is overlooking human freedom. Freedom must constantly be won over for the cause of good. Free assent to the good never exists simply by itself. If there were structures which could irrevocably guarantee a determined—good—state of the world, man's freedom would be denied, and hence they would not be good structures at all.

Benedict XVI *Spe Salvi*

Mistaken views on God, mistaken views on the world

...Why then don't those who find atheism unsatisfactory, turn to Christians?

- because Christians hardly seem to find happiness in their faith in God
- because, at every level, they show little urgency about speaking of their God. A journalist recently called this Church which no longer knows how to talk about God, not without cutting humour: “the Church of silence”
- because, when all is said and done, the face of God that Christians reveal by their behaviour and at times by their words, is hardly attractive.

Without any doubt, it is to this misleading face of God that the people drafting *Gaudium et Spes* referred when writing this unexpected and damning phrase: “Hence believers can have more than a little to do with the birth of atheism ...” .We all have to make a terrible examination of conscience starting from this question: do not those who see and hear us, risk misunderstanding the true face of Christ? Fathers and mothers, in considering this question, think especially of the children God has placed in your care.

*Finding happiness is faith
in God*

The misleading faces of God

One of these misleading faces is particularly intolerable for our contemporaries: the God who punishes transgressions against right order, whether by this we refer to the moral order, logical order or social order.

The God of the moral order

A God who is a professor of morality, who supervises, spies and threatens, and for that matter, easily offended, spiteful and vengeful... It is this that gives rise to that anxiety that eats away at the conscience of many Christians, and is to be found amongst the best of Christians when they do not end up turning their backs on this “God of the righteous”, this “sadistic Father”, as Freud agonisingly called him.... Christ declared: *“I did not come to call the righteous but sinners”* Matt 9:13.

The God of the logical, rational order

The God of philosophers, a God whom reason shows us exists and whose perfections it describes, a keystone God for all the great doctrinal architectures. A God who is as cold as a concept, as unsatisfactory as any mere system...: the God of the Inquisition and its imitators continues to be a threat.

The God of the social order

It is hard to be sure whether it is this God who made a pact with power, or power that made a pact with him. In any event there is collusion between them: once upon a time it was the emperor; then the “very Christian” king; today it is those who govern, the privileged, the rich... How could the oppressed, those who lack food, work, respect, put up with this?

Don't you think that Christians and non-Christians, and your children too, have often come to imagine that one or other of these three caricatures represented the true face of God?... On the other hand, it is true that other Christians – or the same ones- in the way they spoke and acted, often presented a soothing “good God». Is this other face of God more tempting? This easy-going good guy God, more of a grandfather than a true father; this “stand-in, emergency services, insurance broker” God, has also significantly contributed to disappointing mankind and to encouraging atheism

Doubtless what is still more shocking for the younger generation and atheists or those looking to atheism, is the gap in the existence of so many “good Christians”, between their relationship with God and their lives. Listen to how they talk. It is all about comfort, holidays, a later model car, holiday homes, and all the money worries that these involve. They discuss the latest show, which may or may not be “raunchy”, the latest literary award because you have to be in the swing! They criticise politicians, family members, friends, the Church... Where is God's influence in all of that?

Do you understand now why it may never occur to those who are seeking, to speak to Christians? And why the Fathers of the Council approved the little remark *“Hence believers can have more than a little to do with the birth of atheism ...”*?

Henri Caffarel – Les Equipes Notre-Dame - Face à l'athéisme END p.140

IV – Suggestions for the Sit Down

As a couple, what image of God do we give our children and our neighbours?

What room do we make as a couple for the role we have to play in the world as “God's collaborators?”

V – Running the meeting

Suggestions for reflection for the sharing

In the course of the past month, what influence has God had in our lives?

Prayer

“In my estimation, all that we suffer in the present time is nothing in comparison with the glory which is destined to be disclosed for us, for the whole creation is waiting with eagerness for the children of God to be revealed. It was not for its own purposes that creation had frustration imposed on it, but for the purposes of him who imposed it with the intention that the whole creation itself might be freed from its slavery to corruption and brought into the same glorious freedom as the children of God. We are well aware that the whole creation, until this time, has been groaning in labour pains. And not only that: we too, who have the first-

fruits of the Spirit, even we are groaning inside ourselves, waiting with eagerness for our bodies to be set free. In hope, we already have salvation; in hope, not visibly present, or we should not be hoping -- nobody goes on hoping for something which is already visible. Rom 8:18-24

Sharing - Some suggestions

In what way has our prayer, our liturgy and listening to the Word helped us to make choices in our lives by reference to the Gospel and to practice Hope when faced by the mutations in our world?

Does our rule of life increase in us our responsibility as Christians in the world?

Discussion of the topic – Some suggestions

How have listening to the Word and the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit helped us to discern this topic and find responses appropriate to the signs of the times?

Our “capacity to transform and in a certain sense create the world through our own work ... is always based on God's prior and original gift of the things that are” [965] (SDC N°460).

“If technical progress is not matched by progress in man's ethical development ..., it is not progress”. What reflections does this statement engender in us?

As suggested by Father Caffarel, attitudes or behaviours likely to spread misleading faces of God, and to give rise to a degree of atheism in our surroundings?

Psalm 84

Restore us once more, God our savior;
abandon your wrath against us.
Will you be angry with us forever:
drag out your anger from generation to generation?

Please give us life again,
that your people may rejoice in you.
Show us, O Lord, your love;
and grant us your salvation.

I will listen for the word of God;
surely the Lord will proclaim peace
to his people, to the faithful,
to those who trust in him.

Mercy and truth will meet;
justice and peace will kiss.
Truth will spring from the earth;
and justice will look down from heaven.

For the Lord will give goodness:
and our earth shall yield her fruit.
Justice shall walk before Him:
and shall set His steps in the way.

Discerning the signs of the times

Third Meeting

Building a “civilization based on love”

I – God’s Word

God created man in the image of himself

“God created man in the image of himself, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them.

God blessed them, saying to them, 'Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it. Be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven and all the living creatures that move on earth.’ Gen 1: 27-28

“The Lord God said, 'It is not right that the man should be alone. I shall make him a helper.'

So from the soil God fashioned all the wild animals and all the birds of heaven. These he brought to the man to see what he would call them; each one was to bear the name the man would give it.

The man gave names to all the cattle, all the birds of heaven and all the wild animals. But no helper suitable for the man was found for him.

Then the Lord God made the man fall into a deep sleep. And, while he was asleep, he took one of his ribs and closed the flesh up again forthwith.

God fashioned the rib he had taken from the man into a woman, and brought her to the man.

And the man said: This one at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh! She is to be called Woman, because she was taken from Man.

This is why a man leaves his father and mother and becomes attached to his wife, and they become one flesh.

Gen 2:18-24

In Genesis, there are two stories of creation.

The first is decisive: it provides the meaning of the history of humanity from its beginning to its end. Man – “male and female, he created them” - is the image of God. The love that circulates in God circulates between man and woman. Everything derives from this similarity of love. At the end of time, this love we have received from God will flourish. We shall see God, “*we shall be like him* » (1 Jn 3:2). The purpose of the world is love.

The second story is existential but presupposes the earlier one. It is centered on man’s solitude. God presents him with the beasts of the fields, the birds in the sky, who man names and he takes possession of them. But this is not enough. God presents the woman. Love, similar to God, is there but also has to be built up. They do not know each other and have to discover everything about each other; then, different and complementary, they are made for each other. Finally they remark on the essential thing: “*they become one flesh*”. This is the magnificent path of conjugal love offered by God, a sign of the civilization based on love that needs to be built up.

II - Presentation of the chapter “Building a civilization based on love”

Discerning the signs of the times, in the face of the fascination exercised by fake portrayals of love, means witnessing to the beauty of human love in accordance with God’s plan

The first manifestation of love is the discovery of a previously unexpected happiness. Yes, love derives from happiness because man, in God’s plan, is made for happiness. The incompleteness from which God wanted to deliver us in Gen. 2:18: “*It is not right that the man should be alone. I shall make him a helper*” is then revealed to us. God who created man through love, also called him to love, which is a fundamental aspiration that is innate in all human beings. “*The vocation to marriage is written in the very nature of man and woman as they came from the hand of the Creator*” (CC 1603). In marriage as in all the sacraments, Christ starts from a human reality and makes it into a sanctified reality. Man and woman become a reflection of his union with the Church

From the moment when we decide to inscribe our relationship in the passage of time, fidelity becomes a necessity, not as a constraint but as the foundation of an undertaking we have freely entered into and a source of hope in order to triumph over the test of time. The consent exchanged by the spouses expresses this wish to “forge an alliance”. The Pascal mystery lies at the heart of the conjugal mystery: self-denial and sacrifices are necessary to give birth to an ever greater love reflecting the love God has for us. Christ, the source of grace linked to the sacrament of marriage, accompanies us all the way.

*... Love can only be
maintained by Love*

If it is true that God wants to free us from our incompleteness, we nonetheless experience a solitude which, far from being negative, opens us up to God, the source of plenitude and Love. So it is that our daily yes to each other progressively introduces us to a new dimension of love, in a dynamic which surpasses our simple human resources to lead us to God.

III - Documents for reflection

The divine “We” constitutes the everlasting model of the human “we”

In the light of the New Testament, we can perceive that the original *model of the family must be sought in God himself*, in the Trinitarian mystery of his life. The divine “We” constitutes the everlasting model of the human “we”, and above all of the “we” that is formed by the man and woman created in the image of God, in his likeness. The words of the Book of Genesis contain the truth about man to which the very experience of humanity corresponds. Man, from “the beginning”, is created male and female : the life of the human collective— of small communities just as of the whole of society— bears the sign of this original duality. It is from this duality that the “masculine” or “feminine” character of individuals flows, and it is from it, too, that all communities draw their characteristics and their richness in the complementarity of people. This is what this sentence in the Book of Genesis seems to refer: “*male and female he created them*” (Gen. 1:27). ...

The family has always been considered the first and fundamental expression of the *social nature* of man.

Marriage, sacramental marriage, is an alliance of people in love. And *love cannot be deepened and maintained except by Love*, that Love which was “*poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us*” (Rom 5:5).

The Apostle, kneeling before the Father, begs him “*that he may grant you in accord with the riches of his glory to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in the inner self*” (Eph. 3:16). This “power in the inner self” is necessary in family life, especially in its critical moments - that is to say when love, which was expressed in the course of the rite of the exchange of vows by the words “I promise to remain true to you... all the days of my life”, is called on to overcome a difficult test...

By asking “Are you prepared?”, the Church reminds the newlyweds that they *are in the presence of the creative power of God*. They are called to become parents, that is to say, to cooperate with the Creator in giving life. Cooperating with God to call new human beings into life, means contributing to the transmission of the divine image and likeness which is reflected by anyone who is “born of a woman”.

John-Paul II – Letter to Families – 1994 Year of the Family

God cares about man’s happiness

There can be no doubt that God cares very much that in the course of his evolution, every human being should experience happiness. It matters to him that man should have a taste for happiness; and not only that he have a taste for it, but that, because he has experienced it, he believes it is possible; and as a result he desires and pursues it. God cares about it, not only because this faith in happiness contributes greatly to health in body and soul – losing it is akin to dying – but above all because it points man towards him... In a word, God’s life is happiness, and so the eternal life he proposes to man is already a foretaste of this happiness. How could anyone commit to this religion of happiness, if he did not have a taste for happiness? Conjugal love has the privilege of causing this aspiration to gush forth –an aspiration which for many is no more than an ember under the ashes, until they experience love, - and through it to set out on the road towards God’s happiness. But how fragile this experience of happiness is! For many it is ephemeral. How very few are the households that prove the truth of the definition of marriage proposed by Orthodox Archbishop Innocent Borissov: “all that is left of Paradise on earth”. Even so, even if it does not last long, this experience is of the greatest importance. Fragile and ephemeral are not synonymous with deceptive...

Many reasons explain this precariousness. Some confuse happiness with pleasure and by pursuing the latter, lose the former even though, at one time, they had discovered it... Others seek an absolute in happiness: in so doing they destroy it and their loved ones, by requiring of them what they are incapable of providing...

However, happily, there are those for whom this experience is still the experience of their lives. Doubtless as the years pass, it loses its initial vivacity and liveliness, but this is to the benefit of a clarity, depth and strength that love could not know in its springtime. They recognize that they did not receive a share in absolute happiness, but in the happiness born of their love, they learned to see a promise of another happiness that they pursue together and of which they already have a foretaste.

Père Henri Caffarel - L'Anneau d'or N°117-118

*Marriage: "all that is left of
paradise on earth!"*

Marriage: support and protection against the mirages of passion

The mutual act through which the spouses commit to this specific conjugal love in a lived reality and not as a mere project for the future, is the very one which, through them, gives birth to an indissoluble institution before God and before society itself. The institution created by the act of love and conjugal love gives support and protection against the passing mirages of passion. True conjugal love is not restricted or prevented by the institution of marriage, and its dynamism is not shackled, limited, nor closed in... The institution of marriage would not exist if conjugal love did not exist, and one cannot give without giving of oneself.

This dual aspect of the reality described in biblical terms as "one flesh" can be enriched and progress continually according to the laws of its own dynamics which consist in involving personal and communal daily life in the demands of this initial gift... It is a distortion to consider the dynamism of conjugal life as a fruit of love to which the laws of unity and indissolubility, as well as the intrinsic purpose of marriage, would be opposed... as if conjugal love in and of itself was indifferent to this or that of its own characteristics. Independent of the love that existed during their engagement, the spouses are now obliged to love each other through a special bond. Previously, they could stop loving each other. Now, the commitment to give themselves to each other, obliges them to give effect to the gift of their own lives. This mutual gift through which the married couple have become man and wife, should be reflected for the rest of their lives through daily demonstrations of affection and works of love.

The daily exercise of conjugal love lived as gift and generosity, apart from reflecting pre-existing love, can make it grow and raise it to fulfilment. If marriage presupposes love, conjugal love in its turn is a fruit of marriage, since love in the latter should be a unique kind of friendship which leads us to share everything generously, without any selfish thoughts or considerations. It is in this context that the unique and specific union of the spouses is found, as a sign of love and a possible means of development...

Francisco Gil Hellin
Archbishop of Burgos - Former Secretary to the Pontifical Council on the Family

IV - Suggestions for the Sit Down

Are we one of those couples who think as the Orthodox Archbishop Innocent Borissov does, that the couple is "*all that is left of paradise on earth!*"?

*If marriage presupposes
love, conjugal love in its turn
is a fruit of marriage*

What daily signs of affection do we give each other to constantly give effect to this mutual gift by which we became man and wife?

Over the years, "does our love gain in clarity, depth and strength, what it has perhaps lost in vivacity and liveliness", as Father Caffarel says?

V - Running the meeting

Suggestions for reflection for the sharing

Conjugal love, a source of giving and generosity.

Prayer

"The Lord God said, 'It is not right that the man should be alone. I shall make him a helper.'

So from the soil God fashioned all the wild animals and all the birds of heaven. These he brought to the man to see what he would call them; each one was to bear the name the man would give it.

The man gave names to all the cattle, all the birds of heaven and all the wild animals. But no helper suitable for the man was found for him.

Then, the Lord God made the man fall into a deep sleep. And, while he was asleep, he took one of his ribs and closed the flesh up again forthwith.

God fashioned the rib he had taken from the man into a woman, and brought her to the man.

And the man said: This one at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh! She is to be called Woman, because she was taken from Man.

This is why a man leaves his father and mother and becomes attached to his wife, and they become one flesh.

Gen. 2:18-24

Sharing – Some suggestions

The place and role of listening to the Word in our life as couples and families.

Conjugal prayer in our life as couples

The Sit Down as a source of knowledge and understanding between spouses.

Discussion of the topic - Some suggestions

How have listening to the Word and the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit helped us to discern this topic and find responses appropriate to the signs of the times?

True conjugal love is not limited or prevented by the institution of marriage and its dynamism is not shackled, limited nor closed in...

Faithfulness within the couple cannot be considered as a constraint, but as the desire to establish a life plan that is maintained over time.

Conjugal love, the promise of another Happiness (Father Caffarel)

Psalm 126

When the LORD restored the captives of Zion,
we thought we were dreaming.

Then our mouths were filled with laughter;
our tongues sang for joy.
Then it was said among the nations,
“The LORD had done great things for them.”
The LORD has done great things for us;
Oh, how happy we were!
Restore our captives, LORD,
like the dry stream beds of the Negeb.*

Those who sow in tears
will reap with cries of joy.
Those who go forth weeping,
carrying sacks of seed,
Will return with cries of joy,
carrying their bundled sheaves.

Discerning the signs of the times

Fourth Meeting

Respect for the human person

I – Word of God

“Take courage; get up, he is calling you.”

‘They came to Jericho. And as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a sizable crowd, Bartimaeus, a blind man, the son of Timaeus, sat by the roadside begging. On hearing that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, “Jesus, son of David, have pity on me.” And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he kept calling out all the more, “Son of David, have pity on me.” Jesus stopped and said, “Call him.” So they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take courage; get up, he is calling you.” He threw aside his cloak, sprang up, and came to Jesus. Jesus said to him in reply, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man replied to him, “Master, I want to see.” Jesus told him, “Go your way; your faith has saved you.” Immediately he received his sight and followed him on the way.’ Mk 10:46-52

Bartimaeus is famous. He has a strong personality. Blind and begging, he is cured by Jesus who notices his faith. Firstly – first act of faith – he hears Jesus passing by. Immediately, he calls out to him. He has confidence in Jesus. Second act of faith: he cries out all the more even though the crowd want to silence him; adversity does not stop him. His faith survives all the tests. Third act of faith: he is called by Jesus, through those people who previously rebuffed him. Straight away, he springs towards Jesus, abandoning his cloak because, once he is cured, he won't need it any longer. Fourth act of faith: his freedom is sought by Jesus (*“What do you want me to do for you?”*). He asks for sight. A strange dialogue? No, so many people do not know what is wrong with them. Final act of faith: he follows Jesus on his way and becomes a disciple of Christ.

Jesus cures Bartimaeus highlighting his faith. This man has become the symbol of our journey: Christ-like respect for everyone; Christian respect for the varied paths taken by individuals. We must bring to light the search for truth which makes its way in this world.

II - Presentation of the chapter “Respect for the human person”

Discerning the signs of the times means observing and analysing the risk of dehumanization of our societies to better combat them in the light of the Gospel.

In numerous societies of antiquity, the human person was not systematically respected as such. It was the citizen who was recognized and not the man (emancipation of slaves came close to this recognition...). Christianity brought about a change in outlook. *“For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male*

and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Gal. 3:27-28. God sent his son among us to teach us respect for human life, by his word and the example of his life.

Basing one's life on this absolute love for the other, who is created in God's image, has always been a struggle for man. Making progress and then falling back is inherent in his imperfect nature.

It is here that individual discernment, helped by the Spirit and enlightened by Scripture and the Church, makes complete sense. We do this work of discernment in our conscience, which is the "sanctuary" of all moral decisions.

Today, too, confronted by the growing complexity of an evolution of the world, that is not only biological, but economic and political as well, man has to ensure that the progress accompanying the development in any society remains reconciled with respect for the human person. The gift of life that God gave to man in trust, imposes on him an obligation to be conscious of his priceless value, and to take responsibility for it. Let us not be won over by a feeling of powerlessness rather, as Pope Francis proposes, "...Challenges exist to be overcome! Let us be realists, but without losing our joy, our boldness and our hope-filled commitment» (*The Joy of the Gospel, §109: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html*)

III - Documents for reflection

Preventing humanity from becoming inhuman

We hear Jesus' warning to "interpret the signs of the times" (Cf. Lk 12:54-56), that is to say, to apply our intelligence and reason to understand the current age, instead of enduring it; and by understanding it, to measure the responsibilities we have, if we believe that God's word should be inscribed in the flesh of our humanity to prevent it from becoming inhuman ... At all times, and therefore in these unpredictable times of the second decade of the 21st century, we are called upon to work at an intelligent discernment.

"... No doubt, we can legitimately diagnose any particular crisis involving numbers and rationality, ie those crises that involve figures and quantities. However there is a tendency to treat the human person according to that same implacable logic, treating them only in terms of financial return and competition.

It is like a heartfelt cry of reason that we hear on all sides: Put a stop to the headlong rush which crushes human activity! It is this dignity that we must truly restore in various ways! This is true as much for the embryo in the womb, and for the old or sick person at the end of their life; as it is for men and women who are at risk of being manipulated as objects or as pawns in response to the demands of technical profitability or the laws of a market that is without control. "

... What we are asked to do is to participate, calling on our own resources, in this ongoing battle for: respect for the human person; a resolute practice of solidarity; and deep-rooted and sustainable development. This battle, even if we are involved in it specifically as disciples of Christ, cannot but join us with all those who, whether consciously or unconsciously, refuse to despise those who are humiliated; those who are left by the wayside; and those who refuse to manipulate others by fear, in the face of all sorts of threats, real or imaginary.

It is from inside our Christian faith in the God of the Covenant and of Salvation that we participate in contemporary political discussions... And if there is a crisis of rationality, it is our responsibility to regenerate political reason, so that it asks questions about the choices to be made with a view to giving priority to the common good; in other words, everything that prevents divisions and withdrawal, and everything that gives priority to actions that express confidence and solidarity, at the very heart of the ruptures in our society.

Monsignor Claude Dagens of the Académie Française – Bishop of Angoulême
Catholiques et présents dans la Société française – Foi en Dieu et Démocratie – Bayard – April 2012

*Participating in the ongoing
battle for respect for the
human person*

Respect for human dignity: the objective of all Christian society

In reality, man is of value for what he is and not just for what he has or what he does. Man deserves love and respect because he lives, not because he possesses. His dignity is properly linked to the fact that he is a person. Consequently as long as he lives, he will always retain his dignity; even if he is old and sick, even if he errs or is delinquent. The human person never loses his original grandeur and no-one can take it from him. Man always remains the underlying principle and end of civil society. This is the reason why – as Vatican Council II notes: “According to the almost unanimous opinion of believers and unbelievers alike, all things on earth should be related to man as their center and crown”(1). ...

Faith should not be in conflict with scientific and rational research

Society is a community of people who are in a relationship with each other. It is not a troupe of anonymous individuals living alongside each other, each of whom only thinks of himself. Without social responsibility, there is no personal freedom. The common good is not the sum total of individual good, but is the good of all and of each. As the Council confirms: “Man's social nature makes it evident that the progress of the human person and the advance of society itself hinges on one another. From the beginning, the subject and the goal of all social institutions is and must be the human person who, for their part and by their very nature, stands completely in need of social life. Since this social life is not something added on to man, it is through his dealings with others, through mutual service, and through fraternal dialogue that he develops all his gifts and is able to rise to his destiny” (2). The role of Christians once again is decisive. Christian revelation again comes to our aid. . Solidarity is necessary, but pure legality on its own is not enough: “in the name of an alleged justice (for example, historical justice or class justice), the neighbour is sometimes destroyed, killed, deprived of liberty or stripped of fundamental human rights. The experience of the past and of our own time demonstrates that justice alone is not enough. It can even lead to the negation and destruction of itself, if that deeper power, which is love, is not allowed to shape human life in its various dimensions.”(3).

- 1) Vatican Council II, Pastoral Constitution Gaudium et Spes N°12
- 2) Vatican Council II, Pastoral Constitution Gaudium et Spes N°25
- 3) John-Paul II, Dives in misericordia (1980) N12

Bartoloméo Sorge S.I. Rome

22 January 2009 – 2nd international meeting of the Regional Responsible Couples of Teams of Our Lady

Everything on earth should be ordered for man as its center and pinnacle

Offenses against the dignity of the human person are offenses against God

It is by virtue of creation that adoration of and adherence to God are linked to respect for man: “the image of God” whom he has made his partner, co-responsible with him for his own life, that of others and for the global environment. Respect for freedom of conscience for all which presupposes, first and foremost, respect for religious freedom and at the same time a refusal of all violence, is intrinsic to this concept. Consequently, it seems to me that the very nature of religion in general and of Christianity and Catholicism in particular, makes three fundamental preliminary demands if there is to be a proper relationship between faith and the law.

First, there is an anthropological requirement, ie a requirement for a concept of man which demands respect for the dignity of all human beings. On the one hand, any infringement of human dignity, even if it is motivated by a mistakenly interpreted religious sense, is offensive to God. On the other hand, all honour paid to God should be realized in respect for man created in His image and likeness. Clearly this respect for man should not be understood in a reductionist sense, ie as no more than respect for his conscience, but also and primarily as respect for his life from the first moment of his existence as the foundation of all other human values.

The second requirement is of an epistemological order: faith should not be opposed to scientific and rational research, but should indicate the very direction of this research, within the framework of the purpose of man, while respecting his human dignity. Similarly, science should respect the proper role of faith and the realization of human values inherent in man's transcendent dignity. Ignoring the specific values of the spiritual and moral dimension of the individual, would be contrary to the harmony of knowledge and would constitute a manifestation of fundamentalism and intolerance rather than secularism. True secularism, in fact, respects and takes account of the plurality and the harmony of different areas of knowledge and values.

The third requirement is the principle of acceptance of the democratic system. The right to freedom-with responsibility should be guaranteed for all mankind, within a climate of dialogue and conviction, and the possibility of disagreement should be assured when fundamental moral values are in play. It must be made clear here that, where the State is concerned, it is precisely the democratic system as such which demands the duty of defending the life of every individual, and of creating the conditions for the development of everyone in justice and solidarity.

Elio Sgreccia – Member of the Pontifical Council for the Family – *Lexique*

Suggestions for the Sit Down

Is respect for the other (spouse and children) sufficiently present within our life as a couple and how is it made manifest?

All too often love can be reduced to wanting to possess the other. Does this happen for us as a couple, or family? How can this difficulty be overcome?

V – Running the meeting

Some suggestions for the general sharing

What situations have we experienced this month that led us, as invited by Mgr Dagens, to *“truly restore the dignity of the human individual?”*

Prayer

‘They came to Jericho. And as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a sizable crowd, Bartimaeus, a blind man, the son of Timaeus, sat by the roadside begging. On hearing that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, “Jesus, son of David, have pity on me.” And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he kept calling out all the more, “Son of David, have pity on me.” Jesus stopped and said, “Call him.” So they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take courage; get up, he is calling you.” He threw aside his cloak, sprang up, and came to Jesus. Jesus said to him in reply, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man replied to him, “Master, I want to see.” Jesus told him, “Go your way; your faith has saved you.” Immediately he received his sight and followed him on the way.’ Mk 10:46-52

Sharing – Some suggestions

The endeavors are a help to better follow Christ who teaches us to look at our neighbour afresh, with a new look which requires us to put others first.

Do we experience the endeavors as a restrictive obligation or as an aid to our becoming more human day by day?

Discussion of the topic: Some suggestions

How have listening to the Word and the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, helped us to discern this topic and find responses appropriate to the signs of the times?

Do we feel our responsibility as committed Christians when faced with the many assaults on human dignity? In what way do we think it appropriate to react?

Jean Vanier thinks that *“all too often in our societies we confuse the good with success”*. Does this confusion sometimes lead us to see the other for what he represents, and not for what he is; to view the other not as an end, but as a means?

In the debate about the absolute and primary respect due to human life, is it conceivable that alleviation of physical or moral suffering arising from a long and serious illness, can take precedence over respect for life?

Psalm 139

I will say, 'Let the darkness cover me
and the night wrap itself around me,'
¹even darkness to you is not dark
and night is as clear as the day.

You created my inmost self,
knit me together in my mother's womb.
For so many marvels I thank you; a wonder am I,
and all your works are wonders.

You knew me through and through,
my being held no secrets from you,
when I was being formed in secret,
textured in the depths of the earth.

Your eyes could see my embryo.
In your book all my days were inscribed,
every one that was fixed is there.

Discerning the signs of the times

Fifth meeting

The Poor, beloved of God

I – The Word of God

“How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!”

An official asked him this question, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus answered him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery; you shall not kill; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; honor your father and your mother.’” And he replied, “All of these I have observed from my youth.” When Jesus heard this he said to him, “There is still one thing left for you: sell all that you have and distribute it to the poor, and you will have a treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” But when he heard this he became quite sad, for he was very rich.

Jesus looked at him [now sad] and said, “How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” Those who heard this said, “Then who can be saved?” And he said, “What is impossible for human beings is possible for God.” Lk 18:18-27

A tragedy and a call to hope.

Tragedy. Everything starts off well. Jesus replies to a fundamental question, about “inheriting eternal life” with a universal call to sanctity: observing the commandments is the high road to life with God. The ruler’s insistence (in Mark, it is a young man) is touching. He has obeyed all the commandments since his youth, but wants more. In fact he could become an admirable disciple of Jesus and, through his preaching, lead lots of people to the Lord. After offering this man the common vocation (observing the commandments), Jesus invites him to an individual vocation: poverty to follow him. The tragedy is that his wealth holds him back. His worldly wealth touches him too closely. The treasure of heaven touches him too distantly.

Each of us can reread his or her life..., or can recall those who draw away from God. Is the ideal too-lofty? Who can be saved? Then comes the call to hope. Jesus replies to his disciples who have themselves left everything behind and are saddened like Jesus by this painful departure: “What is impossible for human beings is possible for God.” What a dazzling statement! We are not faced with an unattainable ideal but a call from God who will give us everything so that we can follow him to the end.

II - Presentation of the chapter “The poor beloved of God”

Discerning the signs of the times, means recognizing the poor as true participants in society

Views on poverty have evolved over the centuries. At the end of the middle ages, the eruption of money as an instrument for measuring wealth, leads to discrimination against the poor in society. Progressively, the poor become commonly viewed as people who are unsettling. The society of the 19th century relegates them to the status of people who are assisted. The giver of charity is superior to the recipient, and charity is expressed essentially by the domination of the rich over the poor. Saint Augustine had already revealed our deep motivation in a biting way: *“by being of service to an unfortunate, perhaps you want to lift yourself compared to him, and you want him to be obliged to you, he who is the origin of your good deed. He was in need, you gave him some share of your goods: because you are the giver, you appear superior to him to whom you give”*.

Yet in this context, we should not forget the numerous Christians who sought to witness to God’s charity: St Vincent de Paul, St Jean-Baptiste de la Sales, St Charles Borromeo, St Anthony of Padua, St Martin de Porrès, the hospices, the numerous religious congregations...

The spread of the recent international economic crisis gives the topic of poverty a fresh acuteness just as the information society provides it with much greater visibility. The transnational social movements and bloggers who are outraged and denounce the unsustainable character of social injustices, contribute greatly to this visibility and bring out a new view of the poor. A concern to find the person behind the appearance, to work with the poor and not on the poor, to recognize them as real participants in society today, seems to be an inescapable fact in order to recreate the social fabric. As Jean-Marie Ploux, a priest in the foreign missions, says: *“Christian revelation is not brought about from on high but from down below; not through power but through shared weakness; not by domination but by service.”*(*)

(*)Jean-Marie Ploux– *Agir et résister en chrétiens* – Ed. de l’Atelier

III - Documents for reflection

Looking, thinking and acting in the world in a way geared to the weak...

“He casts the mighty from their thrones and raises the lowly”...

Who can say something so revolutionary? There is a clear relationship between the Virgin Mary in her thanksgiving song in Luke’s Gospel (Lk 1:52) and what one could call quite a reversal of values, and the attitude of Jesus in meeting up with the lowest of men and women. However, there was nothing in Jesus’s actions that could offend the Jews of his time, except that this led him to break through the barriers concerning things and actions that were pure and impure on which the identity of Israel was based, and its resistance to foreign influences: those of Greek culture, as well as those of Roman domination. This brought upon him the enmity of the masters of the temple and death.

...So the Christian revelation of God comes not from on high but from below; not from power, but from shared weakness, not from domination but from service. After his conversion Saint Paul draws out the consequences: *God chose those who by human standards are fools, to shame the wise; he chose those who by human*

standards are weak, to shame the strong; those who by human standards are common and contemptible -- indeed those who count for nothing -- to reduce to nothing, all those that do count for something 1Co 1, 27-28.

In this way what is undoubtedly the fundamental criterion of Christian action is laid out: seeing, thinking and acting in the world focused on the the fragile in society, beginning with margins of existence and not, as one top, from the centers of decision-categorical evangelical imperative.

Ask them what they can contribute instead of assisting them

worthless, the vulnerable and what Pope Francis calls the always does, starting from the making and power ... This is a

John-Paul II... wanted to be the voice of the voiceless, *“the voice of those who cannot speak or of those who are reduced to silence”*. But this is true of all Christians who stand united with their most vulnerable brothers on the planet. However, before being the voice of the voiceless, we should do everything possible to enable them to speak up and say for themselves what they have to say. This has been the approach of communities like Emmaüs and ADT Quart-Monde (Fourth World) since they were founded: insisting that the poor and excluded can speak ... and be heard. Ask them what they can contribute instead of assisting them.

Jean-Marie Ploux – *Agir et résister en chrétiens* – Ed de l’Atelier 2013 - p93-95

Loving attentiveness paid to the poor...

199. Our commitment does not consist exclusively in activities or programs of promotion and assistance. What the Holy Spirit mobilizes is not an unruly activism, but above all an attentiveness which considers the other “in a certain sense as one with ourselves”. [166] This loving attentiveness is the beginning of a true concern for their person which inspires me effectively to seek their good. This entails appreciating the poor in their goodness, in their experience of life, in their culture, and in their ways of living the faith. True love is always contemplative, and permits us to serve the other not out of necessity or vanity, but rather because he or she is beautiful above and beyond mere appearances: “The love by which we find the other pleasing, leads us to offer him something freely”. [167] The poor person, when loved, “is esteemed as of great value”, [168] and this is what makes the authentic option for the poor differ from any other ideology, from any attempt to exploit the poor for one’s own personal or political interest. Only on the basis of this real and sincere closeness can we properly accompany the poor on their path of liberation. Only this will ensure that “in every Christian community the poor feel at home. Would not this approach be the greatest and most effective presentation of the good news of the kingdom?” [169] Without the preferential option for the poor, “the proclamation of the Gospel, which is itself the prime form of charity, risks being misunderstood or submerged by the ocean of words which daily engulfs us in today’s society of mass communications”. [170]

The worst discrimination the poor suffer from is the lack of spiritual care

Only political interest. Only this community the poor the greatest and most

200. Since this Exhortation is addressed to members of the Catholic Church, I want to say, with regret, that the worst discrimination which the poor suffer is the lack of spiritual care. The great majority of the poor have a special openness to the faith; they need God and we must not fail to offer them his friendship, his blessing,

his word, the celebration of the sacraments and a journey of growth and maturity in the faith. Our preferential option for the poor must mainly translate into a privileged and preferential religious care.

Pope Francis – Apostolic Exhortation “The joy of the Gospel”.

Doing “with the poor” and not “for the poor”

In the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10), the latter comes to the aid of the injured man because he is “seized with pity” or “moved by compassion”... The behavior of the priest and the Levite both of whom having seen the injured man pass by on the other side, poses a question for us. What prevented them from feeling the pity experienced by the Samaritan?

This leads us to reflect on what we are obliged to call the inhibitors of pity; a whole series of recurring arguments throughout history persuade us not to come to the aide of the poor or at best only in an extremely limited and controlled way. Before the 19th century, there were very few people who insisted that poverty could have anything but an individual cause ... We should also mention a criticism of pity that denounces a condescending attitude that dispossesses the object of it of his autonomy and dignity... *True pity begins with clear thinking*

True pity begins with clear thinking and, in particular, by recognizing the vicious circle of destitution... When we are destitute, we cannot be the “deserving poor”. True pity demands that we come to the aid of the destitute, by going with them just as they are, and supporting them with a hope in which they become stakeholders. A formula could characterize this as: not “doing for” but “doing with” ...

As I have said, those who are destitute do not have the capacity to make themselves heard. So they need interpreters and defenders... Remember the figure of Job: this poor man who has lost everything, and whose friends wanted to persuade that he is himself responsible for his ills. And this is Job’s cry: “*Oh, would that my words were written down! Would that they were inscribed in a record: That with an iron chisel and with lead they were cut in the rock forever!*” Job 19:23-24. Precisely, when will someone turn up to plead his cause? Yet the person who takes up Job’s defence, implicating God at the same time in this defence, is the author of the Book of Job himself... In this way, by the very fact of this response, this cry, which is the cry of everyone who is destitute, was not forgotten and can no longer be forgotten.

Similarly, all those who are destitute need someone to make their cry heard..., to bring their plight to the consciousness of everyone and argue for them in public debate. If Jesus could say that the poor will be always with us (Mt 26:11), this was not to provoke us to surrender, but to remind us that the task always needs to begin again, to help the poor to get out of the margins into which a society wants to push them back. But to do this, we must also keep our consciences alert, increase the sense of urgency and strengthen our collective determination.

Cries that come to us from destitute situations pose a question for us and challenge us to change pity into imagining what can be done.

Bernard Rordorf – Honorary Professor in the Faculty of Theology, Geneva -
Begging Seminar - Begging, being fined or being pitied? – 2 March 2012

IV - Suggestions for the Sit Down

Who are the poor in our life?

How could we as a couple be, as JM Ploux urges us, “*the voice of those who are voiceless...*”?

What is our view of the situation of the poor today in our society? How can we act with them? How can we be converted?

V – Running the meeting

Suggestions for reflection for the sharing

In the course of the past month, how have we regarded our most deprived brothers and sisters?

In what way have we been able to show “spiritual care” for them?

Prayer

One of the rulers put this question to him, 'Good Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: You shall not commit adultery; You shall not kill; You shall not steal; You shall not give false witness; Honour your father and your mother.' He replied, 'I have kept all these since my earliest days.' And when Jesus heard this he said, 'There is still one thing you lack. Sell everything you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' But when he heard this he was overcome with sadness, for he was very rich. Jesus looked at him and said, 'How hard it is for those who have riches to make their way into the kingdom of God! Yes, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for someone rich to enter the kingdom of God.' Those who were listening said, 'In that case, who can be saved?' He replied, 'Things that are impossible by human resources, are possible for God.' Lk 18:18-27

Sharing – Some suggestions

The place of the poor in our rule of life.

Listening to the Word shows us a God who is concerned for the poor, the widow, the orphan, the sick. All human life has value....

Pope Francis declares: “it is time to pray”.

Prayer, a source of humility: we are all poor before God.

Discussion of the topic: Some suggestions

How have listening to the Word and the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit helped us to discern this topic and find answers that are appropriate to the signs of the times?

Seeing, thinking and acting in the world focused on ‘the worthless, the vulnerable and the fragile’ in our society.

Pope Francis wants a “poor Church for the poor”.

Bernard Rordorf invites us to act “with the poor” rather than “for the poor”.

Psalm 130

Yahweh, my heart is not haughty,
I do not set my sights too high.
I have taken no part in great affairs,
in wonders beyond my scope.

No, I hold myself in quiet and silence,
like a little child in its mother's arms,
like a little child,
so I keep myself.

Let Israel hope in the Lord
henceforth and for ever.

Discerning the signs of the times

Sixth meeting

Being there for others

I – The Word of God

“Welcome him as you would me”

From Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus and from our brother Timothy; to our dear fellow worker Philemon ... I am rather appealing to your love, being what I am, Paul, an old man, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus. I am appealing to you for a child of mine, whose father I became while wearing these chains: I mean Onesimus. He was of no use to you before, but now he is useful both to you and to me. I am sending him back to you -- that is to say, sending you my own heart. I should have liked to keep him with me; he could have been a substitute for you, to help me while I am in the chains that the gospel has brought me. However, I did not want to do anything without your consent. It would have been forcing your act of kindness, which should be spontaneous. I suppose you have been deprived of Onesimus for a time, merely so that you could have him back for ever, no longer as a slave, but something much better than a slave, a dear brother; especially dear to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. So if you grant me any fellowship with yourself, welcome him as you would me; if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, put it down to my account. I am writing this in my own hand: I, Paul, shall pay it back -- I make no mention of a further debt, that you owe your very self to me! Well then, brother, I am counting on you, in the Lord; set my heart at rest, in Christ.

1 Philemon: 1-20

Paul invites Philemon to see Onesimus, no longer as a slave who has escaped but as a beloved brother in the Lord. This reality: ‘in the Lord’ changes all human relationships.

Paul, like the New Testament, says nothing about slavery as a social institution. It is a fact. What matters to Paul, is not calling institutions into question but reforming them “top down” through the love that comes from Christ. By his incarnation, by his death and resurrection, the Son of God makes all of us children of one and the same Father, brothers and sisters. This fraternal equality changes everything: “There is neither Jew nor Greek” (Gal 3:28)

The outcome is immense. We are all admitted to the same nourishment at the Eucharistic table, the Body and Blood of Christ. In the history of humanity, equality in religious practice began with the Lord’s meal. It is one of the greatest miracles of the Christian religion. The abolition of slavery (although it still exists in so many countries!) finds its origin in Christ, the power of faith in the Lord acting in the course of history!

II – Presentation of the Chapter: “Being there for others”

Discerning the signs of the times, means making good use of modern means of communication across every boundary, so that we become the neighbor of our brothers and give birth to an authentic culture of encounter.

God became man in Jesus to help us to come back to Him through our brothers. So he makes us observe how Jesus treats people to better understand and put into practice the commandment of the Lord, that Father Caffarel so often draws to our attention: *“Love one another as I have loved you”*. Jesus-Christ sees the other as an image of God whatever his social standing, his circumstances or his journey, even to the point of finding himself antagonizing the scribes and Pharisees. In this regard he makes things clear: *“For if you love those who love you, what recompense will you have? Do not the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what is unusual about that? Do not the pagans do the same?”* * Finally, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, *“Jesus reverses the perspective: it is not a matter of recognizing the other as my equal, but of my capacity to make myself equal to the other person.”***.

Today’s globalization, social networks and development in communications in general, allow a better understanding of people around us. However it is paradoxical to find that, despite this abundance in the means of communication, our view of the other still remains too superficial, even contrived and does not lead to a true encounter. We often satisfy ourselves with seeing without really being *“affected to the core”* as the Samaritan was by the wounded man. Yet this emotion is the first stage in our sensorial vision becoming a heartfelt view that leads us to act. Let us take advantage of technical progress to change *“our hearts of stone... into hearts of flesh.”* Ez 36:26.

*Mt 5, 46-48

** Pope Francis: Message for the 48th World Communications Day – 24 January 2014

III - Documents for reflection

Communicating to open up to others

Whenever communication is primarily aimed at promoting consumption or manipulating others, we are dealing with a form of violent aggression like that suffered by the man in the parable, who was beaten by robbers and left abandoned on the road. The Levite and the priest do not regard him as a neighbor, but as a stranger to be kept at a distance. In those days, it was rules of ritual purity which conditioned their response. Nowadays there is a danger that certain media so condition our responses that we fail to see our real neighbor.

It is not enough to be passers-by on the digital highways, simply *“connected”*. Connections need to grow into true encounters. We cannot live apart, closed in on ourselves. We need to love and to be loved. We need tenderness. Media strategies do not ensure beauty, goodness and truth in communication. The world of media also has to be concerned with humanity; it too is called to show tenderness. The digital world can be an environment rich in humanity; a network not of wires but of people. The impartiality of media is merely an appearance; only those who go out of themselves in their communication can become a true reference point for others. Personal engagement is the basis of the trustworthiness of a communicator. Christian witness, thanks to the internet, can thereby reach the peripheries of human existence.

As I have frequently observed, if a choice has to be made between a bruised Church which goes out to the streets and a Church suffering from self-absorption, I certainly prefer the first. Those *“streets”* are the world

where people live and where they can be reached, both effectively and affectively. The digital highway is one of them, a street teeming with people who are often hurting: men and women looking for salvation or hope. By means of the internet, the Christian message can reach “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Keeping the doors of our churches open also means keeping them open in the digital environment so that people, whatever their situation in life, can enter, and so that the Gospel can go out to reach everyone. We are called to show that the Church is home to all. Are we capable of communicating the image of such a Church?

Message of Pope Francis for the 48th World Communications Day

Knowing how to listen to your neighbor...

“Listening, listening without judging is much more difficult than we think. Listening is not only an attitude we have to take on when someone else ‘talks with me’; it is another attitude that is much more fundamental and permanent, because human beings express themselves, not only in their words but in communication and relationships. So listening is being someone to whom the other person can express himself.

And I don’t know what he has to say: this is a fundamental principle. However, despite this, my morality runs a constant risk of acting in me as something that allows me to know what the other person is about. It authorizes me to ‘pigeon hole’ him in my mental chessboard: he is this or that. Doubtless I can then show him good will or understanding, but the fact is that often he is first classified and labelled.... 'understood'! What is at issue here is a deeper welcome: I have first to hear what the other person says. That is to say, that where he is concerned, I am to be poor and destitute; unarmed, in a state of indispensable poverty.

Let’s have no illusions. I fear that we shall never achieve such an attitude in its pure state. But at least if we have something like it, we open up to the other person, in our small way, a free space - a space where he can go of his own accord because he is no longer being judged from the very start. He is what he is; and that is outside our control. It is striking to see how Christ in the Gospels is free of the ‘readymade images’ that people around him have of this person and that person. These images are based on the ‘law’ of course. We can say that for Christ the ‘impure’ are not ‘impure’, the ‘possessed’ are not ‘possessed’, sinners are not sinners. Not that he denies or underestimates the importance of misfortune or of faults, but he does not perceive human beings first of all through a grate which would put them in their place and at a safe distance from his ‘morality’. They are themselves.

*Listening is being someone to
whom the other person can
express himself*

So perhaps we shall succeed in finally recognizing that what we judged to be pride or aggression was suffering; that what we judged to be indifference was a desperate cry for help; that what we judged to be a refusal was a protest against lying; that what we judged a fall was progress”.

Maurice BELLET, “L’inadmissible”, in *Christus* 82 (April 1974), 251-252.

From exclusion to encounter

An encounter is not an exercise in power. Nor is it a demonstration of generosity where we might seek to do good to the other person. It requires real humility and profound weakness. Being there for the other person, listening to him and looking at him with respect and attention, allows us to receive in return. It is a communion

of hearts – a free reciprocal gift. In the course of my life I have noticed that many people in great difficulty were, in reality, in need of these true encounters. One day, a helper at one of the l'Arche communities ... arrived just in time to take into her arms a young man who was dying of an overdose. She knew him and that he belonged to the world of prostitution. The latter was finally able to say to her: 'you never accepted me as I am. You always wanted to change me!' That woman had never truly 'encountered' that man. How could she have become a friend to someone caught up in drugs and prostitution? How could she recognize him as a person who had been profoundly hurt? How could she reveal to this man the beauty of his person hidden behind his human poverty and his addiction?...

A similar story involves a father who rang me one day to ask for my help. He didn't know what to do any more. His forty year old son was an alcoholic. His wife had left him. He had undertaken several stays in a detox unit but every time he returned home, he had started drinking again. This is what I said to him: he could start by no longer talking of this son within the family as a problem, but as a man who was in tears... The 'true' encounter strips us back and makes us rediscover our powerlessness. To live it we must be able to recognize our own weaknesses and need of help. These two examples reveal the difficulties of encountering those who are 'at the lowest' in the beauty of their individuality.

Each of us has a personal story that is often very complex, sometimes marked by suffering experienced within the family itself. Through each true encounter we find ourselves exposed to our own weaknesses. Whereas in doing charitable works we retain power, in a true encounter we lose all power and all preconceived knowledge. This requires a lot of humility as well as requiring growth towards a love built on wisdom.

*The 'true' encounter strips us
back, and makes us rediscover
our powerlessness*

We often don't know how to manage our own feelings, our aggressive or emotional impulses, nor our fears. But each of us feels fear, each of us often does not know what to say or do. We then begin to need others: a community of professionals, the Holy Spirit, etc..., who are able to give us the words that reassure and cure. The encounter impoverishes us and makes us participate in our own poverty. This route opens up extraordinary perspectives for us: encountering the poor, the humiliated and the rejected can transform us and make us discover the deep meaning of our lives.

Jean Vanier – Founder of Arche (International Organisation)
The signs of the times in the light of Vatican II – Editions Albin Michel October 2012, p 61 to 65.

IV – Suggestions for the “Sit Down”

In what way do modern means of communication alienate our communication as a couple?

When educating our children, do we respect their identity even if it surprises us or upsets us? Doesn't our authority as parents, guided by love, sometimes deviate towards a simple desire to be obeyed?

Does each of us, as Jean Vanier tells us, accept the need to recognize our own weaknesses and our need to be helped? What progress does each of us need to make on this journey?

V – Running the meeting

Some suggestions for the sharing

In what way have modern means of communication helped us in our daily lives this month to be more or better present for the other?

Prayer

From Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus and from our brother Timothy; to our dear fellow worker Philemon ... I am rather appealing to your love, being what I am, Paul, an old man, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus. I am appealing to you for a child of mine, whose father I became while wearing these chains: I mean Onesimus. He was of no use to you before, but now he is useful both to you and to me. I am sending him back to you -- that is to say, sending you my own heart. I should have liked to keep him with me; he could have been a substitute for you, to help me while I am in the chains that the gospel has brought me. However, I did not want to do anything without your consent; it would have been forcing your act of kindness, which should be spontaneous. I suppose you have been deprived of Onesimus for a time, merely so that you could have him back for ever, no longer as a slave, but something much better than a slave, a dear brother; especially dear to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. So if you grant me any fellowship with yourself, welcome him as you would me; if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, put it down to my account. I am writing this in my own hand: I, Paul, shall pay it back -- I make no mention of a further debt, that you owe your very self to me! Well then, brother, I am counting on you, in the Lord; set my heart at rest, in Christ. 1 Philemon: 1-20

Sharing – Some suggestions

Does our rule of life lead us, as Maurice Bellet proposes, to better “listen and be such that the other is able to express himself or herself”?

What readings from the Word guide us on this journey?

In what way do our prayers give us the strength not to “pigeonhole the other” and to recognize our weaknesses?

Discussion of the topic – Some suggestions

How have listening to the Word and the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit helped us to discern this topic and find answers that are appropriate to the signs of the times?

What of acceptance of difference, welcoming those who “are not on our side”, from our country or culture...

Within the Church, the Pope and the bishops invite us to welcome homosexual people and those wounded by life. What is our personal attitude?

How can the man/woman relationship evolve to construct a society that is more respectful of each other?

Psalm 106

Voyagers on the sea in ships,
plying their trade on the great oceans,
have seen the works of the Lord,
his wonders in the deep.

By his word he raised a storm,
lashing up towering waves.
Up to the sky then down to the depths!
Their stomachs were turned to water;
they staggered and reeled like drunkards,
and all their skill went under.

They cried out to the Lord in their distress,
he rescued them from their plight,
he reduced the storm to a calm,
and all the waters subsided.
He brought them, overjoyed at the stillness,
to the port where they were bound.

Let them thank the Lord for his faithful love,
for his wonders for the children of Adam!
Let them extol him in the assembly of the people,
and praise him in the council of elders.

Discerning the signs of the times

Seventh Meeting

Being a disciple of Christ today

I – Word of God

“The Spirit of your Father will speak through you”

“Behold, I am sending you like sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and simple as doves. But beware of people, for they will hand you over to courts and scourge you in their synagogues. You will be led before governors and kings for my sake as a witness before them and the pagans. When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say. You will be given at that moment what you are to say. For it will not be you who speak but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.

Matthew 10:16-20

It should be no surprise. Following Christ today is dangerous just as it was yesterday. Just as the master experienced the cross, so will the disciple. The martyrs of yesterday or today bear witness to this. Here Jesus lays three responsibilities on his disciples who are going to go out as missionaries. They are also addressed to us who go through the adversities of life, sometimes quite painful adversities.

First comes prudence, flexibility. Wolves and so many other difficulties surround us. We are to make no frontal attacks! Advancing without provoking the demons, letting them sleep instead, is the way. Not adding to our problems means we stay free.

Then, comes caution. If persecutions come “because of the Lord”, then we need to be wary and take care not to allow ourselves to be overwhelmed. Our witness lies in our strength, our stability, our tranquillity. God is there.

Finally, “The Spirit of your Father will speak through you”. It is the Word which illuminates the lives of all martyrs and each of our lives. In the midst of trials, whatever they may be, the Spirit rests on us and speaks through us. Believing in this presence, experiencing this strength, is a source of peace. Joy consists in living with Christ and following him.

We shall always be the disciples of the risen Christ; witnesses to the trials that have been overcome, thanks to him.

II - Presentation of the Chapter “Being a disciple of Christ today”

Discerning the signs of the times, in our unpredictable societies, means, knowing how to pay attention to the truth of what others have to say without abandoning witness to Christ’s message.

By his acceptance of death and his resurrection, Jesus showed us that love is the fundamental law, the ultimate purpose of life. Faith in the son of God is inseparable from the gift of oneself, from belonging to the community, from service, from reconciliation with others. The Christian ideal invites us to surpass any lack of confidence and the defensive behaviors brought about by the daily world. Faced by the complexity of our societies, we should not give up on witnessing. With the grace of God to stimulate our imagination, we can prove our creativity. Making choices enlightened by the Gospel is difficult because, even if Christian teaching seems clear and unambiguous, we must also know how to be attentive to the truth of what others say and be on our guard to avoid hurt. If we fail to listen, the Word will only be a slogan. As Timothy Radcliffe says: “*we must become the other, enter into his imagination and into the choices he is confronted by, before passing on our teaching.*”*

Joy, mercy, patience and perseverance cannot be separated from the Gospel message, We have to find the means of communicating that is best adapted to the circumstances. Without hope and without confidence in God’s plans, we are unable to be Christ’s disciples. Pessimism contains the seed of defeat; a feeling of powerlessness is a trap.

What defines the Christian is not first and foremost attachment to a morality, but attachment to the person of Jesus-Christ who never ceases to amaze us by the intensity of his love for us and for our neighbor. In this very way he gives meaning to existence. The more we engrave the Word of God in our lives, the better we shall be able to contribute to the growth of humanity in our society.

* *Pourquoi donc être chrétien* [What is the point of being a Christian]? – Flammarion - Champs-Essais - Nov.2010, p 59

III - Documents for reflection

The Christian’s commitment as a disciple of Christ is to build a civilization of love

551 *The presence of the laity in social life is characterized by service, the sign and expression of love, which is seen in the areas of the family, culture, work, economics and politics according to specific aspects. Complying with the different demands of their particular area of work, lay men and women express the truth of their faith and, at the same time, the truth of the Church's social doctrine, which fully becomes a reality when it is lived concretely in order to resolve social problems. In fact, the credibility of this social doctrine comes more immediately from the witness of action than from its internal consistency or logic [1153].*

563 *Faced with the complexity of today's economic context, the laity will be guided in their action by the principles of the social Magisterium. It is necessary that these principles be known and accepted in the area of economic activity itself; when they are ignored, above all the principle of the centrality of the human person, the quality of this activity is compromised [1179].*

The commitment of Christians will also be translated into an effort of cultural reflection aimed at *a discernment of the current models of economic and social development*. Reducing the question of development to an

exclusively technical problem would deprive it of its true content, which instead concerns “the dignity of individuals and peoples” [1180].

565 *For the lay faithful, political involvement is a worthy and demanding expression of the Christian commitment of service to others* [1183]. The pursuit of the common good in a spirit of service; the development of justice with particular attention to situations of poverty and suffering; respect for the autonomy of earthly realities; the principle of subsidiarity; the promotion of dialogue and peace in the context of solidarity: these are the criteria that must inspire the Christian laity in their political activity. All believers, insofar as they possess rights and duties as citizens, are obligated to respect these guiding principles. Special attention must be paid to their observance by those who occupy institutional positions dealing with the complex problems of the public domain, whether in local administrations or national and international institutions.

Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church

*Politics is a worthy and
demanding expression of the
Christian commitment of service
to others*

The couple, disciples of Christ

Allow me to express God’s thoughts about the couple, in the style of Péguy, a French writer who is overly neglected these days.

God says: “Christian couple, you are my pride and my hope. When I created heaven and earth, and the great lights in the vault of heaven, I saw in my creatures traces of my perfection, and I found that this was good ...

*God says: Christian couple, you are
my pride and my hope*

And yet nowhere did I see the image of what is my most secret, most fervent life.
So there awoke in me the need to reveal the best of myself, and this was my finest invention.

SO it was that I created you, human couple, “in my image and likeness”, and I saw that this was very good.

In the midst of this universe in which each creature spells out my glory and celebrates my perfection, love had arisen at last to reveal my Love.

Human couple, my beloved creature, my privileged witness, do you understand why amongst all my creatures you are dear to me, do you understand the immense hope I place in you?

You bear my reputation, my glory. In all the universe you are the great reason to hope because you are love.”

Let us look more closely at your mission as witnesses to Christ. The first way to accomplish it is to live your love more and more perfectly, to ensure that it unfolds all its potential, that it reveals itself to be faithful, happy and fruitful.

It is true that this is beyond your unaided capacity: men and women soon realized that evil was at work within their household. You must necessarily have recourse to Christ’s grace, which is the salvation of the couple. But in so doing, your union becomes the witness of the saving God and no longer just of God the creator. Your home will bear witness to God in a still more explicit way if it is a union of two “God seekers” in

the admirable words of the psalms: two seekers whose intelligence and hearts are hungry to know and encounter God; ... people passionate for God and impatient to be united with him... There is no risk that such a home becomes a kind of ghetto where we shut ourselves in, sheltered from the suffering of the world. We go there to regather our strength in mutual love, prayer and rest, only to leave again with renewed vigor as a servant of “God, friend of mankind”. In this way Christian spouses are out in the world as witnesses to the living God.

I should like to know how to communicate to you, my conviction that a household of “God-seekers” in our world which no longer believes in love, is a “theophany”, a manifestation of God, just as the bush burning in the desert without being consumed was for Moses.

Father Henri Caffarel – END Face à l’athéisme {Teams confronted by Atheism} p144 and following page.

Living our faith

... Anyone can say, ‘God is love’. But it will not be a statement that makes any Christian sense unless its context is a community that does love, however badly and with whatever weaknesses.. If we say that Jesus is risen from the dead but there is no sign of resurrection in our lives, then we can talk about the resurrection until the Kingdom comes, but our words will not mean anything...

We often complain about the immense ignorance of the young about Christianity, but we waste our time in producing more documents, videos, radio and TV programs unless we also labor to make the Church a place of evident freedom, courage, joy and hope. We must choose with care the words that we speak. Truth matters. But our words will be useless unless they are embedded in communities which show how they are oriented beyond us, to the one who has sought us out and given us his Word. St Anthony of Padua, the thirteenth-century Franciscan preacher, complained that the Church in his time was “bloated with words”. Things have not changed much. We go on producing vast quantities of documents, tedious long sermons, but unless people catch the whiff of freedom in our lives, then our words will actively subvert the preaching of the gospel.

The point of Christianity is to point to God as the meaning of our lives. To hope is to hang on to the confidence that there is some ultimate point to human existence. If there is not, then Christianity and all religion is a waste of time...

At this stage it becomes clear that entry into true freedom and happiness requires of us a profound transformation. Freedom is not just choosing between alternatives, and happiness is not just a cheerful emotion. They are a sharing in God’s life, and this asks of us a sort of dying and rising. This is frightening. We require courage if we are to let the God who is with us liberate us and fill us with joy. This ... is the virtue we most urgently need in the Church today...

Timothy Radcliffe, *What is the Point of Being a Christian?* – Burns & Oates –2005 – p. 5-6

*Courage is the virtue we
most urgently need in the
Church today*

IV – Suggestions for the Sit Down

How can we enable our spouse to “realize his/her potential”, as Father Caffarel proposes?
Our love: a source of joy, optimism and courage in our lives.

V – Running the meeting

Some suggestions for the sharing

What activities in our working lives, in our families and in our commitments this month have enabled us to live our faith in a practical way and to bear witness to it?

Prayer

“Behold, I am sending you like sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and simple as doves. But beware of people, for they will hand you over to courts and scourge you in their synagogues. You will be led before governors and kings for my sake, as a witness before them and the pagans. When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say. You will be given at that moment what you are to say. For it will not be you who speak but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.

Matthew 10:16-20

Sharing – Some suggestions

Prayer in our commitments as disciples of Christ: what is its fruitfulness?

What choices does our rule of life encourage us to make to better live Christ’s message consistently?

How does our prayer help us in discerning our life choices?

Discussion of the topic – Some suggestions

How have listening to the Word and the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit helped us to discern this topic and find answers that are appropriate to the signs of the times?

Role, mission and responsibilities of the Christian in society.

What place does Christian hope have in our approach to the realities of the world and in our approach to other religions?

“...Unless people catch the whiff of freedom in our lives, then our words will actively subvert the preaching of the gospel.” Discuss Timothy Radcliffe’s conviction.

Psalm 92

It is good to give thanks to the LORD,
to sing praise to your name, Most High,
To proclaim your love at daybreak,
your faithfulness in the night,
With the ten-stringed harp,
with melody upon the lyre.

For you make me jubilant, LORD, by your deeds;
at the works of your hands I shout for joy.
How great are your works, LORD!
How profound your designs!

The just shall flourish like the palm tree,
shall grow like a cedar of Lebanon;
Planted in the house of the LORD,
they shall flourish in the courts of our God. 1-6; 13-14

Discerning the signs of the times

Eighth Meeting

The universality of Christ's message

I – Word of God

The Gentiles are coheirs

[This mystery] was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit, that the Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and copartners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Of this I became a minister by the gift of God's grace that was granted me in accord with the exercise of his power

To me, the very least of all the holy ones, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the inscrutable riches of Christ,

and to bring to light [for all] the mystery hidden from ages past in God who created all things.

Eph 3:5-9

Solemnity, admiration and enthusiasm have never been lacking in Paul's writings. Here he is blown away! It is a watershed. The mystery hidden in God is revealed. He says it with great respect. "[This mystery is ...] that the Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and copartners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. A mystery? Not one that is incomprehensible but unimaginable for a son of the people of Israel: the pagans have access to the Holy of Holies, to the heart of everything that makes up the faith, the life of the people, they have access to the Father. Peter had already seen this: the pagans received the Holy Spirit like the Apostles (Acts 10: 44-11, 18). The prophets, like Isaiah, had foreseen this opening to the pagans. Paul sees it. Everyone can dare to approach the Father with "confidence of access through faith in him" (Eph: 3, 12).

Christ's message is universal: the father's plan is to save all mankind. In Christ, they are now one. This is not to say that we are all lost in a great mass of humanity. Each of us remains as he was originally: an individual. Having become members of Christ's body, the life of the Risen One circulates in every corner of our lives. It is the joy of the Father.

The Christian's mission is always that of Paul: "to bring to light [for all] the mystery": the immense joy of discovering henceforth— and then in God's eternity — the multitude of people standing upright before the Father, "the Creator of all that is".

II - Presentation of the chapter: “the universality of Christ’s message”

Discerning the signs of the times means seeing in the phenomena of globalisation an opportunity to spread the presence of the Gospel.

Jesus announces repeatedly in the Gospel that he came to save all mankind without exception. As in the Apostles’ day, this message unsettles some, while for others this universality of the Christian message goes without saying. However, this spontaneous acceptance of a universal love risks being diluted today into a somewhat poorly defined philanthropy. Universality experienced in this way can lead us to confusion between what we call love for all and a sort of general solidarity with them that can lead us to a dangerous relativism. In practice this love for all under the pretext of not wanting to offend the other, all too often leads us to refuse to declare our Christian identity.

Why should we declare our Christian identity? Because, in Christ’s words, Christians bear a great blessing for all humanity; they are bearers of good news and catalysts for hope. We should assert the signs of the kingdom for all to see. However the revelation of the Gospel goes further: God has come to save all peoples, all pagans, all nations, but above all, God speaks to each of us personally with the same intensity that he used in speaking to Israel or Abraham. God’s personal love for each of us is at the heart of our faith. That is why this intimate, profound and personal relationship with God is primary because it is what lights up our lives, nourishes us and makes us strong to proclaim the Gospel to which all people are entitled.

III - Documents for reflection

New opportunities for evangelization in today’s world

Our Church is alive and faces the challenges that history brings, with the courage of faith and the testimony of her many daughters and sons. We know that we must face in this world a battle against the “*principalities and powers*”, “*the evil spirits*”

The phenomena of globalization: opportunities to expand the presence of the Gospel

sons. We know that we must against the “*principalities and*” (Ephesians 6:12).

We do not ignore the problems that such challenges bring, but they do not frighten us. This is true above all for the phenomena of globalization which must be opportunities for us to expand the presence of the Gospel. We welcome migrants as brothers and sisters. Many have suffered much. Migrations have been and continue to be occasions to spread the faith and build communion in its various forms. Secularization – as well as the crisis brought about by the dominance of politics and of the State – requires the Church to rethink its presence in society without however renouncing it. The many and ever new forms of poverty open new opportunities for charitable service. The proclamation of the Gospel binds the Church to be with the poor and to take on their sufferings like Jesus. Even in the bitterest forms of atheism and agnosticism, we can recognize – although in contradictory forms – not a void but a longing, an expectation that awaits an adequate response.

In the face of the questions that prevailing cultures pose to faith and to the Church, we renew our trust in the Lord, certain that even in these contexts the Gospel is the bearer of light and capable of healing every human weakness. It is not we who are to conduct the work of evangelization, but God, as the Pope reminded us: “*The first word, the true initiative, the true activity comes from God and only by immersing ourselves in the divine initiative, only by begging this divine initiative, will we too be able to become – with him and in him – evangelizers*” (Benedict XVI, Meditation during the first general Congregation of the XIII General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, Rome, 8 October 2012).

Final Message of the Synod of Bishops to the People of God, Rome 8 October 2012

Salvation is offered to all mankind

3. *Peoples everywhere, open the doors to Christ!* His Gospel in no way detracts from man's freedom, from the respect that is owed to every culture and to whatever is good in each religion. By accepting Christ, you open yourselves to the definitive Word of God, to the One in whom God has made himself fully known and has shown us the path to himself.

8. Proclaiming Christ and bearing witness to him, when done in a way that respects conscience, does not violate freedom. Faith demands a free adherence on the part of man, but at the same time faith must also be offered to him, because the "multitudes have the right to know the riches of the mystery of Christ in which we believe that the whole of humanity can find, with unsuspected fullness, everything it is searching for concerning God, man and his destiny, life and death, and truth....

10. The universality of salvation means that it is granted not only to those who explicitly believe in Christ and have entered the Church. Since salvation is offered to all, it must be made available to all in practice. But it is clear that today, as in the past, many people do not have an opportunity to come to know or accept the gospel revelation or to enter the Church. The social and cultural conditions in which they live do not permit this, and frequently they have been brought up in other religious traditions.

42. People today put more trust in witnesses than in teachers,⁶⁹ ...

The first form of witness is *the very life of the missionary, of the Christian family, and of the ecclesial community*, which reveal a new way of living. The missionary who, despite all his or her human limitations and defects, lives a simple life, taking Christ as the model, is a sign of God and of transcendent realities. But everyone in the Church, striving to imitate the Divine Master, can and must bear this kind of witness;⁷⁰ in many cases it is the only possible way of being a missionary.

The evangelical witness which the world finds most appealing is that of concern for people, and of charity toward the poor, the weak and those who suffer. The complete generosity underlying this attitude and these actions stands in marked contrast to human selfishness. It raises precise questions which lead to God and to the Gospel. A commitment to peace, justice, and human rights is also a witness to the Gospel when it is a sign of concern for people and is directed toward integral human development.⁷¹

Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris missio* of John-Paul II

The catholicity of the Church is that of Christ

The catholicity of the Church is that of Christ. It is Christ's nature in action that can reunite at one and the same time, man with God and man with man. In other words, the Church, by virtue of its catholicity, is opposed to all discrimination, to all division, to all introversion and even to everything that provokes division, whatever its source, whether this be from within mankind or from external forces.

Christ not only brings together skin colors, races and peoples that are divided, in a single way of thinking and in a single faith. He brings them together in a single body in the strongest sense of the term, with everything that implies intimacy, understanding and love. In addition the Church, which is his mystical body through baptism and the Eucharist, also ends up as the meeting place of all humanity, the sole meeting point for all peoples, nations, races, languages, orientations, where all barriers and disagreements are dissolved. In this way all become a single great body, a single spirit of intimacy and love, a single reconciled man who has Christ as his head. Christ takes on all that each race, each people, each skin color, each language possesses in

the way of gifts and talents, but without this leading to any division or dispute or discrimination. That is precisely what the “catholicity” of the Church means.

So why has the Church still not fully realised this catholicity – or rather, why does it still not live fully in the world in accordance with its catholic nature, which should be the essence of its life in Christ, the manifestation of his power, the secret of his perfection and his divine integrity? The reason is straightforward and obvious. She has not yet perceived his divine concepts in their full purity, in their supernatural dimension which surpasses all logic and all human intelligence.

It is not until each of us totally renounces his own will that the single will of Christ can appear. When each of us denies his passions, his hatreds and submits his body and spirit to the working of the Holy Spirit, then, and only then, is the mystical body of Christ made manifest. Only then does it act within the Church to bring together hearts, principles and ideas.

Father Matta-El-Maskîne (Spiritual father of the coptic monastery of St Macaire in Egypt)
La communion d’amour – Spiritualité Orientale N°55 – Abbaye de Bellefontaine

IV – Suggestions for the Sit Down

What importance do we attribute to conjugal prayer in our faith life?

To what extent does it open us as a couple up to the world?

V – Running the meeting

Some suggestions for the general sharing

How do we manifest our evangelical witness in our professional, familial and friendship environment? What are its characteristics?

Prayer

[This mystery] was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit, that the Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and copartners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Of this I became a minister by the gift of God’s grace that was granted me in accord with the exercise of his power.

To me, the very least of all the holy ones, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the inscrutable riches of Christ,

and to bring to light [for all]* what is the plan of the mystery hidden from ages past in God who created all things.

*It is not until each of us totally
renounces his own will that the single will
of Christ can appear*

Eph 3:5-9

Sharing – Some suggestions

The nearer we get to God, the more we receive the earth as our inheritance. Prayer is a source that takes us inwards to act better as children of God towards our brothers and sisters in the world.

Pope Francis declares: *“When Christians do not pray, they close the door on the Lord. Not praying means shutting the door on the Lord so that he can do nothing.”* What do you make of this?

The rule of life: Christ’s presence in us, a path towards others.

Listening to the Word: first steps towards witnessing to the good news for all.

Discussion of the topic – Some suggestions

How have listening to the Word and the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit helped us to discern this topic and find answers that are appropriate to the signs of the times?

The universal reach of the Christian message presupposes that it should be announced to all men of good will. What does the “new evangelization” mean to us within our contemporary unpredictable societies that are in the making and trying to find themselves?

“Preaching and witness to Christ, when done with respect for conscience, do not violate freedom” (John-Paul II). What do you think of this?

How do we understand and live Maskine’s view: *“the catholic nature of Christ is his ability to unify different natures in a way that surpasses the capacity of each one of them?”*

Psalm 150

Hallelujah!

Praise God in his holy sanctuary;
give praise in the mighty dome of heaven.
Give praise for his mighty deeds,
praise him for his great majesty.

Give praise with blasts upon the horn,
praise him with harp and lyre.
Give praise with tambourines and dance,
praise him with strings and pipes.

Give praise with crashing cymbals,
praise him with sounding cymbals.
Let everything that has breath
give praise to the LORD!

Hallelujah!

Discerning the signs of the times

Ninth Meeting – Summing Up

The “The Team’s Sit Down”

Is not the methodology of the Sit Down the best way of summing up our life as a Team during the year just past?

The pedagogy of listening and dialogue under Christ’s gaze will keep us company throughout our sharing and help us reveal ourselves to each other.

1- Listening to the Word

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You have faith in God; have faith also in me.*

In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If there were not, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you?

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back again and take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be.

Where [I] am going you know the way.”

Thomas said to him, “Master, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?”

Jesus said to him, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

If you know me, then you will also know my Father. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”*

Philip said to him, “Master, show us the Father, and that will be enough for us.”

Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you for so long a time and you still do not know me, Philip?

Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’?

Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on my own. The Father who dwells in me is doing his works.

...

the Spirit of truth, which the world cannot accept, because it neither sees nor knows it. But you know it, because it remains with you, and will be in you.

I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you.

In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me, because I live and you will live.

On that day you will realize that I am in my Father and you are in me and I in you.

John 14:1-10, 17-20

Silent time and prayer after listening to the Word

2- Our life as Team members

Have you been truly able to share during the sharing, which is an essential part of the Team meeting. Did the suggested reflection topics help us? Did we live the endeavors this year as obligations, or as directions for making progress in our Christian lives? Did we support each other?

Did they help us to convert ourselves a little more each day?

Did we meditate suitably on the topic and prepare for our monthly meetings so as to make them richer and more fruitful? What were the strong and weak points of our sharing? Was communication between us satisfactory? Did the study of the topic lead us to modify our view of changes in the world? Did it help us develop awareness of our responsibility as Christians in this evolution?

Have we given some priority to a few moments of fellowship with our team, besides the monthly meetings? Have these times contributed to a greater understanding between us?

3- Our relationship with the Movement

We have noticed that Teams that have little solidarity with the Movement go downhill little by little and become hardened, somewhat like the vine shoot *“as a branch cannot bear fruit all by itself, unless it remains part of the vine”* John 15, 4

Where are we in our relationship with the Movement?

Did we participate in the various events organized by our responsible couples? What did we get out of these?

4- Room for improvement

Strengthened by the above review, let us make an effort to identify, under Christ’s benevolent gaze, the points we would be well advised to improve if we, as a Team, are to better live the charism of Equipes Notre-Dame.

Let us dare to identify precise objectives for our Team, and for ourselves, that we shall take to heart and pursue throughout the coming year.

5- Final summing up

Let us listen to Father Caffarel speaking of the commitment to teams: *“...no-one is obliged to join, nor to stay. But members who belong to the Team should play in the spirit of the ‘game...’”*.

Conscious as we are of our freedom as children of God, but also of the demands that the Movement imposes on each of us in proportion to our capacities, do we choose to follow the path suggested by Equipes Notre-Dame for the coming year? Each Team Member will provide his sincerely held viewpoint.



The Magnificat

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord
and my spirit exults in God my Savior;
because He has looked upon His
lowly handmaid.

Yes, from this day forward
all generations will call me blessed,
for the Almighty has done great things for me,
Holy is His name,
and His mercy reaches from age to age
for those who fear Him.

He has shown the power of His arm,
He has routed the proud of heart.
He has pulled down princes from their thrones
and exalted the lowly.

The hungry He has filled with good things,
the rich sent empty away.
He has come to the help of Israel His servant,
mindful of His mercy —
according to the promise He made
to our ancestors —
of His mercy to Abraham
and to His descendants forever.

Our Lady, Queen of Teams, Pray for us.