

IN THE FRAGRANCE OF UNITY - THE LOVE THAT LEADS TO GOD

Introduction

The gesture of the woman of Bethany, who pours precious perfume upon the head of Jesus, is simple yet filled with love. It is a love that gives itself without calculation - a sign of faith, hope, and consolation. As Pope Leo XIV in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Dilexi te* reminds us to love God is to recognise Him in the poor, the small, and the excluded: love for Christ and love for our brothers and sisters form a single path. Blessed Maria Teresa Ledóchowska invites us to carry this fragrance of love into our community life - there, charity, empathy, and consolation are born, spreading gently into the world.

1. Scriptural Meditation: The Love that Gives without Counting the Cost

Now when Jesus was in Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came up to him with an alabaster jar of costly perfumed oil, and poured it on his head while he was reclining at table. When the disciples saw this, they were indignant and said, "Why this waste? It could have been sold for much, and the money given to the poor." Since Jesus knew this, he said to them, "Why do you make trouble for the woman? She has done a good thing for me. The poor you will always have with you; but you will not always have me. In pouring this perfumed oil upon my body, she did it to prepare me for burial. Amen, I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be spoken of, in memory of her" (Matthew 26:6-13).

The gesture of the woman at Bethany, pouring precious perfume on the head of Jesus, travels through the centuries like a fragrance that does not fade. She performs an act full of mystery: breaking the alabaster jar and pouring out costly oil upon the Lord's head. It is a quiet and unassuming act, yet filled with love. In that silent movement the logic of the Gospel is revealed: true love does not count the cost, does not measure, does not expect anything in return. It is love that gives itself wholly, keeping nothing back, unafraid of being "wasteful."

In that anointing, the woman senses what the disciples have not yet understood: Jesus is walking toward His Passion, and His body now receives a tender consolation, a fragrance that already announces the Resurrection. The disciples see only waste; Jesus recognises in her act a prophetic sign of His Passion and burial. It is a language that speaks of faith, hope, and consolation.

For every consecrated person, Bethany becomes an invitation to preserve within our relationships the fragrance of gratuitous love. Every kind word, every quiet smile, every attentive and empathetic gesture becomes a Gospel sign, a living memory of love that does not pass away. Our holiness grows in this continual movement between contemplation and action, between prayer and service. The love we offer to God reflects itself in the service of others and returns to Him as adoration. Every small gesture, when performed with a pure heart, becomes a fragrance that fills the religious community and the world with the scent of the Gospel's love.

2. The Teaching of the Pope – "Dilexi Te": The Charity that Unites God and Our Brothers

Jesus' disciples criticized the woman who poured costly perfumed oil on his head. They said: "Why this waste? For this ointment could have been sold for a large sum, and the money given to the poor." However, the Lord said to them in response: "You always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me" (Mt 26:8-9,11). That woman saw in Jesus the lowly and suffering Messiah on whom she could pour out all her love. What comfort that anointing must have brought to the very head that within a few days would be pierced by thorns! It was a small gesture, of course, but those who suffer

know how great even a small gesture of affection can be, and how much relief it can bring. Jesus understood this and told the disciples that the memory of her gesture would endure: "Wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her" (Mt 26:13). The simplicity of that woman's gesture speaks volumes. No sign of affection, even the smallest, will ever be forgotten, especially if it is shown to those who are suffering, lonely or in need, as was the Lord at that time.

Love for the Lord, then, is one with love for the poor. The same Jesus who tells us, "The poor you will always have with you" (Mt 26:11), also promises the disciples: "I am with you always" (Mt 28:20). We likewise think of his saying: "Just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me" (Mt 25:40). This is not a matter of mere human kindness but a revelation: contact with those who are lowly and powerless is a fundamental way of encountering the Lord of history. In the poor, he continues to speak to us (Dilexi te, §5).

As Pope Leo XIV recalls in *Dilexi te*, the fragrance of Bethany becomes an image of authentic charity. When Jesus says, "*You always have the poor with you,*" He is not setting worship against service, nor love for Him against love for others. Rather, He reveals that His face continues to live in the small, the forgotten, and the suffering. To love God means to recognize Him in the poor, the little ones, and the excluded, for in the concrete service of our brothers and sisters we encounter the living Christ. This teaching reminds us that love for God and love for the poor are not two separate paths but two faces of the same encounter with Christ. To love Christ and to love our brothers and sisters are not two distinct roads, but one and the same way - the path of self-giving.

We are called to live this mystery of unity: prayer that does not become concrete love risks remaining empty, and service that does not arise from prayer loses strength and meaning. True holiness is born of this mutual movement, from adoration springs service, and through service the heart returns to adoration.

The anointing at Bethany thus becomes a symbol of every sincere act of charity. Every gesture, every moment offered to others becomes a fragrance rising to God, sharing in the mystery of His Passion and bringing consolation to the Heart of the Lord.

3. Listening to Our Foundress: The Love that Builds Unity

"The first thing I fear is that (...) a certain selfishness, a disordered self-love, may easily take root, one that makes you turn too much around yourselves. By this I do not mean that you avoid sacrifice; I know you are ready for anything that might be asked of you. Yet there remains the danger of forgetting that beyond this place there are other things, and of imagining that the whole work is centred upon yourselves. That is the external aspect. But there also exists a spiritual selfishness. It makes us scrupulous not to lose anything of our spiritual exercises, overanxious to perform them perfectly. This is all well and good when there is no contrary reason. Yet we must know how to leave God for God. Too much insistence on one's own way is not right; it has nothing to do with perfection; it may in fact be self-love. (...) I would not wish for spiritual egoists to be formed. (...) My dear Daughters, 'Caritas Christi urget nos!' The love of Christ compels us! It is love that has brought us here together. But it would be a mistake to come here for love of God and for the sake of the poor Africans, without extending this love above all to those who are closest to us. God first, then the Superiors and the sisters, and only after them, the poor Africans. This is rightly ordered charity. Now, my dear Daughters, let us forget ourselves completely in order to preserve a good spirit among us. You have given me joy, you help me, and by doing so make things easier for me — and that too is necessary. The Work and its direction are becoming ever more burdensome to me. Naturally, the more it expands, the more difficult its direction becomes. Yet I always notice that when peace reigns here, when there is a good spirit within, everything else can be overcome more easily. If to external

struggles internal discord were to be added, things would become far harder. Surely the Lord will continue to assist us, but we must do what depends on us to ensure that the good spirit is preserved." (Blessed Maria Teresa Ledóchowska, "On Selflessness", address to the community at Maria Sorg, 27 August 1911).

Blessed Maria Teresa Ledóchowska calls us to bring the fragrance of love into our community life, warning us against a subtle danger - spiritual selfishness. Not the visible selfishness, but the disguised one that wraps itself in pious forms, drawing us inward even in the holiest things. We cannot serve Christ in those far away if we do not first learn to love Him in those near to us - in our own sisters within the community. Sometimes, even as we devote ourselves to prayer and service, we risk remaining closed within our own world, forgetting the sister beside us.

Maria Teresa offers a path of rightly ordered charity: "*God first, then the Superiors and the sisters, and after them, the poor.*" This is not a hierarchy of importance, but a journey that begins with love lived within community. Only in a united community, where peace reigns, can we live in a true workshop of holiness where we learn humility, forgiveness, patience, empathy, and joy. When serenity and good spirit dwell among us, even the greatest difficulties can be faced with strength and confidence.

Caritas Christi urget nos - the love of Christ compels us. It is this love that teaches us to forget ourselves in order to serve with a free heart; to overcome selfishness so as to welcome each sister with tenderness and empathy. Every daily gesture becomes a concrete offering of charity.

In this way, community life itself becomes the fragrance of the Gospel - a presence that consoles, a sign of unity, and a reflection of Christ's love in the world. Sincere charity is born within the community, grows through daily service, and from there radiates into the world as a fragrance of consolation, care, and unity.

For Personal Reflection

- Do I allow my heart to be filled with the fragrance of Bethany's love?
- Does my love for the Lord translate into concrete gestures of service and attentiveness?
- Am I able to recognise the face of Christ in every sister, even when it is difficult?
- Which attitudes can I cultivate to foster harmony, communion, and empathy within the community?

Conclusion

Love and unity lie at the heart of holiness: love unites us with God, and unity binds us to one another. Like the woman of Bethany, we are called to pour out the fragrance of our consecrated life upon Christ, to recognise Him in the poor and the small (*Dilexi te*), and to build daily a spirit of peace, communion, and empathy within the community.

Where sisters live in harmony, where forgiveness transcends differences, and where love overcomes fear, holiness blossoms - a love that becomes home, light, and gift for the world. The fragrance of Bethany, the lived charity of *Dilexi te*, and the empathy of the Foundress blend into one harmonious melody: the love that springs from God, becomes communion among sisters, and pours itself out into the world as a sign of consolation, peace, and hope.