

THE WISDOM OF GOODNESS

Letter of the Year 2021



Maite Uribe Bilbao



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THE WISDOM OF GOODNESS

When we arrived at the end of 2020, we had the sensation that we had been through an experience that was deeply human and spiritual. It was something that we could never have imagined or foreseen earlier in the year.

It all began in a confused way and gradually reached every continent. Now we realise that, since then, humanity has had to face up to its vulnerability and to uncertainty. We have come to realise that we no longer control the things that we thought we had firmly under our control.

In these exceptional and strange times, no area of our personal and social life is left unaffected. New experiences, new challenges, new exclusions, new possibilities, new fears and new hopes, all assail us, challenge us, call us in a language we barely stammer without quite knowing the full import of the words. We are living in pandemic times, something unknown to the generations of adults, young people and children used to the security given by scientific progress and our health and social systems.¹

This harsh experience has also touched the extended family of the Teresian Association and affected people, activities and projects. However, in the company of the unique Spirit of Christ, and strongly sustained by the fellowship among us, we ended the year in the certain conviction that the One who began the work in each person and in the Association, a work of God, will carry it out to the end.

Under the guidance of Mary, the first disciple, we have learned to be more attentive in listening to people and to the world. We have grasped how important it is to welcome, comfort and guide individuals and groups; to encourage situations that are vibrant and innovative, and to accompany the most vulnerable people who find it hard to face into the future.

¹ *La sociedad fragilizada*, Consejo de Cultura, 2020.

The 18th General Assembly has presented us with a new challenge for the year 2021. It asks us to be gentle and firm. This is a spiritual challenge that will hopefully make us explore our vocation and charism further, encourage us to live accordingly and to offer them to others. We have received them freely and we want to put them at the service of the world which is in need of a sense of meaning and hope, now more than ever.

The invitation to be gentle yet firm, in Pedro Poveda's challenging words, to be both soft and hard, has struck us as being the wisdom of goodness. It is the beatitude of being merciful, of living out our own vocation-mission and what the world expects from us as prophets and witnesses of hope.

King Solomon petitioned God in the following words when he wanted to learn how to discern and act out of wisdom and goodness:

Give your servant, Lord, a heart to understand how to discern between good and evil, to govern your people (...) The Lord was much pleased with this request from Solomon, and said to him: Since you have asked for this, (...) I give you a heart wise and shrewd... (1 Kings 3: 9-10).

A wise and prudent heart, a kind and compassionate heart is always attentive and ready to listen; it is compassionate in the presence of pain and suffering, it opens up ways towards the common good, to service and solidarity; it helps people to be joyful, patient, trusting and serene. It is an intrinsic component of love.

Pedro Poveda was spoken of as “a good man” in the words of the people who first knew him in his Guadix years. It was their way of expressing the human and spiritual qualities by which he lived. It was also an attitude that he wished to propose to his early collaborators from 1916 on.

Goodness sums up a spiritual life in which, “as God’s love lights up within us, we start to be gentler and kinder”.² Paul highlights this in his letter to the Colossians:³ mercy is tender and compassionate, kind and humble, gentle and patient, forgiving and reconciling.

² Pedro Poveda, *Obras I, Creí, por esto hablé*, 1916 [81].

³ Col 3:12-14.

Throughout the year that has just begun, the wisdom of being good and the blessedness of being merciful will help us to rebuild relationships, bonds of trust and meaningful opportunities. With humility and awareness of our personal and collective limitations, our daily lives should be filled with acts of kindness, gentleness in our gaze, kind words and compassion in our judgments.⁴

I. Only God is good

The moment of truth

According to the Gospels⁵, the rich young man who approached Jesus came from a stable economic background with a family that had social status, and this permitted him an easy life. He had the means to get ahead since he had all he wanted to give his life stability and a future. He was a sincere young man, and in a moment of truth with himself and others, he sensed and articulated that there was still something missing.

Over the past months we have been dealing with our vulnerability as individuals and as a society. We feel a certain emptiness of heart when we see that in the society that we are constructing, there is something missing in the way we take care of people, and in how we care for creation and show respect for life. The world, apparently confounded and paralysed by a virus that nothing and no one has yet managed to master or control, has brought humanity to ask questions in all areas of knowledge and action and, more importantly, to question the deep meaning of human life, its reason and purpose.

What the young man lacked was a sense of the meaning of life in its two dimensions. He felt that he could control the embodied and real side of life, and he also believed that he could manage the dimension of the life to come, the one for which we are living now and towards which we are moving.

What is the point of everything we have in this life if we do not know what can become of it all today and in the more final tomorrow – our day-to-day life now, and ultimately after death?

What seems clear is that the most important thing for this young man was what he could take with him to the world to come, for he had a materialistic concept of eternal life. Then the moment of truth came in the person of Jesus.

4 Cf. Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, n° 223.

5 Mt 19:16-22; Mk 10:17-22; Lk 18:25-37.

Jesus revealed to him where his great mistake lay, a mistake that comes with the insecurity of those who believe that their salvation depends on their own “good works”.

This is an attitude we might well find in ourselves too. We might think that we have never done enough or done well enough, but with that way of thinking, we could end up just doing things to fulfil our obligations. They would be done without soul or heart and without the love that John the Evangelist speaks of, that which is seen in deeds and truth.⁶, Pedro Poveda has something to say about this:

To love in deed, to love in truth, you do not need to say much. ... Love of God, through God and for God; because the created are made in God's image, because God accepts as done to Himself all the good we do toward our neighbour.⁷

The surprise of the crossroads

This young man was mistaken in his approach to life in general, as well as to eternal life and how to achieve it. Furthermore, he did not really grasp who Jesus was. That is why a surprise awaits him, as Jesus wishes to enlighten him about something essential: *who Jesus is and who he himself is*.

From the young man's attitude, it is clear that he had an exalted view of Jesus as a person and as a man of his time. This too is the case with many people today, but that is not enough if we are to know who Jesus truly is.

That is why Jesus begins by analysing the word “good” and the way in which the young man uses the term. His answer is direct, clear and very true, *No one is good but God alone*.

Jesus shows the young man that he lacks a correct understanding of the person of Jesus and of who he is, and above all of the importance of a real relationship. Only on that basis could the young man understand the invitation that he is about to receive, to leave all and follow Jesus. What authority did he recognise in Jesus? Did he regard Jesus as a teacher, a guide? Or did he recognise in Jesus the One who has the words of eternal life?

⁶ 1 John 3 :18.

⁷ Pedro Poveda, *Obras I, Creí, por esto hablé*, 11 March 1920 [173].

Many people see Jesus as someone special, a wise man and a prophet, but they do not recognise him as the friend, the companion on the road, the one who gives his life to the end and the One in whom God delights, Jesus, Risen and Lord.

This is a question that we, too, can face throughout our lives: who is Jesus for me? What exactly does Jesus mean in my life? How I answer this question in my life, how I perceive, recognise and relate to Jesus, conditions the way in which I proclaim Jesus and share him and make him known to all those I meet on my life's journey.

The second clarification directly concerns the rich young man himself, and how he sees himself. In this too Jesus makes him see that he was mistaken. It is the key question about one's own identity. It is the same question asked by philosophers and theologians, humanists and seekers of meaning, the question of all times and all stages of life. Who am I? What is the deeper identity of the human person?

In the Gospel account we see that, deep down, the young man believed himself to be a good person and thought he measured up to what God was asking of him. He was in good standing and he kept the law. That is why Jesus had to resort to using the law as a mirror for the young man to look at and question himself. However, goodness means something else in God's eyes. Its deepest meaning is in God and in the human heart that lets itself be touched by people's suffering, people who need and long to be seen by merciful eyes.

That is why Jesus reminds him of the Commandments. He may have forgotten that they are basically about how we see and relate to other people like ourselves. It is significant that Jesus underlines specifically these commandments and not the ones relating to God. Jesus interprets the law in a way the young man does not expect, and he does it in a new way. He opens the young man's eyes towards others, invites him to look outwards, towards the peripheries, as Pope Francis would say. It is perhaps the only way to help him look beyond self and get out of himself, to recognise the root of his own identity: because if you do not love your neighbour whom you see, you will hardly be able to love the God whom you do not see (cf. 1 John 4:20).

The young man quickly reacts and explains how he sees himself. He believes he is keeping God's law perfectly because he had been doing so since he was young: *I have kept all these since my youth*. However, his doubt is great along with his dissatisfaction, and he recognises that something is missing, something he cannot quite grasp. He is not free of his riches, or his ideas, or his securities. He is tied to them.

How many times do we hear around us, and feel in ourselves, how hard it is to surrender our own securities, both personal and those that society has built for itself in the political, socio-economic and technological spheres? These securities rest on a certain powerful and dominant style of being. But Jesus invites him, and invites us, to take a different direction, and become humble seekers who do not know it all, or control everything. It means risking challenging relationships, uncontrollable changes and paths of solidarity that are open and lead us to worlds that are different from what we expect.

The question is asked and Jesus proposes that he leave a social circle that limits him and narrows his future, inviting him instead to go further. Jesus offers the path of inner freedom since the young man already had freedom within the framework of his own self. We too often deceive ourselves by confusing inner freedom with holding onto the greatest number of options, securities or certainties. The adventure of inner freedom requires us to enter a process, to be patient, to persevere and be faithful on a day-to-day basis.

We are initiated into true freedom when Someone intervenes in our life. Someone calls us to the adventure of following Him, because his word liberates and opens us up to a new plan, a different way of seeing life. It is wanting to learn from Him and with Him, to live as people who are free, detached and able to share.

Jesus, looking at him, loved him

To get him out of this new dilemma, Jesus chose another way, perhaps the least expected, that of love, trust, unconditional welcome. *Then Jesus, looking at him, loved him.*

Jesus lets him see that it is only by loving in response to the One who loved us first, that we or the young man can accept what Jesus was going to propose. Jesus feels compassion for this young man. He sees him as both fervent and ignorant in an unusual way, determined and desirous of true freedom, closed in on himself yet dreaming of a different life, open to what is new and changing.

How often has Jesus looked at us like this. He continues to do so and hopes for fresh responses from us and from humanity, especially in these times of fragility, doubt and uncertainty. If only we could be receptive to a gaze that will set us free to truly serve others and truly care for creation, and to recognise the one true love. May we understand that behind that gaze there is love surpassing all that we can imagine, a presence that never ceases to meet us and to open up for us a fulfilling life, that of being human and divine persons in God's image.

You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, then come, follow me. We may think Jesus did not think too badly of the young man, because all Jesus said was that he “lacked one thing”. That may be our situation too, but that was not the point.

For Jesus, the young man lacked the one thing he needed, the moment of truth, the most important crossroads of his life, and ours: to welcome Jesus as the Word of life, to recognise that only in Jesus can we place our hope, and remain in a friendship that opens us up to infinite and eternal love. Eternal life has a face, that of the One whom we know loves us unconditionally and forever.

Only from that experience could the young person, like ourselves, understand how to love our neighbour, those close to us, or different, poor or rich, wise or ignorant. Jesus invites us to see all people as equals: as people created and recreated by Love, freed from any ties to sin, called to love and be loved.

Perhaps when the rich young man approached Jesus, he was expecting the advice of a teacher, someone who would approve of him and tell him that he was on the right path and should not worry too much.

Far from giving advice, what Jesus did was share his own experience, *Take up your cross and follow me.* Welcome your life, love it, give it meaning, learn to desire deeply what is good, the common good and your own, that will lead you into fullness of life. If you do this, you are already on the way to wanting to walk with me, to follow me and to go as far as love leads you.

We do not know for sure what the young man did afterwards, but, for us, that which we draw from Jesus' gaze upon us and his invitation and call, that is our crossroads.

Faced with the complex situations now confronting so many people, the wisdom of goodness asks us not to judge or condemn.

Let us not fall into humiliating indifference or a monotonous routine that prevents us from discovering what is new! Let us ward off destructive cynicism! Let us open our eyes and see the misery of the world, the wounds of our brothers and sisters who are denied their dignity and let us recognize that we are compelled to heed their cry for help! May we reach out to them and support them so they can feel the warmth of our presence, our friendship, and our fellowship! May their cry become our own, and together may we break down the barriers of indifference...⁸

As believers animated by a vocation, and called to be *gentle yet firm*, we believe that there is a new earth for all humanity where each person has a place, and his or her life finds meaning and a mission. There are always new ways of hoping, keeping up our faith and enthusiasm, building justice and peace and proclaiming the goodness of God.

May this first reflection on the goodness of God, who alone is truly good, stay with us this year, as an invitation to recognise the source of our love and our style of being *gentle yet firm*, with which we want to bring comfort and hope to our world.

II. Discerning in uncertain times

Gift and task

The art of discernment is an invitation to stay alert to real situations, to our ambivalent feelings and to our desire for innovation in order to try out new pathways. Above all, discernment means the desire to live in a way that makes us do for love what we have learned to do out of duty. These new pathways are to be built and prepared, sought and proposed, opened up and embarked upon.

⁸ Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, n° 15.

Discernment is especially necessary and urgent in our cultural and church environments. *How can we know if something comes from the Holy Spirit? The only way is to discern it, which calls for something more than intelligence or common sense. It is a gift for which we must pray.*⁹

Psalm 25 reminds us that good discernment is not derived from something external or distant; it is from God who is at our side in our daily endeavours to guide and orient us, and in that company we acquire some discerning wisdom in making choices and options.

Lord, make me know your ways. Lord, teach me your paths. Make me walk in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Saviour. In you I hope all day long, the psalmist says.

At the 2018 Assembly of all the Associations, we followed a process of community discernment as we built something together. The prayer of Pedro Poveda, *May I think as you want me to think, want what you want me to want, speak as you want me to speak, act as you want me to act,* guided our work during those days. It helped us to reflect, dialogue and reach conclusions. We were aware that we were at the service of communion, and we embraced the reality of different world contexts where the challenges are a continuing call to live our vocation-mission faithfully.

Discernment is an attitude in the life of every person who tries to be faithful to God and seeks to create a more humane world for all. The right approach for these uncertain times in which we find ourselves is clearly to feel the urgent need for discernment so as to avoid radical, legalistic or coercive positions. It is to accept that the art of discernment applies to all the personal and community crossroads through which our lives move, for we are so much in need of God's light.

Discernment does not just apply to specific moments, as Pope Francis reminds us in the exhortation quoted above, *but a way of being and existing within this constantly changing world loved by God.*

⁹ Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exultate*, n° 166.

It is a dimension of Christian life that must always be active, but in times of personal, institutional or social crisis, it becomes decisively important. It is a constant invitation to visit the very depths of our hearts where there are mysterious powers hiding that make us blind when we need to see, and clumsy when we need to act.

If we are attentive and available to God and his word, we will let ourselves be led by his Spirit, and we will learn how to make small daily decisions gently and harmoniously.

In this understanding of discernment, the most important thing is to see where new life coming from God reveals itself, new life that remakes people, families, groups and communities, and that opens us up to the future.

Discernment should help us find ways of responding to God and growing despite the limitations. By seeing everything as black and white, we sometimes close off the way of grace and growth. We become discouraged, and maybe discourage others too.

Let us remember that a small step, taken amid great human limitations, can be more pleasing to God than an outwardly orderly life that goes through the day with no great difficulties to be faced.¹⁰

The newness that God offers us always has something of the unpredictable about it, and it comes through small and simple things. It is both gift and task.

Jesus himself, the human face of God in history, had to find the way to embody his own life, and for this he had to find the words, gestures, images and parables which were to make sense to so many peoples and cultures of all times. In the words of Karl Rahner, *Lord, you are always coming*.¹¹

Discernment invites us to be at the crossroads where humanity is to be found, and to identify the right words, gestures and actions that will open up these pathways to the newness of God.

¹⁰ Pope Francis *Amoris Laetitia*, nº 305.

¹¹ K. Rahner, *Dios amor que descende. Escritos espirituales*. Santander 2008.

The clear new breath of the Spirit

This morning I felt an enormous tranquillity in myself. After days of plentiful and intense inner life, a kind of well-being emerged and I see life in a softer and kinder way. Being reconciled with life. A life that is great and good, fascinating and eternal. When one puts too much emphasis on oneself and becomes agitated and irritated, then that great and powerful flow that is life escapes. Etty Hillesum, Diary 1941.

An intense inner life reconciles us to life; and for that we must let the clear new breath of the Spirit work in us. This is the art of discernment.

Our routine and the way we live our lives are the direct result of every little decision we make. Sometimes we can trivialise the power and impact of our choices because they are small.

In these uncertain times, are we aware that decisions and directions exist that indeed we can take? What stance do we take towards our humble ability to influence human destiny, and nearer to hand, those around us in daily life? Do we discern the consequences of our choices well enough, the simplest as well as the most important?

We are living at a time in history that has exposed the fragility of our hyperconnected societies, the globalised economy, the non-inclusive health systems and the idolatry of purchasing power. At the same time, we have grasped the importance of the attitudes and the fundamental requisites that make individuals, groups and societies human, like protecting and caring for each other, training and educating, healing and socialising, etc. In other words, we have become aware that we are responsible and co-responsible for our own lives and the lives of others. Pope Francis says in *Fratelli Tutti*,

It is my desire that in this our time, by acknowledging the dignity of each human person, we can contribute to the rebirth of a universal aspiration to fellowship. Fellowship between all men and women. Here we have a splendid secret that shows us how to dream and to turn our life into a wonderful adventure. No one can face life in isolation... We need a community that supports and helps us, in which we can help one another to keep looking ahead. How important it is to dream together... By ourselves, we risk seeing mirages, things that are not there. Dreams, on the other hand, are built together. Let us dream, then, as a single human family, companions on the same journey sharing the same flesh, as children of the

*same earth which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all.*¹²

All this calls for discernment in supporting the initiatives of people and groups who seek and propose alternative ways to promote the structural changes needed by our societies. We need to discern in fighting the injustices, accentuated by the pandemic, that affect the most vulnerable generations and the most fragile social classes, especially migrants and refugees.

We cannot do everything, but with the help of the Spirit we can discern where to deploy our personal and collective energies to work, console and support.

To discern in the manner of Jesus

In the Gospel we notice how Jesus is always in discerning mode. The Gospel has stories that surprise and disturb us two thousand years after the event. That is because they can make us see the situation from a novel viewpoint.

The parables are stories about men and women like us, told by the exceptional storyteller that is Jesus. These stories shatter preconceptions and the traditional understanding of justice, and they help us to understand how Jesus sees ordinary life.

The parable of the Pharisee and the publican¹³ tends to arouse intense disapproval of the Pharisee standing before God with arrogant self-confidence, and spontaneous sympathy for the publican humbly admitting his sin. The story can even make us feel like saying, *I thank You, my God, that I am not like this Pharisee.*

In order to hear the message of the parable correctly, we must remember that Jesus did not tell it to criticise the Pharisees. He wanted to prick the conscience of *some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else.* Perhaps we too are numbered among them.

¹² Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* n° 8.

¹³ Luke 18: 9-14.

The prayer of the Pharisee reveals his inner attitude when he says, *God, I thank you that I am not like other people*. He feels righteous before God. That is why he becomes judgemental, despising and condemnatory of those not like himself. He stands there centred on himself and sure of himself. His monologue demonstrates how remote he is from others and also from God. Jesus' disapproval is not because of the Pharisee's good works, but because of the fact that he expects nothing from God. He is sufficient unto himself.

The publican, on the other hand, only manages to say, *God, have mercy on me, a sinner*. He humbly acknowledges his sin. He cannot feel proud of his life. He surrenders to the compassion of God. He compares himself to no one. He does not judge others. He lives in truth before himself and before God. He goes up to the temple fully aware that he is a sinner in need of God's forgiveness and mercy.

Jesus uses the example of the publican to invite us to be humble and truthful towards ourselves and others, and to trust in the strength of God's mercy that can heal and transform our fragility. The publican trusted God and abandoned himself to God. He did not need to make comparisons or to judge others.

When we look around us and see the confusion in these times of uncertainty, what do we notice about people? How do we discern, how do we behave, how do we support people, projects and activities so that they can express the freedom and truth to which Jesus invites us? Do we ask ourselves, *who am I to judge?* Do we let this refine our discernment?

*The ability to sit down and listen to others, typical of interpersonal encounters, is a paradigm of the welcoming attitude shown by those who transcend narcissism and accept others, caring for them and welcoming them into their lives.*¹⁴

We can learn how to really listen from the way Jesus looks at each person and welcomes them. He does not hold anyone back, or compel them, or impose useless conversation. He prefers to observe, to speak truth bravely, to question, to examine, but always with respect, tenderness and goodness. This is what he does on the road to Emmaus as he helps the disciples to go back over the events, to find meaning in the scriptures and to bring them to life.

¹⁴ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, n° 48.

To discern in the way Jesus did is to make life more human and relationships more friendly, to look at life with eyes of mercy, and to act humbly and responsibly in truth and freedom.

III. The present times are in need of goodness and gentleness

Goodness as a way of life

Pedro Poveda called for tolerance, dialogue and respect for others. We first see this in the recommendations he wrote for the teachers in the Academies in 1912. A spirit of compromise is essential in living together and in our daily interaction with others. *To surround ourselves with ill-judged rigidity would distance us from the very world we wish to convert to God.*¹⁵ The secret lies in respect and in being able to speak truthfully with words that heal, cure and liberate. Let us use words that create an atmosphere of trust, rather than of imposition on others. *To want everyone to be as we want them to be and yet not change what we are like ourselves*¹⁶ would be the very opposite of the attractive and tolerant spirit of “conciliating wisdom” with which Pedro Poveda interacted with the culture of his time. This wisdom helped him to understand everyone yet without capitulating on anything or to anyone.

From 1911 to 1936, Pedro Poveda wrote about tolerance as an imperative for himself and for others. This theme culminates in his reflections on gentleness in which he stresses how important it is to be understanding. These date from just before the difficult years of the civil war in Spain.

Pedro Poveda’s spirit of dialogue and compromise calls on us in turn to be balanced and to appreciate others. This is a way of being and of communicating with other people that elicits kindness, friendship and reaching out. Even when people are aware of diversity, if there is respect, difference can always be a source of dialogue and mutual acceptance.

15 Pedro Poveda, *Obras I. Creí por eso hablé*, “Espíritu atrayente y tolerante”, 1912, [65].

16 *Idem*, “Dejad que sea cada cual según es”, 1917, [94].

Does the contradiction surprise you? Look carefully and you will see there is none. (...) To be gentle, pleasant, compassionate, tender-hearted, caring, accommodating, friendly and kind towards everyone; yet firm, strict, rigorous and uncompromising towards oneself (...) How can we be both of these at the same time? I will give you a most effective means: the divine fire of God's love.¹⁷

Holding firm to his own convictions while tolerant of those of others, this was how Pedro Poveda lived right up to his last moments. It is interesting to see how he wanted to counteract the stereotypes of women prevalent in the early 20th century that said that they were *pious but without depth, lacking in personality, emotional and easily led*, we are told by Maria Dolores Gómez Molleda.¹⁸

Pedro Poveda was proposing a way of life – for his collaborators and for us too today – which is to be friendly and caring, yet resolute, natural, even-tempered and diligent. It is to be people who clearly hold God within, and think, feel, desire, speak, work or leave the work aside, all according to God's promptings.¹⁹

It is true that such a way of being does not attract attention; our gentleness can sometimes be taken for weakness, fear, a desire to please or even a way to be loved or admired; our strictness with ourselves may also be interpreted unfavourably; to give of oneself kind-heartedly and suffer in silence goes unnoticed. But how real is the virtue that operates like this, hidden!²⁰

How are we to acquire this spirit? The key to discernment lies in prayer: *To find out what God wants of us we must pray; if we want to be as God wants us to be, we must pray, and to overcome adversaries, we likewise need to pray.²¹*

The present time is one of uncertainty. We feel challenged to look into the core of our being and to the roots of our actions. We seem to be living in times in some way similar to those of Etty Hillesum. Her experience was one of inner

17 Pedro Poveda, *Obras I. Creí por eso hablé*. "Caracteres espirituales 1", 1916, [81]

18 *Idem*, p. 329, footnote in [81].

19 *Idem*, "Espíritu atrayente y tolerante", 1912, [65]

20 *Idem*, "Caracteres espirituales 1", 1916, [81]

21 *Idem*, "Espíritu atrayente y tolerante", 1912, [65] No 30

freedom, something she gradually discovered, cherished and embraced. It was her desire to be the person she felt called to be.

Feeling at first distant from God, fragile and unsatisfied, she looked deep within herself and felt that she wanted to somehow “unearth God” there. She wanted to do this through being kind towards everyone and very especially towards herself. Her discovery of God made her aware of who she was, but in a different way. Although increasingly limited by her circumstances, given all that happened, Etty found that she was becoming more and more free.

I'll 'turn inwards' for half an hour each morning before work and listen to my inner voice. Lose myself. You could also call it meditation. I am still a bit wary of that word. But anyway, why not? A quiet half-hour within yourself. But it's not so simple, that sort of 'quiet hour'. It has to be learned. So that something of 'God' can enter you, just as there is something of 'God' in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. May something of 'love' arise inside too, a love which can influence our smallest daily actions.²²

Everything good is done gently

“Why should we talk about being gentle?”, Pedro Poveda wondered in 1935. The reflection he then shared with his collaborators would give rise to a series of articles and documents answering the question. *I believe that the present times in particular need people to practise this virtue* ²³, he wrote.

During last year's pilgrimage to Covadonga, we expressed our need to keep going faithfully and creatively amid the uncertainty and challenges felt by so many people in this pandemic. Faithfulness and creativity give us the answer to many other questions that continue to be heard around us, and most probably in our own minds too. We ask, why this pandemic? Why now? When will it end?

We are people of faith who wish to share with our contemporaries our conviction that this apparent absence of meaning is not due to any indifference on God's part. It is really a time when something new is gestating, growing in the silence and discretion of God. It urges us now more than ever to be wayfarers and pilgrims who listen, receptive to questions and queries so as to help others discover the presence of God in history. We may be affected by the tension all

²² *An Interrupted Life, The diaries of Etty Hillesum, 1941-1943.*

²³ Pedro Poveda, *Obras I. Creí por eso hablé*, “Consideraciones sobre la mansedumbre”, 1935, [466].

around us, so we need to look at Jesus and accept his invitation to *Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart.*²⁴

In difficult times of huge social upheaval, Pedro Poveda insisted:

*Resolve firmly that you will learn to be gentle. Let people say of you: How peaceful! Such gentleness! How kind! If this is what you are like, you will know how to educate and how to carry out your mission.*²⁵

Pope Francis wants to introduce a different kind of language and a new approach to the joy of love in its different aspects, to support, understand and integrate vulnerability. He does so by reminding us of the logic of pastoral mercy, reflected in the compassionate heart of Jesus. He continues:

*This mercy offers us a framework and setting which help us avoid a cold bureaucratic morality in dealing with more sensitive issues. Instead, it sets us in the context of pastoral discernment filled with merciful love, which is ever ready to understand, forgive, accompany, hope, and above all integrate. That is the mindset which should prevail in the Church and lead us to open our hearts to those living on the outermost fringes of society.*²⁶

It is only with these attitudes that we can be credible to our contemporaries today. Mercy is God's option for each human being, inviting us to live life in abundance and to choose to receive and share life. Life comes from God, and God wants it to be fulfilling for us through our free will and responsible choices.

Even when we think that we have made mistakes and face the prospect of failure, God continues to offer his love and mercy. It is a long and winding road for everyone, including ourselves, and we will be able to get there in the end if we take it gently. No life should be summed up or paralysed by an experience of failure. Maybe instead of asking "Why?" we can ask "For what purpose?" We can learn from our failures. We can support others if we see failure as helping us to realise that failure and sin do not have the last word in God's eyes. The unconditional and merciful love of God has the last word.

With God, the future always brings something new. God is close to us and supportive throughout the sometimes painful journey of our lives and of those who travel with us. We are invited to support people with mercy and patience as

²⁴ Mt 11:29.

²⁵ Pedro Poveda, *Op. cit.* "Consideraciones sobre la mansedumbre", 1935, [468].

²⁶ Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, n° 312.

they grow through their various vulnerable stages, with onward steps day by day. Jesus always desires and encourages communities to be receptive and alert to the good poured out by the Spirit in the very midst of frailty.

The Gospel asks us not to judge or condemn (cf. Mt 7:1; Lk 6:37). Jesus is inviting us to the power of tenderness and to put no limits on mercy and forgiveness.

We must educate kindly, teach kindly, encourage virtue kindly (...) by being kind many sins can be avoided; be kind in governing, be kind in doing all that is good.

Make no mistake: to be gentle, affable and kind is the way to win the world. You say it is very difficult. I could not agree more, but nothing is impossible when we cooperate with God's grace.²⁷

Gentle yet firm, the wisdom of acting with goodness

When Pope Francis signed his third encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, in Assisi, it was to acknowledge that his inspiration came from Francis of Assisi. He is inviting us to dream together and to deal with the shadows and conflicts in the world. He perceives humanity to be ever more divided. Men and women in our societies are increasingly isolated, the vulnerable are excluded, new forms of slavery are emerging and the dignity inherent in every individual person is forgotten.

He uses the image of the Good Samaritan to point out that pathways to hope do exist. Even though the wounded man lying on the road is ignored by many, there is one who stops and shows him kindness. With so many open wounds in today's world, we can stop and not just pass by. We can choose to draw near and be neighbours. We can learn to care for one another and to give the best of ourselves earnestly to others, with a compassionate heart, open to the whole world.

The Pope dreams of universal fellowship that would exercise political responsibility with dignity. It would bring about global recognition of the most basic human rights, address the problems of today's world and renew structures and organisations. It would seek social friendship, heal the wounds of discord and restore peace.

²⁷ Pedro Poveda, *Op.cit.*, "Consideraciones sobre la mansedumbre", 1935, [470].

It is his dream and desire that religions would place themselves at the service of fellowship and build friendship, and that they would give and share peace, harmony, kindness and goodness.

This is the wisdom of acting with goodness that we wish to practise and share throughout the year 2021. To this end we will unite in a prayer of petition, crying out,

**Lord, help us to hear the cries of our world with gentle
and humble hearts.**

Maite Uribe Bilbao



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