"Brotherhood:
a divine promise in little human steps"

Bernard Dumas, theologian

See how good and how pleasant it is
for brothers to live together in unity!

It is like the precious oil on the head
that ran down on the beard,
even Aaron's beard;
that came down on the edge of his robes;

like the dew of Hermon,
that comes down on the hills of Zion:
for there Yahweh gives the blessing,
even life forevermore.[[1]](#footnote-1)

A mirror of the human soul as much as divine will, the Bible will always know how to surprise us! Far from being an austere book reserved for a few deserving ascetics, it can occasionally glorify and poetically translate the deep aspirations of the human heart. Indeed not everyone dreams of oil that runs down the head, beard and robes… but who would decline this deep desire to live as brothers - and sisters? Extending the family metaphor, the Bible knows how to stimulate in us this aspiration to experiencing human relationships made up of trust, solidity and proximity. In its own way it doesn't hesitate to open our eyes on the importance of brotherhood: "Don't trade a friend for money, nor a true brother for the gold of Ophir".[[2]](#footnote-2) By focussing your international congress of Christian teachers on brotherhood, you indeed chose a major theme of Christian tradition.

Yet the topic appears extensive, even very extensive. For instance it concerns philosophy, ethics, politics, anthropology or religion. As for me I'll deal with it from a theological point of view before all. More specifically from the point of view of Christian (Roman Catholic) theology.

To do so, I'll start with stressing the universal desire for brotherhood (1. "Living as brothers: a universal aspiration"). Then I'll compare this common aspiration to its imperfect - to say the least - materializations (2. "Brotherhood in bits and pieces"). From there I'll expose a few essential features of biblical teaching about brotherhood as a paradoxical reality (3. "An impossible duty! A paradoxical biblical teaching") before drawing some practical, even voluntarily down-to-earth recommendations from it (4. "Brotherhood in little steps \_ a sketch"). This is because Christian ethics is supposed to unite the highest ambition to the most resolute pragmatism, at the risk of being only vain theory.

1. **Living as brothers : a universal aspiration**

Memories of a bucolic Sunday

In a moment of particularly successful human proximity, who among us never experienced a powerful feeling of harmony, to the extent of dreaming that it would last and extend ? Like that bucolic Sunday, for instance, which one day burnt into my memory. We were sitting round the table for a celebration with some very dear friends. The talking was going on easily, a few jokes would spark - or even more uneasy secrets. We were sharing true experiences, serious or light, anyway facets of our lives that matter to us and that we don't disclose to strangers. The children would come and go, peacefully, shaping a merry corolla rustling with life around the company. There we were, aimless, delighted with a good meal and relaxed, trustful and truthful… when all at once I was struck by the obviousness. I saw us there, as if I had stepped aside. As if the veil opened for a moment. Isaiah's word describing the end of time through the metaphor of a feast that would gather all peoples in concord[[3]](#footnote-3) like came on top of the scene, and I knew that we were experiencing, just there, a foretaste of the Kingdom of God. In this simple brotherhood, in this apparently commonplace proximity, it was a tiny piece of God's huge joy and peace that was pouring down in this world.

Brotherhood, a presage of beatitude…

But could I be suspected of going too far? Could this be romantic - maybe ethylic - dreaming, and isn't human life definitely a more serious matter? Then how to explain that dream running along history and emerging again and again? How to understand all these works which tell us about brothers and brotherhood, from the Bible to folk songs, from Stoic philosophy to John Rawl's political theories, from Antiquity to the present day ?

Brotherhood, a soft and unquestionable concept?

The reason why is that the human being isn't only a reasonable or political or technical animal, but also a brotherly one. Or rather a being considerably attracted by brotherhood, in whatever time, including our West widely dominated by scientific and technical projects. Christians or not Christians, religious or not, we all yearn for a more brotherly life. To the point that one eventually wonders whether this concept of brotherhood might not have often become an obstacle for thought!

By speaking of brothers and sisters we are faced with a family metaphor often extended so far as insignificance. Brotherhood has become a warm concept pointing all at once to social cohesion, welfare, unity in front of danger, smiling universal humanitarianism, enthusiasm, mutual assistance. A vast sentimental haze which hardly conceals a stock of sometimes brutal injunction: talking about brotherhood is also saying: "This is indisputable. It points to a tie you can't criticize, a value all should unquestionably assume." You only need to see the number of phrases in which the word "brotherhood" is only meant to emphasize an adjective. One may for instance talk of "student brotherhood", "manly brotherhood", "universal brotherhood", "interreligious brotherhood", "political brotherhood", "priestly brotherhood" and so on. Right or wrong, one often feels that brotherhood is before all the ultimate rhetorical resource aimed at silencing any attempt at opposition or reflection. In short a both soft and unquestionable concept (we'll come back to that later on, as brotherhood should conversely muster all human energies, including intelligence). The reasons for this state of affairs are undoubtedly linked to the history of the very notion of brotherhood. This is because this universalizing concept, before it enjoyed the glory we are witnessing through its progressive secularisation[[4]](#footnote-4), fundamentally comes from the religious world. And more precisely from Christianity. Then let's try to say a few words about it in order to theologically give reason for this universal aspiration to brotherhood.

A theological view: mankind's unity, a root of the brotherly aspiration

From the point of view of Christian faith, many possible approaches might give reason to the wish of brotherhood. First of all the divine intent which wishes to gather mankind in God's Kingdom might be mentioned: a teleological reason. One could also explore human nature as a relational nature, in the likeness of God Trinity. Or one could move forward along the lines of ethics, or spiritual life, and so on. What is certain anyway is that in spite of a few historical eclipses we'll mention later on, Christianity never stopped to put forward mankind's brotherly vocation.

For instance the Church Fathers would comment the first pages of the Bible in a peculiarly revealing way. As they read the accounts of man's creation and fall[[5]](#footnote-5), they didn't use to understand Adam and Eve's creation as that of a couple of individuals meant to beget others (the modern perspective), but rather the coming to existence of all mankind, personified here by Adam and Eve. Irenaeus, Origen, Gregory of Nazianz, Gregory of Nyssa and all the others loved to contemplate the original creation of mankind as a single whole.[[6]](#footnote-6) To the point that for some of them one shouldn't talk of men in the plural but of mankind ; in the same way as one doesn't talk of gods in the plural but of Trinity.[[7]](#footnote-7) And when pagan wise men derided Christians' - the new barbarians - hope of uniting all peoples in a single faith, the latter retorted that this dream of brotherhood wasn't so silly since all men were made in the single likeness of the single God. Besides in the Bible, when a Jew utters the word "Adam" he is often far from thinking primarily of the first individual man: generally the word keeps its collective meaning, frequently translated with "one"… The collective meaning clearly dominates.

What is true for creation extends to the whole of anthropology: in Christianity the individual perspective matters but should never come first. As in the Bible, the matter of brotherhood anyways doesn't appear as a minor theme in the theological tradition. Conversely it is a key topic for considering not only the human being on the way to final achievement, but also God's work in the world.

The universal desire for brotherhood can be understood as a sort of vestige, a more or less conscious trace of a creation aimed at the unity of mankind. A testimony given to God created human vocation: to constitute a single whole. So one already understands that there will be no opposing human striving and the divine will. No need to immediately translate in terms of Promethean temptation human toiling for greater brotherhood. If everyone more or less consciously yearns for it, it is because the universal human clay has in a way kept the trace of the Creator's hands.

1. **Brotherhood in bits and pieces**

An assessment

Yet reality is quite different. From the dream of brotherhood to its materializations, one could often repeat St Paul's words: "For the good which I desire, I don't do; but the evil which I don't desire, that I practice."[[8]](#footnote-8) No need to open a philosophy book: the daily paper or any History textbook are enough. There one sees mankind tearing one another to pieces. Whether at the level of a couple, of a family, of a company or of a country, human unity always looks suspended when it isn't utterly trampled.

This is a general phenomenon. It is true not only at practical level, but also too often from a theoretical point of view. No era seems to lack heralds assessing loud and clear the superiority of one human group over another. The 20th century left us particularly bloody testimonies of that, but even today one could point at a lot of conceptual centres for the destruction of brotherhood. And if racism is no longer its constant cutting edge, it found quite a lot of substitutes striving to shatter human relationships. Whether they are financial ultra-liberalism, a brutal globalization, technical and scientific projects for the benefit of a privileged class (one thinks of transhumanism[[9]](#footnote-9)), the social weakening of family relationship, and so on.

Who then is my brother? Hesitations even in Christian theology

Not even the Church's history is free from painful testimonies of counter-brotherhood. Apart from recalling some facts about the historical errors of many of its members, one can mention some hesitations of Catholic thinking about the extension of brotherhood.[[10]](#footnote-10) To make things clear:

- On the one hand the question has arisen whether Christians were entitled to call "brothers" all humans, or if this name had to be reserved for the baptized specifically, honouring the special brotherhood that should exist between Christians. A hesitation which recalls the Gospel episode where Jesus is talking to a Moses law specialist asking him: "Who is my neighbour?”[[11]](#footnote-11)

- On the other hand the notion of brotherhood experienced historical limitations without any theological justification. To be persuaded of this, one only needs to watch the Church's - even ecclesiastical - use of the word itself. Along the centuries the word "brotherhood" gradually ceased to qualify the Church as a whole, thus leaving aside the way of speaking of the early Christian generations.[[12]](#footnote-12) Similarly the word "brother" (or "sister") was gradually specialized and diluted. Specialized: it was less and less used to mean the whole of the baptized, but rather a specific group: either that of clerics (with the example of "brothers in episcopacy"), or that of monks or nuns. See, still today, the Catholic habit of reserving the word "brother" or "sister" to consecrated persons.

Diluted: the phrase "brotherhood" can be plurisemic, and even become a mere social title. So if the brotherly perspective never totally disappeared from Christianity, it nevertheless experienced all the more impressive eclipses since they could affect the theoretical level.

Temptations about brotherhood

In front of this flood of obstacles or good reasons against brotherhood, temptations are many. Putting up a thorough list of them is impossible as well as useless. But we would like to stress three of them which still appear to us topical, and which we'll come back to later on.

**Despair**. Indeed, through hearing day after day about what is faulty in the world, by dint of mixing with human silliness and selfishness in our school, family, street… hope may decline. Twenty centuries of Christianity and thousands of years of human history haven't been enough to bring an end to reciprocal oppression and concord among humans. Why should that happen in 2017? After all, my commitment to my students, to my kin, might not all that express a subtle form of pride? Ancient Greeks avoided the sin of *hybris*, which means excessiveness… what about me? After all I can live without putting all my energy into solving conflicts and improving things. A quiet career, maybe even an academic award in my old days. I would avoid many troubles, and above all many disappointments.

**Activism.** I am not on earth for enjoyment. Besides ancient Catholic piety textbooks described present life in terms of prayer, service, useful toil.[[13]](#footnote-13) I must in my turn work hard for brotherhood to happen. Professional and volunteer commitments, unlimited hours, dedication … all is right in the service of a great cause. I'll have eternity for rest, and in the meantime no time should be wasted. A kin to activism : the risk of impatience, consisting in seeking perfect brotherhood here and now, in privileging warm small groups rather than expecting the coming of hypothetic universal brotherhood endlessly.

**The Mother Theresa syndrome.** Pardon this playful phrase whose authorship I wholly assume. I mean this is a firstly planetary way of regarding the good to be done. The *media* overwhelming us with the tale of the planet's evils, it can be tempting to adopt this view, above all to young people: a will to save the world, to go to India for a life with the lower castes, to found an orphanage in Manila, to collect books to teach reading and writing to African children, and so on. All good things for that matter. Yes, but what about brotherhood to be built nearby, from circle to circle?

The list might be longer still[[14]](#footnote-14), but it is useless to write a *catalogue à la Prévert* as the French say. What matters today is daring to see that there is a sometimes very painful clash between the wish for brotherhood and its so limited realisations. That this clash may lead us to despair or conversely impose on us an impossible weight … attitudes which are derived from a single root and need a more thorough exploration.

By the way the Bible itself not only calls us to brotherhood but opens our eyes by telling us about the conditions of possibility (or impossibility) of a brotherly existence.

1. **An impossible duty! A paradoxical biblical teaching**

Far from charming us with illusions, the Bible (and the Christian tradition in its wake) gives us a rather hard teaching. Indeed, it starts with situating brotherhood outside our human realisations.

Brotherhood: humanly out of reach

Beside carnal brotherhood, the Bible records another one, born from either contingent rapprochements (allies can be called "brothers" for instance), or from spiritual kinship.[[15]](#footnote-15) Blood kinship then isn't the only form of brotherhood, far from that: the ideal of universal brotherhood is already present and announced in the Old Testament, then mainly in the New Testament. Yet the Scriptures don't start from the idea that all humans might be born brothers (and sisters). Still harder to hear for us, modern men: it declares brotherhood an impracticable human task. Let's explain ourselves.

Of course, all peoples are potentially born brothers and sisters through the symbolical common line of descent from Adam and Eve or through Noah's universal blessing.[[16]](#footnote-16) But the biblical teaching thoroughly distances itself from the (modern) myth of the human being's original goodness. It is enough to read closely the symbolical story of the first brotherhood, that of Cain and Abel: You know that it starts with an irrepressible jealousy and ends in blood. A third child, Seth, will have to come and "replace" the murdered brother for the brotherly adventure to start again. Israel's prophets, while recalling the ideal of universal brotherhood, will also point to that natural state of brotherly war : "No one spare their brothers"[[17]](#footnote-17); one can't " trust in any brother; for every brother will utterly supplant" the other[[18]](#footnote-18), Isaiah and Jeremy lament, while wise men or psalmists ponder the utmost painful wound of abandoning a brother:

For it was not an enemy who insulted me, then I could have endured it.

Neither was it he who hated me who raised himself up against me,

then I would have hidden myself from him.

But it was you, a man like me, my companion, and my familiar friend.

We took sweet fellowship together. We walked in God's house with company.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Fundamentally the Bible doesn't condemn brotherhood as an impossible or blasphemous dream: it rather mourns it. It mourns an out of reach horizon, as humans are always the prisoners of their urges for envy or violence.

At this point one might profitably consider René Girard's philosophical work, and its biblical and theological developments by Raymund Schwager. Of course Girard's work is still debated, mainly for its too systematic character. But one can't help seeing a true depth in their questioning human brotherhood as a natural reality.[[20]](#footnote-20) In the wake of the biblical impetus, Girard and Schwager are indeed questioning our romantic vision which ignores some abysses in the human heart. At rock bottom, aren't we trusting human reason and good will too far? Are we really these reasonable beings able to sign up to a social contract and walk hand in hand towards brotherhood, overcoming our rivalries, our self-interest and the dark bottom of our passions? To trust reason so far … might not this be a tragic form of madness? For we know, at the bottom of ourselves, that brotherhood isn't self-evident at any level, be it in our blood family, in the chosen or affective ties of the couple, in our social group, at work, in our countries and so on.

So, through the multitude of its tales, the Bible first sends us back to impossible brotherhood. Or more precisely it flushes out in picturesque form all that is an obstacle to brotherhood in the human being. So far as to display a dark (or realistic if you prefer) picture: becoming brothers might really exceed human strength.

For the theologians of the patristic times, this inability to experience brotherhood will be the most flagrant mark of sin, regarded here as a social reality:

"Where sins are, there is the multitude" (…) Whereas God is continually acting in the world to allow everything to contribute to unity, through [original sin] (…) "the single [human] nature was shattered into a thousand pieces" and mankind, who was supposed to make up a harmonious whole, where mine and yours would not be opposed, became a dust of individuals with violently conflicting tendencies. "And now (…) we tear at each other like wild animals…"[[21]](#footnote-21)

Brotherhood, a divine work…

Might the Bible seek to depress us and kill in us any brotherly longing? Of course not! This is why the Bible also displays beautiful examples of brotherhood: for instance Abraham and Lot avoiding discord; or Jacob, who eventually reconciles with Esau; or again Joseph forgiving his brothers, although they mistreated him and sold him as a slave.[[22]](#footnote-22) Fundamentally the Revelation seeks to point out the fact that real brotherhood isn't a side question in the history of salvation.[[23]](#footnote-23) Just the opposite: the whole history of the Alliance, the whole biblical history can be read as a transformation of the human heart and a long education to brotherhood. From Moses's Law to the Gospel's precepts of loving enemies, it deals with huddling under the Father's hand who seeks to gather all dispersed humans in unity. And universal brotherhood is eventually a concrete and deeply just way of evoking the matter of salvation, as Paul's exclamation in his epistle to the Romans testifies: through his death and resurrection Jesus has become "the first-born of a multitude of brothers".[[24]](#footnote-24)

Hence three major reflections:

- First, brotherhood comes from God. To say it differently, it will only be possible with God's help. The dream laid at the bottom of our hearts isn't a pipe dream, provided we listen to the evangelical lesson placed in Jesus's mouth by St John: "Apart from me, you can do nothing."[[25]](#footnote-25)

- Second, brotherhood isn't a reality of this world. Indeed foretastes and partial realisations of it exist, but no person, no structure (be it the Church) will be able to establish final brotherhood here and now. In history many claimed to do so, in political and philosophical movements as well as in spiritual groups. But to understand the equation of brotherhood and salvation is to accept eventually that it come true after the end of history. It is to live by this promise which is both a gift and a pain: We are expecting, and will always be expecting the time when God reconciles nations in peace and unity.[[26]](#footnote-26)

- Finally, despite this reservation which links achieved brotherhood and the end of history, becoming brothers and sisters is an urgent duty everyone should carry out without delay.

… and an appeal to human commitment

Christianity is quite clear: Seeking brotherhood is a fundamental duty to anyone. All of Paul's letters, for instance, are full of exhortations to do so: to avoid disagreements; to support one another; to share one's goods; to display gentleness; to pray for others; to put different social or race conditions into perspective; to forgive one another[[27]](#footnote-27) etc. And at bottom there isn't a single page in the New Testament that isn't an exhortation to live in love and harmony. Christians aren't invited to live "as if" all men were their brothers, which still implies a certain relativizing of this notion. But they are invited to live according to a reality that precedes them: God is Father, as they repeat every day in the "Our Father" prayer. It belongs to them to draw consequences from that and discover that it is more than a mere comparison. Brotherhood isn't a way of speaking or inviting Christians to be philanthropists. It is both the reminder of our duty as men or women and the more appropriate expressions of the ties which link us together in God's project.

To become a Christian means to enter this great dream filling man's heart, in the wake of Christ. To become a Christian means to muster all our strength to cooperate to the work of God, who wants to lead us from dispersion to unity. From rivalry to brotherhood: from this point of view, the matter is always and again to move from the more or less vague feeling of solidarity we were pointing out above to true actual brotherhood.

Hence the fact that the Bible, by dealing with brotherhood, displays to us a paradoxical picture since we are faced with a reality both desired but out of reach, impossible but imperative, granted but that we have to work for. A tension inherent to Christianity, but a tension for freedom; that is what we'll deal with in our conclusion.

1. **Brotherhood in little steps \_ a sketch**

A gift of God requiring man's cooperation: what comes out of a confrontation with the three temptations we mentioned earlier is a paradoxical conception of brotherhood, but which sets us free.

A remedy to despair and activism

Let's first deal with despair and activism. Putting them closer to each other might sound surprising, as they look so opposite. On the one hand a brotherhood desperado who slows down and retreats from the human adventure through lack of perspective. On the other hand an activist who multiplies actions and strains himself so that a brotherly world may appear … Yet - in spite of all the subtleties our simplified approach overlooks - we think that they are the head and tail of a single coin. We think that despair or over-commitment are the opposite symptoms of a single non-Christian conception. Lets' explain.

What the biblical picture ultimately displays is the human being's necessary but limited responsibility. And this conception sets us free. Fundamentally the Lord doesn't ask us to save the world - he makes it *his* business. On the last day, we won't have to account for the general state of the planet or harmony between the living. That brotherhood be forecast only at the end of times, following God's mighty intervention, should free us from a fantasy of all-might. Christians too often and too long acted as if they were to carry the whole world, modern and pious Atlas bowing under the weight of an impossible task. Indeed we aren't preaching quietism, which is a lazy abandonment to God's will. We already said it: this attitude isn't righter than the previous one. But a Christian knows that he's supposed to act on a cooperative mode, God introducing himself as the main artisan of human gathering. As Pope Francis wrote in his apostolic exhortation entitled *The Joy of the Gospel* (2013):

Although [the Christian mission] requires from us a generous commitment, it would be a mistake to understand it as a heroic personal task, since the work is his before all, beyond what we can discover and understand. Jesus is "the very first and greatest evangelist". In any form of evangelizing primacy first belongs to God, who wanted to call us to collaborate with him and to stimulate us through the strength of his Spirit.[[28]](#footnote-28)

We aren't here below to establish universal brotherhood by the sweat of our brows, as virtuous hermits.

Hence a series of typically Christian features through which brotherhood may progress, away from activism or despair. Let's sketch a few of them:

- **hope**: A Christian knows brotherhood will come, since God promises to achieve it. And so none of the human striving for good he may make will be lost. On the contrary despair would be a token of excessive importance given to his own human work. Hope, the sister of God founded modesty.

- **patience**: Indeed Christians long for brotherhood as much as other humans. But they know it can only be partial on this earth. No impatience with limits in him. No wish to trust or idealize an institution, a way of doing things, a party, a state, a Church, a spirituality blindly. So a Christian will be able to alternate commitment and rest, love for others and self-care.

- **gentleness**, a consequence of patience. No brotherhood can spring out of violence; the unity of mankind will never be hastened by scorn for a few. Conversely one of the features of Christian activity will always be kindness for the weakest, as the magnificent parable of the Last Judgement in St Matthew illustrates.

- **interiority**: Indeed brotherhood will always translate into concrete actions, we'll come back to that. But this outwardness will never be able to do without a deep rooting in a certain contemplative dimension, a regular revitalisation in spiritual life, for fear of weakening into a philanthropy threatened by the temptations we mentioned.

In short, one could carry on long. But what really matters is to see that Christians - and indeed good will humans - are never faced with brotherhood to be achieved like Sisyphus in front of his rock or the Danaids in front of their leaking barrel. God isn't a Doctor Pavlov who would blow hot and cold and submit us to a self-contradictory injunction like: "Work for brotherhood you'll never be able to establish!" But he is that Father who precedes and guides us along the ever to be invented paths of a more human because it is more brotherly, existence.

An ethics of little steps \_ a plea for everyday life

That being so, let's eventually come to the third temptation we named - maybe a bit arrogantly - the Mother Theresa syndrome. That is a way of regarding brotherhood as a block-letter reality: BROTHERHOOD. The concept of brotherhood, its planetary stakes, its universal necessity. These remarks are true and very often, as can be seen in the solution of conflicts or migrations for instance, coordinated actions at supra local or even global level are vital. But I would like to champion the following thesis: Before considering Brotherhood we have to consider the more neighbourly brothers and sisters. Before thinking in terms of global logics and humanitarian actions we should more often take care of the clumsily called "everyday" life.

Allow me to read to you a page by Madeleine Delbrêl, a great female poet and mystic of the 20th century. A text which, *mutatis mutandis*, deals with our topic:

Passion, our Passion, of course we're expecting it, we know that it is to come and it is agreed that we mean to experience it with a certain greatness. Our own self-sacrifice, we expect its hour to ring. Like a log in the blaze, we know we are to be burnt out. Like a thread of wool cut off with scissors we are to be separated. Like a young being slaughtered, we are to be annihilated.

We are expecting Passion. We are expecting it and it doesn't come. What comes, are patiences.

Patiences, these little bits of Passion, whose job it is to kill us quite gently for your glory, to kill us without our glory.

Even from daybreak they come forward to us:

They are our too vibrant or too slack nerves;

it is the packed full bus passing away,

the milk boiling over,

the chimney sweeps arriving,

the children muddling with everything;

they are the guests our husband brings in,

and that expected friend who doesn't come; it's the telephone ringing away,

those we love who don't love one another any more;

it's the urge to keep quiet and the duty to speak,

it's the desire to speak and the need to keep silent;

it's wanting to get out when we are locked in

and stay at home when we have to go out;

it's the husband we'd love to rely on

who becomes the frailest child;

it's the disgust with our daily ration,

and the nervous longing for all that doesn't belong to us.

So our patiences come in tight ranks or in lines and they always forget to tell us that they are the martyrdom that was prepared for us. And we let them pass disdainfully, waiting to give our lives away on a worthwhile opportunity.

For we've forgotten that if there are branches which are burnt out, there are boards slowly worn out by walking, and falling away in thin sawdust. For we've forgotten that if there are wool threads cut off by scissors, there are knitted threads which get thinner and thinner day by day on the shoulders of those who wear them. If all redemption is martyrdom, not all martyrdom is bloody. Some are strung out along a life from end to end.

It is the Passion of patiences.[[29]](#footnote-29)

What is true for Passion is as good for brotherhood: it is at stake today, in the most daily life. Brotherhood I won't live through with block letters and ideally, but in all the tiny or commonplace events of my life: in happy hours like in domestic quarrels; in the ever repeated toil to keep the house clean and welcoming, in the bringing up of children who never cease to be children; in my teacher's job with its joys and tiredness; in my not always ideal neighbourhood relationship; in my friendly relations, and so on. To be brotherly is to endeavour to live through little things peacefully and for peace, whatever unimportant they may look. It is to accept that brotherhood, except for a special vocation or explicit mission, be experienced through concentric circles, starting from those who are nearest to us in life or work.

God's ways aren't to be found out of our concrete life: on the contrary, the Lord's extraordinary grace unfolds in everyday routine. Like all of God's other gifts, brotherhood appears to us as an ultimate perspective which requires growing day after day through our quite small achievements. Brotherhood? A divine promise in little human steps.

Translated from French by Gérard Fischer

1. Psalm 132 (133) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ecclesiasticus (Sirach) 7, 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Isaiah 25, 6 + [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Thus brotherhood is one among the many notions coming straight from the Gospel that were so internalised and widespread in a secularised form that our contemporaries no longer guess their origin (see for instance the very stimulating book directed by René Rémond, *Les grandes inventions du Christianisme*, Paris, Bayard Editions, 1999 (4th ed.), 249 p. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Genesis 1 to 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In this respect, see the ancient but unsurpassable book by Henri de Lubac, *Catholicisme. Les aspects sociaux du dogme*, coll. "œuvres complètes" VII, Paris, Cerf, 2003 (1938), 560 p. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Ibid.*, p.  7. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Romans 7, 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For a simple and well-documented presentation of this major yet still poorly known movement in the 21st century, see Jean-Michel Besnier *Demain les post-humains : le futur a-t-il encore besoin de nous ?*, Paris, Pluriel, 2012, 208 p. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See among others Joseph Ratzinger *Frères dans le Christ : l'esprit de la fraternité chrétienne*, Paris, Cerf, 2005 (1960), 116 p. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Luke 10, 29. This hesitation is perceptible in several passages of the New Testament, for instance in Paul's Romans 9, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Here the reference - and very easy to read - study remains that of Michel Dujarier, *Eglise-fraternité, l'ecclésiologie du Christ-Frère aux huit premiers siècles*, t. I and II, coll. "Patrimoines", Paris, Cerf, 2013 (1991) et 2016, 498 et 862 p. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For a study on toil, a specifically current but little studied topic in the point of view of Christian ethics, see Bertrand Dumas, "Aux prises avec cet ange dont 'Fatigue' serait le nom", in *Revue d'éthique et de théologie morale*, Paris, Cerf (to be published). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For instance, among other risks: declarative brotherhood (displaying good intentions but without concrete commitments); only private and sentimental brotherhood (no translation into fair institutions) or conversely brotherhood based on outside structures only (reallocation of goods, governance, etc.). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Cp. Armand Négrier et Xavier Léon-Dufour, "Frère", in *Vocabulaire de théologie biblique*, Paris, Cerf, 1995 (8th edition), col. 491 s. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Genesis 4, 1f. and 9, 1f. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Isaiah 9, 18 f. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Jeremy 9,3. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Psalm 55 (54), 12-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Cp. for instance Raymund Schwager, *Avons-nous besoin d'un bouc émissaire? Violence et rédemption dans la Bible*, Flammarion, 2011 (1978), p.29s. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Henri de Lubac, *Catholicisme, op. cit. p. 11.* [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Genesis 13, 8; 33,4; 45, 1 f. About Joseph and his brothers, see the beautiful book by André Wénin, who reads this biblical saga as a reflection about the possibility to work across crises and find - with God's help - the way to brotherhood freed from lie and violence at last: André Wénin, *Joseph ou l'invention de la fraternité: lecture narrative et anthropologique de Genèse 37-50*, Bruxelles, Lessius, 2015, 352 p. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. For an inspiring reading of brotherly matters as woven into the history of Revelation, see Philippe Lefebvre, *Ce que dit la Bible sur… la famille*, Nouvelle cité, 2014, p 64 f., 103 f. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Romans 8, 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. John 15, 5f. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See for instance the splendid announcements in Isaiah (2, 1-4 and 66, 18 f.). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Galatians 5, 15; Romans 15, 1; II Corinthians 8-9; I Corinthians 8, 12; I Thessalonicians 5, 25; Galatians 3, 28; Colossians 3, 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Pope Francis, *Apostolic exhortation The Joy of the Gospel*, 2013, n. 12. Available on Vatican's site [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Madeline Delbrêl, "Passion des patiences", in *Alcide. Guide simple pour simples chrétiens*, Paris, Seuil, 1968, 83-84. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)