

*Selection from Chapter 16, Structure and Spirituality of the Movement -
Acogida
Acogida & personal relationships, pp. 339-341*

When José Manuel, after his three years with Father Gabriel, found himself unexpectedly committed to teaching the good news of the gospel to a group of eighteen year olds, largely unmotivated and indifferent in their faith he broke through their defences with the help of *lectio divina*. This break-through paved the way in the end for the creation of the Movement. However there was - there must have been - more to be said than that about it. *Lectio divina* is not a spiritual battering ram and its success with these young people, and many others later, owed a lot to the very special way in which it was used. That brings us to another vital factor about the Movement.

When he entered that classroom José Manuel had himself come to a profound realisation of the presence of the risen Lord in his life. When he turned to *lectio divina* to teach those boys it was with the purpose of bringing to life that same realisation in their minds and hearts. He saw Christ as present in them and sought to awaken them to a new awareness of that presence in their own lives and in each other. Such things cannot be done in the context of a cold, detached relationship at arm's length nor by means of a clever technique, however strong and effective it may be. It was with real personal warmth, founded on living faith in the risen Christ, that José Manuel welcomed them. That was what above all melted the ice-bound atmosphere and taught them through his personal self-giving how to recognize Christ in the unpromising context of their own lives as rich young men in a state of confusion. It was the warmth of the relationship they first met with in him that counted.

The young who worked with him soon began to learn the same lesson. They became aware of the risen Christ in their lives, they recognized him in each other; they began to see him in those they served in his name. It created a new atmosphere in the group. They used the Spanish word *acogida* to express this mutual relationship - mutual in the long run although it might have to start by being one-sided. As to its meaning - it is best to keep the Spanish word *acogida* because there is no adequate English equivalent - at least in the rich sense in which it came to be used universally in the Manquehue Movement.

The surface idea is that of welcome. Beneath the surface is the idea of personal affirmation, support, encouragement, love. Bound up in this is the recognition of the truly personal quality of the relationship which the word expresses and the love combined with deep respect which is inseparable from that relationship. Finally there is a transcendental quality beneath the surface of every act that it inspires because it is founded on the recognition through faith of the risen Christ in the other. A human relationship is transformed by the eternal fire which Christ came to kindle on earth.¹

On this basis and because of the supreme importance of *acogida* in the growing spirituality of the Movement it had another practical consequence. It implied and demanded a readiness to make time and space for other people - to be available - even to waste time with them. From the first beginnings of the Movement *acogida*, thus understood, was a lesson in the spirituality of the Movement which all had to learn. More, perhaps, than any other particular aspect of Manquehue spirituality it has been responsible for its rapid growth and cohesion and educational success. The strength of

Manquehue *acogida* is that it draws all together into unity in Christ. It is the full application in modern life and in modern terms of St Benedict's precept to his monks: "to put nothing whatever before the love of Christ."

José Manuel himself was personally involved at this level of inter-personal relationships not only with his original followers but with everyone in the early stages of San Benito, and everyone was amazed at what they saw and experienced. He always made time for anyone who came to him. It was very far from the availability of a politician working the crowds at the time of election. It was the ability he had of deep personal communication that was remembered. During the moment he was with them all that existed for him was what each one wanted of him. For the Oblates, for the children, for the parents and for the staff his availability was the same and when he called it *acogida* he gave the word a depth of his own. He taught them to treat each other and to treat the children they taught as he treated them.