

Closing Speech

DO NOT BE AFRAID: YOU ARE WORTH MORE THAN MANY SPARROWS!

Dear Mother Abbess and Father Abbot Presidents,
Dear Fr. Procurator General Lluç, Dear Fr. Procurator Emeritus Meinrad,
Dear Mother Abbesses, Father Abbots, Mother Prioresses, Father Priors
And all the members of the General Chapter,

At the end of this General Chapter, I do not think it is necessary to repeat or summarize what we have said, what we have discussed and the decisions we have made. Rather, I think it is important to pause for a moment in order to realize what has taken place in these days, because it is this that we must carry with us, transmit to our communities, and allow to ferment as new leaven in the bread of our Order.

God does not forget us

Yesterday, in the Gospel of the Mass, Jesus told us: "Are not five sparrows sold for two small coins? Yet not one of them has escaped the notice of God. Even the hairs of your head have all been counted. Do not be afraid. You are worth more than many sparrows!" (Luke 12:6-7).

I do not know why sparrows were bought and sold in the days of Jesus; probably in order to eat them; and therefore, in itself, it is paradoxically in a situation that tends toward death that Jesus sees the most evident sign of the providence of God. And perhaps, when he says that the hairs of our heads are all counted, he is thinking also about the hairs that fall... In the Gospel according to Mathew, Jesus insists even more on the attention of the Father toward that which is fragile: "Are not two sparrows sold for a small coin? Yet not one of them falls to the ground without your Father's knowledge" (Mt 10:29).

We all have the tendency to feel forgotten by God when for one reason or another we feel weak, when we feel as though we are diminishing in number, strength or quality. In that moment Christ puts the reality of the Gospel in front of us, which is nothing different from the reality we always have under our own eyes, because we see the sparrows: we see that they are not valuable birds, and we know that they are purchased for very little at the market, because there are so many of them. So too for the hairs on our head: we see them every day, at least those of others, and we see that it is impossible to count them, and that they fall easily. Well, this daily reality becomes the reality of the Gospel when we look at it with the eyes of Jesus,

with his eyes full of faith and passion for the Father. Jesus was not able to look at a sparrow, not even at a hair, without thinking about the Father, without becoming filled with passionate recollection of the love of the Father. And it is precisely this gaze of Jesus that reveals reality to us, the whole of reality, which is not so much the whole reality of the universe, but rather the whole reality of the universe as it is illumined by providence, by the mercy of God.

In these days, the call to *lectio divina* returned many times among us, the call to meditation on the word of God as a source of passion and fervor in living our vocation and mission. All things considered, all the practices of monastic life serve precisely in order to ignite in our heart and in our eyes the gaze of Jesus which reveals to us the entire face of reality, of all that exists, and of all that happens. And this shows us that reality, life, is beautiful, full of meaning and good, because everything is embraced by the care and will of the Father. God does not forget us, God does not let us fall without this being a part of his will, and therefore a mysterious episode in his good plan for us and for the world. And God does not forget us above all when we are few and without value like two sparrows worth a small coin.

Their eyes were opened

I believe, rather I saw with you, that in these days we have received the gift of looking at each other and of looking at our communities and the Order with this evangelical gaze of Christ. And it is just like for the disciples of Emmaus for whom suddenly “their eyes were opened” (Luke 24:31) in order to recognize that Jesus was alive and present in their midst.

“Their eyes were opened”: what a strange expression, in the end. Usually we say that we open our eyes, that is, that we are the ones to decide and to will when we open our eyes. If anything, we say that “my eyes closed” when we are tired, for example during a conference of the Abbot General. But normally we do not think that our eyes can open themselves alone.

When this happens, we are amazed, because suddenly reality reveals itself to us in its totality, in all of its beauty, because we see it in God and full of God, in Christ and inhabited by Him. And we understand that this phenomenon cannot be anything other than a grace which comes to us from Him; a phenomenon that we cannot cause, but only recognize, like a child is surprised by something beautiful. We saw this often during these days in the radiant face of little Maria.

Then, maybe, Jesus seems suddenly to disappear, and it seems to us that reality returns as it was before. But by now we know that “reality as it was before” is not the true face of reality, because by now we know, even if we have seen it for only a moment, that reality is, so to speak, full of Jesus, that Jesus illumines everything, that his presence transfigures everything. Imagine how for the eyes of the two disciples the apparition of the Risen One completely transformed the tavern where they had stopped to eat! And then, setting out to go back to Jerusalem,

imagine the new gaze they had on the road which they had already taken. And the incredible thing is that their return on that road, made at night and without Jesus, was now infinitely more luminous and full of Christ than their outward journey, made during the day and with Him accompanying them. Because now they had open eyes, or rather “eyes opened” to the light of the Mystery which had been revealed to them.

In our midst

Just as for the disciples of Emmaus, this revelation took place also in our midst. It would have been necessary to have had blindfolded the eyes of the heart not to have seen it. It is what amazed me the most and most often during this General Chapter: that suddenly our eyes were open and we saw Jesus in our midst.

We saw him in our midst in a sudden and un hoped for unity of judgment, of thought, of desire for solidarity, of reciprocal compassion, or toward the painful situation of a few of our communities; in the incredible, almost unanimous votes on themes discussed at length in which we thought we were divided; we saw him in the mercy we showed each other, in our desire to understand our diversity, or rather: in our happiness that we are so diverse in cultures, styles and sensibilities, because we see that with all this God carries out in the Church a symphony of which He alone has the score...

We saw the presence of Christ in our midst in the liberty with which Fr. Meinrad laid down his office of twenty years as procurator general, but also in the generous availability with which Fr. Lluç accepted it.

We saw Christ in the generous service of all those who, beyond these two, organized and assisted this General Chapter: Agnese, Piotr, Elia, Fr. Galgano, Sr. Aline, Sr. Marina, Fr. John, Fr. Francesco, Annemarie, Br. Tobias, Fr. Coelestin, and all those who translated texts... Everyone generous and radiant with the joy of serving! We saw Christ in our midst in our guests, in their words, or rather in their witness. And obviously we saw him in those among us who prepared speeches and studied and presented the topics we treated. The Holy Spirit did this in our midst, the Holy Spirit incarnated the Word in our midst, as in Mary.

To bear witness

It is of this that we are to witness; it is with this desire to witness that we should return to our communities, that we should return to our daily ministry. After his manifestation to the disciples of Emmaus, Jesus disappeared, not in order to be absent, but so that the sure and luminous sign of his presence would be the two disciples themselves.

We too, returning home, will find our communities just as we left them: or actually, in certain cases we will find them smaller and more fragile, like Thyrnau in which two sisters died during this Chapter, or Wilhering which lost a father yesterday. But it is precisely to our communities, with all their problems and

difficulties, that the Lord sends us to bear witness that it is not a dream that he appears, that it is not a dream that he is in our midst, that it is not a dream or a utopia that he knows how to transform surprisingly the poor reality of our life, of our encounters, of our thoughts, feelings, words.

This is not so much or simply a matter of relating all that we have experienced together, because maybe they will not believe us and they will tell us that it was an illusion, a collective mirage or even, just like after Pentecost, that we are drunk with “too much new wine” from the roman hills (Acts 2:13). Even we ourselves, with the passing of days and weeks, will perhaps begin to think about these days as a nice memory of the past, and therefore like a phenomenon that is not recurring in the present of our daily life. But Christian witness does not bring a mere memory to others; it brings an experience that takes place now, which renews itself every day, every moment, because it is the experience of the presence of the risen Lord in our midst, who acts and speaks to us.

What we have to take to heart, however, is the fact that if the Lord gave us this experience in these days, he did so precisely by emphasizing some essential elements of the Christian life which we should try not to lose as we leave this place.

First of all, the importance of fraternal communion among ourselves. We have great need for it, we superiors in particular, precisely because we were sent to keep company, to accompany, our brothers and sisters. Whoever isolates himself, whoever withdraws, whoever thinks he can manage by himself, maybe with the haughtiness of thinking that he knows how to do things better than others, sooner or later loses himself, and loses his community.

A communion among us which renders us more attentive to the Lord in our midst, and which therefore shares his love, his Word of eternal life, his forgiveness, his humble and radiant joy with others. A communion among us therefore which continues in prayer for each other, and of each one for all. A communion among us which remains attentive, vigilant over the brother, the sister which we are for each other. “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gn 4:9). Yes, we are!! We have to be, we have to be among ourselves. And certainly we leave here with a certain remorse inside, because we could not or did not want truly to be attentive to the fatigue and difficulties which a few of us, and perhaps many, live in their community. Among us there are certainly superiors who would have desired more attention, more listening, more help. But in any case I hope that everyone perceives at least that during the General Chapter a process of life in time has begun for each one of us, which aims not to leave alone any superior, and therefore not to leave alone any community. But we will be responsible in front of God not to suffocate, through negligence, laziness, or fear of losing our life, these processes of communion which the Spirit is beginning in us and among us.

Do not be afraid

At heart Christ asks us to work on only one point in order to allow the surprising gift of his presence and light in our midst not to extinguish: he asks us not to be afraid. "Do not be afraid. You are worth more than many sparrows!" (Luke 12:7).

I will not hide from you that in the preceding weeks I thought about the General Chapter with fear. I was afraid I was not ready, I was afraid of possible disagreements, I was afraid that old conflicts would resurface with this or that member of the Chapter, I was afraid that it was too short or too long, I was afraid of the hard work it would have included for me and for the other organizers, I was afraid of the possible outcomes of the voting and elections... In short, I was afraid of a ghost of reality, that is, a reality in which I did not leave space for the presence and work of God in our midst. Fear is the forgetfulness of the Father, of his mercy and tenderness toward us, toward all.

Fear is also a way to refuse a journey of fraternity and friendship with one's own "enemy". In Christ, that which conquers fear of the enemy is not the strength to conquer him, but the humility of allowing ourselves to be reconciled by God with our brother, with our sister. Sometimes we do not progress in the life of communion because we fear the grace of reconciliation more than we fear the enemy himself. We are afraid to find ourselves asked by God, through a gift of grace, to become friends with our enemies. Because enemies remain far away from us, but the friend enters to become a part of our life. In fact, in communities and among superiors of the Order, often one does not pray for reconciliation because we know that this is the prayer that God always grants, and if he grants it, then the other who was hostile to us becomes a member of our family and we will not be able to free ourselves of him again.

To welcome reconciliation is the most burning need of humanity, of the world today. For this reason, whoever allows himself to be reconciled with the other renews the whole world. And the fact that reconciliation and forgiveness are a grace that God wants to give us, renders us even more responsible for them.

An experience of communion like the one we have had in these days frees us from the fear of truly becoming friends and brothers and sisters for each other, and this sets in motion the most beautiful and fruitful process of life which the Rise Lord can create in us and among us.

So forgive me for being afraid, let us forgive each other for being afraid of each other, and let us continue our journey ever more together, sincerely praying for each other!

Thanks be to God and to all of you for these days. I wish you a happy return to ... Jerusalem, where Jesus will appear to you ever again. And greet and embrace all your brothers and sisters on my behalf!

*Br. Mauro-Giuseppe
Abbot General*