

The flame of charity



Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Nine hundred years ago our first Cistercian fathers with their communities had Pope Calixtus II approve a text which guided the relationships between monasteries as the Rule of St. Benedict guides the relationships between the members of every single community. They called this text *Carta caritatis* – *The Charter of Charity*, precisely so that this document could enable the nascent monastic family of Cîteaux to grow in fraternal communion, and thus to reflect in the Church and in the world the divine light of trinitarian Love.

During this year there are many initiatives for celebration and study to commemorate this anniversary, which is important because, in fact, the approval of this document marks the birth of the Cistercian Order as a monastic Order canonically constituted and organized. In the various commemorative congresses, symposia, and meetings planned in the whole world, many aspects of the *Carta Caritatis* will be explored, and this will certainly help us be more aware of our identity, of the value of our charism, of the task that the Holy Spirit has entrusted to us and which the Church has recognized and blessed with the authority that Christ entrusted to Peter.

The central point

In this Pentecost Letter I would like to focus on a single point of the *Carta Caritatis*, the central point, which needs to be highlighted so that we Cistercians, and those who are involved in our charism in various ways, can revive today the flame which was lighted nine hundred years ago and which, notwithstanding such human weakness and infidelities, has not ceased to burn through the centuries. This central point is the flame itself: charity.

The problems and difficulties in living out our vocation today are multiple and are not new. But the constant effort to face these problems, along with our finding ourselves ever more often united in the desire and work of confronting and resolving them, makes an essential question come up more often: What unites us? Why are we walking together? Perhaps it is the problems, difficulties, and weaknesses that unite us? Or is it just the canonical laws, the commitments we undertook with our vows, that unite us? Is there not something more profound?

This question becomes even more acute the more we recognize that, often, all these factors, and the effort of facing them and living them, do not truly unite us. Many flee from the communion among us, or in their own communities, precisely to avoid facing the problems or because they can no longer tolerate a fidelity based only on laws and the commitments undertaken with the vows.

It is amid this situation, in which there seem to be fewer and fewer of us who joyfully take on a responsibility for the Order, its charism, its vocation and mission, that this year comes as if the postman had rung our doorbell to give us one more time a letter sent nine hundred years ago. The date of the postmark stuns us: 23 December, 1119! We open it with trepidation and curiosity and, surprise!, we discover that it is a love letter! We blush a little, because we are not so used to receiving them. As we read it, its freshness surprises us. It is nine hundred years old and is so real, so adapted to us today! Where does it get this permanent newness? It comes precisely from its having put love, charity, at the center, and from its helping us understand how we can face the difficulties and problems, but especially how to live out our vocation and mission starting from this center, letting it shine upon our being together and on the fragile and difficult situations that we face.

A fundamental question

The *Charter of Charity* reaches us, then, with a fundamental question: Do we live our vocation in the light of charity? Do we live it with love? Do we walk together in charity? Are we united by charity? Do we live our belonging to the Order as a communion of charity?

When a lover writes a love letter to his beloved, he first of all declares his love for her, then asks the beloved to declare her love for him. Perhaps we are not sensitive enough to this any more, but it would be good for us to read the fundamental texts of our faith and vocation precisely as declarations of love that ask for love. Is this not what Sacred Scripture is, what the Gospel is? Is this not what the Rule of St. Benedict is, or the works of our authors? And this is what the *Charter of Charity* of St. Stephen Harding and his contemporaries is. We must truly feel that we are loved, favored, by a text that, for nine hundred years, has concerned itself with making us live our vocation fully, and which, for this reason, institutes and recommends acts and moments of communion of life and of prayer, of formation, of reciprocal correction, to purify us constantly from our tendency to let our “first love” grow cold, to grow tepid in our fundamental vocation, that of “preferring nothing to the love of Christ” (RB 4:21).

The temptation to be tepid

What is tepidness, that which, in the Church of Laodicea, disgusts Christ so much that it gives him nausea (cf. Rev. 3:15–16)? To be tepid, neither hot nor cold, means adapting to the temperature of the surrounding environment. Trepidness is the temperature of the world. To be tepid means, basically, being worldly. It is sad to see how we often become worldly, conformed to the world and its vanity, in all that should instead give us a different temperature, even in living what all live: prayer, work, rest, human relationships... Trepidness is the temptation into which we slide most easily, because one loses fervor in the Holy Spirit sort of like a coffee cools off or a refreshing drink warms up: slowly the liquid which is not further heated or chilled takes on the temperature of the environment, and its taste and the pleasure in drinking it are lost.

It is an experience that we all have. We lose fervor, enthusiasm, joy in living our vocation. We lose the taste for what once set us on fire, the taste, for example, for the Word of God, or for common prayer, or the taste of fraternal life, or for our service to the community, to the Order, and to the Church. But one does not combat this tepidness with a thermos that artificially maintains the original fervor. *Conserving* is not enough: one must *stoke* the heat, the flame that directly and constantly raises the temperature of the heart and of life. Is not this the method of every monastic discipline, the goal of all that the Rule of St. Benedict recommends and prescribes for us? The faithful repetition of the acts and moments of communion with God and with the brothers fights against the inexorable spread of tepidness into which we drift, or towards which we are drawn by the illusory fascination of worldliness.

The fire that we need and that we must always feed is charity, the charity of God that is shared with us through the Holy Spirit. A hymn for terce has us ask the Spirit: "*flammescat igne caritas* – let charity be ignited by fire." Thus it is important, as the *Charter of Charity* teaches us, to help each other keep the flame of Christ's love alive among us and in us.

They knew full well that it was the Lord

How does this happen? How did Jesus always rekindle the fire of charity in his disciples?

When we meditate on the Gospels of the Resurrection, we notice a constant: that the mysterious self-manifestation of the Lord makes the disciples' hearts burn with love and joy. Other than the scene of the disciples of Emmaus, in which this fire of heart is explicitly described (cf. Lk 24:32), I like to contemplate the scene of that dawn at which the risen Jesus appeared on the shore of the lake of Tiberias. After the miraculous catch of fish and after Peter unloaded the 153 big fish from the ship, Jesus invites the disciples to share the breakfast that He himself had prepared for them. In fact, they find "a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread" (Jn 21:9).

After asking the seven disciples to add some of the fish they had caught to the fire, Jesus invites them with simplicity: “Come and have breakfast.” John adds: “Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, ‘Who are you?’ because they knew full well it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish” (Jn 21:12–13).

It is not hard to imagine the joy with which the tired and disappointed disciples lived that moment of communion and sharing. In the quiet of the early morning, in the golden light of dawn on the lake, being with Jesus was a total, complete experience. They could not desire more, imagine greater beauty and peace than that. They felt loved, filled with love, because Jesus was alive and with them. For them love coincided with the living presence of Christ. And the experience of this love made them capable of loving, of loving the love of Jesus, his presence, and around this fire of love they felt full of love for all and for everything: of love among themselves, for each of them, of love for their families, for the absent disciples, and for all humanity. Of love for that lakeshore too, for the hills and for the sea, for the sky, the sun and air, for the birds and fish, for the whole universe. Jesus, who was inviting them to be with Him, to be simply with Him, was a fire that inflamed their hearts and all of reality with love.

The love that renews

The whole newness of Christian love is not what is done for God or for others. The newness is the point from which the love of God and neighbor radiates: the newness is that fire that Christ has lighted for us, to make us experience the beauty of his presence. The fish and the bread that are cooking on the charcoal fire lighted by Christ are symbols of the passion and death, are symbols of the Eucharist. The fire of charity is fed with the wood of the Cross to give us Christ himself to eat and drink, to assimilate and give away.

St. Augustine recalls that the newness of the “new commandment” given us by Jesus is not so much in loving our neighbor as ourself, because the Old Testament already demanded that. The newness of the new commandment is that “it strips us of the old man to clothe us in the new.” To love as Christ loves us is a new commandment because it is a love that renews us (cf. *Tractates on John* 65.1). The commandment of Jesus is new because it renews our love with the flame of his paschal love.

Peter, too, immediately after the scene beside the fire on the lakeshore, understands that he can say to Jesus, “You know that I love you!” (cf. Jn 21:15–17), because this charity is no longer something that he attains on his own, but is the reflection and radiation of the love that he feels burning in himself as he is with Jesus, uniting himself to Him.

Being one with Christ

The great newness is that charity has been kindled in us by union with Jesus Christ.

The disciples gathered with Him around the fire, the grilled fish, and the bread, felt themselves flooded by the simple and joyful ardor of communion with Him. Perhaps at that moment they remembered a word that Jesus had spoken about himself when he spoke to them of the good shepherd who gives his life for his sheep. He said: "The Father and I are one" (Jn 10:30). They intuited that this communion with the Father was like a flame that was constantly kindling a limitless love in Jesus. After his resurrection, the disciples understood that they could say this about themselves with respect to Him, and that this was the flame that fed an infinite love in them as well. God so deeply involves us in the love that He is that each of us can say: "Christ and I are one"; and we can say it in the ecclesial awareness that this communion with Jesus unites us among ourselves as one thing. My brother, my sister, are also one with Christ like me, and nothing can unite us more closely than this mystery. The Church lives on the awareness that we are all one with Christ. And in being one with the Son, we are immediately one with the Father, in the communion of the Spirit: "On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you" (Jn 14:20).

Union with Christ, a radiant experience of his trinitarian charity, is the sure principle of our fruitfulness. Before the challenges of the life, the vocation, and the mission that the Lord entrusts to us, we often live with fear of not being capable, of not succeeding. And we doubt even more that others are capable of changing. We forget that God has made us particularly capable of union with Him, or rather that Christ has already made us one with Him in virtue of his death and resurrection, with the grace of faith, of Baptism, of the Eucharist and of all the sacraments, making us members of his body, the Church. The grace of being united to Christ is everything, and makes us capable of all that God wants of us. Communion with Christ is the grace that is always granted and renewed. Whoever welcomes and cultivates this grace sees that all becomes grace, even the most burdensome task, even the heaviest trial.

Heredity and task

Welcoming this grace makes it possible to fulfill and renew our vocation, every vocation. By asking us in the *Carta Caritatis* to live our whole vocation in the light and with the ardor of charity, our first Cistercian fathers left us in heritage the secret of a renewal that is always possible, nourished essentially by the grace of being one with Jesus Christ. When we feel the need and urgency of this renewal, personal or communal, we should therefore perceive the call of Christ himself to let ourselves be burned by the fire of charity in communion with Him. We must not, however, dissociate charity from the communion with Christ that unites us to the Father in the gift of the Holy Spirit, because God alone is charity and only by being united to Him do we become "participants in the divine nature" (2 Pt 1:4).

Our greatest error is to forget that Jesus, exactly when he was asking us to love each other, told us that without Him we can do nothing (cf. Jn 15:5). Defining charity outside of being united to Christ makes love become our own project, our own work destined for failure. We must not decide to love, but to be united with Christ who makes us capable of loving as He has loved us, of loving each other and loving Him in every person whom we meet.

Only this charity radiating from communion with Christ transforms our lives and our communities. It transforms them by making them instruments for building the Kingdom of God, because “love builds up” (1 Cor 8:1). It transforms them with mercy, because charity “covers a multitude of sins” (1 Pet 4:8), both ours and those of others. It transforms them by unifying them, because Christ is the unifying center of all created reality. It transforms them by making us pass “from death to life, because we love the brothers” (1 Jn 3:14). It transforms them by changing our sadness into a joy in us and among us that is greater than our own: the complete joy of Christ (cf. Jn 15:11).

But this heritage is also a field that we are asked to work. Every heritage remains alive if it becomes a task. We are heirs of a charism that asks us to build dwelling places, communities, to build together a family of monasteries, not museums or clubs of individualists. The *Charter of Charity* teaches us to embrace the gift of charity as a seed that wants to bear much fruit. It also teaches us to correspond to the fact that the charity in us can be nourished only in communion with the risen Lord.

How then is it given to us and asked of us that we cultivate the union with Jesus that makes his charity spring forth in us and among us?

One could say that Christ unites us to Himself according to the measure in which we welcome and cultivate our being united to the signs and instruments of his presence. The *Carta Caritatis*, then, like the Rule of St. Benedict, insists that we be united to the ecclesial body formed by our charism, that we not disregard the over-ridingly important membership in our community and in the “community of communities” formed by our Order and the whole Cistercian Family. It teaches us to spend time with each other, to work together, to correct each other with mercy, and to strive always for a communion of prayer that welcomes us in each community as if it were our own.

We must be thankful to our fathers for having sent us this letter of love that calls us back to all this. But we must respond to this letter.

May God grant us the ability to respond with the letter of our life, and that this too be a love letter!

A handwritten signature in red ink, reading "Fr. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori O.Cist.", written in a cursive style.

*Fr. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori OCist
Abbot General*