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The Community: Truth and Mercy*

The fundamental and original problem

When I began to prepare this conference, the reading at Vigils was from the Third letter of St John, and I was struck by the apostle's insistence, in this letter which is so short, on the theme of truth, a truth which always manifests itself or is denied in the context of community life.

"From the Elder: greetings to my dear friend Gaius, whom I love in the truth. (...) It was a great joy to me when some brothers came and told of your faithfulness to the truth, and of your life in the truth. It is always my greatest joy to hear that my children are living according to the truth. My friend, you have done faithful work in looking after these brothers, even though they were complete strangers to you. They are a proof to the whole Church of your charity and it would be a very good thing if you could help them on their journey in a way that God would approve. It was entirely for the sake of the name that they set out, without depending on the pagans for anything; it is our duty to welcome men of this sort and contribute our share to their work for the truth. I have written a note for the members of the church, but Diotrefes, who seems to enjoy being in charge of it, refuses to accept us. So, if I come, I shall tell everyone how he has behaved, and about the wicked accusations he has been circulating against us. As if that were not enough, he not only refuses to welcome our brothers, but prevents the other people who would have liked to from doing it, and expels them from the church. My dear friend, never follow such a bad example, but keep following the good one; anyone who does what is right is a child of God, but the person who does what is wrong has never seen God. Demetrius has been approved by everyone, and indeed by the truth itself. We too will vouch for him and you know that our testimony is true. (...)"

In reading this text, it was as if the expression and the judgments of St John resonated with the sentiments that I experience more and more often when confronted with the life of so many communities of our Order, and not only of our Order. As I continue the ministry which is entrusted to me, which is essentially to be a shepherd of communities, a shepherd of different flocks rather than of individual sheep, I feel more and more that

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truth is the fundamental problem underlying so many problems that arise in community.

When one meets a community, for example for a canonical visitation, the first thing which is often glaringly obvious is a lack of unity, of fraternity; in short, a lack of love. But if one looks more closely, more deeply, one perceives that at the root of this lack of love is a lack of truth. In other words: I realise that when one accompanies a community, what is at play is surely love, unity fraternity, communion, but when one thinks about love in a community, the issue is truth.

The Form of the Snake

Lack of truth is difficult to grasp. From the origins, there is the symbolic form of the snake, the snake who through falsehood, or half lies, made the human creature slide into sin. Half-lies are perhaps even less true, in a manner of speaking, than lies. Because half-lies deceive more than whole lies. During the night, I know that the light is absent, but if I find myself in semi-darkness, I risk thinking that I can see clearly, and so go wrong. Perhaps Jesus alluded to this danger when he said: *"All you need say is 'Yes' if you mean yes, 'No' if you mean no; anything more than this comes from the evil one."* (Mt 5:37)

Falsehood is the opposite of truth. But the half-lie coincides with the half-truth. The truth is a bit like coffee: it is good either very hot or iced; disgusting when tepid. *"I know all about you: how you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were one or the other, but since you are neither, but only lukewarm, I will spit you out of my mouth."* (Ap 3:15-16) Who says this? *"Here is the message of the Amen, the faithful, the true witness, the ultimate source of God's creation"* (Ap 3:14). And he adds: *"I am the one who reproves and disciplines all those he loves: so repent in real earnest"* (Ap 3:19), which means: I will speak the truth to those I love, the truth about their lives, about their way of living, even if that means showing them the half-lies in which they live.

Essentially, the half-lie is the lie which we do not manage to expose. In fact, the half-lie hides behind its half-truth. How difficult and wearing it is to find yourself with a person or a community where you never manage to get around the façade of half-truth to confront the half-falsehood which is hidden behind! It is like the moon which we can only see illuminated on one face, and never the other; or the toys which always come back to the same position because they have a weight hidden inside ...

Sometimes you believe you have reached the hidden part, but as soon as you brush against it, the half-truth puts itself in front like a shield, and you must retreat without having touched the issue, which would allow the truth to light up the hidden face of the moon.

I confess that it is the most difficult part of my ministry. But it is also an experience that allows me to become more and more conscious of my own half-lies and half-truths, of my own hidden aspects.

Often, we are convinced that we have kept hidden an aspect of ourselves which has been obvious to others for a long time. Discovering that our hidden aspect has been discovered is a humbling realisation, but can be our salvation if we accept it, even with a bit of humour. That happened to me one day when a friend asked me in passing “aren’t you a bit temperamental?” Or another who said to me in an uncompromising tone “you, you’re greedy!” And I could give you many other examples which are less kind!

The attitude of confession

These realisations about ourselves, that a sane community life should both provoke, and then help in our process of conversion, are essential for the exercise of mercy. God alone is able to be fully merciful without having to experience the shameful side of his own misery. We need to be aware of our own humbling misery to be able to sympathise with our human brothers and sisters. Are we, then, the blind leading blind? Perhaps more a case of one-eyed people leading other one-eyed people. But with the condition that having only one eye means that we realise that we can’t see everything; there is a zone of darkness in our own field of vision, in our own lives. A zone of darkness that we have accepted that we must cross, in order to look at it, to recognise it, or at least to let others look at it for us (you can’t see the back of your own neck!) and talk to us about it, show it to us through their light, like in a rear-mirror.

Everywhere, I see that superiors, like communities, on the whole, begin to get on well and to do good when they commit themselves to accepting that there are half-lies and half-truths in them and that a process of conversion is needed in order to recognise them, heal them, and even profit from them in order to grow in the truth of humility. An abbess of my Order reminded her sisters in a Chapter that we are not called to be witnesses of *perfection* but witnesses of *conversion*. A lie when recognised, becomes a truth, the truth of the person who recognises and confesses it. This act of truth has a strength which shines out and is never without fruit, never without a positive influence on those who surround us and on everyone, through the mysterious communication, that Christ, by becoming man has created in the whole of humanity.

We have perhaps become a little more conscious of this thanks to the Jubilee Year of Mercy and the emphasis put on the renewal of the Sacrament of Penitence. But perhaps we have not yet grasped how much the insistence of Pope Francis on the infinite gratuity of the forgiveness of God should help us to live the sacrament more as a sacrament of truth than of penitence.

The term “confession” is a bit out of fashion since the Council, but it is perhaps the best way of naming the sacrament, because to *confess* implies the affirmation of the truth; speaking the truth – in this case the truth of the evil which is in us, of our sins, of our lies.

Confessing our sins is an act which affirms the truth about ourselves, in the same way that confessing our faith is an act which affirms the truth about God, an act which can go to the point of martyrdom. What unites the two confessions is the truth. The truth is truth, whether we express it through our own misery or about God. It is this which makes *The Confessions* of St Augustine so intense. But it is already there in Psalm 50, the *Miserere* of David. The most profound truth about God being his merciful love, the sinner who confesses his sin so as to be open to forgiveness is making the most sublime confession of the truth of God that a human being can express.

When a community nurtures this attitude of confessing one’s truth before the other, this defuses the logic of falsehood, and can become a place of mercy, a place of love. Without the truth, - and in first place *that* truth that we choose by accusing ourselves - the community becomes an organisation of false brothers.

It is the most disagreeable part of the canonical visit in certain communities ; when all express their half-truths by accusing the others of half-lies; at the end I find myself perplexed and bewildered, looking into an empty space, and I ask ‘Whom should I believe? Is it possible to believe anyone? Where is the truth?’

Welcoming the truth

But it is exactly at these moments that what might be called the truth of truth is revealed in all its light. The truth of truth is the fact that we cannot seek and find the truth in ourselves, nor amongst us, but we must welcome it from Another, the only veritable Witness, of “*He who is the Amen, the faithful, the true witness, the ultimate source of God's creation*” (Ap 3:14) When we search for the truth as coming from ourselves, it will always, sooner or later, end in failure. As it did for Pilate in the trial of Jesus. He, too, understood that the truth did not come from the Jews, or from the crowd, or from the witnesses. This search resulted in an impasse. For an instant, he had the intuition that from Jesus alone could come real truth: “*What is truth?*” (Jn 18:38), but he asked Him the question whilst fleeing from the answer.

In Jesus, there was a silence and a word that threw Pilate, toppling over all the half-lies and whole lies of all the actors involved in the trial. The lie of Pilate himself was exposed: «*Re-entering the Praetorium, Pilate said to Jesus, "Where do you come from?" But Jesus made no answer. Pilate then said to him, "Are you refusing to speak to me? Surely you know I have power to release you and I have power to crucify you?" "You would have no power over me," replied Jesus, "if it had not been given you from above".*» (Jn 19:9-11)

The real problem of a lack of truth in any human group, and very specially in communities, is not so much falsehood, half-lies, or half-truths, but forgetfulness of the fact that truth does not come from us, it is not our product, neither individually or collectively. The truth for us is always a revelation, an '*apocalypse*' in the etymological sense of the term, something hidden which is revealed, the unveiling of a truth which is not our product nor our creation. The gravest temptation of the serpent was basically to insinuate that we ourselves could become the creators of the truth.

Recently, in a very good community of nuns of our Order, we discovered that a young sister had succeeded, over a period of six years, in the building of a house of lies about herself, her past, her family, her friends. Then, a short time before her solemn profession, thanks to a trivial occurrence, her superiors realised her lie, through a detail, and that brought down the whole house. Naturally, the sister had to leave the monastery straight away. But the community found itself confronting the absurd. Who could you believe, who could you trust, if, for a period of six years, a member of the community succeeded in making them believe so many lies? I've also experienced this several times, for example, discovering that people who had our total trust and who seemed to help us with great professionalism and generosity, were only crooks with no scruples. But in the case of crooks, at least the lie had a sense – to swindle us. It is frightening, but not too absurd. But this sister, why lie like that? She wasn't hiding a past life or family that would have stopped her being welcomed in community. It was a lie for the sake of a lie. Certainly, that could, and probably must be explained by a serious psychological problem. But also, I think this behaviour makes us attentive to something that mustn't be forgotten: *falsehood has a charm*, the charm of the serpent, the charm of Satan, which is the charm of power, and a very subtle power, very 'spiritual': *the power to create truth*, to be ourselves the creators of truth. The charm of being able to possess the truth without receiving it from God, and so without having received it through reality, the reality of ourselves, of others, of everything. The charm which tickles primarily our pride, that of Lucifer, of the first creature, who wished to create truth without having received it from God, without listening to God, without obeying God. Satan does not lie out of fear but out of pride, out of thirst for power, out of vanity. Jesus noted this bitterly when he addressed the Pharisees: "*The devil is your father and you prefer to do what the devil wants. He was a murderer from the start; he was never grounded in the truth; there is no truth in him at all: when he lies he is drawing on his own store because he is a liar, and the father of lies. But as for me, I speak the truth and for that very reason you do not believe me.*" (Jn 8:44-45)

Do we not need to be aware of this poisoned root when listening to the accusations that often circulate between brothers, between sisters, between members of family, a community, the Church, a people?

The accusation of the other has often the enticing taste of the power to *create* the truth about our neighbour, our brother and about everyone and everything.

From curse to blessing

“Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate. Do not judge, and you will not be judged yourselves; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned yourselves; grant pardon, and you will be pardoned.” (Lk 6:36-37) The New Testament and Pope Francis today, both put a great emphasis on the renunciation of the word that curses, that speaks badly of others, that judges others badly, because this attitude abandons the fact that truth comes only from God and from a God who is a merciful Father.

Saint Peter, in his first letter, insists on this theme, citing, as St Benedict would do later in the Prologue of the Rule, Psalm 33:

“Finally: you should all agree among yourselves and be sympathetic; love the brothers, have compassion and be self-effacing. Never pay back one wrong with another, or an angry word with another one; instead, pay back with a blessing. That is what you are called to do, so that you inherit a blessing yourself. Remember: anyone who wants to have a happy life and to enjoy prosperity must banish malice from his tongue, deceitful conversation from his lips; he must never yield to evil but must practice good; he must seek peace and pursue it.” (1 P 3:8-12; cf Ps 33:13-17)

The blessing, such as St Peter speaks of it here, must not only be understood as a gesture or an attitude of benevolence, but also as an act of truth, literally ‘say what is good’ (*bene-dicere*) of the other. And here, it is clear that this plain truth that is said of the other and about the other does not come from us; it is a truth that we ask from God and receive from Him: *“call the blessing upon others”* (cf. 1 P 3:9). Thus, we too open ourselves for our own sake to this plain truth that comes from God: *“inherit a blessing yourself.”*

I said that we sometimes hear within communities so many accusations, so many evil things that are said, that we listen to so many maledictions of one another, that we no longer know who to believe, we no longer know where the truth lies. St Peter, St Paul, St John, St James, must have had the same experience in the first communities, which can console us. Above all they are unanimous in their awareness that truth can never be sought by confronting malicious gossip, but by seeking to call down a blessing, the plain truth that God wants for each one and for all. We need to look for or create an opening, a breach, which lets the original truth of God’s blessing enter into this situation of falsehood.

I speak of falsehood, even if those who make accusations or criticise are often right. *To be right* is not yet to know the truth. Because truth is a total reality that no man, as such, can ever grasp in its entirety. A community is never renewed by accusations, even just ones. One may be right in the way of describing the behaviour of a brother, a sister, a whole community, but in doing so we do not reach the fullness of truth about them. God alone can, and knows how to understand the truth about a person, a heart, a life, a liberty.

Can we ever attain this truth then? Yes, we can, but only on condition of adopting an attitude which welcomes from God the truth about the other, and before all else, about ourselves.

Obedying the truth so as to love like brothers

The essence of our theme seems to me to be expressed by a very fine synthesis in two verses from the first letter of St Peter. He writes:

“You have been obedient to the truth and purified your souls until you can love like brothers, in sincerity; let your love for each other be real and from the heart; your new birth was not from any mortal seed but from the everlasting word of the living and eternal God.” (1 P 1:22-23)

Obedience to the truth purifies us so that we can love one another as brothers and sisters. And here St Peter helps us to understand that obedience to the truth coincides with rebirth from on high, begotten by God, through the imperishable seed of his living and eternal word.

I find that this text of St Peter gives the essence of the whole way of conversion of life that St Benedict proposes in his Rule, and that the Cistercians took up and wished to deepen. Indeed, the whole Rule offers an accompaniment of the purification of our souls, that is to say of our persons, through obedient listening to the truth about God, about ourselves and about others. This culminates in fraternal love, literally *“philadelphia”*, which is sincere, literally *“not hypocritical”*, where we love one another with a pure, sincere, attentive heart; one could say a *“transparent”* heart. We live this obedience as children of God, because through it, we experience listening as a way of interior new-birth from God through whose Word we are *“reborn”*; his living and everlasting Word which dwells with us.

This passage of St Peter is too rich to exhaust here and now, especially with respect to the Rule of St Benedict which gives a full flowering to the core, in the time and space of our human lives in all their aspects.

Paths of work

Let us retain only a few paths for work and reflection. They can help us to deepen, by drawing from the source of our charism, the essential elements, which, to my mind, are the most urgent for today, as much for monks and nuns as for lay Christians who seek an orientation so as to be able to live in their vocation in all its fullness in the world.

First of all, if the truth is not our own product, and if at the same time we have need of it to live fraternal love fully, it is essential to not gloss over obedience to the truth of the Word of God. We cannot attain love without listening and without obedience to the Word. Nor without silence, this meditative silence of the Word of God on which St Benedict insists so much. I'm repeating myself, but it is a serious problem in too many communities: we pretend to love one another, but we don't begin our renewal at the fount of obedience to the truth. We do not keep silent in order to learn to bless instead of curse. We do not listen to the fine and beautiful word of the Gospel which alone can embody in us a sincere '*philadelphia*.'

So that the truth is not the product of our thirst for power, those who are responsible for any community must not abandon the ministry of giving life through the seed of the living and everlasting word of God. A Superior who doesn't teach, who is not at least preoccupied in providing the food of the word necessary for the community, will never form a community of brothers and sisters.

Linked to this is the importance of a tradition, in the deepest and not the superficial meaning of the term: the transmission of a heritage of the seed of the living word of God through the centuries, through the saints, through the charisms that the Holy Spirit has raised up, through the Magisterium of the whole Church. This is essential so as to never reduce the truth to a proud and sterile product of our vanity.

There is another aspect that it seems more and more necessary to reclaim today: the communion of listening to the word. A community lives a real and sincere "*philadelphia*" if it nurtures its unity through a common listening and sharing of the Word of God, living and present, in the liturgy certainly, but also in shared dialogue on the Word. Sharing the word of God means sharing silence and the word, the experiences, the joys and the sufferings, like a people walking in the desert. Without that, the community would not be united like a living body, but by its functioning, like a machine.

And today the world needs the witness of a living fraternal communion and to see, despite our misery, that truly "love and truth have met; justice and peace have embraced" (Ps 84:11) like spouses, to give life.