



Letter from the Abbot General
for Christmas 2013

"You Have Broken My Chains!"

Dear Cistercian Brothers and Sisters,

The joyful or painful events of the past year, in our Order, in the Congregations, in the individual communities, have made me more aware and sensitive to the theme of freedom with which we live our vocation.

At the same time we all feel summoned by the witness of Pope Francis to rediscover an evangelical fervor, to renew and, especially, to ask the Holy Spirit for a willingness of heart and life to follow the Lord with a joyful determination towards all the human "outskirts" in which Jesus is not yet known and loved. The recent Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* must be for the whole Order a working tool and an aid towards conversion in to order to understand how to get to the length and breadth of our charism with greater gratitude and joy. But for this, as with everything else, the freedom to consent to God's plan is the condition, and it is on this condition that I would like to meditate with you.

The chain of iron and the chain of Christ

Jesus Christ came to set us free, truly free, "So if the Son makes you free, you will be truly free" (John 8:36). What does it mean to be truly free, that is, free with truth?

Regarding this I often quote the story told by St. Gregory the Great in the third Book of the *Dialogues*. A hermit on Mount Marsico, whose name was Martin, "just as soon as he got on that mountain (...) he attached an iron chain to his foot and fixed the other end of the chain to a rock, so that he could not move any further than the length of the chain allowed. Hearing about this, the venerable Benedict (...) said to one of his disciples: 'If you are a servant of God, it should not be an iron chain that holds you, but the chain of Christ'. At these words, Martin freed himself immediately from the iron chain, but although his foot was freed from the chain he did not move any further than he usually did when he had been chained" (*Dialogues* III, 16).

St. Benedict did not tell the hermit Martin that he had to free himself from every bond, he did not propose freedom to him as an end in itself. Rather Benedict reminded him to bind himself internally to Christ. The "chain of Christ" is a much more solid bond than an iron chain, yet it is a bond that sets us free. How? It activates our freedom. To stay bound to Christ, that is to belong to Him, in order to be "a servant of God," a person cannot delegate his freedom to an iron chain that holds a foot tight, and not even to laws and strict rules that bind you with force and fear. To be bound to Christ, a person must use his freedom to consent to Christ's love, to consent to a friendship with Him. Contrary to what the dominant mentality claims, human freedom is alive and mature when it knows how to choose to belong, and when this choice is taken in each moment, in every encounter, occasion, circumstance in freedom and not because of compulsion. Freedom, in contrast to the iron chain, is invisible, but it is manifested in the bonds that it holds on to and accepts, in the bonds that it chooses and to which it remains faithful. Fidelity, in every sphere of life, is a choice to belong which we constantly renew with our freedom.

Why does it seem so difficult, in monasteries, in communities, in families, in society at large, to always choose the bond of fidelity? Perhaps because one thinks that freedom can be born by itself, or rather, be born out of nothing. The "iron chains," which are often virtual, sentimental, moralistic chains, are bonds in which freedom remains by itself, without any connection. Human freedom, instead, is made to be born, grow and express itself in a more personal relationship with God and with others. A person cannot be in a relationship with iron. When the hermit Martin wore the iron chain he was alone with himself. Instead, the "chain of Christ" puts one in a relationship with Him; it's a relationship, a friendship, and within this relationship space is created where freedom can live, express itself, generate loyalty and love.

The modern person, especially in the West, feels very lonely and has few relationships. Due to this, he lacks the air to give breath to his freedom, or rather the water in which freedom can swim and expand. And also it has been observed that many communities are often more a group of solitudes brought together than of free hearts in dialogue and communion.

Children of the Handmaid of the Lord

For me a verse of Psalm 115 is one of the best theological definitions of freedom: "Yes, I am your servant, Lord, I am your servant, the son of your handmaid: you have broken my chains" (115:16).

It is the freedom of the children of God, a liberated freedom, a freely-given freedom, an Easter freedom. We become truly free when God enables us to belong to him and educates us to this in a relationship with Him and in Him. For this reason, He Himself enables us to be generated and educated by his "handmaid", who for us is Mary, who for us is the Church, the Christian community into which we are born through baptism, and which always accompanies us in order to form the freedom of the children of God within us, the freedom which rejoices to serve the Lord and His plan of salvation.

The community in which God calls us to serve him, each according to his or her vocation, is this "school of the Lord's service" that St. Benedict describes in his Rule (RB Prol. 45). In it freedom is called to breathe and develop itself "with an expanded heart," so as to "run the way of the Lord's commandments in unspeakable sweetness of love" (Prol. 49). St. Benedict invites us to experience how obedience liberates our freedom, enabling it to expand itself in the love of the communion with God and neighbor.

The seasons of Advent and Christmas, as all the seasons of the Church, should help us to learn true freedom in Christ from the Virgin Mary. Mary teaches us that freedom is alive when it accepts, when it obeys God's plan. What does it mean that God has a plan? It means that from all eternity He renews everything, makes all things new (cf. Rev 21:5). God cannot but make new things always new, and then not but renew every being that already exist. Every moment of life and existence that he gives us is new. And God always precedes us in willing the fullness of an infinite fulfillment for us and for the universe. If we were aware of this, that is, if we had this attitude of faith regarding ourselves as well as everything else, we would live in a joyful hope, an invincible hope that nothing could confuse, because we would have the awareness that everything will be fulfilled in love, in the eternal fullness of God's charity.

Well, Mary lived without darkness the freedom to consent to this hope of faith in the project of the charity of God. At the moment of the Annunciation, what was the first "vow" that the Virgin made? The vow of obedience. Mary did not think first of virginity, nor of poverty. She understood what God was asking of her first and foremost. It was the consent of her freedom, her free obedience. The Lord asked her if she wanted to consent to his project to make all things new through the Incarnation of the Word, his Son. And Mary, freely gave her freedom to God: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord, may it be done to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38). Obedience is a freedom given, and when freedom is given to God, He uses it to accomplish his work, his project of renewing the world. It is not power, nor is it force, but it is obedience as an offering to God of our freedom that makes life an instrument of the miracle, of God's work which is always a miracle, even when he creates a blade of grass.

It is this freedom that Mary wants to teach us, it is in it that she wants to generate us, children of the Handmaid of the Lord. It is in this freedom that Mother Church wants to generate us. And every charism in the Church, like that of St. Benedict and the Cistercian charism, are essentially expressions of this maternity of the Church through which the Holy Spirit educates us in the freedom to consent to the plan of God. Every charism is a form of obedience to the Holy Spirit so that Christ may be incarnated in the world here and now in order to save it.

The desire to obey the will of God is the living soul of the Christian life, and therefore especially of the consecrated life. Everything else is vanity, projects destined to perish without fruit.

We often think that a great faith means to have a faith that obtains everything from God. In fact, we admire the saints who with their faith obtain graces and miracles. This is also true; this is also an important aspect of the greatness of faith. But I would say that there is a deeper aspect of the greatness of faith of which we think little: that the greater faith is not when we get everything from God, but when God gets everything from us. It is the great faith of Abraham, the tremendous faith of Mary.

Abraham and Mary basically have never asked much of God. Their great faith instead consisted in permitting God to ask them for everything, trusting that this was the best thing for them and for everyone, even when God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, or when Mary had to accept in silence the death of her Son on the cross. At Cana, Mary does not insist much on what she asks. Indeed, she does not ask for anything, she only makes an observation: "They have no wine." She becomes more assertive when she asks the servants to have the attitude that she herself always lives: "Do whatever he tells you" (Jn 2:3-5). She teaches them her faith, her way of living the faith, which is basically a way to get everything from God by allowing God to get everything from us.

I think that here the essential nature of monastic obedience is described, which is nothing other than going to the essentials of the obedience of faith, to the obedience of faith that trusts that everything that God asks of us is for the realization of our good and the good of all. The transformation of water into wine at the wedding feast at Cana is a symbol of how the faith that is put at the service of God leads to the joy of everyone; it allows Christ to save and bring fulfillment to the celebration of life and love.

For us religious, for us monks and nuns, this is essential. It is the heart of our vocation, which is the baptismal vocation of everyone lived with priority and radicalism, at least in intention, as a desire, as a request. The Rule of St. Benedict essentially teaches us to live this Marian radicalism in an obedient faith that permits Christ to save the feast of the human community.

Encounter and Task

But how can we educate ourselves to this fullness of life and willingly live it? For a few months I have been deeply challenged and helped by what St. Paul tells the Jews of Jerusalem about his first encounter with Christ. Here he recalls two questions he asks Jesus: "As I was traveling and was drawing near to Damascus about noon, suddenly a great light from heaven shone around me; I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' I answered, 'Who are you, Lord?' He said, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.' Those who were with me saw the light but did not hear him speaking to me. I asked, 'What must I do, Lord?' And the Lord said to me, 'Get up, and go into Damascus, and there you will be informed of all that is assigned for you to do.'" (Acts 22:6-10).

"Who are you, Lord?"

"What must I do, Lord?"

These two questions are fundamental in life. These are the questions that basically consent to the encounter with Christ and ask that it be ingrained and expressed in our lives.

Saul of Tarsus summarizes in these two questions all of Christian morals, that it is a question of what one "must do" which is never separated from the question that wants to know Jesus Christ, that asks Christ to reveal himself. The desire to know the identity of someone is the desire to remain in relationship with this person. Starting from this expressed desire of relationship, which is substantially the prayer that seeks God, the question: "What must I do?" takes on its full meaning. Then it becomes an expression of the openness to the fact that the encounter with Christ changes our lives, that faith informs and transforms life. Saul immediately understands, educated like the Virgin Mary by the Jewish religion, that every encounter with the Mystery must be completed in an obedience, in an agreement that permits the Mystery to penetrate into the heart of one's existence.

"Go to Damascus!"

"What must I do, Lord?" What does Jesus respond to the person who takes seriously the encounter with Him and asks to be directed on the new path that one must undertake after this encounter? The response of Jesus to Saul is a bit strange, "Get up, and go to Damascus, there you will be told about everything that has been assigned for you to do" (Acts 22:10).

That Christ, who has just bothered to appear to Saul with a great burst of light, with a sort of divine violence as in an Old Testament theophany, who speaks to Saul personally, who reveals himself to him in an extraordinary manner, perhaps uniquely so, cannot himself explain to Saul what he needs to do? He cannot reveal his path to Paul in a mystical manner, in the same way He just revealed himself to him? He will do so, but later on, for now Saul must be led to Damascus and it will be the Christian community of Damascus, with its poor and simple "parish priest," Ananias, who will help him to understand the path of his vocation, to understand what God wants from him. And note that this community of Damascus is the community that Saul up to three minutes before had hated with all his heart, so much so that he was on his way there to destroy it. But Saul needs a place where people can teach him to know the Lord Jesus whom he prosecuted, whom he does not love, whom he would never have recognized as the way, the truth, and the life of his life. What Saul wanted to destroy, now becomes the way to follow, the rule to obey, the group that will accompany him so that he truly fulfills God's plan for him.

For me, this is one of the more extraordinary aspects of the Christian event: that Christ chooses what we would like to eliminate, what disturbs and disgusts us more, as the place where the encounter with Him becomes for us the clear and safe path of our lives.

Why does our community always seem to us to be full of defects and not up to the greatness of its vocation? Why do the superior, the brothers and sisters with whom

we must closely share life, seem to us to be the least fit to ensure our happiness and are often the people with whom we have more problems in living together?

In fact, the community of Damascus was like this for Saul of Tarsus. This is the place where Christ sends us in order to give fulfillment to our encounter with Him, with Him who is persecuted, crucified, not loved, and first of all, by ourselves.

Imagine with what humility, with what veneration, with what contrition Saul must have looked at the community of Damascus after this experience. What amazement he must have experienced finding himself full of affection for this small, miserable group of Christians who a few days before he was about to destroy in the blind arrogance of his pharisaical pride.

Our awareness of our encounter with Jesus must lead us to have the same affection and veneration as we regard the Church, the life and the vocation that the Lord has assigned to us. Only in this way will the encounter become flesh of our flesh; and we, like Paul, will also become apostles, witnesses of his light and of his divine-human beauty that can transform the world.

If we become aware of this, we will begin to love with tenderness the limitations and all the limits of our belonging to the situation to which we have been sent: our community, each of our brothers and sisters, the place and the circumstances of our presence and mission. And there we will discover the treasure of Christ's friendship. And, if at the beginning our encounter with Him was a light that blinded us, through this community to which He sends us, that encounter will expand into a new vision, a vision in which the presence of Jesus is revealed as a gentle light that lets one look at everything and everyone with His tenderness.

Familiarity with Jesus

We have seen that Jesus entrusted Saul to the poor "parish priest" of Damascus, Ananias. As he rarely appears in the New Testament, Ananias must not have been too intelligent nor too courageous. In fact, he begins to inform Jesus about Saul's past, as if God needed him to know about it, and he is afraid that Saul may not be truly converted and has come to arrest him (cf. Acts 9:10-19). Ananias is neither an eagle nor a lion. But in him there is a fundamental quality, which overcomes all his defects and all his weaknesses: he has an extremely familiar relationship with Jesus. They talk to each other like old friends. Ananias is not surprised at all that Christ appears to him, that he speaks to him. He answers Jesus: "Here I am, Lord" (Acts 9:10), as though he was saying, "Hello!" on the phone. For him, Jesus is a familiar presence, a presence whom he converses with often, who lives with him each day of his life.

It is to such an unassuming man, who will not become one of the great apostles, missionaries or martyrs, that Christ entrusts the conversion and the first Christian steps of Paul, one of the greatest, one of the most fruitful, one of the most enlightened and courageous apostles that the Church has ever had. To progress in our conversion, to allow the encounter with Christ to become a way of life for us, those who help us most are those for whom Jesus is a familiar presence. And in this regard, often a child or a grandmother has greater authority than 'important' persons.

This also helps us to understand that familiarity with Christ is the root and substance of every fruitful witness. Paul will be great, he will announce Christ to the ends of the known world, to the geographical, human, religious, cultural and spiritual "outskirts" of his and our times, but he will never forget the existential catechism of his first teacher, or better, father, the one who baptized him in the community of Damascus. He will live his whole great mission cultivating familiarity with Christ, because it is Christ who was the first to cultivate it with him. He, like Ananias, will not be surprised that the Mystery appears to him to tell him very simply, as a friend, as a father, "Do not be afraid, but continue to speak and do not be silent, for I am with you" (Acts 18:9-10).

It is in the familiarity with Christ that we find the strength that comes to us from his tenderness towards us and towards all. And it is from there that we too are called to gather up courage and confidence in order to resume our journey. At times, seeing the fragility of our communities and the difficulties, often enormous, of the situations we must face, we experience fear in obeying the task of our vocation. We need to rediscover the familiarity of the encounter with the Lord. We need to stimulate each other to come back to this source, like the shepherds did on Christmas Eve night when they urged each other, "Let's go over to Bethlehem and see this event which the Lord has made known to us!" (Luke 2:15).

On Christmas Eve night, God became familiar with man, with every person, in every type of situation and condition they find themselves in, and forever. May this Christmas help us to rediscover together this familiarity with Jesus every day, to communicate it to each other with joy and live it totally, with trusting and obedient freedom, in the tenderness of this experience.

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year to each and every one!



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