

The Song of the Lamb



Dear Cistercian Brothers and Sisters!

Recently, I have often found myself reminding communities that the work of communion is the most urgent task to which we should dedicate ourselves if we wish to progress in the path of the vocation and mission which the Holy Spirit has given us and entrusted to us. Without the awareness of our fundamental vocation, it becomes difficult, at times even impossible, to face, correct, and bring to new form the partial and temporary elements in the lives of our communities, even if precisely these elements often seem to draw the most attention.

The symphony of communion

Often children's drawings are more meaningful than the works of great artists. This drawing makes me think that the community is like an orchestra, big or small, with the task and the joy of performing a symphony in which each member has his part, his music to perform, always, however, in harmony with all the other players, under the direction of a superior who represents the great Maestro of the symphony of the universe, Jesus Christ.

In this child's drawing, the orchestra fills up the space between the earth, clearly drawn in brown, and the blue of heaven on high. It is as if the orchestra must connect earth with heaven, fill the empty and colorless space that separates them. The conductor, though his feet are on the ground, wears clothes the color of heaven. Strangely, it seems that the musicians do not have instruments. They are themselves the instruments of the symphony, as in a voice choir.

To the side of the orchestra, a little group of spectators, who would be children, is drawn by the music and seems to walk toward the orchestra. They do not have faces with nose, eyes, mouth. In contrast, the musicians begin to have these features of the human face.

It seems to me that this drawing expresses the work of communion that we are called to fulfill together, and to which every community must consecrate itself as a priority. It is the most important work for us, because it reconciles heaven with earth, filling the period of time that we live with meaning, color, beauty, and harmony. Christ directs it, the God of Heaven who became man and walked on the earth, reaching even to the underworld to reconcile man with God. Whoever agrees to participate, whoever is willing to be part of the orchestra, acquires ever more clearly the features of his true face, of his true personality, he becomes ever more fully himself. And this draws mankind, lost and without a face, toward this symphonic work directed by Christ for the salvation of all. The whole world, in fact, is called and drawn to enter into the symphony of the Church's communion.

To be true performers of this symphony, however, the musicians stay seated right in their places, in front of music stands that are green like a forest of trees, on which the music they must perform is set. But they do not look only at the music stand and the score: they simultaneously watch the blue Conductor with his feet on the ground. Everything hangs on his gesture, on his lifted hands, whose fingers are clearly recognized. The score, distributed to each one, is the Word of God, the Gospel, and also for us the Rule of Saint Benedict, and the whole treasure of Christian and monastic wisdom that the Church and the Order hand on to us. Everyone must study them with care. But if there were no attention to the one Maestro who even now conducts the orchestra, the scores would remain dead letters, whose performance would only produce dissonance, noise, cacophony, not the beautiful and attractive harmony of the Trinitarian Communion that God wants to give to mankind.

Coming to communion

In chapter 63 of the Rule, Saint Benedict establishes the order to be kept in community. It is fundamentally the order dictated by the moment in which each one is called and led by God to enter the monastery. It is therefore not a "natural" order, but a "vocational" order, established by the choice and the grace of God. But also by each person's free response to the Lord's call.

It is worth noting that Saint Benedict speaks of it like an order to be kept by *walking*, so to speak, by moving toward something. In fact, it is to be respected when the brothers “*come for the kiss of peace and for Communion, when they leads psalms or stand in choir*” – *sic accedant ad pacem, ad communionem, ad psalmum imponendum, in choro standum*” (RB 63,4).

The order within the community is the order in which we progress, come to the gestures and to the most profound and meaningful expressions of monastic life: the fraternal peace, the Eucharistic communion with Christ and in Christ, the prayer of the psalms and the liturgy that reunites us in choir. These aspects are not only liturgical, but are the dimensions of human life redeemed by Christ, who gives us a new relationship among ourselves and with God. The community, reunited in the peace of communion with Christ who prays to the Father (the Psalms) in the love of the Spirit (the choir like the Upper Room of Pentecost), incarnates the work of the symphony of communion to which each has been called by God, with a personal choice, precise and unique, but which is realized only if it leads us to walk together toward full communion with Christ and in Christ, communion from which fraternal peace shines out among all men and with God.

The more I visit communities and listen to each monk and nun, the more I am convinced that what is missing and is overlooked is precisely the work of communion, symbolized by the performance of the orchestra of which I was speaking at the beginning. We worry and complain about everything, except the lack of the essential thing that Christ came to bring to the world, the lack of that for which Christ died and rose again, of that for which he gave life to the Church, of that for which he sent the Paraclete: communion with Him, and in Him with the Father and all our brothers and sisters, in the love of the Holy Spirit. The symphonic work of communion with Christ and in Christ should be the heart and soul of every personal and communal effort of following Jesus. It is the essential work for which we have been called to follow our call, guided by the Rule of Saint Benedict according to the Cistercian charism. It is the work for which each one of us and each community receives from God all the interior and exterior aids to become the workmen, or if we prefer the performers. Superiors should think only of this, just like the formators, but also the bursars, the guest-masters, the parish priests, the cantors, the infirmarians, everyone, up to the one who most recently entered the community, that is, all the “workers” that God has called and chosen “in a multitude of people” to give and transmit “true and eternal life” (cf. RB Prol. 14-17). Because true and eternal life is the life of communion: “If you desire true and eternal life, *keep your tongue free from vicious talk and your lips from all deceit; turn away from evil and do good; let peace be your quest and aim*” (RB Prol. 17; Ps 34:14-15).

Without the spirit of consecrating ourselves to the communion of Christ, no community problem or difficulty can be resolved, no formation can be seriously organized, no new vocation can be adequately attracted and received, no crisis can be overcome, no balance between prayer and work, contemplation and mission,

silence and speech, can be found. Beyond the realm of a communion lived and always sought after anew, no conversion can be asked for or willed; and no stability finds ground and a spot to realize itself.

But how do we “come” to communion, the source of peace, of union with God and with the brothers? What are we called to choose to make up our minds for communion with Christ?

Called to the Wedding-Feast of the Lamb

Christian communion, before being a connection among us, is the relationship of love that binds us to Jesus Christ. This relationship is the supreme Paschal gift, which makes the Eucharist the Church’s beating heart, because the Eucharist is the direct meeting of Christ’s dying for us and our communion with Him risen from the dead. Saint Paul clearly expresses this mystery, writing to the Thessalonians: “He died for us so that ... we might live together with him” (1 Thes 5:10).

This life together with Jesus who loves us so much as to die for us has a spousal dimension that the whole of Sacred Scripture announces to us and describes. Christ is the Spouse who offers every human being the fullness and salvation of life in union with Him who unites us to the Father in the Spirit.

To recover this dimension of spousal communion with Christ in our own consciences and in living out our vocation is the great urgency I hear “cry out” in our Order, and a little bit everywhere in the Church, from the situation and the crisis of people and communities. If quite often we live out our call like confirmed bachelors or old maids who think only of themselves, it’s not so much because we are not married, but because we do not live out and cultivate the spousal dimension in our relationship with Christ. The spousal dimension means that the relation with Christ is for us, as for all, the affective fulfillment of the heart and the permanent source of fruitfulness in our life.

Easter is an ardent and definitive invitation for each of us to the “wedding-feast of the Lamb” (Rev 19:7,9; 21:9).

The Book of Revelation speaks to us constantly of the Lamb, of Christ the Lamb, immolated and living, who is, with the Father, the center of the new Jerusalem, of the city of our communion with God and with all, the center of the mystery of the Church, of the Spouse who descends from heaven to embrace all of humanity through and in the Redemption of Christ who makes all things new.

The image of the Lamb of God, of the Lamb who is God, the Son of the Father, thus brings together the whole mystery of the communion with God which is offered and granted to us in the Paschal Christ, “The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” (Jn 1:29).

When the author of Revelation speaks to us of the Lamb, amid the descriptions of the drama of world history, marked then as now by violence, by sin, by deceit and

by death, it is always to help us accept and live in communion with Jesus and in Jesus, who saves and transforms our life and the world. The Lamb is the shepherd who leads us to the springs of the waters of life (cf. Rev 7:17). The Lamb is the Bridegroom of the Church, to whose wedding-feast we have been called (Rev 19:7,9; 21:9). With the Father, he too is the Temple of the new city and the source of its light (Rev 21:22-23). From him, and from the Father, springs the river of life (Rev 22:1).

Yes, Christ is the Lamb and Shepherd, who guides us; the Bridegroom, to whose wedding-feast we are called; he is the Temple of our true worship of God the Father, of true prayer; the source of the only light that illumines our lives, and of eternal life. We are called to let ourselves be led by Him to union with Him, so that our thirst for eternal life and light can be satisfied.

If we consider all of this, we must admit that very often we are content with a rather superficial and partial relationship with the Paschal Christ. We neglect to live the relationship with Him on all the levels that He makes available to us through His self-offering in the sacrifice of crucified love and in the joy of the Resurrection. Sometimes we ask him for a little bit of spiritual guidance, a little bit of friendship, a little bit of light, a little bit of consolation, and we enter for a moment into the temple of his presence and his prayer, without stopping for too long. When he, by contrast, offers us everything, forever, without limits of time or space, without limits of love, he offers himself to us completely, always!

But when in our life and in the life of our communities we neglect to put the mystery of the Lamb at the center, we lose peace. True peace does not consist in the absence of problems, of sorrow, and of worries. Peace is given us when we humbly allow the Lord to respond through his presence and his love to our need for God, to our need for light and life, to our need to be guided and to find fulfillment in love. This is precisely what the Lamb of God wants to grant us, by offering himself for us and giving himself to us as Temple, Light, Spring, Shepherd, and Bridegroom.

The peace of Christ is the free and lasting gift of the Lamb. His love nourishes it, his blood makes it secure, his resurrection animates it. It is given to us with his life, with his presence, with his love. It is the peace of the sheep who has his shepherd; the peace of the bride of a faithful spouse. The peace of Christ is given to us with Him. He himself is our peace (cf. Eph 2:14). What should unsettle and frighten us, then, is not the loss of peace, but the loss of the Lord, the possibility of being separated from him.

The liturgy has us make the invocation: "Lamb of God, who take away the sins of the world, grant us peace!" And immediately afterward we receive Him and unite ourselves to Him in Eucharistic communion. Our peace is the gift received in communion with Jesus, and in Him with all.

The new song of the witnesses of the Lamb

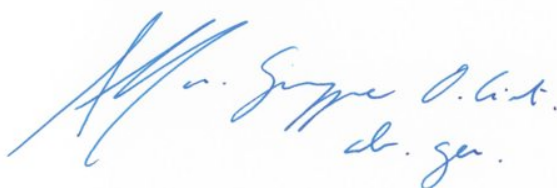
The Book of Revelation speaks to us of a “new song” (14:3), of a “song of the Lamb” that comes down from Heaven, accompanied by the sound of the “harps of God” (15:2-3). This is the song that only the “redeemed of the earth” can learn to sing, those who “follow the Lamb wherever he goes,” attached only to him, without deceit and without stain (cf. 14:3-5). These are the martyrs, the witnesses, who “have conquered [the Accuser] by the blood of the Lamb and the witness of their testimony, for love of life did not deter them from death” (Rev 12:11).

They are those for whom the Lamb is truly the shepherd, spouse, light, temple and fount of life. By their docility in following the Lamb to be united ever more to his destiny, they become the humble performers of the symphonic song of communion with Christ and in Christ. They are those who transmit to the world the beauty of Redemption in communion.

Their song draws us to the wedding-feast of the Lamb, it draws us, like the children in the picture, to enter with our whole selves into the symphony orchestra of communion, each with his qualities and his limits, without fear of being off pitch or of following the wrong notes, because the song is not ours, and it is a song of mercy, of reconciliation, of humility and meekness, the song of the immolated and living Lamb. He who fixes his heart and his eyes on Him, who lets himself be calmly directed and led by Him, receives from Him the harmony of the Spirit which makes us all together instruments and witnesses of the Communion of God, which takes care of and heals the world’s wounds.

The new life is a song, a harmony that we are called to learn from the Lamb of God, by following him, loving him, drawing from Him life, light, mercy, and Easter joy. The new life that changes the world is a victory thanks to the blood of the Lamb and the witness of people who disregard their lives even unto death, out of preference for Him who first of all and for us “humiliated himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:8).

Is not this the symphonic melody of the song of the Lamb that our vocation, charisma, the Rule of Saint Benedict, especially the chapter on humility, teaches us to sing together, with the whole Church, with Pope Francis, with the small and the poor of mankind, so that here and now, among us and with all, the Kingdom of the Communion of God come down to earth from on high?

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Fr. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori" with "Abbot General O.Cist." written below it in a smaller, cursive script.

Fr. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori
Abbot General O.Cist.

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