



The Abbot General's
Christmas Letter 2012

Encouraged in Faith

Dearest Cistercian Brothers and Sisters,

The Year of Faith urges us to live the liturgical times and the daily time of our life with an ever greater desire to hold on to Christ, who dwells in our hearts by faith, as in Mary, to let us know the whole fullness of his love (cf. Eph 3:17-19).

Mountains to move

But often the problems and difficulties of life distract us from this experience, because they accumulate, come one on top of the other, are intertwined. We feel impotent, and the temptation arises in us to desire a grand solution, an immense solution that resolves the whole thing, puts everything in its place, makes everything progress in an instant, or makes everything return to a beginning point as innocent and pure as the earthly paradise.

Jesus seems to take this feeling seriously when he tells us of the faith that moves mountains. "If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you" (Mt 17:20). But perhaps he says it with a bit of irony, to help us become aware of our absurd claim to want to move on our own mountains of problems, real or created by us. Regardless, real or apparent, Jesus promises us to move them, the mountains, but only thanks to a tiny bit of faith, a little mustard seed of faith. We were looking for the colossal solution, and here Christ surprises us by proposing the tiniest, simplest solution to us: faith.

Like the Apostles, we are left a bit lost listening to Jesus' answer to our great preoccupation before the problems of life. We feel lost because we understand that the faith that Christ proposes to us is a mysterious act of our heart, in which everything depends on us and everything depends on God. The demand of faith is that it depends on us to depend entirely on God. God is able and willing to move our mountains of problems and difficulties, everything is possible for Him, but he does not want to do so without our liberty opening the door of our life and world to the

immense power of salvation and love that He offers us. God is like a very rich and powerful man who begs to be able to distribute all his riches and favors to whomever might open his hands to receive them. God begs beggars who believe in the gift of his whole self that He wants to give us.

The transcendent humility of God

This is the humility of God that has completely manifested itself in Christ. The humility of Christ wholly transcends ours. But he comes to meet us and he asks us to let his humility express itself for our salvation. Often those who have found themselves faced with Jesus' initiative have reacted by expressing their sense of unworthiness and incapacity, but they had to stop themselves in front of a humility much more profound and mysterious than their own. At the Annunciation Mary is disturbed that an Angel visits her and greets her as full of grace. But it is not just an angel who visits her: the Son of God wants to become man in her. Then she understands that she must simply let it be: "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38). Joseph perceives that something great and mysterious is taking place in the life of his betrothed. He decides to react with humility, and perhaps with humiliation, by divorcing her in secret. The angel reveals to him the salvific humility of God who chooses Mary for a mother and him for a putative father. Joseph let it happen in silence and takes Mary and the Child with him (cf. Mt 1:20-25).

This dynamic reappears in a paradigmatic way at the beginning and at the end of the public ministry of Jesus: at the Baptism in the Jordan and in the Last Supper when he washes the disciples' feet. In the two scenes Christ manifests a humility that his interlocutors do not understand. St. John the Baptist and Simon Peter both have the reaction of one who cannot conceive of God being more humble than himself. " 'I need to be baptized by you, and yet you are coming to me?' Jesus said to him in reply, 'Allow it now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.' Then he allowed him" (Mt 3:14-15). " 'You will never wash my feet!' (...) 'Unless I wash you, you will have no inheritance with me.' (...) 'Master, then not only my feet, but my hands and head as well'" (Jn 13:8-9).

These are reactions of human humility, of a human sense of unworthiness. But in both cases, Jesus cuts to the chase by asking the two to let things go ahead, to permit the mystery of God's humility to express itself in their life and in the world, so that the design of salvation might be realized.

The last prophet and the first of the Apostles were reminded to let God's humility express itself without objections. And with this Jesus makes them realize that God's humility is on a different level than human humility. The humility of God is an immeasurable abyss, of a depth that man cannot examine with his own eyes, with his judgment, because at the bottom of the abyss of God's humility lies the very heart of God, his infinite and burning love, there lie the Trinitarian relations between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the infinite, loving affirmation of the Other that characterizes each person of the Trinity.

John the Baptist and Peter would like, as it were, to compare their sense of unworthiness with the humility of Christ that surprises them. They would like, as it were, to stop that spring that gushes from an immeasurable abyss. But now the deep spring of God's love must flow, must run in the world, against all the currents of pride and of humiliation that run in human history since the sin of Adam. And now this spring has been received by the "living fountain" of the sinless humility of the Virgin Mary (cf. Dante, *Divina Commedia*, Paradiso, XXXIII:10).

The humility of Christ is a mystery that man cannot measure, because it is the "counter-measure" to all the values of the world, yet man is called to entrust himself to it, letting it happen, letting it express itself, manifest itself from Bethlehem up to Calvary, to then remain in the mystery of the Church and of the Eucharist.

The humility of Christ is like the death of the seed, in the darkness of the earth, that miraculously produces life, a larger life. The humility of Christ is the death of the seed of the tree of life, of the life of all lives, of the resurrection, of eternal life. In the womb of Mary, in the silence of Joseph, in the waters of the Jordan, in the paschal mystery that the washing of the feet begins and expresses, the humility of Christ leads God to the death that produces the fruit of eternal life for all mankind.

Leaving it be

"Leave it be!"

God's concise and determined invitation to Mary, Joseph, John the Baptist, Peter, to each of us, is an invitation to faith. You do not see, you do not understand, you would like to resist, to rebel, to get out of it, to flee; you do not manage to contain in your mind and in your heart the infinite abyss of the humility of my love, but you can trust, you can believe, and believing, you can let this mystery happen, let it express itself in your life and in the world. "Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled!" (Lk 1:45).

The Christian faith does not consist only in believing in God: it is trusting the event of Christ right where his humility is revealed to be infinitely more profound than our judgment of men who are unworthy and pridefully humiliated. Faith opens us to a glory that buds from a humility that we cannot understand. For men humility and glory are incompatible. For Christ and in Christ, however, they are indissoluble. Because the two coincide with charity, with God's being: "God is love" (1 Jn 4:16).

Faith means trusting the fact that in the humility of Christ up to the Cross "all righteousness is fulfilled" (cf. Mt 3:15). All is fulfilled, all is perfected in the depth of the humility of Christ, who empties himself to redeem mankind with the fire of his love.

Jesus' "Leave it be!" coincides with a "Let me enter!", that is, with the offer of his presence in our midst and in us that brings about salvation. Christ's humility is a knocking at the door of our existence, to enter and dine with us (Rev 3:20), the knock of a beggar, of a poor man who seems to ask for everything right at the

moment when he comes to offer us His whole self. It is not the perfect who opens the door to him, but the one who understands that without Christ he is lost, like the tax-collectors of his time. Zacchaeus knows he is unworthy to welcome the Lord into his home, but he feels that this initiative of Jesus responds to the deep desire of his sinful heart. He welcomes him, and in welcoming him he feels himself rising up again to a new humanity that he did not believe was possible for him: "They began to grumble, saying, 'He has gone to stay at the house of a sinner.' But Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, 'Behold, half of my possessions, Lord, I shall give to the poor, and if I have extorted anything from anyone I shall repay it four times over.' And Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house.'" (Lk 19:7-9).

We are saved by faith, but faith consists in corresponding to the initiative of Jesus Christ, who in the infinite humility of his love and in the infinite love of his humility asks us to be able to enter into our life to share it with us, like a communion meal. Then the miracle of our conversion happens: friendship with Christ transforms us, gets us up on our feet, resuscitates us, and we find ourselves able to give more than steal, happy to lose our life rather than to win it by grabbing and possessing people and things.

The event of the Kingdom

"Leave it be!" And the Kingdom of God comes about.

The humility of Christ, since the Incarnation in the womb of the Virgin, coincides with the event of the Kingdom of God in the world, an event that penetrates and manifests itself wherever it finds even a speck of faith. Everything is possible to God, and this is his royalty, his inconceivable power. The Kingdom manifests itself wherever faith allows the Lord, for whom everything is possible, to express his omnipotence in us and among us, in the world.

We need the impossible, we need the Kingdom of God. This does not mean that we need marvelous things, but just of the fulfillment of our life, of the fullness of our heart, and also of that which all men need. Jesus gives as an example of the necessity for which the Father provides the need to eat, as the birds of the sky eat, and to dress, as the lilies of the field "dress themselves" (cf. Mt 6:25-30). How many people in the world, and now with the economic crisis very near to us and among us, need what is necessary to live! It is the Kingdom of God also to let the Father give us bread, clothing, work, a house, education, health... That is why Christ asks us to open ourselves to the Kingdom of God with faith that works through love, with faith that allows us to deprive ourselves to share with the one who is in need.

Faith hears the "Leave it be!" of Christ behind every human need to which we do not manage to respond on our own or with our strength. And leaving Jesus be also means letting him give us the decisiveness, the strength, and the ability to give ourselves, what we have and what we are.

Mary, Joseph, John the Baptist, and Peter indeed understood that the “Leave it be!” that God was asking of them did not mean simply stepping aside letting Christ continue his mission alone. They understood that the “Leave it be!” of Christ had to pass through them, as it were, through their freedom, their life, their heart. They understood that if they let Christ act, He would bring them into the event of his Kingdom, and their life would no longer be as it had been before. The docility of Christian obedience is like letting oneself be swept away by a river that carries us on journeys and toward goals that were not in our plans. The river into which Christ takes us, if with faith we let him act, is the way, the truth, and the life that He is for the world. He gets us involved in following him on the path of his life and mission, to “have a part with Him” (cf. John 13:8) in his love to the very end, up to martyrdom, up to the Cross.

“The further we advance in monastic life and faith...”

St. Benedict summarizes this awareness in the final, sublime phrase of the Prologue of the Rule, which helps us understand the role of faith in our life and vocation: “But as we progress in this way of life and in faith (*processu vero conversationis et fidei*), we shall run on the path of God’s commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love. Never swerving from his instructions, then, but faithfully observing his teaching in the monastery until death, we shall through patience share in the sufferings of Christ that we may deserve also to share in his kingdom.” (Prologue 49-50)

Faith increases on the path of our vocation. Like our vocation, it is a “process,” a “progress,” which literally means walking forward. Faith and the vocation are a walk, the walk of our life that goes forward by following Christ. Faith listens to the Lord, his word, his call, and, trusting in Him, agrees to the change of life that Christ asks of us and offers us by granting us the grace of continual conversion. Thus faith opens our life to the “inexpressible sweetness of the love” of God, that is, to the Holy Spirit who expands our heart to run on this path to following Christ who obeys the Father up to the total patience of the Passion. That is why, always in faith, we need not separate ourselves from his teachings (*magisterium*), and to persevere up to the end in his teaching, in the truth that he reveals to us. The outcome of this path is the grace of having a part with Christ in his Kingdom. As Jesus promises it to Peter if he let his feet be washed. Or as he promises it to the repentant thief, crucified next to Him (cf. Lk 23:42-43).

With the intensity of this phrase, St. Benedict wants to summarize at the beginning of his Rule the intensity of life to which we have been called, which is an intensity of belonging to Christ that, through faith and the monastic life, involves the whole person. Intensity that involves our life with the truth and love of Christ. The Christian faith is the power that opens our freedom to the truth and to the love of the Lord: it is a belief in the word and in the love of God, in his presence in our midst which speaks to us and loves us, to lead us to cling with our whole life to the truth of his love, which is the Kingdom of God which begins here and now for those who believe in Him.

We would have to ponder the whole Rule of St. Benedict as the guide for this itinerary in which every aspect and moment of human life has been called to become a progress of vocation and faith, a journey with Christ that unites our poor person, through faith and love, ever more closely to His person.

That is why we live together, in community. We are together to help us live this journey of conversion and faith that expands the heart in an “indescribable” love. We should always remember that the goal of our common life is fundamentally the expansion of each one’s heart in the love of Christ. Is this concern really present in our relationships? In our communities, do we live out a brotherhood concerned with the heart of each one, that is, concerned that each one grow in love and joy? Do we live our monastic vocation with the missionary solicitude that each man live with his heart expanded by faith and the love of Jesus?

During the night of Christmas, all the angels of heaven communicate their joy and their light to some miserable shepherds lost in the night (Lk 2:13-14). We too are called and invited to this evangelization of the poor, to this evangelization of hearts, starting with our own heart, which asks our freedom and our commitment to receive the truth and love that expand it. Only then does our heart, our “inner man” (Eph 3:16), receive the strength to make our life run on the way of the will of God, that is, becomes the center and subject of new life in Christ, for us and for others.

The Faith of Abraham

“Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness” (Rom 4:3; Gen 15:6). Abraham expressed his faith by departing from his country toward a land promised by the Lord, a land of plenty and fecundity without limits. He too “let it be” by obeying, entrusting all the joy and fecundity of his life to the Lord who had promised it to him.

We too are called ever anew to live our faith by leaving our securities, our projects, to go into a land that is not our own, the land of the Kingdom. But Christ revealed that this “promised land,” the condition for every true fecundity and life, is the soil, silent and hidden, of his humility. The humility of Christ is the “land” in which God promises us, in the expansion of the heart to the measureless measure of his love, all the fecundity of our life.

The call and the faith-response of Abraham is the paradigm of every vocation. Faith is the foundation of every vocation because it is the grace and the virtue of clinging and belonging to Christ, “the way, the truth, and the life” of every man (Jn 14:6). Without faith there is no vocation, none at all, because there would not be the recognition and joining to Christ who love us, calls us, and leads us, always in faith, to live on his love, in the hope of eternal life in the house of the Father. If we love Christ and our vocation, if we want to live it in truth, we should always ask ourselves if we are living it based on faith as the one security that no one can take from us.

Only the foundation of faith roots everything we live in Christ: “as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, walk in him, rooted in him and built upon him and established in the faith” (Col 2:6-7). The foundation of faith makes us free, free from the idols that bind us to ourselves, to our projects, and to our fears, and which divide us off from others. The great choice of life is between faith in Christ and idols. Idols divide us off from Christ and from the brothers, because they prohibit us from being founded in Him. The result of attachment to idols is death, not living in the freedom of the sons of God.

An episode from the Second Book of Maccabees always makes me think. At the end of a battle, the Jews went to gather the corpses of their fallen. “But under the tunic of each of the dead they found amulets sacred to the idols of Jamnia, which the law forbids the Jews to wear. So it was clear to all that this was why these men had been slain” (2 Mc 12:40).

Perhaps we too should always go see if under what is not really alive and free in us there is hidden an idol to whom we entrust the salvation and the joy of our life instead of to Christ. Faith indeed gives us life, liberty, and unity with our brothers and sisters, unity with all.

The mutual support of faith

St. Paul speaks at the beginning of the letter to the Romans of the mutual support that we can offer each other with the faith: “I give thanks to my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is heralded throughout the world. (...) I long to see you, that I may share with you some spiritual gift so that you may be strengthened, that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by one another's faith, yours and mine” (Rom 1:8, 11-12).

It is each one's faith that permits us to edify and strengthen each other. The testimony of lived faith is a gift that is transmitted to all without diminishing in the one who gives it, and which make the faith of the other grow. We cannot give each other a greater gift than strengthening each other in faith since this means mutually giving each other a possibility of intensity and fullness of life that only Christ makes possible, through every trial and every limit, even sin and death. Jesus praised the faith of the poor and of sinners, giving them a fullness of life, of healing, of pardon, and of salvation inconceivable to man.

In our communities, in the Order, in the Church, those who strengthen our little faith are the most fragile persons and communities who, in trial, give witness of a faith greater than our limit. We all need this “strengthening through faith” to overcome, with Christ and in Christ, the crisis we are living at various levels. We need faith before all else, before well-being, before vocations, before unity and harmony of the community, before sanctity, because faith is the condition of all the rest, and if we seek out all the rest without founding ourselves in faith, even if we obtain it all, it will be sterile, because we do not receive it as grace.

Faith enables us to receive all as grace, and so to receive the gifts as charisms, that is, expressions and signs of God's gift of self to the world. With faith, the gifts and charisms remain gifts of God and do not become idols of pride that kill the life and vocation in us. Faith always puts everything back into the Lord's hands so that He will always remain the subject of what we do.

The temptation to ask each other for some help other than support in faith fills us with mutual pretence. And pretence leads to illusion, which always ends up in delusion. To give each other, instead, the support of faith means to help each other recognize Jesus present and working in our midst, and then everything becomes possible, because He can truly do everything.

Perhaps we must forgive each other all the occasions and all the attitudes in which we ask each other for something other than the support of faith, because this pretence leads us to delusion and division of hearts.

But faith rescues everything. Faith is a power of resurrection of love ever possible. Starting from faith one can always recommence relationships, works, the journey, because faith does not start off from ourselves, from our good will, or from our capacities, nor from our limit or sin, but from the Lord born, dead, and risen for us. Starting from faith one can recommence a whole life that has been lost, even at its last moment, like the repentant thief who, begging with faith for salvation, let Christ transform his death into birth to eternal life.

In faith, every circumstance is Christmas!

Best wishes from the heart to everyone!

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Fr. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori" and "Ab. gen." below it.

Fr. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori
Abate Generale OCist