

1. The grafted slip, the roots, and the vital sap

Perhaps I should remind you that we concluded last year's Monastic Formation Course by reflecting on the relationship between the old and the young, in preparation, further, for the Synod of Bishops, which met in October on the topic: "Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment."

Afterwards, a meeting with an assembly of Benedictine Superiors forced me to consider the topic more deeply: "Transmitting and Lasting in order to Live Together." A little later the Chapter of the Congregation of Castile met to explore the topic of the relationship between the old and the young in our monastic communities. In the meantime began the year in which the whole Cistercian Family commemorates the 900th anniversary of Pope Callixtus II's approval of the *Carta Caritatis*, the document in which our first Cistercian fathers, guided by St. Stephen Harding, outlined the basic aspects that enabled the first group of abbeys born from Cîteaux to become practically the first monastic Order in the Church organized as a community of autonomous communities, with means of meeting, of formation, of correction, and so of communion, which, if well observed, are still today the secret of vitality and fecundity for every religious Order in living out its specific charism.

All this, I think, motivates us to explore the topic of *transmission*, of how one transmits a charism, a vocation, a mission, and to seek to help each other understand it as St. Benedict, and then the other charismatic families born from his charism, understood it. Not to perform "monastic archeology," but to rediscover in our roots the sap that can revive our Christian and monastic vocation today.

When young people face a crisis in their vocation – and it happens often, but not just to the young – I realize more and more that the problem is that their vocation could not truly be grafted onto a transmission of the charism that goes from the roots all the way to the leaves and the fruits of the tree. It is as if they had not been given the opportunity to "graft themselves" truly onto the tree of the Church, of their Order, and of their community, to the point of becoming branches to which the plant's roots transmit the vital sap that passes through the whole trunk, through the older and bigger branches, to get to them and enable them too to become living and fruitful branches that transmit the charismatic sap to whoever comes after them, to whomever the Lord will graft onto them too.

Grafting is a very interesting practice of fruit farming, because once a grafted slip begins to live on and from the plant onto which it has been grafted changes its nature in a certain sense, lives from roots other than those of the plant from which it has been cut. But at the same time the grafted piece also changes the nature of the old plant that receives it. For example, the old plant becomes more fruitful, the quality of its fruit improves, thanks to the graft. Without grafting, an old plant tends to produce wilder and wilder, and smaller and more tasteless, fruit.

Thus, one must not think only of the good that an old Order or an old community, or the almost 2000-year-old Church, can offer to the young onto whom the vocation is grafted, but also of the new vitality, the new fruitfulness, that all the grafted parts bring to the old plants, thus enabling their roots not to absorb in vain the water and substances they transmit to the tree.

Without new grafts and without ever renewed capacities to transmit the sap, it becomes useless to have deep, old roots. It is clear that the Church has deep roots, that she transmits a very ancient and noble tradition, just as our Orders and communities do. But if there is not a transmission today of this precious and profound sap, if there are not new and good grafts today onto the venerable and revered tree of the Church and her every charismatic family, even the deepest roots become sterile, useless. They stay alive, they stay young, they stay faithful to their task, but they remain sterile because of the tree's not being faithful to the transmission of the sap it produces all the way to the last little branch.

All that we can do or organize for formation, like this Course, would also be sterile, useless, if it did not transmit, if it were not a means of transmitting, the vital sap of our roots.

It is on this that the Second Vatican Council essentially centered the renewal of the whole Church, and the renewal in particular of consecrated life. It asked for a return to the roots to update the life of the Church today. In the end, all the infidelities to the Council, or rather to the Spirit that animated it, came from a bad understanding of the transmission that the Council wanted to promote. A transmission is bad if it does not originate in the roots, and thus from a truly original and living tradition, but a transmission is also bad if it does not reach all the way to the newer and peripheral branches of the tree, and thus if the reference to tradition does not become mission, evangelization, to the farthest boundaries of the human and humanity.

I say all this, and I will go into it more deeply in what follows, especially so that we each, students and professors, ask ourselves a crucial question from the very beginning of this Course: Do we live out our vocation within a good and living transmission that goes from the deepest and oldest roots to the fruits that we are called to bear today?

That is, I invite you to examine how you live out your vocation, first of all the Christian vocation, and then in all the particular forms in which we are asked to follow Christ. Do we live it out by finding nourishment in the roots? Is the formation we have received and are receiving a transmission of living sap? Is it also living in the one who forms us or should form us? Are we formed by persons in whom the charism is alive, is a life, is a soul, or by persons who transmit only notions, theoretical or practical as they may be?

And if we are formators ourselves, is that how we do it? Are we transmitters of living sap from the roots all the way to the fruit that the Spirit wants to produce today in our persons, in our communities, in our Orders, in the Church?

I will explore these topics more deeply, but I would like the point of departure for this Course to be the individual's examination of his or her own life and experience. It does not matter if the result of this examination maybe be disastrous, if we realize that perhaps up to now we have live out our faith and vocation without a true transmission, rooted and fruitful. It is already significant progress to realize that we are missing something, especially if we are missing something essential. For from that point one can restart the journey more humbly and openly, and when the Holy Spirit finds a clear and humble conscience, it knows how to recover in a day what we might have been missing for a thousand years (cf. Ps 90:4; 2 Pet 3:8).