

**Letter for Lent 2021
of the Abbot General OCist**

Convert and You Will Live



Dearest brothers and sisters!
The unusual time in which we have been living for more than a year is perhaps becoming a normal time. Not because we are getting used to the discomforts and difficulties provoked by the pandemic, and even less to the sufferings of its victims, but because we recognize that this time is the reality that we must pass through, without “skipping over it,” and nothing is more normal than reality. But we can also say that it is the very unusualness of this time that makes it normal, since, if we were attentive and aware, we would realize that reality is always unusual, that reality is always more unusual than the normality we dream of.

If we lived the reality of life with the awareness that in every instant all is created and given by God, we would recognize that reality is always a miracle, and we would live even times of crisis with wonder, adoring God, Creator and Father, in all. Thus Jesus lived each instant of his earthly life.

What does reality ask of us?

When reality is in crisis, like now, and reveals its dramatic face, we realize that it asks more of us, that it makes us hear its question more strongly, its need for meaning. It is not just the time of pandemic that demands a response from us. Human reality is always dramatic, is always an insistent question. So too the situation of our Order, the situation of our individual communities and persons, is always dramatic, is always “in crisis,” and for this reason it demands something of us. We are questioned by the fragility of our communities, by the lack or short perseverance of vocations, by individualism and little fervor, by the little happiness of many among us in living out our faith and vocation. But what challenges us even more is the reality of such fidelity, of such capacity for sacrifice and service, the reality of such holiness that many members of our Order and of the whole Church live out in a hidden way. When I encounter the fidelity that is heroic and, notwithstanding everything, joyous of so many monks and nuns, of so many lay people or pastors in the Church, or even of non-believers, I cannot but feel challenged, called to give a response that God also asks of me.

But what is the adequate response to all this questioning we hear from the present reality?

We must first of all admit that reality asks of us quite a bit more than what we can give or be ourselves. We are not capable of responding to the great and insistent question of reality. So, what to do? Should we pretend that there is no question? But, indeed, the dramatic nature of the current situation makes it ever more difficult to escape from the insistent question of reality. We need to be able to give a response that, though not coming from us, is as real as the reality that asks it of us.

The season of Lent, like the insistent reminders of the Pope and the witness of the saints, reminds us that we can express a response without being able to possess it. This response is **conversion**.

The grace of graces

Pope Francis ends his precious apostolic letter *Patris corde*, dedicated to St. Joseph, with a surprising phrase: “We need only ask Saint Joseph for the grace of graces: our conversion” (§7).

Our conversion is a grace, or rather the grace of graces, because it opens us to all the gifts that God wants to give us, up to the gift of being always united to Him in eternal life. “Convert and you will live” is the promise God makes to the people through the prophet Ezekiel (18:32). But our conversion is not only the grace that we must ask for: it is also what God asks of our freedom. In fact, at the beginning of his public life, Jesus makes the question that reality asks us his own, and thus he reveals to us what the response is that we are called to give: “Convert and believe in the Gospel” (Mk 1:15); “Convert, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mt 4:17).

If we do not want to leave unanswered the reality that questions us, if we do not want to stand in a passive and sterile way before the global crisis of the present time, it is important that we accept the grace of conversion as a response to Christ who enables us to respond to the whole of reality.

Taking our conversion seriously is an enormous responsibility, because God has mysteriously placed within our conversion the response to the dramatic question of the entire world. The whole history of Christian monasticism, from St. Anthony the Abbot to the holy monks and nuns of today, like the Blessed Brothers of Tibhirine, has always been motivated by the desire to embrace conversion as a response that Christ enables us to accept and transmit to all mankind’s question of meaning.

So much so that St. Benedict made it one of the three essential vows for living in a monastery: the vow of *conversatio morum*, which one could perhaps translate freely as “path of communal conversion of life,” that is a life that, guided by obedience in a communal stability, allows for constant conversion to the Gospel, following Christ the Lord (cf. RB 58:17).

Fear of conversion

When Jesus explains why he speaks in parables, he cites a passage of Isaiah in which the closure of those who oppose the revelation of God in Christ is explained as “fear of conversion” (cf. Mt 13:15; Mk 4:12; Is 6:10). St. Paul too, when he faces the resistance of the Jews of Rome, citing the same words of Isaiah, decides to privilege the proclamation of the Gospel to the pagans (cf. Acts 28:25–28).

Where does this fear of being converted come from, of literally “returning” to the Lord who saves and heals us? We have to recognize that this fear is often present in each of us too, and at times blocks the path and the freedom of entire communities.

Why do we fear conversion? Perhaps because we only think of ourselves and live entirely within the closed and exclusive horizon of our “I.” Conversion wants to break this closure. To be converted means in fact to return to Him to whom we belong. In the parable of the merciful father of Luke 15, conversion begins when the lost son, up to that point enclosed in the search for himself that has distanced him from his father and brother, understands that his life can be reborn only by returning home: “I will arise and go to my father” (Lk 15:18). St. Peter also describes conversion as a return of the lost sheep to the good Shepherd of souls: “You were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls” (1 Pet 2:25).

Why fear this? Certainly one reason is the lack of awareness and of experience of the Lord’s tenderness. But it is only by returning to him that man can experience this merciful goodness, like the prodigal son who, returning home to be just a worker who receives the necessary bread, discovers instead that his conversion has led him to a paternal embrace overflowing with tenderness and pardon, which grants him the ability to be fully a son and brother (cf. Lk 15:20–24). The lost sheep, returning to the fold, discovers the infinite joy that the shepherd feels in rediscovering it (cf. Lk 15:4–7).

But it is not just the meager awareness of God’s goodness that makes us fear conversion. Often we do not return because we fear renouncing the autonomy with which we conceive the salvation of our life. We fear entrusting ourselves, because we think that the pretense of saving ourselves on our own is for us a space of freedom and for self-realization. Thanks be to God, the dissatisfaction and emptiness that we feel living this way drive us to exit from this closure upon ourselves and to begin to entrust ourselves to an Other who we then discover is good Shepherd and Father. We start to understand, that is, that to be free we need a Redemption that we do not bring about on our own. The fear of conversion is overcome only by our profound need for Redemption.

Transformed by his gaze

When the need for salvation makes us turn, perhaps even just physically, to another Redeemer who we ourselves are not, and we experience again the encounter with Him, a path of deeper conversion begins for us. This is not just turning to God, but letting ourselves be transformed by his grace.

This is the beginning of what the New Testament calls *metanoia*, namely a transformation of mind, of soul, of thought, of heart; our conception of ourselves changes, our conception of God, of others, and of all of reality. If we return to “the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls” (cf. 1 Pet 2:25), He himself will set us on a path of conversion on which the Spirit transforms our heart of stone into a heart of flesh, meek and humble like the heart of the Nazarene (cf. Ez 36:26).

This conversion of heart becomes possible only by returning to Jesus Christ. Returning to the Lord means finding ourselves once again in the space of his gaze, of his Face turned toward us, in the space, therefore, of his compassion and consolation, of the Father’s mercy which Jesus transmits to us, in the space of his friendship. Returning to Christ means finding ourselves once again in the relationship of friendship with the Redeemer of man. Nothing can transform us more and better than the Redemption achieved by Christ on the Cross. The Redemption transforms us so profoundly that it recreates us in filial friendship with God.

Returning to Jesus – but in reality it is always he who comes to us and seeks us out even when we are furthest from God – allows his presence to transform our heart with a single gaze, like Peter in the courtyard of the high priest (cf. Lk 22:61–62), and above all on the shore of the sea when Jesus – with who knows what kind of gaze! – asks Peter for his love and to feed his flock with the new heart that he gives him (cf. Jn 21:15–17). In this encounter with the risen Redeemer, Peter finds himself already defined by a love that is greater than his limit, than his sin, than his betrayal, and even than his fear of not knowing how to love Christ and the brothers to the point of death.

It is in the relationship with Jesus that we truly convert, that our heart changes. Not by our capacity and merit, but by grace. All our effort of conversion is that of returning to Him, of turning towards Him, to Him who is already entirely turned toward us, to the point of becoming man and of taking on himself our death and our sin.

We should think of this when we return to all that makes the Lord present in our life, as St. Benedict invites us to do when speaking of the time of Lent (RB 49). For example when we return to the fraternal life of our community, to the sacraments, to the Word of God, to the teaching of the Church, or to the brother or sister who needs us, to the poor one who stands outside our door. All these “returns” to the Lord makes us enter into the space in which He changes our heart. All these returns to the Redeemer open us to the surprise and the miracle of discovering that it is precisely where we feared to go that we meet Jesus and allow him to give us a new heart, overflowing with love and joy. It is the great Paschal surprise of the disciples of Emmaus: “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road?” (Lk 24:32).

Our offering in the hands of Christ

This return to Christ is the true offering of our life, and of all that we live. The Christian offering always has a Eucharistic nature, is always a placing of ourselves like bread and wine, or like the five loaves and two fish, into the hands of Christ the Redeemer, who unites us to his offering to the Father for the salvation of the world.

I was recently recounting to a group of people engaged in the world of labor how, one evening, at the end of one of those somewhat inconclusive days which have become rather frequent since I became abbot general, those days, that is, in which we want to do who knows what but then it seems to us that we have not done anything because the time has been eaten up by a thousand requests and demands, so that at the end we feel even guilty and lazy, though we do not really know why, so: at the end of such a day I stopped to look upon Jesus, in silence, aided by a small wooden statue of a Christ of the Passion, seated and thoughtful, with an intense and questioning gaze, which I brought back years ago from Krakow. I then understood that the order I want to put to the last moments of my day betrayed an erroneous way of considering the problem of life. I understood – it is not the first time, but each time I seemed to understand it for the first time – that the problem is not for life to be organized, ordered and efficient, but that it be *given*. And I understand that, for it to be truly given, life must be Christ's, must belong to him, in his hands or, though it is the same, in his Heart. For Christ, God, never keeps anything for himself. Christ gives all, all that he is and all that he has. If he keeps me, he gives me. If I belong to him, he gives me away. If I am entirely his, I am all things for all.

If we accept the Redemption, which literally means “reacquiring”, if we let ourselves be involved and penetrated with it, it makes us property of Christ, it makes us his. We become slaves of a Lord who does not keep anything for himself, who gives all away. We become slaves of a total gift, of a total gratuitousness. Christ's Redemption purchases us for the gratuitousness of God, gains us for charity, and thus for a humanly inconceivable freedom.

To experience this, the fruit of conversion, gives us a great freedom, above all from the fear of giving our life away, or rather of losing it. In the current crisis there is often much fear of dying. For example, we greatly and rightly fear the demise of our ever more fragile communities. But if we live this too as a demand for conversion, for returning to Christ to consign ourselves again into his hands, we see that our death is right away a gift of Christ, His gift and a gift of Him, and we can live it with hope, certain, that is, that the seed that He casts into the field always bears fruit, as He alone knows and wills.

In the hands of Christ we become seed sown to reproduce in the field of the world the Paschal mystery of the Lord's death and resurrection. Only this makes life fruitful, fruitful for the kingdom, and enables us to pass through every trial and every experience of fragility with a peace that bears witness to the good Father who thinks of everything and takes care of everyone.

As St. Paul writes to the Romans: “You also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God” (Rom 7:4).

United on a road that is always open

Readiness for conversion and offering makes us free also from the errors and false attitudes that block our path. It is like having a path always open before us, the road of hope, the road of a newness, of a change that is always possible. Conversion is the new road that Christ opens before us when he says and repeats to us with tenderness his invitation: "Follow me!"

It is important that we not forget that it is precisely this that can unite us, in humanity, among all Christians, in the Church, as also in every community. It is not perfection that unites us but conversion. We can be united only on the path, directed toward the perfection of charity and holiness that we will all find in Heaven.

Perfection in this world is in constant conversion. Perhaps we are afraid of conversion precisely because we believe that it asks us to be perfect and not to be on a path toward a perfection that is a grace of God. We fear to be called to die instead of to live with fullness. Conversion means walking with Jesus, following him, being with Him, even if we are always poor sinners. What can be more beautiful for us in this world?!

And this is how St. Benedict asks the brothers or sisters of each monastery to remain united. The *conversatio morum* unites us on the path of conversion; a unity that is already perfect only in the charity of bearing each other's imperfection with patience and without disdain. How beautiful the community will be which does not insist on being united by perfection but by conversion! For it will be united by the charity of faith reaching out in hope.

For all the baptized conversion means responding to the call and mission to let ourselves be redeemed to the fullest, to live as sons and daughters of God who transmit to all, fraternally, the tenderness of the Father.

Have a good journey of Lent! And for each other let us ask, as St. Benedict teaches us, for the grace to be able to live this time in expectation of Easter "in the joy of the Holy Spirit" (RB 49:6).

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Fr. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'M'.

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