

General Chapter of the Cistercian Order
Homily at the Votive Mass of the Holy Spirit
for the opening of the General Chapter
Rome, October 7, 2015

Readings: Joel 3:1-5; John 7:37-39

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

the votive Mass of the Holy Spirit is the true beginning of a General Chapter, and of any ecclesial assembly. It is like taking the deep breath that makes it possible to start a journey, or pronounce a phrase, or sing a song. Every baby that is born must start living in the world with a great inspiration, drawing a great breath. If this does not happen, the baby dies, suffocates. Its heart was already beating in the womb of its mother, but the great newness of birth is that the baby must breathe. And this fundamental act of human existence is provoked by a dramatic need, which, furthermore, coincides with the first cry of the newborn. The need to breathe, the need for air, for oxygen, is the first shout, the first question, perhaps the first prayer of our life. We are missing something without which we cannot live.

Perhaps in this initial moment of life the human being symbolically relives the mysterious moment when the first Adam, molded from clay, received the breath of life directly from God, as the book of Genesis recounts it: “Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being” (Gen. 2:7).

Every human life begins from that point, from being material, earth, to which God transmits a breath of life, which is a symbolic image, taken indeed from our need to breathe, to express a much deeper mystery, the mystery of our need of the Holy Spirit to live truly, to be “living beings” that live from the life of God.

At the beginning of anything, at the beginning of each day, of each moment of life, of each task, of each encounter, we should therefore become like newborn babies, “*quasi modo geniti infantes*” (1 Pt 2:2), whose need is to receive the breath that makes life possible. St. Benedict reminds us of this at the beginning of the Rule: “First of all, when you begin to do any good work, ask, insisting greatly in prayer, that it be [the Lord] himself who brings it to completion” (RB Prol. 4).

There is no beginning to a good work, there is no beginning to a work that will reach completion, if we do not start from our need for the Holy Spirit, that it be incarnated in our hearts, in our lives, in our encounters, in our words, in our whole humanity. Every work is good if it is a work of God, if it is a work animated by God, by the living Breath of God. God wants that we be the ones who work, that our freedom act, that our faculties be engaged, that our creativity be expressed, but only if we are animated by

the Holy Spirit will our work be able to come to completion as a good work of God. And the only way to graft ourselves onto the life of God is the act of our freedom which asks, which prays, which beseeches. And if the work is to be shared, God loves for us to ask together, to be united when we ask. That is how the great work of God which is the Church began and always continues: “All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers” (Acts 1:14). The commemoration this very day of Our Lady of the Rosary reminds us of this.

“Then afterwards I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit” (Joel 3:1-2).

In what does this prophetic capacity given to all, of which the Prophet Joel speaks, consist? In reality, even now that the messianic times announced by Joel have been completed, even after Pentecost, we see quite well, like St. Paul, that not all are apostles, not all are prophets or teachers, not all work miracles, not all speak in tongues... (cf. 1 Cor 12:29-30). In what sense, then, are we all prophets? Joel makes us understand a bit later: “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Joel 3:5).

The universal prophetic gift, made to all the faithful, is to know whom we must invoke, to know the divine Name, the divine Presence, to which we present our neediness, from whom we beg for Salvation, the living Breath that allows us to live and to give life to the world. We are all prophets if we call on the Lord, but also if we make known to others, to all, by our prayer, who He is who saves us, who it is who saves us truly, certainly; who He is who listens to us, who is tenderly attentive to all the little ones who cry out to Him.

Only one who begs, who prays, is an authoritative prophet; only the one who asks salvation of God is a credible prophet in whom we can place our trust, from whom we can request the discernment that orients us, the correction that puts us back on the right path.

For this reason, at the beginning of the General Chapter, as at every meeting of the Order, and in every community, it is important to start off with the awareness that the true prophetic office, the one that will illuminate us in these days, but also the one that we are called to express in the world, is above all the prophecy of prayer, of invoking the Lord who saves us. We are prophets if we show that we ask Jesus Christ for salvation, not ourselves, not our powers and abilities, nor the power of the world.

Also in the Gospel that we have heard Jesus demonstrates his role as the He whom we can and must call upon to have Salvation. Jesus is up on his feet and cries out (Jn 7:37). It is clear to sight and to hearing, it is clear to faith, whom we must call upon, what Name we must invoke, what Salvation we can attain.

Jesus defines himself as He to whom to turn to obtain the Spirit in abundance. “Streams of living water” flow from His breast and from ours, if we give our thirst to Christ, if, suffering from thirst, we beg for living water from Him.

Whoever offers his thirst to Christ in prayer becomes a source of life for others.

For this reason, during the General Chapter as well, if we want to obtain great life and vitality for our communities, if we want to obtain the Holy Spirit for the Order, our first concern should be to beg, to carry our thirst to Christ, to bring him the thirst of the brothers and sisters we represent, and of all the people who, in one way or another, have entrusted themselves to us, who are entrusted to our prayer, to our pastoral care, to our educational labors, to our welcome and assistance.

It would serve no point at all to come here with the notion of resolving our problems ourselves, or of winning some space of force and power for our communities. This would not be thirst for God, but thirst for dominion, which does not receive the living water of the Spirit. God asks us, rather, to share our weakness with each other, to bring our needs together, to show to each other the thirst that we have for Him, and the world’s thirst. Then, indeed, streams of living water, streams of grace will be able to flow from Christ into us, and from us into our brothers and sisters, for all. Christ’s Heart is a source of the Holy Spirit that pours forth all the more abundantly as the thirst He can satisfy expands and deepens.

St. John ends this episode by saying that when Jesus spoke thus “there was not yet the Spirit, because Jesus had not yet been glorified” (Jn 7:39). He speaks of the glorification of Christ in the resurrection and ascension into Heaven. But I think that we must understand this word also in the sense of the glorification that must come to Jesus from us. We receive the Spirit if we give glory to the Son, and through Him to the Father. We receive streams of living water, if we live for the glory of Christ, that is, if we adore Him, if we prefer Him, as St. Benedict teaches us: “Let them prefer absolutely nothing to Christ” (RB 72:11).

Prophecy, then, is an invocation, but also a preference. It is a begging that prefers, that glorifies, that trusts Jesus more than anyone else, more than ourselves. A preference that asks everything from Christ alone. A begging that asks for Christ alone. And this glorifies Him, and makes it possible for Him to pour over us his preference for the Father, the Holy Spirit.

Our responsibility is to guide our communities, each of our brothers and sisters, essentially to pray by preferring Jesus Christ, to pray by loving, glorifying, and adoring the Lord. Then the Spirit can be given to us in abundance, and the Order and each community will be able to become truly prophetic, evangelizers, signs, that is, of the glory of Christ for the whole world.

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