



Letter of the Abbot General OCist for Lent 2023

THE FRUIT OF THE CROSS

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

here we enter the auspicious time of Lent to prepare ourselves for Easter with the whole Church. I would like to continue our listening, begun with the Christmas Letter, to Pope Francis' address to our General Chapter on October 17, 2022, focusing now on the suggestions that are useful for our journey of conversion, in order to live our charism of "observing Jesus together." In the Pentecost Letter I will explore more deeply the Pope's invitation to live our vocation in the great symphony of the Church.

Being converted by observing Christ

To grasp the positive meaning of the Christian conversion to which we are invited, it is important to understand that it is not only a transformation of our hearts, our thinking, and our behavior. It is above all a paschal passage from ourselves to Christ, from our life to that of Christ in us. The repentant thief crucified beside Jesus did not have time to change his life, to improve it, to correct it, but asked the Savior to take his whole person, and so his death was an Easter birth to eternal life with Him (cf. Lk 23:39-43). Only by observing Jesus, hearing his word and adhering to his presence, do we truly convert, allowing the Holy Spirit to reproduce in us the living image of Jesus Christ, the beloved son of the Father.

During my sabbatical month with the Bernardine nuns of Hynning, in England, I thought a lot about St. Benedict's *habitare secum* in the cave of Subiaco. St. Gregory the Great explains in chapter 3 of the second book of *Dialogues* that Benedict "dwelt with himself (...) seeing himself always before the eyes of the Creator." This is how St. Benedict's face became a reflection of God's good gaze. In fact, it was from that moment that Benedict became the father of monks, beginning to welcome disciples and found monasteries.

True conversion consists in allowing the living and present God to transform our lives into his image, to love as God loves, to forgive as he forgives, to serve as he serves, giving life as he gives it.

But what is the means through which this transformation takes place? It takes place through the communion Christ grants us to live with him and the Father, in the gift of the Holy Spirit.

“There is no communion without conversion”

The Pope told us in his address, "There is no communion without conversion." This is especially fundamental for us monks and nuns who are called, as we read in Chapter 49 of the Rule, to constantly live an observance of Lent (cf. RB 49:1), and especially to take the vow of "*conversatio morum*" (RB 58:17), that is, of conversion following the life of the monastery, in obedience and fraternity.

Pope Francis told us this after inviting us to walk together by living our differences in symphonic harmony, participating in the mission of the Church that constantly brings us out of ourselves to meet others. If we are to allow God to transform our lives, the conversion that is asked of us is to open ourselves to the communion for which Jesus shed his blood on the Cross to unite us with the Father and all humanity. Indeed, the Pope goes on to say that conversion "is necessarily the fruit of the Cross of Christ and the action of the Spirit, both in individuals and in communities." We are not called to conversion to mortify ourselves but to participate fully in the Paschal Mystery, accepting Christ's gift of self unto death and the outpouring of the Spirit of Pentecost. Christian conversion then expresses a desire for fullness of life, for the life of Christ in us, which is a life of filial communion with God and fraternal communion with all. Precisely because "there is no communion without conversion," conversion for us is a good to be desired, a path of salvation on which to walk with joy, even if it demands sacrifice, because it opens us to the greatest gift, that of loving communion with God and our brothers and sisters.

Conversion to communion is the daily bread of our community life. The life of a community is beautiful and fruitful if it is a patient stimulus and merciful help for all its members to convert to communion, each at his own pace and according to his personality.

Of course, this conversion is impossible without the grace of the Holy Spirit. But the Paraclete cannot refuse us the grace to accept the gift of the communion of love that he himself is in the Trinity and the Church.

Therefore, let us ask ourselves sincerely: do we desire every day to be converted to communion with God and with the brothers and sisters we meet?

“From a closed-off self to an open self”

But what does the path of conversion to communion in Christ consist of?

The Pope explains it to us with a recurring image in his magisterium. He told us that our vocation "entails a constant commitment to conversion from a closed self to an open self, from a self-centered heart to a heart that goes out of itself and encounters the other. And this, by analogy, also applies to community: from a self-referential community to an extroverted community, in the good sense of the word, welcoming and missionary. This is the movement that the Holy Spirit always seeks to imprint on the Church, working in each of its members and in each of its communities and institutions. A movement that goes back to Pentecost, the 'baptism' of the Church."

We seem to hear St. Benedict, when in the Prologue of the Rule he promises us that "as one progresses in monastic conversion and faith, one runs on the path of the Lord's commandments with a heart expanded by the inexpressible sweetness of love" (Pro. 49). Expansion of the heart is precisely the transition from a closed, self-centered heart to an

open heart that goes out of itself to encounter the other. The open self is a self that truly becomes itself by encountering God as Father and others as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Our communities are called to always take the same path of conversion from closing in on themselves to openness that welcomes the other into itself or goes out to visit it. In the Pentecost Letter, we will elaborate on this aspect, which, as the Pope says, is "the movement that the Holy Spirit always seeks to imprint on the Church." But it is good that, taking advantage of Lent, each of us and each community should meditate on what it means for us to participate in this movement of openness of heart toward a life of communion. It is not primarily a spatial movement, but precisely a movement of conversion to communion that allows the Holy Spirit to dilate our hearts. A dilated heart is not a broken, divided or dissipated heart, but a bigger heart, bigger as a heart, bigger as "I," because our heart is made in the image of a God who first came out of himself to reach us with his infinite charity. Thus we understand that conversion is for us a process of divinization in charity that the Spirit wants to accomplish in us and in the world.

Near the monastery where I spent my sabbatical month is a beautiful "castle" that we visited one day, guided by the very kind and welcoming owner. She told us that many years ago, after World War II, her father-in-law, inheriting the castle in a bad state and aware of the burden that its management would represent, managed to ask for advice from St. Padre Pio of Pietrelcina, who replied, "If you always keep the door open, you will never lose the house."

I immediately thought of the Pope's invitation to our hearts and monasteries: do we really want to continue living by remaining open to encounter with God and humanity?

“Blessed are you who are poor!”

But precisely because communion is an immense grace, the condition for receiving it cannot be what we are or have, but poverty of spirit. And this is another point in Pope Francis' address that it will be good for us to meditate on this Lent.

The Pope, at the end of his address, told us:

"Another aspect on which I want to encourage you is your intention of greater poverty, both in spirit and in goods, so as to be more available to the Lord, with all your strengths, with the frailties and the blessings he gives you. Therefore, let us praise God for everything, for old age and youth, for sickness and good health, for the communities in 'autumn' and those in 'spring.' The essential thing is not to allow the evil one to rob us of hope! The first thing the evil one tries to do is to steal hope, so he snatches it out of our hands, always. Because evangelical poverty is full of hope, based on the beatitude that the Lord announces to his disciples: 'Blessed are you who are poor, for the kingdom of God is yours' (Lk 6:20)."

As the Pope describes it, poverty, both of the heart and of material goods, is the secret of joy and hope. It is the first of the Beatitudes, that is, the first and fundamental renunciation of ourselves that God fills with confident hope in Him.

Without poverty, we cannot be available to the Lord, we cannot serve Him, especially in the monastery as "the school of the Lord's service" (RB Prol. 45). Poverty sets us free to serve, like Jesus, like the Virgin Mary, "the handmaid of the Lord" (Lk 1:38) who in the Magnificat reveals her joy to serve in poverty: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God, my savior, because he has looked upon the humility of his handmaid." (Luke 1:46-48)

In the Rule of St. Benedict, humility is presented as the deepest form of poverty because it is poverty of the heart in relationship with everyone and everything. It is the humus, the soil, that bears fruit for the kingdom of heaven by welcoming the seed of the Word of God.

We often think we cannot adequately serve the Lord, the Church and humanity because we lack means, people, capacity, time, and energy. Instead, the Pope reminds us that the law of evangelical fruitfulness involves upside-down criteria compared to the world, because it is God who gives to bear fruit for the Kingdom. This is why the Pope invites us to live all our poverty and frailty with gratitude, praising God, that is, already experiencing the blessedness promised to the poor.

For those who complain, frailty, old age, sickness, the autumn season that so many of our communities experience, are a diminishment that tends toward exhaustion, the end, death. For those who give thanks, for those who praise God, these same realities that impoverish us become stepping-stones to Heaven, they are opportunities for offering and spiritual growth that makes us joyful witnesses to the paschal victory of Christ the Lord.

We can then ask ourselves: what poverty are we called to desire today, personally and in our community, in order to be freer to serve the kingdom of God? Do we praise the Lord for all that impoverishes us?

Guardians of hope

This witness is the hope that the Pope and the Church ask us to guard, defending it from the evil one: "The essential thing is not to allow the evil one to rob us of hope!"

We know that, from St. Anthony of Egypt onward, monastic life has always been lived as a frontline combat against the forces of evil that undermine all of humanity. This struggle, which many considered "unfashionable," returns with tragic relevance in the face of the evident raging of evil in the affairs of the world and the Church. Many perceive, even without having faith, that contempt for life and its dignity, contempt for the poor, for creation, as well as the wars and oppressions from which peoples suffer, will not be eradicated by politics and weapons. What is needed is a victory of Christ's humble love in the depths of hearts, a victory of the Cross against the dark forces of evil.

By dying and rising again for us, the Son of God introduced into the world an inexhaustible and invincible source of love and hope: "One of the soldiers with a lance struck his side, and immediately blood and water came out" (Jn. 19:34). Mary standing by the Cross is the icon of hope that is nourished by God's infinite love for humanity. We do not lose hope of salvation for all when we draw it from the inexhaustible source of Christ's love. The evil one knows this, which is why he wants to steal our hope by turning our gaze away from the One who loves us all, even though we have pierced him.

May our commitment, Lenten and permanent, really be to "look at Jesus together," like Mary and John, guarding hope for all humanity!



Fr. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori OCist