

1st Chapter of the Abbot General OCist for the MFC – 26.08.2013

This year I will again accompany the Monastic Formation Course with daily Chapters on the Rule of St. Benedict. I am increasingly convinced that the Cistercian Order and the other Orders to which you belong have an urgent need to renew themselves and to find their identity again in the school of St. Benedict. This, after all, was the awareness that led the founders of Citeaux to found a new monastery. And in the history of our Orders every good renewal has always been a return to the source of the Benedictine charism.

To return to the source does not mean to go backwards, to close one's eyes to the passage of time, to history that keeps moving on, to the changes, whether cultural, psychological, economic, etc., that mark the journey of the human adventure. To return to the source means, above all, to return to the water at its source, to its purity and freshness, so that it can also flow through the stretch of the river that we are called to travel on today.

The first piece of classical music that I remember hearing was the Moldau by Smetana. When I was 3 or 4 years old, my nursery school teacher made us listen to it. We children were told to rest our heads on our arms and close our eyes. Then we had to say what we recognized in the various passages of this symphony: the water's calm flow, the rapids, the village dance, and so on. Smetana begins with the famous theme of the source of the Vltava River. This theme is unmistakable, and it returns at each stage of the river, after each of its changes, whether quiet or stormy. And this theme of the source is what we must always find again in the lively flow of the great Benedictine movement, and generally in the great monastic movement.

Our own Orders and Congregations also highlight the more or less gross changes in the course of this great "Benedictine river"; changes which were also stormy. For example, the birth of the Cistercian Order with respect to Cluny, and the separation of the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance from the Cistercian Order were not without conflicts or agitation. But all this forms part of the flow of a river, and in the end, it is unavoidable if the river wants to get to the sea. Without these storms, the river would stop, and it would become a putrefying, dead pond.

However, the true reforms of every ecclesial movement, those that get the stagnant waters moving again, always occur in a pool of spring water. This new water, this living water, that is able to start moving a pool towards the sea, is a water that does not come from the pond itself, but from the mountain, from the source.

Sometimes the Holy Spirit transforms the water of the spring into a raging torrent that dislodges the stagnant water, even carrying its impurities with it down to the valley. Then, as the river renews its course, the impurities brought by the raging torrent are deposited, and so the river continues to flow with purer water and at a more tranquil pace until a further more or less stormy renewal is needed.

But for the river to flow, water from the source is always needed. It is not the sea that draws the water from the river towards itself; it is the headwater that pushes the water towards the sea. The sea lures to itself the rivers feeding the springs, forming clouds that give rain or snow on the mountains which in turn feed the springs. God, who is our destiny, the purpose, the end of our life and vocation, always nourishes in the Church the source of our flow or path towards Him. These are the so-called charisms, such as the charism of St. Benedict, that the Holy Spirit creates in the Church to lead us all to the salvation and holiness to which we are called by God's love.

Recently I had to give a commentary to nuns on a very significant passage of St. Paul's Letter to Timothy: "Revive the gift of God in you" (2 Tim 1:6). In Timothy's case it is the gift of the priesthood received by the laying on of Paul's hands. But every vocation is a gift from God that the Church communicates to us. And in our freedom we are always called upon to revive in ourselves God's gift of our life's vocation and mission.

In 2 Timothy 1:6, Paul literally says, "rekindle the flame [*anazopyrein*] of the charism of God which is in you." In the Latin translation it even speaks of the resurrection of the charism: "*admoneo te ut resuscites gratiam Dei quae est in te*".

The ideas of "rekindle the flame" and of "resuscitate" make us aware of the importance of the responsibility we have towards the gift of our vocation, towards every vocation, both personal and communal, towards the vocation of every religious movement or family that the Spirit raises up in the Church. A vocation is a charism, a grace, a gift of God, but we are called, urged, to fan or rekindle this flame. I prefer the idea of rekindle the flame, rather than to revive or resuscitate, because a resurrection requires the power to give life to something dead, instead to rekindle a flame means to restore oxygen and fuel to a fire that is not completely extinguished, as under the ashes there are at least some burning embers.

This is because every gift of God is something definitive as Paul writes to the Romans "The gifts and calling of God are irrevocable" (11:29). But our freedom, to which every gift of God is entrusted, is responsible for the gift

that is either a blazing flame or a smoldering ember under the ashes. It is our responsibility to allow the charism to burn, to be a blazing flame, and not only a dying ember. We are responsible for a charism that is truly alive and blazing.

The gift of God is a bit like what Christ in the Book of Revelation calls the "first love" (Rev 2:4) when he addresses the Church of Ephesus: the flame of the first love that we have abandoned and which we are constantly called to rekindle. How? Jesus tells us a little later when he addresses the Church of Laodicea: "Be zealous and convert yourself. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come into his home and eat with him and he with me." (Rev 3:19-20)

In short, you have to open the door to Christ, so that there is an air flow that will rekindle the flame of the first love, of the gift of God that first ignited us, that sparked the beginning of our Order, that at the beginning fired up the Church on the day of Pentecost.

"Be zealous and convert yourself. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come into his home and eat with him and he with me. "

The elements that allow the flame of God's gift to be rekindled are zeal and conversion which allow the word and presence of Christ to come into our lives, into our hearts, into our communities. It is only in this way that our life and vocation find again their veracity, because they are reanimated at the source of God's gift, at the source of the presence of Christ and the Gospel.

We see clearly, even 50 years after the Council, that the renewal of the veracity of our monastic life is always something we must recapture. The Council launched a work of renewal that was not just for a few years or decades after the Council, or for some external reforms that were done more or less in a hurry, such as the adaptation of the Constitutions. The Council also encouraged a rekindling of the flame of God's gift of our vocation, and this must always be done by returning to the origin, to the beginnings, to the headwaters of the first love, or rather returning to the first Loved One, to Christ, who calls us through a particular charism, which for us has its inexhaustible source in Saint Benedict and his Rule. For this reason, in our on-going formation it is important to never tire of drawing ever new and ever more deeply from the source of St. Benedict's charism.

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