

26th Chapter of the Abbot General OCist for the MFC - 26.09.2013

Everything we have seen together during this month could be summed up in the simple awareness that our fundamental vocation is to learn to put the presence of God who works in our midst at the center of our lives, no matter the type of observance we are in and no matter the types of activities that we dedicate ourselves to in the various monasteries. This is what St. Benedict wants to teach us, in particular with the *Opus Dei*, the Divine Office which is that constantly repeated action of communion with God and with our brothers and sisters. The radiation of our lives, wherever we are and whatever we do, the radiation of our community and of our Orders, is a consequence of the decision and the obedience to put God who works at the center of our lives: at the center of our time, at the center of our space, at the center of our hearts, at the center of our relationships, at the center of our work. This is the profound essence of all the Christian and monastic virtues, of all asceticism, of the continuous conversion of our lives. This is how we truly follow Christ, as the apostles did, as the women of the Gospel did; looking at Jesus, we are continually formed to perceive that all the good and powerful radiation of his Person came from the fact that he put in the center his relationship with the Father.

When the disciples asked Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray," at the beginning they thought to ask for a method of prayer, a spiritual way, because they add: "...just as John taught his disciples" (Luke 11:1). Of course, John the Baptist was a mystic, a man of prayer who epitomized in his prayer the whole tradition of Jewish prayer. But prayer has a totally original dimension in Jesus, absolutely new with respect to all the religious traditions of humanity, that is, this dimension of communion with the Father in the Holy Spirit. As I said, prayer for Jesus is his nature, his identity, the depth of his being as the Son of God. And it is this that Christ transmits to his disciples and in the end, this is the reason why he came. For in the prayer of the "Our Father," in Jesus' filial prayer which he transmitted to us sinners, there is the heart of redemption; there is the grace of being adopted children of God that Christ communicated to us by dying and rising for us and giving us his Spirit.

After teaching the "Our Father" in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus continues with a parable: "Suppose one of you has a friend and at midnight you go to him and say to him: 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend has arrived from his journey and I have nothing to offer him.' And if the one inside answers, 'Do not bother me, the door is already locked, my children and I are in bed, I cannot get up to give you the bread.' I tell you that, even if he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up to give him whatever he needs." (Luke 11:5-8)

Years ago in Hauterive, we had our monthly community sharing on this passage of the Gospel, and after all of us had expressed our opinions, impressions, and reflections, I asked a very simple, elderly brother who had evidently not said anything yet what this gospel suggested to him. And he said something that has impressed me and which I think

about often as if it were a maxim of the Desert Fathers: "We must pray so that all people may become friends of God."

This simple brother understood the essence of Christian prayer, of the prayer of Christ and Christians: that all of us become friends of God, persons who live in an exchange of love with God. In this Gospel, Jesus speaks primarily of human friendship: a friend goes to his friend because another friend has come to visit him. Humanly speaking, however, friendship ...does not flow back and forth. The one who is going to ask for the three loaves of bread, goes there thinking of being able to share with a sleeping friend his friendship with the one who has arrived at his home from a trip. He asks for *three* loaves of bread, as if he wanted to invite the friend who gives the bread to eat it with him and with the other friend. He thinks that friendship can circulate among them, stronger than the annoyance it causes, more important than lost sleep, more beautiful than earned comfort: "the door has already been locked, my children and I are in bed." Sooner or later the human capacity for friendship is exhausted; it is blocked; it does not flow from one heart to another, also because it is not instinctive. Then the friend must insist and compensate for the weakness of the friendship by becoming a nuisance, as if to break the blockade of privatization and egotistic comfort that prevents the friendship from circulating, breathing, spreading itself.

But with God, our request does not force a weak and lazy friendship. You can always count on the friendship of God, on the love of the Father, especially if we ask him to nourish and share with Him our human friendship, which is always unprepared, always lacking in the necessary bread, and above all in the love necessary to respond to the need to love each other.

God is never "blocked" at home. He "has nowhere to lay his head" (Mt 8:20), he does not have a door to lock, nor a bed to lie in. God is not afraid of our requests; he is not afraid of our needs. We are, yes! We are afraid of what the other might ask us, because we always have the impression that love and giving might deprive us of something. We are afraid that an open friendship with God and with our brothers and sisters might "lessen" us. This betrays the fact that our treasure, the value we give to our life, is still not love itself, is not friendship itself. We do not understand that the three loaves of bread we have are worth much more if they are shared and if they become the subject and opportunity to grow in friendship with others.

The Kingdom of God grows and spreads when we communicate an openness to friendship with each other. The man who goes to disturb his friend at midnight, goes there because first he allowed himself to be disturbed by his friend who arrived from a trip. He has opened the door, he didn't say: "My door is locked and I'm in bed," that is, "I'm safe and secure; come back tomorrow morning when you won't disturb me!" No, he opened his door to his friend, even though he realized that he did not have bread in his house, that is, he realized that to be a real friend, he could not remain alone, but must involve the third friend in his hospitality, asking him for three loaves of bread, and even

inviting him to come and eat with him and with his other friend in a moment of celebration of friendship that would have warmed and illuminated the night, overcoming the solitude of each of them.

I think it is essential for us to understand that true Christian prayer is a mystery to be included in the vocation of every human heart to live in communion, in friendship. This is how we must understand the meaning of community life and the role of prayer in it. This is how we must understand the intrinsic link between community life and the Divine Office, between fraternity and prayer, and how it is possible to expand fraternity and prayer to include the *ubicumque* of all humanity.

In a certain sense, Jesus inserts our need for prayer into the awareness of our inability to truly love and to respond to the need for love and friendship that is directed towards us by our neighbor. The person who wishes to answer the need of another with friendship sooner or later will find themselves in front of a locked door and before the laziness of the other, if they remain locked up in the context of human relationships. The locked door and being already in bed are symbols of our fear and our laziness to respond to the other's need for love. Prayer is like the realization that only God is a friend who does not disappoint, who is not afraid to love, who is not lazy to love: He is the only one who can and knows how to give us all the bread we need in order to be able to give it to others, and this bread is Himself. Christ is the Bread of Life. And only by turning to Him can the friendships among us revive and expand.

I am reminded of the episode in which the Greeks go to Philip to petition him: "We want to see Jesus" (Jn 12:21). Philip goes to tell Andrew, and Andrew and Philip both go together to tell Jesus. The desire to see Christ is the deepest desire of the human heart, it is a universal desire. There is no greater friendship, there is no greater love, than that which makes us intermediaries of this desire between the whole of humanity and Jesus himself. And Philip understands that this universal intention of prayer cannot be carried alone, he must go with his friend Andrew to present it to Jesus. When we pray the Divine Office together, we should think about this. We should think that we are like Philip and Andrew who, before the Lord, are ambassadors of the desire that everyone has to meet him, because "to see Jesus" means to meet him; it means to become his friend. Even Philip and Andrew constantly needed to meet him, and their friendship was animated and always renewed by this desire and this experience. For this reason, they could not do anything else but welcome the Greeks, that is, the whole of humanity, into their friendship created by the encounter with Jesus and always aimed at staying with Him.

This is what should always be happening in our communities, if we want them to stay alive, and above all, if we want them to be always renewed in the work of Christ's love for each of us and radiated out into the whole world.

In the monastic communities I visit around the world I always find problems with fraternal relationships. It is human, and God knows that we are poor sinners. The locked

door and the comfort of the bed, that is, the fear and laziness in welcoming one another, in sharing the needs of each other, are our heart's poverty that continually emerges and from which we must always be converted by the grace of God. The love which shares three loaves of bread with the others reflects the Trinitarian gift of the Holy Spirit in the world; it is a decision that we must continually renew, with humility, and above all, with prayer.

But the important thing is not to forget that the Lord has formed our communities so that there should be a friendship among us that seems as if it were suspended between God's mercy and the misery of the world. Philip and Andrew, who starting from the need of the Greeks go together to Jesus, are the same disciples that Jesus challenges when he sees the hungry crowd to feed and for whom he feels compassion (cf. Jn 6:5-9). The Christian community, the community of the disciples of Jesus, is a friendship always urged by Jesus to think about the needs of the world and always urged by the world's need to turn to Jesus. When we lose consciousness and contact with these two poles of the Christian event, precisely the mercy of Christ and the misery of the world, we also lose the value, the beauty and the task of friendship between us, and of the communion among members of the same community.

I am sure that many community problems, many infidelities, many divisions, and especially so much sadness would disappear from our communities if we didn't forget that God has united us in order to convey the pleas of the world to Christ and to transmit the mercy of Christ to the world.

Fr Mauro - Giuseppe Lepori OCist

I cannot conclude this last Chapter of this 13th Monastic Formation Course without thanking God and all those who have collaborated towards its success with such generosity and dedication. I think of the Procurator Father Mainrado, of Agnes with Piotr, of the Sisters Daughters of the Heart of Mary who have worked in the kitchen, laundry, etc., of Salvatore and all the professors; and I think of the interpreters, in particular those of our Order who have generously made themselves available, and of their communities who loaned them to us, at times with much sacrifice: Sr. Aline, Br. Francesco, Father Ignatius, Mother Matilde, Mother Eugenia, Sr. Marina; and I think of the four translators who worked every day on the Chapters: Mother Eugenia, Annemarie, Sr. Michaela and Eileen. And think of those who were in charge of the Liturgy: Father Mainrado, Br. Francesco, Br. Galgano, Sr. Agatha, Br. Emmanuel and Don Gerardo. And then I think of each one of you, of all the services that you have given to each other, and of how you have contributed to the fraternal and friendly environment, but also of the prayer and silence of this course, and for your commitment to listen and learn.

The course is a work of communion in which everyone has a valuable role. And a work of communion is a work of God that when it begins, it never finishes producing fruit.

A big thank you to all and let us remain united in this work praying for each other!