

1st Chapter by the Abbot General, M-G. Lepori OCist, for The Monastic Formation Course, 25.08.2014

This is the fourth time, I am beginning a series of Chapters for the Monastic Formation Course. It is my desire to accompany you during this month of intense formation and fraternal life. Each year this series of Chapters tries to follow and deepen a particular theme or themes that I think are important not only for you, but also for the progress of our communities. Naturally, my point of departure is, above all, based on what I see and experience in the Cistercian Order in various parts of the world which is the reality I am always in contact with. But I have seen that many other monastic communities share the same concerns and desires, and whose members, moreover, are also well represented among you.

As I previously announced in my Lenten letter to the Order, this year the theme that I would like to follow and deepen is that of mysticism, of the mystical heart of our Christian and monastic vocation. In the conclusion of my report on the situation of the Order which I gave at the last Synod, I said that it is "necessary to find again a mystical dimension at the heart, or rather at the source, of our vocation. Mysticism does not mean living outside of reality, rather it means living with a clear awareness of the total reality. Therefore, it means to put our relationship with God, our experience of God at the center of our lives and of our heart. If I promoted in our Order, and along with the Trappists and Benedictines, the cause of St. Gertrude the Great to be declared a Doctor of the Church, it was not principally for the title of Doctor in itself, but rather it was to help awaken the mystical dimension of our vocation in us and among us. And in this regard, St. Gertrude, together with St. Bernard and our other Cistercian fathers and mothers, is a good model. Sometimes, looking at our communities, at how the liturgy and community life are lived, I wonder if these people are Cistercians for the love of Christ or for another reason? Do they truly meet Jesus? Do they have a living relationship with Him? Do they live for Him, with Him, in Him? (...)

Cistercian mysticism is a mysticism that includes a biblical, liturgical, patristic, communitarian, Eucharistic, human, spousal, filial and a fraternal communion mysticism.... We have to help ourselves rediscover the source of this life in order to live our vocation, in order to be true witnesses of Christ in the midst of the world, and in order to be able to transmit this life to young people; otherwise we abuse their freedom. When we have vocations and we keep them, capitalizing on the superficial reasons which they believe attracted them due to the fragility of their narcissism, their formalism, their clericalism, it means that we, too, do not experience the profound reasons for following Christ. Only these deep reasons grant perseverance, a faithful fruitfulness, and happiness, without always having to look for new compensations to fill the void." (XVIII Ordinary Synod of the Cistercian Order, *Report of the Abbot General On the State of the Order, Concluding Reflections*; www.ocist.org)

The desire to examine in depth this dimension of a life lived following Jesus, as I explained in my Lenten Letter, was born particularly during my pilgrimage to the Holy Land earlier this year, and above all, by a phrase from the Song of Songs which deeply impressed me while I was praying Vigils on Calvary in the Basilica of the Holy Sepulcher. It was this phrase of the Bridegroom to the bride: "You have seized my heart, my sister, my bride, you have seized my heart with a glance of your eyes!" (Song 4:9). In that sentence I perceived the intensity of the relationship of love that Christ offers us from the Cross; it is a love that reaches the point of giving us his own heart as a gift in exchange for the price of one simple glance.

When we speak of "mysticism," particularly, of Christian mysticism, we must understand it within the revelation that Christ has shown us, that is, of the immense value that communion with us, a deep communion to the point of giving his heart, has for him. It is the precious pearl which Jesus speaks about in the Gospel (cf. Mt 13:45-46). It is the most precious pearl of all that He gives us, free of charge, without imposing it on us, but without which we can not possess the kingdom of God; that is, everything for which Jesus, being born, living, dying and rising for us, came to give humanity. It is, therefore, a central experience in the Christian life without which all the rest is in danger of losing its meaning and its vitality. It is the central experience of love which, like the heart in the body, transmits life and fervor to everything else.

As I pointed out during the Synod, often it seems as if this central experience is not really that important. We do not seem to be aware of it until the drama of life makes us understand our need for it. St. Gertrude wrote that one day the Lord gave her the grace of knowing and contemplating the inner depths of her own heart and so she realized that previously she had ignored her heart and had not valued it any more than she had her feet. (cf. *The Herald of Divine Love*, II,2,1). We forget about our physical heart, too, until we experience fatigue, fear, or pain which makes it start to beat faster. However, it is not really serious if we are not conscious of our physical heart. But if we are not aware of our heart in the biblical, spiritual sense, it is as if it cannot really beat; it cannot give life to the whole body. This lack of awareness of the profound nature of our heart makes us less alive, not only in living the extreme and dramatic experiences of life, but also in living daily life, that is, the life that is given us to live fully every day. It is urgent that we learn to understand how to consciously live this central experience of Christianity because it is precisely the central experience of our human nature; it is the heart of our humanity; it is the discovery of our hearts. It is only through this central experience that a life, a vocation, a community, an Order, the whole Church can continually renew itself and flourish.