

3rd Chapter of the Abbot General M-G. Lepori OCist for the MFC – 27.08.2014

"In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28), says Saint Paul to the Athenians. The coming of Christ introduces us into a new awareness of the relationship of our life with God. "God," Paul said, "established the times of the existence and the boundaries of the places where they (the various peoples) would live, so that they would search for him, and perhaps grope around for him like blind men and find him – though indeed he is not far from each one of us" (Acts 17:26-27). The desire for God is within the human person; they seek Him, spurred on by creation which is a sign of God. But instinctively, they seek for Him as an external object, to touch, to grasp, as if we do not know where he is hiding. Abandoned to our instinctive, even religious, concepts, life becomes like a cruel joke, in which the Deity has cynical fun hiding himself and making one seek him, groping around like a poor blind person. In reality, from the sin of Adam on, it is the human person who has chosen to hide from the God in whom he or she lives, moves and exists, and without whom he or she cannot live, move, exist. It is absurd! It is as if a fish wants to hide from the sea, as if a bird in flight wants to hide from the air. But it is God, who is the one who must reduce himself to being blindfolded in order to search, to grope around, for the human person, even if God knows that, in relation to Himself, the human person is very near, indeed he or she is in Him, he or she lives, moves and exists in Him. «The Lord God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?". The man replied: "I heard your voice in the garden and I was afraid because I was naked, and so I hid myself." (Gen. 3:9-10).

The estrangement of the human person from God by sin is like trying to force a mother to search for the child she is carrying in her womb. The human is lost in a space where it would be impossible to get lost; they have left a space outside of which there is nothing, from which no one can leave. Madeleine Delbr el expressed it so well, with a brilliant irony about herself: "*Mon Dieu, si vous  tes partout, comment se fait-il que je sois si souvent ailleurs?* – My God, if you're everywhere, how is it possible that I am so often elsewhere?" (*Alcide*, Ed du Seuil, 1968, p. 61).

I emphasize these things because it is important that we focus on the existential situation of our search for God, of our need for God. It is useless to always tell oneself, as I often do, that I should pray more, that I should meditate more, that I should listen more to the word of God, worship more, be more attentive in the celebration of the sacraments and in praying the Divine Office, that I should meet Christ in my brothers and sisters better, if I do not realize the stage on which I and others are acting out our lives, if I do not realize the global stage, the "great theater of the world" which also includes God, and all the space that God is and creates for the unfolding of the human adventure. If we are not aware of this stage, we continue to stumble in the dark as blind persons, in a space where we have turned off the light, or better where there is light, but we have closed our eyes to it. And we do not realize that we are already touching the God we claim to grasp in some hidden corner of that dark space. It is like the air that fills a space, like water in which a swimmer continues to feel the water flowing over his whole body. These

are just images which have their limitations, but they can give us an idea of the novelty of Paul's message in Athens: "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

Paul expresses an awareness that often resonates in the Psalms, as in the magnificent Psalm 138:

«Lord, you have searched me and you know me,
You know when I sit and when I stand,
you know my thoughts from afar,
you observe my path and my rest,
you are familiar with all my ways.
A word is not yet on my tongue
and, behold, O Lord, you know it completely.
You surround me, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
it is so high that I cannot attain it.
Where can I go from your spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend up to heaven, you are there;
if I go down to Sheol, there you are.
If I take the wings of the dawn
and dwell in the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, "At least the darkness shall cover me
and the light around me become night, "
even the darkness is not dark for you
and the night is as bright as day;
for the darkness is as light to you.»

These are expressions that we should repeat like a sea in which we swim, like the air and light in which we fly like seagulls. Often we think of meditation on the word of God as something that we have to grasp and close in our head or in our heart. There is this aspect, too. But perhaps meditation is more a penetration into the dimension of the Word of God in which everything is, in which everything is created. The ancient monks meditated on the word of God out loud, as if to simulate acoustically the fact that everything is in the Word of God, everything is included, and we find meaning and truth by dwelling in It. It is like when you sing Gregorian chant where there is the resonance of a Romanesque church. The Word of the Lord, in which we are created, surrounds us and penetrates us at the same time: "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you want and it will be done" (Jn 15:7). It is the Word of God who tells us to abide in Him, and to let his words penetrate us, to penetrate our thoughts, our heart, our will, our desires.

In short, as the Athenians, we are called to be converted to an awareness of the mystery of God that places our life, all our inward and outward movements, our whole existence in a totally new context. Despite this, we always have within us traces of paganism, or simply traces of original sin, of Adam's hiding and fear. Sin has distorted Adam's relationship with the presence of God. It has not altered the presence of God towards the human person, but rather the presence of the human person with respect to God.

When Paul asks the question: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" (Rom 8:35), he lists everything that will never separate us from this love: "tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, the sword"; he tops this off by stating that "neither death nor life, neither angels nor principalities, neither things present nor things to come, neither powers nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. "(Rom 8:38-39)

However, there remains one thing that can separate us from this love: our refusal, our freedom to reject this love, to run away from this love that desires us. Our refusal does not annul God's love for us, rather it reduces us to saying that the light that surrounds us, in which "we live and move and exist," does not exist. It is this God that St. Paul wanted to announce to the Athenians, if he would have been allowed to continue his discourse on the risen Christ.