

5th Chapter of the Abbot General M-G. Lepori OCist for the MFC - 29.08.2014

"How beautiful you are, my love, how beautiful you are!" (Song 1:15, cf. 4:1, 6:4, 7:7).

Yesterday I said that the gaze of Jesus confers on the person his or her real beauty, the reality of beauty which is not a beautiful being in itself, rather it is a person invited by a desire for relationship, communion and friendship.

This is the beauty that was discovered one day by the Samaritan woman, who is perhaps one of the most harmed women in the Bible, as she was repudiated five times, five times cursed by her husbands. What a very low feeling of self-worth this woman must have had! Always feeling unwanted, rejected, not only by men but also by society, so much so that she goes to the well when no one else goes there, at noon, under the scorching sun when she is sure not to find anyone else. She, too, is a poor, blackened, and hidden dove. But Jesus is there for her. It is as if he has always sought to converse with her, to tell her the most profound things that he carries in his heart, things that he has not even yet told his disciples: "If you knew the gift of God and who it is who says to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him and he would have given you living water. (...) Whoever drinks the water that I shall give him will never be thirsty again. Indeed, the water I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life. (...) The hour is coming, and is now here, when true worshipers will adore the Father in spirit and in truth. For the Father also seeks such to adore him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship him in spirit and truth." (Jn 4:10-24). And he concludes with the revelation that is key to every mystery: the Messiah, "I am he who is speaking with you" (Jn 4:26).

The truth is that when Christ speaks to us of our relationship with Him, he reveals to us our true beauty. He is the Messiah, he came for this reason, to call us into communion with Him. He is the Word of God, in whom everything is, who comes to speak to us personally, unconditionally. "I am he who speaks to you." This is the Christ we are called to rediscover in the mystical dimension of Christian life. We are invited to rediscover Him who seeks us, who is already here to speak to us, who precedes us even to the place where we go to hide so no one will meet us, and to draw water with our water jug which has a limited capacity and thus it never contains enough water, it never quenches our thirst. But we think we can quench our thirst with the latest "husband" we have, whom we are ashamed to have. The Samaritan woman no longer dares to have a husband, and probably no one wants her any more as a wife. And yet she has to realize that her dissolute life has led her to meet the Bridegroom, the one who loves every soul without limit. Were she not the woman she was, she would not have had to go to get water at that hour, as if in secret. But the miracle is that the hour of our misery is also the hour of Mercy. It is the hour of our very misery, rather than another hour of worth and dignity, that coincides with the hour of Mercy. The hour of shame becomes the hour of dignity.

As for the bride in the Song of Songs who said, "Don't stare at me because I am dark, because I have been darkened by the sun" (Song 1:6), the hour in which the Samaritan woman wastes the last rays of her beauty under the mid-day sun, becomes the hour when she discovers how beautiful she is in the eyes of Christ, so much so that she no longer thinks to hide, instead she goes and wakes up the whole town during the afternoon siesta in order to lead them to the Messiah.

Perhaps we don't think about it often, but through Christ, this woman not only recovers her bridal beauty, but she also regains her fecundity as a mother. It is she who generates all her people into a personal relationship with Jesus who has renewed and saved her. «Many more believed because of His word and they said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said, for we have heard for ourselves and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world"» (Jn 4:41-42).

"We have heard for ourselves," for each of them Jesus has become the Messiah and Savior who says, "I am he who speaks to you." The Samaritan woman has generated them into this life; she has led them to a life of relationship with Christ. For, from Him who sought her face and her voice and was looking for the beauty in her, she was allowed to be the first, despite everything, to obtain from his glance and from his word that beauty that is born and reborn in the encounter with Him, in looking at oneself with Him, in dialogue with Him.

The mystical experience of the encounter with Jesus, if it is real, always has a missionary fruitfulness.

Pope Francis also stressed this point in *Evangelii Gaudium*, particularly in the passage that I quoted on one of the first days: "How much good it does us when He once more touches our lives and impels us to share his new life! (...) We need to recover a *contemplative* spirit which can help us to realize ever anew that we have been entrusted with a treasure which makes us more human and helps us to lead a new life. There is nothing more precious which we can give to others." (§ 264)

We must not forget the missionary and evangelization work of the Samaritan woman, nor that of Mary of Magdala, because it helps us to understand that a mission, a ministry, must always start from a spousal encounter with Christ.

In this regard, St. Augustine in his *Discourse on Pastors* has an extraordinary insight: "For even as Christ gave his sheep into Peter's charge, like one man passing responsibility to another, he was really seeking to make Peter one with him. He handed over his sheep so that he himself might be the head and Peter, as it were, the body – that is, the Church – so that like a bridegroom and bride they might be two in one flesh.

Before he handed his sheep over to Peter he made sure that he would not be entrusting them to someone quite separate: Peter, do you love me? And he responded, I love you. Again: do you love me? And he responded, I love you. And a third time: do you love me? And he responded, I love you (cf. Jn 21:15-17).

Christ makes certain of love and gives a firm foundation to unity. He, the one shepherd, feeds the sheep in these many shepherds, and they, the many, feed them in him, the one." (46:29-30)

I have always felt that this dialogue between the Risen Christ and Peter on the shore of Lake Tiberias in chapter 21 of John, is Peter's Song of Songs. There, Peter is called to root all the fruitfulness of his ministry and that of all the pastors of the Church, in the communion of love with Christ, that communion that Christ firmly makes with the unfaithful, denying spouse, who only in the benevolent gaze of the Bridegroom can recover her beauty.

It is important to always be aware that when we hide behind trees or in rocky crevices of any kind, we are removing ourselves from this experience; we are giving up this experience. This is due, not so much because of infidelity to the Bridegroom, rather I would say, it is due to a neglect of the spousal dimension of every Christian vocation. It seems this hiding in the most hidden places, in the deeper rock crevices, from where it is so hard to get the doves out, is the tendency to prefer being the Bridegroom's servants and slaves rather than his "beloved and blessed bride." There is a crisis of mysticism at the heart of the Christian vocation. It is a crisis at the center of the experience in which Christ offers himself to us, in which he begs to be able to live with us, in which he seeks and calls us. The crisis of friendship with Christ, the Bridegroom of our soul – this expression now sounds so old-fashioned and kitsch, so "nineteenth-century-ish" to us – this crisis is a negligence at the center of the Christian experience which is a Heart to heart experience with him. How many things in our consecrated lives we do more as servants rather than as friends of Christ, and therefore, we do them with little passion, with little joy!