

## 8th Chapter of the Abbot General M-G. Lepori OCist for the MFC – 02.09.2014

"O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the hollow places of the cliff, show me your face, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely!" (Song 2:14).

Another "hidden dove" whom we will never cease to reflect upon is Martha. She does not hide behind wealth, but behind activity. The contrast between her attitude and that of her sister, Mary, should not be sought in an opposition between action and contemplation, but between the response and lack of response to the desire of Christ to exchange attentive looks and words with us. Martha is hiding; Mary puts herself before Jesus. This is the alternative, this is the choice that decides whether or not our lives will be full of beauty. Jesus at Bethany did not look for Mary more than for Martha, or for Lazarus, or for his disciples. When the saints, like Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta, have looked on you, even once, you understand that the gaze of Christ was such that each person, even if that person was in the midst of a crowd, felt that the words expressed by the Song of Songs were personally addressed to them: "O my dove, (...), show me your face, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely!" (Song 2:14). Martha could feel herself being looked upon, being blessed and respected even while she was cooking and preparing everything with diligence and generosity. But that day she began to hide herself behind what she was doing; she was beginning to hide from Jesus. And from that hiding place, she began to negatively look around her; she looked negatively at her sister, at her guests, at everything. When we hide from Christ in a rock crevice, He is not the only one we have a hard time seeing, if we can see out at all. All reality is darkened, and makes us afraid, or irritates us. So when Jesus says to her: "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things, but only one thing is necessary" (Lk 10:41-42), rather than a correction or a rebuke, we must hear, as Marta certainly did, these words vibrate with the same passion of the bridegroom for his dove in the Song of Songs: "Martha, my dove, you are hiding in the secret places of your duties, and in your fear of doing your duties poorly, show me your face, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely! I love you and I want you just as you are, not for what you do or think you have to do. Before being the perfect cook and hostess, for me, Martha, you are beautiful just because you are. I want you to accept to see yourself as I do. But in order to do this, you have to look towards me, listen to me, define yourself in relation to me and not in relation to things, or in relation to your thoughts and the judgments of others!"...

Martha has understood, she has heeded. She has not gone back into hiding as she did before. She has remained there, pained but moved, in silence (if the Gospel does not add any of her words it means that she has remained silent). This is holiness, it is not going back to hiding oneself from Christ, rather it is continuing to put oneself before his gaze, his love, his voice; and letting oneself be formed, reformed, by the gaze of His Face on us. This is a gaze that transforms us into the

original beauty of his imagine which is reflected in us: "Look to Him and be radiant, and your faces shall not be confounded," says Psalm 33:6. The new translation of the Italian Bishops' Conference says: "Your faces shall not blush," while the NRSVCE (New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition) says: "Your faces shall never be ashamed," (Ps. 34:5): that is, they will not darken, hide themselves, or want to hide again.

Finally, there is another passage in the New Testament that I would like us to read in the light of the Song of Songs 2:14. It is a text that is frequently quoted and commented upon. It is what Christ says to the Church of Laodicea in Revelation 3:14-22.

"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me." (Rev. 3:20, RSVCE) It is the same situation as in the Song of Songs 2:14. From outside, God, the lover of the human person, calls the hidden dove with his voice; he desires to have an encounter of communion with it, which here takes the image of a banquet, of a meal together.

Maybe we have not often thought about the fact that the *closed* door hides the person who is inside. It is as if one has pretended not to be home, so as to avoid an encounter. A few lines before this verse we read how "...the Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of God's creation" (Rev 3:14), has described the person who is hiding behind the door: "You are neither cold nor hot. (...) For you say: I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked "(Rev 3:15-17). You are hiding for this reason, or rather, you are hiding in this. The person hides from Christ because he or she believes that they need nothing, they think themselves self-sufficient, they think that they have enough to give themselves happiness, honor, wealth, prowess. Instead, Jesus lays bare and reveals the nakedness of the king to him, he reveals the false and empty values that are behind what satisfies the person. Jesus does not do this with contempt, even if he speaks about being nauseated in front of him: "Because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of my mouth" (Rev. 3:16). It is always the Lover of the Song of Songs who is outside the door; it is always because Christ loves our lives and our happiness that he speaks to us: "Those whom I love, I reprove and chasten" (3:19). As with Martha, Jesus does not hesitate to speak frankly, to tell her why she is not happy, and what she risks by remaining closed in a falsehood that will not protect her in the long run. Jesus does not despise us, for even when he harshly corrects us, he does it simply to make his invitation to open the door and not flee from him more forceful. It is enough to open, show him our face and talk with him because everything that covers us, which obscures us, that defiles us, disappears, and is transformed into beauty. When the light enters, the darkness goes away, it disappears, darkness is removed by the light. This darkness is not like greasy dirt that can be scraped or torn off us. The darkness disappears as soon as we expose ourselves to the light that invites us, that urges us to come out of our hiding place.

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What happens when the human heart gives in a little, or a lot, even if only for a moment, to this summons to this fundamental vocation to meet with that God who for him or her has chosen to go right down to the bottom of the cliffs? The story of Martha and the promise to the Church of Laodicea have already suggested to us the answer, but the words of the Song of Songs that I heard addressed to me on Calvary in Jerusalem expresses it completely. We find ourselves face to face with Christ, who says to us: "You have seized my heart, my sister, my bride, you have seized my heart with just a glance of your eyes!" (Song 4:9).

This is what I would like to finally deepen with you in the next few chapters, because, as I said, this is a phrase that seems to me to sum up the whole Christian, monastic, Cistercian mysticism, as an experience, as a need, as a grace. Until now, however, I have felt it was important to go over the attitude that resists this grace, which is always a *hiding from God who seeks us*, a removing oneself from his presence, from his face and from the voice of the Lord who desires communion with us.