

## **23rd Chapter of the Abbot General M-G. Lepori OCist for MFC – 22.09.2014**

I said that if we must make reparation to the Heart of Christ, it is for our neglect, our forgetfulness of Him, because we do not realize that He loves us and wants us to the point of suffering. It is an aspect to be highlighted in the reading of our mystics, such as St. Gertrude the Great.

Like all the mystics that the Church gives us as examples and guides in the spousal relationship with Christ, St. Gertrude is one of these who needed to become aware of this. The Lord led her to realize that she was neglecting the divine Bridegroom who had given all of Himself to her. In all of the mystics this becoming aware is something that constantly happens. Their conversion is not so much a conversion of their habits, of their behavior, because usually they were good nuns or monks, or good Christians, who were faithful enough, doing their duty, and who perhaps had been in the monastery since their childhood. But there comes a moment when grace leads them to become aware of this passionate love of God for them, and for everyone, and this changes their lives.

Basically, the mystic saints are people who, having seen Jesus' look of love on them, did not try to hide themselves again as the rich young man in the Gospels did. Then their love story with Jesus was full of ups and downs, of fragility, of forgetfulness, of small or large infidelities, but despite all this, and through it all, they remained faithful to God's desire for them, letting themselves always be brought back to Him after even the slightest distancing of themselves from Him. They let themselves be purified by the passionate fidelity of the Lord who wants to be united to our hearts.

Let us imagine that every day we pass a beggar on the streets of Rome, who has no legs or arms, who is blind and cannot talk. Perhaps once or twice we even look at him for four seconds instead of two, perhaps we may even toss in a few coins as these are a bit of an annoyance in our pockets. Let us imagine that one day we come to discover that the man is in that state because when we were little we risked being hit by a speeding car and he, instead, was hit; he saved us and he suffered the injuries in our place.

When we read the writings of the Christian mystics, there is always something similar in their awareness with regards to the Lord. And from this insight springs a renewed attention, a repentance for distraction, a desire for unbounded gratitude. And normally Jesus does not want too much repentance, too much regret for past negligences. He prefers gratitude, praise, because he wants love, and there is more love in gratitude than in repentance. God wants us to experience the joy of being loved by Him so greatly, and that we express that joy. Jesus never even once asked Peter: "Why did you deny me?". Instead he asked him, "Do you love me?". He asked him this question at least three times, and perhaps many more times.

The texts are innumerable in which St. Gertrude expresses her gratitude to the Lord for His mercy and kindness, for the graces that He grants her. I will mention one almost at random, which I particularly like because Gertrude expresses her complete gratitude, in which her heart comprehends the whole Trinity and the whole of creation, because at the center of this action of grace is the gift of God's Heart: "With these words, and many others that raise up in memory, I want to render an account of what is yours, and through this melodious organ that is your divine Heart, and through virtue of the Spirit, the Paraclete, as resonant singing to you, Lord God the Father adorable, I lift up the praise and thanksgiving of all creatures, in heaven, on earth and under the earth, that are, were and will be." (*The Herald of Divine Love*, II, 23,16)

The thanksgiving of the Christian mystic embraces everything: God in his fullness, all creatures, all times. The one who lets the Heart of Christ live within themselves embraces the universe in His gratitude to the Father. When Jesus publicly expresses his prayer to the Father in the Holy Spirit, he always says, "I thank you, Father!" (Jn 11:41; cfr. Mt 11:25, Lk 10:21). St. Paul often echoes this thanksgiving to God in Christ.

Think of the central and essential sign of the Christian faith: the Eucharist. It is a celebration of Christ's sacrifice for us, but it is not a funeral, it is the sacrament of thanksgiving to the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit, for their total and extreme self-giving to humanity, in the Son who died and rose for us. The best way to celebrate a gift, and to renew the awareness that it is a gift, is gratitude. If a friend gave me a picture and I kept it hanging in the house, when I looked at it the picture would remind me of the friend who gave it to me. It's not just a painting, it is a symbol in which the giving of my friend and my receiving it with gratitude are reunited again and again, they are renewed as an experience. The Eucharist is this but to infinity. And this does not deal with just a gift given to me by a friend, which makes me remember my friend even at a distance, in his or her absence; here it is the Friend himself who gives himself as the Gift, and he renews this Gift again and again for me, for everyone, and therefore, gratitude, thanksgiving, *eucharistein*, cannot be just a feeling, a memory, but it is communion, relationship, it is the embrace of the Friend. The Eucharist essentially brings about this heart-to-heart with Christ, with God.

For this reason, when you lose your sense of gratitude, you lose love. We must be vigilant that the gestures and signs of our Christian and monastic life always remain an expression of a grateful memory for the gift that God gives us of himself, and not the weight that we carry because of duty. Do you remember what I said about being servants or spouses of Christ? The blessed ring that the bride and groom exchange on their wedding day is a symbol of their bond of love. Even in the spouse's absence, the ring should always arouse the gratitude of faithfully belonging and for all one's life to a person with whom they make a journey of love and fecundity.

However, when one begins to see this ring as if it were a link in a chain that makes them a prisoner, the meaning of the symbol is no longer respected. Fidelity can sometimes become difficult, but the effort does not prevent gratitude, and gratitude, if it is cultivated, relieves fatigue, and gives it meaning. It reminds us that we are struggling not out of duty, or because of a "condemnation", but to welcome even more deeply a gift, the gift of the other, and our gift to the other.

This applies to the links between people, links related to our vocation (with the husband or wife, with children, with parents, with a community), and is especially true, always and for everyone, in connection with God, in the bond with Christ. The mystics give us testimony of this loyalty full of love and gratitude for the supreme gift of the eternal bond with Jesus Christ.

The loss of gratitude does not only mean the loss of a feeling, but rather, the meaning of the value of that to which we are bound, of that to which we belong. We lose gratitude when Christ is no longer of immense value for us, that is, if we lose the preference for Christ before everything else. For this reason, to lose gratitude and to lose fidelity is practically the same thing, they coincide.

Let us think of the episode of the ten healed lepers. Only one returns to praise God and thank Jesus. Luke puts the emphasis on this strong sense of gratitude that this man expresses completely, with his whole heart, and with his whole voice, with his whole body: "One of them, realizing that he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice, and bowed down before Jesus, at his feet, to thank him [εὐχαριστῶν αὐτῷ]." (Lk 17:15-16). And Jesus observes: "'Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?' Then he said to him: 'Get up and go on your way; your faith has saved you!'" (Lk 17:18-19)

This thanksgiving, this "Eucharist" of the healed leper has allowed him to find Jesus again; it has allowed him to bind himself to Him in faith. It is not enough for us to be healed, not even from the worst of diseases, such as leprosy. We need Christ, we need to cling to Him. Of what use is being healed, to feel well if we do not live in Him in faith? True gratitude always brings us back to the Lord, it helps us prefer the Lord before everything else. This is the eucharistic gratitude which the Christian mystics express and teach us. For this reason we need to keep company with them and listen to them.