The Abbot General's Christmas Letter 2011

The Fig Tree and the Roots

Dear Cistercian Brothers and Sisters,

My long trip in Vietnam allowed me further to deepen my knowledge of our Order, our vocation, and our mission. All is grace that challenges us to follow and continue the path that the Holy Spirit alone permits us to run. In touch with the vitality, the affectionate welcome, the poverty and simplicity of our brothers and sisters in Asia, and of their people, I became more aware of the commitment that the Lord is asking of all of us, in whatever condition or culture we may be. It is urgent everywhere that we deepen our experience and our formation of our monastic-cenobitic vocation in order truly to offer to ourselves, to those who join with us, and to the society that surrounds us, a true witness of the new humanity that the Son of God has made possible by becoming man himself.

The humanity of Christ became for us an experience of new life that leads us back to the Father with the breath of the Spirit. But in order for this to be true for us, it is asked that we abandon ourselves to this experience by following the Lord deeply. To follow Jesus is the rule of all rules, and St. Benedict is for us, as for our Cistercian fathers and mothers, the charismatic guide that teaches us to follow Christ: “Clothed then with faith and the performance of good works, let us set out on this way, with the Gospel for our guide, that we may deserve to see him who has called us to his kingdom” (RB, Prol. 21).

In this experience, in this following, everywhere we feel a bit tired and hesitant. I have noticed that the problems of the big and young Vietnamese communities are very similar to the problems of small and old communities in the West. Deep down we all have something of a hard time abandoning ourselves with simplicity to the path that the Word of God proposes to us by becoming man and calling us to follow him. Why is there this trouble? Why this hesitance to be simple?
“From where do you know me?”

The first disciples of Jesus followed him because they were drawn by the charm of his person and of his word. Their encounter with him was an event that swept up their lives with the desire to remain with him always. None of them managed to explain this fascination to himself, but it was an experience that they could no longer deny, not even being unfaithful to him, denying him, or betraying him. What struck them in Jesus was that their encounter with his mystery revealed the mystery of themselves, the mystery of their own lives, of their origin and their destiny.

When he saw Nathanael coming to meet him, Jesus said: “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!” Then Nathanael, surprised, asks Jesus: “From where do you know me?” (Jn 1:47-48)

With this question, Nathanael shows that he perceives that in Jesus the mystery of his own life is revealed to him. “From where do you know me?”: Jesus knows us starting from an Origin of our very selves that we do not know, because it is an Origin that precedes us in the eternity of the design of the Father who creates us in the image of his Son.

Jesus gives Nathanael a mysterious answer: “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you” (Jn 1:48), but what Nathanael understands is that only by listening and following Christ closely will it be possible for him to return to that Origin and reach that End from which Jesus evidently knows him. In fact Jesus announces and promises right away to his disciples this revelation and experience in Him of their own Destiny: “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man” (Jn 1:51).

Perceiving this mystery of ourselves in the encounter with the mystery of Christ could limit itself to a stupor, an amazement that the first meeting with Jesus arouses in us, and it might not have any repercussions in our life if, though drawn by the fascination of Christ, we do not commit ourselves to listen to him and follow him with humble fidelity. To see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man, walking with Jesus in the daily aspects of our life is required of us.

St. Benedict would say that we need to run the way of the steps of humility: “If we want to reach the highest summit of humility, if we desire to attain speedily that exaltation in heaven to which we climb by the humility of this present life, then by our ascending actions we must set up that ladder on which Jacob in a dream saw angels descending and ascending. (...) Now the ladder erected is our life on earth, and if we humble our hearts the Lord will raise it to heaven” (RB 7,5-8).

This is the path that leads us to that true and humble self-knowledge that ever increasingly coincides with the knowledge Christ has of us in the light of the mystery of the Father, in the light of the mystery of the Trinity, on the basis of which Jesus knows us as he knows Nathanael.
Beneath the Fig Tree

Christ’s first answer to the skeptical Nathanael – “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you” (Jn 1:48), which provoked an immediate confession of faith full of enthusiasm: “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” (Jn 1:49) – is one of those mysteries of the Gospel that we are waiting to understand when we reach heaven, somewhat like what Jesus wrote on the ground in the gospel of the adulterous woman (Jn 8:6-8), or what he said to St. Peter in the final scene of the Gospel of John (Jn 21:19).

While we wait to know what Nathanael was doing under the fig tree, perhaps we can understand, even if it is banal, that under the fig tree their are its roots, and that in some sense Nathanael, in the shade of that tree, had an attitude that rooted his life especially in the truth of the vocation of the People of Israel: “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile” (Jn 1:47).

During my stay in Vietnam, I was struck in the Liturgy by the gospel of the patience of God that permits that a sterile fig tree be left in the ground another year, so that the vineyard worker can hoe around its trunk and spread fertilizer (cf. Lk 13:6-9). What the worker does is an intervention in favor of the roots: he hoes around the fig tree and spreads fertilizer there so that the roots receive the necessary nourishment to give life to the whole tree and enable it to bear fruit. This image expresses well the nature and the task of our monastic vocation, in whatever form it be lived, because our vocation is living and fruitful only if we work at its roots.

Our vocation bears fruit if we allow our monastic observance to nourish the roots of our person. The roots’ work is hidden, silent, deep. You do not see it, but on it depends the whole life, the beauty, and the fruitfulness of the tree. It is in this sense that St. Benedict asks us first of all to be rooted in a community by means of stability, and to cultivate every day, personally and together, what nourishes our belonging to the Lord who has called us to be fruitful trees in the vineyard of his Kingdom. The monk, the nun, who dedicates himself to the deep work of the roots becomes living and fruitful, not only for himself but for the whole community, for the Church and the whole world.

All that we are called to live in our monastic communities hoes the soil and nourishes it to feed our roots. In this Christmas letter I would like to insist on this aspect of our life-giving work on the roots of our vocation, which, I think, ought to be an object of greater commitment everywhere in the Order, if we want to bear the fruit that God promises us and asks of us. The issue is our permanent formation, starting from our listening to the word of God.

“Your Word is a lamp for my steps”

St. Benedict and our Cistercian fathers and mothers attribute great importance to silent, humble listening to God, to the God who is present in our life and who speaks to us constantly in the word of Sacred Scripture, in the Liturgy and in the Sacraments, in the teaching of the superior in the community, in the tradition of the holy fathers and
mothers of monastic life. When we listen in silence and humility to God who speaks, who speaks to our heart, we become capable of listening to the Lord who comes to meet us in everything, in every encounter and in every circumstance.

I have the feeling that in the life of our communities lectio divina is not sufficiently cultivated as slow and meditative reading of the Word of God. There are often so many spiritual and pious practices, and above all many activities, but often all that seems to me insufficiently nourished by attention to the word of the Bible.

In the meditative reading of Sacred Scripture, lectio divina seeks each day the word that God wants to speak to us today, in our present circumstances, to help us live in His will, in His love, in His light and in relation with Him. As Psalm 118 puts it: "Your word is a lamp for my steps, a light for my path" (v. 105). The word of God is the light that illuminates every step that we make in following Christ and that allows us to go forward with confidence, even through night and fog. Each day we must seek with our lectio divina the Word of God that helps us let ourselves be formed by God in all the situations that we have to live, the good and the unpleasant. The word of God, then, that helps us respond to Him, to dialogue with Him in continuous prayer. When our heart is nourished by listening to the word of God, by listening to the Gospel, of the Word of God which is Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, observing silence is no longer difficult; a profound silence, even when we are in the middle of noise or have to speak with others.

lectio divina lived and cultivated in this way also allows us to listen to each other better, to be more attentive to our brothers and sisters, and to open to more profound dialogue among each other. Community exchanges about the Word of God are especially worthwhile, because listening to what God suggests to a brother or sister makes us more attentive to the word that God is addressing to us personally.

For St. Benedict, and for all the Cistercian Fathers, like St. Bernard, there is never meditation without listening to the Word of God. Christian meditation is always a listening to the Word with the aim of conversing with the Lord. Our Fathers and Mothers teach us to meditate always with the Word of God as our starting point.

This also encourages the inner joy that enables us to be satisfied with everything. We have the experience of the disciples of Emmaus who, while listening to Jesus as he explains the Scriptures to them, feel their hearts filling with ardent joy and renounce that dark, disappointed, murmuring sadness in which they were sinking before they met and heard Jesus, Jesus who is the Word that illumines all the Scriptures (cf. Lk 24:13-31).

We too, thanks to this meditative listening to the Word of God, can realize that from the deep roots of our heart life comes forth to animate the whole tree, the branches, the flowers, and the fruits of our person and of our community. Without this interior life animated by our listening to the God who speaks to us, our whole life in the monastery is reduced to empty formalities, which can be aesthetically beautiful, but which in the long run are insufficient to justify the renunciations and the sacrifices that our vocation implies, and then one starts to run off in search of compensations and distractions.
The sources of permanent formation

For St. Benedict the Word of God is the deep and constant source of our monastic formation. It gives sense to all that we live and allows us to live everything with depth and truth in the living memory of Christ, the Word of God. This source, however, is brought to us by the whole tradition of the Church, and it is important not to forget or neglect this ecclesial dimension of Revelation, because we would reduce our formation to an abstract biblicism.

In the last chapter of the Rule it is as if St. Benedict were taken by a sudden concern not to see us fall into a sort of fundamentalism that diminishes the sources of our faith and of our monastic vocation. He says that the Rule does not say everything and that to live it in its true fullness it is necessary to nourish our observance by drawing upon the whole tradition “of the teachings of the Holy Fathers” (RB 73:2).

St. Benedict then presents this work of permanent monastic formation as a drawing upon a fountain that, so to say, transmits the water of the biblical spring to us by means of two basins: the basin of the “holy catholic Fathers” and that of the monastic Fathers:

“What page, what passage of the inspired books of the Old and New Testaments is not the truest of guides for human life? What book of the holy catholic Fathers does not resoundingly summon us along the true way to reach the Creator? Then, the Conferences of the Fathers, their Institutes and their Lives, and also the rule of our holy father Basil, what else are they than tools of virtues for monks who live well and with obedience?” (RB 73:3-6).

The living water of the Word of God reaches us directly, but our ability to draw upon it is enriched if we receive it also by means of the whole patristic and monastic tradition that the Church offers us.

In this passage of chapter 73 of the Rule, it is important to note the motivations that St. Benedict emphasizes in order to draw at every level upon the fountain of Christian Revelation and Tradition.

Above all he says that the Bible is for us “rectissima norma vitae humanae” – “the truest of guides for human life.” The Word of God teaches us to be men, not only to be religious, to be pious; not only to pray and meditate. God speaks to us above all so that our human vocation be brought to completion in us, the design that He has in creating every man to his image and likeness. The Word of God, then, must form us in our whole humanity, in all the aspects of our humanity. And St. Benedict illustrates the wide and full breadth of this listening to God’s Word by citing Scripture in almost every chapter of the Rule regarding every sort of thing, even the more material and banal aspects of daily life.

The Word of God illuminates and guides the steps of the whole human adventure and allows us to live everything in the unity of the Father’s loving plan. Just as the Word was made flesh and lived and lives with us the perfection and fullness of our humanity, so too in our life the Word of God wants to incarnate the Father’s good design to conform us in everything to his Son by the grace of the Holy Spirit.
St. Benedict then tells us that the writings of the Fathers of the Church teach us the straight path to arrive to our Creator. The Fathers teach us, then, to return to the Father, to rediscover Him who makes us, our true Origin. So the teaching of the Fathers allows us to go straight to our destiny, to walk toward the goal of our existence, which is to find in eternal communion with God our image lost with sin. So the Fathers too are a source that nourishes the truth and the fulfillment of our human life.

For “the holy catholic Fathers” we must understand all the authors that the Church recognizes as conforming to the truth of Revelation which she has received from Christ and which she hands on to us in the course of the ages and, evidently, the whole Church Magisterium up to today. To return even now to the Father who creates us we need the faith of the Church, as well as constant help to be faithful to it in truth and in freedom.

Lastly, St. Benedict asks us to draw upon the monastic tradition. As the Fathers and Mothers of the Church hand on to us the Word of God to walk with truth toward our destiny, so the Fathers and Mothers of the monastic life hand on to us, based on the same sources, the Church’s tradition, which helps us to live our vocation with truth and beauty. Other than the monastic sources St. Benedict was able to cite in his time, we can add all the writings that up to now have been offered to us to help us deepen our specific vocation, and the life of all the monks and nuns who are examples for us.

Obviously we should add our Cistercian authors and saints. Their writings and their lives – since their teaching is always an experience of life – are “tools of virtues for monks who live well and with obedience.” A vocation form like the monastic one grants fulfillment to existence if it becomes “virtue,” that is a value that grace incarnates in the person, a “living well” that makes good, just, true, and beautiful the person who lives this form of following Christ. This “living well” is always the fruit of an obedience, because we do not invent our vocation ourselves. Were we to invent it ourselves, we would not follow Christ, we would follow ourselves, and there is no worse form of “vocation” than that of merely reflecting ourselves, of listening only to ourselves, of “obeying” ourselves. One thinks one is progressing, but instead one turns in on one’s self, walking in place without ever progressing.

But if this happens, perhaps the reason is that our obedience and our following the Rule are often not adequately nourished and watered to the roots of our conscience and our freedom by the springs of monastic formation which St. Benedict enumerates here. It is important that we become aware of them and that we try hard to reach these fonts personally and communally.

The issue is not knowing the Bible entirely or reading all the Fathers. Everyone simply needs to become aware that he needs an entrance, even if simple and minimal, but always faithful and constant, to these three springs of formation that the Church offers us and transmits to us. Only thus will the roots of the tree of our vocation be watered and nourished, and we will be more fruitful not only for ourselves, but for the whole Church and for the world, because in the Church the monastic life has above all the vocation of the roots, hidden but indispensable to the life, beauty, and fruitfulness of the whole tree.
“Let it be to me according to your word”

St. Benedict asks us to dedicate ourselves to this permanent monastic formation in order to travel better the path of the monastic-cenobitic life which the Rule proposes (cf. RB 73). Listening to the Word of God and deepening our understanding of it is a task for life: the Word of God becomes true for us if we let it take flesh by the work of the Spirit in our daily human life.

In this the Virgin Mary is our Mother and our Guide. For her everything is focused on the answer to the angel Gabriel: “Let it be to me according to your word!” (Lk 1:38). The humble and receptive freedom of the Virgin allows the Word of God to become an event in her, the event of Jesus Christ, who becomes man to save the world. The Word of God that we hear and meditate wants to become an event in our life. Only then does it reach its goal, which is the realization in us of the loving design of the Trinity. Our very life becomes the event of Christ, a sign and instrument of his presence and his love.

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and return not thither but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it” (Is 55:10-11).

Like Mary, we are asked to put our trust in the power of the Holy Spirit that inhabits the Word of God which we are asked to accept humbly and to let grow in the soil of our poor humanity. The Word of God is not an idea, a concept difficult to grasp, because it is Someone, it is the Son of God who appears in the world as a Baby who is born and grows in us and among us. He it is who realizes in us the connection of the Word and the Event, of truth and life, in the sacraments and in the life of the Church. He is the Word that makes all things new (cf. Rev 21:5), that recreates all that to us seems old, sterile, dead. He is the Root of Jesse (cf. Is 11:1), from which is reborn the whole People of God, and from whom is always reborn the life of our persons, of our communities, and of the whole Order.

It is this continuous rebirth of us in Christ and of Christ in us that I wish everyone for this coming Christmas and every day of the new year, in which I will be glad to meet you, or at any rate to stay united with you in our humble and happy path of listening and following the presence of Immanuel!

With brotherly affection, your

Bro. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori
Abbot General OCist

Rome, December 8, 2011
Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception