

## And If God Would Give Us His Heart?



*Icon of Christ on Calvary  
Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem*

Dear Cistercian Brothers and Sisters,

This year I am sending you a "Letter for Lent" instead of a "Letter for Pentecost," because, as St. Benedict reminds us, it is more appropriate to read and ponder during the period of Lent. Also for many communities, especially for those who have educational and pastoral ministries, the period after Pentecost is a type of "end of the year" in which they are already quite busy.

But most of all, I want to share with you, without waiting too long, what I experienced during my pilgrimage to the Holy Land which I had the grace to live between December 30, 2013 and January 9, 2014, especially enjoying the fraternal and generous hospitality of the Franciscan communities who guard the holy places of the life of our Lord.

### **The Tightrope and Emptiness**

This was my first opportunity to visit the Holy Land. I went there carrying within me all that these three years as Abbot General have been for me. And, of course, I kept in mind the thoughts and prayers of the communities of our Order, with their joys and sufferings. From my frequent visits to our communities - and I haven't yet visited them all - I deduce a growing uncertainty about where the coming years and decades will lead us. Often the thing that inspires good expectations in us is the very thing that then disappoints us the most; while the thing in which, humanly-speaking, we have little or no hope, proves incredibly fruitful. Often the apparently more fragile realities are those which the Lord asks more of, "testing" their very survival with various trials and external and internal threats. It seems to me that we live a bit as if we were hanging on to a tightrope of hope, rather, we are walking on it. But walking on a tightrope is only possible if we focus on its strength and not on everything that threatens to make us fall into the emptiness below. I have never walked on a tightrope - if I had, I don't think I would be here writing to you! - but I imagine that the whole art of tightrope walkers consists in overcoming vertigo, then the fear of the emptiness below.

Vertigo is a fear of falling, of not having secure supports, it is thus the fear that emptiness, the void, could take hold of us more than the tightrope on which we walk. To continue and not to fall into the void, the tightrope walker only has to focus on the tightrope; but he concentrates so well, and has such confidence in his stability that the tightrope provides him with enough support for him to walk, to move forward in spite of everything. The tightrope walker does not expect or dream of being able to fly, that is, to dominate the emptiness. His whole art consists in concentrating his forces, the focus of his person and his movements, to stay balanced on the wire that supports him.

It is the same in our Order, those who focus on walking with simplicity and humility on the wire or tightrope that carries them go forward, and they can go far. Those, instead, who feel too secure and think they know how to fly do not progress and sooner or later fall like Icarus. "Whoever thinks he is standing," St. Paul admonishes us, "should watch out lest he fall." (1 Cor 10:12).

The sense of vertigo, the fear of the void, the fear that the wire would not support me and thus it would not be possible to continue and walk on it, had grown in me over the past year. This was due partly to the various events in the Order that, unfortunately, were not possible to heal. Certainly, the witness of Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis were, and are, a great comfort to everyone; but I realized that the anguish of a certain emptiness was gaining my heart.

### **The Word of the Bridegroom**

From those first days in the Holy Land, particularly in Jerusalem at the basilica of the Holy Sepulcher, I was deeply moved. At the same time, however, the more I went to the holiest sites of Christianity, the more I had to admit that I was not really aware of what they represented, nor of the events that had happened right there: that there in that place Christ had died, that there he had been buried and there he had risen, that there he had met Mary Magdalene and the other women, that Peter and John had ran there.... I felt that the Lord wanted to offer me something more than just simple emotions.

On the morning of the third day, after having celebrated the Eucharist at half past four on the Tomb of Christ, I went to Calvary to pray Vigils. There already were a lot of people, and the Masses and groups followed one another. I was able to sit in a corner, to the right of the beautiful Crucifix of Calvary, near the icon of the Virgin Mary that is on the side of the Cross. In those days of the Christmas season the first reading of the monastic Vigils offers a reading from the Song of Songs. One sentence struck me deeply, as if Jesus himself was telling me it from the Cross: "You have seized my heart, my sister, my bride, you have seized my heart with a glance of your eyes" (Song 4:9)<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> In many languages there are different interpretive translations for this passage of the Song of Songs. The literal translation of the Hebrew text is: "You have taken my heart, my sister, young wife, you have taken my heart with one of your eyes".

Suddenly I realized that in this sentence from the Song of Songs, Christ speaks to each of us, and describes everything that in Him is given and asked of us. In that sentence was the secret of the correct attitude to have in front of Him, the true contemplation of his mystery, even while visiting each place where he had lived. In that sentence I perceived the synthesis of the Gospel, of the Christian mystery, and the essence of our vocation as baptized persons, as monks and nuns.

### **Seizing the Heart of Christ**

What indeed is the Lord saying to us in the Song of Songs through the bridegroom's words to the bride? He tells us that his Heart is given to us, that he has let his Heart be seized, or better, "kidnapped". And the price of this immense gift, this gift beyond measure, is a simple glance, my glance, our glance – and what could be greater and more important for us than to possess the Heart of God?! "You have kidnapped my heart with just your glance!"

Just one glance is enough for Jesus to allow us to carry away his Heart, that is, his love, his life. Just a glance, a simple moment of attention to Him, of being directed towards Him, and his response is the gift of His Heart. He gives it to us, he leaves it with us: His Heart is ours! And this means that we can live with his Heart, we can love with his Heart, pray with his Heart, think with his Heart, rejoice and suffer with his Heart.

The words of the prophet Zechariah mentioned by John after the piercing of Jesus' side came immediately to my mind: "They will look on him whom they have pierced" (Jn 19:37; Zech 12:10). Immediately after his death, Jesus also let his Heart be kidnapped by the Roman soldiers who had tortured and crucified him. There is no limit, there is no exclusion in the gratuitousness of the gift of Christ's Heart to all.

His side has been opened, his Heart is accessible, it is at our disposal. And the wound is so large that even the big fisherman's hand of the unbelieving Thomas could enter it (cf. Jn 20:27). Christ desires that we take his Heart; he came for this; he lived for this; he died and rose for this. We then discover that everything in our lives happens in order to attract our glance towards Him and His heart in us.

With this sentence Christ confesses his crazy love for every human creature. The whole Gospel and the whole history of Christian mysticism witness to how much the Lord, on every occasion, has incarnated and expressed his passionate love for the human person, his unreserved giving of himself. All the encounters with Christ, all the glances towards him in the Gospel, can be understood as the unraveling of this verse of the Song of Songs. Also the experiences and written testimonies of our Cistercian fathers and mothers, and in particular the mystics such as Lutgard, Matilda, Gertrude, are a living illustration of this mystery.

Should we not also put at the center of our lives, of our vocation, this encounter with Jesus who goes to the extremes in giving his Heart to our extreme poverty?

In Jerusalem, I was reminded of the Augustinian etymology of the Latin word "*miser cordia*": "*miseris cor dare*," give one's heart to the poor. This is what God does, what God wants to do in his crucified and risen Son. And it's not just a metaphor, a pietistic and sentimental image. In Christ the whole Cantic of Canticles, the poem of passionate love between man and woman, has really happened between the Heart of God and the human heart, between Christ and the soul. He really gives us his Heart. He give it to us as a source of life. He gives it to us really and sacramentally in the Eucharist. The Eucharist, like the human heart, is a mystery of Flesh and Blood, offered to give life to the whole body of the Church. St. Paul described his experience of this mystery to the Galatians: "It is no longer I who live, it is Christ who lives in me. And this life that I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me." (Gal 2:20)

We could define the Christian life as living with the Heart of Christ, that is, a life in which Jesus, through baptism and the grace of the Holy Spirit, becomes the new interior subject of human existence, he is more us than we are ourselves, because we are "created in Christ Jesus" (Eph 2:10). When Paul wrote to the Ephesians that by means of faith Christ dwells in our hearts (cf. Eph 3:17), or when he invites us to have within ourselves the same sentiments as Christ Jesus (cf. Phil 2:5), it is as if he is describing the gift of the Heart of Christ that has been given to us in order that he may live in us.

### **The Essence of Conversion**

This mystery is at the heart of a true and constant Christian conversion. The Spirit transforms us, not only because he allows us to behave well, to do good works, to love, to possess various virtues. All this is nothing but the consequence and the radiation of an interior event for which it is given to us to be able to live with the Heart of Christ. It is from this awareness that conversion, a new life, a new relationship with everyone and everything begins. The new man that the Holy Spirit forms in us (Eph. 4:23-24; Col. 3:10), is born from a new heart, a heart of flesh that God substitutes for our hearts of stone (Ezekiel 36.26-27). But this heart of flesh animated by the Spirit of God is first and foremost the Heart of Christ, the Heart that the merciful grace of the Father puts in us through the Spirit that the Son may live in us.

Our ancient Cistercian fathers and mothers had a strong sense of this mystical Christology which for them was the soul of our Christian and monastic vocation. Often we believe that the holiness and the radicalism with which they lived their vocation was due above all to their exceptional strength and virtue. But the deeper reason was in the depth of their relationship with the Lord, that is, in the mystical marriage with which they lived united to Him. For this reason, the Song of Songs was their preferred book in the Bible, because it inspired and described the inner experience that radiated throughout their lives.

The real crisis in Christian life, and in the monastic and religious life, is not a crisis of form, but of substance. We live dissipated not because we lack virtue, discipline,

consistency, but because we lack the mystical experience in our relationship with Christ. To excuse ourselves, we situate Christian mysticism in the stratosphere, as if it were only the business of angels or angelic men and women who do not live with their feet on the ground. Instead, Christian mysticism is nothing more than the unheard of, but real possibility of kidnapping the Heart of God and of living our daily lives with this Heart. The possibility of this experience is really immediate, not because of our virtue, but because of the mercy of a God who became man and died for this, so that he could put his own Heart under our sinners' glance, and let his Heart be kidnapped.

The conversion of our lives must always be reborn from the surprise of this possibility of an intimate relationship with the Lord. It is an intimate relationship that is not exclusive, because if Christ gives us His Heart, it is not possible that this Heart lives in us without transmitting to us his universal love, without communicating to us his giving of himself for all, his love and pardon for everyone, and above all, for those whom we do not love, sometimes even ourselves, including even the most unpleasant of our "enemies." The more that the Heart of Christ becomes intimate within us, the more he gives us the ability to reach, as Pope Francis would say, the extreme fringes: to those who are not loved, in our community and in the world.

### **Return to the Source of Life**

But the words of the Bridegroom in the Canticle of Canticles, "You have seized my heart with just a glance," makes us understand that this conversion happens at the source that is the gift of the Heart of Christ embraced with only our glance. For our lives to change into the image of the universal love and mercy of God, we are not asked to work as much with our effort, with our generosity, but with that unique glance of our eyes to which God gives the power to kidnap his Heart. It is necessary to return there, to this source, to this "one thing necessary," to this "best part" of our lives and vocation, otherwise we are troubled and agitated needlessly (cf. Lk 10:41-42).

St. Benedict, in Chapter 49 of the Rule which deals with Lent, says in summary that Lent is a time when we return to the truth and purity of our vocation. It is not a time to do more, but to rediscover the essential cornerstones of our monastic and Christian life. It is a time to return to the source. And we know that St. Benedict says that we should always live this way (cf. RB 49:1). Perhaps what should always be seen as Lent is not only the ascetic and penitential observances, but more fundamentally the decision to "return," to return above all to the sources of our life in Christ. The monk, the nun, in the Church should be the sign that the return to the source is always possible, that conversion can always be begun anew. It is not important to preoccupy oneself with bearing witness to great holiness and asceticism, because this is grace; rather we must focus on always witnessing to the fact that returning to the essential, to what gives life, is always possible, and basically simple because just "a glance" towards Christ is enough. And the new life,

the resurrected life, is all in the gift of His Heart, which coincides with the gift of the Spirit in us who cries out "Abba, Father" (cf. Gal 4:6).

This is the true Easter of our personal and community life, and the life of the world, a permanent Pentecost in the mystery of the Church and the charism to which we belong.

Do we help ourselves to offer to Christ that one, poor and humble glance that receives from him the greatest gift? Do the life of prayer and the fraternal life of our community, and each of us in the community, educates us to this? Does it remind us of this grace? Do we still have in our daily lives and in our hearts the time and silence needed to give just a glance to the crucified and risen Lord who gives us his heart, his life, his divine, filial and brotherly love? And do we realize that in every brother and sister that we meet, especially those who are poorer, it is Jesus himself who begs from us at least one glance so that he can give us his Heart?

These are the questions that we should be asking before all the problems we think we have to solve. I say this first of all for myself, but I see and I think it is important for everyone.

And this is what Pope Francis strongly affirms in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, in particular in paragraphs 264-267:

"We need to pause in prayer to ask Him to come back to fascinate us. (...) How good it is to stand before a crucifix, or on our knees before the Blessed Sacrament, and simply to be in his presence! 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)

Each monastery is called to evangelize the world, but especially by giving a living witness to the source of every evangelization which is communion with the Heart of Christ who is thirsting to save the world.

Dearest Ones, for now, I just wanted to simply share with you the awareness that I brought back from my pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I would like to deepen it in the Chapters of the next Monastic Formation Course. Meanwhile, during this Lent and in the joy of Easter, we remain united in the desire to offer to Christ crucified and risen that one glance that captivates, possesses and shares the infinite gift of His Heart with all!

Yours,



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