



Dearest brothers and sisters!

This year my Letter to the Order happens to coincide with the beginning of the Year of Consecrated Life, in which the Pope and the Church ask us to commemorate the past with gratitude, to live the present with passion, and to embrace the future with hope. It is a year, then, during which it will be important, for each of us and for our communities, to deepen our awareness of our vocation, to follow Christ closely in the particular form of consecrated life which is our Cistercian charism.

What it is urgent that I start with you through this Letter is a task and journey of considering our vocation in depth, returning to its source, because only in this way can a religious family, which in the long course of its history has been greatly enriched but has also become quite diverse and dispersed, find the freshness of the beginning. Since a charism is a gift of the Spirit, it never grows old as such, but in persons and communities its freshness often grows tepid, loses flavor, fervor, passion. As the Spirit says to the Church of Ephesus, though it is still faithful and generous: "But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first" (Rev 2:4).

When we lose our passion for the present time of our vocation, we do not succeed in looking at the past with gratitude, nor at the future with hope, because only that which is on fire in the present gives sense, foundation, and reality to gratitude and hope. Gratitude for the past and hope for the future are sentiments that spring from passion for the present. Passion for the present contains and nourishes gratitude and hope. A married couple who love each other with passion today are grateful for the past and look toward to the future with hope. A couple, on the other hand, in whom love no longer burns today, thinks of the past with nostalgia and regret, and to the future with fear, or dreaming of better times.

Therefore, the real question that we must ask ourselves, the only important question for fully living the consecrated life, as also the whole Christian life, is how we can live our vocation today with passion. Only from this starting point can the flame of gratitude and hope be brought back to life.

## **Encounter**

“First love” is often limited to falling in love. But when the Book of Revelation speaks of “first love,” it refers not so much to a sentiment as to an encounter. An encounter is greater and deeper than falling in love, because an encounter is a reality in which it is the persons who count more than anything else. If today family and community bonds often do not last, perhaps it is because we think that the setting for fidelity is a feeling and not the relationship with the people to whom it is bound up. Every vocation, however, asks for fidelity to the person or persons to whom the vocation itself grants and asks us to belong.

The religious vocation implies belonging closely to the Lord Jesus, fidelity to “being with Him” (Mk 3:14) and to being with the people through whom we are granted to obey Him and love Him in the concreteness of his ecclesial Body. St. Benedict indicates quite clearly to the one who is called to the monastic life the need to “prefer absolutely nothing to Christ” (RB 72:11), but within his obedience to an abbot and his stable and fraternal belonging to a community.

When one is faithful in following Christ in person and in the people who represent Him for us, the sentiments are the fruit of fidelity, less than its origin. If at the beginning of the Rule St. Benedict asks for an “unhesitating,” almost mechanical obedience to the abbot (RB 5:1), in the end he asks us to “love him with sincere and humble charity” (72:10). If he asks that among the brothers there be a hierarchically ordered relationship of service and mutual obedience (RB 63), still the fruit should be that “they live chastely in brotherly love” (72:8). Fidelity to the people produces tenderness, which is not the blind love that idealizes the other, but the true maturity of a relationship nurtured through a path of reciprocal awareness and mutual forgiveness.

Fidelity to Christ also matures like this, becoming ever more affective. The Master, the Rabbi followed from the beginning (cf. Jn 1:38), becomes the Friend, the Bridegroom in whose presence the life of each person and of humanity as a whole is fulfilled (cf. Mt 25:1-11). The encounter with Him, if it becomes a journey alongside Him, matures into an embrace, in the communion of heart.

Encounters with the Lord are strewn throughout the Gospel. Meditating on Jesus’ encounter with the Apostles, the Samaritan woman, Zaccheus, the rich young man, Mary Magdalene, the lepers, the sinners, the scribes and Pharisees, and so many other encounters, we come to a deeper knowledge of the unique and exclusive encounter that each of us is called to live with Him.

Likewise, the Gospel of the disciples of Emmaus is nothing other than the detailed description of what it means to encounter the risen Lord, and there we discover that Christ has conquered death and sin precisely so that we can meet Him and live in communion with Him.

### **“He was walking with them”**

The Emmaus episode also helps us realize that to deepen our encounter with Christ we need to take a journey with Him, and that we are often doing just that even without noticing it. “While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him” (Lk 24:15-16). It is He who takes the initiative in meeting us, it is He who accompanies us, speaks to us, gives us his Spirit, and remains with us in the Eucharist, in the Church, so that our eyes and our heart can open up to the event of meeting the Lord of life.

Above all, the encounter with Jesus purifies our thoughts, our fears, our projects: Jesus “said to them, ‘What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?’ They stood still, looking sad... ‘But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place” (Lk 24:17-21).

The two disciples of Emmaus live their present moment with sadness, without passion, because even when they were with Jesus they did not look to the future with hope in Him, but only with the desire that He bring about their plans for glory and power. So now they look to the past without gratitude, because their human expectations have been disappointed.

Jesus corrects them and accompanies them precisely in the purification of their memory, of their passion, and of their hope. He does so by being with them, by exploring the Word of God with them in the light of the Gospel, the Good News of the Resurrection which, though not yet written down, has already happened and indeed begins to spread. When the encounter with Jesus touches our life, it reestablishes for us a new relationship with all the dimensions of life and of time.

The Emmaus episode thus teaches us that the encounter with Christ changes our life and renews it only if it becomes a journey with Him, a journey

- of correction and conversion: “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe!” (Lk 24:25),
- of listening: “He interpreted to them the things about himself in all the Scriptures” (24:27),
- of demanding: “Stay with us!” (24:29),
- of communion: “When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them” (24:30).

## **Bearing witness with an ardent heart**

Only thus can the encounter with Jesus transform our person to the very depth of our heart: "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the Scriptures to us?" (Lk 24:32).

Only Christ, the Word who walks with us, can transform us deep within. And what produces this transformation? It allows us to recognize Christ and to see everything in his light. What earlier was delusion, sadness, and fear, of a sudden is filled with gratitude, passion, and hope. And this is what makes witnesses, intrepid and untiring witnesses of the encounter with Him, present and living: "That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, 'The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!' Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread" (Lk 24:33-35).

The testimony to Christ, in the Church and for the world, becomes like a concert, a light show that is reflected and intensified in turn. My encounter with Him is reflected in the other's encounter with the Lord, and this renders the encounter ever more certain, ever more beautiful, living, and real. A communion is born from it, a brotherhood, a friendship that nothing can destroy, because the foundation is not sentiment, sympathy, consistency, but rather the shared experience of the living presence of the Lord in our midst.

And the Lord always unites himself to this symphonic concert of bearing witness to the encounter with Him, to bring an ever deeper awareness of this inexhaustible experience: "While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you'." (Lk 24:36)

When mutual witness to the encounter and to the journey with the Lord is cultivated in a community, the encounter with his peace-giving Presence also increases in intensity and clarity, not only for the members of the community, but for the whole world.

## **Seeing Christ in his Kingdom**

While I was starting to write this letter on the farm property of our Sisters of La Paz, at an elevation of 4000 m, it was the memorial of St. Charles Borromeo, a bishop who was "post-conciliar" like us. The collect of the Mass really struck me, because it seems to me to express in brief the whole task and grace of the Christian life and of the consecrated life in particular: "Preserve in the midst of your people, we ask, O Lord, the spirit with which you filled the Bishop Saint Charles Borromeo, that your Church may be constantly renewed and, by conforming herself to the likeness of Christ, may show his true face to the world."

The conformity to the Gospel that constantly renews the Church must not concern itself so much with transmitting a message of moral consistency, but with reflecting in the world the true face of the Lord, that is, the encounter with Him.

The true face of Jesus is that loving gaze that seeks out every human being with the desire to meet him and to walk with him. The true face of the Lord appears in the world if we consecrate the journey of our life to the encounter with Him, like the disciples of Emmaus, and let ourselves be swept up in the passionate urgency to give witness to it.

All this sent me back to a passage from the Prologue of the Rule of St. Benedict, from which we often cite this or that “famous phrase,” but which we rarely contemplate in its entirety: “What could be sweeter for us, dearest brothers, than this voice of the Lord calling us? Behold, in his mercy the Lord opens to us the way of life. Therefore, with our loins girded with faith and the accomplishment of good works, let us move further along his road, under the guidance of the Gospel, so that we may merit to see Him who has called us into his Kingdom” (RB Prol. 19-21).

Here St. Benedict summarizes the whole path laid out by the Rule as a vocation to follow Christ in the way of life according to the Gospel. He makes us understand that our vocation is, above all, being attracted and fascinated by the Lord: “What could be sweeter to us?” The beauty of the Lord, a beauty that coincides with his goodness and mercy, is the whole setting within which we have been called to follow Him. One follows Christ by contemplating Him, by desiring his Face. His sweetness calls us and draws us, and we follow it, intent upon seeing Him and contemplating Him in his Kingdom. Before being a law, the Gospel is the beauty of the Word of God who, by his incarnation, has become an experience of life for us. The commitment of faith and of good works is presented here as more than a duty: it is “girding the loins” to run more lightly in corresponding to Christ’s attraction and in following Him on the path of life according to the Gospel.

Jesus calls us to enter “into his Kingdom.” The Kingdom is the place where we see the Lord. It is not only a future Kingdom, a Kingdom beyond life, because Christ has made himself manifest in the world, and He asks and offers us to see Him in prayer and in fraternal charity.

It is ever more urgent for mankind today, so dispersed and wounded, that those who are called to follow Christ closely be essentially a sign of this mystery for all. He who looks upon Christ manifests his true Face, and the world needs to see the true face of the Lord in the gaze of the one who consecrates his whole life to “merit to see Him.” He merits to see Christ who lets himself be drawn by his beauty more than by any other beauty. The desire for Him above all else, the desire that his voice, his word, be kindled in us, as in the heart of the disciples of Emmaus, is man’s true merit before God. The rich young man was not lacking in virtue, but in desire, in preference for Christ. He did not let himself be drawn by the beauty of Christ, that is, by the love of his gaze (cf. Mk 10:21).

How important it is that in our initial and permanent formation we do our best to understand and to live obedience, poverty, chastity, and humility as settings in which we prefer the beauty of Christ to every other attraction! Only in this way do these

choices and virtues not remain sterile, but incarnate a testimony of love that also allows others to see the true face of the Lord.

The world needs the Kingdom of God, it needs the humble King, crucified and risen, to reign in it, the only one who knows how to love man, and in loving him saves him. We are called to desire to see Christ, because by seeing Him, by recognizing his presence in our midst, the Kingdom itself can enter into the world. He who looks upon Christ changes the world.

### **Light to enlighten the nations**

To consecrate one's life to the encounter with Christ is, then, the essential task and grace of consecrated life. Are we really focused on this task in our life of prayer and through our activities? Are we intent on the encounter with Him in all the settings of our life and vocation, in the liturgy and in our work, in solitude and in fraternal life, within the community and in our relationship with the world?

The encounter with Christ is the only experience capable of unifying all that we live, and in unifying it it makes us joyful and peaceful witnesses of a new life that is otherwise impossible. In our relationship with Him the hundredfold has been given to us in our relationship with every person and every circumstance. Virginité for the Kingdom is precisely this consecration to the primary encounter with the Lord which makes us fruitful in everything, and helps all the members of the Body of Christ which is the Church to live their vocation with fulness and fruitfulness.

In the eschatological parable of the ten virgins who await the bridegroom, in Matthew 25:1-13, the wisdom of the five virgins who were able to enter the wedding consists essentially in having taken the encounter with the Bridegroom seriously, preparing sufficient oil. The foolish virgins, on the other hand, did not put all their dedication into keeping themselves ready to meet him. But those who had sufficient oil, and therefore had lighted lamps, were able with the light of their expectation of Christ to illuminate others as well, and the space in their lives into which the Bridegroom should enter. Christian vigilance is a lamp that, lighted for Christ, enlightens everything and everyone around us, revealing to everyone that we are made to meet the Lord and to be one with Him who comes. All of reality, all of mankind, is made to receive Christ the Lord. Are we witnesses to this for the world?

At the center of the parable of the ten virgins, at a certain point a cry is raised: "Behold the bridegroom! Go out to meet him!" (Mt 25:6). It is a cry that wakes up everyone in the middle of the night and of their sleep. A cry that comes from no one knows where, whether from outside or from inside the house. Perhaps because it is the cry that resounds from God himself toward the whole world, which all of reality echoes. God and the whole of creation proclaim to us the essential task of life: to come out of our sleep, out of our comfortable house, to enable the encounter with Christ who is already at the door and knocks to enter.

He who welcomes Him is not led out of his daily reality: he enters back into it, like the wise virgins, but does so along with the Bridegroom, and in order that the daily reality of life become the place for the wedding between God and humanity, with us and with everyone.

Every day we should wake ourselves up from sleep and ask ourselves what exit out of ourselves is asked of us to go meet Christ, to allow Him to enter into our day to celebrate the continual feast of communion with Him in everything, with everyone, always.

We know – and St. Benedict does not fail to remind us of it – that Christ wants us to go out to meet Him present in our neighbor, in the poor who ask for our attention, our love, our time, and our talents. We know that He asks us to meet Him in every aspect of community life, beginning with common prayer, but also in obedience, in silence, in the renunciation of so many useful and damaging distractions. We know that Christ asks us to go out to meet Him also by making space in our heart to listen to Him and love Him. How far we are from our heart, made to meet God!

“Behold the bridegroom! Go out to meet Him!”

Perhaps we should actually understand the poverty, obedience, chastity, and communal stability that we profess, and the whole Benedictine “*conversatio morum*,” as a “going out to meet Christ the Bridegroom.” This would help us live our vocation with truth, humility, and ardor. This would help us get out of sleep, of night, lighted up like lamps that truly can illuminate the whole world.

The Christmas season is completed with the solemnity of the Presentation of the Lord, which is also the feast of consecrated life. In the canticle that the Church has us recite at Compline, the old man Simeon is the model for consecrated life because he lived only to see Christ, and seeing Him he saw in Him the “light to enlighten the nations” (Lk 2:32).

Precisely this is the essence of our vocation, with respect to which we should verify our fidelity, our whole dedication: to live to see in Christ the Face, the Light, which gives fulness to the life of every human being. And looking upon Him, to manifest Him to all.

May Advent and the Christmas celebrations, as well as the whole Year of Consecrated Life, grant us a chance to deepen our encounter with Jesus, always, with everyone, and in everything, and to prefer Him over every other thing, for love of all mankind!

Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Fr. Mauro-Giuseppe O.Cist.", written in a cursive style.

Fr. Mauro-Giuseppe OCist  
Abbot General