

The charisma of preferring Christ

Meeting Christ in Philadelphia

The dependent house of Casamari in New Jersey is very close to Philadelphia. For some time the name of this city has stirred in me the desire finally to see the “Head of Christ” by Rembrandt found in its Museum of Art. The monks and their friends gladly planned a visit for me. The closer I got to the museum, the more I longed to see this portrait of Christ that is part of a series on the same subject, with the same model, a young Jewish man whom Rembrandt must have met in the Jewish quarter of Amsterdam. The portrait in Philadelphia is the one that speaks to me the most, but I did not really know why. We headed straight for the rooms dedicated to the painters of the epoch of Rembrandt, but we did not manage to find “my” painting. And the news we got from the attendants in answer to our search was pretty discouraging: “It’s on exposition somewhere else... it’s in restoration... it’s in storage...”. In all, I started to resign myself to not seeing it and console myself by admiring the numerous other masterpieces that make up the wealth of the museum. But my heart was a bit like Mary Magdalene’s on Easter morning, and I almost wanted to ask them: “If it is in the cellar, tell me where it is, and I’ll go look for it myself!”. Since I very much love this painting, I had imagined it would be exposed in some special way, at the center of the room, maybe by itself, protected by safety glass, and that one would almost have to wait in line to see it, because certainly many people from all over the world must come to admire it. A bit like the Mona Lisa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Louvre, or Michelangelo’s Pietà. Then, visiting a room where there was no one, passing along without much enthusiasm from a still life to a hunting scene, when I passed before the painting I was so much looking for, I didn’t see it right away, and it was my companion who pointed it out to me: “It’s Rembrandt’s Christ!”



It was in a corner, like some ordinary painting. For me it was a leap for joy, as if I had found a long-lost friend whom I thought was dead. Rarely has a painting or icon made me encounter Christ like this work of Rembrandt. Admiration was immediately prayer, contemplation, dialogue with Jesus. And I asked myself why, why this portrait could speak to me so intensely of the mystery of Christ.

Staring at it a long time in silence, I slowly saw that the attraction of this face come not from its surface, from its look, but from an unseen interiority that Rembrandt managed to express.

It is the face of a Christ recollected and concentrated in his heart, in his heart in relation with his Father. But at the same time, this face expresses attention to someone else, to someone present ideally to his right towards whom Jesus discreetly directs his gaze, and also his right ear, uncovered by his hair and especially illuminated by the light streaming over the face from above.

Rembrandt thus knew how to depict the union and the simultaneity in Jesus of inner attention to the Father and of attention to the man, to us all. An inner and radiant attention that coincides with Christ's humility, the Christ's humble love for the Father and for men. And it is this, the beauty of Christ, that strikes us and draws us, and makes the encounter with Him reveal to us at the same time the Father and ourselves.

Is this the Face that appeared in the lives and hearts of all the disciples that saw him risen? Is this the Face that St. Mary Magdalene saw when the Risen One called her by name? Is this the Face the disciples of Emmaus looked out along the way without recognizing it, but which they recognized for an eternal moment in the breaking of the bread? Is this the Face with which Jesus asked Peter three times: "Do you love me?"?

The preference that regenerates us

This unexpected and unusual "meeting" with the mystery of Christ at the Philadelphia Museum came at the end of a long journey of two months dedicated to visiting several monasteries of our Order in Brazil, in Chile, in Bolivia, and in the United States. As last year in Vietnam, and January in Ethiopia, I had accumulated many beautiful experiences and rich brotherly meetings; I had a clearer idea of the problems and difficulties of the communities, and naturally also a certain dose of weariness. Rembrandt's painting reminded me that the point and the goal, the consolation and the unity of all these experiences were not in my hands, in my strength, in my judgment, nor in the hands, strength, or judgment of others, but in the mystery of a Face that came to look at us personally with the depth of a Heart whose love comes from the Father and leads everything back to him. And that freed me, even in the midst of my worries, of the contradictions, of the experience of my own limits and those of others.

What regenerated me in this experience was the renewal in my heart of the preference for Christ, the preference that is normally the original experience of our vocation, of every vocation. A preference for Christ that is reciprocal, when our heart consents to love above all things the one who loves us first, who prefers us first and freely. One consents to one's vocation when one grants one's preference to Him who prefers us. One accepts to leave everything for Him who, for us, left "his divine status" to become man, to die for us and rise (cf. Phil 2:6-11). One sells everything to purchase the pearl that offers itself to us with its inestimable worth (cf. Mt 13:45-45).

This reciprocal preference, which between persons is the exchange of love, remains the core of every vocation. But often, the path of a vocation involves as it were a wearing down of the preference. Life after the decisive encounter continues its course with its demands, its loads and overloads, its highs and lows, its trials, its hopes, and its delusions. The preference, so clear-cut at the beginning, becomes less evident, less decisive, less passionate. But we have the experience that this makes us more fragile, less capable of facing life with trust, with joy, and with the necessary strength. And often, even with such an experience, we do not understand that what we must rediscover is not above all the strength and joy, but really the preference of Christ, that reciprocal preference that had so potently animated us one day to pursue our vocation.

The essential gift of the Spirit

Reading the book of the Acts of the Apostles during Eastertide made me aware of an effect of Pentecost that I had never thought of before. When the Apostles and the other disciples had left the Cenacle, suddenly extraordinary gifts manifested themselves: the gift of tongues, the gift of healing, the gift of preaching such that the crowds were drawn and converted. That must have impressed everyone, and first of all the disciples themselves. But the fact that these gifts were not predominant afterward in the life of the Church makes us realize that the most important effect of Pentecost is not based on them. Another gift, more profound, and constant, was communicated by the Holy Spirit to the disciples of the Lord, and it is this gift that has characterized the true vitality of the Church in all times: the gift of preferring Christ, the charisma of preferring nothing to Christ.

The preference of Christ is the true and the most important gift of the Spirit, the gift we need the most, the gift that enables us to receive with truth and fruitfulness all the other gifts. In fact all the other gifts of the Spirit, if they are not received in order to prefer Christ, will be as it were diverted from their nature and their goal and, instead of serving to build up the Kingdom, they destroy it. Because the Kingdom of God is the preference of Christ.

And in fact we see the Apostles, who were afraid, who had denied Jesus, who had preferred themselves to Him, become, thanks to Pentecost, men who are happy to suffer for the Name of Jesus (Acts 5:41-42); men who fear nothing and no one, neither prison, nor beatings, who obey God rather than men, who accept no profit or benefit from their ministry. For them, preferring Christ is everything. The love of Christ for them is worth more than life.

Let's think of Simon Peter. What was the greatest desire that must have dwelt in his heart as he awaited Pentecost with the Virgin Mary, the Apostles, and the other disciples? What must he have asked the Holy Spirit while he awaited Him in the Cenacle of Jerusalem? What grace did he desire above all?

Instinctively we think that he was waiting for the strength not to be weak, the courage not to fall victim to fear again, the wisdom and the eloquence to proclaim Christ to the crowds... but we forget that Peter had just heard Jesus ask him three times: "Do you love me?", and, as if it were not enough, "Do you love me more than them?" (Jn 21:15-17). Jesus had left him with this expression of his need for love, for preference. And Peter had answered yes three times to this poor and humble request of the Son of God. But Peter knew that he could not longer count on himself. He knew that he could no longer promise not to deny him.

I am sure he entered into the expectation of the Spirit promised by Jesus with the one desire to be able to respond with all his heart and all his life to Jesus' thirst to be preferred in love. Peter begged the Spirit for the gift of preferring Christ, and it was Jesus himself who had suggested to him this essential prayer intention, the one that corresponds best to what the Spirit wants to give us in giving himself to us.

If we do not ask and do not accept this essential gift of the Paraclete, it is as if we had refused all the other gifts and graces that the Spirit wants to share with us. Indeed, no charism, no vocation, no mission, no ministry, no sacrament finds its meaning and fruitfulness if we lack this opening to the essential grace of being able to love Christ more than everything else.

But it is a grace, a gift of the Spirit, and that means that we can always return to the preference for Christ, even if we deny it so often, personally and communally, we can always receive it again, ask for it constantly from the Spirit, sure to receive it.

The problem is that all too often we neither ask for nor await this essential grace of the Holy Spirit. We ask him for so many things that we are lacking, that our communities are lacking, but we forget to ask him for what is missing not only to us, but also to Christ: our love that gives him preference. While this is the only grace that the Spirit, which is Fire, burns with the desire to give us.

If we do not set back out again, in every circumstance and before all problems, from this act of begging the Holy Spirit to grant that we prefer nothing to Christ (RB 4:21; 72:11), to hold nothing dearer than Christ (RB 5:2), nothing new, no renewal will ever be possible. We will continue to spin our wheels, always facing and resolving the same problems, without any renewal ever reaching us, renewal from on high.

But it is enough that one single person, one single heart, humbly and truly beg the Spirit for the essential grace of preferring Christ to everything, for the renewal to come, irresistible, as when Peter exited from the Cenacle, having been heard in his desire to respond to Jesus' thirst for love. His very shadow started to work

miracles (Acts 5:15-16), because his heart was accepting the burning sun of preference for Christ. Such that he will propose the same experience to all the faithful, called to confront hostility and persecution: “Adore the Lord Christ in your hearts, always ready to respond to anyone who asks you the reason for the hope that is in you.” (1 Pt 3:15)

Communion in predilection

When St. Paul unhesitatingly headed for Jerusalem, everyone started to dissuade him and to put him on guard against this project, because it was clear that in Jerusalem Paul would be persecuted. The Holy Spirit itself made him aware of what was about to happen to him (cf. Acts 21:4.10-11). But Paul did not let himself be lead astray by his companions’ reasonable fear: “Upon hearing these things, we and those gathered there begged Paul not to go to Jerusalem any more. But Paul replied: ‘Why do you behave like this, continuing to cry and break my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.’ And since he would not let himself be persuaded, we stopped insisting, saying: ‘May the Lord’s will be done!’” (Acts 21:12-14).

This episode enlightens us about how we should always ask and receive the light of the Spirit. St. Paul understood that if the Holy Spirit was letting him know his destiny, it was not for him to flee from it, but to embrace it, consenting to it for the love of Christ. What was directing Paul’s path was not his being imprudent or a show-off, but his desire to prefer nothing to Christ, not even his life and liberty. The Holy Spirit does not enlighten us to serve what suits us and our comfort, but to help us freely and consciously to make the choices that will allow us to prefer Christ to ourselves always more, because that, as St. Benedict says at the end of the Rule, is what opens us to the grace of life in its fullness: “Let them put absolutely nothing before Christ, and may he lead us all together to eternal life.” (72:11-12)

Paul’s companions accept his testimony, and rather than oppose his path, accompany him, surely drawn by the fascination of his predilection for Jesus. Like Mary at the Annunciation, they are swept along by Paul’s predilection to consent themselves to the will of God: “May the Lord’s will be done!”

How beautiful is the fraternal company in which the preference of one draws all the others to love the Lord more than themselves! Shouldn’t this preference be the constant dynamism that unites and reconciles our communities, in all the choices that we must make to advance on the path?

To love without a return

Peter, Paul, by receiving from the Spirit the gift of preferring Christ, receive also the freedom to love Him without a return, as He loved us in the gratuity of his divine freedom.

But what does it mean to love for no return, for no reward?

In John 10, Jesus describes his Paschal freedom: “This is why the Father loves me: because I give my life, to then take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I offer it on my own, because I have the power to offer it and the power to take it up again. This is the command I have received from my Father.” (Jn 10:17-18)

Jesus lives out his freedom in the infinite space of his obedience to the Father. The Father’s command does not diminish the Son’s freedom, because the Father wants and commands the Son to have the freedom to give and take back up his life. The power to take it back up means that the power to give is truly free, totally free. Christ gives what he can take back up. But in reality does not take his life back: he prefers to receive it from the Father, from the Father who grants him the freedom to take it back. The Son could have taken his life back in every moment of his Passion, from Gethsemane to his last breath. Jesus has put this freedom back into the Father’s hands, in an act of trusting obedience that leaves to the Father all the freedom to grant the Son his life when and as he wants.

That is the obedience that monastic Profession should reproduce, and we all too often forget the profound Trinitarian inspiration of our monastic vocation, and our vows. St. Benedict was very conscious of this, and in his Rule one can find explicitly the invitation to live out all our monastic tasks as a way of following the freedom of Christ, who gives his life, renouncing the power to take it back, in order to receive it from the hands of the Father, the hundredfold of the gift and the joy of Easter. After Profession, made in full liberty after mature reflection, the monk will no longer be able to leave the monastery and the demands of the Rule (RB 58:15-16); he should not expect glory or wealth deriving from his talent or his work (RB 57), from his social status (2:16-22), or from his priestly state (62:2-4). St. Benedict summarizes this attitude well when he speaks of poverty: “Everything necessary should be hoped for from the father of the monastery and one cannot retain anything that the abbot has not given or permitted.” (33:5)

How many times we change the nature of our monastic commitment by claiming and creating for our love some reward that we choose ourselves. We do not hope for or await the gift that comes from the Father.

And yet this hope and this expectation are the peak of the proclamation of the Resurrection, and thus the fulfillment of our true Life in Christ.

When Jesus says to Mary Magdalene: “Do not hold on to me!”, he immediately explains the profound reason for the separation he is requiring: “Because I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and tell them: I ascend to my Father and your Father, my God and your God.” (Jn 20:17)

Jesus does not want our love for Him to fold back in on ourselves, to return to ourselves according to the length of our arms, our capacity to grasp with our own hands, with our affectivity, with our ambitions. Indeed it is for something much greater that we have been created and redeemed: we have been made for a return of love that comes from the Heart of the Father, from the Love between the Father and the Son: the Holy Spirit. And a return of Trinitarian love that is too large for us to receive alone: “Go to my brothers and tell them... your Father... your God.” And this gift of the Father to everyone is the fruit of Trinitarian gratuity. It is because Christ and the Father “do not hold on to each other” – and that takes place up to the abandonment of the Cross – that they have given themselves to us, that we can possess them in fullness beyond every return or benefit that we can desire or pick ourselves, as Adam and Eve picked the forbidden fruit.

Freedom and obedience

“Mary of Magdala went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord,’ and what he told her.” (Jn 20:18)

If Mary Magdalene accepts right away this freedom with respect to her own possessive tendency to grip and hold on to the object of her love, if she departs right away, without comment, to complete her mission of proclaiming the resurrection and of the presence of Jesus at the right hand of the Father so that, in Him, he be our Father and our God, it is precisely because she has seen the Lord and has listened to Him: “I have seen the Lord, and here is what he told me.”

Our freedom cannot truly be activated and become mission except in the measure that the Face and the Word of the Risen One become the treasure of our heart that we must not hold on to in order to be sure that it is always given to us by the Father. And that is the secret of free and fruitful obedience. The proclamation of Mary Magdalene, her mission to the disciples, is an act of obedience to the living Christ. She has contemplated Him, she has listened to Him, she can proclaim Him with detachment and obedience. Our obedience is a fruitful exaltation of our freedom if our heart lives it out by always leading it back to its true source: the preference for the living and present Christ that we contemplate and listen to with love.

That is what St. Benedict expresses at the beginning of the chapter on obedience: “The first step of humility is readiness in obedience. This is characteristic of those who hold nothing more dear than Christ” (RB 5:1-2).

In two phrases he expresses the secret and the nature of the new freedom of the Christian, a freedom that arises from preferential love for Christ. We are free if our treasure, our pearl, is Christ. We are free only if we ask for and receive the Spirit that grants us to love Christ above everything.

The presence of the Lord who speaks to us is our liberation, the integral liberation of our person, the one that makes us sons of God. Often we ask Christ for a partial liberation, a liberation only from what bothers us, from what we don't like, or what makes us suffer, a liberation, then, that other people or other means could also obtain for us. We would like an exercise of our freedom that, deep down, would do nothing but fold our lives back in on ourselves, instead of letting ourselves be gripped and accompanied by Christ toward his Father and our Father. Christ wants to free us completely, profoundly, in our being more than in our contingent condition. The freedom that the paschal Christ grants us is a freedom of heart that enables us to live freely also in the midst of constraints. Like Paul and Silas who, caned and thrown in prison, sing praise to God (Acts 16:22-25).

The freedom that the Spirit grants us is the freedom to love Christ all the way to the Father, and to have no other return on our love but the Love with which the Father loves us in his Son through the Spirit.

The more I get to know our Order, our communities, and all the monks and nuns that make them up, the more I love them and desire to love them, and I ask nothing more of the Spirit for all of us than the gift of preferring Jesus. Do we want to stay united in this prayer?

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori'.

Fr. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori
Abbot General OCist

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