



Pentecost Letter 2011
of Abbot-General Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori
To the Cistercian Order

“Go, your son lives!”

Dearest Brothers and Sisters!

A retreat at 4000 meters

While I was in Bolivia, after visiting all of our communities in Brazil, our nuns of La Paz, who carry out the immense work of their school of 4,500 pupils with faith and courage, accompanied me in their agricultural holding of Achocalla for a day of rest, in the purity of the mountains, at an altitude of 4000 meters, from which you can contemplate Illimani, which peaks well beyond 6000 meters. It was a day of spiritual retreat as well, to think over the many meetings, the many experiences in immense and vivacious Brazil, and about all the experiences I have had during seven months as Abbot-General. Everywhere the Lord had given me the joy of meeting people and communities with whom a bond of communion, of friendship, and of fraternity was born. When a fraternal relationship with superiors and communities is born, my heart fills with hope, even amidst the most difficult challenges.

It is the paradox of Christian communion that friendship heightens hope precisely while it makes us more sensitive to the problems and difficulties the Lord makes us encounter, and even while it accentuates the feeling of being unable truly and effectively to give help and comfort. In the rarefied air of Achocalla, I asked myself in front of God what the often so contradictory situation of our communities asks of me and of us. The previous day's Gospel came to mind, John 4:46-54, in which a royal servant, anguished by the illness of his son, goes to Jesus and would like him to go to Capharnaum to heal the child. At first Jesus gets irritated, as though he felt taken advantage of by the continual search for miracles, as though he were tired of performing miracles without ever obtaining the faith of the people, tired of realizing that everyone wants His miracles without really wanting Him: “Unless you see signs and wonders, you will not believe”(4:48).

The servant insists but we can perceive that his question becomes meeker, more pleading and poor: "Lord, please come before my child dies!" (4:49). What could be poorer, more helpless than a father who can do nothing for his dying child?

In front of this cry on the verge of desperation, Jesus then surprises the man with a word full of certainty: "Go forth, your son lives!" (4:50).

Imagine the confusion of the anguished father. Jesus declares to him the very thing he most desires. And he communicates it to him as a reality already present, a fact already accomplished. His son is healed, his son lives!

At the moment for the servant, it is only a word. There is only Jesus in front of him and the word of life that He announces to him. But here comes into play the royal servant's faith and a new path for his life: "He believed in the word Jesus had said to him and set on his way" (4:50).

Faith is a path whose direction and energy are the presence and word of Jesus. It is a path of poverty because this man has no more than this word to sustain and guide him. All the assurances are without value. All the path of his life hangs on Christ's word.

A word of life

Why do we often find it difficult to live our daily relationship with the word of God, for example in the liturgy, or in *lectio divina*? Perhaps it is just because we are not sufficiently aware that Christ's word is a word of life. And we are not aware of this because when we turn to Jesus, we do not really ask him for life, as the royal servant in our Gospel does.

Indeed, Christ announces life to us, he announces life to us always. Every word of his is entrusted to us so that we may live, and so that everyone around us may live.

"Go, your son lives!"

Deep down this word is the summary of the Christian message. Jesus Christ gives life to everything we hold most dear. And in this way, he gives life to us too. For this parent, the son's life was his own life, the fruitfulness of his very own life. Assuring the life of the son, Jesus resuscitates and revives this man's paternity, revives his anguished heart, the meaning of his life, his work, his family.

"Go, your son lives!" Clinging to this word, repeating it to himself, this man began to walk in faith and hope. At every temptation not to believe that it were true, not to think that it were more than an illusion, the man kept on repeating this word of life to himself, and thus discovered that this word of Jesus became in him like a spring gushing with hope, with trust, with happiness that transformed his way of looking at the people and things he encountered along the way. Repeating that word to himself, the sun shone more, the sky became bluer, the fields more golden, the olive trees more silver, and all the people he came across on the road became as it were more alive,

more beautiful, more friendly, more linked to his destiny. The hope of life that the word of Jesus put into his heart was not just for his son. It was a hope for everyone, a faith in life for everyone.

Why is this so? Because that word brought him back constantly to the presence of Christ, to his Face, to the One who had pronounced it and who remained its constant source. The word remained the word of Christ, even as the man walked away from Him physically. Christ is the Word of life that remains present and alive in all his words.

And so, keeping Jesus' word of life, the servant did not have to wait to arrive at home to rejoice in the fruit of his faith. His servants "came out to meet him". And what did they tell him? They repeated to the letter Jesus' word of life: "Your son lives!" (4:51). For whoever bears the word of Christ with himself in faith reality presents itself to confirm that this word is true, that it is not just a word, but a fact, an event.

"Go forth, your son lives!"

Perhaps this is exactly the word we need to bear within us on the personal and communal path of our Order, and of the Church as a whole. We need faith to be life, to meet up with life. We need faith to make us recognize and embrace the life Christ is giving us, that Christ is for us.

I am more and more aware, as I visit and meet the communities of the Order, so far in Europe and Latin America, that in the ultimate analysis, the reason for so many problems and personal and community difficulties lies in the refusal of the life that Jesus Christ gives us. The faith in this gift is weaker than all the problems, and the word of life that Christ speaks to us, that he spoke to us when we followed him at the beginning, and that he ever repeats to us, because it is an eternal word, is silenced, is suffocated in our hearts and in the dialogue between us by the noise that our many choices of death make, by the noise of choices of apparent life that kill the full and eternal life the Lord offers us.

Who is the man who wants life?

St. Benedict summarizes our vocation in the call to full and happy life that God addresses to us. The Lord, as he writes in the Prologue to the Rule, has searched for us in the crowd, crying out: "Who is he who longs for life and desires to see good days?" (RB Prol. 14-15; Ps 33:12). God has sought us so that we may have life, and one could say that this "cry" of his in the midst of the crowd is similar to the anxiety of the father who asks Jesus to heal his son. God is anxious to give us "life, true and eternal life" (RB Prol. 17).

Only if we say "Yes!", if we say "I do!", "I want life!", do we really respond to our call, to our vocation. Our vocation is above all the anxious desire of God, who wants to give life to the world.

But Benedict also tells us about this man who thirsts for life that God seeks him as a “worker”. What does this mean? It means that real and eternal life, and happiness, demand work on our part. They are a gift from God, but a gift not for our passivity but for the work of our liberty.

The fundamental work of our liberty is the choice, the choices we make. We can work well or badly, choose well or badly, be good or bad workers, even if God has taken us on for the work of life and the happiness that is the work of his Kingdom, the work of the Gospel, the work of God in the world.

It stuns me how much this awareness is lacking in the real dedication which nonetheless we live in our communities. Normally we do a lot, we dedicate ourselves a lot, we build many relations, many contacts, and not only in those monasteries which do pastoral or educational works. But in all this commitment, one does not always perceive the commitment to the work of God which is the life and happiness of man. We choose many things, in themselves good and excellent, but almost as an alternative to the choice of “true and eternal life.”

The fact is that the worker whom God seeks is a worker for *His* work, for the work of God. It is in choosing the work of God, a work that is not our own, that we live and are happy, because the work of God is the life and happiness of man, of all mankind.

I often notice in communities, in individual people, and above all in myself, that the choice of our own work ultimately prevails over the choice of God’s work. We choose our own work, we choose to be workers for ourselves, above all when what prevails within our choices is the thirst for power, for autonomy, for individualism.

Why do we need this? To be sure, there is within us the root of sin, the tendency to rebel against God and his design. But Christ helps us to understand that the real problem is that we lack faith. We do not trust the work of God, we do not really believe that choosing the work of God is a choice of life and happiness for us. We prefer to settle with the fragile and passing pleasure of a bit of power, of some liberty we can allow ourselves, of some little “kingdom” managed only by us, all within our hands. God’s work, the Kingdom of God: they do not ever seem sure and fertile enough to leave the rest behind.

The better part

But we are unhappy, we are not content. How much unhappiness I find in our communities! And how much division! In fact, if we can be united and happy in the work of God, which gives each a place, a task and a vocation of love, when we live for our own work, sharing and giving are no longer possible. At most we need accomplices, allies, but more often slaves, not brothers and sisters, not friends with whom to share the difficulty and the joy of the infinite work of God.

In Chile there is a village called "*Peor es nada*" - "Nothing is worse". Apparently it was the bitter comment of the last of the brothers of a large landed family when he saw the plot granted him as a heritage.

At times, I have the impression that many of our brothers and sisters define in this same way what is stored up for them in community life, the Cistercian vocation. And yet, also for us, and above all for us, the "better part" has been reserved (Lk 10:42), and we have been promised "a hundredfold here on earth and eternal life" (cf. Mk 10:30). Anything but *peor es nada*!

How then can we regain the life and happiness of our vocation? How can we recover the choice of God's work as the better part that has fallen to us? How can we renew our "yes" to the God who, in Jesus Christ, calls us to choose the life that is true and eternal, and happy, for ourselves and for the world?

Above all, we should not be scandalized about our lowliness, about our misery and that of others. It is to sinners that Christ came to bring salvation: "The healthy do not need the doctor but rather the sick; I did not come to call the just but sinners" (Mk 2:17).

Often mutual criticism in communities comes precisely from this scandal we face in our structural fragility, and in the end this hides a lack of faith in Christ the Doctor who can always heal us. Up till the last moment, the disciples closest to Christ lacked faith, courage, intelligence, and generosity. Ambitious and petty; thirsting for power and yet so fragile. We really do carry the treasure of our Christian and monastic vocation in vessels of clay (cf. 2 Cor 4:7), and the treasure does not change the clay into gold. The vessel only has worth if it bears the treasure within. If it loses this, nothing remains but clay.

But what is this treasure?

St. Paul expresses it in short with a sublime formula: "The God who said: 'Let the light shine out of the darkness', has shone in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." (2 Cor 4:6)

The treasure is the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. The treasure is the Face of the Lord, which reveals to us all the splendor of the Trinity, of the God who out of love has created the Universe, beginning from light, and ending with the communication of Himself to our hearts through the gaze of the Son of God made man. The treasure is the gaze of Jesus, who looks upon the rich young man with love and calls him to freedom from everything to follow Him: "Then Jesus fixed his gaze on him, He loved him and he said: "You are lacking only one thing: go, sell what you have and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come! Follow me!'" (Mk 10:21)

The rich young man refused this vocation to the fullness of life, to freedom and to happiness in a stable relationship with Jesus: "He went away saddened; for he had great possessions." (Mk 10:22)

“He went away saddened.” The real problem was not so much that he was attached to his goods, but that he went away, that he left Christ, thus turning away from His gaze, from His face, and so from the real treasure of his life, that which would have allowed him to recognize the vanity and inconsistency of all his other goods. The rich young man did not stop before the face of God that gazed on him with love. This is the real betrayal of the vocation to follow Jesus Christ.

“Be still and know that I am God”

And for those of us who have said “yes”, do we really stop still before the light of His Face?

Never before becoming Abbot General was I so aware that we must start to stop still. One starts back up only by stopping still. And never more than now have I realized that the heart of St. Benedict’s method is precisely to stop still to set oneself back in the presence of God and in the hands of God, so that He Himself make us instruments, workers, of His work, and of His Kingdom. I am rediscovering for my vocation, and that of the whole Order, the essential importance of the first verses of chapter forty-three of the Rule of St. Benedict: “At the hour of the Divine Office, as soon as the signal is heard, one must leave everything that one has in one’s hands and run with utmost haste, but always with gravity, so as not to offer the occasion for frivolity. Nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God.” (RB 43:1-3)

Often in our monasteries one thinks that participating in the Divine Office is essentially a question of equilibrium between activity and prayer. It is always as though we were trying to balance *our* work and *our* prayer in our life and in that of the community. For St. Benedict, however, the problem and the choice do not play out at this level, at *our* level. The choice for him is not between two activities that *we* engage in. For him, it is rather about the relationship between the work of man and the Work of God, the choice between what we do and what God does. The Divine Office is evidently not the whole Work of God, but it is the educational gesture that St. Benedict repeatedly inserts into our day to help us choose the Work of God in everything we do, or rather: to help us insert into the Work of God our very selves and all that we do. The Rule offers us common moments of interrupting our work so that our freedom be educated to consent to what God works, to the God who creates and vivifies, to the Holy Spirit who “is Lord and giver of life” (*Credo*).

“The Master is here and is calling for you” (Jn 11:28), says Martha to her sister Mary, and this Master is the Lord who is “the Resurrection and the Life” in person (Jn 11:25).

Those brothers and sisters who, without good reason, neglect the common prayer, and sometimes even the Eucharist, perhaps do not realize that they undervalue not only a liturgical act, but the new life that God always wants to recreate in us and in all that we do.

In this passage of the Rule, St. Benedict uses the evangelical terminology of the call of the first disciples: “One must leave everything [*relictis omnibus*] one has in one’s hands and run with utmost haste [*summa cum festinatione curratur*].” How can we not hear the echo of the call of Peter and Andrew, James and John, of Matthew the tax-collector, or of Mary of Bethany, who drop the nets, money, home, and business to follow the Lord with joy? The Divine Office renders us contemporary to Jesus and renews the evangelical reality of our vocation and following.

If we hesitate, if we are not there, it is often because we do not accept detaching ourselves from “everything we have in our hands.” We all have this tendency to hold too tight the things and the people that we have in our hands. The relationships, the work, the responsibilities, the interests, the projects, ourselves..., at times we hold things so tightly as to “strangle” our very own life. For fear of losing it, we suffocate it.

St. Benedict invites us to the freedom of empty hands. And he invites us to live this like a feast: “*summa cum festinatione curratur*”. He wants us to be passionate about God’s Work, like lovers who run to meet the person they love. He wants us thirsty for life, “like the deer who yearns for running streams” (Ps 41:2).

“Nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God” (RB 43:3). Preference is a choice that produces the miracle of prevalence. What is preferred, prevails, that is, it takes the first place. If the Work of God is preferred, the miracle is that it prevails in everything, in all our life, in our work, in our projects, in our relationships, in all that we are and do. Everything is transformed into Work of God, that is, everything becomes life, because the Work of God is eternal life.

It is true that in our communities there are many problems, and many complain. This is true for the Order and for the Church as a whole. Humanly speaking, it is true, there are things to worry about. But our worry is still a sentiment that we live with hands fastened to that which bothers us. We worry, we despair, without preferring Christ and the Father’s Work, that is without allowing God to intervene, to take into His own hands everything that is worrying us and that does not go well.

The royal servant of the Gospel of John (Jn 4:46-54) detached himself from his dying son to go to Jesus, and the distance from Capharnaum to Cana in Galilee corresponds to a day’s walk. This detachment from his son, which for him must have been as painful as the sacrifice of Abraham, was an act of faith that allowed him to rediscover his son alive and well. This father became for his son an instrument of Christ’s work, which is the resurrection and the life.

Thanks to his faith, Jesus gave him back his fatherhood a hundredfold. What is a father if not the one who generates his son to life? This father, by loosing his hands from the grasp with which he held his dying son to go present them empty and impotent to Jesus, received in faith the gift of Christ’s own paternity, and thus became a father a hundred times over, because he was the instrument of the life that only Christ can give.

We are destined to this in all that we must be and do.

From the house of Emmaus to the Upper Room in Jerusalem.

But stopping still as St. Benedict has asked us to do is not just for prayer: it is about stopping to pray *together*, for common prayer. Fundamentally, it is about stopping still for the encounter between the communion with God and fraternal communion.

This is the Work of God to which St. Benedict invites us, along with the Church from her very beginning: “Then they returned to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day’s journey away; and when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying (...). All devoted themselves with one accord to prayer, together with some women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.” (Acts 1:12-14)

Recently in Poland, I was meditating on the Gospel of the disciples of Emmaus. It struck me that their return to Jerusalem was essentially a conversion that brought them from their individualistic life project to the community reunited in the Upper Room, that is a return from their private home to the Upper Room of life in common. It is as if at Emmaus the Risen One had suddenly vanished from before their eyes precisely so that they would run to rediscover His presence among their brothers and sisters reunited in the Upper Room.

The disciples of Emmaus, distancing themselves from Jerusalem and so also from the community of the other disciples of Christ, no longer knew what to do after the violent death of their Master. Before, they had been disciples; probably one day they had left everything to follow Christ, and they had remained faithful to him till the end. But when he died, they lost the only reference point of their vocation. After a few days of hesitation and fear, they decided to return home, to Emmaus, to take back up their usual activities. Jesus, for them, would have been a memory, but a disappointing memory, because they had expected so much from him and everything had finished without their hopes having been satisfied.

How great is the temptation for us to do as they did. One day we entered the monastery to follow Jesus Christ, to be with him for ever, but then with the passing of time it seems to us that our expectations have been let down and slowly we make our way back to Emmaus, to our previous life, to our individual projects, to the organization and private management of our time, of our work, of money, of relationships, and even of prayer. We are convinced that we are right and we tell ourselves that what we are doing is always for Christ anyway, always a service to the community and the Church, or for the salvation of souls. And for this reason it does not seem necessary any more for us to stay united with the people with whom and through whom we once found Jesus, followed Him and listened to Him. We go away from Jerusalem, we go away from the Upper Room, from the place where Christ promised us the Resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit, from the place where, despite everything, we were united to the Apostles, to Mary, and to all the disciples.

At first we feel free and relieved to leave this company of people who, without Jesus, is even more miserable and poor than before. But along the individual way we make from Jerusalem to Emmaus, sadness and a sense of emptiness slowly come over us. We tell ourselves many things, we really set ourselves about our tasks, we busy ourselves with many things, but it is as if, in everything, there were a lack of sense, of meaning, of peace, of joy. Life becomes sterile and we are alone, more and more alone with our projects and our activities. Even if in the meantime, Jesus has risen and they come to tell us so, we don't believe it, we are sceptical, and it no longer seems possible that He can be the fountain of life for us: "We were hoping that he would be the one to redeem Israel; and besides all this, it is now the third day since this took place. Some women from our group, however, have astounded us: they were at the tomb early in the morning and did not find his body; they came back and reported that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who announced that he was alive. Then some of those with us went to the tomb and found things just as the women had described, but him they did not see." (Lk 24:21-24)

The only thing that can save us from this moving off from Him in sad and sterile individualism is that Christ joins up with us through grace, through mercy, and that His presence and his Word bear our hearts back to a burning desire to be with Him: "Stay with us, for evening is falling and the day is now far spent!" (Lk 24:29).

What saves us is the grace of renewing our desire and the request that the presence of Christ be that which keeps our lives from setting in our sadness. What saves us is the mercy of Christ who always comes to join up with us, even where we stray from Him, to talk with us and make us desire the fullness of life He wants to give us in our being with him. Above all, what saves us is the event of suddenly seeing the light of His face once more, His eyes, His loving gaze upon us, as on the first day.

Then the disciples of Emmaus returned to Jerusalem, they returned to the Upper Room. Christ vanished from before their eyes so that they would go back to unite themselves to the communion of people in whom He wanted to remain present for ever, by virtue of the Eucharist, of common prayer, of the gift of the Holy Spirit, of the ministry of the Apostles, of the presence of Mary. The Upper Room was also the place in which Jesus, Lord and Master, had taken the last place, that of the servant who washes the others' feet, the place of the poor One who calls us back to recognize our own poverty and not to want to lord it over others.

It is precisely to this return from Emmaus to Jerusalem that St. Benedict invites us in the whole of his Rule. After the period of isolation in Subiaco, St. Benedict had had the experience that it is above all in the Upper Room of the cenobitic life that the Risen One appears and speaks to us: "While they were still speaking about this, he stood in their midst and said to them, 'Peace be with you'." (Lk 24:36)

“We have never even heard that there is a Holy Spirit”

But why is it so difficult for us to decide in favor of the community? Why does communion seem less attractive to us than solitude?

Perhaps it would be enough for us simply to remember the main reason why, before his Ascension into Heaven, the Risen Jesus asked the disciples to remain together in the Upper Room. The reason is the gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus asks us to be together to welcome the Spirit. Because it is the Holy Spirit that animates communion and prayer, fraternal communion and communion with God. The Spirit is the Love that unites us to God and to our brothers and sisters. What Jesus asks of the disciples is not to be capable of prayer and love, but to stay together in prayer as if to open to the Spirit the empty space that corresponds to the fullness of love and prayer that He is. This is the Christian offering.

We, however, always think that fraternal communion and prayer are a duty we must accomplish with our own efforts, and that God is like a galley master who, without doing anything himself, moderates the forced labor assigned to others. We are a bit like the dozen inhabitants of Ephesus who, when St. Paul asked them if they had received the Holy Spirit, had to reply: “We have never even heard that there is a Holy Spirit” (Acts 19:2).

The Rule of St. Benedict is not usually considered very “charismatic.” Even so, the few times that the Holy Spirit is mentioned in it are significant and cast over the whole Benedictine and Cistercian observance a breath of Pentecost that we must not overlook if we want to live our vocation in happiness and truth.

For example, St. Benedict mentions the Holy Spirit as a joyous gift exactly when he speaks of the most demanding period of life in the monastery: Lent. Here Benedict links the “joy of the Holy Spirit” to the freedom of the offering. In fact, after noting that “the life of the monk should in all times preserve the discipline of Lent” (RB 49:1), he asks that “everyone should, on his own initiative, offer to God, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, something above the assigned measure.” (49:6)

The Holy Spirit is the fullness of heart, that is, joy, which suddenly fills the free and empty space that we open up to God. True liberty is not for power, but for offering; it is not for being capable, but being available; not for being full, but open. The worst defect we can have is to feel perfect, because this closes us to the fullness of the small and the poor: the Gift of the Spirit.

In the same sense, St. Benedict mentions the Holy Spirit at the end of the chapter on humility. Here as well, when the monk has climbed all the steps of humility, and has as it were emptied himself of all pride and presumption, and of every fear, the Spirit comes to fill with love his whole life and person, open to grace:

“Now, therefore, after ascending all these steps of humility, the monk will quickly arrive at that perfect love of God which casts out fear. Through this love, all that he once performed with dread, he will now begin to observe without effort, as though naturally, from habit, no longer out of fear of hell, but out of love for Christ, good habit and delight in virtue. All this the Lord will by the Holy Spirit graciously manifest in his workman now cleansed of vices and sins.” (RB 7:67-70)

Yes, St. Benedict, like our Cistercian fathers and mothers, knew that there is a Holy Spirit and that without Him we can do nothing. For this reason he was happy and invited others to happiness, like a child who knows his parents never ask him for anything without helping him, and that everything they ask him for is for his good and for his life.

Let us, then, simply ask ourselves if, even after so many years of Christian and monastic life, we know whether or not there is the Spirit. Perhaps we don't know this yet. I must confess that I never know it enough. But it would be sufficient at least to have the humility of the twelve Ephesians who recognize that they do not know the Spirit, the Comforter, the Father of the poor, the sweet Guest of the soul, the Fire of Love, the Lord who gives life. Then, by virtue of our baptism, ratified by our monastic profession, the Holy Spirit will be given to us immediately as, again, to the inhabitants of Ephesus, making us joyful in the praise of God and the prophets (Acts 19:5-6), that is, witnesses of the newness of life that the Risen Christ wants to give to all mankind.

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Dearest Brothers and Sisters, with gratitude, affection, and humility, I remain united to all of you in asking for the Paraclete and receiving Him with empty hands, with Mary, so that the whole Order, in the variety of its charisms and observances, may offer to the world an Upper Room that is welcoming and open, in which the Spirit of the Father and of the Son may be a gift for all.

Rome, Pentecost 2011

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Mauro-Giuseppe O. Cist. ab. gen." The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Mauro" and the last name "Lepori" being the most prominent parts.

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Abbot-General*