

## 1. Where we should start back up from

After three years of interruption because of the Covid-19 pandemic, we have restarted our Monastic Formation Course according to the established plan that we paused with the 2019 course. In these three years, especially since the spring of 2020, we and the whole world have passed through a time of trial, of fear, of disorientation, which is not over, on account of the war that began in the Ukraine at the end of February this year. Humanity wavers between discouragement and indifference. Maybe we are living a little like the tenth century after Christ, when, at the approach of the year 1000, which many feared would bring the end of the world announced in the Book of Revelation, peoples lived between fear and superficiality. And us? How do we live out this dramatic time in history? How do we live out our vocation? Do we consider ourselves responsible for humanity, which seems ever more fully to be drifting off the path, without a sense for living, without hope for a better future, without solidarity between the poor who are getting poorer and poorer and the rich who are always getting richer?

At the same time, Pope Francis, as the Popes have always done, is a strong call to hope and to living a faith that is truly engaged in charity toward the poor and unfortunate. He asks us to live out our religious and monastic vocation with responsibility toward the Church, toward humanity, and also in relation to the created universe, the common home that we must take care of out of love for the man of today and tomorrow. More particularly, the Pope has been inviting us in these years to deepen our awareness and experience of the synodal nature of the Church, also as a better way to progress, in the time we are living, in a way that is fruitful and useful for ourselves, for the Church, and for the world. Synodality, walking together, is the ecclesial and safest way for us and for all to go forward as we follow Jesus Christ, and so it is also the way to be certain that the road is right, even if it often seems that we are “walking through a dark valley” (cf. Ps 22:4).

Last June 13, I met the Holy Father in a private audience, and after talking to him about the Order’s path in these years, I told him in summary: “We are all having a harder time walking, but we walk more closely together.” He answered me: “An African saying comes to my mind, which goes: If you want to walk fast, walk on your own; but if you want to walk steady, walk along with others.”

So, I think that in the present moment we are asked to learn again from St. Benedict and our fathers and mothers in the monastic vocation how to walk together, to walk truly together, even if this involves a sacrifice of ourselves, of our way of thinking of ourselves, our life, and even our vocation. For, I must say, I see growing in our communities, sometimes also and especially among the younger members, a strange individualism in conceiving of and living out our vocation, in thinking about the vows, in thinking about the community, in thinking also about holiness, that is, the fullness of life to which we are called. I understand that we need a deepening of the sense of life as vocation, and of the sense of vocation as mission, as a task that the Lord entrusts to each of us for the sake of the Church’s vitality and the salvation of the world.

It is getting clearer and clearer to me that we cannot truly walk together if we do not personally say yes to the Lord's call to follow him on the road that He opens up before us. We cannot follow Christ by ourselves, but we cannot even walk together after him without a leap in our conception and awareness of our own "I," a leap that means a renunciation of whatever within us is opposed to the way of Christ, to his life, to which we are called to conform ourselves, so that He can live within us.

St. Paul writes to the Galatians: "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life 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)

"It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." What does this mean? What a leap of awareness and of life are we each asked to make to pass from our life to the life of Christ in us? This is certainly the goal of the vows of our monastic Profession, either as St. Benedict formulates them – obedience, *conversatio morum*, and stability – or as came to be formulated later – obedience, poverty, and chastity. The issue is always our free choice, which entails a new conception of our person and of our being and walking along with others.

So the desire I feel, in the awareness of the need for new life that I see in our persons and communities, is the desire to deepen our awareness of our vows, to live out a true Synodality in the Church and in service of the Church in this dramatic time in history. I intuit that, if we do not take notice of this, we risk living out the current fragility of our Orders as a fruitless end, which would not bear witness to Easter, that is, to the possibility of the Resurrection even if we die.

I am ever more convinced, in fact, that in the current Church there is not so much a numerical crisis of *vocations* but a crisis of *vocation* as such, a crisis in the way of conceiving and living out the vocation that Baptism and Confirmation entail, and in particular the matrimonial vocation.

And the communities that have more vocations are not spared from the crisis of vocation. Quite the contrary! At times it is precisely the more numerous communities that more easily lose their concern for the deep meaning of vocation, thinking that, to be alive and fruitful for Christ, it is enough to be numerous. The important thing is to cultivate and favor the meaning of the Christian and monastic vocation just as Christ calls us to live it out, following his Person and identifying ourselves with his life.