

LOOKING AT JESUS TOGETHER



Dear brothers and sisters, duties after the General Chapter have permitted that only now do I come to write a brief Christmas letter to you. It is also true that in almost all languages the opening and closing discourses of the Chapter have reached you, and I am sure that your superiors have or will share with you the experience of such an important moment in the life of the Order, as also of the decisions and documents that the Chapter expressed for the support of the Order's journey in the next years.

Following Peter to follow Christ

You all know the brief but intense description that the *Carta Caritatis* gives of the meeting of all the superiors of the Order: "Let them treat of the salvation of their souls; let them make arrangements concerning the observance of the holy Rule or of the Order, if there might be something to correct or to increase; let them recreate among them the good of peace and of charity" (CC 7.2).

Certainly every General Chapter presents positive and negative aspects, moments of grace and of fraternal communion, as also of conflict and power struggle. All is part of "journeying together," that is, of the synodal way, of the disciples of Christ. We should not be scandalized or discouraged by our pettiness, but especially we must not forget to be thankful to the Lord for keeping us together in this journey and making us experience again and again the beauty of our vocation and mission.

As I said in the *Closing Discourse*, the moment of greatest grace in this last General Chapter was certainly the meeting with Pope Francis and the discourse that he pronounced for us on October 17. We experienced with what force Peter is, in the Church, the one who has the mission to recreate in us and among us, as the *Carta Caritatis* says, "the good of peace and of charity."

Pope Francis found the way to suggest to us what needs to be “corrected and increased” among us so that the life of the Order can serve the salvation of our souls and of all humanity. For this reason I felt right away that the first duty to assume in starting my service as abbot general again is that of taking up with all of you the Pope’s words as a certain indication, inspired by the Holy Spirit, to direct and urge on the continuation of our common journey. For only by following Peter do we follow Christ, and only by following Christ are we sure not to get lost, not to lose the right orientation of our charism, even in the rich variety of our different observances.

The charism of shared observance of Christ

It is on the word “observance” that I would like to concentrate in this Christmas letter, leaving to the next letters other topics of the Pope’s discourse that we certainly need to think about more deeply.

We know that our Order has the official title of *Cistercian Order*. The qualification “of the common observance,” as the Pope also said elsewhere, is for distinguishing us from the other “special” observances, like the “strict observance.”

The Pope gave value back to an expression that is perceived as almost disdainful, showing us the way we can live out our observance in a special manner. It is pointless to compare different observances, not only among Orders but even among our various Congregations and individual communities. Not infrequently competition in observance creates tensions even between the monks or nuns of the same community. The point, however, is to live out every observance in a way that appreciates it from within. Our observance will not be better if we compare ourselves to others exteriorly, but if we live it out in an evangelical way, putting Christ at the center. The Pope helps us understand that an observance is not good if it is exteriorly better than the others, but if it is animated by two profound dimensions of each life and each Christian vocation: contemplative attention to the Lord and fraternal communion.

It was good for us to hear from the Pope that these two fundamental elements of Christian life are, so to speak, inscribed in our charism, that is, they are the gift of grace that can always unite us to follow Christ with joy and hope. In fact, Pope Francis said: “This gift we have received never ceases to amaze us and bring us joy: to be his community, as we are, not perfect, not uniform, no, not like that, but *convoked*, involved, called upon to stay and walk together behind him, our Master and Lord. This, brothers and sisters, is the basis of everything. Thank you for emphasizing this, and I encourage you to rekindle your desire and willingness towards this common observance of Christ.”

Only by starting over from this gratitude for our vocation, for the charism that we have all received, and for the call to live it out together, can we truly recreate the “good of peace and of charity,” not only for ourselves and among ourselves, but for the whole world that, today more than ever, has a vital need for this gift.

Looking at Jesus together

So we understand that the first and fundamental commitment that is asked of us after this General Chapter, and my first and fundamental commitment as abbot general, is to *look at Jesus Christ together*, not first of all at ourselves or at each other, but at Christ. When we do not look first at the Lord, we always end up judging, condemning, and dividing ourselves. Instead, when we look at Jesus together, with amazement we discover ourselves united by Him, by his presence, by his gaze, by his word, by his love for us. It is an experience that the Pope calls us to have as an Order, in every community, and also among all superiors. It is the experience that the whole Church is called to make, that all Christians are called to make, in order to always rediscover a unity, a communion, that are not our work, but the luminous reflection of Christ's Face in us, that luminous reflection that, as Jesus promised us, allows the whole world to believe that the Son is sent by the Father to save humanity (cf. Jn. 17:21).

The Pope outlined with simplicity the manner of this "common observance of Christ," as a practice of prayer and meditation that should be familiar to us in the school of St. Benedict, St. Bernard, and our Cistercian tradition: "Observe Jesus. Like a child who observes his father, or his best friend. Observing the Lord: his way of doing things, his face, full of love and peace, at times indignant in the face of hypocrisy and closed-mindedness, and also troubled and anguished at the time of the passion. And observing together, not individually; in community. Each one doing so at his own pace, certainly, each one with his own unique and unrepeatable history, but together."

These words invite us first of all to stop, to waste time looking at the Lord, listening to his Word, praying. This practice of the common observance of Christ is a space of gratuitousness that we all need, despite so many urgent needs we face. We need it because those who look at Jesus do not look at a static image but at a living Face that, when we gaze upon him, radiates upon us, transforming us with the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Looking at Christ, "his way of doing things, his face, full of love and peace, at times indignant in the face of hypocrisy and closed-mindedness, and also troubled and anguished at the time of the passion," we realize that everything we see in Him becomes ours, that his way of doing becomes ours, his face becomes our face, his gaze becomes our gaze. We realize that his love and peace invade our hearts and our relationships. We are thus also given his truth in the face of hypocrisy, our own or that of others, as well as his turmoil and anguish to be entrusted to the Father and to be lived out as sharing in the turmoil and anguish of so many of our brothers and sisters.

As we look at Jesus with attention and longing, we realize that He becomes more and more the subject of our lives, coming to live in us, giving us his filial communion with the Father in the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Like the shepherds and wise men

“Observing together, not individually; in community,” Pope Francis insisted. What does this mean? Why insist on this?

It is not something to understand, but to experience, because by experiencing it one understands, one sees that it is true, that it is good, that it is fruitful and does good.

We often see that so much indifference and division come from the way we look at one another. Only by looking at Jesus, and observing his gaze on us and others, do we discover a new light on ourselves and on others. The right gaze on everyone and everything is not our own, but is that of the Lord of truth and mercy. Looking at Jesus together, as we should do in every community act, in every liturgical celebration, particularly in the Eucharist, we discover that Jesus first “sees us together,” has a gaze on each of us that immediately recognizes us as brothers and sisters in Him. Christ has a gaze that unites, that creates communion. Christ has the gaze of the Father who recognizes us all as his children, all as one flock and one Body of the only-begotten Son.

Recognizing this asks us first of all for an attitude of humility, accepting that we always need to go through Jesus in order to be united, to love one another, to walk together, and to live out our vocation and mission.

In John’s Gospel it is recorded that some Greeks approached the apostles with the request, “We want to see Jesus!” (John 12:21). They, too, wanted to see him together. When Jesus was informed of this desire, he understood that his Easter mission was being fulfilled: “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (Jn 12:23-24).

Perhaps the Pope asked us to look at Jesus together for this very reason, so that Christ’s mission can be fulfilled in us, in our Order, and the grain of wheat of our charism can bear “much fruit” in the Church and for the world, the fruit of communion, of the universal fraternity for which we have been called to give our lives.

Even the simple shepherds of Bethlehem, or the refined wise men who came from the East, wanted to see Jesus together. Let us make our own and share with each other and with everyone the invitation they addressed to each other as the best Christmas gift we can exchange: “Let us go with joy to meet the Lord!”

Fr. Mauro - Giuseppe Lepori O.Cist

P. S. I would like to inform you that from Jan. 11 to Feb. 13, 2023, I will be on retreat in a monastery in England for a “sabbatical month,” during which I wish to pause to look at the Lord and listen to him, that he may help us to follow him on the path together that he is tracing before us. Thank you for respecting this time of retreat, writing to me only for matters of extreme urgency. You will all be very present in my prayer and I entrust myself to yours! Merry Christmas and blessed new year! Your Fr. MG