



(Icon of Christ in the museum of Poblet)

Christmas Letter 2021 of the Abbot General OCist

Let us walk, Lord, in the light of your face

Dearest Brothers and Sisters,

We are already far into Advent, preparing ourselves with the Church to receive the gift of the coming of the Son of God, a great joy, infinite consolation, liberation and redemption of the whole world. Christ comes and ever makes himself present in every contingency of the history of the world, as also of the history of our communities and of our lives. It is beautiful to read in the Gospel of Luke how the event of the birth of Christ enters into the totality of human history, that history which encompasses both the emperor Caesar Augustus in the capital of the world, Rome, and a young married couple, Joseph and Mary, inhabitants of a small, poor, and unknown village of Galilee. Today too Christ comes into the current history of the world and of our lives, the history marked by the pandemic and by so many other problems.

This faithful awareness should continually make us lift up our gaze to Jesus so that the light of his face can come today as well to illuminate the history of our lives, of our communities, and of the whole world.

Who can be saved?

How does this happen?

For two months now I have been accompanied by a discovery that occurred while I was meditating with our Sisters of Santa Susanna in Rome on the episode of the rich young man in the Gospel according to St. Mark (10:17–27). We know that in this version, when the young man expresses his desire for eternal life, which not even the observance of all the commandments has satisfied, Jesus combines the call to leave everything to follow him with a look of love: “And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him: ‘You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me’” (Mk 10:21).

The young man goes away sad, because his desire for eternal life is as it were swallowed up by his attachment to his riches. Yes, it really is a sad and terrible choice to refuse an invitation into which Jesus put all his love, as if he had said to the young man: “You are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you!” (Is 43:4).

While that man distances himself, Jesus begins to speak of the grave danger that attachment to the riches of the earth can become for us, and his words stir up the anxiety of his disciples: “How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!’ And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, ‘Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.’ And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, ‘Then who can be saved?’” (Mk 10:23–26).

And this is the real problem, this is the challenge that should make us anxious: Who is saved? How can we be saved? What saves our life? With just this question we should live out all circumstances and confront our whole life.

The gaze that opens us to the impossible

How does the Lord respond to this troubling question? He does not limit himself to words: rather, he responds with a gaze. “Jesus looked at them and said, ‘With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God’” (Mk 10:27).

Between our fear of not being able to be saved, because we feel incapable of being converted from our idols, and the grace of salvation, Jesus grants us the gift of receiving his presence which looks upon us with love. After the departure of the rich man whom he had looked upon with particular love, Jesus certainly looked upon his disciples with the same love, with the same friendship. Jesus could not look at anyone without love, without mercy, without tenderness, even when he was looking with severity upon those who turned to him with hypocrisy. Christ always looks upon man with love, because he is God, and God is love. The Lord’s gaze expresses the infinite love of his heart.

God knows that, on our own, we are not capable of being converted, and for this reason he sends his Son to be so present in our life that he can look upon each of us with infinite love, that love that the life of Christ expresses unreservedly, from the manger of Bethlehem to the death on the cross. Yes, “All things are possible,” especially our being given the salvation that is impossible for us. God does not impose salvation upon us but he offers it to us so freely that he asks of us only a single thing in return: to receive his gaze of love upon us, to consent to an exchange of looks and of love with him, to a communion of hearts that is impossible for man but which the Lord makes possible because he loves us infinitely.

Receiving the gaze of love that Christ directs to us is the open secret of what permits the Lord to grant us the impossible, the impossible conversion, the impossible salvation, the impossible detachment from ourselves and from what we possess, to be free to follow Jesus, that is, to make a journey with him, giving life to the poor and testifying to the joy of the Gospel.

Many psalms also love to sing of this mystery when they contemplate the light of the Lord’s face. Like Psalm 80, which repeats this essential invocation as a refrain: “Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved!” (Ps 80:3, 7, 19).

The whole essence of Christianity is in this event of salvation that is impossible for man yet becomes an experience when the light of Christ's face is kindled in our life, the light of his presence that looks upon us with love, even when we might be found in the depth of an abyss of darkness.

The mystical contemplation to which we are all called does not consist in having who knows what supernatural visions, but in realizing that the good face of the Lord is there gazing upon us now, without judgment, without condemnation, without demands that would be beyond our powers. It is enough to lift our gaze to his eyes to realize that Christ desires only to enkindle in our lives and in our hearts the light of his friendship that saves us, that saves all that we are and live. If the rich young man had stopped to contemplate that gaze, if he had remained exposed to that powerful and sweet light for a while, he would have understood that what was asked of him was not so much the superhuman effort of leaving everything behind, but the humility of receiving all in the grace of remaining always with Jesus. All his goods would disappear, as it were, from his heart's field of vision; he would no longer have been able to give them a greater value than the experience he was having with Jesus; he would no longer have been able to prefer absolutely anything to Christ (cf. RB 72:11).

Walking in the light of his face

But to live this out we know that we need to make a journey. We, too, often find ourselves in the same situation as the rich young man. So many times we have the experience of being loved by the Lord, of feeling called to an infinite freedom, of being invited to give our whole life, or even just what we have now in our hands, and instead we go off sad. We do not allow God to grant us the impossible. But the Father's mercy always gives us this opportunity of salvation again, always calls us back to follow the Son with freedom and happiness on the path of life. He offers it to us again by repeating the offer of his loving gaze, of the light of his face. In a thousand ways, through experiences, encounters, circumstances, words, God renews the grace of offering us a relationship with Jesus that allows us a new journey, that renews the daily journey of our life. Maybe nothing has to change outwardly, but if the heart changes, if the heart lets itself be illuminated by the loving gaze of Christ, all becomes new, even the journey that we are always making and which seems grey and monotonous to us.

This is the Paschal experience of the disciples of Emmaus: "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road?" (Lk 24:32). But it was also, many years before, the experience of the poor shepherds of Bethlehem, or of the Magi, but especially of the Virgin Mary when she set out on a journey toward the hill country to help Elizabeth and sang: "The Lord...has looked on the humble estate of his servant" (Lk 1:48).

Following Jesus Christ on the journey with joy is our salvation, that salvation "impossible with man" that the loving gaze that Jesus directs to us makes possible. The eternal life that Christ was offering to the rich young man was not that of being found immediately in Paradise like the repentant thief, but of being able to follow him, to make a journey with him and the disciples who were already with him. Our

salvation is that our life becomes ever more fully a journey with the Savior, a journey whose only energy is the very presence of Jesus who looks upon us and loves us.

Walking together

We must especially think of this at this moment in which Pope Francis asks us throughout the Church to deepen the synodal nature of the Christian experience, as a “journey together” in reciprocal listening. In so disoriented a time, it is essential that the Church live out and testify to her nature as people of God who, in the course of history, follows Christ – the Way, the Truth, and the Life – who, as St. Benedict puts it so well at the end of the Rule, wants to “lead us all together to eternal life” (RB 72:12), that is, precisely to that fullness of life that is impossible with men that the rich young man asks Jesus for and which Jesus has come to lead us toward by drawing us to himself with the light of his face.

So we understand that we could hardly make this journey together if we do not start from Christ’s gaze. If the rich young man had followed the light of Jesus’s face, he would immediately have found himself journeying after him together with an ever larger people of disciples, the new people that is the Church. But the disciples who were already with Jesus, who had already left everything to follow him, also needed and always will need to return to looking to the Lord who looks upon them with love, in order not to stop to “argue among themselves,” asking each other hopelessly: “Then who can be saved?” (Mk 10:26).

A synodality that does not draw on the full presence of Christ’s love quickly loses hopes and does not allow for a journey. If we do not live it out while exposed to the light of his Face, we start to get bogged down in the limits of our possibilities, when instead the Church’s journey is the journey impossible with men that God makes possible, makes a reality, a Paschal experience of victory over sin and death. When we argue only among ourselves, without exposed ourselves in humility and adoration to the loving gaze of Jesus, our face becomes dark with sadness, like that of the rich young man who goes his way (Mk 10:22) or that of the disciples of Emmaus (Lk 24:17). Our faces, our testimony, become dark, do not give light to the world, because we forget to let our gaze be prevailed over by the loving gaze of Jesus upon us and upon others, the gaze of Jesus on the world and history.

The gaze of communion

As Psalm 89 puts it: “Blessed are the people who know the festal shout, who walk, O Lord, in the light of your face!” (Ps 90:16).

Without light we cannot walk. The light of the world does not come from the world, but is Christ who loves the world and wants to save it. God has chosen us to give testimony to this light, to this love that conquers the darkness and saves humanity. Our responsibility as disciples of the Lord, in particular as monks and nuns, is to keep ourselves first of all exposed to the light of Christ’s face, so that all whom we meet can be guided to lift up their gaze toward him and realize how lovingly God is looking upon them from all eternity.

Only the light of Christ's face creates fraternity. When we realize how lovingly Jesus looks upon us personally we immediately discover that this is the gaze with which God looks upon every person, every heart, every life. In the episode of the rich young man, between the gaze directed to him and that directed toward the disciples, Mark also makes mention of a circular gaze of the Lord: "Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, 'How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!'" (Mk 10:23). It is as if Jesus wanted to show his own disciples the loving gaze with which the good shepherd scrutinizes the whole world in search of every lost sheep whom he wants to carry back to the sheepfold, into the kingdom of God the Father. Nothing unites us to all humanity, to each individual heart, as much as the experience that the love with which Jesus looks upon us is extended to embrace all, seeks the face of all. As when he looked upon the rich young man, Christ does not cease to draw us to enter into his passion for the salvation of every man. But even to be in communion with the brothers and sisters of our community, or of our family, even for making a journey together with each other, the condition is not that we have good will, but that we surrender ourselves to the love with which the Lord is looking upon us, personally, in every instance and circumstance.

The first smile of the Child

While we, along with the General Chapter and urged by the Church, are preparing to give our specific contribution to the synodal path started by the Holy Father, it is important for me that we begin from the starting point of every journey together for the disciples of Jesus Christ: the light of his face that calls us with love to follow him. If we do not start ever anew from that point, it will be impossible to make a journey of conversion to the new life that the Lord grants us. The light of his face, however, allows God to do "great things" (Lk 1:49), to do impossible things in us, among us, and in the world. It is enough to surrender ourselves to his love.

The imminence of Christmas makes me think of what the first smile of the Baby Jesus must have meant for Mary and Joseph, that is, the first time that Jesus looked upon them with love, with gratitude, with joy. In that moment Mary and Joseph saw the light that illuminates the world and saves it.

We too are called to have this experience constantly. Only thus does Christmas happen. This is the Christmas wish that I make for you from the heart in my poor but constant prayer for you, and entrusting myself to yours!

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Fr. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Fr. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori
Abbot General OCist