

## Letter of the Abbot General OCist for Pentecost 2023

### “ABIDE IN MY LOVE”



Dear Brothers and Sisters, with this Pentecost Letter I would like to conclude our meditation on the discourse that Pope Francis addressed to our General Chapter on October 17, 2022, now exploring more deeply his invitation to live our vocation within the great symphony of the Church.

#### **The heart of the Risen One**

In chapter 15 of the Gospel according to John, Jesus tells us something extraordinary that should be constantly meditating on: “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love” (Jn 15:9).

Jesus gives us everything. There can be no greater and more beautiful gift than to be loved by the Son as the Son is loved by the Father. The gift of the Holy Spirit, the gift of Pentecost, is the communication of this Trinitarian Love, made to us by the Father through the Son, who animates the Church.

The risen Jesus, when he appears in the Upper Room on the evening of Easter day, displays this gift: “On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.’ And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld’” (Jn 20:19–23).

I was recently invited to hold a day of reflection for consecrated life in Lithuania in the city of Vilnius. There they have a church open day and night for perpetual adoration, and there they venerate the first image of the Merciful Christ that appeared to St. Faustina Kowalska. It is the icon of the Risen One who appeared the evening of Easter as the Gospel of John describes him.

Our Cistercian mystics also loved to contemplate the Lord who, from the Cross and after the Resurrection, receives us into his always open wounds, indelible sign and inexhaustible source of his infinite love for us sinners. In that church of Vilnius, one perceives that the Lord who appears on the evening of Easter remains present for us, as a source of love, joy, and peace, breathing the gift of the Paraclete upon us and upon the world. Jesus always awaits us, always draws us to this spring, to make us too instruments for transmitting his merciful love in the world.

### **The eyes of the bride**

But in the scene of the Upper Room on the evening of Easter, it is clear that this whole mystery has an inalienable link with the community of the disciples and their unity. We understand this thanks to the absence and incredulity of St. Thomas. Jesus did not want to manifest himself to Thomas in private because the Apostles must be the first witnesses that the certain form of the Risen One's presence is the communion of the Church. The secret to seeing Jesus and believing in Him is not the capacities or qualities of a single person, but the readiness to share the faith with the brethren. The eyes of faith observe Christ together with the others, as Pope Francis reminded us. Each of us, if they want to see the Lord, is called to join to the gaze of the Church, who has the eyes of a bride that are filled with joy at the sight of the Bridegroom. As happens on the evening of Easter: "Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord" (Jn 20:20). Only by joining ourselves humbly and thankfully to this shared gaze do we live the faith with joy, that is, with love that rejoices over the Beloved. One is joined truly to the faith of the Church when it permits us to find in Jesus joy of heart shared with the others.

I always think of this when I see our brothers in Ethiopia living the festive liturgy, singing and dancing full of joy, often together with the Christian people, as I recently experienced in Mendida as we celebrated the hundredth anniversary of the foundation of the Lazarist monastery that was then entrusted to the Cistercians. The mass lasted almost five hours: a true wedding feast of the Lamb. Joy for the Bridegroom was the whole beauty of the bride. Often in our liturgies we restrict ourselves to attending to a formal beauty, or to lamenting if we can no longer express it, forgetting that the true beauty of the human face is joy, the smile, not its shape. I will never forget the face of an extremely disfigured and deformed boy whom I met years ago. I never saw such a beautiful face, because he was full of joy to meet people. The true face of man, in fact, is in his heart. Indeed, "Man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart" (1 Sam 16:7).

### **Symphonic joy**

Christian joy, then, is always symphonic. It is a joy that each of us perceives if they accept becoming instruments of the great symphony that the Holy Spirit always raises up in the Church.

In the Audience the Pope told us that the common observance of Christ "involves a constant effort of conversion [...] from a *self-referential* community to an *extroverted* community, in the good sense of the word, welcoming and missionary. It is the movement that the Holy Spirit always seeks to impress on the Church, working in every one of its members and in every one

of its communities and institutions. A movement that goes back to Pentecost, the ‘baptism’ of the Church. The Spirit himself then inspired and inspires a great variety of charisms and forms of life, a great ‘symphony’. There are many forms, very different to each other, but to be part of an ecclesial symphony, they must obey this outward-bound movement. Not a chaotic movement in random order: going together, all in tune with the one heart of the Church which is love.”

The one heart of the Church is the love of Christ who unites the disciples and at the same time sends them out: “‘As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.’ And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (Jn 20:21–22).

The urgency that the Pope communicated to us is the same as that which Christ communicated to the Apostles and thus to the whole Church: the urgency to live out our vocation centered on the one love that embraces all humanity.

The metaphor of a symphony helps us understand how this must happen, because “symphony” means sounding together. This implies unity, but a unity that spreads out, that resounds, that diffuses itself. In a symphony the instruments sound together in order to resound more, to transmit better the beauty of the music. Jesus too asked the disciples to gather in the Upper Room to be able to receive the Spirit who immediately sent them into the whole world.

We can only understand how this must take place for our communities and our Order if we seek unity above all, communion in prayer and in fraternal life, that which Jesus asked of the disciples before he ascended into heaven: “That they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (Jn 17:21). When we obey Christ when he asks unity of us, the Holy Spirit makes us capable of transmitting to the world the beauty of the Gospel. Whoever consents to unity in Christ receives from the Spirit the grace of universal love, the grace of transmitting Christ to the world.

We must be thankful that the generosity of our Trappist brothers of the Abbey of *Notre Dame des Neiges* has granted to our sisters of Boulaur their monastery where St. Charles de Foucauld, the saint of “universal brotherhood,” entered and to which he always remained connected! Let us allow ourselves to be watered by this precious nourishment, so dear to Pope Francis!

### **The gift of diversities**

For this reason, the Pope invites us to live out all the diversities that characterize us precisely as an invitation to find unity in Christ and not in what we are.

To live out the symphony of the Church means to harmonize all the diversities in the communion of the one Body of Christ to whom the Spirit gives life.

Here it is worth citing Francis’s discourse at length, taking his insistence on this point seriously: “Like the Twelve, who were always with Jesus and walked with him. They did not choose themselves; he chose them. It was not always easy to be in agreement: they were different from each other, each one with his own ‘edges,’ and his pride. We are like this too, and also for us it is not easy to advance together in communion. And yet, 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. [...]

Returning to the image — or rather the sound — of the symphony, you aim to embrace the great missionary breath of the Church also by valuing the complementarity between *male and female*, as well as the *cultural diversity* among Asian, African, Latin American, North American, and European members. I encourage you on this path, which is not easy, but which can without a doubt be a wealth for the communities and for the Order.

Thank you for the commitment with which you cooperate in the effort the whole Church is making in this regard, in every particular Community: today the experience of the encounter with diversity is a sign of the times. Yours is a valuable contribution, particularly rich because, on account of your contemplative vocation, you do not content yourselves with bringing together diversities at a superficial level; you also live them inwardly, in prayer, in spiritual dialogue. And this enriches the ‘symphony’ of deeper and more generative resonances.”

The Pope reminds us that the diversities of nature, of gender, of culture, of race, of temperament, of tastes, but also of grace and charism, must not be cancelled. For in these Jesus, who has chosen us and called us to live together, wants us to hear his voice, which calls us to communion in his crucified love. The diversity that instinctively makes me feel that my brother or sister is distant, in reality is a call from Christ who invites us to participate more profoundly in the love of his Heart.

Often, we must admit, we tend to level out our differences in order not to disturb each other. Ultimately, we would like everyone to adapt themselves to what we consider good and pleasant for ourselves, at all levels: ideas, religious sensibilities, conceptions of life and vocation, etc. We forget that hiding behind the differences among the disciples of Christ are the roads and bridges that Christ calls us to travel and build in order to be more closely united to Him, to follow him closely, to follow him together. The Pope invites us to live this out with depth, reminding us that being contemplatives does not mean fleeing from others, but rather living out the relationships with the depth of heart and love that Christ breathes upon us when he gives us his Spirit. How many communities are divided or, even worse, live relationships of indifference, for fear of travelling the road toward the heart of Christ which every brother and sister always is for each of us! What a mystery to think that the Lord is the personal friend of every human creature, that for Him each disciple is “the beloved disciple,” that for each man Christ has poured out all his blood! Perhaps we should ask the Spirit first of all to reveal to us Christ’s love for each brother and sister with whom we live, especially if they are not likeable for us.

### **The first notes of hope**

Many of us may ask ourselves: “Yes, it is nice to talk about the symphony of communion. But in the communities and situations in which we seem to be reduced to the extreme, how can we make a symphony resound that would spread the joy and beauty of Christ?”

Perhaps it is just because I often ask myself these questions, regarding myself or the communities that I visit and accompany, that I was particularly struck in the liturgy by the

reading of the Acts of the Apostles in which the imprisonment of Paul and Silas at Philippi is narrated (cf. Acts 16:22–34). The crowd had risen up against them, and the magistrates had them violently flogged, and then they had them thrown into the depth of a prison with their feet fastened in the stocks. It is hard to imagine a physical or moral situation more depressing than this. Who knows what pain in all the beaten body parts, on account of the scrapes and tears in the naked skin! Who knows what the health conditions were in that prison! Who knows what unsavory company the other prisoners must have been!

But behold, from the bottom of this total human neediness, Paul and Silas begin singing hymns to God. They start a sacred symphony. They did not stop at lamenting their situation and condition, their wounds and the injustice they had undergone. They did not even think to abandon themselves to a well-earned rest. They began to sing and pray together in the heart of the night. I imagine that the quality of that song must not have been exceptional. And yet, their prison companions, certainly men of little musical or religious culture, did not begin screaming curses at them to stop disturbing their sleep. “About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them” (Acts 16:25). The song of the two disciples draws their companions, draws their crude hearts, burdened by vice and gnawed by who knows what remorse. In them awakened the human heart made for God, made for love, purity, peace, good, friendship. Even without singing, their hearts are united to the symphony of the two Christian brothers tossed so violently into sharing their sad situation. What follows the episode – the earthquake that releases all the prisoners, opening all the doors, the conversion and baptism of the guard who becomes Christian with his whole family, the festive banquet and probably also Eucharist – is nothing other than the further resounding of the symphony begun by the two Apostles when they set themselves simply to sing together in the darkness of that harsh night. But in the heart of the prisoners, conquered by the Christian song, there is already the whole human world to which Christ came to bring the Gospel. Already when those prisoners started to listen to Paul and Silas, the mission of the two Apostles had reached the furthest bounds of the world and of history, for these bounds are in our sinful hearts, which Christ came to love and save, to lead to the Father.

See, it is enough to start sharing the prayer and praise of God fraternally among ourselves, like Paul and Silas, to give rise to a symphony that reaches the ends of the world. This is the true and eternal fruitfulness of our life and vocation. This, as Pope Francis told us, is what “enriches the ‘symphony’ of deeper and more generative resonances.”

Let us ask the Holy Spirit for this gift, with Mary and the disciples gathered in the Upper Room, to rediscover a new fruitfulness full of hope in living out our vocation and mission in the Church and for the whole human race!



Fr. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori OCist