



2015 Christmas Letter of the Abbot General OCist

Merciful like the Father

Rome, December 8 2015
Solemnity of the Immaculate

Dearest!

I write you this Christmas Letter just as the Jubilee Year of Mercy is beginning, and I am united to each of you, and with you to the Pope and the whole Church, in the desire to live intensely this “year of the Lord’s favor” (Lk 4:19).

Experiencing the grace of unity

St. Bernard writes in a sermon: “We all complain that grace fails us; but it would perhaps be more correct for grace to complain that we fail it” (*De diversis* 17:1). Yes, we fail grace because we do not accept it, we do not let ourselves be filled by it. And we treat grace as if it were a treasure that God guards jealously and grants only with an eye-dropper, if we merit it. In the Bible, however, grace coincides with mercy, and in Christ it has been revealed to us and demonstrated that God’s desire is to pour it out on us like “streams of living water” in the gift of the Holy Spirit (cf. Jn 7:38-39).

I think back, always with vivid gratitude, to the experience we had with all the superiors of the Order during the last General Chapter. We perceived in us and among us a unity and a desire for communion that surpassed our capacities and our intentions. I understand that, if the Lord made such an experience possible in those days and on that occasion, it is because he desires to continue that work of grace among us and through us. Now we are responsible for not failing this grace, for letting it run through our whole Order and to all the persons and situations that God entrusts to us.

But, to avoid living this sentiment and this responsibility in a vague way, it is good that we ask ourselves: in what way during the Chapter did we realize that we were living

a particular moment of grace? What really surprised or gladdened us in those days? Certainly not the ever more fragile and precarious position of the larger part of our communities, faced with ever more pressing difficulties. I think that what truly surprised and gladdened the members of the General Chapter was precisely the grace of unity. We experienced a fraternal communion that was more profound than our differences and was greater than our efforts. We felt in our midst the presence of the Lord, who was giving us his Spirit, his charity, his mercy. And this experience gave us joy, peace, and the strength to continue our path with confidence together.

The charism is communion

Often we reduce the understanding of a religious family's charism to what is done or should be done, or to the way one lives or should live. Or one thinks of the charism as a grace received and lived well only in the past, by those who preceded us, by the founders and saints, and we feel unworthy of such perfect fathers. Perhaps it would be more useful and fruitful if we understood the charism of our vocation as unity, that is, as a place of fraternal community to which God calls us to belong. The charism is the "big family," the community of persons, to which we have been entrusted by the Holy Spirit to follow Jesus Christ. We are faithful to our charism when we are faithful to the unity among us in Christ, a unity that is a grace of the Spirit. In this every family reflects and incarnates the mystery of the Church: "The multitude of believers had one heart and one soul" (Acts 4:32).

Then we understand that that which has been asked of us in order to continue and spread the experience of the General Chapter is, above all, fidelity to the unity among us that God grants us and asks for.

This primary task does not close us in on ourselves. In fact, I see that the communities that are most united, not only formally, on the surface, but in the communion of Christ, are also the most missionary, the most radiant. In this is certainly reflected the infinite mystery of the Trinity in which "we live, and move, and have our being" (Acts 17:28). There is no unity more focused and at the same time more radiant than that of the Three divine Persons. This mystery is reproduced in us and among us by grace. Accepting the grace of unity radiating with charity is the great task of our Christian and monastic vocation. A divided community, a divided Order, a divided Church, become more opaque, less luminous, less fruitful in serving and loving humanity.

Therefore, the fact that the Jubilee Year of Mercy begins just a few weeks after the Chapter is the great opportunity that the Church offers us to deepen this experience. To cultivate communion among us, in our communities and among our communities, is the task that is asked of us in order not to fail to live up to the grace that God desires to spread in us and through us.

The responsibility of reconciliation

The mercy of God, in fact, is reflected in the human world precisely through the unity that it creates among persons. The Divine Mercy shines in reconciliation among men. The father of the parable, who receives the lost son who returns to him, immediately calls every together to share the joy he felt in embracing his son again, but above all he has no peace until the son who was lost and found again is reconciled with his older

brother (cf. Lk 15:22-24, 28-32). The son who considered himself righteous also has to understand that his fidelity to his father is not complete until he is reconciled with his brother. One is not faithful to God if one is not faithful to his mercy. Our fidelity is formal and sad if we do not contemplate the Father's heart and do not follow Him in embracing every brother, every sister whom He waits for, seeks out, receives with infinite love.

All Christ's words and parables of God's mercy ask of us the responsibility of reconciliation, of unity with the brothers and sisters whom He loves as He loves us. Reconciliation is basically the one demand of God's mercy, the one "price" of the Father's infinite grace.

"Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us," Jesus makes us pray in his prayer to the Father (Mt 6:12).

"You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?" (Mt 18:32-33).

"Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36).

The mercy that forgives a brother's trespass is the great responsibility of the Christian, the great responsibility to the Father's love, manifested in the Son who died and rose for us and in the gift of the Paraclete Spirit who purifies, renews, and gives life to our sinful hearts. To be *merciful like the Father*, which is the great theme of the Jubilee, is basically the single task of the Christian, the single mission, the single vocation to which our freedom is called to say yes at every encounter, every circumstance. All the rest follows from this, all the rest is nothing but grace that springs and radiates from this source. To be merciful with others as God is toward us means simply permitting the grace that has been granted us to flow through us toward others. And the more we transmit grace, the more we receive; the more it goes out from us toward our brothers, the more it enters into us from the Father.

The "holy door" of the monastery

Perhaps we often forget that, to live out our vocation, the fundamental task that St. Benedict asks of us is, indeed, the mercy that constantly reconciles the members of the community. In fact, the Rule begins by opening the monastery door to the prodigal son who returns home to the good Father: "Listen, my son, to the teachings of the Master, incline the ear of your heart, receive with docility and put concretely into action the admonitions that come to you from a merciful Father; so that you can, by careful obedience, return to Him from whom you departed by the sloth of disobedience" (RB Prol. 1-2).

By entering the monastery, like entering the Church with baptism, we find ourselves in the House of the Father who receives us with infinite joy, forgiving us for everything and granting us again the grace of being sons of God in Christ in the Holy Spirit. Having entered this house, we find ourselves surrounded by brothers and sisters who live the same experience. It is granted and demanded of us that we make a journey with them to become perfect in mercy like the Father. A journey that at times is difficult, because it demands growth in humility, which little by little disarms our pride, our thirst for dominion, for affirmation of ourselves. The energy that nourishes this journey is the hope

that always taps back into God, the mercy demanded by our misery and by that of our brothers and sisters.

For this reason St. Benedict, at the culmination of the instruments of sanctification that he lists in chapter 4 of the Rule, puts boundless confidence in mercy: “Never despair of the mercy of God!” (RB 4:74). He asks this of us immediately after having asked that we “be reconciled (*in pacem redire*) before sunset with the one with whom some disagreement occurred” (4:73). Trust in God’s mercy nourishes our mutual mercy, and for this reason we also should not put limits on our capacity for reconciliation, because, in God’s love, it has an endless source.

This is every Christian’s task, and especially every monk’s and nun’s in their community. A task that is missionary, because it makes of our communities a sign and instrument of the miracle of reconciliation, the great miracle that the merciful Father insists be realized today more than ever in the human world.

Put nothing before mercy

In this light each community should consider its way of living, of being together, and the tools that the Rule of St. Benedict and our Cistercian fathers and mothers offer us for the contemplation and living out of the Divine Mercy. I would like us this year to help each particularly in this regard. A Jubilee Year is a privileged occasion for renewing our concentration on that to which we are essentially consecrated in our life and our vocation, “fasting” a little from the occupations and preoccupations that give too much space in our heart and in our time to that which is not truly essential for us, for our communities, but also for the Church and for the world.

True conversion consists in concentrating on that that which truly saves us. What saves us if not the mercy of Christ, who reconciles us with the Father, with others, with ourselves, with all creation, with all of reality? Communities and their superiors are often too engaged in resolving so many problems, certainly real, but not over-riding. Pope Francis, with this Holy Year, asks us to put back in the center of our attention and our work of conversion and missionary hospitality our bearing witness to God’s mercy – “Merciful like the Father” – and in this he calls us back to the heart of our vocation, to the heart of the charism of St. Benedict, St. Bernard, St. Gertrude, of all the saints whose children and heirs we are. The Jubilee calls us back to the heart of our vocation, and therefore to the source of our true joy, which cannot be different from the Father’s joy in forgiving and reuniting all his children.

This is the joy of Christmas, because Jesus was born for this, just as he lived for this, died and rose for this. Let us ask Mary, “Mother of Mercy,” whom we invoke in the *Salve Regina* every evening and everywhere, for this joy of reconciliation in the Divine Mercy, among ourselves and with all, and let this be our Christmas wish for the whole Holy Year!

Yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori".

Bro. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori
Abbot General OCist