

Formation Course of the Cistercian Order, on Prayer, 27.9–1.10. 2021 Chapters of the Abbot General Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori OCist.

1. The space between the heart and God

Let us begin this five-day online formation course offered to the whole Order, from Asia to the Americas passing through Europe and Africa. It is like a small course of spiritual exercises that should bring us together not only to speak and meditate on the theme of prayer, but must bring us together also in prayer. It is a gesture and a sign of communion that we want to live together in this very strange time in the history of the world, in which so many direct contacts have been and are interrupted, or have become difficult to make happen. For this reason I thank all those who choose to participate in this gesture, whether in offering the courses, or technically organizing them, or translating, and also all those who participate individually or in community, certainly not without a little sacrifice.

I have asked myself from what point of view I should meditate on prayer. It is clear that I feel drawn to do it from within the pastoral concern with which I look upon the Order, and thus to start from the experience of the visitations and meetings with various communities, in different cultures. We are a monastic Order and this means that prayer should be that which unites us most, that which unites us most deeply. Is this true? And how does it happen? This seems to me to be an important concern because, deep down, this is true for the whole Church spread through the entire world and in all epochs of history. And this is true inside each community. Are our communities united in prayer? To understand this we must understand what it means to “be united in prayer.” Perhaps it is exactly this theme that it is important for me to explore more deeply with you, so that this course, enriched by the authoritative teaching – and certainly quite a bit more prominent than mine – of Sr. Manuela Scheiba and Fr. Jordi-Agustí Piqué, both of whom are Benedictines and professors at the Pontifical Athenaeum of St. Anselm, so that this course be able to help us make a leap in awareness and also in conversion in the way we live our vocation together, our Benedictine-Cistercian vocation, even if our current circumstances make our meetings rare and difficult.

We know that St. Benedict asks us to begin whatever we do with prayer: “First of all, every time you begin a good work, you must pray to him most earnestly to bring it to perfection” (RB Prol. 4). This way of expressing himself seems to me to echo what St. Paul wrote to the Colossians: “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ” (Col 3:23–24).

“Work heartily, as for the Lord.” What does this mean? It means that, between our heart and God, there is, so to speak, a space to be filled, a space which our freedom is called to fill with what it chooses to put there, or to live in as it chooses. Now, when St. Benedict asks us to pray before beginning the whole path of our vocation, it is as if

he were aware that, if we want our whole life to be between our heart and God as something good, something well done, well lived (*quidquid agendum... bonum*), it is necessary above all to fill this space with prayer. Prayer with which our freedom asks most earnestly, that is always, means that for our life, for all we live and all that happens and will happen, we must prepare a space between our heart and the Lord. Or better: a space for our heart that *is* the Lord, because there is no space outside of Him. Our heart, our soul, are made to breathe in an infinite space, and this space is the Heart of God, a God, that is, who is Love and who loves us personally, to the point of knowing how many hairs we have on our head (cf. Mt 10:29–31).

“Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men.” St. Paul, like St. Benedict, and most of all like Jesus himself, points out to us that the space between our heart and men is too limited to contain our whole life, all that we are called to live, to do, to desire. We always have the tendency to live within a single, horizontal dimension, a “flat” dimension, two-dimensional. Paul speaks here only of the relationship between human beings, but he could add also that we must not live only for things, for goods, for our body, and deep down not even for our heart, because all that which is only horizontal does not create adequate space for living our life. Living only between our heart and things, between our heart and our heart, or between our heart and our body, regardless this space would be too limited to contain our whole life, all that we are called, to live, to do, to desire. Only the space between our heart and God, between our heart and the Heart of God, is enough for the human vocation, because God has created our heart in the image of His own and for Himself.

So let us understand one thing right away: that we are not dealing so much with putting a little prayer in our life, but with putting our life in prayer. The issue is casting our whole life and the life of the world into prayer, into the relationship with the Lord. We are thus invited to cultivate a great, expansive, universal, infinite idea of prayer, even if it is expressed by our heart and by our communities, which seem to us always small and fragile. Prayer, as an energy connecting our heart and the Lord, is an infinite breath granted to our misery and frailty.

When Jesus, and after Him the whole Christian and monastic tradition, asks us “always to pray and not lose heart” (Lk 18:1), he wants, more than just calling us back to a practice, to teach us to have a just and true awareness of ourselves, of our life, of all reality. To pray always, to ask always, means to live entirely within the relationship of the heart with the Lord, and thus to put and to live all in the right place, in the truth. I can complete a heroic deed, but without knowing that all is done by God and for God. Then this heroic deed is less true, less human, less holy than a small gesture, even an ordinary and daily one, done and lived with awareness of the relationship with the Lord, that is, in prayer. Prayer is granted to us and asked of us in order that we may live everything with truth. For the truth of ourselves, of everyone, and of everything, is the relationship with a God who creates us, who loves us, who is the fullness of our life.