

Oriented by the Sun that Rises

Letter of the Cistercian Abbot General for Christmas 2017



Dearest brothers and sisters,

While we are already anxious to celebrate the coming of the Lord's Birth, I think with gratitude to the intensity of the past year and to the many meetings with your communities. Neither do I forget the many critical and dramatic situations that I shared with so many of you. Personal, communal, ecclesial, social, political situations in which, at times, we feel lost, disoriented. For this reason, on not a few occasions I found myself meditating on this theme of disorientation, that is, on that condition in which one finds oneself standing still and incapable of discerning the right direction to follow on the way. This state of disorientation is, today, a cultural condition often taken advantage of by those who seek easy power.

When a people no longer knows where to go, it becomes easy prey of the one who screams most strongly that the right way is to follow him. Dictators, whatever ideology they present themselves with, are always people who manage to orient the crowds toward themselves. St. Benedict, too, puts us on guard: each of us, in the little world of his community or family, or in the realm of work and of responsibility, can yield to the same logic and become "tyrants" over those around us (cf. RB 27:6; 65:2).

O Oriens!

Christianity is the response to this condition of disorientation in which the heart of man and society as a whole always comes to find itself. From his first appearance in the manger of Bethlehem, Jesus Christ orients the path of men. This is what we sing solemnly in the antiphon "*O Oriens!*" in the liturgy of December 21:

*O star that rises,
splendor of eternal light and sun of justice:
come, illumine those who lie in darkness
and in the shadow of death.*

The verb “orient” derives directly from the term “orient” that is used to refer to the geographical point where the sun rises. The first meaning of “orient” is tied to the verb *oriri*, that is, “to be born, rise.” The sun is the *oriens* in the proper sense, because it is the star that rises. The rising of the sun orients the entire world, orients the day with its light. The very nature of the universe symbolically teaches man to orient himself, to begin and live the day knowing the direction of his path. The rising of the sun orients the time and space of the day until sunset. And the day that runs from the rising of the sun to its setting is a symbol of human life, stretched from birth to death. It is between these two poles that life must have its sense, its direction, and therefore it needs to be oriented.

The birth of Christ, the event of God becoming man, is revealed as the rising of a light capable of orienting the life of each human being and of each people. To orient them not toward death, the sunset, but toward a fullness of life that man, by himself, does not succeed in giving himself. The shepherds called to visit the newborn Jesus, or the Magi come to adore him by orienting themselves toward a star that mysteriously appeared in the human world, bear witness for us that Christ, from his first appearance in the human world, is the light that orients life, that gives life its true direction, its meaning. Whoever orients himself toward Jesus finds, in Him, the true orientation of his whole life. The Magi return home “by another route” (Mt 2:12), which no longer follows the desires of Herod, but instead is determined by the Baby whom they have met. The old man Simeon has lived his whole life in the Temple oriented toward the encounter with Jesus, and when the encounter comes, when “the light to enlighten the nations” (Lk 2:32) comes to enlighten his life, even the path toward death becomes for him a “going in peace” toward the destiny of eternal life revealed by the presence of Christ (cf. Lk 2:29). Every true encounter with Jesus gives meaning to life, orients life toward its truth and beauty.

Coming out of chaos

Before Jesus rises in the life of persons or communities, one is always in a situation of chaos, of confusion. Before meeting the Lord, the Light of the world, our heart, life, ideas, relationships, all are confused. Let us just think of the confusion of thoughts and feelings in which the disciples of Emmaus found themselves, or of the moral and relational confusion of the Samaritan woman, or of the spiritual and mental confusion of the possessed, or rather let us think of the confusion that the ambition to be the greatest or the lack of faith create in the group of the apostles. All, before meeting Christ, are disoriented, do not know where to go, even and especially when they think they are on the right road, like the Pharisees, like Saul of Tarsus.

It is important to recognize that this confusion is present most of all in ourselves, in our communities. But one should not think that this feeling of disorientation is necessarily negative. Often it derives simply from the reality in which we come to find ourselves.

Many communities are disoriented by the fragility of their members, owing to the advance of age or the lack of vocations. At times it is the confusion of society, the political and economic situation of a country, that gives rise in us to confusion and a sense of disorientation. Disorientation can also be a contagion that spreads from just one member to the whole community, for example, when someone passes through a powerful crisis, or leaves the community, or lives out grave infidelities to the common vocation.

Even when everything is going well, it can be positive for a person or a community to pass through moments in which one must reorient oneself, because this means that one is on the path, that one is advancing. One who is always seated or lying down will never feel disoriented, but he does not move, does not walk.

In all situations, when we need to escape from confusion, to rediscover the direction of our life's path, it is important that this take place not through our turning to ourselves, or to worldly guides, but, as we sing every day in the *Benedictus*, to the "sun that rises to shine on those who dwell in darkness and in the shadow of death," the one who alone knows how and is able to "direct our steps in the way of peace" (Lk 1:78-79).

From the first centuries, the orientation of churches eastward taught the faithful to live their prayer as an act of returning to the right direction of life. Christ is to return from the east. From the east Christ has already come, rising like the sun each day, after each night, also after the spiritual nights in which we lose the direction of our life. We should always pray to bring direction and meaning back to our life, to that which happens to us, to the situation in which we find ourselves, such that this direction and meaning be Christ himself, his presence, his coming to meet us, his walking with us. When we do not pray in this way, we notice that confusion increases in us and around us, a disorder that makes life sad. Prayer does not take away effort, suffering, fragility, but allows all this to find meaning again, a direction, an order, generating the joy of peace.

It is the Lord!

It is not prayer in itself that orients life. To pray means to look to the east to see the rising of the sun. It is the rising of the sun, its manifestation, its light, its warmth, that free us from the confusion of darkness and the shadow of death. Prayer changes our life when one turns to the presence of Christ who rises for us.

When we face the problems and difficulties of individuals and communities, how much time we lose by searching for solutions or expecting changes without first starting to turn toward Christ who has come, has died, and has risen to manifest himself in every possible human situation and to give it sense and destiny! Solutions will come, too, and change, but they will no longer be our work but rather the reflection in us and around us of a light that has opened our eyes.

How does the luminous presence of Christ rise in our life?

When we meditate on the Gospel, we notice that the Lord very rarely manifests himself as a flash of light. Almost always Christ's self-manifestation is actually like the sunrise, like the dawn, which progressively announces and shows what the source of its splendor is.

Like that morning on which Peter and some other disciples went out to fish, and during the night had not caught anything. And the risen Jesus seems to appear just like the dawn: "Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus" (Jn 21:4). And, faced with their delusion and confusion about not having caught anything, Jesus orients them, indicates to them how to proceed so that their life can be fruitful, useful, happy: "'Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.' So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish" (Jn 21:6). And then the apostle John recognizes that this presence that rises like the sun and orients their life toward its fullness is the Risen One: "That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!'" (21:7). All see and hear that Presence that manifests itself more and more, yet only one recognizes Jesus, and shares this recognition with his nearest companion. And step by step as the luminous presence of Christ rises, the recognition also spreads, as if John had lighted a candle at that paschal flame and had transmitted the flame to Peter and the others. Such that all find themselves around Him, in silence, happy, with hearts full of adoration and affection for the Lord. "Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, 'Who are you?' because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish" (Jn 21:12-13).

Should not this marvelous scene, full of tenderness and friendship, be reproduced for us and among us? Should it not be a daily, eucharistic event for our communities? If this does not happen, what sense will our living together have, our working together like the fishermen-apostles, our praying together, our eating together? And above all, what sense will it have for us to share tiring efforts, failures, the fading away of our strength, of our human means? "Jesus said to them, 'Children, you have no fish, have you?' They answered him, 'No'" (Jn 21:5). It is as if, often, when Jesus appears to ask for the fruit of our labors, we remain closed in the "No!," in the "No!" that limits itself to recognizing our limit without desiring more, without asking for more.

The absurdity of this closing off is that we do not ask for and desire more, though standing in the presence of the infinite "more" that has been given to us, that speaks to us, that longs for us. The sun has already risen and we close our eyes to live in the night.

The eyes of faith

The Lord has already risen in our life, in the life of the world. When the shepherds or the Magi were gathered together at Bethlehem, Jesus was already born. And all the disciples, witnesses of the Resurrection, opened their eyes to recognize a Presence that had already come out of the tomb, that Mary Magdalene had already seen, taking him for a gardener, that had already been walking with them for hours toward Emmaus, a Presence that was already standing on the shore of the lake to see them, call them, wait for them. The presence of Jesus is not created by, but is always recognized by, the gift of faith. And faith is like the eyes: they see not because they create light, but by opening to receive it as a gift. Faith is always an opening of the eyes to recognize, in the gift of the Spirit, the light of the presence of God in Christ.

For this reason Jesus reproaches the disciples only when they are lacking in faith, because they are not opening their eyes to a light that has already been granted. Nothing pains Christ more than this closing of our eyes before the splendor of His presence. For this reason Jesus wept over Jerusalem: “As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, ‘If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! [...] You did not recognize the time of your visitation’” (Lk 19:41-44).

One is never faithful or unfaithful to something, but to someone. The splendor of the fidelity of so many elderly monks and nuns is not measured in years, in works, but in the freshness of their remaining enamored of Christ. And when someone leaves, perhaps the younger members, it is almost never because of grave infidelities, but precisely because of not having known how or been able to open the eyes to the light of His presence, which alone gives meaning to each vocation, and also to our human weaknesses in living the vocation.

Recentering and reorienting ourselves on the presence of the Lord, living on the basis of his rising within the daily reality of our relationships and deeds, is the great work of the Christian life, which, for monks and nuns, should be privileged. Our task in the Church, whatever we do, is to remain oriented toward Christ who rises in our midst “to direct our steps in the way of peace” (Lk 1:79), peace for us, peace for all, the peace of the communion with the Father in the Holy Spirit in Christ, the Redeemer of the whole of humanity. Only in this way do our faith and vocation become meaningful for the world, because they transmit to it the meaning of itself and of every reality. A single person who lives with a heart oriented to Christ and from Christ, transforms chaos into a reality ordered toward its end, even when the world continues not to take notice of it.

Precisely for this reason God put the Church in the world, as Psalm 88 sings: “How blessed the people who know your praise, who walk, O Lord, in the light of your face” (Ps 89:16). Are we this people? Is our Order, are our communities this people that is blessed, happy, because it walks in the light of the unveiled face of the Mystery, Christ the Lord?

Reorienting ourselves to Christ

If we often feel lost, disoriented, even while following our vocation and in our communities, if certain situations disturb us, and make us indecisive about how to continue our path, or tempt us to stop and turn backward, it is because we neglect our life's orientation to Christ, we do not focus enough, personally and together, on the Sun that rises to direct our steps. We have the nerve and presumption, or perhaps just the carelessness, to be able to orient ourselves in life without orienting ourselves to Christ. We think we can define the cardinal directions of our existence without looking to the direction in which the sun rises. For this reason it is not rare to see individuals and communities who are convinced that they are going in the right direction when, instead, they are going the opposite way. Whoever does not look at the sun that rises in the East cannot be sure about directing himself North, South, or West.

But how to let ourselves be oriented by the presence of Christ who rises for us? It would be enough to read and meditate on the Rule of St. Benedict with attention, applying it to our life and situation, to learn to live this capacity for orientation, which is Christian wisdom. The whole tradition of the Church and the magisterium that actualizes it today have been given to us for this purpose.

Seeing the situation and the need of our communities, and not just ours, it seems important to me to emphasize two points.

The silence that focuses on Jesus

Above all it is necessary always to revive our awareness that only Christ is the true Way of life (cf. Jn 14:6). He alone leads us to the Father, origin and destiny of every creature, of every man, of every heart. And to become aware again that Christ is the Way in the act of walking with us, accompanying us, that is, making himself really present.

All must start again always from a gaze that recognizes Him as present. Present in our heart, present in the Church, in the sacraments, in his word, in our neighbor, in the poor. This recognition is a silent gaze. As the Letter to the Hebrews expresses it: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith" (Heb 12:1-2a).

All becomes a useless burden that wears us out in vain, if we never stop, perhaps just for a second, to fix our gaze on Jesus in silence. As we have seen in the scene on the shore of the lake of Tiberias: "Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, 'Who are you?' because they knew it was the Lord" (Jn 21:12). They stand there, in silence, with their gaze fixed on Him, waiting for his initiative. The cry of John – "It is the Lord!" – has become a silent and adoring recognition of their heart: they do not need to speak, to ask, because "they knew it was the Lord."

And it is this attitude that allows Jesus to become ever more manifest, to become ever more present: “Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish” (Jn 21:13). Silence that focuses on the Lord opens us to the gift of the Eucharist, complete gift of Christ to man: of Christ, letting himself be assimilated by us, so that we become Him.

Speaking together about Him

From this silence is born our speaking about Him. The shepherds, after having adored him, speak of Him to all who are present: “When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child” (Lk 2:17). The disciples of Emmaus converse about what the presence and word of Jesus has provoked in the depth of their heart (cf. Lk 24:32). The apostles speak of Jesus to Thomas (cf. Jn 20:25), and then to the entire world.

It astounds me how little Christ is spoken of in communities, how little it is normal for us to speak to each other about His presence, about His word. It is as if, walking together, we do not remind each other about the reason we are walking and where we are going. How beautiful it is, instead, to be able to transmit to each other the light of the Sun that orients our steps. If at times peace is lacking in our hearts and our relationships, it is precisely because we do not help each other enough to be oriented by Christ to follow the way of peace.

Even the Mother of God and St. Joseph needed to be helped and oriented by one who was contemplating the Baby and speaking of Him to them. The old man Simeon, receiving Jesus in the Temple, exclaims: “for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles” (Lk 2:30-32). And then he puts himself in dialogue about Jesus with Mary: “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed...” also revealing the destiny of his Mother in her Son’s work of Redemption: “—and a sword will pierce your own soul too” (Lk 2:34-35).

Behold, dearest brothers and sisters, it seems to me that nothing is more urgent for us and for humanity than to put at the heart of our vocation this gaze fixed on Jesus Christ, the Sun that rises, and thus to become among ourselves and with all, witnesses of this Light.

May this be the gift that we offer to each other, to the Church, and to the world, in this Christmas and always!

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

*Fr. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori
Abbot General O. Cist.*