

## Christmas Letter 2018 of the Abbot General OCist

# The Grace of Walking Together



Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I write my traditional Advent and Christmas letter after the recent experience of participating in the Synod of Bishops that was held in Rome from October 3 to 28, around Pope Francis. You know that the theme was: “Young People, Faith, and Vocational Discernment.” I am thankful to the Assembly of Superiors General which elected me, along with nine other brothers of various Orders and Congregations, to participate in such an intense ecclesial event, in which we heard the life of the Church pulsing even to the farthest end of the world. In addition to the Bishops of every people and nation, about thirty young people were invited as auditors, coming not only from the five continents, but also from various ecclesial realities which are especially in touch with the world of youth. Representatives of various Christian churches were not absent, in addition to a numerous group of experts who offered indispensable help toward assimilating all the contributions, evaluating them, and then putting them together harmoniously in the *Final Document*.

I do not want to talk at length about the description of the Synod, as to who was there and what happened, because all this has already been revealed and publicized by the media, even if often during the Synod we realized how certain media, even Catholic ones, were giving descriptions of the Synod debates that were totally lacking in balance and foundation. Ideology, of whatever tendency, is interested more in justifying itself than in listening to the truth of words and deeds.

### **Bearing witness to an event**

For this reason too I feel compelled to speak to you of the experience of the Synod, and of the texts which arose from it, in the form of a personal testimony and of a reflection concerned that our Order welcome the impulses of the Holy Spirit that the Synod offers to all, to renew the path of the whole Church and of every community and person who composes her. In fact, the more I advanced in living this experience the more I perceived that the Synod is an event whose Author is the Holy Spirit, and all of us were called more to serve as instruments of this event than to construct it with our ideas, our words, our capacities. And at the end of the Synod the instruments are called to become witnesses of an event in act.

The Pope reminded us of this with simplicity, speaking at the end of the last session of the Synod: “The result of the Synod is not a document (...). We are full of documents. I do not know if this document will have any effect outside, I do not know. But I am sure that it must have one in us, must work in us. (...) Now the Spirit gives the document to us so that it can work in our heart. We are the recipients of the document, not the people outside. May this document do its work; and one must pray with document, study it, ask for light... This document is for us, principally. Yes, it will help so many others, but we are the first recipients: it is the Spirit that has done all this, and now it is our turn” (October 27, 2018).

It will be useful for communities to make an effort of reading and meditating on the *Final Document*, even if the Holy Father will probably use it as a starting point for publishing a post-synodal Exhortation. Many of us perceived the *Final Document*, certainly not perfect, as a true miracle. During the hours and hours of listening to quite different speeches, but also in the more detailed work of the smaller Circles, we often told ourselves: but from such a disorganized and dusty construction site, what good will come? How is it possible for us in so little time to get to the point of producing a text that synthesizes the multi-colored richness of all that we are saying and writing? When the draft of the Document arrived, my amazement was great, because the impossible had happened. The Holy Spirit is working. Then we discussed and corrected it again, but one noticed prevailing among all a gratitude to God, to all the participants, and to those who had worked day and night to redact the text, because we felt like participants in a work of God, and the essential characteristic of this work was a communion among all of us which was more profound than simply being in agreement on some ideas or some decisions. We were experiencing, that is, the mystery of the Church.

### **The Gift of St. Paul VI**

It is not by chance that, right in the midst of this month of the Synod, Pope Francis canonized Paul VI, the Pope of the Council, the Pope who, perhaps more than any other, expressed himself with depth and beauty about the mystery of the Church, while also terribly suffering from the profound crisis that intensified in the years after the Second Vatican Council.

I thought back to a personal experience that marked my whole life. In 1975 I participated in a diocesan pilgrimage for the Holy Year. I was sixteen and had many doubts, not so much about the faith, but rather about the Church. On Wednesday I was in St. Peter’s Square for the audience, amidst the crowd. Paul VI passed not far from me, on the jeep. He was smiling at the crowd and was making his typical gestures, simple and noble, of blessing and greeting. I saw his gaze as if it were turned personally to me. From that moment I loved the Church, I always thought of her as my house, my family. Peter had passed by and his shadow healed me from a human way of looking on the Church. The Church had become a mystery for me, a sign and instrument of the saving presence of Christ. It was a great emotion, but not only an emotion, because that which is only emotional or sentimental does not last for one’s whole life. Later I knew the defects of the Church, of her members, including myself, much more than those that filled me with doubts at the age of sixteen, and yet the grace that St. Paul VI transmitted to me has never waned.

And if today the infidelity of so many members of the Church fills us with sadness and scandal, we must understand that for this very reason we are called urgently to ask the Holy Spirit and the saints to make us even more aware of and amazed before the profound and eternal mystery that is the Church, because it will always be from that point that the People of God will be able to be converted to the marvelous mission of being the incarnation of the Risen Christ for the salvation of the world.

## **The answer is in the Church**

For this reason, when I read the draft of the *Final Document*, the first thing that made me glad was precisely that the Synod expressed with clarity that the fundamental answer to the need of young people all over the world, within and outside the Church, is that the Church truly be herself, that the Dioceses and individual communities, as also religious Families, incarnate the mystery of the Church with greater truth and beauty. At first one had the impression that, in the face of the discomfort of the young, in all its forms, or at least regarding the challenges made by the young, one only asked oneself: What should we do? It was as if we were searching for solutions and means to apply them. Now, one could feel that a new breeze had passed, and that we had understood that before asking ourselves what *to do* we had to ask ourselves what *to be*. The first Christians did not confront the world with an analysis of the situation and a program of action. They faced it based on an encounter with Christ, dead and risen, and they were driven onward by the gift of the Spirit of Pentecost. Thus there entered into the final document the awareness that we need first of all “a new Pentecost” (FD 59) and that, for this very reason, the center and source of the Church’s mission is the liturgy (FD 134). The Church, in the mystery of her being the bride of Christ, which makes her one body with Him, also in her being the People of God, emerged as the essential response to the challenges and the demands that all the young of the world are, in her embrace or beyond it, as the direction of her love and her mission.

What struck us as stirring up this awareness was above all the testimony of young people and pastors of persecuted Churches, transmitting to us their confession of faith and their martyrs’ cry for help. But also the cry of so many young people who are faced with terrible trials, like migrations, insufficient education, lack of work, the corruption of those who hold power, abuses of every kind. When an Iraqi young man bore witness to the trials and martyrdom of his Church, we all applauded at length, but above all a deep emotion took hold of us, a great sorrow. It was as if, all of a sudden, there opened up to the Synod’s heart the wound that the suffering of the young represents in the body of the Church, but which we often do not feel as if it is our own, as if between the suffering members and us there were no living contact. St. Paul writes: “If one member suffers, all the members suffer too” (1 Cor 12:26). Pope Francis continually calls us back to this “sensibility.” If we do not feel that the wound of all the brothers and sisters is our own, especially the wound of babies and young people who often suffer by the fault of the adults, it means that our “being Church,” “the Body of Christ,” is not vital for us, is not flesh of our flesh. For this reason, along with the awareness that the Church in her mystery of communion is what all young people need, there grew in the Synod the awareness of the *need for a conversion* so that we all become more transparent to what the Church is and must radiate in the world. Not for nothing does the final Document end with an exhortation to holiness.

## **What tower do we build, what battle do we fight?**

And here I also thought a great deal about our Order, and about the consecrated life in general, with its various kinds of crises, according to the various latitudes, but they are, at the deepest level, essentially crises of the same kind. The problem is not the many or few vocations, the economy, the observances, the coherence. The problem is how we conceive our identity, and therefore our vocation. Do we truly conceive them as a being living members of the Church, or as something separate, something accessory? Do we live our vocation in an ecclesial way? Do we live it with responsibility toward the universal Church, its nature and mission?

In the Gospel according to Luke, it always makes me stop and think when Jesus tells us that, to follow him, we must act like one who wants to build a tower and first calculates if he has the means to bring it to completion, or again like a king who goes off to war and first calculates if with ten thousand soldiers he can confront the enemy who has twenty thousand of them (cf. Lk 14:29-32). It is as if Jesus asked us to calculate how much we have and how many we are in order to be able to follow him in the building and battle of his Kingdom. But Jesus reverses the perspective immediately by saying: “So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions” (Lk 14:33). To participate in the building up of the Church and to “serve under the true King, Christ the Lord,” as St. Benedict proposes to us (RB Prol. 3), we are not asked to calculate the means and the forces we have, but to renounce everything. For the Church is the work of God, she is the Body of Christ animated by the Holy Spirit, and the victory of the Kingdom is not our victory but the victory of Christ, the crucified King, meek and humble of heart, who conquers the world by loving it, by giving His life for all.

It is as if, when facing the strong or weak situation of our communities, we had not made the evangelical reversal from the *calculation* of our means and our forces to the *renunciation* of all to abandon ourselves truly to the work and the victory of Christ the Lord, to the work and victory in the Holy Spirit.

It is at this level that we are called to a deep conversion in our way of understanding ourselves and our vocation and our mission. For if we are not disciples of Jesus, renouncing all the other worldly and ecclesiastical identifications with which we reassure ourselves, we build on sand and battle wind-mills.

### **Opening ourselves to the grace of a new Pentecost**

For this reason, as I was saying, I was particularly glad when, in the draft of the Synod’s *Final Document*, I saw that the Holy Spirit, so to speak, had entered, to the extent of dedicating the first chapter of the second part to a profound meditation on the action of the Spirit, especially in renewing the Church and each Christian (cf. FD 59–62). The Document notes that “the issue is not creating a new Church for the young, but rather rediscovering the youthfulness of the Church with them, opening ourselves to the grace of a new Pentecost” (FD 60).

What opening to this grace indeed means is the effort and desire that we must help each other to reanimate among us, and it is for the sake of living this out that work on the suggestions and reflections of the Synod will be helpful to us.

I limit myself to emphasizing only a few points on which I think we must especially work, personally and in our communities, to open ourselves up to this grace with the whole Church. We must indeed be aware that the grace of Pentecost is the charism that God always offers the Church, because it is the source of all ecclesial graces, and it is the grace in which the paschal mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection is fulfilled as an inexhaustible Gift. From Pentecost onward, the Lord’s Passover continues to pour itself out with the gift of the Spirit to the Church, in tongues of fire with which the love of God continually renews the gift of the sacraments, of charisms, of ministries, of virtues, and of the sanctity of the people of God.

What runs out is never the gift of God but our opening to the grace of the Spirit. And we always need the Virgin Mary to be for us, as she was from the Annunciation to the Upper Room, *Mother and Teacher of opening to the Holy Spirit*. The saints, like St. John the Baptist, St. Joseph, or the Apostles, are those who learned this opening from Her, who were united to Her in this opening to the Spirit, the necessary condition for the existence of every sanctity and charism in service of Christ’s mission in the world.

## Listening

From the first day the Pope himself called the Synod members to listen. In his opening discourse he recalled that “the humility of listening must correspond to the courage of speaking” (October 3, 2018). And to form this listening during the whole Synod he asked that every five presentations in the aula there be three minutes of silence to meditate. I confess that sometimes they were three minutes of siesta, because it is tiring to listen for hours in six different languages. But even so that silence helped us find our attention again, an opening to the Holy Spirit who was speaking to us through brothers and sisters of the whole world.

Obviously this call to listen, to silence, made resound in me the echoes of the Rule of St. Benedict and of our vocation: “*Obsculta, o filii, ... et inclina aurem cordis tui...*” (Prol. 1). How beautiful is this image of a heart that inclines its ear to listen to the “*pius pater* – the merciful father”!

But this “inclining of the ear of the heart” also implies a mortification. The Synod was also a good school of humility because, to listen to everyone, the speaking time in the meeting room for everyone, without distinction or privileges, not even for the cardinals, was four minutes! Of course in the *circuli minores* one had more room for dialogue and debate, but even there, if you wanted really to participate in the truth of the exchange, you understood the importance of “*taciturnitas*,” as St. Benedict would say, that is, a silence that mortifies one’s own word, one’s own idea, to let another speak, to listen to another. Then you see that slowly, slowly a truth takes form, rises like a spring, which comes not from one or the other of those present, but from the Spirit. We must always recover this in our communities.

## Synodal listening

It is in this sense, I believe, that we must understand the insistence of the last part of the *Final Document* on *synodality* as a characteristic of the life and mission of the Church (FD 119ff.). “Synodality” means “walking together,” but, as the Pope was emphasizing in a discourse of 2015, it is a path that progresses only if there is mutual listening: “A synodal Church is a Church of listening, in the awareness that listening ‘is more than hearing.’ It is mutual listening in which each person has something to learn. Faithful people, episcopal College, Bishop of Rome: one listening to the other; and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the ‘Spirit of truth’ (Jn 14:17), to understand what He ‘says to the Churches’ (Rev 2:7)” (Francis, *Discourse for the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, October 17, 2015; cited by FD 122).

Here too I could not but hear an echo of a chapter of the Rule of St. Benedict, one which we perhaps do not place enough value on and do not sufficiently put into action: chapter three on the calling together of the brothers in council. The Church tells us that the time has come truly to take this seriously.

We know that in this chapter St. Benedict asks the abbot, when there needs to be a decision about something important, to convoke the whole community, to explain the issue, to listen to all, to meditate on what has been said, and then to take a decision.

St. Benedict’s conviction is that a community is built only by listening to the Holy Spirit, and that one listens to the Spirit only by listening to all and if all listen to each other.

In chapter three you see that, to reach the point of listening to the Holy Spirit, the abbot does not separately consult each brother, does not go to look for each brother to ask what he thinks, but congregates the community and listens to each member, so that the opinion of each one is listened to by all. Thus, the abbot invites the brothers not only to speak, but also to listen to each other with humility. The gift of counsel is born from the readiness of each one to express himself while listening to the others, because in a true dialogue each one is helped by the brothers to understand what he himself truly thinks. We are not dealing with a strictly democratic procedure, because the authority is not the majority's, but rather of the Spirit who reveals the Father's Word to us as light for the steps that we must take today.

The community, as our Cistercian Fathers liked to define it, is an "*auditorium Spiritus Sancti* – an auditorium of the Holy Spirit" (cf. Guerric of Igny, *Adv.* 5.2; *Christmas* 5.2; *Epiph* 3.6), a place of silence and speech, consecrated to listening to the Spirit. In the humility of dedicating ourselves to listening to each other, there grows in all a sensitivity to the gift of counsel, which, rather than a cold judgment about what one must do in order not to make a mistake, is a wisdom, a taste for the truth and the beautiful, a taste for the splendor of the truth in love, which makes us acquiesce to the gift of the Spirit, who wants to incarnate the presence of Christ in this moment of the community's and the Church's life, in this circumstance, in this trial. When you discern in a truly ecclesial, synodal, way there are never winners and losers, but all contribute to bringing about and realizing the truth of the Spirit, which is always good even when it contradicts us.

Too often in communities, and even in the Church, tensions and conflicts are carried on because synodality, the shared discernment for walking together, is lived out in a superficial way. Everyone seeks only the victory of his own ideas, opinions, and choices, and not the manifestation in us and in the world of the victory of Jesus Christ, the way, the truth, and the life (cf. Jn 14:6). For this reason we note that certain communities are not synodal, that do not "walk together," do not advance, march always in the step place, or always pretend that their salvation comes from outside, instead of letting it emerge from within as St. Benedict asks us to do in chapter 3 of the Rule. The gift of the Spirit does not arrive so much like the rain, and even less like an irrigation that comes about by connecting up to external pipes, but rather like a spring that God wants to make rise up in the heart of each person and community who, with faith, drinks at the Spring which is Jesus present in our midst: "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the Scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive" (Jn 7:37-39).

It is necessary to revive our faith in Christ in the "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic" Church, just as it involves us through our Order and each of our communities. It is necessary, that is, to activate the *auditorium Spiritus Sancti* which each community is, which the Order is in its entirety, and to do this in order to be living members of the Body of Christ which is the Church, and thereby to participate in the mission of universal salvation for which Jesus came and remains present up to the end of the world.

### **To Accompany**

"Walking together" means an accompaniment. If there is a need that is common to all young people it is the need to be accompanied on the walk of life. The *Final Document* of the Synod dedicates the third chapter of its second part to this theme (*FD* 91-103), and it returns to the theme more than once. In our Order too we have very often called this back to mind.

Where accompaniment is missing, it means the adults are missing, the mature people who have had the experience of vocation, of following Jesus, of fraternal communion, of prayer as a relationship of love with God. Where accompaniment is missing, it means that those who should be fathers and mothers have not been sons and daughters, have not been accompanied in their turn. Accompaniment is fundamentally a form of testimony. There is no need to be more intelligent, more learned, or holier than others, but rather to have experienced the Church as Mother and Teacher, the Church in which we have been given the chance to walk together in order to live out our humanity fully. If we do not accompany anyone, we generate no one. Christ became man to accompany us, with extreme patience, on the path of life toward the fullness that He wants us to transmit. How much patience Jesus had in accompanying the apostles, in accompanying the disciples of Emmaus, and now in accompanying the Church, us, to the end of the world!

I would say that it is precisely in readiness to accompany others that we choose to prefer time to space, as Pope Francis reminds us to do in the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*: “Giving priority to time means occupying oneself with *beginning processes more than with controlling spaces*” (EG 223).

Preferring to give time rather than conserve spaces of power means giving priority to people, respecting their freedom and vocation, living the present moment of our life and community, more than being projected toward the future we desire, we plan and think to control ourselves. It also means embracing the logic of the incarnation with Christ, letting ourselves be saved by the presence of the Emmanuel who lives, dies, and rises for us and with us, rather than giving ourselves a law to apply with our forces and capacities. Accompaniment is not so much a pastoral technique, nor just a practice necessary for formation. Accompaniment that we give each other in community, like that we offer to younger people, is born and is nurtured in the awareness that Jesus is present and walks with us. He is present in the one who accompanies, but he is present also in the one who needs to be accompanied, because the need to be accompanied is the structural poverty of every human being, and Jesus is always present in our poverties, asking for our love.

### **Stopping in order to walk together**

Accompaniment begins from a *stopping* before Christ who comes to us. The disciples of Emmaus are reached by Jesus, who starts to walk with them. At first they do not pay attention to him. They are too much taken up with their own problems and discourses, their own projects and their disappointments. As we also often are regarding our communities, individual persons, and at times the whole Church. But the moment comes when the presence of Jesus arrives to consult us, to question us: “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” (Lk 24:17a). Then the two disciples stop and, from that moment, can begin the accompaniment by Jesus, who leads them patiently to the truth, to joy, and to the gift of their life in testimony to the Risen One.

“They stood still, looking sad” (Lk 24:17b). They stop, looking at Jesus, even if they do not recognize him, and they stand before him as they are, without masks, exposing their sadness before him, their confusion, their not knowing what to think anymore, where to go, what to do, whom to believe, what to hope for.

I recognize that this is the moment of grace that we are called to live, in our communities, in the Order, as in the whole Church: to know to stop ourselves just as we are, with a glimmer of intuition that Jesus is already here with us, to let him see the situation in which we find ourselves; and from that point to let ourselves be accompanied by Him toward the full and luminous revelation of his Face in the broken bread of the Eucharist. If we do not stop ourselves like this, we will not walk with Jesus, we will not listen to his word, we will not experience the heart's ardor, and our walking together will likewise be nothing more than a sterile continuing to complain that leads to nothing but the failing of light and the cooling of love. But it need not be like this, because Christ is present, is born for this, lives, dies, and rises for this: to walk with us and enable us to walk united among ourselves with Him in the center. When we allow Jesus to make our heart burn with his presence, by listening to his word and receiving the gift of his Spirit, our hearts are immediately in communion with each other and with the hearts of all men and women in the world.

### **The root of martyrdom**

This year the Cistercian Family received the gift of the beatification of eight martyrs: Fr. Janos Anastasius Brenner, who was a monk of Zirc, and the seven Trappist monks of Tibhirine. It strikes me that the martyrdom of all these brothers was the fruit of the decision to “stop” to stay with Jesus where He was asking them to stay, even if it was clear that they were risking their lives. Martyrdom is the fruit of the freedom to stay more attached to Jesus than to the security of our life. For this reason martyrdom announces that Jesus is the most precious treasure and allows the Risen One to manifest his Face to the world. Should the daily and humble *stability* that St. Benedict asks of us, in order to prefer nothing to Christ the Lord, not educate us toward this? In the silence of Nazareth Jesus prepared the great paschal testimony he gave in Jerusalem. Our blessed martyr Brothers invite us to this, and certainly they help us with their intercession.

May the recollection of Advent and the joy of Christmas help us, then, to stop, just as we are, to set our poverty and fragility before Jesus, like the shepherds of Bethlehem, to start off again, running together on the way of life, on which the Lord, in his mercy, does not cease to accompany us!

Thank you for everything and best wishes from my heart!



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