

Friends of God and prophets

Letter of the Abbot General for Christmas 2016



Dearest Cistercian Brothers and Sisters,

With the Christmas Letter I always enjoy being able to reach you in every place where you find yourselves, at the moment of beginning a new liturgical year and living joy again because God became man and came to walk with us in time. Receive my greeting and the gratitude that I do not manage to express to you personally on occasion of the approaching Feasts, except in prayer. Christmas announces to us that everything joyful or sorrowful that we experience can be lived with Jesus as an experience of his love, of his truth, of his beauty, and in Him of the love, truth, and beauty of the Father, in the communion of the Holy Spirit.

Certainly this year too we have had many signs of the Lord's presence. Even in the midst of so many tragedies and bleeding wounds in the history of the world, of individual communities and persons, no one is abandoned by God, who not only became man, but wanted to suffer, die, and rise to be with us forever.

And when we truly experience that He is with us, we cannot but perceive his desire to be with all, to reach and welcome every man, every heart, above all the most alone, abandoned, and suffering.

Moments of communion

This year too has had its moments of communion that fill us with gratitude. After the extraordinarily fraternal meeting of the General Chapter of 2015, which we must not forget, a good 50 superiors of the Order renewed this experience during the Course for Superiors in the month of July. Brotherhood, shared *lectio divina*, listening to those who shared with us their own experience and wisdom, and constructive dialogue between people who are so different in sensibility, age, culture, confirmed us again in the surprise of how much a common vocation unites us more than anything else. And the common vocation is above all that of following Jesus Christ, of listening to his Word, of receiving from Him the grace of being sons of the Father, and therefore brothers and sisters of all.

This year we were also helped by the whole Church, under the stimulating guidance of Pope Francis, to understand that all of this is an experience of God's mercy. With the superiors reunited for the Course, as also with the young monks and nuns of the Monastic Formation Course, we explored the theme and the experience of mercy, with shared pilgrimage gestures as well, as we crossed the Holy Door of the Jubilee together. For me it was significant that the first Holy Door that I was able to pass through this year was not that of a Roman basilica, but that of a large Marian shrine in Vietnam, in the course of my five-week visit to all our monasteries.

I think that this Jubilee was for everyone an occasion for renewed experiences of mercy, which surely leave traces in our conscience, but I hope also in living our vocation and mission, and in the fraternal relations in communities and with all those whom we meet.

From mercy is born the friendship of God

In this letter I would like to underline an aspect of the experience of God's mercy that I think should help us continue our journey, as the Holy Father desires of all the Church (cf. Apostolic Letter *Misericordia et misera*).

What is left for us to live out after experiencing mercy?

Let's think of the Gospel. What did Matthew live after Jesus called him, looking upon him in mercy? What did Zacchaeus live after Jesus wanted to enter into his house? What did Mary Magdalene live after being freed from seven demons? What did Dysmas, the "good thief," live after Jesus promised him Paradise? What did St. Peter live after the pardoning of his denial? And St. Paul? And St. Augustine? And St. Francis? And all those who in one way or another experienced God's mercy in meeting Christ: What happened afterward?

In the end the answer is simple: They lived out friendship with Christ. The experience of mercy gave rise to a relationship of friendship with Jesus. Or better: the experience of mercy continued for them as a relationship of friendship. For them, friendship with Christ, experienced as mercy, as a gaze of love that pardons and redeems, became a path, became the form and substance of their vocation, of their following of Jesus, and it also became mission, the mission of their life: they lived for this, with the desire and effort of living out this friendship, of bearing witness to it, of communicating this experience, this grace, to all.

In the end, the Church is born and grows in this way, as an experience of friendship with Christ and in Christ that is ever renewed and shared with all. Friendship with Christ is the substance of the Church, of holiness. Friendship with Christ is the happiness of the redeemed.

But in what does Christ's friendship consist?

It is above all friendship with God. And God is God, that is, omnipotent, eternal, merciful. Friendship with God is true if it generates a life determined by faith as trust in Him. A constant friendship, because God is eternal and always present. A friendship that gives peace, because

God is good and provident. A friendship that has no fear, because God is omnipotent. A friendship open to all, universal, because the love of God is for all. A merciful friendship, because God is merciful. A friendship that makes us grow, that makes us responsible, because God creates and loves our freedom and wants to be loved freely.

Do not sell poverty

But we see that we are often missing all these characteristics of friendship with God in Christ, that we do not possess them stably, that we lose them in front of all the trials of life, or we forget them when things are going well. We too, like Peter, often deny this friendship and, at times, like Judas, we betray it for just a bit of money, to gain ephemeral values, goods that pass, or simply because our project, our pride, our time, our convenience, our talents, our vanity, are actually more important to us than communion with Jesus.

A somewhat mysterious phrase from a sermon of St. Bernard makes me reflect much: “Woe to us if we rejoice in what is not in Christ and for Christ! Woe to us if we offer a poverty that one can still sell! – *Vae nobis si exsultaverimus, nisi in Christo et pro Christo! Vae nobis, si vendibilem obtulerimus paupertatem!*” (*De diversis* 21,3).

It is proper to friendship to find joy in the other, to exult for the friend, as Mary, the friend of God *par excellence*, rejoices in God her Savior (cf. Lk 1:47), or as John the Baptist, “the friend of the Bridegroom,” exults with joy at the sound of his voice, and testifies that this joy of his is complete (cf. Jn 3:29). If we do not find complete joy in Christ, we are not his friends. And poverty, leaving everything for Him, becomes a lie if we want to “earn” from our renunciations something other than Christ himself, other than his friendship. This is the total poverty that St. Paul chose: “I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ” (Phil 3:8).

We all have in us the tendency to “sell” our poverty, our renunciation for Christ, to gain something other than Christ himself. Even the Apostles, who had suddenly left everything to follow him, then wanted to “earn” to be the greatest, or that Jesus manifest his power to affirm himself politically. Instead, Jesus wants to give us “only” Himself, as we see him in the manger of Bethlehem or on the Cross.

But life grants us no truce, always puts us again to the test. Our heart also puts us to the test, demands an account of our happiness, of our satisfaction, of the fullness we believe we live. Life always asks us: “Are you sure you are happy, satisfied, at peace, without friendship lived with the Lord? Are you sure you are happy looking again to gain something that is not Christ, when you have chosen to live and profess a poverty that should announce to all that you live only for Him, for a joy that is found only in Him?” For this is friendship with Christ: a treasure, a pearl, for which one can leave aside everything, because in Him one has everything.

We should not be scandalized too much by our betrayals of our preference for Christ. For the Lord, all our infidelities are occasions ever renewed to make us experience with awe and gratitude how much He remains faithful to us, and how much the free offer of his friendship never fails. Jesus will never tire of standing at the door and knocking to enter and live friendship with us, even if we hesitate to open up to him, even if we have “kicked Him out” through negligence, to let other guests enter, or to transform the table of our heart and of our life into a fancy restaurant where one pays to come eat, where we receive clients instead of friends, instead of Him... Jesus does not tire of standing at the door and knocking, a poor pilgrim who has nothing else to offer us but his friendship.

The ascesis of friendship

We understand, then, that friendship with Christ too cannot be lived out instinctively, in a sentimental way: it takes effort, work, ascesis. Grace is gratuitous, but from God’s gratuity arises the work of corresponding to it, of opening ourselves to it. Friendship with Christ is to be exercised if we want it to grow; it is to be chosen and preferred, if we want it to fill our life and our heart more than any other thing.

Why not take the whole Rule of St. Benedict as a school or workroom for friendship with Christ and in Christ? Is that not perhaps what St. Benedict recommends to us at the end of the Prologue? “As one goes further and further on the path of monastic life [*conversationis*] and of faith, one runs on the way of the Lord’s commandments with a heart expanded by the inexpressible sweetness of love” (Prol. 49).

This is a dynamic definition of friendship with God: a path, a race, in the ardor of a love that, starting from the heart, involves the whole of life, lived in the truth and goodness that God desires of us by revealing his will to us and granting us his Word and his Spirit.

This, however, is the fruit of fidelity to the path of monastic *conversatio*, of a path, that is, which is accompanied by a community just as the Church and our charism offer it to us. What’s important, however, is not to live out the path that the Church and each individual community offers us in such way as to live something other than or for some other purpose than the friendship of Christ. In the friendship of Christ one can live it out completely, and all is expanded, enhanced, and unified if we live it in the friendship of Christ; but nothing must take the place of this treasure at the center of our life. St. Benedict advises us “not to prefer anything to the love of Christ,” because only He “leads us all together to eternal life,” to the fulness of life (RB 4:21, 72:12).

The community is given to us for this purpose, to nourish as a priority among the brothers and sisters this friendship which is a source of eternal life in daily time. And the basic field of this common labor is the relationships in the community. A community is Christian, and therefore is also monastic, if the search for fraternal friendship tends toward growth in the experience of friendship with the Lord.

All is enclosed and condensed into the words of Jesus during the Last Supper:

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father” (Jn 15:12-15).

Friendship with Christ, chosen and nurtured in obedience to his desire that there be fraternal friendship among us, opens us up to knowledge of all that the Son hears from the Father in the communion of the Spirit. There cannot be a greater human and mystical experience, a more important and exalting experience, because this means that fraternal love in Christ’s friendship makes us participants in the Trinitarian life of God.

Do we cultivate this among us, in our communities? Do we cultivate this among the Order’s communities and among superiors, who often exhaust themselves in solitude and anguish before their responsibilities? Do we offer this experience to those whom we want to form toward our vocation, or to all those who in one way or another are tied to our community and experience? Do we radiate this to the Church, to those who carry out on the front line the work of mission, of testimony in the world, in family life, in work, in social and political commitment? Do we offer this to the loveless world, wounded by such divisions and violence, disturbed by such terrors?

The prophecy of Christ’s friendship

Pope Francis does not stop calling upon all, and religious in particular, to live out their prophetic mission in today’s world. On this topic a verse of the Book of Wisdom makes me reflect:

“Although she is but one, [wisdom] can do all things,
and while remaining in herself, she renews all things;
in every generation she passes into holy souls
and makes them friends of God, and prophets” (Wis 7:27).

Being prophets means expressing God, confessing God before the world. A prophet is a witness of what God lets him know and experience so that the world can know and experience it in turn. The Christian’s true prophecy is testimony to an experience. Our prophecy arises entirely from the experience of mercy, the experience of meeting Jesus who welcomes and forgives us with his friendship. Our prophecy coincides, then, with the grace of being friends of God, friends of Christ. “I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you” (Jn 15:15). In Christ’s friendship we experience all that the Father says to the Son, and that the Son says to us so that we bear witness to it to the whole world: “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that

they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (Jn 17:21-23).

Every community, from the first community of Jerusalem, is willed by God and lives in the world, even from the cloister of a monastery, to be a prophecy of the Trinity, of the Communion of Love, that is, of Friendship, which is in God and which, in Christ, has engaged us in order to be able to engage the whole of humanity. It is precisely one of our Cistercian fathers, St. Aelred of Rievaulx, who dared to suggest, paraphrasing St. John, that “God is himself friendship” (cf. *Spiritual Friendship* 1.69-70).

Prophecy, however, does not work on its own. It is grace, but we are called to respond to the free choice of God. And this begins from our own living out of the experience to which we are called to bear witness, because otherwise we would be false and empty witnesses.

If God has chosen us to be prophets of friendship with Him, fidelity to our vocation and mission implies that we concentrate truly and as a priority on the experience of friendship with Christ. I emphasize that it is already St. Benedict that asks this of us, and the charism of Citeaux consists exactly in concentrating on this experience. The community is given to us for this purpose, and that is why there is no community if there is no reciprocal aid toward deepening friendship with Christ, in fraternal charity, in simple and beautiful common prayer, in humble, mutual service, in the dialogue through which we listen together to the Holy Spirit and the Word of God, in the obedience with which we let ourselves be accompanied by superiors and by brothers and sisters to follow Christ more closely, that is, as friends and not only as servants or soldiers. Silence, too, the true kind of silence, is a form of assistance we can give each other, to hear Christ’s light and respectful knocking at the door of our heart, of our life, of our very community, always called to welcome the Friend who comes, under all the forms of his divine and human Presence.

Let us ask the Spirit, this Christmas, to renew in us, and in the whole Order, the grace and mission of being friends and prophets of Christ the Lord!

Thanks for the prophecy of your friendship!

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Fr. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori O.Cist.", written in a cursive style.

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