



Salvation is Present

Letter of the Abbot General OCist for Easter 2020

Dearest brothers and sisters,

With the persistence and worsening for many of the emergency created by the coronavirus epidemic, it seems good to me to reach you with a second letter, to continue exchanging with you a word that would increase our communion, and also to deepen the meaning that this circumstance can have for all of us in light of the imminent Easter. The more deeply we engage the sense and message of the experience we are living, the more our resumption of our so-called “normal” life will be a “going out into the open, into deep waters” (cf. Lk 5:4) and not just a sterile, probably impossible, return to how we were before. For it is not true that we were doing well before the epidemic, immersed in a culture and in an economic and social organization in which desires were often created by the greed of a few and not by the nature of our heart or by the need of the most poor.

The horizon of the desert

The situation we are living seems to me ever more similar to a march in the desert. In the desert, as in the midst of the sea, the horizon is not definite. In the desert one cannot orient oneself by fixing on the horizon, which often is transformed into a mirage. Up to a few months or weeks ago, it seemed that the horizon we designed guided our journey, or rather our race. We seemed to be progressing safely because all had already been established, set down, planned. Now this horizon has shown itself to be a mirage, a false promise. And so? How can we continue to journey? And what direction can we take?

In this time of Lent the liturgy often reminds us of the desert crossing of the people of Israel. God let the Israelites wander in the desert for forty years to teach them to enter the Promised Land. The people thus learned to let themselves be led, not by checking the horizon, but by attending to the presence of God. The people’s journey was guided by the cloud that manifested the constant presence of God and his will.

“Whenever the cloud lifted from over the tent, then the Israelites would set out; and in the place where the cloud settled down, there the Israelites would camp. [...] Whether it was two days, or a month, or a longer time, that the cloud continued over the tabernacle, resting upon it, the Israelites would remain in camp and would not set out; but when it lifted they would set out” (Num 9:17, 22).

The whole journey of the people of Israel was orientated toward the presence of God, not toward that which was seen or imagined on the horizon.

We all ask ourselves: How long will the epidemic last? How long will we have to stay shut in our houses? When will we be able to return to normal life? These are valid and comprehensible questions, but they must not detach us from the true question that we must always ask ourselves, even when there is an epidemic: Are we letting ourselves be guided by the presence of God?

God with us

God does not give indications for our journey without accompanying us. God has always journeyed with his people. In Christ, the Emmanuel, God-with-us, the way to take is God himself who walks with us, whom we can always follow. Jesus Christ, “the Way, the Truth, and the Life,” (Jn 14:6), is the true horizon that guides our steps in the desert crossing of our existence. When we feel disoriented, as we do now, we do not need to examine the horizon, look far off, but rather realize again, or perhaps for the first time, that Jesus is near, that he is with us, looks upon us, and shows us the way, saying: “Stay with me! Follow me!”

Pope Francis reminded us of this on March 27, during the extraordinary moment of prayer in St. Peter’s Square: this is “a time to choose what matters and what passes away, a time to separate what is necessary from what is not. It is a time to get our lives back on track with regard to you, Lord, and to others.” And he added: “We are not self-sufficient; by ourselves we founder: we need the Lord, like ancient navigators needed the stars. Let us invite Jesus into the boats of our lives. Let us hand over our fears to him so that he can conquer them. Like the disciples, we will experience that with him on board there will be no shipwreck. Because this is God’s strength: turning to the good everything that happens to us, even the bad things. He brings serenity into our storms, because with God life never dies.”

If we must concentrate on one thing, even in the midst of so many worries and fears, it is precisely the presence of Christ with us, here and now, in the boat tossed by the storm or in the middle of the horizon-less space of the desert that we have to cross.

Christ, once recognized in our midst, transforms every hostile space into a path taken with Him, with Him who is the meaning and fullness of life. Death is also a way to the fullness of life, a way to the Father, if we live it with Jesus. St. Paul summarized this proclamation, writing to the Thessalonians: “He died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him” (1 Thess 5:10).

This is the Easter proclamation, the living presence of the Risen One in our lives, in each circumstance. The Pope also reminded us of this on March 27: “In the midst of isolation when we are suffering from a lack of tenderness and chances to meet up, and

we experience the loss of so many things, let us once again listen to the proclamation that saves us: he is risen and is living by our side.”

Jesus died on the Cross to live by our side, to give us life by His side, or rather: to embrace him, as Pope Francis invites us again: “Embracing the Lord in order to embrace hope: that is the strength of faith, which frees us from fear and gives us hope.”

Embracing Salvation

We will live this Holy Week and the celebration of Easter in the same situation in which we find ourselves and the world finds itself for the last few weeks. The Church invites us to live it as an opportunity offered to all to concentrate on the essential: the Mystery is present, is the Son of God dead and risen for us. Salvation is present, and is a Person who “lives at our side” and whom we can embrace, thus embracing in Him the Life that conquers death and the Mercy that conquers sin. In Him is conquered also every distance that separates us from God and from our brothers, even the dramatic and sorrowful distance of all those who, in these days, suffer and die without the physical presence of their loved ones.

In Christ we are given a spiritual nearness to each other that has the absolute solidity of the presence of God, of the love of God. Nothing is more real than the presence of God, even if for us it is a mysterious presence because we are immersed in it, as Paul proclaims to the Athenians: “In him we live, and move, and have our being” (Acts 17:28). But precisely when Paul explains that this presence is the Risen Jesus, the Athenians deride him and stop listening to him. Life, for them, was not dramatic enough to let themselves be reached by a proposal of real salvation. Perhaps many of us too listened to the Easter proclamation with superficiality, as if on it did not depend the real salvation of our life and of the whole world.

For St. Paul this proclamation was not a theory: it was the communication of a real familiarity with the Risen Jesus, with him who, a little later, in Corinth, in the middle of the night, said to him: “Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you” (Acts 18:9-10), or who, when Paul was imprisoned in Jerusalem, “stood near him” at night “and said, ‘Keep up your courage! For just as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also in Rome’” (Acts 23:11).

The familiar closeness of the Risen One is a gift, it is He who give himself to us, who lives for this, to be with us in friendship. This is the invincible Salvation of our life, and it is this that we are called to bear witness to. How? Especially by living it, being present there in this intimacy of God with us. The life of one who is familiar with Christ becomes a certain and convincing sign of his presence that saves the world.

The trace of eternity

This year we commemorate the 400th anniversary of the death of the Venerable Veronica Laparelli, a nun and mystic of the Cistercian monastery of the Most Holy Trinity of Cortona. What is striking in the mystics is that the essence of their extraordinary charism is, fundamentally, to manifest how much Jesus can be present

and familiar in an ordinary human life. The testimonies of the nuns who lived with the Venerable Veronica describe how her life, her gestures, her whole person, became, so to say, the visible “mold” of an invisible Presence. For example, when the Virgin Mary would have her hold the Baby Jesus in her arms, the nuns would see the contour of the Baby’s body in her garments. Or, as her Abbess testified, they would see her “speak with the sweet Jesus and go step by step through the Oratory, making pleasing lines of thought, showing great joy in her face, but with modesty, as one usually speaks with a great Personage.” It was not a fiction, but the extraordinary testimony of her familiarity with Christ. Whoever was around her did not see Jesus but the beauty of their spousal friendship, an evident and convincing proof of the presence of Christ.

God gives these mystical charisms to remind us that the Holy Spirit wants to offer all the baptized the extraordinary experience, in our ordinary life, of being able to be and converse with Christ the Lord. And this relationship is the present Salvation that conquers sin and death.

As, indeed, the Pope was saying: “Embracing the Lord in order to embrace hope: that is the strength of faith, which frees us from fear and gives us hope” (March 27, 2020). Embracing is a gesture of friendship, of familiarity. An embrace is symbolically an exchange of hearts, putting one’s heart in contact with the other’s heart, to share that which is most intimate and precious in each one. An embrace does not take, but gives and receives. Perhaps this is why, in the Gospel, we see Jesus embracing only little children: he wanted to leave an image of a gratuitous embrace, in the pure joy of exchanging love. And he asked us to become like little children to receive the Kingdom like them (cf. Mk 10:15-16). The Kingdom of God is the embrace of Christ.

In these weeks, the greater part of the faithful must renounce sacramental communion and is invited to spiritual communion. We should not forget that spiritual communion with Jesus is not so much an alternative to sacramental communion but its fruit. We should always and everywhere live spiritual communion with Christ, familiarity with Him, because this is why the Eucharist and all the sacraments have been given to us.

This is expressed well by a twelfth-century Cistercian author, William of St.-Thierry: “If, then, you want it, if you truly want it, at each hour of the day and night, [the substance of the Eucharistic sacrament] is at your disposal [...]. Whenever, in memory of him who suffered for you, you let your soul be pervaded by this event with all your piety and faith, you eat his Body and drink his Blood; and for all the time that you remain in love with him and he, by means of his holiness and his justice, remains in you, you are counted as a part of his Body and as one of his members” (*Golden Epistle* 119).

The trace of charity

“Part of his Body and as one of his members.” William reminds us that, if the fruit of the sacrament is constant communion with Christ, the fruit of true communion with Christ is always fraternal communion, the awareness of all being members of his Body. This communion is universal, it unites us to all mankind, because the Son of God died and rose for all. Christ is dead and is risen to reunite the whole human race in the community of the redeemed, of the members of his glorious Body fraternally united in

filial love for the Father. From the Cross and from Heaven, the Lord draws all toward this: “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (Jn 12:32).

Nothing impresses upon us and manifests in us the real presence of the Risen One as much as permitting the needs of others to change the form of our person, of our life, of our time, of all that we are and have. Whoever gives life to his neighbor becomes a trace of Christ in the world, manifests his saving presence.

Each of us is called, in this time and for our whole life, to incarnate the form of Christ according to the manifold richness of His total self-giving to all. Every member of his Body is called to express the unique and infinite charity of God in the inexhaustible variety of charisms, of vocations, but also of need that we encounter.

This mystery was brought particularly to my mind by the message of a nurse in Northern Italy, with the significant name Emanuele, who, in these weeks, works and gives himself on the most advanced front of care for those ill with coronavirus. He gives voice to so many other health workers who ask for the help of our prayer and the offering of our life, but also to the silent cry of all the sick, and of their loved ones in anguish.

“My work has always been based on the firm foundations of prayer, lived as a mission for Him who lives in the last, in the sufferer, and today in the patient in respiratory crisis because of Covid-19, which is putting the whole of Italy to the test!

I am certain that prayer on your part is constant and welcome to God, but I permit myself to bother you by asking for spiritual nearness in prayer.

I ask you to be our Aaron, who holds up our arms when we are tired and discouraged, to be ready from your monasteries to dry our tears every time we think we cannot make it any more, to comfort those who wait for us at home without knowing how we are and what our eyes and hearts are really living! People die alone without their loved ones near, yet they die enveloped in the love of God in our wards, which have no more space or time, our rooms, our colorless hallways; but regardless of the chaos and fear that surround each of us too, filled with hearts that struggle each hour, each instant to give life to those who seem not to have it any more! Be our strength in the Holy Rosary; be our oxygen in the reading of the Word and in pronouncing the Divine Office! Be the resurrection to heaven for our patients during the breaking of the bread, where Christ manifests himself, alive for every child who longs for His Fount of Salvation!”

Dearest brothers and sisters, we enter into Holy Week and into the invincible joy of Easter accepting this call to be living members of the Body of the Risen One, remembering always that the life of the Body of Christ is charity!



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