

The Cry and the Consolation



Dearest brothers and sisters,
Even this year, which has been so unusual and dramatic for the world, the Church, and our communities, reaches the season of Advent and Christmas, which renews in us the desire that the Lord Jesus be for everyone the Emmanuel, God-with-us who founds our hope and brings the consolation of his presence. It seems useful to me, then, to meditate with you especially on the presence of Christ who consoles every heart.

“Do not weep”

“Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother’s only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, ‘Do not weep.’” (Lk 7:11–13)

It always strikes me how Jesus expresses his compassion for this woman. It strikes me that he immediately says, “Do not weep!” without preamble, as if he were overlooking the issue of this woman’s suffering, the tragedy that has struck her. He does not enter into dialogue with her, does not ask her anything. He just sees the present reality of a single woman leading a young man to the tomb. Perhaps no one had informed Jesus about the family situation of this woman. Jesus sees that she proceeds alone, without a husband or other children near her to console her. She is alone with her immense sorrow. Jesus sees this reality. He does not need to see anything else, even if he knows how to read hearts, knows how to discern the past and future of each person whom he meets. But this sorrowful present is enough for him to embrace this person with his great compassion. Compassion is true if it inheres in a present sorrow, a heart that weeps now, which perhaps even despairs now. Jesus does not have compassion on a sorrowful history, but on a heart that is suffering now, even if inscribed in that heart is a whole history of pain, of solitude, of disappointed hopes, like the final hope that this woman could place in her only son after the death of her husband. For Jesus, the reality

of heart suffering in this instant before Him is enough. Thus it is that Christ eternally has compassion on the whole world, because in every instant he sees the present suffering of every heart. Compassion is the heart's sharing in the passion of the other's heart.

But compassion is not enough. The suffering heart needs **consolation**. In compassion one suffers with the other, but this could be reduced to a sentiment that ultimately leaves the other alone with their pain. Consolation is a relation; it is, etymologically, a "being with the one who is alone," it is an accompaniment. "I am with you who suffer": this is what consolation expresses.

Now Jesus, before the miracle, expresses his consolation to the widow of Nain in an apparently brusque and cold word, which almost seems like an order, a cutting short of the woman's sorrow: "Do not weep!" Certainly he said it with sweetness, even with tears in his eyes, like when he wept over Jerusalem (Lk 19:41) or before the tomb of Lazarus (Jn 11:35). But such a direct word, expressed with authority (in fact, Luke puts here not "Jesus" but "the Lord"), reminds us of something essential: only Jesus Christ can say a word like this, only Christ can express compassion and consolation thus.

Two hours of crying

About a month ago I was returning by train from Germany. A long trip of twelve hours. Between Frankfurt and Freiburg in Breisgau, when I took my seat, I heard someone behind me moaning in a strange way. Then suddenly I understood that it was a young man who was crying, sometimes very strong, such that everyone in the train car was troubled. Next to him, I heard a young woman, who also happened to be near him by chance, tried to console him with great delicacy, asking him questions about the reason for his sorrow. I understood that this young man was rushing home where his brother was dead, or at least was in a desperate condition. I was not able to sit next to him and console him directly, also because the young woman was doing it very well. I would have wanted to do it, and I almost felt duty-bound to do it, but apart from a rapid contact in which we could briefly hold hands and look each other in the eyes through the crack between the two seats, the situation did not permit me to. Then I understood that something else was asked of me: prayer, a persistent and impotent prayer, which could not count on anything but the Father's tenderness, the Son's compassion, and the consolation of the Paraclete.

For two hours this man's weeping and my poor prayer traveled together, in a much closer connection that if I had been able to embrace him, to console him with deeds and words. I could do nothing else, I could not concern myself with anything but this. His sorrow was placed in my hands, as it were, and I put it before the Lord.

In those two hours I understood what prayer is, and in particular what the monastic vocation is, as I had not understood it in 61 years of life and 36 in the monastery. We are granted and asked to console the world with the consolation that only God can give us, that only God can offer us. In that train, I had been placed in a position in which every attempt at consolation that would come from me was brought low, rendered powerless. But at the same time it was as if I were responsible for transmitting the consolation of Christ to that broken heart.

Certainly, Jesus calls us to express his consolation to the world in deeds and words too. But he reminds us that only He knows how and is able to console man's heart, He who formed the human heart and knows all its joy and all its sorrow. Even when we are asked to and we can express ourselves in deeds and words, our consolation has meaning and effect only if it transmits the compassion of Christ.

St. Paul expresses it well, writing to the Corinthians: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God." (2 Cor 1:3-4).

The consolation of humanity – and how much consolation the world needs in this year of pandemic and so many other challenges! – comes through *transmission*, the transmission of an experience of consolation which have been granted and asked to have first, to be able to grant it to others.

I do not remember which father wrote that the prayer of monks, especially the night vigils, is like a mother getting up out of bed when she hears her baby cry in the night and goes to console it. Perhaps it is this above all that we are called to recover for a profound renewal of our Christian and monastic vocation. Before the tears of the world, Jesus calls us to become humble and certain ministers of the "Do not weep!" that He alone can say to one who suffers, to one who is alone, to one who has lost everything, even hope.

Thus in the face of every sorrow we are asked to offer a real accompaniment, a real friendship, but one which has the breath of faith that knows that only Jesus can reach broken hearts and console them. This breath is prayer, the explicit begging for the consolation of Christ, begging for the Paraclete Spirit, whom in the Pentecost sequence we invoke as "Father of the poor" and "best Consoler."

That day in the train I thought back to a phrase of Isaac of Syria, who has been with me for years: "In the labor of prayer and attention of heart, unite yourself to afflicted hearts, and a spring of compassion will open up before what you ask" (*Ascetic Discourses*, 30).

True renewal

From this experience on the train between Frankfurt and Freiburg im Breisgau, I have found myself praying in a new way. All the liturgical prayers, all the Psalms, have started to have a different resonance, and different horizon. Christian prayer always makes us cry out to God to obtain that which He alone is able and wills to grant us. Whatever he asks for, man in the end always asks for consolation from God. He always asks for God to be near him, that he not abandon him, that he be with him in the path of life, that he be with him in trial, in every "dark valley," in every "shadow of death" that he must cross through and in which he feels alone (cf. Ps 23:4).

This awareness, which is a position before God, is the secret of every renewal. Whoever confronts the present trial of humanity with faith realizes that it does not make sense to expect something new that is not tied to the consolation that God offers to the world

in Christ, dead and risen, in Christ present in our midst and who walks with us. The Church, notwithstanding all her human poverties, is the sacrament of this consolation, and is only faithful to her mission in the measure that she prays and works to transmit to humanity the consolation of God in Christ. Only in this way can the world be renewed, starting with ourselves, with our communities.

I had never paid attention to the fact that in the Book of Revelation, Jesus says, “Behold, I make all things new” (Rev 21:5) right after the description of the New Jerusalem in which tears are wiped away and every sorrow consoled by the presence and companionship of God:

“See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them as their God;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.”
And the one who was seated on the throne said,
“See, I am making all things new.” (Rev 21:3–5a)

It is in consolation that Christ renews all things. He will do it completely at the end of time, but this eschatological renewal begins here and now, every time the tears of human sorrow are wiped away. Every prayer that begs for the consolation of the Lord and every deed and word that transmits it in all the situations in which human sorrow emerges before us anticipate and hasten the complete renewal of the world in Christ.

Identified with Jesus Christ

St. Gregory Nazianzen, commenting on the verse of Psalm 8, “What is man that you are mindful of him?” (8:5), asks himself: “What great, new mystery surrounds my existence? Why am I small and also great, humble and yet exalted, mortal and immortal, earthly but also heavenly?” And he finds the answer in the redemptive incarnation of the Son of God: “God has fully assumed our humanity and became poor to make our flesh arise, to save its original image and thus restore man so that we become one single thing with Christ. He shared himself completely with us. All that he is, has become completely ours. Under every aspect we are Him” (*Orations* 7:23).

This should be the great wonder that faces us and every person: the fact that the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ enable us to say: “Under every aspect we are Him.” Under every aspect of our humanity, even the smallest and most fragile, we are Him and He is us. We cannot understand, it is a mystery, but we are given the possibility to live it out, to experience it, and this experience is a new life, a new morality, a new way of being in relation with God and with all. The new humanity of Christ, that fascinating humanity that the Gospel and the saints’ lives show us, is possible for us because He has identified us with Himself, and it is as if all that were missing were our being available to cling to him as the total and complete truth of our person.

God grants us life so that we can receive in ourselves the identification with Christ that completes our humanity. It is a path, because our freedom does not proceed in bursts but in steps. It is important, however, to know that this is the path, and that the destiny, the goal, is already completed, as St. Gregory of Nazianzus says, in God who “has fully assumed our humanity.”

But if we are drawn by our destiny of being identified with Christ, it is important that, with the help of the Church, we see how Christ wanted to be present in our midst. The Church presents Christ to us, puts us into the presence of the Lord, in all the aspects of his life, and ours, for we are drawn and helped to partake of identification with Him. Just think of how Pope Francis asks us to take a path of conversion to universal brotherhood, putting before us, in his encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, the image of Christ the good Samaritan. It is an icon of true humanity, of full humanity, identified under every aspect with Christ who came to console every person.

For this reason, even when we are gravely deficient in this, when by sin we dissociate ourselves from the beauty of the model that Jesus is for us, – and we do it a thousand times a day! – the true correction of the Church consists not in sinking us into the mud of our wickedness, into the ugliness of our not living up to Christ, but rather in putting back before our eyes and heart the supreme beauty of the Lord, which is his mercy, his paternal tenderness, totally transparent to the goodness of the Father.

“I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” (Mt 11:25–29)

Jesus draws us toward a fullness of humanity that is a meekness and lowliness of heart that manifests the Father and transmits all the good that the Father grants to the world, that is, the Son himself and the Paraclete Spirit.

Prayer and fraternal communion, then, are not just good, Pharisaic practices for feeling like we are in order, but are participation in the new humanity that is granted to us in identification with Christ, Son of God. The relationship with God and the relationship with our neighbor are the essential and substantial dimensions in which we are called to experience that “under every aspect we are Him.”

The cry of the question

At death of Lazarus and in the face of his sisters’ sorrow, Christ expressed his consolation in the two dimensions of a profound prayer to the Father and a real accompaniment of the friends who were suffering. To transmit the consolation of Christ, the Church teaches us to live out an authentic prayer and a real companionship, incarnate like Christ’s. Consolation is transmitted like Jesus granted it during his earthly mission: with a real presence to the people, yet a presence that was inhabited by a total mendicancy toward the Father. In Him these two presences, to the Father

and to others, were never dissociated, because they constituted the relational unity of his person.

Jesus did not dissociate communion with God from communion with neighbor. In him they were an expression of a single Heart, of a single love. So the Church is also always called not to dissociate the work of prayer from the work of fraternal nearness, and to teach us to live out this unity that enables us to cling to Christ, to become like him, to be identified with him.

Recently I noticed how superficially and distractedly I recite the prayer of the *Our Father*. We pray it many times a day, because it is the prayer that Jesus taught us, the concentrate of all Christian prayer, of all biblical prayer.

But I understood that the distraction in praying the *Our Father* was not so much in not thinking about what I say but in not *asking* what I say. Distraction, superficiality in prayer, are not a matter of concepts and words that one thinks of, and not even of lacking sentiments of fervor, but is found where the words of prayer are not a cried out request, do not supplicate, do not beg. So I set myself to pray the *Our Father* accentuating the verbs of asking that this prayer makes us say:

“Our Father who art in heaven, **hallowed be** thy name, thy kingdom **come**, thy will **be done** on earth as it is in heaven. **Give us** this day our daily bread, and **forgive us** our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And **lead us not** into temptation, but **deliver us** from evil.”

And suddenly it was as if the *Our Father* started to be a prayer again, my prayer and the prayer of all mankind which needs God, needs the Father. What makes what we say truly ours is essentially the request, the cry that requests, that begs. For it is like uniting the word we say to the abyss of our true need, which can be a wound, a sorrow, a lack, but also the good that we want for those whom we love. This abyss, however, is always that of our heart, which expresses itself and expands in prayer. The more our prayer expresses an acute and great need, capable of expanding to all of humanity, the less it is superficial, distracted. The need that makes us cry out is never superficial. Our heart and the heart of the world is never superficial. Superficial is not praying from this abyss. Prayer becomes profound if the cry it expresses resounds from the depth of a need that makes us feel abandoned if an Other does not respond. For this reason, profound, true, human prayer is always the expression of a need for consolation, of that consolation that only a “God-with-us” can grant us.

The Psalms, too, how profound they become when we emphasize the request in them! The psalms are a school of prayer because they teach us to ask truly, to cry out truly to God. “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord!” (Ps 130:1). When Jesus cites a Psalm in the Gospel, he too does it crying out: “About three o’clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, [...] ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’” (Mt 27:46).

He cries out an abandonment, cries out to ask for the Father’s presence, the Father’s consolation for the abyssal solitude of the “man of sorrows” burdened with the sin of all mankind.

The freedom to ask

Like all the Church's prayer, the Psalms form us to understand that the cry activates our freedom. Man can have lost all his freedoms, but he never loses the freedom of crying out, and when the cry is raised, freedom surges back up, even if it is impotent. We do not have the freedom to be able to do everything, but we always have the freedom to ask for everything, the freedom that recognizes that God can do all, that we can obtain everything from the Father, even grace after sin, even communion after division, even life after death.

St. Benedict was very aware of the link between prayer and freedom. When he speaks of the oratory of the monastery, he gives every monk, who has indeed given a vow of total obedience and of not doing anything at all without the abbot's permission, the freedom always to be able to enter the church to pray: "*simpliciter intret et oret* – let him simply go in and pray" (RB 52:4). No one can be denied the fundamental freedom of simply asking everything of God. For it is a freedom that God gives to man by creating his freedom in the image of His own, in dialogue with His. In the face of the prayer of simple request, there is the infinite space of the freedom of God who creates man in the presence of his infinite love, of his loving paternity. The garden in which God places Adam and Eve is more a spiritual than a material place, in which the human being is in the presence of a paternal, familiar God, always open to the relationship with his creature and to dialogue with it.

By sin, man withdrew from this standing *simpliciter* before God, but God did not take it from him, and in Christ he has totally restored the unconditional possibility of freely "going into" this space. St. Benedict is aware that this space is, above all, interior, even if the place of the oratory forms us to discover it in us and among us. In fact, after having asked the brother who wants to pray "simply to go in and pray," he adds: "not lifting his voice, but with tears and the desire of the heart – *in lacrimis et intentione cordis*" (52:4). It is not necessary artificially to emphasize the profound nature of our freedom, which is already a cry from the depth of our heart, from the depth of desire that is our heart, especially when it feels its own misery, the deep sadness of being alone and abandoned because it has abandoned God. The heart's tears are simple and profound like those of Adam; better yet: like the tears of a baby missing its mother.

Psalm 102 says that God looks down from heaven "to hear the groan of the prisoners and free those condemned to die" (Ps 102:21). God's listening to our prayer, which may be just a groan, a sigh, is a space of liberation, a possibility of being free even if we are prisoners of whatever limitation on our freedom. If we were truly aware that prayer is a space of true freedom, in which our freedom is engaged, or rather is reborn, we would not "deal with" our prayers so quickly, as if to free ourselves from a tiresome duty. Rather, we would want to pray always, because man is by nature made to be always free. Adam did not understand that God gave him the freedom to *ask* for all, not that of *taking* all. For in taking, freedom is reduced to possession, closes in on that which is possessed, while in asking freedom expands and remains open in receiving the gift, and therefore in gratitude, for God never sets limits to the gifts of his gratuity.

The body of the Spirit

If there is this soul, if we allow Christ to free our cry to the Father, then the flesh also revives, then the body also comes back to life.

“So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, ‘Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me [which implies that Jesus always petitions!], but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.’ When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’ The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, ‘Unbind him, and let him go.’” (Jn 11:41–44)

The fruit of the request that the Spirit makes to the Father is the life of the body, the flesh that comes back to life, the flesh freed from death, though remaining bound by the earthly condition, “the strips of cloth,” which that others must help us unbind.

The life of the Church, and our life in the Church, is the ever-renewed event of the Spirit of God who comes to give life to human flesh, to the flesh of our humanity, wounded and slain by sin and by its consequences in us and in the whole world. Christ became incarnate to show us how human flesh can become, so to say, the body of the Holy Spirit. What is Pentecost if not the animation of an ecclesial body in which the Spirit of God realizes the presence of Christ in the world? And it is our flesh that the Spirit takes and animates to make it the incarnate Body of Christ. As happened to Mary: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God” (Lk 1:35).

It is a mystery we cannot understand, but which we are called to live out, to let it come to be in us and among us as in the Virgin. The Christian mystery can only be understood by experiencing it, because it is not an idea but an event. In the face of the general human crisis, or rather: *within* it, as before that young man who was crying on the train, the urgent matter, along with the cry of our impotent freedom to the omnipotent Father, is that a renewed presence of God come about in the flesh of the world, that the Holy Spirit return to animate the Body of Christ to tell Lazarus to come out of death and to *touch* the bier of the widow of Nain’s son and to make him rise up (cf. Lk 7:14).

This is the grace and the urgency of and in the Church, from Pentecost on: to become a Body animated by the Holy Spirit, like Jesus in Mary. The issue is giving body to the Paraclete, that is to the Consoler. For this reason, in the face of the tears of humanity, the truest position is the prayer of the Cenacle, but also going out into the square to announce the Risen One, bring into the world, with voice and deeds, the breath of the Spirit who makes the God-with-us present.

Incarnating the encounter with Christ

What does the Spirit incarnate in our humanity, made of people, of daily and social life? What does the Paraclete incarnate in our body, in our voice, in our gaze? It incarnates the encounter with Christ, the presence of Jesus who goes out to meet every person, who enters into relation with humanity, responding to the whole desire of every heart.

Jesus performed miracles of every kind, but every kind of healing or liberation from a demon satisfied the persons' hearts not so much or not only with returned health or well-being, or even with restored life, but always and only with the encounter with Christ himself, with the light of his Face. The nine lepers who did not return to Jesus, were content with the healing of their leprosy. Only one understood that his heart was searching not only for this healing, but for the Face of the Man whom he had met (cf. Lk 17:11-19).

When the Paraclete Spirit gives life to the Church, it does so by transforming the group of people present in the Cenacle into a body that allows all to encounter Christ. The Spirit transfigures our faces into the Face of Christ, so that even through our wretched flesh Jesus can respond to the desire for meaning and beauty that burns in the heart of every human being, in every personal, social, and cultural situation in which they are found; which burns even under the ashes of the worldliness that makes us today so distracted from our true desire.

Advent and Christmas help us remember that the Annunciation must never be separated from the Visitation, because God becomes flesh in us to become the substance and joy of every human encounter. "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!'" (Lk 1:41-42). The Spirit is granted to us to realize among us the communion that He is in the Trinity. The Body of the Church is formed by the Paraclete so that every man can encounter Jesus Christ and make him be encountered by others, and in him the Father. Brotherhood, to which Pope Francis intensely recalls us with the journey of awareness and conversion that he illustrates in the encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, is the realization of this mystery in us and among us, and with all. If our Christian life and the life of our communities does not serve this purpose, does not form us toward this, that means that they are not animated by the Spirit of Christ, but by the spirit of the world, which is always proud and closed in on itself, even when it thinks it is being generous and useful to everyone.

Without an encounter with Christ there is no consolation, because without him the heart remains alone, deprived of meaning and of love. For this reason it is important that in this period of history, so confused and full of anxieties, we live out Advent and Christmas attentive, for the good of all mankind too, to the invitation that Jesus himself addresses to us, to welcome his coming with the certainty of faith: "Stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near!" (Lk 21:28).

May the Christmas joy of always being able to encounter Jesus illuminate our gaze upon everyone and everything and make us ever more united around Him!
Holy and Merry Christmas to all!

A handwritten signature in red ink, reading "Mauro-Giuseppe O.Cist.", written in a cursive style.

Br. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori, Abbot General OCist