



Pentecost Letter 2015
of the Abbot General
of the Cistercian Order

"Mary!"

Dearest brothers and sisters,

I write you, thinking back to Holy Week, which I spent in Jerusalem at the Basilica of the Holy Sepulcher as a guest of the Franciscans. I took the opportunity to live those days as a time of retreat in prayer, keeping you there with me in the holy mystery of those places and those days. The “here and now” of the Church’s liturgy is the greatest opportunity, which is always given to us anew, to be contemporaries with the mystery of Christ, the Incarnate God, who died for us and rose again. Living Holy Week, and especially the Paschal Triduum, at the Cenacle, Calvary, and the Holy Sepulcher, allowed me to celebrate these mysteries with a realism that I often forget as I live the liturgy. The Christian mysteries are realities, events, renewed now for us, just as they happened two thousand years ago for the Virgin Mary, for the Apostles, for all the disciples who were Jesus’ contemporaries.

In those days I sought to beg from the Lord constantly the grace to be able to encounter him and receive him as He wanted to give himself to me and to all the people whom He entrusts to me in one way or another.

The first encounter with the Risen One

The page of the Gospel that particularly spoke to me during those days was that of the first encounter of the Risen Christ with Mary of Magdala in the Gospel according to John (20:11-18). Every evening the Franciscans of the Holy Sepulcher pass back through the places of the Passion and Resurrection of the Lord that are present in the Basilica, repeating the rite and the chants of an ancient procession. This culminates in the place which tradition and devotion identify as the spot where the Risen One appeared to Mary Magdalene. I lived this last stop of the procession every time with special emotion because there the fundamental event of our Christian faith, Christ's Resurrection from the dead, became for the first time an encounter, a personal experience of the senses and heart of a human being like us. It's in encountering Mary Magdalene that the Risen Lord began to "make all things new" (cf. Rev 21:5). Just how the Resurrection occurred no one can describe, no one knows, but the Resurrection is a reality, a real event, because the Risen One has truly encountered his disciples, starting with Mary of Magdala.

For this reason, the encounter with Mary Magdalene is fundamental for all of us, the paradigm of how the event that gives meaning to our whole faith can become an experience for all. For if the Risen One has conquered our death and our sin, the fact of meeting him is for all of us the only salvation, the single experience that can fill our life with happiness. The encounter with Mary Magdalene is the first one that happened and the first one recounted by the Gospel because in it is announced to us an experience that we too can and should have if we want to satisfy truly our heart's thirst for salvation.

In my last letters I insisted on the importance of rediscovering the mystical dimension of our Christian and monastic vocation, united to the communal dimension in which the gift of communion with Christ shines forth and becomes true. It goes into the depth and truth of our Christian vocation, and of our vocation as persons called by the Year of Consecrated Life back to a special conversion in living our proper charism in its essence, gradually purified, at least interiorly, of all that burdens and tangles up the path toward following Christ.

The episode of the Risen Lord's encounter with Mary Magdalene is like a summary of the Christian experience. It seems useful, then, to identify ourselves with this Gospel episode to understand how we can live it ourselves.

"Woman, why are you weeping?"

Mary Magdalene was a woman in love with Jesus. What brought her to the Sepulcher was the desire to express her love for him once again, by at least anointing his lifeless body. But when she finds the sepulcher empty, this desire is transformed into anguish. He whom Mary longs for is no longer even a corpse, and she no longer knows where to look for him, where to find him, whom to ask about

him. All of reality becomes something that hides her Lord from her and does not give him back. Someone is “to blame” for this absence, but she does not know whom to accuse: “They have taken my Lord away and I do not know where they have placed him” (Jn 20:13), she says to the angels. And she even suspects that Jesus, whom she mistakes for the groundskeeper of the garden, is guilty for this absence: “Sir, if you have taken him away, tell me where you put him!” (20:15).

Mary weeps. She weeps for sorrow, she weeps for love, she weeps for anger, she weeps for fear, she weeps for anguish. Weeping is the over-flowing from the human heart of the sorrow that it feels. Jesus also wept, out of friendship for Lazarus, out of compassion and disappointment as he looked upon Jerusalem, and from anguish in the face of death in the garden of Gethsemane (cf. Jn 11:35; Lk 19:41; Mt 26:37-38; Heb 5:7).

The angels at the tomb and Jesus himself do not disapprove of Mary’s weeping. But they invite her to explain this weeping, to define the reason for this sorrow: “Woman, why are you weeping?” Jesus also adds, “Whom do you seek?”, as if to help Mary to “channel” her sorrow into the desire to meet the Risen Lord. Mary is not weeping only because she does not find his corpse, since that would not console the deep sorrow of her heart anyway. She does not know yet that she is weeping because she seeks the living Jesus. Jesus makes her understand that we are consoled in our sorrow, or in our dissatisfaction, only if we encounter Him who fulfills the deep desire of our heart.

But to the angels’ and Jesus’ question, Mary responds by saying that she is weeping because they have taken away the body of her Lord. It’s as if she had said that she is weeping because she is the victim of a crime, of a theft, and that fills her with sorrow and anger. How often we too look for those who are “to blame” for our sadness, for our dissatisfaction. If in our life or in our community things do not go as we would want, our first reaction is to search outside of ourselves for those responsible for this inconvenience. And “we weep” like moody babies until someone comes to take responsibility for our dissatisfaction, giving us what we want. We do not realize that even through this dissatisfaction and this anger there moves a much deeper desire, the fundamental desire of the human heart: to encounter Jesus living and present, the Risen Jesus.

“Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?” In Jesus’ two questions to Mary Magdalene there is, as it were, the offer of a path to help her become aware of the true desire of her heart. “Why are you weeping? – *Quid ploras?*”: it’s as if the weeping were still the expression of the desire for something, for a faceless “*quid.*” It is a desire still closed and bound up in the tangle of our whims, of our lusts. Deep down we want to satisfy ourselves. With the second question, Jesus then invites Mary to stop closing in on herself, and on her own sorrow, to allow the desire of her heart to seek a Face, to seek God: “Whom do you seek? – *Quem quaeris?*” Through all its passions and its longings, our heart does not seek something to possess, to

consume, like the forbidden fruit of the first sin, but Someone, a Person, and therefore a relationship. It's like hearing St. Benedict, who asks the novice-master to observe attentively if the novice "truly seeks God – *si revera Deum quaerit*" (RB 58:7).

The whole truth of our human, Christian, and monastic vocation actually consists in the readiness to recognize that happiness lies not in seeking to satisfy our heart with all that we can grasp, like the fruit of Eden, but in letting God draw our heart toward the experience of encountering Him.

"I will go get him"

But also faced with the precise question of Jesus, "Whom do you seek?", Mary tries again to reduce the experience of encountering God to something that she can grasp and bring about by her own strength: "Sir, if you have taken him away, tell me where you put him and I will go get him" (Jn 20:15).

We often reduce the experience of God, being with him, prayer, the liturgy, or encountering Him in our neighbor, to a task that we can carry out with the strength of our own arms, with our energy. Thus we reduce the Living God to a "dead body" that weighs on our shoulders, which we pick up, put down, and leave how and where we want. Our heart desires the infinite, the impossible, but we are instinctively tempted to achieve by ourselves that which is beyond us. Man's great temptation is to want to achieve with his own strength the infinite that his heart desires. And thus we often tend to grasp with our hands that which is already given to our eyes, to our heart. If Jesus appears to Mary as the "groundskeeper of the garden," it is not because He hides or is disguised, but because she does not look at Him, does not recognize Him, is too occupied with seeking him where she thinks she can get hold of him herself. The gift of the living Jesus is veiled to Mary Magdalene's eyes by her anxiety to be able to find and take him with her own strength, like a dead body.

When Jesus calls her by name, the gospel says that Mary "turned around" (Jn 20:16) as if she had been looking somewhere else. Jesus is right there, he truly appears, in flesh and bone, but his disciples' ability to recognize him needs a conversion, a process of converting the gaze, the attention, which is an interior process. The disciples of Emmaus are distracted by their fear, by their ideas about that which has happened, by the foolishness and slowness of their hearts to believe the Prophets (Lk 24:25). Peter and his companions are distracted by their weariness and their disappointment in having fished all night without catching anything, to the point that when Jesus asks them if they have any fish, exasperated and irritated, they answer: "No!" (Jn 21:5). Mary Magdalene is distracted by her suffering for not finding the body of Jesus, by her tears, by her agitation to do everything herself even just to find him.

All these attitudes, in one way or another, turn us in on ourselves, they blind us, they distract us from recognizing the Lord, the present and patient Lord who is already here with us, who is already before our eyes, who is already walking with us, who already looks upon us with infinite love and longing to reveal himself by accompanying us with his word and the sacraments, like the disciples of Emmaus. Christ want to convert us so that we recognize him as he comes to give fruitfulness to that which is sterile in our life and in our work, and he makes us irritated with life, with ourselves, with others, with God, like that morning at lake Tiberias.

“Jesus said to her: Mary!”

But above all, Jesus wants to convert us to Himself by calling us by name, when our heart cries out, loves, and tries with all its might to grasp the object of our desire, perhaps in a possessive or capricious way, with tears at once sincere and false, because we are not able to love with truth, with purity, with generosity. Mary Magdalene is a tangle of sentiments and passions, but she has sought Jesus, she has not been satisfied by anything less than Jesus. And that morning, she really put her whole self into the search, the good and the bad that was in her, the beauty and the misery of her heart, all her qualities and all her defects. She was all there, with all her passion, with her willfulness, with all her might and all her weakness. We should leave out nothing of what we are from the meeting with the risen Christ. Because He awaits us like this, he desires us like this, he calls us like this.

To all this tangle of humanity, at once great and wretched, Jesus comes with the breath of a gentle breeze with which he pronounces our name. Then he will tell us more, he will ask us more, he will give us a mission, but the vocation consists entirely in his pronouncing our name. As on the day of our Baptism. Because when the Risen One pronounces our name, he tells us everything. He tells us everything because he gives us everything, all that suffices for living, all that which we need to live in fullness, to live eternally, to conquer sin and death. Because by pronouncing our name he gives us communion with Him, he grants us to live by responding to Him who calls us, he grants us to live by “turning around” (cf. Jn 20:16), that is, by converting continually toward Him, toward his kind Face, his Face which illumines our life and the entire world.

The whole of Christian moral and ascetic life consists in turning toward Christ who calls us by name.

“Rabboni!”

One who hears Christ calling his name can no longer live except by responding to his presence and his love. The meaning of life is completely in responding to the love of God who calls us to exist, to be born and ever be reborn by his infinite love. To the Risen One who calls her, Mary of Magdala does not instinctively answer, “Jesus!”; she answers, “Rabboni! – Master!” (Jn 20:16). She calls him by the title of

him whom one wants to follow, of him from whom one wants to learn truth and life. Mary wants to hear the Lord who speaks the whole truth about her life, who says her name like no one can say it. Mary wants to obey this call to be fully herself in becoming that which she is for Jesus, that which she is in the gaze, in the feelings, in the love, in the heart of Christ. In Him we are created. His gaze sees us better than we see ourselves or look upon others. His sensitivity perceives us as we do not manage to perceive ourselves. His heart loves us as we do not know how to love ourselves. Mary wants to let herself be defined completely and solely by Jesus who calls her.

“Rabboni!” literally means “my Master!”, a title that simultaneously expresses respect and love, veneration and affection. The only adequate response to Jesus who calls us by name is, therefore, readiness to hear him and follow him by loving him with all our heart.

“I have seen the Lord, and here is what he told me”

The mission of every disciple, in whatever form of life and vocation, springs from this experience of encountering the Risen One. For the Christian mission is always to emit the power of a personal encounter with the Lord who died and rose again to save all humanity.

When Jesus says to Mary Magdalene: “Do not hold on to me, But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’” (Jn 20:17), he does not separate her from her encounter with Him. He only wants Mary to live this encounter with the open heart with which Christ himself lives, with that personal love for her that at the same time embraces the whole of humanity needing salvation and redemption.

When Mary runs to the Apostles to announce that she has seen the Lord and to repeat what He said to her, it is not only a discourse that she transmits. Mary transmits the Face of the Risen One. She would do that even if she said nothing. In her, vocation and mission already coincide. To be called is her mission, because wherever she goes, whomever she meets, in her there is none other than Jesus who calls her with love in everyone and in everything. For her everything is an opportunity to respond to the call of Christ who fills her heart.

Christian witness is possible and is always coherent because it does not speak of itself, but of the Lord; it does not announce our own ideas, but that which we hear from Him. The eyes of Mary Magdalene reflect the face of the Risen One, and her words make his voice resound. The voice of Jesus called her by name and now, even when speaking of herself, Mary no longer presents herself but Him who calls her, who fills her life with meaning and beauty, who frees her, who console her in her weeping, who satisfies her every desire for life and happiness. No one will ever call her “Mary!” like Jesus did; Mary will be so herself for no one but Jesus.

Mary belongs so deeply to that call that from this moment onward no one will be able to encounter her without meeting her encounter with the Risen One, without experiencing through her the encounter with the Lord.

“My Father and your Father”

Jesus entrusted to Mary Magdalene a message that summarizes the whole Christian event, the whole Gospel: “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God” (Jn 20:17).

There is everything in this message. In Jesus who died, rose, and ascended into Heaven, we take part in his Trinitarian life, we are in communion with his filial life: his Father is our Father, his God is our God. All that is “Christ’s” is also ours. As the father of the parable of the prodigal son tells his older son, Jesus tells us that we are always with Him and that all that is his is ours (cf. Lk 15:31). We cannot desire anything more than that.

And with this message, Jesus has Mary Magdalene also announce the most profound communion of all his disciples, because what could unite us more than that “ours” which coincides with the “my” of Jesus?! That which belongs entirely to Christ we have been granted to possess and to share, to possess it *together*. We are all brothers and sisters, all children of a God who is Father, and sons as Christ is Son.

But to have her announce all this, Jesus expressed everything in how he simply said “Mary!”. If in pronouncing our name Jesus expresses his whole love and life, his entire capacity for friendship and communion, then in that “Mary!” the whole of Trinitarian, filial, brotherly love should resound, which he wants to pass on to his disciples, to the whole of humanity, because that is why he died and rose again. Mary bears this whole horizon of infinite love in sharing with the disciples, with the Church, with us, her calling, her life called by Him, her heart risen up to the voice of the Beloved who pronounces her name.

Freed from seven demons

In the Gospel according to Mark it is said that “Jesus appeared first to Mary of Magdala, from whom he had cast out seven evil spirits” (Mk 16:9). Mary’s pressing desire to find Jesus again was certainly also caused by the awareness that, without Him, she could not remain free from these demons. Without Jesus, Mary would be like that house from which the demon, once cast out, would return, bringing with him seven other spirits worse than himself (cf. Mk 12:43-45). Without Christ we are powerless to remain free from all that which drives us to evil, to division, to pride, to vanity, to scorn for others, to lust, to ambition, to busyness, to laziness, to sadness, to death. Each of us, and also our communities, has some “demons,” of weakness, of tendencies to sin, that tie up our freedom to love God and others.

That is why we need to seek and find the Lord, to rediscover ever anew the experience of encountering Him who frees us.

The true renewal of our lives, of our communities, of our Order, as also of the whole Church, cannot come but from the reproduction of the experience of meeting the risen Lord who calls us by name and opens us to communion with Him and in Him. That is how Christ begins to live in us, to make us instruments of his presence and of his charity. That is how the divine life enters the world and becomes like a fire that spreads from our encounter with Him to our encounter with others, until all of humanity, so torn by divisions and by violence, becomes one big family of God.

True brotherhood consists in helping each other, with prayer and mercy, to renew and deepen the experience of the Risen One who calls us by name and makes us bearers of the good news of communion with the Father and with all. Let us ask the Holy Spirit for the gift of this brotherhood in our communities and in the Order! There is no greater preparation for the General Chapter, and better way to encourage the evangelical renewal that Pope Francis and the Year of Consecrated Life want to kindle in us and among us.

I wish you an ardent and unending Pentecost!

Yours,

The image shows a circular seal on the left and a handwritten signature on the right. The seal features a central figure, likely the Virgin Mary, with the text 'ABBAS GENERALIS ORDINIS CISTERCIENSIS' around the perimeter. The signature is written in black ink and reads 'Fr. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori O.Cist. ab. gn.'.

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