



## “If you want to be perfect”

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I write this Pentecost letter while in many communities of our Order preparations are under way for the meeting of our Synod, considering the theme “Are we faithful to our vocation?”, motivated by a letter from the Chapter of the Brazilian Congregation. In the communities of the various continents I have visited in recent months I have seen that dialogue commencing from this question allows for a deep exchange of experiences, and allows for the development in communities of a renewed desire to help each other live with fidelity the calling that God addresses to us today. The Lord continues to call us from out of the depth of our centuries-old charism, as also through the voices and testimonies that, in this time, renew for us his “Follow me!”.

What does the voice of Pope Francis represent if not Christ’s invitation to renew our fidelity to our vocation and mission? The Pope reminds all the consecrated that we are not allowed to distinguish our religious vocation from the cry for help that is lifted up from all corners of the earth, from the geographical, social, cultural, and spiritual “peripheries” in which contemporary man wanders without fatherland, without home, without family, without love, exposed to so many aggressive and unscrupulous egoisms, those of the powerful, but also those which, like an invisible virus, pass into our hearts, into our way of thinking and of living, of treating people and things.

### **Do not lose the question**

The question about fidelity to our vocation, as I was saying, is working its way into the heart of many member and communities of our Order. In a meeting with young professed monks in Ethiopia, one of them said that this question kept him from sleeping at night, it so put him at issue.

For many, in fact, this question is like a surprise, because we are no longer in the habit of asking it of ourselves, and asking it every day. We know that St Bernard, as William of St. Thierry recounts, “always had in his heart and often even on his lips these words: ‘Bernard, Bernard, why have you come here?’” (*Vita Prima* 1:4). He knew that one could live in the form of our vocation, responding to the Lord’s call, only by keeping this question open.

For this is what infidelity is: keeping on the path without remembering for whom we are doing so. Like Judas, who began at some point to be with Jesus for the money he was taking from the common purse, or waiting for Jesus to become king of the Jews. Betrayal begins when Christ himself is no longer the ultimate reason for our being with Him.

Today we more easily put our vocation into question than our fidelity to it. To pass our life asking ourselves if we really have the vocation in which we are occupied is a sterile exercise, but we must never tire of asking ourselves if we are really faithful to it and what kind of conversion of ourselves is necessary today in order to grow in that fidelity.

None of us, we know, manages to be truly faithful. But what matters is continual striving to see and hear the Lord, counting more on His fidelity to his calling us than on ours in responding to him. What matters is keeping our ears attentive to the Word of God with the desire to let ourselves be led wherever the Lord wants to take us.

The first words of the Rule of St. Benedict, “Listen, O son!” (Prol. 1), define our whole life as *vocation*. God’s calling is an eternal word, is Christ himself, the Word of the Father. “Listening” for us means being vivified by God’s voice, walking in the light of the presence of Him who calls us. “Your word is a lamp for my steps, a light for my path,” says psalm 118 (v. 105). Once you have heard the Lord’s call, you can no longer live except by listening to his voice. Simon Peter understood this immediately when he said to Jesus: “But at your word I will cast my nets” (Lk 5:5). This gave Jesus the chance to work the miracle of the miraculous catch of fish, which was, for Peter, a symbol of the extreme fecundity that his life would have if he walked *at the word of Jesus*, listening to His calling. We too, each in the form of vocation that God has chosen for him, always experience a mysterious and marvelous fecundity in our existence if we continually renew our fidelity to listening here and now to the Lord who calls us.

## **Called by Beauty**

Being called is always an experience of beauty, even when the Lord calls us to choices or renunciations that seem to mortify our life. The rich young man went off sad because his fear of renouncing his riches caused the withdrawal of the extraordinary beauty of Jesus who was calling him, looking upon him with love (cf. Mk 10:21). Beauty summons, attracts. Our vocation is beautiful because in it we are drawn by the beauty of a God who knows us personally to the point of calling us by name and of having for each of us an exclusive project, which no one else can do in our place; above all God’s supreme project, which is the desire to be loved by us as He loves us.

In the Prologue of the Rule, St. Benedict exults in admiration of the beauty of our vocation: “What could be sweeter for us, dearest brothers, than this voice of the Lord who invites us?” (Prol. 19). It’s like right in the middle of a discourse on the monastic life St. Benedict stops himself, lifting his eyes, with his face radiant, crying out loud: “How beautiful is our vocation, brothers! How beautiful to be called! Rather: *invited* by God to be his, to live with Him and for Him, in a life that is no longer the one we have calculated ourselves, but a new life, freed from the bonds of our small-mindedness.

And this calling is a *voice*. Not just a word, which could reach us also by means of other people or other means. It is really the *voice* of the Lord, it is really the Lord himself who speaks, who invites us, who addresses himself personally to our freedom to respond or not to His desire to give us life.

St. Benedict calls us all together, calling us “*fratres carissimi* – dearest brothers,” to share this joy, which is the joy of the saints. That the Lord calls each one of us is a joy for all, a joy to share so that it become greater. It is the joy of the good shepherd, who, when he finds his lost sheep, calls all to feast with him (cf. Lk 15:6). But for St. Benedict joy arises first of all from our having been found ourselves by Christ the Good Shepherd. When Jesus calls us, when his voice reaches us, pronouncing our name, we realize that we have been found, that we were lost and He has found us to give a meaning and dwelling-place to our life.

Baptism is already this sweetest calling, in which God’s voice pronounces our name and invites us to live with Him and for Him in his Body which is the Church. The life of each baptized person is a life called by God, and every particular vocation does nothing other than make us hear in a more definite way the voice that gives meaning to our existence.

But a vocation, as Benedict says, is and always remains an *invitation*. An invitation is not a marching order to go to military service. The invitation is a proposal made to our freedom. The invitation is a mystery hanging between two freedoms, for he who makes the invitation exposes himself, disarmed, to the other’s freedom to accept or refuse. The one who makes the invitation puts himself in a position of weakness, of vulnerability, in relation with the other. God chose this form of calling us to correspond to his project of love for us and for all. That is why St. Benedict uses the term “sweet” to describe the voice that calls us. It is always the Lord who is “meek and humble of heart” (Mt 11:29) who calls us to follow him.

This humble love of Christ who calls us with tenderness is the beauty of our vocation. Jesus himself is the beauty of our vocation, of every Christian vocation. We live our vocation with fidelity if we live it by the constant fascination of the presence and voice of the Lord. True fidelity is the reflection of Christ’s presence, the echo of his voice, the light of his love spreading over our persons, our communities, and the neighbor whom we meet.

A vocation is beautiful when it does not lose the wonder that cries out to Christ: “You are the most beautiful among the sons of men, grace has been poured out on your lips” (Ps 45:3). The splendor of his Face, the sweet grace of his Word, should be the ever-living and vivifying source of our fidelity. And the path of our life, lived by following his call, then becomes the poem that sings of Christ’s beauty: “My heart overflows with noble words, I sing my song to the king. My tongue is like the pen of a quick scribe” (Ps 45:2).

The beauty of our vocation is the reflection in us and through us of the presence of Christ who calls us by name. Then the poem that we compose for Him can even be a single word, a single gaze, or a smile. The beauty of a single act of love. Like Mary of Magdala who cries out “*Rabbuni!*” (Jn 20:16), like Thomas who confesses: “My Lord and my God!” (Jn 20:28), or John who exclaims: “It is the Lord!” (Jn 21:7).

### **Leave all behind for Him**

Is there really this beauty in us and in our communities? Are we faithful to the beauty of our vocation, which is Christ himself? In us and among us, is there the joy of being called by Christ and of following him? Are we not, instead, like so many “rich young men” at the moment in which, with sadness, they refuse to leave all for Jesus?

“Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, ‘You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me!’ When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.” (Mk 10:21-22)

Often we forget that between Christ’s calling and our following there is a space of freedom. When we enter a monastery, as in any kind of vocation, deep down we are not yet following Jesus, because we have not yet left everything for Him. But we behave as if, once we have entered, or once we have made profession, the renunciation of all for Him has been achieved, and then we pretend to follow him without worrying any more about selling what we have to give it to the poor. Perhaps we have really left all the possessions we had, but we do not worry about leaving the goods that we find or receive in the monastery, which are often more than what we had before. We think we are able to live our vocation without having to renounce anything anymore.

In reality, all whom he calls remain, up to the end, under the loving gaze of Christ, who repeats to us constantly and on every occasion: “If you want to be perfect, go, sell all you have, give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me!” (Mt 19:21).

Christ essentially asks for this vocation discernment: the readiness to give up all for Him. After two parables on the prudent calculation of the means necessary for finishing the construction of a tower or winning a war, Jesus surprises all by saying that what we must “calculate” to be his disciples is our readiness to renounce all our possessions (cf. Lk 14:25-33).

Is this not what St. Benedict asks of us, too? But it’s like we have become accustomed to read the Rule by censoring its demands. As if St. Benedict no longer asked us to educate our freedom to love by means of the discipline of obedience and fraternal service. As if he no longer asked us to limit our possession and use of goods to what is necessary, thinking especially of the poor. As if he no longer asked us to discipline our external contacts, even with the modern means of communication, with transparent sincerity. As if he no longer asked us to educate our words with silence and listening. As if he no

longer insisted on the necessity of being faithful to the times and places of common prayer to grow in our relationship to God. As if he no longer said that rest and sleep are at the service of watchfulness in prayer, and that food and drink must not extinguish our hunger and thirst for the Word of God. Even work, for St. Benedict, is not an end in itself, but becomes fruitful if it learns to stop for the Work of God. The whole Rule, in reality, accompanies us on an ever freer path of renunciation of all to follow Jesus.

Okay, let's admit it! It is precisely concerning this renunciation in order to let Christ alone give fulfillment to our life that we are most in crisis. And that is where the sadness of the rich young man in the Gospel comes from, as does our own sadness.

## **Repairing the ruins**

In recent weeks I have found myself on various occasions speaking with other superiors about grave infidelities that come up in not a few of the communities of the Order. These infidelities are often the final result, sometimes tragic, of the refusal to live our vocation, accepting, for Christ, to renounce goods, affections, personal projects, personal conveniences, personal proud. And in speaking with these superiors there arose in us the awareness that the time has come to take responsibility for this situation together. If in a family there are seriously ill people, or some members who are lost or corrupted, it is not possible to stand there watching, or being watched, with indifference.

But how to help ourselves?

Christ does not ask us anything other than or more than that to which he has called us: the renunciation of ourselves and of everything for Him. And that is what repairs and rebuilds our house, our Order, our Church, and even the society in ruin.

When Peter denied Him, Jesus turned to look at him (Lk 22:61). What was this glance like? Certainly it was the same look as the one with which Jesus looked upon, loved, and called the rich young man. And in the Lord's gaze Peter saw that, to repair his infidelity, Jesus was going to die on the Cross, Jesus was renouncing all for him, Peter, and for all. Renunciation of self, when it is true, is an emptiness that the Holy Spirit fills with charity, and charity restores all, repairs all, rebuilds all.

The renunciation made in order to correspond to Christ's love is never negative, is never a diminishment, because it opens up to the gift of the freedom of love, of giving one's life. And this is the perfection, the fulfillment of every life and vocation. How many beautiful testimonies to this do we find, thank God, in the Order and in the Church! Renunciation for the sake of Christ always means diminishing to grow, depriving ourselves in order to possess, dying to live. Jesus never demands our renunciation except in order to prefer Him, the Lord of life. When Christ asked the rich young man to sell all to give it to the poor, he asked him to attach himself completely to Him, because giving everything to the poor was not only a condition for joining Christ: it was already joining up with Him, because all that we do for the poor we do for Him, as he will say in the parable of the last judgment in Matthew 25:31-46.

Behold, dear brothers and sisters: The Order urgently needs to rediscover this freedom, this love, this real connection to Christ. And that this be the ideal that we propose to the young and form in them. We need people and communities that rededicate themselves to the path of a conversion, of a *conversatio morum*, that respond day by day with joy to the demand to leave all for Christ.

Certainly, it is impossible truly to leave all. But what matters is the personal and communal awareness that it is essential to our vocation to walk on a path of self-renunciation that never finishes, and that always remains before us like the ideal of our vocation, because the ideal is Jesus, who, for love of our love, asks us to make this sacrifice, to carry this cross, to let ourselves be ever more taken by Him and for Him. St. Peter, who actually did leave all from the beginning to follow Jesus, had to understand that the renunciation was never perfect, and that it would be completed only at the moment of death: “‘When you are old you will stretch out your hands, and another will clothe you and take you where you do not want to go.’ He said this to indicate by what kind of death he would glorify God” (Jn 21:18b-19a). After these words, Jesus said to Peter: “Follow me!” (21:19b). Peter knew that following Jesus meant consecrating every instant of his life to preparing himself for this total gift, and stretching out his hands freely to receive the grace of being taken beyond the limits of his own will and freedom. How many martyrs today give us this testimony!

To repair our House, it is not necessary to resort to extraordinary deeds and prayers. It is enough for each of us to offer the humble daily fidelity of granting Christ the self-renunciation we need to love him, the renunciation he lovingly begs of us. And the weaker monks and nuns, the more precarious communities, in number, age, illness, are those that can best contribute to this renewal. We need them to reach out their hands for all, letting themselves be taken over by the renunciation that purifies from so many worldly desires for power, success, admiration, so that the Order can really glorify God and not itself.

We would like to glorify God only with our life, and He, instead, makes himself glorified by our death (Jn 21:19). Because now, in Christ, true life is the resurrection of Him who died for us. Let us not worry about asking God for so many vocations: let us ask for *one single vocation*, our own, that of our community and our Order, the vocation to which Christ invites us, and which we live in the spousal beauty of leaving all for Him, the perfect model of which is the Virgin Mary.

### **Come, Father of the poor**

I propose to all, in the light of the mystery of Pentecost, to let ourselves become a home for the loving and begging gaze of Jesus, while he tells us and repeats every day: “If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you possess, give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me!” (Mt 19:21); to offer to God and for our brothers and sisters a life constantly striving to want to give him all, even if this is impossible without the gift of the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit burns with the desire to free us from all that does not correspond to the Lord who calls us. He wants to free us from the sadness of not knowing how to leave all for Him. That is why St. Benedict invites us to live the Lenten renunciations “*cum gaudio Sancti Spiritus* – with the joy of the Holy Spirit” (RB 49:6). The Spirit is the divine joy of giving oneself completely for the others. The joy of Mary’s *Magnificat* after consecrating herself totally to the Lord and in serving Elizabeth’s need.

I know that in the Order, many, like me, often pray the sequence of Pentecost, *Veni Sancte Spiritus*, to open ourselves and others to the Paraclete, to the “Father of the poor,” so that he come to renew and revive all that is tired, sad, dirty, dry, wounded, corrupted, and so that we taste already the “*perenne gaudium*” of following Christ with our whole life.

This prayer announces to us that the Holy Spirit can always intervene in our miseries and weaknesses, even those that are our own fault, if we humbly present them to him. Our miseries are the empty hands that God loves to see open before Him, even if they are dirty and trembling, to refill them with the ever-springing newness of his grace. We need more than ever to feel united in this gesture of supplication and humble acceptance, full of faith and hope, to be filled up with the more complete beauty of our vocation: charity!

In fraternal embrace,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Fr. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori" in a cursive script.

Fr. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori  
Abbot General OCist