



“Be still and know that I am God”

Letter of the Abbot General O.Cist. for the time of epidemic

Dearest brothers and sisters,

The situation that has come about with the coronavirus pandemic urges me to seek to make contact with all of you through this letter, as a sign that we are living this situation in communion, not only among ourselves, but with the whole Church and the entire world. Finding myself in Italy and in Rome, I experience this trial at a crucial point, even if it is clear that the greater part of the countries in which we live will soon find themselves in the same situation.

To be helpful to all

It is evident that the first correct reaction that we must have, also as an Order and as monastic communities, is to follow the indications of the civil and ecclesiastical authorities to contribute, with obedience and respect, to a rapid resolution of this epidemic. Now more than ever we are all called to realize how much personal responsibility is a good for all. Whoever accepts the necessary rules and behaviours to defend oneself from contagion contributes to limiting it for others too. This would be a rule of life to observe always, at all levels, but in the current emergency it is crystal clear that we are all jointly responsible in both good and ill.

But leaving the sanitary aspect of the situation aside, what does this dramatic moment asks of us with respect to our vocation? What is God calling us to as Christians and particularly as monks and nuns through this universal trial? What testimony are we invited to give? What specific help are we called to offer to society, to all our brothers and sisters in the world?

What comes to my mind is the expression of the *Carta Caritatis* which I often emphasized during this last year, in particular in the *Christmas Letter 2019* which, among other things, was published right as the COVID-19 contagion was starting in China: “*Prodesse omnibus cupientes* – desiring to be helpful to all” (cf. CC 1). What assistance are we called to offer to all mankind in this precise moment?

“Be still and know that I am God”

Perhaps our first task is to live out this circumstance in a way that gives it meaning. Fundamentally, the true drama that society is currently living out is not really or not only the pandemic, but its consequences in our daily existence. The world has stopped. Activities, the economy, political life, trips, entertainments, sports have stopped, as if for a universal Lent. But not just this: in Italy and now in other countries too, public religious life has also stopped, the public celebration of the Eucharist, all church gatherings and meetings, at least those in which the faithful meet up physically. It is like a great fast, a great universal abstinence.

This interruption imposed by the contagion and by the authorities is presented and lived out as a necessary evil. Contemporary man, in fact, no longer knows how to stop. One stops only if one is stopped. To stop oneself freely has become almost impossible in contemporary western culture, which is globalized, for that matter. One does not even really stop on vacations. Only unpleasant setbacks manage to stop us in our breathless race to take ever greater advantage of life, of time, often also of other persons. Now, however, an unpleasant setback like an epidemic has stopped almost all of us. Our projects and plans have been annihilated, until we do not know when. We too, though we live a monastic or even cloistered vocation, how much we are used to living like everyone else, running like everyone else, thinking about our life and always throwing ourselves toward some future!

To stop, on the other hand, means to rediscover the present, the instant to be lived out now, the true reality of time, and thus also the true reality of ourselves, of our life. Man only lives in the present, but we are always tempted to remain attached to the past that is no more and throw ourselves toward a future that is not yet and perhaps never will be.

In Psalm 46, God invites us to stop to recognize his presence in our midst:

“Be still and know that I am God,
exalted over nations, exalted over earth!
The Lord of hosts is with us:
the God of Jacob is our stronghold.” (Ps 46:11–12)

God *asks* us to keep ourselves still; he does not impose it. He wants us to stop before him and remain freely, by choice, that is, with love. He does not stop us like the police who arrest a fugitive delinquent. He wants us to stop as one stops before a beloved person, or how one stops before the tender beauty of a newborn who sleeps, or at a sunset or a work of art that fill us with wonder and silence. God asks us to stop in recognition that, for us, his presence fills the whole universe, is the most important thing in life, which nothing can exceed. *To stop before God means to recognize that his presence fills the instant and thus fully satisfies our heart, in whatever circumstance and condition we find ourselves.*

Living constraint with freedom

What does this mean in our current situation? That we can live it with freedom, even if constrained. Freedom is not choosing always and anyway that which we want. Freedom is the grace to be able to choose that which gives fullness to our heart even when all is taken from us. Even when our freedom is taken from us, the presence of God preserves us and offers the supreme freedom of being able to stop before Him, to recognize Him as present and as a friend. This is the great testimony of the martyrs and all the saints.

When Jesus walked on the waters to reach his disciples in the midst of the storming sea, he found them unable to go on because of the contrary wind: “The boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them” (Mt 14:24). The disciples struggle impotently against the wind that obstructs them in their project of reaching the shore. Jesus reaches them as only God can approach man, with a presence free from all constriction. Nothing, no contrary wind and not even any law of nature can oppose itself to the gift of the presence of Christ who has come to save mankind. “Early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea” (Mt 14:25).

But there is another tempest that wants to oppose itself to the friendly presence of the Lord: our diffidence and fear: “But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, ‘It is a ghost!’ And they cried out in fear” (Mt 14:26). Often what we imagine with the eyes of our diffidence transforms reality into “ghosts.” Then it is like we ourselves are nurturing the fear that makes us scream. But Jesus is stronger than this interior tempest, too. He comes closer, he makes us hear his voice, the pacifying sonority of his friendly presence: “But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, ‘Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid’” (14:27).

“And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God’” (Mt 14:33). Only when the disciples recognize the presence of God and welcome it as such, that is they stop before it, does the wind cease to oppose them (cf. Mt 14:32) and “immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going” (Jn 6:21).

Can this happen in the situation of danger and fear that we are living now in the face of the spread of the virus and its consequences (certainly grave and lasting), in the face of this situation for all of society?

To recognize in this circumstance an extraordinary chance to welcome and adore the presence of God in our midst does not mean fleeing from reality and renouncing the human means that are put in place to defend us from evil. This would be an affront to those who, like all health professionals, now sacrifice themselves for our good. It would also be blasphemous to think that God sends us these trials Himself to then show us how good he is in freeing us from them. God enters into our trials, he suffers them with us and for us, to the point of death on the Cross. Thus he reveals to us that our life, in trial as also in consolation, has an infinitely greater meaning than the resolution of the current peril. The true peril that looms over our life is not the threat of death, but the possibility of living it without meaning, of living it without being directed toward a greater fullness of life and toward a greater salvation than health.

This pandemic, with all the corollaries and consequences it implies, is thus an occasion for all to truly stop, not only because we are constrained to, but because we are invited by the Lord to stand before Him, to recognize that He, at just this moment, comes to meet us in the midst of the tempest of circumstances and of our anxieties, proposing to us a renewed relationship of friendship with Him, with Him who is beyond doubt capable of stopping the pandemic as he stopped the wind, but who above all renews for us the gift of his friendly presence, who defeats our fearful frailty – “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid!” – and wants to lead us immediately to the ultimate and full goal of existence: He himself who remains and walks with us.

We should always live like this

This scene from the Gospel, just like the troubled scene of the world today, should not seem so strange to us. In reality, our vocation as baptized persons, like our vocation to consecrated life in the monastic form, should always help us and reminds us to live like this. The current situation reminds us and all Christians a little bit of what St. Benedict says of the time of Lent (cf. RB 49:1–3): we should always live like this, with this sensitivity to the drama of life, with this sense of our structural frailty, with this capacity to renounce what is superfluous to safeguard what is more profound and true in us and among us, with this faith that our life is not in our hands but in the hands of God.

We should even always live with the awareness that we are all responsible for each other, mutually joined in the good and the ill of our choices, of our behaviours, even the most hidden and apparently insignificant.

The trial that comes to torment us should also make us more sensitive to all the trials that strike others, other peoples, whom we often watch suffer and die with indifference. Do we remember, for example, that while among us the coronavirus goes wild, the peoples of the Horn of Africa have for months suffered an invasion of locusts that threatens the subsistence of millions of people? Do we remember the migrants stuck in Turkey? Do we remember the open wound in Syria and the whole Middle East?...

A time of trial can make people harsher or more sensitive, more indifferent or more compassionate. Fundamentally, all depends on the love with which we live them out, and this above all is what Christ comes to grant us and to awaken in us with his presence. Any trial whatever comes and goes, but if we live it with love, the wound that the trial cuts into our lives will be able to remain open, like that on the Body of the Risen One, like an ever surging spring of compassion.

Ministers of the cry that begs for salvation

There is, however, a task that we are called to take on in a specific way: the offering of prayer, of the supplication that begs for salvation. Jesus Christ – with baptism, the faith, the encounter with Him through the Church, and the gift of a particular vocation to be with Him in the “school of the Lord’s service” (RB Prol. 45) – calls us to stand before the Father, asking all in his name. For this he gives us the Spirit who, “with sighs too deep for words,” “helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray

as we ought” (Rom 8:26). Before entering his passion and death, Jesus told his disciples: “I chose you (...) so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name” (Jn 15:16). He did not choose us just to pray, but *to be heard always* by the Father.

Our richness, then, is the poverty of having nothing power than that of begging with faith. And this is a charism that are given not for ourselves alone, but to be able to bring to fulfillment the mission of the Son who is the salvation of the world: “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (Jn 3:17). The need to safeguard or recover one’s health, which all feel in this moment, perhaps with anguish, is also a need for salvation, for the salvation that keeps our life from seeming meaningless, buffeted by waves without a goal, without the encounter with Love that is given to us in every instant to reach and eternally live with Him.

This awareness of our primary task of prayer for all must make us universally responsible for the faith we have, and the liturgical prayer with which the Church entrusts us. In this moment in which it is imposed upon the greater part of the faithful to renounce the communal Eucharist that gathers them into churches, how much should we feel responsible for the Masses that we can continue to celebrate in our monasteries, and for the prayer of the Divine Office that continues to gather us in choir! We certainly do not have this privilege because we are better than others. Perhaps it is given to us precisely because we are not, and thus makes our begging more humble, poorer, more effective before the good Father of all. We should be more aware than ever that none of our prayers and liturgies is to be lived without feeling ourselves united to the whole Body of Christ that is the Church, the community of all the baptized reaching to embrace all of mankind.

The light of the eyes of our Mother

Each evening, in all Cistercian monasteries in the world, we enter the night by singing the *Salve Regina*. We must do this also with a thought toward the darkness that often shrouds mankind, filling it with the fear of being lost in it. In the *Salve Regina* we ask that, over the whole “valley of tears” of the world, and over all the “exiled children of Eve,” there shine the sweet and consoling light of the “merciful eyes” of the Queen and Mother of Mercy, so that, in every circumstance, in every night and peril, the gaze of Mary *show us Jesus*, show us that Jesus is present, that he comforts us, that he heals us and saves us.

Our whole vocation and mission is described in this prayer.

May Mary, “our life, our sweetness, and our hope,” grant us to live this vocation with humility and courage, offering our life for the peace and joy of the whole human race!

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Third Sunday of Lent



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