

## Chapters CFM 2023 *THE JOY OF CHRIST*

### 1. Joy is a serious matter

One of the main goals of this Monastic Formation Course is to help the participants explore more deeply and develop their vocation, particularly their monastic vocation following St. Benedict, who in his turn followed the masters of monastic life that preceded him: St. Antony and the other fathers and mothers of the desert, St. Augustine, St. Basil, Cassian, etc.

To go more deeply into what the monastic vocation means, it is first of all necessary to start with going more deeply into what a Christian vocation means, the vocation of each person baptized, called to follow Jesus Christ. It is such an important topic that you cannot finish exploring it in a single course, and not even in many courses, because it is a reality that each of us must experience throughout our whole life. When we see the journey of the Apostles during the three years they lived with Jesus and after his Resurrection and Ascension, it is clear that, to follow Jesus, it is necessary to continually explore what this means for us, to understand more and more new aspects, or understand anew aspects that we thought we had already understood but that life forces us to reconsider from other points of view.

During this course, I would like to go more deeply into an essential aspect of the Christian, and so of the monastic, vocation, an aspect that we always risk trivializing or overlooking: **joy**. It seems important to me to go into this more deeply also because the time in which we are living seems to lead us to overlook joy in our vocation, to considerate it with superficiality and frivolousness. But really, joy is paradoxically a serious matter, perhaps the most serious thing in life. One who does not take their joy seriously is not content. One who lives it frivolously loses it, and in losing it realizes that everything else loses its taste and beauty, including the most important and sacred realities of human life.

It is significant that St. Benedict invites us to live out the renunciations of Lent “*cum gaudio Sancti Spiritus* – with the joy of the Holy Spirit” (RB 49.6), that is, that he invites us to cultivate joy precisely when ascetic discipline is intensified. You know that St. Benedict says that Lent is the time when monks and nuns return to the truth of their vocation. “Even if it is true that the life of the monk should always have a Lenten character, since this virtue belongs to rather few, we insist particularly that at least during Lent each one keep fervent watch over the purity of his life, taking advantage of those holy days to cancel out the acts of negligence of the other parts of the year” (RB 49.1–3).

This is true, however, for all the baptized, since the whole Church lives out Lent. This means that the monastic vocation, as St. Benedict understands it, is a call to go to the depth of the Christian vocation, of the baptismal vocation, which consists in finding in faith in Christ the Redeemer and in communion with Him the fullness of life for which each human being has been willed, created, and loved by God.

When St. Benedict asks us to live out the renunciations of Lent “with the joy in the Holy Spirit” he makes us understand that the topic of joy is inseparable from the topic of the

fundamental vocation of each human being, namely the calling to find in Christ the fullness of life, eternal life.

But he also makes us understand that this fullness of life and joy is granted to us in clinging to the paschal mystery, is granted to us in Christ who died and rose for us, that is, in the mystery toward which he wants us to direct our time of Lent. And since the monastic life should always be Lenten, we see that what should always direct the life of monks and nuns, like the life of every Christian, is Easter. The whole liturgical year, in fact, has for its origin, center, and purpose the celebration of the Lord's Passover.

In the same chapter 49 of the Rule, on the observation of Lent, St. Benedict expresses this reality in a very incisive way when he says that every monk "should deprive his body of some food, or drink, or sleep, or speaking, or joking, and with the joy of spiritual desire should await holy Easter – *et cum spiritalis desiderii gaudio sanctum Pascha expectet*" (RB 49.7).

This passage of the Rule is an excellent summary for understanding the nature of Christian joy and how it is connected to the fulfillment of our humanity in the Risen Christ, of our whole humanity. I hope that this year's Chapters can help us engage more deeply with and absorb this understanding of vocation and of joy. I hope so, because as more years pass and I accumulate experiences visiting communities and monasteries and meet monks and nuns, but also so many other religious, priests, and laypeople in different cultures, of different ages and sensibilities, well: it is ever clearer to me that it is useless to confront the many problems and the many difficulties that arise if one does not always return again to the fundamental problem of life, of vocation: that of desiring and meeting the joy of Christ, joy in Christ as the fullness of our humanity.

And how important it is to help each other in this, to form each other in this! Normally a young person, an adolescent, carries in themselves this yearning for joy and feels the drama that their search entails, that is, they suffer for the lack of true joy. For this reason, one is often sad as an adolescent, with a true sadness, because the heart suffers from lacking that for which it is made. Then, with the passing of time, often it is like the false joys manage to cover over this yearning, manage, like drugs, to anesthetize the wrenching desire of the heart for its fullness. We notice this in ourselves too, we notice it in monasteries too, we notice it also in those who are mature in faith, in those who are at work in the Church. It's like we have neglected the heart of life, distracted by all that we are and do. On account of which we find ourselves living and acting without joy, without passion, without life.

For this reason, I see the genius in what Benedict advises us in the chapter on Lent, because it helps us really to rediscover the heart of our heart, the soul of our soul, that which we are suffocating underneath our eating, drinking, sleeping, under our chatter and the superficial joys that dissipate us. Today St. Benedict would certainly have included the use of the Internet, of cellphones, of social media, under the heading of all that which basically impedes a profound source from springing up and flowing freely in our life: the source of spiritual desire that awaits Easter with joy, that yearns like the deer for the living water that springs up from the heart of the Risen one.

So, let us begin the journey of this year first of all by making ourselves aware of how and how much we are drawn away from this silent source of the desire for Christ, our life and our joy, which is our heart.