

1. Starting over from the heart of our vocation

Last Good Friday, I was in Cortona to celebrate the Triduum with our nuns, and I went to confession at the sanctuary of Santa Margarita. I was speaking to the priest about my usual difficulties and struggles in my ministry, and how fatigue and discouragement often make me live my vocation as though it were something grey and sad. The priest asked me, “But what is the center of your charism? You talk about *Ora et labora*, praying the Office, working, living in community, etc.; but what is truly central and essential in your vocation?” I responded to him saying that for St. Benedict, the center is “to prefer absolutely nothing to Christ” (*RB* 72.11). And he answered me, “Put that back at the center, and everything else will take care of itself and fall into place. Find rest in that preference, just like when Jesus said to his disciples, ‘Come away by yourselves and rest a little,’ rest with me, with me alone.”

It was a beautiful day in mid-April, amid the splendor of the medieval Tuscan city. I had returned from a long and grueling trip to Brazil and Bolivia. I had passed from the torrid heat of the Brazilian Bahia to the cold and 13,000 feet worth of altitude sickness in La Paz. In the communities I had found, in addition to wonderful experiences of encounter and fraternity, many struggles and much sadness in living our vocation. Because of this, I felt the call to rest which the priest offered to me, to rest myself in Christ in the heart of my and our vocation, as an answer to a profound and acute need, not only for myself, but for the persons and communities which I had visited and which I continued to think about, asking myself how to help them, how to help all of us.

I think it is important that we too, finding ourselves here this month at the Formation Course, rekindle our focus on what is most urgent in the present situation of monastic life, just as we are living (or not living) it in our communities, our Orders or Congregations.

This past year, I have not been able to forget at all our young brother David who, just five weeks after the Course, departed so tragically not only from the monastic life, but from this earthly life. We cannot fail to question ourselves about this sorrowful event. What does it ask of us in terms of responsibility, not so much with regard to David, because he is in the hands and heart of God, but with regard to ourselves, our life and vocation? Our brother left us a challenge, as it were, which I feel like formulating in the following question: what meaning does the monastic vocation give to human life? And what meaning does human life give to the monastic life?

In the face of other factors and dramatic, almost unbelievable choices, even without thinking of the cultural context, this year I have understood more than ever that the primary urgent task is to help all of us live the consecrated life, a life which begins at baptism and must do none other than allow that baptism to generate life, with a breath which gives meaning to human life, both ours and that of others.

When I see the monastic life lived and, above all, the formation for it, in such a way that it fails to give meaning to one's own humanity, I get the feeling that we are committing a great betrayal of Christ and of man, a great betrayal of Christ the Redeemer of man, a betrayal of the Redemption as new life, renewed and full of meaning here, now, and for eternity. I also sense that we are committing a betrayal of our own charism, of St. Benedict and the spirit of his Rule, which was fundamentally given to us for the sake of living out unity between our life and our vocation, between the meaning of life and the meaning of vocation. Jesus came to call us to this unity with the joyful message of the Gospel, and He calls us to this by calling us to Himself, to follow Him, to be with Him, to cling to Him in order to be one with Him and the Father in the Holy Spirit. Baptism brings this mystery about. But our freedom is called to live it, to allow this immense grace to penetrate into our life, our humanity. The monastic vocation was given to us in order to bring about the baptismal vocation of every Christian, and so that we might become living witnesses that Jesus Christ alone gives full meaning to human life.

It's as if everything appealed to us to find ever anew the meaning of our vocation, precisely there where our vocation gives meaning to life, adheres to the meaning of life, and permits us to live it to the full. A vocation, any vocation, is lived well if our human life achieves the purpose for which it was given to us by means of it. A vocation does not make sense if it is cut off from the meaning of life, of our entire life. If the purpose for which I live does not coincide with the purpose for which I follow a vocation (and vice-versa), it means that something isn't working, that there is a space of untruth which sooner or later will impede the work of Christ who calls us to achieve a unity of life, to *be* the entire meaning of our life, and therefore its fullness.

In the context of that confession in Cortona, I came to realize that perhaps I didn't understand that our true rest coincides with returning the heart of our vocation to the center of our life. I have certainly experienced this often, and I continue to experience it, but I perhaps never formulated it for myself with such clarity. What gives us rest is not an exiting from the center of our vocation, separating ourselves from that center of the vocation, but putting oneself back in it, returning oneself to it. True rest (in Italian, *riposo*) lies in *re-positioning* ourselves (*ri-posarsi*), in returning once more, in placing ourselves again at the heart of the encounter with Christ, who calls us to follow Him on His mission.

All this came to me when I recalled how Jesus called His disciples to come away by themselves to rest a little and be alone with Him, only to find that, upon landing, a great crowd had preceded them on foot (see Mark 6:30-34). Was their rest ruined? Was their holiday a failure?

If the apostles had gone to confession like I did to that priest, they would have had to ask themselves what was the profound center of their vocation. And perhaps they would have responded, "The center is the beginning, when Jesus looked at us and

told us, 'Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men!'" (Matthew 4:19). The center, therefore, was not "Come away by yourselves and rest a little," but the call to follow Christ in His desire to save all human beings. But if this was their vocational center, there was also rest there. Jesus had not deceived them when He called them to go and rest apart with Him, even though He certainly knew that even in going away with Him, the apostles would find the crowd to evangelize, to assist, to live with. Because then, as it turns out, the person who had to work was Jesus Himself, not the disciples. They had only to be there, to look upon Him as He preached to the crowd, to listen to what He said, to allow Him to live His vocation without disturbing Him with their need for rest, without wearying Him by their continual temptation to swerve Him from His mission, to dictate to Him how He should carry it out. For the temptation of disciples, including ourselves, is always to desire to follow Christ, but to dictate to Him where He should go, what He should do and say, or rather not do and say.

As a bottom line, I would like these conferences this year to aid us in setting ourselves aside for a time with Jesus, in order to *re-position* ourselves, once more and more profoundly, there where our vocation fills our life with meaning, and therefore with truth, beauty and peace.