

WITH CHRIST

1. I want to be with you

I have thought out the Chapters of this Monastic Formation Course as a continuation of the five Chapters held during the online course of last May, which treated the topic “Resurrection and renewal,” and in which I want us to be provoked by the question about the meaning and truth of our vocation that St. Bernard constantly asked himself: “*Bernarde, Bernarde, ad quid venisti?* – Bernard, Bernard, why have you come?” He would put himself this question, letting himself be interrogated in his turn by the same question that Jesus asked Judas in Gethsemane: “*Amice, ad quid venisti?* – Friend, why have you come?” (Mt 26:50), a question that St. Benedict cited in chapter 60 of the Rule to make the priests who want to enter the monastery reflect about the truth of their intentions.

At the end of the Chapters of the Online Course I reached the point of focusing the permanent renewal of our Christian and monastic vocation on a verse of the second letter of St. Paul to Timothy: “The saying is trustworthy: If we have died with him, we will also live with him” (2 Tim 2:11).

I pointed out that In the original Greek and in the Latin translation – “*si commortui sumus, et convivemus*” – this phrase is even more concise and we could translate it as follows: “If we co-die, we co-live.”

I added: “What does this mean? Mainly that our resurrection and renewal imply death, a passage through death. At the same time we understand that the essential thing for living out this paschal journey is to be with Christ, is communion with Him. This means that to rise again, to renew the situations of death in which we find ourselves, we must first of all begin by living our death with Christ, by living our situations of death with Christ. The path of renewal is, with Christ, to cross through every condition and situation of death that our human condition as sinners involves. Before the resurrection, we must receive from the Risen One the grace of being able to die with Him, of living our death with Him.”

I concluded by saying: “The secret of the renewal of everything, then, is not to lose, not to refuse, not to neglect communion with Christ in every experience of our life. In trials we should never worry mainly about changing our life and situation but about living them with Him.

The question, then, that we must always ask ourselves in every moment of crisis in which life fades away is a single question: how do I remain with Christ, how do I stay with Him, how do I walk with Him through whatever I am being asked to live through today, now, at each instant? How do I live with Him the trial I or we are passing through?

It is precisely in this way that the monastic life is *per se* a way of renewal and resurrection. For the monastic life, from the very beginnings, is entirely organized toward choosing and welcoming communion with Christ in every moment and situation of the day and in each step of life.

How often, however, our reaction to the moments of crisis and death that we pass through, personally and as a community, is to look for every kind of solution instead of running back to communion with Christ, to which our vocation is wholly dedicated and for which it offers us every kind of help: life in the monastery, the rule, the liturgy, the sacraments, the Word of God, fraternal communion, the authority that guides us.

The seeds of renewal that we need are already contained in all that which the Church and our charism offer us constantly for welcoming the presence of Christ, up to the point of being able to die with Him in order to live now and always with Him.

The new thing that Jesus wants to make in us and among us is his friendship, which embraces our whole life to the point of death and resurrection.” (Online Course, Chapters of the Abbot General, Chapter 5)

It is from this central point that I would like to begin again, seeking to go more deeply into it with you. If communion with Christ is not the center of our concern and our effort with our life and vocation, we cannot but lose ourselves and let ourselves be dragged off by everything and everyone to live a life that is empty, that does not respect the ultimate desire of our heart and the meaning and purpose of the gift of our life and vocation.

A few days after the Online Course I left for Vietnam for two weeks in which I visited about ten monasteries. Among them was Chau Son Nord, the only monastery that occupies its original buildings, with a beautiful church in neogothic style from 1936. There I found three inscriptions that came to confirm the meditation that has accompanied me for a while on the topic of why we have come to the monastery.

The first inscription is painted above the door that leads from the cloister into the church. It says, in Latin: “*VOLO TECUM*,” that is, “I want to be with you.” This phrase struck me because it summarizes the ultimate reason why, not only for our going into church for prayer and the Eucharist, but the ultimate purpose for which we enter into life and then into the Christian community, into the Church, into the monastery, and in every form of Christian vocation. We come, we enter, we join because *we desire to be with God, with Christ*.

This is the deep desire of our heart, the structural desire of our heart, that desire that St. Augustine described in an unsurpassable way: “You have made us for Yourself, Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you” (*Conf.* 1.1.1). “*Volo tecum*” really describes the desire for God that does not find satisfaction except in communion with Him. We are not made for God, or to desire God, but to *be with God*, for communion with Him, with Him present in Jesus Christ.

The essentialism of the Latin formulation, “*Volo tecum*,” which implies the verb “to be,” is like the first words of babies, who quickly learn the word “want,” because it

expresses well their thirst and hunger to be satisfied by milk, by food, but also by the people who love them. The baby says, “want mama,” “want papa,” because deep down their heart does not admit distinction or distance between their desire and what they desire. They do not even say, “I want,” because they do not distinguish between their “I” and the desire to be with mama and papa. In fact, babies who get neglected, to whom everything is given except the presence of their parents, are wounded at the root of their heart and often for the rest of their lives never know what they want. They desire, and desire, but do not know what, and so they attempt everything, try everything, without criterion, without judgement, without ever embracing the one who truly loves them. Until they meet the one who reaches their heart, bringing them the face of the Lord, He for whom we have been made.

See, by writing on the door of the church the words “*VOLO TECUM*,” the first monks of Chau Son Nord understood that when a monk goes into church to pray, in a certain sense he incarnates the whole of humanity, lost and dispersed far from the awareness of its own heart, made for God.