

2. Having come to be with Him

When Jesus looks with compassion on the crowds because they are like sheep lost without a shepherd (cf. Mt 9:36), it is really the disorientation of the human heart he is thinking of. He sees that their hearts do not know the direction of their desire, no longer know what to want, are no longer aware of what they truly desire. Like babies they say: "Want, want, want...!" but they do not know whom they truly want. Jesus knows perfectly well that all hearts desire Him, have been made to meet Him and to be with Him. But how to help the vast crowd of humanity to reach him, to receive in Him the full joy of their heart? He does not set up barriers between the heart of man and his presence. He cries out to all: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest!" (Mt 11:28).

What a mystery! The whole crowd was there in the desert following Jesus, athirst for his word, for his miracles, but Jesus sees in the desire of all those people something like a final dissociation between what He was giving and Him who was giving himself. In this he saw that they were like sheep lost without a shepherd. For this reason he asks for prayer to the Father to send workers into the harvest, ripe because they were all there for the gifts of Jesus but not yet to be with Him, to find in Him the Bread of life that truly satisfies the heart made for God.

"VOLO TECUM – I want to be with You." This is basically the truest, simplest, and most universal response that each of us should give to the question *"Ad quid venisti?* – Why have you come?" Christ himself is the essential goal of our vocation, of every Christian vocation, of the vocation of every baptized person; but which for the monastic vocation is the exclusive goal, to which all else is subordinated, for which all else is renounced. St. Benedict is very clear about this, in fact, at the end of the Rule, at the end of chapter 72 in which he summarizes the essential points of the monks' life, and exclaims with a strong and clear voice: "Let them not prefer absolutely anything to Christ!" (RB 72:11). The issue is not not preferring anything to an idea, to an ideal, to a doctrine, but to a Presence with whom to be, with whom to live out everything. Because, Benedict adds right away, it is exactly the presence of Jesus and communion with Him that "leads us all together to eternal life" (cf. RB 72:12). Being with Jesus means in fact being with Him who is "the way, the truth, and the life" of our life (cf. Jn 14:6).

"VOLO TECUM – I want to be with you." This is the simplest and purest expression of our heart's desire. It is the truest and simplest reason for which each of us comes to the monastery or follows Jesus in whatever other form of Christian life. There is the one who is called to be with Jesus by following him in married life, in the world of work; there is the one who is called to be with Jesus in the ministerial priesthood, in the missionary life; there is the one who is called to be with Jesus without a particular vocational form, but perhaps accepting a form of solitude or a difficult and exhausting life, for example in sickness. Visiting the imprisoned I found people for whom the prison sentence was revealed as an occasion of encounter and communion with Jesus lived out with an intensity that is a strong reminder for us monks and nuns too.

This purity of intention in responding to the question, “Why have you come?” is not so much an issue of acquired virtue, but of truth in living out our own humanity. I’ll explain what I mean. Entering the monastery or following and serving the Lord in other forms of consecrated life, in the ministerial priesthood as well as in family life, for the simple reason of wanting to be with Jesus does not demand an extraordinary capacity, a particular spiritual maturity, except that one consent to one’s vocation by listening to the deep need of our heart. Before calling us to a particular form of vocation and mission, Jesus calls us to be with Him to respond to the thirst of our heart that is made for Him, made to be always with Him. In fact, when he describes the call of the apostles, St. Mark says: “And he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) *so that they might be with him* and he might send them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons” (Mk 3:14–15). Before calling us to complete a mission, Jesus calls us to be with him. The form and the mission of a vocation are only the consequence or the radiance of the grace of being able to be with Jesus.

The authenticity of a vocation needs to be verified on this point. Certainly, we often follow a path because we feel drawn by the form of a particular vocation, by what a vocation enables us to live, to do, to become. But a vocation is truly authentic if sooner or later we realize that what truly drew us was not the form of the vocation, which can maybe be taken away from us or can become in time tiresome or less attractive, but its substance. And the substance is always being with Jesus, communion with Christ.

Certainly, we are always tempted to attach ourselves to the superficial things to reassure ourselves. We think we can find greater security in the things we can control than by abandoning ourselves to a personal relationship in which we must take account of the other’s freedom, beyond also our own freedom. Often we prefer to base our vocation on what we do for Christ instead of on Christ himself. It is in this sense that St. Benedict advises the abbot not to occupy himself too much with “transitory, earthly, and passing things” instead of with the salvation of souls (cf. RB 2:33).

It is not always easy to maintain the awareness that the monastery is essentially the “house of God” (RB 31:19, 53:22, 64:5), and hence the place in which to be with Him, and not an institution that has other aims that end up putting the relationship with the Lord off to the margins of daily space and time. It is significant that St. Benedict demands that in the oratory of the monastery one not make or set down anything that is not consecrated exclusively to the worship of God, to prayer, to communion with Him, either communal or personal (cf. RB 52). Temporal reality, legitimate too like work, must not obscure our communion with God. It is rather the communion with God that must illuminate temporal reality.