

3. I am with you

“VOLO TECUM – I want to be with you!” By what is this desire of the heart to be with God stirred up? Or better: how does this thirst for God, which is constitutive of our heart, reawaken and become conscious in us? Why do we feel drawn to be with Christ and recognize that this is the fundamental desire of our life?

All this is possible, all this happens because “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn 1:14). We become aware of being made to be with Him, of wanting to be with Him, *because He came to be with us.*

In the Church of Chau Son Nord, the monk who enters through the door on which is written *“VOLO TECUM,”* finds himself in the monastery church and runs into another inscription, just below the tabernacle of the altar, which says: *“ECCE VOBISCUM SUM OMNIBUS DIEBUS.”* It is part of the phrase that Jesus says to the disciples at the end of the Gospel according to Matthew, before ascending into heaven: “Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Mt 28:20).

The inscription is arranged in such a way that the verb, *“SUM,”* that is, “I am,” is found in the center, right below the tabernacle, as if to underline the reality of the Lord present in our midst. In fact, as he ascends into heaven, Jesus does not say to the disciples: *“I shall be* with you always, to the end of the age,” but *“I am* with you...”. The Eucharist is the real presence of the Lord, here and now. For a presence to be real, it must be present now, present in the present, in the present that is the only real dimension of time. The past and the future are not real except in a memory or in a hope that inserts them into the present. Jesus is present eternally in our midst, and the proof, the substance of this presence is his Eucharistic presence, mysterious but real.

See then, the monk, that is the human being who carries in his heart the desire, often unconscious, to be with the Lord, when he gets into the church, as a sacred building but above all into the Church as a community of believers “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone” (Eph 2:20), runs into a surprising mystery. What is it? That Christ is already present, that Christ is already there, truly there, expecting us, full of desire to meet us and to satisfy our desire to be with Him that we carry in our heart from our very conception.

So the man realizes that if his heart says *“VOLO TECUM – I want to be with You”* it is because before this desire arises in us, and before we come to the point of expressing it, Jesus is already present and tells us: “I am with you always! I am here to bring fulfillment to your desire to be with me!”

Before we desire to meet God, God desires to meet us, to the point that he creates us to meet him, that he “makes us for Himself,” as St. Augustine says, so that we can meet him. God’s desire to be with us is the flame that kindles in our heart our desire to be with Him.

But why does God desire this? On the altar of the church of Chau Son Nord, to the right and left of the tabernacle, are written in large letters two other words that deep down explain everything, tell the whole reason for and meaning of this appointment and this meeting between the desire of God’s heart and ours, which

corresponds to Him in going to Him. These words are “*CARITAS ET AMOR* – Charity and Love.” And it is as if the “*SUM*” below the tabernacle pertained not only to the phrase, “Behold, I am with you always,” but also connected the two words written above: “*CARITAS [SUM] ET AMOR* – I am Charity and Love.” It is as if the altar were the burning bush of Sinai, which burns without being consumed by the love that God is for us (cf. Exodus 3).

Only by reaching to this burning center of the presence of God in the monastery do we discover *ad quid venimus*, why we have come; we discover why we have listened to a calling and what we were attracted to by the voice of the Lord. We have come to live in communion with a God who is Charity and Love, a God who remains present in our midst in the eternal act of giving his life for us by dying on the cross and rising victorious over the sin of the world. From Adam onward, sin is a refusal of communion with God, a refusal that distances us and separates us from Him. But in Christ crucified and risen every distance is annulled and it is enough to say, “I want to be with you,” to find oneself in the presence of God, of a God who is “with us” even before we realize it, like the disciples of Emmaus who, when they open their eyes, realize that Jesus was with them for the whole journey, and if he disappears from their eyes it is precisely to bring them to believe that his presence remains with us every day, to the end of the world, in the broken bread of the Eucharist (cf. Lk 24:13–35).

It is like when Zacchaeus, the dishonest tax-collector of short stature, feels drawn to see Jesus as he passes on the road of Jericho and so climbs a sycamore. Unexpectedly he finds himself the object of special attention on the part of the Lord. Jesus lifts his gaze toward him and calls him by name: “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today” (Lk 19:5). Zacchaeus probably was not aware that, wanting to see Jesus at all costs, even climbing up a tree like a little kid, he had expressed the cry too long hidden in his heart, his personal “*VOLO TECUM* – I want to be with You.” Jesus sees his heart, hears this cry, and tells him: “Zacchaeus, what are you waiting for? I am here for this reason, I am here to be with you, to stop at your house so that it become a temple of my presence and of the communion of sinful man with the merciful God, who since Adam left the earthly paradise has not given himself rest until he finds him, until he leads him back into communion with Him.”

So ardent is God’s desire to find himself face to face with the human creature, that instead of having Adam and Eve return to the lost paradise, He exits from paradise to go transform the dwelling of sinful men into paradise. The ill-reputed house of Zacchaeus, like that of Matthew earlier (cf. Lk 5:20), becomes a space in which the Lord converses on friendly terms with sinners.

It is thus that the presence of Christ transforms the world.