

26th Chapter of the Abbot General M-G. Lepori OCist for MFC – 25.09.2014

Here we are at the last Chapter. We have followed a topic that we will always be able to deepen. It is a little bit like what St Benedict said at the end of the Rule with regards to the Rule itself (RB 73:8). I am aware that these Chapters, as everything I say and write, are only the minimum, they are just enough to get you started on a journey, as well as awaken your awareness. The more I go ahead in my pastoral ministry, and the more I understand what is the best way to improve the lives of our communities and each person, by starting with ourselves, I see that the best way is to sow seeds that the "Lord of the harvest" puts in our hands. He puts them in our hands, not so we can eat them like peanuts, but so that we can throw them straight onto the ground. In the parable of the sower, it is as if the sower is not responsible for the land. He did not prepare the field. Rather, it almost seems that he throws the seeds without looking where they are going. He throws them to the wind and he does not know if they end up on the street, on the rocky ground, among the thorns, or on good soil (cf. Mk 4:3-8). Certainly, the sower in his heart desires and wishes that all the seeds will end up on good soil, but it is as if he does not have the right to think this, it seems as if his boss is a little crazy, and asks him to throw the seeds without looking where he throws them.... So the sower hopes and prays that the wind will carry the seeds to the right place, where they will land on good soil. For this reason we always pray to the Holy Spirit.

But perhaps Jesus also wanted to allude to the goodness of the Father who sows the Word, the gift of the Son, the Gospel, for everyone, everywhere. Perhaps the Father also wants the seed to arrive on the road, among the stones, among the brambles, so that even from there he would like the seed to bear fruit. In fact, he sent the Son to everyone. And when He came to the ground of the Gentiles which was stony and full of brambles, He had a better welcome than on that ground that had been prepared and plowed for centuries which was that of the chosen people. Even the parables of the wedding feast teach us that the guests that the Father had invited and prepared did not come, so the wedding hall was filled with people who could never have hoped to be invited to the wedding of the Son of the King (cf. Lk 14:16-24).

Thus, even with these Chapters, I have tried to throw them to the wind of God, and only He knows where and how He will be able to bring forth some fruit. My only desire is that they help at least a little to make us more sensitive to the essence of our vocation, which is the essence of human life: the grace given to us without measure to be able **to live in Christ for everyone**; the grace to be able to live everything in a communion of heart with the Lord, who makes every aspect and circumstance of life an inexhaustible newness for us and for the world.

The mysticism of life in Christ is the essence of the whole consecrated life, of the Christian life. And it is important to cultivate it and to remind ourselves about it, because today more than ever, there is a great danger that we live our vocation as a form but without content.

This is a danger that has always threatened each generation. But what greatly threatens the new generations is that they are being formed by the culture of the image, of virtual reality, of communication without relationships, of hedonism; and with little communitarian experience in the family and in society, in a large vagueness of generational relations. Pharisaism or hypocrisy, however, has accompanied and accompanies the entire history of the Church since the time of Jesus, as have the weeds which are always mixed in with the good wheat. Perhaps it takes new forms, but it is always formal.

St. Paul, writing to Timothy expressed this problem in a perfect way. He is speaking about the human decadence at the end of time, and he makes a list of all the vices. Then at a certain point he defines the type of religiosity that will come to dominate. He says it is a people who "make a pretense of godliness, but deny its power" (2 Tim 3:5). Literally it could be translated: "They have the form of godliness, but they deny its inner strength - *ἔχοντες μὴ μορφωσιν εὐσεβείας τὴν δὲ δύναμιν αὐτῆς ἠρνημένοι* - *habentes speciem quidem pietatis, virtutem autem eius abnegantes*".

The strength of godliness, the *dynamis* of godliness, is precisely a strength that comes from within, an inner strength. It is precisely that which springs up in us when our heart puts mysticism in the first place, that is, life in Christ, the love of Christ. Remember that the first Cistercians wanted "to live devoutly in Christ" (2 Tm 3:12), thus they renounced all in order to put importance on godliness and its inner strength, its substance. St. Paul reminds us that a godliness of form, a formal godliness "morphological," external, does not have substance, it is not alive, and it is not the source of life. It is not a "force - *dynamis*", that is, it has no purpose, it does not move anything, it does not generate anything, it is not creative. Monastic life involves many forms of godliness; it is itself a form of godliness, of religiosity. But it is only a form of life if the form is at the service of inner and radiant vitality, only if the form builds up the substance. The forms of Christian life and godliness should not be mollusk shells, but skeletons for mammals...

Let us try to be sensitive and vigilant about this, because if we live our vocation as a formal godliness, sooner or later we will find ourselves empty, arid, barren, and very sad. This is why so many abandon their vocation, or even worse, they remain faithful only to the form, but inwardly they are always looking for escapes and compensation!

Mind you, we are and always will be inconsistent with respect to the vocation to respond to the love of Christ, and Christ knows he has called poor sinners to Himself. But at least we should be humble! Let us not transform the forms that are given to us to educate and support us and convert our frailty into the uniforms of victorious soldiers who enter Rome under the arch of triumph!

To think that formal godliness is sufficient, that it expresses everything that is pleasing to the Lord, is a serious mistake, because life is at stake. It is the error of the Pharisees whom Jesus strongly condemned. For this reason, during this series

of Chapters I have tried to insist, until you are bored, on the spousal relationship with the Lord that should and could animate everything, which is the essence of all Christian forms, which is the Divine Breath that can restore life to all the parched bones scattered in the valley of death described by Ezekiel (37:1-14).

Let us think back again to Jesus' meeting with the rich young man. He was a very religious young man, who observed all the commandments. But he felt that formal observance was beginning to make him feel dry and empty. Observance was an end in itself, it was not lived for the love of Someone. Jesus then offers a breath of life that could animate everything in him, even his formal observance of the commandments. It is not so much the need to leave all his wealth that is important, because Jesus was only asking him to "make room" in his heart and in his life for a greater wealth. The breath of life that Jesus offers to the young man is his look of eternal love that gives and asks for an eternal communion of hearts. "Then Jesus looked intently at him, loved him and said to him, 'One thing you lack: go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and then come, follow me'" (Mk 10:21). It is as if Jesus said, "See how much I love you and that's why I want fullness for your life, for your heart, so that you do not miss the essence, the substance of life and godliness! Leave everything in order to have it all! Come with me! Stay united with me forever!"

The young man refuses the breath of life, and returns again to his formal, empty, barren, sterile and sad godliness.

This breath of new life is what I have tried to meditate upon with you during this month; it is this breath of new life that comes only from the Heart of Christ and that calls to our heart; this breath of new life comes from the gaze of Christ and calls for our gaze. It is only this breath of life that fills the form of our vocation with vital substance, as it filled the form of Adam's body molded from the earth with life. Christian spousal mysticism is the soul of our religious godliness.

In these past weeks, I have visited the beautiful basilica of Saints Cosmas and Damian many times. It is an inconspicuous church, because it is hidden among the ruins of the Roman Forum, and in 1947 they removed the facade and moved the entrance.

But in the apse of this basilica there is a beautiful mosaic of the sixth century, which is about the same time as St. Benedict. At the center of the mosaic is Christ in glory, with Peter and Paul, Cosmas and Damian and other saints. In the drum below, 12 sheep who represent the Apostles are pointing towards the center where Jesus Christ represented as the Mystic Lamb stands on a rock from which flow four rivers: the Pishon, the Gihon, the Tigris and the Euphrates. In Genesis (2:11-14) these rivers come out of the Garden of Eden to flow toward the four cardinal points. The Lamb, therefore, seems to be at the center of the world, and from him flow the living waters of the new creation, the living waters of the sacraments, of the Gospel, of grace. The Lamb is Himself the sole source of the four rivers that give life again to the desert of the world.

Now, in the Book of Revelation the person who is invited to the wedding of the Lamb is called blessed:

"Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunder, shouting:

'Alleluia!

The Lord has taken possession of his kingdom,
our God, the Almighty.

Let us rejoice and be glad,
and give him the glory,
for the wedding day of the Lamb has come;
his bride has made herself ready.

It was granted her to be clothed
with bright, pure linen.'

The fine linen is the righteous deeds of the holy ones.

Then the angel said to me,

'Write this: Blessed are those who have been invited
to the wedding feast of the Lamb!'" (Rev. 19:6-9)

The Bible and Revelation find fulfillment in this invitation to the wedding with the Mystic Lamb. The last page of the Book of Revelation is like a return to the Song of Songs, where the bride and Bridegroom want and promise the nuptial encounter: "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.' And let everyone who hears say, 'Come.' And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift. ... The one who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus." (Rev 22:17,20)

The whole of Christian life is a wedding invitation, an invitation to unite oneself to the Bridegroom, to Jesus Christ. This is the essence of every form of godliness. Without communion with Christ, everything becomes like a big wedding celebration, but, without the presence of the bride and bridegroom. Christ has come to fill all human experience with the fullness of that encounter and communion with Himself. This is Christian mysticism.

As at the wedding in Cana, what is human becomes a divine experience. At that wedding feast the bridegroom was in charge of the wine. In fact, the man who directed that feast called the bridegroom to complain that he served the lesser quality wine before the better quality (Jn 2:9-10). By procuring the wine for the wedding feast, it seems as if Jesus has taken the place of the bridegroom, that He has become the Bridegroom of the wedding. So the human wedding feast has become the wedding of God, the wedding with God. And it is Mary, who at Cana as well as beneath the Cross, reminds God himself and humanity (in the servants) that the hour of the wedding of the Lamb has come, which is a miracle, that asks for our faith and obedience, which is an experience of fullness and joy without measure.

Considering the Mystic Lamb in the apse of the Basilica of Saints Cosmas and Damian, it was neither the rock, nor the four rivers, nor anything else that impressed me. What impressed me was His gaze. If you have time go and see it.

It is a Lamb who fixes his gaze on each person who looks up at him. It is a gaze full of tenderness and desire. It almost seems that he has rivulets of tears coming down from his eyes.

"Jesus looked intently at him and loved him..." (Mk 10:21)

Our gaze towards Christ will always be unfaithful and inconstant. But His gaze will always remain on us; his gaze will always flow like a river of tenderness towards us, and we can always start over from there, answering with "just a glance" in order to live with faith and zeal the new life in Him and for all.



The end of the Course is also a time of gratitude: to God first of all, but also to all those who have consecrated their time, fatigue and competence for a good outcome of this Course. We are very grateful to Agnese, to P. Lluç, to P. Mainrado, to Piotr, to the Sisters Daughters of the Heart of Mary who have labored in the kitchen and in the laundry room. We are grateful to all the professors, in particular to Salvatore for his cultural guidance, to the interpreters, in particular to those of our Order who have generously made themselves available and to their communities who have conceded to renounce their presence in community, these are: Sr. Aline, Fr. Francesco, P. John, Mother Matilde, Mother Eugenia, Sr. Marina. To the four great translators of my Chapters who have daily worked and sweated for many weeks, that is, Mother Eugenia, Annemarie, Eileen and Sr. Michaela. We are grateful to those who labored for the Liturgy: P. Mainrado, P. Galgano, Fr. Agostino, Don Gerardo. And we are grateful to each one of you for the services which we have reciprocally given which contributed to a climate of fraternity, prayer, listening and silence during Course.

A good 28 among you are finishing the Triennium this year. The experience of the Course has created bonds of friendship which will remain even though you won't see each other; but they will give a depth to the communion of the monastic family throughout the whole world, in the Church and for the world. Thanks be to God for everyone and everything!