

4. “Peace be with you!”

«Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, “Peace be with you!”» (Jn 20:19)

This verse alone would suffice for us to understand that peace within us, among us and in the entire world is the gift of the Risen One, the gift He paid for with his passion and death on the Cross. Peace is the core of the truth Christ tells us of and gives us. The Risen Jesus is present among the disciples to say, “Peace be with you!” Peace is the essence of the word that Christ tells us, of the word that Christ, the Word of God, expresses among us, the essence of the Gospel. And Christ tells us of His peace through the breath of the Spirit, «And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the holy Spirit!”» (Jn 20:22). And after this breath, Jesus gave the disciples the mission to forgive sins, the ministry of reconciliation, “Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.” (Jn 20:23)

Everything is given to the Church to allow us to live in a fraternal communion in which Jesus is present and speaks to us, giving us peace in a reconciliation which is stronger than everyone’s sin, stronger than our divisions, a reconciliation which frees us from sin to live in a communion of love, the gift of the Spirit of the Risen One, the Spirit of the Father.

From this we understand that when St. Benedict institutes the life of the monastery by asking us to seek and pursue peace, in reality, he is only asks us to look for Christ who has died and risen again for us and to follow Him in his love, animated and always reanimated by the breath of the Holy Spirit.

We can neither seek peace unless we seek Jesus Christ, nor pursue peace unless we follow Him. When we lack peace within us and among us, and we must admit that we lack this often, the real question to ask ourselves is how can we return to a more intense relationship with the Lord, to a more intense recognition of His presence, to listening more intensely to His word. St. Benedict organizes the whole of the monastic life to the service of this, to help each one of us and the community to live completely and constantly this intensity of relationship with the Lord, who is present among us and says to us, “Peace be with you!”.

Fundamentally, it is a question of prayer, of cultivating in the heart and in the community a prayer which lives this intense relationship with Christ.

In the Angelus of 21 January 2024, Pope Francis opened the year of prayer in preparation for the Jubilee of 2025, asking, precisely “to intensify prayer to prepare us to live this event of grace well and to experience the hope of God.”

What does it mean to intensify prayer? We understand that we need this, but often we reduce the intensity to a question of *quantity* rather than *quality* of prayer. The

whole monastic tradition, essentially, wants to cultivate in us the intensity of prayer so that, like a flame, we can transmit this to the world.

During this last Lent, I would often meditate on a passage from the Passion according to Luke, where Jesus “having entered into agony, prayed more intensely and His sweat became like drops of blood falling to the floor” (Lk 22:44). I would ask myself what Jesus praying more intensely meant. The Greek term used here is “*ektenesteron*” which means precisely “more intensely, with more tension.” It made me think of what Benedict asks us to do at the beginning of the Rule: to implore the Lord to bring our vocation to fulfillment with very insistent and intense prayer, “*instantissima oratione*” (RB Prol 4).

Jesus had just told the apostles who had followed him in Gethsemane, “Pray so as not to enter into temptation.” (Lk 22:40). A little after having begun to sweat blood dripping to the ground, He went to the three disciples He had chosen to stay with him, and finding them asleep, he woke them, saying, “Get up and pray so as not to enter into temptation!” (Lk 22:46)

Jesus would have wanted the disciples to share in the intensity of His prayer. Not because He needed them, but for their sakes, so that they might not enter into temptation, or rather so that they might not enter alone into temptation, without the support of God, without entrusting themselves to the Father as Jesus had done, thus receiving from the Father the consolation, strength and peace to endure the Passion and die on the Cross. The peace with which Jesus comes out of prayer in Gethsemane is impressive, even if the worst was yet to come. But by that time, He had received from the Father the gift of a profound peace in obedient and trusting abandon to the latter’s will.

Intensity of prayer does not demand particular qualities or efforts but simply that we should put into our prayer the desire and the need which burn in our heart but which we often suffocate through laziness or negligence, or because we are distracted by a thousand other things. Intensity of prayer is a question of consciousness of who we are and of who the Lord is, a question of relationship. Prayer becomes intense if we really put ourselves into it, just as we are, together with everyone, friends and enemies, who are part of our life, and if we put ourselves in front of God, of a God who is present and waits for and listens to us always, just as the Father always listened to Jesus.

We are called to pray like Jesus in front of Lazarus’s tomb, «And Jesus raised his eyes and said, “Father, I thank you for hearing me. I know that you always hear me; but because of the crowd here I have said this, that they may believe that you sent me.”» (Jn 11:41-42).

He did not only say this so that we might believe, but so that we might pray like Him, because we believe by praying and we pray by believing, i.e. entering into the intensity of His relationship of love with the Father, and also in the intensity of His relationship with others, as was His relationship with Lazarus, Martha and Mary.

Without Jesus's intense prayer, we cannot follow Him in the vocation and mission that He entrusts to us, whatever this might be. Without this prayer, we cannot become instruments of Redemption, announcers of His Gospel and of the Kingdom of God. Without this intense prayer of Jesus, we cannot be peacemakers.

The way in which St. Benedict asks the community to welcome all the guests coming to the monastery is illuminating. "Above all, let them pray together and thus be united together in peace. The kiss of peace is not given until prayers have been said, to dispel the illusions of the Devil." (RB 53,4.5).

Even here, we can only really be together when in truth. But truth which does not divide is a peace asked for to God and is a fraternal communion which we must ask the Lord for, always welcoming Christ, so that we may say in every encounter and occasion, "Peace be with you!"

St. Benedict also asks the brothers of the same community to relive constantly this type of hospitality which requires real peace among us. In Chapter 4 of the Rule, he encourages us "not to give a false peace" (RB 4,25). Certainly, he is thinking above all of the kiss of peace before Eucharistic communion (cf. RB 63,4), but he also wants this truth in the exchange of peace always to reign in our relationships, in the same way as the communion of life and of hearts we receive sacramentally in the Eucharist. In all, we are asked not to believe it is possible to live in fraternal peace without asking Christ for this and without accepting this from Him.