

## Resurrection and renewal

### 1. At the origin of renewal

We have expressed the theme of this year's Online Course in a rather broad way: **"I make all things new" (Rev 21:5) – How can Christ renew everything, and how can we open our monastic life to this renewal?**

And we have added an explanation of this theme: "With this theme we ask ourselves about the truth of our vocation – *ad quid venisti?* – in order to be true disciples of Christ: 'If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free' (Jn 8:31–32)."

When a theme is expressed in a broad way, the reason is mainly the awareness that, in us, this theme is more a question than a response that has already been found, is more an inquiry than a claim of already possessing the solution. We would like this course to help us above all to focus on a need that we all feel, in our communities and in the face of situations and choices that often disturb and disorient us. In various somewhat absurd situations in the life of the Order, with the members of the Abbot General's Council, we have understood that it is truly urgent to ask ourselves together some fundamental questions about our vocation, to confront with clarity the spreading weakness, but also to sustain the seeds of good and of life that are always present, sometimes evident and bright, but often hidden and not appearing in plain view, and the noise with which problems, difficulties, and evil are manifest.

Obviously all this is not a problem internal to our Order or our Orders and Congregations, nor is it even just a problem within the Church. It is a global situation of our time that questions and excites us all. For this reason we have asked for authoritative help from two professors whom we already thank for their readiness: Fr. Carlo Casalone, SJ, who will help us deepen our understanding of the challenge of new technologies on the anthropological and spiritual level, and Dr. Nina Heereman, a biblicist, who will help us deepen our understanding of the biblical and mystical roots of our vocation by way of the Song of Songs.

My task is to introduce each day of our course with a brief chapter that goes more deeply into the theme, particularly starting from the Rule of St. Benedict and from our monastic experience and tradition. I consider it most important to explore more deeply with you the question "*ad quid venisti?*", the question that St. Bernard asked himself from his very entry into the novitiate to return ever anew to the beginning, to the origin of his vocation, as if to renew oneself one had always to begin from the top, always needed a new start.

Certainly, when he was asking this question, St. Bernard had in mind both the Gospel passage in which Jesus asks it of Judas and the passage of the Rule of St. Benedict that cites this phrase of Jesus's to remind the priests who asked to enter the monastery not to presume to get out of the demands of monastic life. Let us meditate then mainly on these two texts, in chapter 26 of the Gospel according to Matthew and in chapter 60 of the Rule of St. Benedict.

In the passage of Matthew we find ourselves in Gethsemane. Jesus has just called three of his disciples, Peter, James, and John, to follow to stay near him while he lives out his spiritual agony, which also involves his body, making him sweat blood. "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me" (Mt 26:38). It is as if he called them to follow him so close that they could stay with his soul, could accompany him in the deep sadness of his soul, so deep that Jesus defines it as "even to death."

When I made solemn profession in 1989, I put on the commemorative image exactly this phrase of Jesus: "Remain here, and watch with me," because I understood that this describes the heart of the monastic vocation: the point in fact is to bind oneself to a place, to a community, with our vow of stability, to "remain," to "dwell" until death where the Lord prays and offers himself to the Father, watching with Him in communion of love.

For Jesus and his disciples, Gethsemane had always been the garden reserved for prayer, for intimacy with God, and for their fraternal communion in silence and meditation. Jesus withdrew there, far from the crowds, to rest in the Father together with his disciples. It was sort of their cenobitic monastery. If, at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus distanced himself also from his disciples to pray to the Father in the night and in deserted places, with time, perhaps after a disciple had finally asked Jesus to teach them how to pray (cf. Lk 11:1), Jesus chose, at least when he was in Jerusalem, to share these retreats with his disciples, along with the place he loved to withdraw himself to. Perhaps one can say that, in the Garden of Olives, Christian monastic life began, dwelling together to unite ourselves to the prayer of Jesus Christ.

But this is also why Judas knew the place and knew that Jesus could be found there at night, undefended and surrounded only by his disciples. So it was the best place to capture him. St. John begins his account of the Passion by saying precisely this: "Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, for Jesus often met there with his disciples" (Jn 18:2).

It is in this sense then that we can understand the meaning of Jesus's words when he receives the kiss from Judas, who betrays him: "*Amice, ad quid venisti?* – Friend, why have you come?" (Mt 26:50). In the current versions there are various translations of this saying of Jesus. We are using the translation that St. Benedict took up from the Vulgate: "Friend, why have you come?"

In this saying of Jesus to Judas, there are a few elements it is important to reflect on. Especially the epithet “friend.” The Greek term *hetairos* is used in the New Testament only by Matthew in four passages of his Gospel, which it is worth the trouble to look at briefly.

In the parable of the workers in the vineyard whom a master calls at different times of day to work in his vineyard, when evening comes and he must pay them, he gives them all the same salary, even to the one who worked only an hour. Those who worked all day murmur discontentedly. The master responds to one of them: “Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?” (Mt 20:13-15)

In the parable of the king who sends out invitations to the wedding feast of his son, in Matthew 22, the first ones invited do not want to come, and actually mistreat and kill the servants who invited them in the name of the king. In the end, the king has all those invited whom the servants can find on the street, no matter if good or bad, so that the hall can be filled. When the king goes to see the guests, he finds one who does not have a wedding garment. The king “said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?’ And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ For many are called, but few are chosen” (Mt 22:12-14).

Let us note that in both cases the title “friend” does not correspond to a bond of friendship or personal affection. It is rather a term with which a superior reminds a subordinate that the relationship with him, born from his own initiative – like giving you work when you are unemployed or inviting you to the son’s wedding feast without your having a right to be there –, has some established rules that must be respected. In both cases, like when Jesus will say to Judas, “Friend, why have you come?” there is between the two persons a relationship crisis, something is not working, there is a reason for discontent compared to when their collaboration began.

But how did the relationship begin? This is an important point for understanding Jesus’s phrase to Judas. The relationship was born on the initiative of the one who now calls the other “friend,” an initiative that expressed a choice, a sort of preference, a free call that the person now called “friend” seems not to remember or to be betraying. The man called to work in the vineyard the first hour of the day forgets that he was unemployed, that he would have remained without work that day and without a just salary of a day’s work if the master had not called him. He forgets that he had the privilege to work thanks to the master who sought him out, saw him without work, and called him into his vineyard.

The man invited to the wedding feast of the king’s son has forgotten that he did not deserve this invitation. But above all he has not given it the importance it deserved. He accepted because he wanted to eat and drink, but he did not care at all about the wedding of the king’s son. That is why he came without putting on a garment suited

to a wedding feast. He betrayed the privilege that the king accorded him gratuitously, without any merit on his part.

So, both these men failed to respond in an adequate way and with gratitude for the call they received. They were invited through the benevolence of a master and of a king, and in their manner of responding they forgot who called them and what he called them to.

This lack of correspondence between the call and the response is expressed also in the fourth passage of the Gospel according to Matthew that uses the term *hetairos*. It is when Jesus says: “But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn’” (Mt 11:16–17).

Here too: the little rascals call their “playmates,” inviting them to respond to what they propose, but the others react in a way that is incoherent with the proposal, or do not react at all: they play festive music, and they do not dance; they sing a sad song and they do not strike their breast to express contrition.

There is a kind of disappointment, for the non-correspondence to what is offered. It’s like giving a present to someone and receiving an indifferent or even hostile reaction. We understand then that what is really at play, behind the parables, is Christ who calls us to follow him by offering us his friendship.