

Loved, we love



Dearest brothers and sisters,
after a very intense year in the life of the Order, of the Church, and of the world, the approach of Christmas makes us feel the need to gather together in spirit and in prayer around the Lord born for us and always present in our midst.

Sign and instrument of unity

When the Son of God was born in the manger of Bethlehem, immediately there gathered around him the poor and the rich, the saints and the sinners, the wise and the ignorant. Everyone felt drawn by Jesus and more united to each other.

This is the nature of the Church's unity: the communion among us is the immediate consequence of communion with Christ. But the unity of the Church is not exclusive, because through it Christ draws to himself all people, all peoples. In fact, the Church is "a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race" (*Lumen Gentium* 1).

The Church is not such in some ideal way, but is such through us, through her members. The nature, vocation, and mission of the Church are the identity, the vocation, and the mission of each of the baptized. To be signs and instruments of the intimate union with God and of the unity of the whole human race is the fundamental vocation and mission of each of us. Our vocation as the baptized is to serve the Church, or better: to be Church as a sign and instrument of communion with God and of fraternal communion with all.

This coincides with the discipleship that Christ asks of every baptized person. When Jesus chose the twelve apostles he did so "so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach" (Mk 3:14), that is, so that they could cultivate an intimate friendship with Him and from there go out on mission to gather humanity into friendship with Christ.

As Pope Francis recalls with force, passion, and compassion in the encyclical *Dilexit nos*, "on the human and divine love of the Heart of Jesus Christ," the main thing is to cling to

the Lord's Heart in order to experience his ardent love for us and for all. The Heart of Christ draws us to himself and at the same time encourages us in the mission of every baptized person, which is to share with all the fire of his love.

A great heritage

When I saw cited in the Pope's encyclical so many of our Cistercian authors and holy mystics, like Bernard, William of St.-Thierry, Lutgard, Mechthild and Gertrude of Helfta, first of all I felt pride, but then I asked myself: But do I live out, do we in the Order live out, this precious spiritual heritage? Do we live out this intense and deep friendship with the Lord? How does his Heart, which loves us infinitely, transform our lives?

Perhaps we read our fathers and mothers with intellectual and spiritual interest; but what do we make of their testimony and spirituality in our life, in living out our vocation?

Of course, the ideal of these saints is high, is sublime, is mystical. But this does not justify us, because these very authors, like the Pope does too, remind us that Christian mysticism is not an unreachable peak, but rather the acceptance of a friendship that Christ came to offer us by descending all the way to us in our fragile human condition. That is where the point is to let ourselves be loved by the Lord and to love him for this tenderness and mercy of his.

In reality, our fathers and mothers in the faith and in our vocation remind us that, if we want to follow Jesus truly, we must focus on his love. Everything gushes forth from his pierced Heart, culmination of the redemptive Passion and of the revelation of the mystery of God. Even when risen, Jesus will begin to manifest himself by showing this wound and breathing forth onto the disciples the Holy Spirit who gives life to the Church, Bride of the Lord and Mother of the reborn human race of the children of God the Father (cf. Jn 20:19-22).

Loved, we love

I continually meditate on and cite a basic phrase of a letter of St. Bernard's: "*Amati amamus, amantes amplius meremur amari* – Loved, we love, and by loving we merit to be loved more" (*Letter 107*).

The first two words are enough: "Loved, we love." In these words is stated everything about God and about man. God the Trinity could say just this about Himself: eternally and infinitely loved, we love eternally and infinitely. In the Trinity everything is loving and being loved, without any difference between the two movements, in a coinciding, in a total contemporaneity between loving and being loved which is in the end the nature of eternity, of that instant of endless love in which God lives, because in God love is eternal, an eternal and total circulation of infinite love.

When we meet Jesus Christ and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, the love of God comes to touch our heart and begins for us a story of love without end, a relationship of eternal communion. Christ shares with our heart the experience of being loved, through his gaze, his word, his acts. He does it especially through the Church, the Christian community, that is, all the people who share with us this being loved by God, loving him and loving each other as He loves us. This is the mysticism of communion that we are all called to live out, each with his or her own gift, temperament, qualities,

but also with his or her limits and weaknesses. Every vocation in the Church is a form of this experience. Each person's mission consists in transmitting this experience to all those whom we meet.

Monastic life, as indeed our father and mothers transmit it to us from the very beginnings, is called to live this out with particular concentration, to be a sign of the heart of every Christian life, of every vocation and mission.

This vocation should not frighten us or make us sad because we are so incoherent and occupied by other things, for our charism is an inexhaustible spring like the love of God, a spring that remains always within reach of our thirst and of the thirst of all humanity, which is so lacking in awareness and experience of being loved for ever and of being able to love for ever. It is enough humbly to recognize that this is what we thirst for.

Even Deuteronomy comforts us in this, when it tells us: "For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it." (Dt 30:11-14)

Often we do not abandon ourselves to the grace of God because we think that one must climb to heaven to conquer it, when instead God has already descended into our midst to grant it to us. Is this not what we should contemplate and receive with joy in the Child of Bethlehem? Is this not what we are reminded of and given in every Eucharist?

The joy of Jesus

It is by discovering the love of God already wholly revealed and offered that we can experience the joy of Christ.

Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit, exclaiming: "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will" (Lk 10:21). Thus he revealed to us the nature of his greatest joy. Not so much the joy of receiving a gift from the Father, but of being himself given by the Father to the little children, to the poor, to all. True joy is not receiving something for oneself, but being given by God.

Discovering that one is a gift of God is the greatest grace of life. A grace that coincides with the discovery of one's vocation and mission, which, in whatever form and state of life, is an insertion into and conformity to the gift of the Son that the Father makes to the world. To live this out, we are granted the Holy Spirit, that is, the Love in which the Father and the Son love each other, the love with which they, being loved, love. It is the gift we receive with Baptism and Confirmation, in the Eucharist and through all the sacraments. It is the gift that the Word of God reveals to us and the Christian community enables us to incarnate in and among ourselves.

When we perceive this mystery, we no longer preoccupy ourselves with what we can receive from the Church, from our community, or from the vocation that we embrace, because we understand and experience that the Church, the community, and the vocation are instruments through which God grants our life with Christ to the world.

We are progressively transformed by the Spirit into the gift of the Son that the Father makes to the world, notwithstanding our resistances and failures.

There cannot be a greater use and realization of our life than this, for the whole world needs only Christ, and if we do not give Him then it is useless to give anything else.

That this being taken and given can be a fullness of joy –we cannot understand that, but we experience it if with poverty of heart we abandon ourselves into the hands of God who, like the bread of the Eucharist, takes up our nothingness, breaks it to share it and give it without measure. It is the joy of the saints, the joy of the martyrs, our joy that we often taste especially in small things, offering ourselves in the simple services and attentions to others that the Lord asks of us in our daily reality.

Without this readiness to be taken up as a gift, sadness grows in the heart, dissatisfaction, complaint, which make life sterile, even if perhaps one manages to accumulate riches and worldly honors.

Today more than ever it is important to help each other live like Jesus in order to rejoice like Him, bearing fruit for the Kingdom.

Synodal identity

At the end of the Synod of Bishops, after a month of listening and dialogue with so many representatives of the Churches spread throughout the whole world, we were given the encyclical *Dilexit nos*. The fruit of the Synod should not be a better organization of the Church, which will always have its human poverties, but a more conscious and decisive mutual help for living out communion to incarnate Christ's mission of love for humanity.

During the Synod I often thought of the synodality lived in community and among communities, which St. Benedict with the Rule and the first Cistercians with the *Carta Caritatis* handed on to us. But in this case too I asked myself: What have we made of this precious heritage? We must admit that we have not always lived it out well, and hence have not adequately given witness to the Church.

But synodality, too, like the mysticism of the Heart of Christ, is not only a good practice: it pertains to the charismatic identity of the Order, as it pertains to the identity of the Church.

Identity is like the soul of a body. The point is not to recover a lost object, but to revive organs and muscles that are more or less atrophied in us and among us. The grace of God can always do this, like when in the vision of Ezechiel, a whole valley of parched bones reconnect themselves at the breath of the Spirit and reacquire the living flesh and soul so that the people of God can rise (cf. Ez 37:1–14).

We need this new vitality of the Body of Christ that we form, in order to be the leavening in the world of a people of God that would unite humanity in peace and love. The whole world needs to be loved in order to learn how to love. Otherwise the experience of being hated, all too widespread today, will produce nothing but hatred. Suffering humanity cries out: "Hated, we hate!" Christ sends us to announce that, "Loved, we love," even our enemies.

Pilgrims of hope

When we think of the synodal nature of the Church and of our communities, we should not think especially of the organizational aspect. Synodality is essentially a question of reciprocal love that pours forth from the awareness and experience that God loves us first. Synodality makes it visible among us that we are loved by God in order to love like Him, thus creating among us a communion capable of bringing the whole world to Christ.

I like to illustrate ecclesial synodality with the episode of the four friends who carry a paralytic to Jesus so that he can heal him (cf. Mk 2:1-12). They make a “journey together,” something synodal, by faith in Jesus, to bring themselves and their sick friend into the Savior’s presence. Certainly, while they walk they talk to each other and listen to each other, seeking consensus and harmony among themselves, to share the weight of the sick man and the effort of carrying him all the way to the roof of the house in order to lower him down in front of Jesus, each one offering the strength he has and asking for help for what he does not have. Among them communion, love, friendship become a work, become flesh, and for this reason becomes clearer to themselves, to the paralytic, and to whoever sees them. And it is this reciprocal love that, in the end, enables Christ to manifest himself to them and to all as the Savior and Redeemer of man.

It is thus that we are called to live out synodality among us. The paralytic to carry together to Jesus represents each of us, but also the whole world, sick, divided, and lost humanity. Only Jesus can save us all, by pardoning our sins and healing us from what keeps us from walking in a new life.

The most beautiful experience I have in the Order is not when everything is going fine, but when we can together take care of one who is not doing well. The synodality of care is already fullness of communion, more fruitful than every success.

In a few weeks the Jubilee will begin, an extraordinary time of grace that the Holy Father has put under the motto: “Pilgrims of hope.” The path together of those who carried their needy friend to Jesus is an icon of what it can mean to be pilgrims of hope. Do we want, brothers and sisters, to be such together and, in this way, during this jubilee year to receive the grace of living always in this way, renewing the life of the Order and of the Church?

Perhaps my Christmas Letter has slowly turned into an Easter letter... But, in the end, why is Jesus born at Bethlehem, if not to offer his life even until death on the Cross and rise to share with us the gift of his life, which makes the gift of our life rise?

May this Christmas enable us, with joy and hope like the Virgin Mary did right away, to share the Love that loves us freely and that enables us to love each other with gratitude!



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