

General Chapter of the Cistercian Order

Ariccia, October 21, 2022

Concluding Discourse of the Abbot General Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori

Dear Sisters and dear Brothers,

We have come to the end of our General Chapter. We are certainly tired, because the work has been so vast, and not a few health discomforts have accompanied us or at least besieged us during these days. We have also been tried by moments of tension among us, as it is right and even necessary that there be during a General Chapter, because it is not a "Roman holiday," but a construction site, that of the continuous edification of our Order. The building site is always open, always active in every congregation, in every community, in each of us, because the work to which we are dedicated is the coming of the Kingdom of God in history. The work is to follow Jesus Christ who in his Body, which is the Church, obeys the Father's plan of love, traversing the whole history of the world, of humanity, to lead us all together to eternal life (cf. RB 72:12). This work is animated by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of communion in love, who grants us the power to act according to truth in charity (cf. Eph 4:15).

The fraternity we have seen growing among us in these days is proof that the Lord has heard our request for the gift of the Holy Spirit more than we could have hoped for. Something greater than our desires and efforts has taken place among us. He has worked and works grace, the grace of fraternal fellowship, wisdom, and gladness that never ceases to surprise us. God knows how and always wants to work among us and in us more than we are capable of. This is the charism, the gift of grace that God never regrets giving us. In these days we have thus renewed the experience that the Cistercian charism that unites us, also with the other members of the Cistercian and Benedictine Family, remains alive and is continually renewed, not because of our own merit, but because God is good to us and to all, with us for all.

Therefore, the attitude we are always called to let burn in us is gratitude toward God and toward one another. Gratitude is the feast of God's children toward the good Father, because "eternal is his mercy" (Psalm 135), because ever anew he welcomes us all, embraces us all, and by holding us close to him he holds us close to one another, even and especially if we were divided, separated like the two sons in the parable of the merciful father (Lk 15:11-32), divided in feelings, in judgments, divided by our mistakes, our frailty and especially by the pride that always undermines our hearts. In the experience of the father's embrace, fraternal unity is recomposed, reborn, resurrected, like the sun that dissolves the night and the fog that hid it from our eyes.

We experienced this embrace of the Father in our meeting with Pope Francis on October 17. It was palpable how the meeting with him, his welcome and charity, his word, renewed in our hearts and on our faces the joy of being together, of walking together. The Pope reawakened hope in us, the hope that the evil one wants to steal from us. "The essential thing," the Pope told us, "is not to let the evil one steal our hope! The first thing the evil one seeks is to steal hope."

Yes, the great temptation for us, as for the whole Church, is to lose hope, to live out our frailties as something that extinguishes the charism in us. But also, to lose hope by living with pride the vitality that is also given to us, as if it were our own merit and not a grace of God at the service of all. St. Benedict invites us, at the culmination of all good works and virtues, to "never despair of God's mercy" (RB 4:74). The unshakable foundation of our hope, the very solid rock on which hope is built, is the mercy of God, the tenderness of the Father, the humble meekness of the Heart of Christ, the Consolation of the Spirit. The fathers and mothers of our vocation, like St. Bernard, call us with beauty and energy to find the firm hope of faith in God's charity for us, to find it in the friendship of God that we can always find again and that regenerates and nourishes the friendship among us.

It is with this hope that we must start over again from the General Chapter, to bring it to all our brothers and sisters, to all those who in so many ways are entrusted to us in our communities or in the pastoral, educational, hospitality, and mission works that are entrusted to us. Even all the documents we have been able to elaborate or renew, to the support of the life of the Order, of its good governance, of communion between congregations and communities, of formation and the ability to grow or diminish with paschal joy, all these documents would be of no use if they did not sustain our hope in the Spirit "who is Lord and giver of life" (Creed).

It is to keep hope alive that we are called to walk together, helping one another, encouraging one another, correcting one another if we take wrong or dangerous paths. It is to keep hope alive that we are called to listen to one another, unafraid of our differences. By listening to one another with truth, we always discover that there is a deeper factor of unity and friendship among us than anything that can divide us. Jesus in our midst is always stronger and truer than the evil one who wants to divide us. Let us not tire of experiencing Christ's victory in our midst, in the midst of our communities!

But I realize that since I listened to Pope Francis' address to us in the October 17 audience, which I do not tire of rereading, I realize that it is his words that are the most beautiful and useful synthesis of our Chapter. The Pope beautifully highlighted our charism, our vocation, our mission. He showed us all the beauty of the road we are asked to travel together.

The Pope reminded us that communion is already in itself the goal of the journey, a destiny that we reach right away, because it is a road that follows Jesus, the source, the substance, the consistency, the fulfillment of the Trinitarian communion that is given to us by Him and in Him. The Pope reminded us of something fundamental: that only by looking at Christ can we walk together.

Playing on the "subtitle" given to our Order, that of "common observance," Francis called us back to the mystical heart of our common vocation: the contemplation of Jesus Christ lived in all the steps of life's journey.

Pope Francis told us:

"Common observance, then, like walking together behind the Lord Jesus, to stay with him, to listen to him, to "observe" him... To observe Jesus. Like a child who observes his father, or his best friend. Observing the Lord: his way of doing things, his face, full of love and peace, at times indignant in the face of hypocrisy and closed-mindedness, and also troubled and anguished at the time of the passion. And observing together, not individually, in community. Each one doing so at his own pace, certainly, each one with his own unique and unrepeatable history, but together. Like the Twelve, who were always with Jesus and walked with him. They did not choose themselves, he chose them. It was not always easy to be in agreement: they were different to each other, each one with his own "edges", and his pride. We are like this too, and also for us it is not easy to advance together in communion. And yet, this gift we have received never ceases to amaze us and bring us joy: to be his community, as we are, not perfect, not uniform, no, not like that, but convoked, involved, called upon to stay and walk together behind him, our Master and Lord." (Audience of 10.17.22)

Pope Francis' entire address will have to accompany us in the coming months and years, we will have to meditate on it more deeply together, precisely as a synthesis of what this General Chapter has given us a chance to experience and understand. The Holy Father's audience is an integral part of this General Chapter and is the heart of it. It is as if Peter came to speak among us, confirming our faith, renewing fraternal charity among us and rekindling our hope. As soon as possible we will make the Pope's speech available in all the languages of the Order. And I am grateful to the Lord and to the Church to be able to resume the journey as abbot general, so imperfectly, carrying with me this new mandate as the Pope has expressed it to us, but also enriched by the pastoral tools that we have worked out together in these days.

Let us walk together! Together with all the differences that make our company rich and beautiful. There are differences that divide, and these we must get rid of with the Lord's help. But there are differences that enhance the symphonic splendor of our Order, and these we must value, love, and esteem in each other with gratitude.

And gratitude is also my last word at the end of this General Chapter. Gratitude to each of you who are here, and also to those who could not come or had to leave early. Gratitude to all the workers in this great construction site of the General Chapter: first and foremost Fr. Procurator Lluç, then the members of the preparatory commission, of the various commissions on the various topics discussed, to the moderators, to Br. Andrew of Pra 'd Mill for his tireless work as secretary! Gratitude to the secretariat, Agnes, Piotr, Annemarie, and to the translators (Annemarie Schobinger, Fr. Lluç, Fr. Stephen of Dallas, Fr. Andrew of Phuoc Son, Fr. Guilherme of Claraval, Fr. Gregory of Jedrzeow, ...), to the interpreters! Gratitude to the experts who accompanied us! Gratitude to those who made our liturgy beautiful! Gratitude to those who welcomed and served us in this House! Gratitude to Dom Vladimir for the medical care with which he helped protect us and also cure us from Covid!

I am also filled with gratitude for the all new Council that has been given to me, but not forgetting gratitude to the outgoing Councilors who have served the Order for so many years, especially Mother Hildegard, Dom Vladimir, Mother Kandida, to name but three!

Gratitude also for the new Synod we have elected in which so many young strengths will be able to renew the synodal dynamism of our journey.

Gratitude to the Virgin Mary who has protected us with her intercession, and to the saints who have especially prayed for us in these days!

Above all, let us always thank God, who is faithful to his gifts and who will never cease to call and send us to live out the Cistercian charism in the Church and for the Church!

As the Pope asked us: let us look at Christ, let us observe Christ! Let us not keep our eyes fixed on ourselves, and let us not scrutinize one another! Or if we do, let us do so in order to recognize Jesus present in each of us, He, the true splendor of every face, of every life; He, the true joy of every encounter among us and with everyone!