

The Mercy of God

An inexhaustible meditation

During this jubilee year, the course for superiors takes for its theme the mercy of God as it is seen in the light of the last tool for good works in Chapter 4 of the Rule of St. Benedict: “And finally, never lose hope in God’s mercy” (RB 4:74).

The mercy of God is a theme we will never exhaust, for the mercy of God is infinite and eternal. We will spend eternity contemplating the mercy of God, and thanking him for it, because it was through his mercy that he created us, and only through his mercy that he created us for eternity, to remain eternally with him, in him. God is love, God is charity. But for us personal beings, the experience of the charity of God, that is the experience of what God is in himself, is the experience of his mercy, that is, the experience of the fact that God loves the miserable, the sinners; that God loves those who are not worthy of his love; that he loves those who do not love him. Even in Paradise we will not be able to contemplate and praise the love of God unless as his mercy. His mercy is his love, when contemplated by our eyes, by our hearts, that is, if you can say it this way, by our point of view. Because even in Heaven we will still be ourselves; we will be in God, and yet still distinct from him, in a personal relationship with him. As the Book of Job says, “But as for me, I know that my Vindicator lives, and that he will at last stand forth upon the dust; whom I myself shall see: my own eyes, not another’s, shall behold him, and from my flesh I shall see God” (Job 25-27).

For this reason, I think we should begin our work these days from a contemplative position, by looking at God and contemplating his mercy. We do not have to understand what the mercy of God is, or think about it, rather we want just to look at it, contemplate it; and then we will understand it, or rather we will allow it to reveal itself, to show itself, and we will see that it is a light which “enlightens the eyes” (Ps 19:9), which helps us to see better, to understand reality better, the reality in which we live and the reality that we should desire and ask for.

The mercy of God is a light that enlightens everything, the whole of reality, absolutely everything, the good and the bad. We do not understand, for example, how evil, the suffering of the innocent, can be reconciled with a God who is love. But it is as if mercy were a light which illumines even the shadows, even the darkness. But the mercy of God illumines reality if it remains alight. We often search for light in our meditations on the Word of God in prayer. But we do this as though we were recharging the batteries of a flashlight. Once the batteries are recharged, we pull the plug out and allow the flashlight to illumine by its own power. We pretend that the light we receive from God has become our own light capable of illuminating reality for us. And thus we

continuously fall back into a new darkness, and we complain to God that he does not give us enough light.

God however is the light of a presence. His word is light in the act of speaking to us, in as much as we hear it now from him. And his mercy is the light of his love which illumines our reality now, which we have to look at as the light of God on the reality we are now living. The light of God on the whole of reality is his loving gaze which values every creature, even and above all the most miserable.

Thus, the problem is not about possessing the light, but looking at God, of remaining with our eyes fixed upon him, contemplating now and in every moment his eternal mercy. In Christ, God made himself visible (cf. John 1:18) so that we could look at him, and it is by looking at Jesus that we have the light of mercy we need in order to understand reality, however it may be, and to be in a right relationship with everyone and everything, in a relationship that is just and true, as God wants.

Contemplate in order to show

The revelation of Jesus Christ with respect to the mercy of God is never a conceptual discourse but rather the transmission of an image, a scene to watch. Even in those passages of the Gospel defined as a “sermon” – like the “sermon on the mountain” in the Gospel of Matthew – we find practically every time a parable, an image to look at and from which to deduce also a theory, a theology, a morality, a law. In order to explain the Providence of the Father, Jesus says: “Look at the birds in the sky... Learn from the way the wild flowers grow...” (Mt 6:26-28). And on the basis of what one sees of God’s way of acting and being, Jesus teaches us to understand how we can and should live, in such a way that our life too is able to become an image of God, a possibility of seeing God, and therefore a possibility of consenting to being the image of God in action. The human being is created in the image and likeness of God, and holiness consists in reflecting in ourselves what God is, in transmitting to others the image of God which must reach its perfection in every human being. And perfection is mercy: “Be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:48). “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Lk 6:36).

Jesus, I was saying, speaks in images. By becoming incarnate, he is himself the Word made Image – made Icon. It is like in theater where a text, a word, becomes an image as it is performed. This does not take away the word, but the word is transmitted through the image, the scene. It is interesting to read carefully Luke 15, the chapter in which we find the three parables on mercy: the lost sheep, the lost coin and the prodigal son. But one has to read carefully also the introduction to these three parables, the context in which they were given and the reason for which Jesus offered them: “The tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to him, but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain, saying, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’ So to them he addressed this parable. ‘What man among you having a hundred sheep and losing one of them...’” (Lk 15:1-4).

Let us note that everything begins with a real image, a real scene: Jesus is approached by all the sinners and he speaks with them. We do not have the discourse Jesus gave to them, but rather the image of him who speaks and of the sinners who draw close to him and who listen attentively. And the Pharisees help us to describe the image we see: "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." This means that everyone sees the Word of God in a relationship with tax collectors and sinners, in a relationship of "handing Himself on", because here the Word speaks and is heard, and is in a relationship of communion, friendship and welcoming to the point of sharing the fellowship of a meal, a table and a house.

All of this is an image, an icon, a scene to see, to hear. "The life was made visible" – St. John writes in his first letter – "we have seen it and testify to it" (1 Jn 1:2).

The Pharisees and the scribes protest against this image. They think it is ugly and inappropriate. They are like critics of a work of art, a movie, who give a negative judgment and seek to disqualify the beauty and truth of the image, of the scene, trying to stop its transmission. All of the works of Vivaldi were forgotten for almost two centuries; that is, they stopped transmitting them, they stopped passing them down visibly, acoustically, until they were rediscovered in an archive. A work of art, if it is not transmitted, does not live. It can rise again, but so long as it is not transmitted it is not alive.

The scribes and Pharisees, in the time of Jesus and in all times, tried everything in order to break the transmission of the living image of Christ, or they simply disrupted it, clouded and distorted it, just like totalitarian regimes disrupt the televised images from free countries. Transmission means tradition. The tradition is an image of Christ that is transmitted in a living way, and the Church has this essential task of transmitting forever and always the living image of Jesus which reveals the Father. For this reason, the Church is faithful when it is faithful to the Gospel, that is to the original image of Jesus which is always reproduced as at its first proclamation.

I emphasize this because when we ask ourselves about mercy we experience in ourselves and in our communities, it is important that we are aware that what is at stake is transmitting the living image of Christ, as he appears in the Gospel and as the Church proclaims him. The Gospel should not remain for some centuries in an archive but rather should always be transmitted in a living way, and this is our responsibility as baptized, as religious, as superiors. The greatest crises in the history of the Church happened when the Gospel was "archived".

So, here Jesus is seen in the act of welcoming sinners and eating with them. He is already an icon of the mercy of God, but the scribes and Pharisees do not recognize him as such. For them, God, if he is God, does not stand among sinners. God for them stands only among the pure, the perfect, the observant.

How does Jesus respond to this refusal to recognize in him the mercy of God? He continues to show, and he shows even more; he increases the transmission of his own

image; he adds more light; he brings into greater focus what his person and his word are showing. He does not justify himself, but he shows more. For this reason he does not give a discourse but tells some stories, some scenes to look at, to imagine.

So, if as superiors of communities we ask ourselves about the mercy of God, we should not try so much to understand but rather to *look at* what Jesus shows us by transmitting to us his own image of the Father, the image of the Father that he is when he receives publicans and sinners.

And since we are called to be pastors, let us focus on the first of the three parables of mercy: the parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15:4-7.

Models of life, not legislators

In order to instill in ourselves the right attitude with which we should meditate on this parable, I read to you an apophtegme of Abba Poemen. It seems to me to be very relevant today, in all the cultures in which we are called to be pastors:

“A brother asked Abba Poemen, ‘Some brothers live with me. Do you want me to command them?’ The old man said to him, ‘No, just work first and foremost, and if they want to live like you, they will see to it themselves.’ The brother said to him, ‘But it is they themselves, father, who want me to command them.’ The old man said to him, ‘No, be their example, not their legislator.’” (Poemen 174).

This apophtegme seems to me very important for how we should live these days together here. When I new that one of the presenters was not able to come, I was a little discouraged because I thought that the program would be impoverished and that we would risk disappointing your expectations. But then I realized that this was actually an opportunity for *us* to work in order to help ourselves – something we should always do if the Order truly is a big family of brothers and sisters. We do not need lectures in order to be good legislators, to make good laws or give good orders to our communities, or to know better the best method of government or have the best program for guiding the flock. We are here in order to look together at Christ who reveals to us the mercy of God in the figure of the Good Shepherd, because by looking at Him, by taking Him as our model of life we can live the same gift of life as Him, in Him, and thus be for our brothers and sisters models of life, images of the love of Christ for them, who themselves then go on to transmit to others the living image of Christ. And all this for Jesus, as for St. Benedict, focuses on mercy, on transmitting the mercy of the Father, on receiving for ourselves and transmitting to others the mercy of God which Jesus shows us, demonstrates for us, transmits to us. At heart, the most important thing for us is to help ourselves to deepen and to live in the light of mercy what St. Benedict says above all with regard to the abbot: “*Christi enim agere vices in monasterio creditur* – He is believed to hold the place of Christ” (RB 2:2). What does this mean for us? How should we have this faith (*creditur*: “is believed”) and live it in our community?

Transmitting a law is easy. One can do it even if the law remains closed in an archive for two centuries. But transmitting a life does not depend upon a tradition of archives but upon places of life, a tradition of community, of life in common which is regenerated in the way a family is regenerated. And in this transmission our role as superiors is fundamental, and it is so inasmuch as we are pastors, inasmuch as we are called to be shepherds.

Also fundamental is the help we can give to each other among our different communities. If we forget a law, all one has to do is find the text which reminds us about it. On the other hand, when we lose the transmission of a life, when we lose the transmission of the living image of Christ, then we have to search for it and find it where the transmission of life and the tradition of the Gospel are still alive and experienced. At some time in the past, one tried to preserve the fire from the Easter candle for the whole year in the light of the sanctuary candle. When the light went out before the flame could be transmitted to the next candle, one would go to light the candle at another church that still had the flame from Easter. This is what we are speaking about – we too should help ourselves in such a way to continue the transmission of our charism, with the humility of asking each other for help, of recognizing that certain persons or communities have a flame more alight than our own, and that we can spread it among ourselves so that the whole Order might transmit faithfully the light of Christ, the evangelical image of Jesus as St. Benedict and our Cistercian saints transmitted it.

The well formed superior or formator is the one who enables his brothers and sisters to experience what truly fosters our growth in life. And if the experience is true and deep, it is transmitted by itself with the testimony of our life. As Poemen says to the brother who had just been nominated superior: “Just work first and foremost, and if they want to live like you, they will see to it themselves.” That is, if you have the experience for yourself of a monastic life that is intense, beautiful, humble, faithful and generous, the brothers who want to live intensely will on their own think about following you, to look at you and to live like you.

It is true that often, today perhaps more than a few decades ago, young people ask for “orders” or precise rules which would tell them precisely what to do and what not to do. Because often young people today did not have models of life in their parents and teachers, and maybe not even in their parish priests. They grew up without structures, without embankments, without clear models in front of their eyes. And so they are insecure, and they think that the restlessness of their heart and the drama of human life can be resolved with some precise rules, with some laws.

Even speaking about “models” is complicated today, because for the young people of today the “model” to imitate is always someone that everyone admires, whom everyone dreams of being like, whom everyone envies, but only because of the image one displays, not for that which one truly lives. One is a model on account of what one *has*, not on account of which one *is*. Models are admired like the pagans used to admire the

gods of Olympus: with the knowledge that in reality one will never be like them, and that therefore our life is not actually beautiful or happy. For this reason many people want to believe in reincarnation, hoping that the next time around a happier destiny would fall to us.

We have to take into account this fundamentally hedonistic culture in order to understand how important it is to be true models of life, of real life, of attainable happiness, of an experience of the fullness possible in Christ.

I think about how St. Peter presents this need to the elders of the Church: “I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and witness to the sufferings of Christ and one who has a share in the glory to be revealed. Tend the flock of God in your midst, not by constraint but willingly, as God would have it, not for shameful profit but eagerly. Do not lord it over those assigned to you, but be examples to the flock.” (1 Pt 5:1-3).

Even Peter does not think of himself as a pastor in virtue of some personal quality but rather in virtue of having contemplated the sufferings of Christ, having seen how Jesus is the Good Shepherd who gives his life. For this reason the elders of the communities should not experience their task as a burden, a duty, as if they were the first to receive a set of orders to carry out, rules to apply. No! We are “elders”, we are pastors, because Jesus Christ manifested himself in this way; he showed himself as the perfect image of the mercy of the Father, as the good and beautiful Shepherd who gives life. Jesus is a fascinating model that attracts but that is not an unattainable dream. Christ shows us in himself the life that we can live, the experience that we can have through his grace. It is by looking at the Good Shepherd that we can be “willing” pastors. Pastors grateful to be such, grateful to be able to give away our lives in such a way, like Christ, freely, in a charity that does not look for its own interest. And in the end, St. Peter sets being “examples to the flock” against “lording it over those assigned to you”. Exactly: the lord or master “commands” as we saw in the apophtegme. The good shepherd, on the other hand, is a model. He does not give orders but rather lives a life, a mercy, a gift of self, which are models of life that are transmitted to the brothers and sisters, and which therefore change them in their depths and render them alive. The master with his orders “has done”. The good shepherd, with his example, “makes living”, that is, he generates in others a fullness of life.

It is precisely in the exercise of authority that we prove whether we are or are not models. Why? Precisely because the model par excellence of Christian life is Christ the Good Shepherd who gives his life for the sheep. The opposite is the “hired man” who “works for pay and has no concern for the sheep” (Jn 10:13). The Good Shepherd does not give orders to the sheep, but he guides them, calls them, leads them, nourishes them, brings them to the good pasture, to the springs of living water...

The figure of the Good Shepherd is the image in which Jesus expressed himself, in which Jesus gave himself as a living image to imitate. But the Good Shepherd is not only an image: it is a presence, an experience, a relation of Christ to us and of us to Christ. Jesus does not reveal himself as the Good Shepherd only to teach us to govern

but above all so that we allow ourselves to be loved by Him, guided by Him, cared for by Him – we in the first place. Jesus is not only a model of the Good Shepherd to imitate, but he is the Good Shepherd who pastures us. In other words, we, before anything else, are ourselves sheep, we are lambs, or maybe goats; and only by letting ourselves be pastured by Christ can we become shepherds like Him.

This means that our being shepherds should not prevent us from living a friendship with Christ, as often happens for many superiors who exhaust themselves spiritually in the exercise of their ministry. Because our ministry was given to us as an opportunity to be more attached to the model of the Good Shepherd par excellence.

Pastoral mysticism

Another apophtegme from Poemen comes to my mind. “If Moses had not lead the flocks to Mandra, he would not have seen the one who was in the burning bush.” (Poemen 195).

Pastoral ministry is not just a function or service. It permits us to have a privileged relationship with the Lord, in order to transmit to our brothers and sisters a special love for each one of them. It is the mystery of the final encounter between the risen Jesus and Peter on the shore of the lake: “Do you love me more than these? Feed my sheep!” (cfr. Jn 21:15-17). If we must stand in the place of Christ, represent Christ, we do so not as a substitute but in order to represent, that is, to make visible, the Good Shepherd who is always present, who is always with us. The more we are united to Him in love, the better we represent him to our brothers and sisters.

But this apophtegme suggests to us that whoever exercises pastoral ministry is called to meet the Lord through it. Often superiors have the impression that their responsibility draws them away from a deep relationship with God, that it takes them away from prayer, from monastic spirituality, from a free *lectio divina*, from the tranquility of being able to stand in silence in front of God, without being assailed by preoccupations. Certainly this is also true. But Poemen seems to suggest to us that it is precisely through concern for the flock, through dedication to the flock, that God gives us a mystical encounter with Him in the desert. There is a “pastoral mysticism”, an encounter and relationship with the mystery of God which are given to us precisely in leading and shepherding the flock. There is a “burning bush” which we find precisely because we are leading the flock to the pasture, precisely because we seek the good of the flock, the good pasture for the flock, the water for the flock. Because the burning bush in which God manifests himself to Moses is the first revelation of God as Charity, as Love which burns without consuming, without destroying. The burning bush is the symbol of the mysticism of charity, of God-Charity. And as God makes himself visible, the burning bush is the symbol of the Charity of God as Mercy. In fact, from the burning bush God does not tell Moses that now he can become a hermit but rather that he has compassion on his people; and from the burning bush God entrusts to Moses a flock far greater than the flock of Jethro: namely, the whole people of Israel to free, lead and pasture for 40 years.

“The Lord said, ‘I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry of complaint against their slave drivers, so I know well what they are suffering. Therefore I have come down to rescue them from the hands of the Egyptians and lead them out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey [...]. So indeed the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have truly noted that the Egyptians are oppressing them. Come now! I will send you to Pharaoh to lead my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.’” (Ex 3:7-10).

Pastoral ministry has to bring us to the place where the Lord reveals to us his compassion for his people, for our own community, for each brother or sister, for the people who come to our monastery, or those who should be welcomed, like the immigrants of today. Our activity should itself bring us to the place where God tells us about his compassion, where God himself renders us sensitive to the affliction of our brothers: “I have witnessed the affliction of my people...” (Ex 3:7). It is as if God had said: “Look with me at the affliction of my people! Become sensitive with me to the real affliction of the brothers! Enter into my compassion, become an instrument of it, incarnate it and express it in the ministry I entrust to you!”

The compassion of Christ

Jesus did the same thing. He too came, made himself visible, and made visible the merciful charity of God, his compassionate gaze which sees the affliction of his people, of everyone, and wants to involve us in his mercy, us pastors in the first place.

So it is interesting to note that in Luke 15, the first parable that Jesus gives in order to justify his welcoming sinners, that is, his mercy, is the parable of the good shepherd. The parable of the merciful father in Luke 15:11-32 certainly goes to the heart of the mystery, but the first image of mercy is that of the good shepherd.

Let us therefore meditate on it together in order to discern the fundamental aspects of the mercy which our vocation and mission ask of us as superiors of communities. Every word Luke uses is meaningful and should be read carefully.

“So to them he addressed this parable. ‘What man among you having a hundred sheep and losing one of them would not leave the ninety-nine in the desert and go after the lost one until he finds it? And when he does find it, he sets it on his shoulders with great joy and, upon his arrival home, he calls together his friends and neighbors and says to them, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.’ I tell you, in just the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance.’” (Lk 15:3-7).

Above all let us note that this parable is ultimately a question, a question that directly provokes those who hear it: “What man among you having a hundred sheep and losing

one of them would not leave the ninety-nine in the desert and go after he lost one until he finds it?” (Lk 15:4). Jesus justifies his mercy by asking a question. Many parables and many teachings of Jesus use the same method. Jesus loves to respond by asking a question, that is, by provoking a question within ourselves, making us search for an answer that is already within us, but that we do not see, of which we are not aware, or of which we do not want to be aware. Jesus does not like it when we ask him questions without interrogating ourselves, without a willingness to put ourselves in question. And this is the problem of the scribes and Pharisees: even when they ask questions, it is only in order to put others in question, to confuse others, to destroy the convictions of others – never their own. They are never willing to put themselves in question. Jesus, on the other hand, puts them in question; he has the authority to do it, to ask them questions which oblige them to put themselves, their convictions and their judgment of others in question. In this case, the Pharisees and the scribes had not even asked a question. They had “murmured” about Jesus and expressed a criticism that was a condemnation without appeal: “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them” (Lk 15:2).

“What man among you...?”

Jesus provokes them very directly: “What man (Τίς ἄνθρωπος) among you...?” Jesus does not react as they do. In other parts of the Gospel he will be very harsh in describing the hypocritical attitude of the scribes and Pharisees. Instead, here he offers them a chance to reflect on Jesus’ behavior in light of their own experience, in the light of their own basic humanity, in light of what they too already experience. It is as if he had said: “But you too are like me! In you too, like in me, there is a humanity and a sense of goodness!” Jesus emphasizes something positive in the scribes and Pharisees, and he would like to draw it out of them, make it become more self-aware and active, more important than their theories and preconceptions.

In a certain sense, in order to help us understand how God is, Jesus refers us above all to man, to the human heart. He makes us understand that the mercy of God has already impressed its image and likeness in the human heart. What human being would not search for the lost one of its hundred sheep? It is like when Jesus says elsewhere: “Which one of you would hand his son a stone when he asks for a loaf of bread?” (Mt 7:9).

It is important to understand that the Gospel, and in particular the Gospel of the mercy of God, refers us to a deeper knowledge of ourselves, to a clearer knowledge of our humanity. By revealing to us the God of mercy, Christ reveals man to man; he renders us more aware of our humanity as an image of God.

This is very important also when we think about the formation that we have to secure and to provide for our community, about the teaching that a superior should offer to his or her brothers or sisters. It is not about filling empty vases, but about fertilizing and watering plants in which God has already placed his image, his creative Word, his Spirit.

“...having a hundred sheep and losing one of them...”

God put in us the image of his love which is always a personal love. Even if someone has a hundred sheep, each one of them is important. If one is lost, the shepherd is not consoled by saying to himself: “It is only one out of a hundred. I lose only one hundredth of my goods; it is not serious.” Whoever reasons in such a way does not respect the image of the mercy of God that is sealed in him; he does not respect his own humanity.

And ultimately, he does not even respect the 99 sheep who remain, because it means that each one of them has nothing more than one hundredth of the love of the pastor, that none of them is unique to him, none is a whole – only a hundredth.

For this reason, when the shepherd “leaves the ninety-nine in the desert” in order to go looking for the lost one, this “abandonment” is ultimately an opportunity for all the sheep, for the whole flock. In this way, all of them learn the character of the love of their shepherd, and thus how the shepherd loves each one of them. They see that if one of them had been lost, the shepherd would have left behind the others also for him.

For this reason, when St. Benedict requires in the Rule that one has concern above all for the weaker brothers and sisters, for the “sick” or maybe “rebellious” brothers and sisters, for the *“fratres delicati”* about whom we said much at the General Chapter, it is not in order to ignore the others, but rather in the awareness that it is in this way that a superior truly shows concern for all. Care for the weakest, for the most difficult, is care for all; it does good to all; it helps all to grow. For this reason St. Benedict reminds the abbot many times not to favor the stronger by ignoring the weak, because this becomes a form of tyranny also over those who are doing well – in other words, it is not really a form of love for them: “He should realize that he has undertaken care of the sick, not tyranny over the healthy. Let him also fear the threat of the Prophet in which God says: ‘What you saw to be fat you claimed for yourselves, and what was weak you cast aside.’” (RB 27:6-7; Ezk 34:3-4).

The exercise of mercy always has an appearance of injustice, because it is a love that privileges someone who does not deserve it. God loves more not so much those who merit his love, but those who have more need of it, those who are less loved and less lovable. This is the whole problem for the Pharisees faced with Jesus. They also invited him to lunch, but He seemed to be more comfortable eating with publicans and sinners rather than with them. They were the more intelligent, the more educated in the Scriptures, the more pious and observant; but Jesus preferred to speak with the publicans, to be with them, to pray with them. The Pharisees experienced this as an injustice. They felt as though they had been abandoned in the desert, punished for having been faithful, for not having gotten lost like the others. They saw that the one who acted worse was loved more than they, that the one who had gotten lost was sought with more passion than they.

We should not disregard or underestimate the feelings of the 99 faithful sheep, because God certainly does not call us to love them less than the one who is lost. It is important that we learn from the mercy of God to love the lost sheep in such a way that also the 99 grow in the awareness of being loved in such a way, that God loves as all in such a way.

“...leave the ninety-nine in the desert...”

The 99 sheep were left “in the desert – ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ” (Lk 15:4). This detail strikes me. Clearly, the pastures of Palestine were deserted regions outside the inhabited areas, like the desert of Judea. But I think this expression, which in itself is unnecessary, is mentioned here because it also has an existential, spiritual meaning. There is a “desert”, a solitude, which we have to know how to accept if we want to grow in the knowledge and experience of the mercy of God. It is an experience that is necessary for our spiritual maturity, and for the spiritual and human growth of our communities. In order to participate in the mercy of God, in order to allow God to be merciful toward the whole world, we are asked to accept a mysterious but precious form of abandonment. I think for example about the solitude and interior abandonment that Mother Theresa of Calcutta experienced for almost her entire life. And all this in order to be a privileged instrument of the merciful charity of God, of the mercy of God which sets out in search of the most miserable in those places where no one was going to look for them.

But what is the experience of the 99 faithful sheep in the desert? They are alone because the shepherd went to look for a lost sheep. But where did the shepherd go in order to look for it? He went into the desert. He went forward into the desert and therefore into solitude. The shepherd is truly alone in his search for the sheep. The 99 are all together. The shepherd on the other hand is alone in the desert where he hopes to meet the lost sheep. The 99 sheep are asked, and given the opportunity, to participate a little in the solitude of the shepherd, to participate in the cost of the shepherd’s mercy, to participate in what mercy “costs” the heart of the shepherd, the heart of God. One has not matured, one is not truly faithful, if he or she does not accept to enter into the compassion of the heart of the pastor, into a “suffering with” the merciful heart of the shepherd. When the father in the parable of the prodigal son goes out to look for the elder son, he asks him to participate in his joy over the return of his brother, but in reality he is asking him and giving him the opportunity to participate in his mercy, and therefore to make his own the heart of the father, to feel with him his suffering for having lost his brother. If the elder brother does not accept to share the pain of the father for the loss and “death” of his brother, if he does not “co-suffer” (com-passion), that is, suffer with the father, he cannot enter into his joy over the salvation of his brother, and not even into his own joy, the joy of having always shared everything with his father (cf. Lk 15:31).

A community that does not grow in this is not a community; it is not fraternal, nor a community united in the love of Christ. We have to ask ourselves if we truly form our communities to suffer with us the afflictions of our most fragile brothers and sisters, physically, morally, spiritually.

The monastic vocation seeks out the desert, in one way or another; but if the desert we are looking for does not have this element of suffering with the heart of the Good Shepherd who goes in search of the lost sheep, then it is not a Christian desert. It is a sterile desert.

...would go after the lost one until he finds it...

So the good shepherd leaves the 99 sheep in the desert in order to “go after the lost one until he finds it” (Lk 15:4).

To go after the lost one: This is the great work of mercy, because it is the great work of Christ, the great mission of the Son of God, the work of Salvation that Christ took up until his death on the Cross. It is enough just to think about the end of the encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus the publican: “For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost.” (Lk 19:10).

The Church exists for this mission, for incarnating this mission of mercy. And Pope Francis never misses an opportunity to remind us of this, “whether it is convenient or inconvenient” (2 Tm 4:2), as St. Paul would say.

What does it mean for us “to go after the lost one”? Often we are more like the father in the third parable of Luke 15, in the sense that we prefer to wait for the lost children to return home on their own, and we feel we are merciful because we welcome them. But Jesus asks us also to suffer the task of searching for them. And we know well that there are many lost sheep in the monastery. Physically they are not very far, but interiorly, in their heart, or with their mind, or morally, they have “left” – they are absent, far, lost. Do we search for them? And how can we search for them?

This parable does not go into the details of this search. It only says that it is a search which does not give up: “until he finds it”. And yet that is already an important detail. The search for lost brothers or sisters does not rest until they are found. It is not a search which sets up conditions of time. It ends only when it finds, encounters and embraces the lost sheep. We know that there are brothers and sisters in community for whom it is necessary to search for years, maybe even for the entire time of our ministry as a superior, or until their own death. Often we find these lost sheep only shortly before their own death. Is it worth it? Does it have meaning? Yes, because this whole search, all this wandering in the desert in order to find them, their salvation, all this time is the time of the mercy of God; it is time in which the mercy of the Good Shepherd is acting, and not only on them but also on ourselves and our community, and maybe even on the whole Church and the world. It is all time and energy spent for the preparation of the joy of the Kingdom, their joy and our own, the joy of the whole community, the joy which will be full and entire only “in heaven” (Lk 15:7), “among the angels of God” (Lk 15:10).

It is truly important that we are aware of this: the life spent in search of the lost sheep offers us a fullness of life, because it is in this way that our ministry adheres to the mystery of Christ, to the mystery of the mercy of God in Christ. When we think that our task is fruitful only if everything is going well, if we experience success, if there are no lost sheep to look for, that means that we are not living our mission “to hold the place of Christ” (RB 2:2), having Him alone as our model and program of life. And we always feel frustrated, because, whether we like it or not, we will always have lost sheep to search for. The Lord sends them to us. Sometimes we are tempted to get ride of them, to bring them to the slaughterhouse rather than to their home. This also happens. But that is never a sign of Christian fruitfulness in a community. Because ultimately, the parable makes us understand that the lost sheep for which we search and which we bring back home are the secret to the greatest joy.

...and when he does find it, he sets it on his shoulders with great joy...

There are two moments of joy in this gospel. The first is when the shepherd finds the sheep. Then there is the shared joy, the feast with everyone.

This is Christian joy: a joy of the heart and a joy that is shared. Like the joy of the Virgin Mary: “Rejoice - Χαῖρε!” (Lk 1:28), says the angel of the Annunciation; and then immediately Mary goes to share her joy with Elizabeth. The same word comes up again in the parable of the Good Shepherd: χαίρων (Lk 15:5), Συγχαρήτέ (15:6).

It is a joy that is received and a joy that is given. It is the joy of God, because it is the joy of love. It is someone else who gives it to me, and I give it to others. And Christ reveals to us that this is the joy of Heaven: “I tell you, in just the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents” (Lk 15:7). It is the same dynamic of joy in the shepherd: a sinner who converts gives joy to God, and God communicates this joy to the whole of Heaven, to his “friends and neighbors” who are the angels (cf. Lk 15:10).

Let us note, however, that the one who first shares the joy of the shepherd is the sheep that has been found. The shepherd does not rebuke the sheep, he does not punish it or give it a speech. His joy is too great for this. What do we do when we find someone we love? We embrace him or her. The shepherd does not put handcuffs on the sheep like a thief being arrested, nor does he put a leash on the sheep so that it does not escape again. He puts the sheep on his back. He embraces, raises and carries it. St. Benedict must have meditated a lot on this image because in Chapter 27 of the Rule he recalls when he says that Jesus puts the sheep “on his sacred shoulders – *in sacris humeris suis*” (RB 27:9).

“He sets it on his shoulders with great joy”. Putting the sheep on his shoulders communicates all the energy of the joy of having found it. Joy gives energy to love, to patience, to mercy. We note that the rediscovery of the sheep does not mean rest for the shepherd. On the contrary! I have never put a sheep on my back, but I looked it up and I learned that an adult sheep can weigh between 45 and 100 kg! That is, it weighs just

as much as a human person. With the weight of that sheep on his shoulders, our shepherd now retraces all the kilometers he had traveled alone in order to find it. During this course we will have a meditation on patience, but we can already see that mercy involves “carrying” the other – the other who is exhausted, wounded, afraid. It does not matter if he or she is responsible for being in such a situation. Mercy takes upon itself the consequences of the loss of the brother or sister. But it does so with joy, with a force of love that is the necessary force, and that God gives us, in order to bring our lost brother back home.

To carry on one’s back is a more paternal than maternal gesture. We are not talking about “rocking” the brother or sister but about offering our person as a support for the other in his or her misery and fragility, in order to make the journey together. The good shepherd does not carry the sheep in order to cuddle it but in order to make a journey with it, in order to allow it to return home, to the flock, to the community, in spite of the fault and the misery that had taken it away.

“...upon his arrival home, he calls together his friends and neighbors...”

Our good shepherd is truly untiring! He should be tired after wandering to find the sheep and after having brought it back home on his shoulders – traveling who knows how many kilometers. The home should be a place of rest, to sit by oneself, in peace, to sleep. Instead, he has not even entered the house and he is already calling his friends and neighbors to communicate to everyone his joy: “Rejoice with me!” (Lk 15:6).

The joy of mercy, as I was saying, is always a joy that is shared. It is for everyone. It is never a private joy, because private joy is a suffocated joy. It is no longer really joy at all. It is like putting a light under a bushel basket, as Jesus says (cf. Mt 5:15).

The joy which calls, which gathers others – this is the “Gospel” in the literal sense of the term: it is the “good news”, the happy proclamation. The sheep is saved! It is the joy of Christ crucified and risen: the whole of humanity is saved! It is this Gospel that we are asked to share with our neighbor, our neighbors by acquaintance and affection, that is our friends, or simply with our neighbor because he lives next to us or is somehow near to us. Every human, personal relationship is given to us to share the joy of mercy that saves. And the “home” – which for us is the monastery, like the family or other environments of life for others – is given to us for this reason. Community is given to us for this reason.

The mercy of the good shepherd is therefore evangelization. It makes evangelization coincide with our person; it makes the evangelization of the world coincide with the history of our community, with our daily concern for our brothers or sisters. Being pastors is the ever-new evangelization that is asked of us by Christ, in Christ, in order to cooperate with him for the redemption of the world.