

**Christmas Letter 2019
of the Abbot General OCist**

TO BENEFIT ALL



Dear Brothers and Sisters,
Just before the solemnity of Christmas, on December 23, the exact 900th anniversary of the approval of the *Carta Caritatis* will occur. During this year we have much meditated on and studied this ancient document, which is in reality the birth certificate of our Order. With surprise, and a little contrition, we have realized how necessary it is for our awareness of and for the vitality of our identity, of our Cistercian charism, grafted onto the fundamental charism of St. Benedict.

Now we do not want to lose this reawakening of conscience; we desire to deepen it and keep it lighted, also in view of the next General Chapter. That is, we should not put the *Carta Caritatis* back into our files, perhaps until 2119 when its millennial anniversary will be celebrated... It is pointless to celebrate and study, to organize symposia, if then one does not live it out, if the impulse that the Holy Spirit puts into the foundational texts do not impel is to live out our vocation with more intensity today, in the present situation of the Order, of the Church, and of the world.

Desiring the good of all

For this reason, as the exact date of the 900th anniversary of the papal approval of the *Carta Caritatis* comes nearer, a date that almost coincides with the Lord's Nativity, I ask myself what point we can pause and focus on in order to restart right away the personal and communal path in the light of the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God, our "only true King, Lord, and Master" (CC 1). What in the *Carta Caritatis* should most stimulate us today, such that we sense that it is always urgent and useful for us and for all? What aspect of the *Carta Caritatis* responds with most newness to the expectations and needs of the Church and of the contemporary world?

Perhaps we should focus our attention most on the catholic dimension, in the literal sense of "universal," with which our first fathers conceived of fidelity to their monastic vocation. All seems summarized for me in a phrase in the first chapter: "*Prodesse enim illis omnibusque sanctae Ecclesiae filii cupientes* – Desiring to benefit them [that is, the abbots and monastic brothers] and all the sons of Holy Church."

The *Carta* goes on to explain the realms in which and modalities with which one desires to make explicit and effective this desire for the good of the Order and the whole Church, but I think we must first of all appropriate this desire for the good and its universal reach, because this is like the breeze that can give (and give back) meaning and vitality to all that our vocation enables us and asks us to live out.

A passionate desire

To express this desire, the *Carta Caritatis* does not hesitate to use a rather strong Latin word: *cupientes*. It could be translated with “longing.” The idea is an ardent desire, a true passion, as strong as the passion of love. Such an intense term is not normally used in legal texts but in the passionate writings of people in love.

This word reminds us first of all that every vocation in the Church is never just a trade, a profession, nor even just a ministry, a service, but is a loving desire awakened by the encounter with Christ. All begins with and must always begin again with that fire that the gaze and call of Jesus kindle in our heart, drawing us to follow him. The first disciples who followed Jesus, Andrew and John, did so because they felt in their heart an irresistible desire to stay with him: “Master, where do you live?” (Jn 1:38). They were drawn by his person; and after the encounter, the one thing that they emphasize is not so much what Jesus said to them, or what they did with him, but simply that they were with him: “and they stayed with him that day” (Jn 1:39).

One who feels affectionately drawn by another, who falls in love, essentially desires the presence of the beloved person and their love. One who falls in love desire the love of the beloved person, desires to enter into the sphere of their love. But what is the sphere of Christ’s love?

Loving the Church in the passion of Christ

St. Paul uses wedding imagery to reveal to us how Jesus loves the Church. He loves it as His bride; he loves it to the point of dying on a cross, to the point of totally giving His life: “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish” (Eph 5:25–27).

Jesus calls each of us to enter into his loving passion for his bride the Church. For all the baptized, love for the Church cannot depend on its condition, on the consistency of its members, that is on our condition and our consistency, but only on the Savior’s heart. Whoever does not love the Church does not love Christ. What bridegroom would be willing to have friends who despise his wife?

But we must not forget that Christ loves the Church out of love for the salvation of the world. Christ loves his bride so that, united with Him, she become a fruitful mother of children redeemed by his Blood poured out for all. The Church is the bride of the Redeemer in order to generate the redeemed people, to generate each human being to the new life of being children of God. The Church is beloved of Christ out of love for the salvation of the world, a love that, for Christ, was expressed in the Passion, that is, where suffering and loving were expressed and continue to be expressed to an infinite degree. Only God can love infinitely, but God became incarnate to be able to express his infinite love in an infinite suffering: the suffering of God in human flesh.

The center that unifies and emanates

The Church was born from the open side of Christ, as Eve was from the open side of Adam. The Fathers of the Church meditated on this mystery a good deal. And the first Cistercians seem to have drawn the *Carta Caritatis* from the very contemplation of this mystery that unites charity, the Church, and the salvation of the world. This document's insistence on charity and the salvation of souls is thus centered on the ardent desire (*cupientes*) to benefit (*prodesse*) all the children of Holy Church. This is the definition of the charity of Christ that is expressed in the paschal moment in which he offers himself for the salvation of the world, giving birth from the Cross to the Church, bride of the Savior and mother of the saved.

Our fathers thus invite us to pause and especially contemplate the central nucleus of the Christian mystery, to start over again from this point and live out our vocation as baptized people and monks, expressing in our life the mystery we contemplate. This central wellspring mystery is renewed for us each day in the Eucharist, that is, in the paschal mystery that we are granted to relive in the sacrament, at the center of our life, of daily time, of all of history, and all of reality.

To be aware that our vocation and mission as Christians and monks and nuns always emanates only from this mystery that helps us not to be scattered, to lose none of our life, of our thoughts, of our words and actions, of our efforts. If in monasteries there is often much toil to manage time and activities, to live our human relationships in harmony and mercy, especially to manage the weaknesses in which we seem to sink, this comes above all from a lack of attention to the central mystery of our and everyone's salvation. If, instead, the center is clear and we prefer it, then all that we are and live can emanate it.

Prodesse

The word that we must underline in the *Carta Caritatis*, then, where it speaks of the ardent desire to serve all the children of the Church – and all human beings *per se* are the children of the Church, because the Church is called to be a Mother that transmits the life of Christ to all mankind – the word that defines the fruitfulness of our life and vocation, then, is the Latin verb “*prodesse*,” which literally means to “be for,” hence to help, serve, be useful, be a good for others.

The ardent desire to benefit all is the desire that God has especially given to the human creature, made in his image as Father and Creator, and blessed to be fruitful in generating: “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply’” (Gen 1:27–28).

We are not truly human if we do not desire to transmit life, if we do not desire to benefit others more than ourselves. In Christ we are given to be fully human, fully fruitful through the universal motherhood of the Church, whether through matrimony or in virginity. This fruitfulness is always possible, because it is a fruitfulness of grace, brought about by the Holy Spirit itself who, carrying out the impossible, made the Virgin Mary’s womb fruitful to bring the Son of God to light in our humanity.

Like a grain of wheat

In the current situation of the world and of the Church, and of our communities, many doubt that there is still any possible fruitfulness in our life and vocation. How is it possible to be fruitful by diminishing, and sometimes even dying?

The Church constantly comes to remind us that what is not possible for our own powers and capacities is always possible for the faith and love which, in hope, cast the situation in which we find ourselves into the ground as a seed. What makes even death fruitful is the love with which we cast our lives into Christ’s bridal gift to the Church so that it can generate children of God in the whole world.

But this is not just the secret of the fruitfulness of death: it is above all the secret of the fruitfulness of life. Whoever considers himself fruitful without dying to himself remains sterile, even if in the eyes of the world everything seems to ensure his success.

Jesus’s words about the grain of wheat, a metaphor of his death and resurrection, must always remain our interpretative key for all that we live and especially all that we are called to live: “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor” (Jn 12:24–26).

At the time of the approval of the *Carta Caritatis*, Citeaux had generated twelve monasteries. There were thirteen of them, then, like Jesus and his twelve apostles. They knew they were still small and weak, but they sensed a force that was making them grow, that was pushing them forward. They were aware, above all, in the light of the Gospel, that their success was not tied to their power or number, but was all contained in the desire to give their life for the Kingdom of God. mindful of St. Benedict’s counsel to the abbot, that he must concern himself more with benefitting than with dominating – “*prodesse magis quam praeesse*” (RB 64.8) – their desire was not to win, to conquer spaces of power, but to be of *benefit*, for the Church and in the Church, by sacrificing themselves, losing their lives in the service of Christ, for the life of the world. The life of the world is that all human beings become children of God.

The calligraphy of our charism

Prodesse. We must reappropriate this little word, the only one that can make our life and our communities beautiful, happy, and useful, in whatever circumstances they be found, along with the whole Church, with all its treasures of grace but also its human weaknesses.



On the day of the benediction of the new abbot of Stična, in Slovenia, we could admire what is perhaps the oldest manuscript of the *Carta Caritatis*, preserved today in the National Library of Ljubljana.

The monk who wrote it used many abbreviations, contracting words, perhaps to gain space on the precious parchment. He shortened the word “*prodesse*” into four letters. The *pro* is a *P* in the form of an *X*. It seems like a little man who runs off to perform some mission. Or perhaps it could symbolize Jesus Christ himself, crucified and risen. The *d* seems to look at it and second its movement, pushing the two *e*'s that follow with its foot. The *e*'s of *esse*, that is of *to be*, have the two *s*'s traced above like two accents. They seem like two little flames, like those of the Holy Spirit on the heads of the apostles in the Upper Room of Pentecost. From off of the last *e* a mark reaches out, like an arrow. It gives the word a dynamic opening forward, like the impulse of a race toward a goal. This mark, however, is present in the first *e* too, like an arm that binds it to the second, which does not embrace the first, as I was saying, reaches its arm forward, as if it embrace and serve others. One could say that the verb *esse* – *to be* has been written in a way that expresses ecclesial communion, almost to suggest that we *are* not, we do not *exist* truly without living out a fraternal communion sent to the whole world by Christ.

So, in this medieval manuscript the word “*prodesse*” seems to me to be a drawing of the mystery of the Church, and hence of every Christian community, as it has been realized from the Upper Room of Pentecost on: a communion of persons generated by the paschal Christ and reaching forth in the desire to generate all human beings to divine life.

The Christmas present of a question

Excuse the fantasy of my interpretation. Perhaps I am confusing the calligraphy of a medieval monk with a piece of writing in Japanese characters... But who knows if this monk of Stična, in the time employed to write this small word with care and love, did not also have these thoughts himself, and want to transmit to us, along with the letters traced in ink, the universal and salvific meaning that this word made resound in him.

However, it may be, I think it would be good for us to let ourselves be interrogated by this word today, so small and yet so full of meaning. It would do us good to compare the life and experience of our communities and our persons with this word, in the situation in which they find themselves today, in the time of transition that the Church and all of society is living through, perhaps in the middle of the drama of a political and

social crisis like the one that, for example, our sisters in Bolivia are going through. It would do us good to compare what we live with the ever new freshness of the desire of our fathers to benefit the universal Church and the whole world.

Prodesse omnibus, to benefit all: How does this desire and this vocation judge our often instinctive and perhaps self-referential way of judging our problems, our crises, and of seeking solutions to them? Are we truly animated by this desire for the good of all, or do we think that the solution will be what only helps us? Do we have the faith that poverty, too, weakness, and even death, when lived out in Christ, can benefit the whole world?

Behold, I would like to offer as a Christmas present to the Order this word that has not grown old in 900 years in the archives and libraries, that has remained fresh and ardent even on a manuscript of the 12th century, and to offer it as a question that probes and stimulates us, perhaps just to realize that, truly to benefit all, we need a great charity that only God can communicate to us and that thus we must beg for together, with humility and faith.

How beautiful, how necessary and urgent it is, for all our communities, with all the monks and nuns that compose them, along with all the people united to our charism, that we be able to return to formulating this word with our life, this word transmitted by our fathers, "*prodesse*," as in this ancient manuscript of Stična, contracted and yet entirely stretched and expanded, "like a bridegroom coming from his wedding chamber" (Ps 19:6), that is, like Jesus who is born from the Virgin to benefit all human beings with the gift of his presence, his love, his salvation!

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori, ab. gen." The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Fr. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori
Abbot General OCist