Letter of the Abbot General OCist for Christmas 2025

THE NEWNESS OF CHRIST

Dearest Sisters and Brothers,
With this Advent and the Christmas feasts, the Jubilee Year will conclude, which has certainly granted each of us and each community moments of grace that we treasure for continuing our journey. It has been a year consecrated to hope, a year that saw the passage from the pontificate of Pope Francis to that of Leo XIV. Every Successor of Peter is always a prophet of hope in the Church and for the world. The Pope reminds us to incarnate this prophecy in our life and vocation, so that we can offer mankind, which is so afflicted by grave motives for despair, a horizon of salvation and of new life.

The grace of the Jubilee

During the Course for Superiors of the Cistercian Order, in which the officials of the Dicastery for Consecrated Life truly helped us lift our eyes up to the beauty and hope of our vocation, we lived together a day of jubilee pilgrimage to the tomb of St. Peter. A simple but significant gesture for the journey of the whole Order: we walked together following a bare Cross of wood, sign of the death and resurrection of the Lord, praying and singing in various languages, from Vietnamese to German, meditating on the Word of God, up to the point of reaching the Altar of the Confession of St. Peter. There, singing the Creed, we renewed the profession of our faith and received there together the grace of the Jubilee, also for all our absent brothers and sisters.

Every pilgrimage is symbolic of the journey of our whole life. During that pilgrimage I thought of the journey that we are called to make together so that our Order, united to the whole Church, can be a prophet of hope for the world. While we were processing along the *Via della Conciliazione*, the people were watching us, smiling at us, and recollecting themselves in prayer. It was as if our walking together were a sign of hope for their lives.
Observing the people, in Rome or in the world, I think of the joys and sorrows that hide behind each face. When a sad or happy face encounters us, it is like the other has come to

knock on our heart, asking us if they can come in and share their life with us. Some gazes wound us, because we perceive in them a suffering, a misery, and a desperation in the face of which we feel powerless. They ask us for everything and it seems like we have nothing to offer. But we have Christ, we belong to Christ, and He is not powerless in the face of human need, because he gave his whole self to respond to the outcry of each life, of each heart, to all mankind's thirst for salvation. So these gazes are an invitation for us to live our Christian and monastic vocation with hope, presenting the world's need to God and receiving for everyone the response that is Jesus himself.

United by what we are

But what makes our life capable of giving the Lord to everyone? The experience of our pilgrimage helps us understand this: the people were looking at us, smiling, praying, and making the sign of the cross because we were walking together on the path of following the crucified and risen Jesus, united in prayer and fraternity, on the path laid out for us by the Church and by our charism.

In the last years we have explored more deeply the synodal meaning of the Church and of our Cistercian charism. This exploration is not a theoretical or organizational question; it is necessary for making our journeying together truly a means of bearing witness to the Redemption of each human being. For this reason, the topic that I feel most urgently needs exploring among us is the meaning of our unity.

I recently had to treat this topic at the gathering of the EMLA, the Latin-American monastic meeting, which was held in Salvador, in Brazil. The topic of this meeting was: *That all may be one so that the world may believe – fraternal community for a fraternal world.* I said: "Often communities live as if what united them were more what they *do* than what they *are*. This is a great weakness of monastic communities, and especially perhaps for those that are numerous and young. But we all have the tendency and suffer the temptation to be united more by what we do than by what we are. And when we no longer manage to do very much, to do well, we get the impression that we are no longer anything important. (...) We must help each other, then, never to lose the awareness of faith that what we are is more important than what we do, because what we are, that is sons and daughters of God and brothers and sisters in Christ, if it is lived out in faith, with gratitude and humility, is fruitful through grace and not in virtue of our strength or our power. Our communities are not called to express a human fruitfulness, but the fruitfulness of God, the virginal fruitfulness of Mary, Mother of God and Mother of all, through which the Father begets the incarnate Son and the sons and daughters of God in the womb of the Church." (www.ocist.org; 2025.10.06 AGOCist. IT-Conferenza EMLA, pp. 7-8).

Christ himself is our unity, only in Him and around Him can we live in fraternal communion. For this reason, asking ourselves what unites us, in the Order, in a Congregation, and in every community, is the same as asking ourselves, as St. Bernard asked himself, the motive for which we have come into the monastery: "*Bernarde, ad quid venisti?* – Bernard, what did you come for?"

There is no difference between the reason for our unity and the reason for our vocation, because the center of our vocation and of our unity is Christ himself. Saying yes to Jesus Christ, and in Him to the Father, is the same as saying yes to communion among ourselves.

Incarnating the greatest grace

In this, the Christian communion is called to receive the greatest grace, that of living out among poor sinners the communion that the Son lives with the Father in the gift of the Holy Spirit: "The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me." (Jn 17:22-23)

Being united among ourselves means receiving the gift of the glory that the Father and the Son share with each other, the luminous glory of their mutual love which makes the Holy Trinity an eternal exchange of the gift of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. For this reason, the soul of Christian communion is the very love of God, is the very God who gives himself in our midst and who in us is given to the world. When a community is united, when it lives out a true fraternity, God is present in the world in the light of charity. This is our "being" that is ever deeper and great than our "doing" and "seeming," because it coincides with the presence of God in our midst. No community will ever be too small, too weak, too old, too miserable to be able to incarnate this mystery of grace. We would never be sufficiently humble and poor to receive and radiate this mystery more than any other quality, strength, or beauty that we can have.

I think back to the words that our Holy Father Leo said to me when he received me in an audience on October 6: "For you the most important thing to serve the Church and help the world in its current situation is that you be faithful to what is essential, focusing yourselves above all on the contemplative dimension of the Cistercian vocation. It is important to serve the Lord with truth, yes, with truth!"

For one who follows the Rule of St. Benedict, contemplation is never isolated from life in the community. The monks are called to contemplate not only when they pray, but also when they work or eat together. The whole of life is contemplative if the memory of the mystery enables us always and completely to receive and adore the ultimate meaning of life. The Most Holy Trinity is the fullness of the mystery to contemplate and to live out, to contemplate by living. When we look at each other we should always think that we are brothers and sisters because the Spirit gives us the grace of being one single thing like the Father and the Son. We are united because the Father loves us as he loves the Son and thus sends the Son to the point of his becoming man and dying on the cross to make us like him and make us be members of his Body.

If we do not stand together as we contemplate this mystery, our relationships lose their depth, their truth, their beauty, and do not attract other to cling to the Lord. Rather, how beautiful it is to discover that we are united by God and not by each other! How beautiful it is to realize that together we can live out our differences and all our limitations because the unity among us is not our achievement but that of the God present in our midst!

The work of God is our communion

When there is this awareness, then the effort toward unity, concord, reconciliation, and peace, among us and in the world, never grows weary, always starts anew, without fear, without desperation, without stopping at the discouragement for our betrayals and others'. We are not building on our own initiative and with our own strength a tower of Babel that rises from the earth to reach the sky, but the Jerusalem that descends from Heaven to be the dwelling-place of God with all human beings. As the Book of Revelation expresses it clearly: "And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away. And he who was seated on the throne said, 'Behold, I am making all things new.'" (Rev 21:2–5)

These words do not describe only the end of times, but the reality in which we are immersed and of which we are called by grace and vocation to be protagonists. For the heart of this eschatological scene is the fact that *God is with us*, that God is the Emmanuel, Jesus Christ present in our midst. "He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God": for us this phrase is no longer in the future tense, but is a present reality. For us this prophecy is in the phase of completion, because "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:14).

This is what Christmas calls us back to, and for this reason we await it with fervor during Advent. The Lord has called us to receive together his presence that dwells in us, allowing him thus to dry the tears of all who are under trial, freeing them from the fear of death. It is incredible: with us dwells He who makes all things new! We are called to be joyful servants and workers of this newness of Christ in the world, which is his charity. A newness, however, which must begin with our fraternal unity, so that all can believe that the Father has truly sent the Son to save the world.

Receiving the newness of Christ

"Behold, I am making all things new" (Rev 21:5).
What makes us collaborators in this work of universal renewal that only Christ can accomplish? I would like to point out two aspects that seem to me to be especially demanded in the current moment: poverty and prayer for enemies.

In Leo XIV's Apostolic Exhortation on love for the poor, *Dilexi te*, – the whole is worth meditating on and living out –, a passage struck me that defines the deep meaning of Jesus's poverty: "He is, in fact, an itinerant teacher, whose poverty and precariousness are signs of his bond with the Father. They are also conditions for those who wish to follow him on the path of discipleship. In this way, the renunciation of goods, riches and worldly securities becomes a visible sign of entrusting oneself to God and his providence" (n. 20). Poverty, detachment, the renunciation of superfluous securities, are not ends in themselves, but are important for making us a sign of the trusting relationship that we can

all have with God. Living poverty this way makes us live like children of God who transmit and propose to all the newness and beauty of a life entrusted to God and to his providence. Let us ask ourselves sincerely if our communities radiate this light.

Some months back I met Bishop Pavlo of Kharkiv, in Ukraine. He spoke to me as a direct witness of the terrible situation in which they find themselves. At the end he entrusted me with a prayer intention for all the communities of the Order that I have already sent out on some occasions but that now I send out with insistence to everyone: "Please ask your communities to pray for the conversion of our enemies."
In this request I recognized a great invitation to what is truly essential in our life and vocation: that even in the most negative experience, like that of suffering hatred that wants to destroy a people and that affects so many innocent victims, we are called to live making recourse to the merciful and all-powerful God, asking Him not to eliminate the enemy, but to convert him, that is, to lead him back to choose his true good, the truth and goodness of his life. Asking for the conversion of our enemy means asking the greatest good for him, his salvation. Only from this, the Bishop of Kharkiv told me, can peace and good come, not only for them, but for the whole world.

Asking for the grace of conversion, our own and that of others, especially of those who make wicked and evil choices, means corresponding to the heart with which God looks upon humanity. One who prays like this unites himself directly to the Lord who tells us: "As I live, declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live" (Ezekiel 33:11).

It is as if when Jesus asks us to turn the other cheek toward the enemy (cf. Mt 5:39; Lk 6:29), he did not ask us to expose ourselves to a second slap, but to give our brother who does us ill the chance to give us a caress, that is, to be converted from his evil and find with us a possibility of renewing his life in charity. But this demands that precisely while we turn the other cheek to the enemy our heart beseech God for their conversion.

When with the Spirit and the Church we cry out: "Come, Lord Jesus!" (cf. Rev. 22:17, 20), the great prayer of Advent that should always burn in us like a lamp that stays up to receive the Bridegroom, we must be aware that Christ will never come to divide, but to unite us in the reconciled beauty of fraternity. To pray for the conversion of our enemies, near and far, so that they become brothers, sisters, hastens the coming of the Kingdom of our Father.

In this Christmas time, may we be able, through the poverty that entrusts itself to God and through prayer for the conversion of all enemies in conflict on the earth, to receive the newness of everyone and everything that only Jesus can accomplish!

Fr. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori OCist