



SEIZED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT

Letter of the Abbot General OCist for Pentecost 2020

Dearest brothers and sisters,

Even if in many nations they are starting a phase of restarting the social, cultural, and economic life that has been stopped for so many weeks because of the coronavirus epidemic, for everyone there is still a state of uncertainty and reduction of human relationships that will be with us for a long time. In the Roman confinement that I have been living for more than two months, in addition to praying in communion with all, I continually meditate on the meaning of this experience, on what it takes away from us, gives us, and demands of us. In two letters I have already tried to share this meditation with you, and now I feel compelled to do it through this traditional Pentecost letter too, aware that we all long, today more than ever, for a newness that only the Holy Spirit can create and grant. As Psalm 103 expresses it: “You send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the earth” (Ps 103:30).

In my first letter – *Be still and know that I am God* –, I realized that this time asks us to stop to recognize that God is the true meaning and the fullness of our life. In the Easter letter – *Salvation is present* – I was helped by the image of the journey in the desert, in which the direction is not indicated by the distant horizon, but by the presence of the Lord in the cloud. I asked myself: Do we let ourselves be guided by the presence of God? And I recalled, with Pope Francis, that the presence that accompanies us is the risen Christ who lives beside us. By living out our familiarity with Him, embracing him here and now, in his word, the sacraments, fraternal communion, and receiving the poor, the road opens up before us at each step and we can announce to the world the hope for a real salvation.

A new expectation

But how does one enact this after the Passover of Resurrection?

The event of Jesus’ Resurrection changes not only the response to our expectation but our expectation itself. The risen Jesus is a reality that changes the form of our

expectation, of our desire, and also of our hope that the difficult situation in which we find ourselves now will be resolved at all level.

The beginning of the Acts of the Apostles describes the new dimension in which we find ourselves from Easter onward: “After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. ‘This,’ he said, ‘is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now’” (Acts 1:3–5).

The time of the Church is a time in which Christ is alive in our midst and converses with us about what concerns the kingdom of God. Jesus continues this conversation with us, seated with us at the table of Eucharistic and fraternal communion, living center of every Christian community. And it is precisely at the heart of this experience that Christ asks us to “to wait for the promise of the Father,” that of being “baptized with the Holy Spirit,” that is, of passing from death to life thanks to the gift of the Paraclete. The Spirit is given us so that we can pass from death, from sin and from fear, to the new life that the Risen One wants to share with us.

We must always await this rebirth, not because it must happen in the future, but because it does not come from us, is not our work, but is a grace given from on high. Jesus explains it to us, still at the beginning of Acts: “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:7–8).

We do not know when and how the Kingdom of God, the Redemption of the world in Christ, is realized. We know with certainty, however, that the Kingdom comes in the gift of the Holy Spirit, which makes us witnesses of the Risen Christ.

So Christ asks the disciples to put themselves in an attitude of expecting and asking for the Holy Spirit. Even staying closed up at home, like us in this time, is something Jesus asks not out of fear of the dangers that await the disciples outside the Cenacle, but so that they can confront them with the force of the Spirit. The Spirit’s force is the love of God.

This is the novelty we must always await, always ask for, always accept. There is nothing newer than the possibility of bearing witness to Christ without fear, compelled and carried by a new force, who is the Love of God in Person.

The breath of the Risen One

The whole Paschal mystery is condensed and revealed in the instant when Jesus, on the evening of Easter, appears to the disciples in the Cenacle, “while the doors were locked”, and, breathing on them, says: “Receive the Holy Spirit” (Jn 20:22).

Jesus is the Crucified one who has conquered death and sin. He is the Living One who shows the wounds on his hands and side. He says, “Peace be with you!”: his presence is the peace of God given to men, which enters not only where fear encloses us, but into our fearful and sad hearts, into our hearts that are incapable of believing that God can always conquer death and evil, division and war, the spite and hatred that suffocate

humanity. For this reason, the risen Christ fills the heart with joy: “The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord” (Jn 20:20b).

But Jesus does not content himself with standing in front of us; he wants to enter into us to animate us with the divine life what he eternally shares with the Father: “He breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (Jn 20:22). This gift is not limited to giving the Apostles the faculty of forgiving sins (v. 23), but wants to reach each human being to grant them rebirth. In fact, here Jesus renews the life-giving breath with which God animated Adam in the beginning: “Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being” (Gen 2:7).

Easter would remain a sterile event of the past for us if we did not always receive the Risen One anew, the one who brings us to rebirth with the breath of the Holy Spirit. The newness of our life, and hence of the life of the Church and of the world, depends entirely on the way we personally and communally receive the Crucified Lord who stands before us, real and living, giving us “without measure” (Jn 3:34) the only Breath of life capable of animating in us and in all the new humanity, filial and fraternal, for which we have been created.

Often we fool ourselves into receiving according to our own measure, our own interest, the measureless gift that Christ breathes upon us. In the New Testament there are various examples of people or communities who treated the gift of the Spirit with deceit, pride, negligence, and small-mindedness, thus choosing death instead of life (cf. Mt 12:31–32; Acts 5:3; Acts 8:18–20; Eph 4:30; 1 Thess 5:19).

It is necessary, then, for us to allow this infinite gift of God to expand and also break the measure of our capacity to receive, that is, of our heart and our life. But this too is grace, like the immaculate heart of the Virgin was formed by the grace of God to receive without reservations the incarnation of the Word by the working of the Spirit.

This does not happen in us once for all, just as, to live, we must constantly repeat the act of respiration. The Risen One remains always with us in the Church and in our heart to breath the gift of the Spirit, so that in every instant we can receive new life from Him. All the practices of the monastic life, which underline the practices of every Christian life, can be understood and lived as a continual respiration of the gift of the Spirit that the Risen One breathes on us.

Before dying, St. Anthony of the Desert, father of monks, advised his disciples: “Always breathe Christ!” (St. Athanasius, *Life of Anthony*, 91.3). We can live this invitation to continual prayer by thinking that we are called always to breathe the breath of Christ who shares his life with us, his love, his wisdom, that is, the gift of the Holy Spirit who is Lord and giver of life.

A truly new life

“Nothing will be as before,” we all tell ourselves in this great crisis provoked by the pandemic. But everyone asks themselves how the world will start back up after such an unforeseen and universal stop. Something new is necessary. But who can definite it? Who knows it? What new thing does society, the economy, culture, education need? What newness does the Church need in her mission in the world and in history?

In this time many people, families, and communities have had deep, dramatic, and sometimes very painful experiences. Sickness and death, uncertainty and fear, in one way or another, have touched us and, whether we like it or not, remain companions on our journey. What change of life and heart can be coherent with this experience? What new thing can adequately arise from this?

We know full well that even if the situation of society can change rapidly, hearts change with more difficulty. But if hearts do not change, every other change, even epochal ones, remain sterile. The changes of history that are not accompanied by a conversion of conscience and freedom are reduced to geological shifts in which man loses his vocation and dignity as subject of the universe, and gets overwhelmed by exterior circumstances like the dinosaurs were. But if the heart does not change on its own and not even under the influence of external factors, how can it be renewed? We need something new that, though not coming from us, reaches into our inner depths.

What strikes me in a new way then is the last scene of the Gospel of John, because it begins with a “return to normal life.” After the great disarray that the encounter with Jesus and life with him, his death and his resurrection, produced in their lives, behold how seven disciples seem to have returned to their earlier life: “Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, ‘I am going fishing.’ They said to him, ‘We will go with you.’ They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing” (Jn 21:2–3).

What? After everything that had happened, they return to living like that, as if the event of Christ had not changed anything! So really nothing manages to shake up the banality of human life? Is it really so impossible to live a new life?

This scene, however, has been given to us to emphasize what the real factor of newness is for our life, in every situation and condition. First of all, it makes us understand that the newness does not come from us. Newness is impossible for man. Left to himself, man produces only realities that are crumbling, closed, old from their birth.

But this scene helps us understand especially that the newness we need is not that the situation change on its own, and not even that we change. The newness is always and only the presence of the Risen Christ. If a new wind must come to change and renew our ship’s course, it can consist in nothing other than the breath of life that the Risen One comes to transmit to us by looking at us, speaking to us, loving us. At first, we do not recognize this presence, and it hardly seems to have an impact on our daily life. We have fished the whole night without catching anything, and the fact that Christ calls us from the shore of the lake seems to be irrelevant, without effect on our existence. We are not expecting anything really new. But his presence, his word, his love for the fruitfulness of our life manage to penetrate and renew our situation even before we believe it. Something new surprises us, because we have not asked for it or expected it. Only after the miraculous catch of fish does one of them, “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” recognize what the source of the change in their life is: “It is the Lord!” (Jn 21:7).

When a child is surprised by something nice, it instinctively opens its mouth and makes a quick and rapid inhalation that expands its lungs. It is as if it had been hit by a strong wind. I imagine that St. John shouted “It is the Lord!” with this amazement. His lungs

and heart were filled with the breath of the Risen One, and his loving confession of Jesus' presence "exhaled" and spread this gift by bearing witness to it to his friends and to all the surrounding reality.

"It is the Lord!": this shout was like the rising of the sun on a tedious morning, and all was filled with light and beauty. The world is renewed by the one who recognizes Christ.

Only in this way is life truly and continually renewed. Not through our initiative, not through our project, not with techniques, tactics, or revolutions conceived by men, but letting ourselves be hit by the surprise of the Risen One who, with his presence, his word, his gaze, his love, comes to breath the gift of the Spirit into our monotonous and sterile life.

The poor and starving Risen One

But this scene of the Gospel demands an even more delicate attention from us. How does the Risen Jesus present himself to his disciples? Perhaps we do not notice that here Jesus appears as a poor person who is hungry: "Children, do you not have something to eat?" (Jn 21:5a). The glorious Lord presents himself as a humble starving beggar.

The disciples have nothing to give him, not even a kind response: "They answer him: 'No!'" (Jn 21:5b). The poor man who asks bothers us; and if we think of having nothing to give him, we make him feel the burden as if it were his fault.

Jesus presents himself as a poor man who asks for help from poor men. Peter and his friends, however, have not yet learned that, when Jesus asks like this, before teaching us how to give he teaches us how to ask. He teaches us poverty. He knows they have nothing to eat, not for themselves or for him, but for this very reason he wants them to be united to him in asking everything from the Father. When he commands them to cast the net to the right of the ship, Jesus does it undoubtedly while asking the Father for this "daily bread," and the Father responds right away, without limit, so much so that even being seven men they barely manage to pull up the net full of fish (cf. Jn 21:6).

This is the way that Christ teaches us to ask for the Holy Spirit, to ask for love. A little later, Jesus again shows himself as a lowly, poor man who begs not only for something to eat but for love, and he begs for it from exactly that disciple who was most lacking in love for Him, by denying him: "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" (Jn 21:15).

Christ teaches us that the poverty we accept to share with him is a space opening to the gift of the Father, the Holy Spirit. The gift of love for Christ is the great, miraculous catch of fish that we can continually ask for and receive, without limit, from the inexhaustible fount of the most Holy Trinity.

The Risen One teaches us to accept our poverty in the face of his. His poverty is ours, that which he assumed by becoming man and dying on the Cross. All of our needs, of bread, of help, of care, he made his own. But above all he made all our need to be loved his own.

Discovering that our need is in Christ makes us attentive to the needs of all. We discover that in our poverty and in the poverty of our brothers and sisters, Christ is present, Christ calls us, Christ awaits us. Such that, in responding to the other's need of care and

love we can be stunned at meeting the Risen One, we can open our eyes and shout: “It is the Lord!”

St. Benedict asks us to live out hospitality in our monastery thus: “Above all in receiving the poor and pilgrims great care must be taken, because in them one welcomes Christ more fully” (RB 53:15).

What can be newer and greater in our life, in our communities, in the Church and in the world, than the grace of receiving Christ, of welcoming him ever more fully and truly in the poverty of our neighbor, near or far, who calls on us?

The richness of the poor one

We need not be preoccupied with already having what we must give. The space for welcoming the poor Jesus in the poor one who addresses himself to our poverty, is the open capacity that the Spirit wants to fill up with gifts, with love. This is the miracle: the gift of God in our empty hands, in our wretched hearts.

After Pentecost, St. Peter will always live like this, like Jesus: as a poor man who begs for everything and receives everything from the Father. He will live in union with the poverty of Christ who knows how to respond to every poor person with the superabundance of the Gift of God. Indeed, Peter will say to the lame beggar at the Beautiful Gate of the Temple: “‘I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.’ And he took him by the right hand and raised him up” (Acts 3:6–7).

What poverty and what richness! Peter has nothing and gives all! To give Christ, Christ who heals and enables him to walk in a new life, is no less an act of giving for Peter than if he had had so much gold or silver. Peter knows that he can give much more than gold or silver. For this reason, his poverty is his most precious treasure, because in it he possesses the Risen One. And his empty hand that cannot give anything is free to lift up the man who does not manage to walk on his own, transmitting to him the power of the Redeemer.

We must be attentive, even we monks and nuns, not to reduce ourselves to wanting to give only “silver and gold,” that is, human values, whether they be material, intellectual, or spiritual, when instead we can always give Christ and the power of his salvation. We have Jesus to give to the world: what more or better do we want to give? But often we are the first not to appreciate the gift for us that Christ makes of himself, of his presence and of his love. If we are not aware of the infinite value of the gift of Jesus, we will reduce ourselves to giving silver and gold, which, compared to Christ, are worth less than straw.

Peter says: “In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk!” The treasure that Peter has and gives, the treasure of the Church, the treasure of Pope Francis, is Jesus “of Nazareth”: the poor, meek, and humble Jesus the Nazarene, the son of Mary and Joseph.

And we, do we have him? Do we possess Jesus in the daily reality of Nazareth, the Jesus of Galilee where he liked to manifest himself to his disciples when risen too, always poor and simple as when he lived and worked in the house of Joseph the carpenter?

Our greatest richness is the humble poverty of Christ. And this alone makes us useful for humanity, because the whole world needs nothing other than Him, than the poor Lord of life whom only the poor of heart can give. By giving Christ with humility we ourselves become a gift of God.

Letting ourselves be seized and given by the Holy Spirit

For this reason, poverty of heart, in which the Virgin Mary is our mother and master, is the most effective work for the renewal of the world.

I think for example of the deacon Philip described by the Acts of the Apostles. We read that, after evangelizing and baptizing the Ethiopian functionary, “the Spirit of the Lord seized Philip,” such that he “found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea” (Acts 8:39–40). Philip is so docile to the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 8:26–30), that the Spirit feels free to “seize him” and carry him suddenly from one region to another, from one mission to another.

What does this “seizing” of the Spirit mean? We are not dealing so much with an ecstasy that subtracts the disciple from reality, but of being taken for the service of the Gospel of Jesus. The ecstasy of Philip has the form and substance of service, of *diaconia*, of mission, of evangelization. Philip is seized from his projects and his work to be a servant of the project and work of God.

Philip is a free man because he is unburdened of all that weighs one down and binds life. He is like a feather that the wind of God carries where it wills. If the Spirit can take him from the street of Gaza to carry him to Azotus, it means that Philip had with himself only himself, nothing else. He was lightened up from all that impedes the Holy Spirit from taking us into service without hesitations or delays.

To be seized thus by the Holy Spirit is an experience to which we are all called, each according to their charism, the form and circumstances of their vocation and mission of life. The point is being personally engaged by Pentecost, becoming living members of the Church, of the Body of Christ which has the visible form of the People of God.

Many people and communities bear witness that in these months they have had a precious experience of being despoiled of what is superfluous, at all levels, and of concentrating on the essential which has freed them from so many burdens and useless projects. Now we desire to continue our journey with the freedom that is available for the service for which the Spirit of Jesus wants to seize us in each moment.

Let us all help each other, with prayer and the fraternal sharing of testimony and of correction, to be in the world like the pollen that the breath of the Risen One spreads to fertilize the earth, so that it bears the fruit of a new spring that all await and only the Paraclete can make blossom.



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