

The true vine and its branches



Being living branches

“I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” (Jn 15:5)

Meditating on this Gospel with the Sisters of the monastery of San Giacomo di Veglia during the fifth week of Easter, we noticed that the image of the vine that Jesus uses to express the mystery of our communion with Him implies a transmission of life from Him to us and from us to the world. The branches are not dry, that is, they are alive, if the vital sap passes through them that moves from the roots and from the trunk of the vine to nourish the grape that the vine produces as fruit. A fruit that then gets transformed into wine that “gladdens the heart of man” (Ps 104:15), especially when it is drunk for the purpose of tasting the beauty of fraternal communion.

This image shows us how important it is for us to be living branches, living with the life of the vine. It is important for the world, which attends the joy of the fruit of every human life, but it is especially important for Christ, the “true vine” of which the Father is the cultivator (cf. Jn 15:1). It is as if the fulfillment of what God is for all creation and what all creation is for God depended on the transfer of the vital sap through the branches. God’s joy is the gift of life. The creature’s joy is the life of God. But if the branches do not let themselves be traversed by the life of Christ, all creation and all humanity miss their purpose and their fulfillment. God would even be humiliated in the total gift of self that he makes to the world.

What a mystery! The fullness of God, the joy of God, seem to depend on us, on the vitality of the branches. Life does not come from the branches: life comes only from God, from the Father, in the Son in the gift of the Holy Spirit. But the transmission of life depends on the branches. The branches are the first to receive life from the vine and can transmit it only in the measure in which they receive it.

We see in the Gospel that Christ's sadness always concerns his failure to give his life because he sees it is rejected. When Jesus sees the rich young man distancing himself, full of sadness, his heart also is filled with sadness because he sees that a branch that He recognized as important for transmitting his life to the world does not want to remain attached to the true vine, freeing himself of all his goods in order to let Christ's life flow through him, that is, that infinite love that Jesus was already giving him without measure (cf. Mk 10:21-22).

The mission of the branches

When we see the situation of dryness, of lack of joy, of consolation, and of meaning, in which humanity is living, – but also the dryness and sadness that often inhabits our hearts and our communities –, we understand that now more than ever the great urgency that we are called to dedicate our lives to is precisely that of permitting Christ to make us living branches of the vine that He became by dying on the Cross and rising again for the salvation of the world.

One could read the entire Rule of St. Benedict – as also all the paths of conversion proposed by so many ecclesial charisms – as an accompaniment that the Holy Spirit has stirred up in the Church to help us become living branches of the vine of Christ the Redeemer. In fact, when Benedict requires as a condition for entering the monastery that one be a man or woman who desires life and happiness (cf. RB Prol. 15; Ps 34:13), in the face of one who says yes to this universal call, he does not propose so much an immediate experience of the satisfaction of this desire as a path that makes us become persons and communities whose fruit is charity in service of the love and joy of others. Yes, the point is precisely the vocation and mission of the branches, which find fulfillment of self in transmitting and bearing to all the fruit that Christ alone can produce: charity, joy of God and of humanity.

The gift of Pentecost, too, the first one that happened in Jerusalem and also the ever new Pentecost of which we have such need, transforms the disciples into living branches of Christ. Indeed the Holy Spirit fills us with Christ's life, makes Christ live in us, as in the Virgin Mary.

If we do not have this fundamental concern with being living branches of Christ, all of our problems and difficulties become not occasions for living in faith, hope, and charity, but overflowing torrents that drag us ever further from the rock on which we have been called to build the house of our life and of the Church that receives it and makes it Christian. If instead we are concerned essentially with letting Christ live in us through the grace of the Spirit, we discover with surprise and consolation that even the most negative and tiresome circumstances are, for Jesus, spaces of new life, spaces of love and peace. If Christ lives, nothing is lost, nothing is in vain. If Christ lives in us, our "I" does not collapse in the face of any threat, not even in the face of death.

The branch that remains attached to the vine of Christ remains alive and capable of fruitfulness, even if the ice cold of winter, the scorching heat of summer, or other calamities come to destroy temporarily all the leaves and fruits it bore. From Christ, the true vine, life always rises again.

Learning to be branches of the vine

At the wedding feast of Cana, why did Jesus object to this Mother that his Hour had not yet come to give the new wine for the joy of the wedding feast? The fact that the problem was the lack of wine suggests to us that John, narrating this episode, was thinking of the words with which Jesus defined himself as the “true vine” during the Last Supper. In the chapter 15 of John, in fact, Jesus also speaks of the fruit of the vine, of perfect joy, of abiding in mutual love, as between spouses. At Cana, for Jesus the hour had not yet come to bear much fruit, the fruit of his life totally given by dying on the Cross. Perhaps Jesus was thinking that, in order for his life to be able to bear all its fruit, it was necessary to wait for the branches of the vine, that is, his disciples, to grow, starting from the Apostles. It was necessary to wait for Pentecost for his disciples to be able to become living branches of the vine, capable of transmitting the new wine of his Blood poured out to give fruit to the New Covenant, that is, of communion in the love of Christ.

Mary, perfect branch from her very conception, seems to be able to intuit the thought of Jesus. So what does she do? She teaches how to become living branches like her, inserted into the vine, so that Jesus can bear the fruit of his Paschal Hour. At Cana, in fact, Mary teaches the servers of the wedding feast the way in which she herself had immediately said yes to the gift and task of being a living branch of the gift of the Son of God: «His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you!”» (Jn 2:5)

To be living and fruitful branches of Christ, we are asked to listen to his word, a listening that is available for whatever Christ wants to come about through us. Listening and service are the essential qualities of the branches of Christ. Jesus wants to bear fruit through us, and his fruit is the vine that regenerates the joy of the wedding feast, the fruitful joy of love that God allows us to have for each other in order to become his image and likeness. This fruit is the Redemption in the blood of Christ, in his life given for us to the end. This was already present in the awareness of Jesus at Cana, and also of Mary when she instructed the servers to obey the word of Jesus to make themselves instruments of the gift of his life, that is, to be branches of the Lord who died and rose again for us.

It is with the same attitude, the same faith, that Mary is present in the Cenacle, in the primitive Church, and now in Heaven continues to be our Mother and Teacher. With her silence, her prayer, her obedience full of faith, love, and hope, Mary is always present in the Church and to the Church, repeating her essential invitation: “Do whatever he tells you!” As if she were telling us: “Remain united to the Word of life, abide in his love, and your life will bear the fruit of my Son, the fruit of the Holy Spirit!”

The fruit of fraternal communion

As the fruit of the vine is the wine of the covenant, the fruit of Christ is communion in his Blood, the communion of God the Trinity that we are given to live with Him and among us. One is not a branch of the true vine without bearing this fruit of fraternal communion.

Pope Francis has dedicated the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* to this essential and universal fruit of the Church and of our Christian life. It is urgent that we work toward this, for us and for the good of the whole world.

To bear this fruit, God the Father often prunes the branches of the vine, of the Body of Christ. He cuts off from us and from our communities that which is of no use for communion in charity, that which produces fruits that are not the authentic fruit of Christ, the wild grape that perhaps seems nice to look at, but which in reality is of no use for the joy of our heart and the joy of God. Often we feel embittered in our relationships with each other, because into them, and especially into our heart, spite, criticism, deceit, hypocrisy, distrust insinuate themselves. So we set about defending our judgments, our attitudes, and this does nothing other than increase the bitter sterility of our Christian and monastic life.

Pruning is a technique that does not bother discussing with that which is sterile, it is a cut that lets what is dry fall off, what does not bear fruit, what does not pass on life anymore, the vital sap of the true vine: the love of Christ, the Gospel, the grace of the Holy Spirit.

In the whole Church and in the Order we are living through a time of great prunings. It seems like we are becoming smaller, shorter, less visible, less important. The world crisis that we are passing through has accentuated many weaknesses among us too. In reality, if we let ourselves be pruned by the Father with trust that He loves us and wants to make us alive with the life of his Son, we discover that the pruning does us good, makes us happier, and more fruitful for the Kingdom of God, even when we apparently die. This is the evangelical humility toward which St. Benedict unceasingly forms us, because St. Benedict is a father who ardently desires that we live as children of God who give life like Jesus.

It is important, however, to be aware that the communion among us is the communion of branches of the one true vine that is Christ. Every branch is responsible for personally bearing fruit by remaining connected to the Lord, but we must not forget that our fruit is the fruit of Christ and that the various branches are united by Him in transmitting this fruit to the world. The fruit is the communion of love that Christ gives to the world, and it would be absurd for the branches that transmit it not to taste this communion among themselves. Who knows what joyous brotherhood was born that day at Cana among the servers who were the first to taste and see that their labor, obedient to the Lord, enabled an incredible miracle! It is the same joyful brotherhood that the Apostles and all the first Christians felt springing up among them in the mission that they started right after Pentecost.

Are we aware that we are together to serve the fruit of fraternal communion, that is, the great miracle worked by the love of the Risen One in the gift of the Spirit? Weakness is never an objection, because the fruit of the love of Christ is always perfect, even if there be always only two or three branches attached to Him to bear it, to let it ripen and to give it to the world.

Brothers and sisters of the poor

I recently had an experience that really challenged me. Because of a distraction on my part, I missed a train for France and had to take it the day after. I was angry with myself and sad to have caused inconveniences to the community I had to visit. In the train I took, however, I met a young African mother with her six-year-old baby girl. Like many migrants she had crossed the Mediterranean on a raft to save herself from a threat about the baby and to find treatments for a sickness. They had already passed a month in a refugee camp in Italy. Now they were going to France where they had a contact. At the customs post the police had to make several illegal immigrants get off, all coming from Africa. Sorrowful and sometimes violent scenes, certain unpleasant even for the police who had to do their duty, even if it is a problem that should be confronted at the international level. The mother and her baby were also made to get off, but after the checks they let them get back on and continue their journey. The baby, extremely scared, was sobbing and had a fever. They told me their story. As we drew near to Nice, I asked where they would spend the night. In reality, they thought they would be able to continue the journey at least up to Paris and certainly would have spent the night in the station or some shelter they might come upon by chance. I telephoned the abbess of Castagniers, who was waiting for me at the station. I asked if she knew of any possibility of hospitality in Nice. She told me she would try to ask, even if it was already late. But right away she told me: "Otherwise we'll take them with us to the abbey and they will sleep at our place." I did not feel very favorable toward this option, but I realized right away that it was because this would mean further compromising myself in the reception of these persons whom God had put on my path. I understood that Jesus, St. Benedict, and Pope Francis do not leave us in doubt about how to respond to this need and that I was called to let myself be involved like the Good Samaritan. On account of which I was content to learn from the abbess that there was no other possibility but to bring them with us to Castagniers. There the nuns received them "with all humanity" as St. Benedict asks (RB 53:9), and at which women are experts. For this community, as for many others in the Order, welcoming migrants and refugees is not something new.

The circumstances were such that, after a short stay in the monastery, that mother and her baby would continue their journey with me, and it was providential because I could help them deal with other serious difficulties in the railway traffic that we had to face. The mother kept repeating to me: "It is God who sent you!" I understood that this was true. It certainly was not I who was good but the Lord who, in the preferential love that he fosters for the small and the poor, had made me an instrument, together with the Sisters of Castagniers, of his care for them.

God truly makes us "angels," that is "those sent," of his charity if we simply consent to be involved in the need of our neighbor. Sometimes it's enough to offer a small yes to the need of others to be completely involved in the providence of the Father who furthermore concerns himself truly with the whole, to every detail.

This episode is not new in our experience. But it happened to me in a moment when I particularly felt the weariness that so many of us are experiencing as we restart the journey in this dramatic time in the world and for all of us. It made me understand once

more how important it is to let ourselves be helped by the small and the poor, helped to take vitality once again from the true vine which is Christ. A simple gesture of receiving the need of a neighbor is enough to restart in us, branches of the vine, the flow of the vital sap of grace, of charity that not only bears the fruit of consolation for those in need but also gives life and happiness back to the branch itself, to us.

It is thus, I am ever more convinced of it, that the Holy Spirit desires to give vitality back to each of us and to our communities, which are often tired and sad on account of their weakness. In this crisis we are living through, all of us should ask ourselves: what poor person am I called to receive today in my life so that God can make me an “angel” and instrument of his tenderness, of his care and love? To notice the need of others, who are often next to us or at our door, and to live it out in communion with Christ, like Mary at Cana, makes us servants of the love of God, who immediately works a miraculous transformation of reality, returning us to the joy of living, of being loved and of loving. We then discover that the poor one grants us the gift of giving our life, of being, that is, living branches of Christ who with the Father wants to give the Holy Spirit to the world.

Let us help each other to be living branches

It seems to me that the present moment that the world, the Church, and our Order are living through asks of us, above all, a renewed readiness to be branches of Christ and to help each other in this. We are not together in the Church and in a particular vocation in order to be admired like showy flowers or valued like juicy fruit, but rather to be branches at the service of the fruitfulness of Christ the Redeemer. A fruitfulness that is always mysterious, hidden, and surprising at the same time. The task of Christians, and in particular of monks and nuns, is often humble and hidden, but is born of a real predilection, a preference for us on Jesus’ part, a friendship that we do not merit, but which is granted to us. Indeed, the branch is more attached to Christ, more united to him, than the leaves, flowers, and fruit of the vine. The life given by the Redeemer flows directly in the branch. If we are truly aware of it, what gratitude we would feel for our vocation and the service that is requested of us!

The Lord has united us, dear brothers and sisters, like the disciples gathered in the Cenacle of Jerusalem, so that we can strengthen each other, with prayer and fraternal affection, and live out together the attachment to Christ that makes us life-giving branches of the Paraclete. Let us ask the Virgin Mary and our friends in Heaven for the gift of a heart that is ready for this grace and mission!

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Fr. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

Fr. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori
Abbot General OCist