

Synodality of Communion



Dearest brothers and sisters, when I was visiting the General Chapter of the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance last February 10, the feast of St. Scholastica, on the eve of the election of their new Abbot General, I gave a conference on synodality that sparked a nice dialogue both in the meeting and afterward. I have since given it in some Congregational Chapters, and I have seen that it would be useful for the whole Order to know about it, also for the sake of preparing ourselves for our General Chapter next October. For this reason I thought I would send you this conference as a Pentecost letter, since synodality is perhaps one of the main gifts that the Holy Spirit has given to the Church from her very beginnings. Today Pope Francis invites us to rediscover the synodal nature of the Church as a renewed Pentecost in service of the new evangelization of our wounded world, which thirsts for salvation and peace. Let us join with him, and with the whole People of God, in this desire and in this effort, and let us pray that the Paraclete Spirit may make us, like Mary and the Apostles, humble servants and faithful friends of Christ the Redeemer! A holy Pentecost to all!

The reawakening of synodality

Ever since Pope Francis launched the synodal path, recalling that synodality is part of the nature of the Church, I have been realizing ever more clearly how much our Benedictine-Cistercian charism is marked by ecclesial synodality. We know how the *Carta Caritatis* is a masterpiece of the synodal awareness of our monastic family, and how the Rule of St. Benedict inspired this awareness and synodal experience of our first Fathers. I notice that this awareness and experience to which the Church seems to be reawakening 60 years after the Council, is provoking in us a reawakening of awareness and of experience of our charism. In the concreteness of our chapter meetings or other kinds of meetings, in the collaboration between our Orders and in the Cistercian Family,

or more widely and specifically in seeking solutions to the problems and weaknesses of our communities, for example in regular Visitations, we realize that no solution can give us hope unless it marks the beginning of a “path together,” of a synodal path, on which we rediscover unity and energy in following Christ, “the way, truth, and life,” who calls us to follow him with love and trust.

“Thomas said to him, ‘Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me’” (Jn 14:5–6).

We too always ask ourselves, “How can we know the way?”, the way that we must traverse today, perhaps in the night or in the fog, perhaps after the roads trodden for so long, which reassure us, prove to be impracticable, too steep for our strength, too slippery with the muck with which our many errors or infidelities have covered it. So many bridges have collapsed, so many tunnels have filled up with rubble, so many paths have become too tricky to follow. In the face of all this resounds Christ’s answer to Thomas, the disoriented disciple: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” And he adds: “No one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn 14:6).

Thomas, like us, needs to realize that the disorientated state in which he finds himself will be resolved not by the discovery of a new track that is practicable and safe, which might appear to him by some miracle, but rather by a present Person who says with certainty, “I am the way!” Right away Thomas and the other apostles recognize that they were looking for a way forward by examining the horizon, the future, the space and time hidden by darkness and fog, when instead it was right in front of them, there with them, seated at table with them. They realized, without for the moment quite understanding it, that the way was a path together with Christ, a path that began not first of all with building roads, bridges, tunnels, mountain passes, or desert trails, but with being seated, like Mary of Bethany, at the table of communion with Jesus and, through him, of communion with the Father, in the Holy Spirit.

Synodality begins and is nurtured in communion, and it remains true and fruitful, it remains Christian, if the path that it involves remains constantly a path along with Christ, and along with the brothers and sisters in Christ.

Go! I am with you.

I have noticed that the final scene of the Gospel of Matthew describes the beginning of the Church’s synodal path, with all the elements necessary for living it out.

“Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’” (Mt 28:16–20)

Jesus sends his disciples on mission toward all peoples and even to the end of the age, with the task of spreading the Trinitarian communion among humanity, baptizing all in

the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. He reassures them that he will remain with them, that is, in communion with them, for all days and for ever. This immediately creates an unavoidable characteristic of the Christian mission: that it can be conducted only in the communion of the disciples among themselves. Jesus indeed says “Go” in the plural: it is a mission declined in the plural, which we must live out as an ecclesial “we” that transmits the great “WE” of the three Persons of the Trinity.

During his earthly life, too, Jesus never sent a disciple on mission alone, but always at least two at a time. It seems to me that the only time he let a disciple leave alone was when he said to Judas, after giving him the morsel: “What you are going to do, do quickly” (Jn 13:27). The others thought that Judas had received from Jesus some mission to fulfill, but instead it was Satan, who had just entered him, to push him, to get him on his way, to send him off alone to betray Christ’s mission.

It is not just a practical question, a question of mutual assistance, that Christ sends his disciples two by two. Indeed, when he sends them he gives them the power to heal the sick, to cast out demons, to raise the dead, to survive poisonings, etc. If one had such powers, even if he were alone, he would have to be invincible. What need would he have for fraternal support? In reality, Jesus wants his disciples’ mission to bear witness to a strength in weakness: “Go your way; behold, I am sending you out as lambs in the midst of wolves” (Lk 10:3), and then he adds that they should not take money with them, or provisions, or useful tools for the mission. And yet he had just said that the workers are few (cf. Lk 10:2). But instead of equipping them with defenses, with armor, instead of making them form a small army to defend their well-being, he sends them out helpless, unarmed, without protections, without means, exposing them to martyrdom.

The substance of the mission

All this clearly shows the importance of the one thing Jesus permits them to take along on their mission: fraternal love, friendship, mutual care, in short, **communion**. The disciples do not need it for the sake of being strong, or being able to solve the problems of the journey, but precisely for evangelizing not only by *speaking* of the Christ event but rather by *transmitting it*, by transmitting an experience of it, and an experience in action, not an experience only of the past, or maybe one that is promised for the future. *Fraternal communion in Christ is the substance of the mission, of the Church’s whole mission*, including the mission of monasteries. Communion is the motive, the method, and the end; the origin, the meaning, and the purpose of the Church’s mission.

Right after the departure of Judas from the Cenacle, Jesus speaks of this to the remaining apostles: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:34–35).

Communion is mutual love, loving each other. It is the love that Jesus kindled among his disciples, that he kindled in the Church by loving us to the end, washing our feet, speaking to us of the Father, and remaining really present in our midst.

The indissoluble bond between communion and mission is expressed by two similar words of Christ, which reflect each other like two slopes in the middle of which the whole paschal mystery of the Lord’s death and resurrection takes place:

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love.” (Jn 15:9)

“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.’ And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” (Jn 20:21–22)

Communion is this Trinitarian love between the Father and the Son in the gift of the Spirit which radiates by nature. Communion is communicated. Communion is by its nature *communication*. And *the mission is the communication of communion*. Without communion there is no mission. Communion is the substance of the mission. Only communion, then, is the subject of the mission. In the sense that, if there is no experience of communion, a reality of communion, that is a community, even if only between two people, a being together, a “we,” if this is not there, the mission becomes like the light of stars that went out millions of years ago that arrives to us now, and we fool ourselves into thinking they exist. But really that light no longer has a source, no longer has substance, there is no longer a subject that radiates it.

Dying to ourselves to live in communion

Go... Baptize ... Teach ... “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Mt 28:19–20). It is necessary for Christ to remain with us always so that, by loving us as the Father loves him, he can nourish the fraternal communion that is to be spread among all peoples.

I have the impression that the great crisis of the Church’s mission, at all levels, also in our monastic Orders, is not so much a crisis in the missionary effort, but really a crisis of communion, in living the communion of Christ. And we risk wasting the grace of this time if we do not understand *what kind of conversion to communion synodality asks of us in order to be fruitful as mission*. In other words, I have the impression that, in living out the Church’s mission, at all levels, it is not so much the mission that frightens us, but the communion. Why? Because in order to live out communion, what is required is more than an external decision, more than an external effort; what is asked for is an interior conversion, we are asked to live out a process that changes us deeply. Of course the mission also demands an interior decision, demands charity, demands sacrifice, capacity for proclamation, for bearing witness even to the point of martyrdom. But it is communion above all that demands a deep conversion of the self, a passage of a paschal nature, an entering into the life that passes through a death. For communion demands the passage from *I* to *we*, a passage in which the *I* must die in order to rise.

One does not become “we” by mere addition, but through a paschal transformation. The “*I*” does not become a “we” simply by adding other *I*’s to my *I*, like adding other coins to the coin *I* have. In fact, Jesus chose the parable of the grain of wheat to explain how one passes from *I* to *we*: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (Jn 12:24–25). Jesus reminds us that fruitfulness consists in “not remaining alone,” in becoming a “we.” One is not fruitful if one is strong, beautiful, intelligent, numerous. One is fruitful if one lives out communion.

Whoever thinks he loves his life by loving his own individuality, his own convenience, his own gain, his own interest, his own glory, loses it. For this reason Jesus calls us literally to “hate,” not so much life itself as the false, egocentric, autonomous image of life that we carry within us because of sin.

Communion frightens us because it implies death to our selves. When John writes in his first letter, “We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death” (1 Jn 3:14), in reality he makes us understand that, in order for us to be able to make fraternal love pass from death to life, it is necessary to die to false life of loving ourselves.

The steps of the resurrection

How does this rebirth to a communion that radiates the presence and love of Christ come about? The more I meditate on the Rule of St. Benedict, the more I notice that in it is offered us a process of conversion to the communion of Christ. The whole Rule again and again proposes steps for growing in the life of communion, for passing therefore through death of our false, isolated “I” to the paschal life of the “I” in the ecclesial “we.”

To me it seems useful, for the sake of the General Chapter and of our choices and decisions, to meditate together on the short but intense third chapter of the Rule, for it really describes a method of synodality and of discernment of communion. In it the topic is precisely *gathering* the brothers for counsel. The verb used speaks properly of “convoking,” and for this reason it recalls the original sense of the term “*Ekklesia*,” as it was used in ancient Greece, which designated the popular assembly in which questions of general interest were discussed and deliberated upon, and in which all participated with right of speaking and voting who were citizens in full possession of their rights. The etymology of this word, as you know, includes the verb *kaleo*, to call, to invite, to convoke, preceded by *ek*, that is, from, out of. It gives the idea of a summons for an election, an assembly in which one is called by a personal appeal, by choice, or by right, as it was with the citizen assembly in ancient Greece.

Christians made this term their own to designate the community of believers in Christ, the new people of Israel, summoned to unite together in an assembly of communion, whether liturgical and sacramental or of discernment, in service of decisions on which to agree for the sake of continuing to walk together after Christ, the great and good Shepherd of our souls.

When a particular community, of monks or nuns, or a community of communities like our Orders are, is gathered together, it must then renew its awareness of being Church, of being an assembly of persons summoned by God to live out communion in Christ and express it as mission in the present time, adapting themselves to circumstances, reading the signs of the times. The abbot, the superior, has the responsibility of reminding himself of it first of all and of helping the brethren exercise a true synodality of communion.

As I was saying, this requires a conversion, a death to self, for it is in that way above all that both the superior and the brethren are called to pass from the autonomous “I” to “we”, that is, to the “I” in communion, to the fraternal “I”.

So I would like to emphasize three fundamental points in the third chapter of the Rule of St. Benedict about how this can come about. It seems to me that Benedict describes some fundamental dimensions of the synodality of communion that we would all need to understand more deeply and practice, today more than ever, in the situation in which the Church and our religious families find themselves. If we feel like we are lacking in vitality, perhaps it is precisely because we do not accept passing from death to life through a process of fraternal communion.

1. Meeting together

The first aspect to meet one's eye is the importance of everybody's meeting together. "The abbot shall call the whole community" (RB 3.1). It is not taken for granted that one start with this concern. I notice in my ministry that communities have a hard time truly meeting together, gathering, reuniting to share what is thought, what is lived, what is experienced. And yet, as I said earlier, this is certainly the fundamental characteristic of the Church: to be an assembly of those who are called, of persons called to make an assembly, to be a "congregation," as St. Benedict defines the community here, that is, literally, a flock that stands together, and which thus recognizes a single shepherd, as Jesus says in chapter 10 of John: "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd" (Jn 10:14-16). As we sing in the *Ubi Caritas*: "*Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor.*"

This negligence in meeting together is not a problem of today: it was already there in the primitive Church, as the letter to the Hebrews denounces: "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near" (Heb 10:24-25).

You abandon something for two reasons: because you do not grant it importance or because you are afraid of it. I have the impression more and more that also behind indifference there hides a fear, a fear of reality, because meeting together, meeting our brethren, is an immersion in the reality of the other that reveals to me the reality of myself, and this causes fear. But when you are there, when you cede to and obey this reality of the others, truly meeting them, normally the reality of the other manifests itself in its real beauty, and it is a good for me, a reality that is "very good," as God himself says after creating the one who is other than Himself, which is man (cf. Gen 1:31). Cain was afraid to live while continually meeting with the goodness of Abel, so he killed him. If he had sought an encounter with his brother, if he had spoken to him, if he had listened, he would have discovered that the company of Abel could do him good, could teach him to live better, to a deeper, more generous, and more trusting relationship with God.

I am always moved by the scene when Jacob returns home with wives, children, and many goods, and realizes that his brother Esau is coming to meet him. He is terrified of him. He no longer knows what tactic to use, which diplomatic trick to invent to make something good out of a reality that he cannot imagine as anything other than negative

or hostile. But when he finds himself before Esau, he realizes that this brother loves him, that he weeps with joy to see him again, to embrace him again, and that he has forgotten all the tricks that Jacob's cleverness had made him undergo, taking advantage of his roughness.

"And Jacob lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, Esau was coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two female servants. And he put the servants with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. He himself went on before them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother. But Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept." (Gen 33:1-4)

For the Church and our communities, meeting together should not be something that happens only when we are forced to. It should be the loving response to an invitation full of love, like when the king in the parable invites people to his son's wedding (cf. Mt 22:1ff.). What an effort it is to gather together with freedom and desire! With what little joy we often go to meet our brothers and sisters! Often we are unaware that meeting together in the Church, being together in the community, in the Order, does not have a political, functional, diplomatic nature, but a theological one, because it is an essential form for realizing in us and among us the image of God-Trinity which we are and which we are called, invited, to become ever more fully. To fear this, or refuse this through pride, is literally "diabolical," a work of the "divider" who wants to destroy the image of God in man that Christ regenerated with his death and resurrection and the gift of the Spirit of Pentecost.

People and communities who accept to meet together open themselves to the surprise of a miracle of communion that the Spirit always wants to realize in our midst.

2. Listening to everyone

Directly linked to the first, the second aspect that St. Benedict underlines in chapter 3 of the Rule is that everyone be listened to. It is not just the abbot who must listen, otherwise there would be no need to summon the whole community, it would be enough for him to go around to all the monks and ask each one to express himself. Instead, no, it is important for each member of the community to hear the whole community. Ecclesial listening is not so much a consultation as a sharing.

St. Benedict insists on listening to each brother, even the youngest, that is the last one, because the awareness of what is best, of what God wants from us, is an agreement that we reach forming, as it were, a necklace of rings that intersect with each other, and only when the last ring is joined to the first is the necklace formed, beautiful and solid.

The listening of which St. Benedict speaks is not a question of democratic rights: it has a theological importance. "The reason why we have said all should be called for counsel is that the Lord often reveals what is better to the younger" (RB 3.3). The issue is listening to God, and by listening to God we are sure to know "what is better," the thing that has the greater goodness, truth, and beauty for us.

So this awareness of God's preference for the littler one, for the last one, for the least important in our eyes and the eyes of the world, becomes a discipline not only of listening but also of speaking. Each brother is invited to become small, to make himself "last," to take the last place at the banquet of sharing the Word: "The brothers, for their part, are to express their opinions with all humility, and not presume to defend their own views obstinately" (3.4). Here, too, there is the awareness that what opens us up to truth is not the affirmation of ourselves, of our "ego," but the affirmation of "us," communion. Only a word expressed by an "I" that sacrifices itself to the "we" is an echo of God's word, of the good will of God who wants what is best for all. The "I" that sacrifices itself to the "we" actually expands, becomes bigger, to the point that its word becomes a word of God, its will becomes God's will.

This attention to listening to each other with humility makes communion grow, even more than the fact of making the best decisions. The problem is not so much always making the right decisions, but rather making agreement grow, the "thinking together" of the community, based on the *"consensus fidei"* that the Holy Spirit makes us perceive when we realize that the Word of God stirs up within us and among us the same love for Christ, the way, truth, and life. "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?" (Lk 24:32). This is the experience that we are always called to have together, because the Risen One remains present, continues to speak to us, walks with us.

3. Synodal authority: a thinking heart

The third aspect, according to me, is fundamental especially for living out our responsibility and being truly authoritative, that is, capable of making the community grow in the communion and mission to which Christ calls it. St. Benedict requires this of the abbot: "After hearing the advice of the brothers, let him ponder it and follow what he judges the wiser course" (RB 3.2).

"Audiens consilium fratrum tractet apud se et quod utilius iudicaverit faciat": this phrase is entirely worth meditating on. The superior is called to judge and act, it is his responsibility and he cannot dispense himself from it. But here St. Benedict helps us understand that the good judgment and good work of a responsible manager, the wisdom of heart and of the hand, as the 77th Psalm says of David – "With upright heart he shepherded them, and guided them with his skillful hand" (Ps 77:72) – are the fruit of a resonance in the heart of what is heard from the brothers and sisters.

"Audiens consilium fratrum tractet apud se." It is like hearing St. Luke when he says that "Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart" (Lk 2:19). Mary knew how to listen to God by listening to the words of the simple shepherds who had come to adore the Child. The abbot is invited to do the same, listening to all his brothers, to the very last one.

This meditation *"apud se,"* this meditating with the heart, you could say within the *habitare secum*, on what has been heard from all, is perhaps the most important aspect, even if hidden, of the synodality of communion, and I think that it is asked not only of the superior, but of everyone.

If the word shared does not go down into meditation, it risks remaining just an idea, or a piece of information. It does not become a grain that falls into the earth and bears much fruit, perhaps after a long time. In this interior and silent meditation, lived out in prayer, the shared words take life, become fruitful, become events, new realities, processes of a new life. I often see this level of synodality missing in myself and in many superiors. But if we are missing this “pondering within oneself” of the words that we have exchanged, we remain at a political, or perhaps ideological, level of ecclesial and communal life, of the life of our Order, and then ecclesial life becomes fragile and dispersed, without true unity, at the mercy of power struggles.

In the camp of Westerbork, after hearing her companions lamenting in the night, Etty Hillesum wrote, “I would like to be the thinking heart of an entire concentration camp” (*Diary*, 3 October 1942). Yes, that is what we are dealing with. With listening to each other, offering to the words, to the lamentations, to the advice, to the ideas, to the projects of our brothers and sisters a heart that listens, that thinks, that meditates, as if to offer the words the soil in which to germinate and bear fruit for the Kingdom of God.

Omnipotent Love

But I cannot conclude this modest meditation without thinking of the last meeting of St. Scholastica with her brother St. Benedict (St. Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*, 2.33). Scholastica and Benedict granted each other a little annual, fraternal “synod,” during which they praised God and engaged in “sacred conversations.” When night falls, Scholastica insistently invites her brother to continue this exchange until morning, “to talk a little of the joys of heavenly life.” Benedict does not want to listen to her, out of rigid fidelity to monastic discipline. We know how the prayer of St. Scholastica provoked an immediate cloudburst that forced Benedict to remain with her. “They passed almost the whole night watching and satisfying each other with sacred conversations about the spiritual life.”

When Benedict reproves Scholastica for having provoked this irregular situation, his sister responds with her well-known phrase: “Behold, I begged you, and you did not want to listen to me; I begged my Lord, and he listened to me.” The great and concise final comment of St. Gregory is: “And if John says that ‘God is love,’ it was a very just judgment that she who love more could do more.”

This episode reminds us that the true fulfillment of every synodal and fraternal process is not just the agreement of words and decisions, but rather of love, the agreement of communion in the charity of God. Often we are deficient in truly listening to each other, in walking together all the way to the end, and even more in loving each other. But God repairs all, renews communion, makes the way keep going by granting an omnipotent love to the one who prays and loves him as “her Lord.”

“I prayed to my Lord and he heard me.”

The holy Curé of Ars says in one of his simple but intense thoughts: “Our Lord is pleased to do the will of those who love him.”

God listens to the one who loves him, he obeys our love, which is the love of mendicants. Perhaps we forget all too often to love Christ so that he will grant us to walk together in his love.