

INTIMACY WITH CHRIST¹

Our first priority

Opening Song, Hymn: “Veni Creator Spiritus”

We shall begin every meditation by singing one verse of this Hymn and saying a few words of commentary. The aim is to meditate on the word of God in the light and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, who “explores the depths of everything” (1 Cor 3:10). For this first meditation it is enough to say something about the history and the place of this hymn in the life of the Church.

The hymn was composed at the beginning of the ninth century by Rhabanus Maurus, Abbot of Fulda and later Archbishop of Mainz. He was one of the greatest theologians of his day, and had a profound knowledge of the writings of the Fathers of the Church. Since then it has resounded unceasingly like a solemn and extended invocation of the Holy Spirit over the Church and the whole of humanity. Starting from the early decades of the second millennium, every conclave, every ecumenical council, every synod, every meeting of any importance in the life of the Church, every priestly ordination, every consecration of a bishop, and in years gone by, every coronation of a monarch, began by singing the *Veni Creator*. Every new year, every new century, has begun with this song. I still remember St. John Paul II opening the new millennium in St. Peter’s by intoning a solemn *Veni Creator Spiritus*.

The *Veni Creator* has grown through the centuries by virtue of the fact that it has been sung. It has become charged with all the faith, the devotion, the ardent desire for the Spirit of all the generations that have sung it before our time. And now, thanks to the communion of saints, when even the most modest of little choirs of believers sings it, God hears in it the whole of that majestic “orchestration”.

The words of the *Veni Creator* condense the very essence of biblical revelation and patristic tradition concerning the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, precisely because they are derived from the Scriptures, the words of the hymn provide us with an “open structure”, capable of receiving each new awareness the Church has in the meantime discovered and experienced, concerning the Spirit.

The *Veni Creator* is not only a beautiful hymn providing a wealth of inspiring suggestion. It contains within its poetry a grandiose vision of the Holy Spirit in the history of salvation. It is the best synthesis we have in the Latin Church on the Holy Spirit and it has the advantage of being theology at prayer. In it we don’t speak *of* the Holy Spirit, but *to* the Holy Spirit.

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In the anointing of this “creator Spirit” let us begin now our retreat. Once, an American Capuchin brother said to me, partly in jest but also somewhat seriously, “I don’t think you are as great a preacher as people say. You have been preaching for so many years to the Roman Curia and I don’t see any conversion taking place there.” I answered, “Brother, I’m too busy trying to convert myself

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture texts are taken from the New American Bible, revised edition © 2010. Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Inc., Washington, DC.

than to think I can convert others.” I say the same thing to you. I did not come from Rome to convert you, but to encourage you, for, right now, that's what you need the most.

The Holy Father asked for my availability to lead a week of spiritual exercises for the Bishop Conference so that the bishops, far from their daily commitments, in a climate of prayer and silence and in a personal encounter with the Lord, may receive the strength and light of the Holy Spirit to find the right solution for the problems that afflict the Church of the United States today. And I intend to stick firmly to this intention of the pope which, I am sure, was also your intention in accepting and organizing so eagerly this retreat.

This means that I am not going to talk about pedophilia or give advice about eventual solutions. That is not my task and I would not have the competence to do it. This is a time for taking a break, as the psalmist says “away from the strife of tongues” (Ps 31:21), and to listen to the voice of the Lord of the Church. I am convinced that this approach is the only way to get to the root issues that the Church is facing, which are both different and deeper than the issues that usually come to mind.

Let us start then our spiritual journey with this intention in mind. The anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, at the beginning of his treatise on contemplation, gives to his readers an advice which is fundamental also for making a good retreat. In order to pierce the cloud of unknowing which exists above us, between us and God, we need to put first “a cloud of forgetting beneath us”, living aside for a time every problem, project or anxiety we may have at the moment.² Unless one doesn't take a strong resolution in this sense it will be very difficult for God to let his light and consolation come to us and we would waste our time. For once let us ask therefore the Holy Spirit for an unusual gift, not that of remembering but that of forgetting.

He appointed Twelve

The theme of our retreat is: “He appointed Twelve that they might be with him and he might send them forth to preach” (Mk 3:14) This compact statement carries a profound theological and ecclesial impact. It describes the birth of the Church as the community “built upon the foundation of the apostles..., with Christ Jesus himself as the capstone” (Eph 2:20). By choosing the Twelve, representing the twelve tribes of Israel, Jesus makes it clear that his work is not destined to end with himself, but will continue on into history, in a community that is the sequel and the fulfillment of the history of the People of God.

In this occasion, however, we leave aside the theological meaning of this text and concentrate on what it says about the mission of the apostles and their successors. “To be with Jesus” and “to preach the Gospel” — these are the two essential aspects of the apostolic mission that are the theme of our reflections.

We know from the Gospels what “being with Jesus” meant to the Twelve. It involved leaving one's home and work to follow him as he moved from place to place, and sharing everything with him: meals, rest, travels and hardships. In the biblical world, the teacher-disciple relationship was very different from what it is today. It involved more than just listening to lectures. The disciple actually went to spend quality time with the teacher; he learned the lessons from watching how the teacher lived. And that's how it was for the apostles. Theirs was a “seminary on the move” because the Teacher didn't have a fixed residence.

We ask ourselves: what does “being with Jesus” mean today for the successors of the apostles? The basic requirement, of course, is to live in a state of grace, with a conscience free of any serious sins.

² Cf. *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ch.5.

Nobody can be "with Jesus" while leading a double life, the one that people see, and an entirely different one that God sees. But that's not enough. Being "with Jesus" means cultivating an intimate relationship with him, making his presence in our life real and vibrant. Being "with" someone means far more than just living together, even under the same roof. When we ride a subway we are surrounded by a mob of people, but we are "with" no one. Being "with" someone means having a mutually personal relationship, similar to any other encounter between two unique individuals, each with his or her own insights and experiences.

We need to ask ourselves a question. Is Jesus for us a person, or just a personality, a celebrity, a cult figure? There's a big difference between the two. Personalities include people like Julius Caesar, Napoleon, George Washington, or any number of people who have a following today. A personality is someone whose name is on everyone's tongue, someone you can freely write about or talk about, but not someone you can talk to or speak with. By way of contrast, a person is someone you *can* talk with and speak to.

Unfortunately, for the vast majority of Christians, Jesus is a personality and not a person. He is part of a set of dogmas, doctrines or heresies. He is the one whose memory we celebrate in the liturgy, proclaiming the Eucharist as his real presence, but as long as we remain on the "objective" level, without Jesus becoming "subjective", that is, without developing a personal relationship between ourselves and himself, he remains external to us, outside of ourselves, something that touches our minds, but doesn't enter into and warm our hearts. And despite everything, there he remains, a remnant of the past, because we instinctively place twenty centuries between ourselves and him.

Still, Jesus said: "I am with you always, until the end of the age" (Mt 28:20). After his Resurrection, Jesus is alive and present "in the Spirit," that is, spiritually present, not physically as he had been with his apostles. But this new presence is even stronger and more real than his physical presence. Saint Paul writes: "Even if we once knew Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know him so no longer" (2 Cor 5:16). This means that this "spiritual" presence is better than the physical presence that the apostles enjoyed, precisely because it is internal, not external, and thanks to this, Christ is not only beside us but dwells within us.

In the life of a bishop, having an intimate relationship with Christ must have absolute priority. Great courage and assurance come to a Christian, and even moreso to a bishop, from doing everything with Jesus, feeling him present in every situation. "I am with you always" also means "I am with you in every situation, in every problem." Think of two newlyweds deeply in love with each other. From the very start of the day, each one is busy, both outside and inside their home, but it is clear where their heart is and where their thoughts turn as soon as they're free from the demands of the moment. That's how it must be for us with Jesus. This is a very high goal, and maybe only saints achieve it. But it is already grace to know that it is possible, and to want it, to steer ourselves toward it, and to ask the Holy Spirit to help us realize it.

Prayer, the indispensable means

We have arrived at the key point of this first meditation: prayer as the indispensable means for cultivating a relationship with Jesus. In the gospel there are, so to speak, two Jesuses. On the one hand, there's the "public" Jesus who casts out demons, preaches the kingdom, works miracles, and is involved in controversies; and on the other hand, there's the "private" Jesus who is almost hidden between the lines of the gospel. This latter Jesus is the praying Jesus.

I say "hidden between the lines" because what gives us a glimpse of him are often just short sentences, even fragments of sentences. It is very easy to miss these flashes, and to be left unaware

of this “other” Jesus: Jesus at prayer. Luke is the evangelist who takes the most pains in revealing the Jesus absorbed in prayer.

In chapter 5 of his Gospel we read: “Great crowds assembled to listen to him and to be cured of their ailments, but he would withdraw to deserted places to pray” (Lk 5:15-16). The use of the conjunction “but” is very eloquent. It creates a remarkable contrast between the pressing crowds and Jesus’ determination not to let himself be overwhelmed by them and give up his dialogue with the Father.

On another occasion, “He [Jesus] departed to the mountain to pray, and he spent the night in prayer to God. When day came, he called his disciples to himself, and from them he chose Twelve” (Lk 6:12-13). It is as if what Jesus did during the day was what had been revealed to him in prayer during the night.

Whenever Jesus prayed something happened to his face and to his entire being. One day Jesus was praying. Watching him pray, the disciples discovered for the first time what prayer really is. They came to the realization that they had never really prayed before, and they said, “Lord, teach us to pray” (Lk 11:1). And so the Our Father came into the world, as a gush of life emanating from Jesus’ prayer into the disciples. And the final trace of seeing Jesus at prayer is the one illuminating the scene at Gethsemane: “Kneeling, he prayed” (Lk 22:41).

Although the gospel tradition only gives us a glimpse into Jesus’ private prayer, we also must take into account that Jesus, like every other devout Israelite, would also have observed the three prescribed daily prayer times: at sunrise, during the Temple sacrifice in the afternoon, and at night before going to bed. Taken together with his thirty years of silence, work, and prayer at Nazareth, the overall picture of Jesus that emerges is of a contemplative who every so often moves into action, rather than of a man of action who every once in a while allows himself periods of contemplation. Prayer was a kind of unbroken infrastructure, the continuous fabric of Jesus’ life, in which everything else “is bathed.”

Let’s move from Jesus’ life to that of the Church. The conciliar texts of Vatican II speak insistently about the importance of prayer, especially liturgical prayer, in the lives of priests and bishops. I would like to recall the passage from Acts 6:4. When ministries are being distributed within the Church, Peter reserves prayer and the proclamation of the word for himself and the other apostles: “We shall devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” On that occasion, Peter, or rather the Holy Spirit speaking through him, laid down a basic principle for the Church: that a pastor can delegate everything, or nearly everything, to the other people around him, but not prayer!

Many of the verses describing the institution of deacons in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles are reminiscent of the institution of judges as described in the Book of Exodus. Let us listen to this passage because it is very important for the bishops of the Church:

The next day Moses sat in judgment for the people, while they stood around him from morning until evening. When Moses’ father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he asked, “What is this business that you are conducting for the people? Why do you sit alone while all the people have to stand about you from morning till evening? ...What you are doing is not wise,...You will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people with you. The task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. Now, listen to me, and I will give you some advice, and may God be with you. Act as the people’s representative before God, and bring their disputes to God. Enlighten them in regard to the statutes and instructions...But you

should also look among all the people for able and God-fearing men, ...Let these render decisions for the people in all routine cases. Every important case they should refer to you, but every lesser case they can settle themselves. Lighten your burden by letting them bear it with you! If you do this, and God so commands you, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people, too, will go home content. Moses listened to his father-in-law and did all that he had said (Ex 18:13-34).

Moses took Jethro's advice, and out of all the possible tasks, Moses chose to act "as the people's representative before God and to bring their problems to God." This did not prevent Moses from acting as lawgiver and continuing to be the true leader of the people, but it did establish a priority.

In his book *De consideratione*, written at the invitation of Pope Eugenius III, St. Bernard applies this lesson to the life of the pastor of the Church. At a certain point he asks permission to play the role of Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, and this is what he says to the Pope:

Do not trust too much to your present dispositions; nothing is so fixed in the soul as not to decay [...] I am afraid that you will despair of an end to the many demands that are made upon you and will become hardened. [...] It would be much wiser to remove yourself from these demands even for a while, than to allow yourself to be distracted by them and led, little by little, where you certainly do not want to go. Where? To a hard heart [...] This indeed is the state to which these accursed demands can bring you if you go on as you have begun, to devote yourself totally to them, leaving no time or energy for yourself [...] Now, since everyone possesses you, make sure that you too are among the possessors [...] Remember this and, not always, or even often, but at least sometimes give attention to yourself. Among the many others, or at least after them, do please have recourse to yourself."

Jesus taught us that prayer can become a kind of connective tissue of our day. "Pray always without becoming weary". "Pray without ceasing" (cf. Lk 18:1; 1 Thes 5:17). Saint Augustine says that prayer does not mean being constantly on our knees or standing with our arms raised to heaven. There is another kind of prayer, interior prayer, and that is desire. If our desire is continuous, our prayer will be continuous, too. If we desire God, the rest will follow by God's grace; even if our tongues fall silent, we will still sing and pray with our hearts. And the reverse is true as well: Without "desire," we can cry out as much as we want, but as far as God is concerned, we might as well be mute³.

We need to discover and cultivate this prayer of desire. "Desire" means something very deep; it is the habitual reaching for God; it is the yearning of the entire being, the longing for God. There's a geological typology known as a "karst phenomenon". When solid rock dissolves, it creates a sort of underground drainage system. When a river encounters one of these areas, it disappears and goes underground. Once the bedrock becomes solid again, the river rises to the surface and flows along in the sunshine. Our prayer needs to become like that. When activity absorbs us more, prayer must not disappear from existence, it needs to retreat and go on, at a deeper, even if unconscious, level. Once free from our preoccupations, our prayer then reappears, as it were, to become conscious and explicit.

We can learn something about prayer from our modern familiarity with computers and internet. As soon as in my apostolic travels I arrive to a certain destination the first preoccupation is to look for a connection to internet to get my mail and stay in contact with my home basis. Sometimes this

³ St. Augustine, *Letters* 130,10 CSEL,44 p.62 f.); *On the Psalms*, 3714 (CC 38, p. 392).

presents difficulties and you have to try different ways before succeeding. When finally the liberating page of Google appears on the screen, you feel relieved: you are connected, the whole virtual world is open for you. This experience has made me reflect. We could connect with another world, wireless, effortless and free. A short prayer, a simple movement of the heart and we are connected with the world of God, with the risen Christ, with the world that truly count for us.

However, continuous prayer or the prayer of desire must never make us neglect the vital need we have for a designated, fixed time for prayer, perhaps going to some solitary place, as Jesus did. Without time set apart for prayer, “unceasing prayer” or the prayer of the heart would be self-deception. St. Augustine has written: “Let us pray, therefore, with ceaseless desire springing from faith, hope and charity. But at fixed times and on given occasions let us pray to God with words, so that these signs may be an incentive to us and make us realize how much we have progressed in our desire and urge us on to make it grow in us”.⁴

I remember speaking about the importance of prayer in the life of a priest when someone objected: “But, Father, do you know how busy we priests are? How many demands are placed on us? When the house is on fire, how can we remain calm in prayer?” I answered: “You're right, brother, but imagine this: firefighters get a call; there's a fire. They race to the scene, with sirens blaring, but when they arrive, they realize that they have not even a drop of water in their tanks. When we neglect prayer, we have nothing with which to meet the needs of our people.

One of the critical areas we need to rethink is the relationship between prayer and action. We have to move beyond *juxtaposition* to *subordination*. Juxtaposition is when we pray first, and then we act. Subordination, on the other hand, is when we pray first and then do what emerges from our prayer! The apostles and saints prayed in order to know what to do, and not merely before doing something. For Jesus, praying and acting were not two separate things. He often prayed to the Father at night and then, when day came, he did what had been revealed to him in prayer... he chose the Twelve; he set off for Jerusalem; etc.

If we truly believe that God guides the Church with his Spirit and answers when we call, we ought to take the prayers preceding conferences and meetings much more seriously. There is no rush to get down to business. We do not get down to business unless some answer has been received by way of the Bible, or an inspiration, or a prophetic word. When discussion gets bogged down and no progress is being made, our faith emboldens us to say, “Friends, let's take a short break and see what light the Lord is willing to throw on our problem!”

Sometimes, even after this, it might look like nothing has changed, everything is as it was before and no obvious answer has welled up from our prayer; but this is not completely true. By praying, the problem has been “presented to God,” handed over to God, so to speak (cf. 1 Peter 5:7). We have stripped ourselves of personal points of view and interests. Whatever decision is made will be the right one before God. The more time we devote to praying over a problem, the less time will be needed to solve it.

We need “to restore the power to God”: the power of deciding, the initiative, the freedom to intervene at whatever moment in the life of his Church. In other words, we need to place our trust back in God, not in ourselves. The Church is not a rowboat driven forward by the strength and skill of the arms of those who are in her, but a sailboat driven by the wind which blows it along “from above.” No one knows “where it comes from or where it goes” (cf. Jn 3:8) — but the wind is caught by the “sail” of prayer.

⁴ St. Augustine, *Letters* 130, 9, 8 (CSEL 44, , p. 60 f.)

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Somewhere I read a story that I think applies in an exemplary way to bishops and priests. You may have already heard it, but it's good to recall on an occasion like this one. It allows us to end on a lighter note.

One day, an old professor of the School of Public Management in France, was invited to lecture on the topic of "Efficient Time Management" in front of a group of fifteen executive managers representing the largest, most successful companies in America.

Standing in front of this group of elite managers he said, "we are going to conduct an experiment. From under the table, the professor pulled out a big glass jar and gently placed it in front of him. Next, he pulled out from under the table a bag of stones, each the size of a tennis ball, and placed the stones one by one in the jar. He did so until there was no room to add another stone in the jar. Then the professor asked, "Is the jar full?" The managers replied, "Yes."

The professor paused for a moment and replied, "Really?" Once again, he reached under the table and pulled out a bag full of pebbles. Carefully, the professor poured the pebbles in, and slightly rattled the jar, allowing the pebbles to slip through the larger stones until they settled at the bottom. Again, the professor lifted his gaze to his audience and asked, "Is the jar full?"

At this point, the managers began to understand his intentions. One replied, "apparently not!" "Correct," replied the old professor, now pulling out a bag of sand from under the table. Cautiously, the professor poured the sand into the jar. The sand filled up the spaces between the stones and the pebbles.

Yet again, the professor asked, "Is the jar full?" Without hesitation, the entire group of students replied in unison, "NO!" "Correct", replied the professor. And the professor reached for the pitcher of water that was on the table, and poured water into the jar until it was absolutely full. The professor now lifted his gaze once again and asked, "What great truth can we deduce from this experiment?"

With his thoughts on the lecture topic, one manager quickly replied, "We learn that, as full as our schedules may appear, if we only increase our effort, it is always possible to add more meetings and tasks."

"No", replied the professor. The great truth that we can conclude from this experiment is If we don't put all the larger stones in the jar first, we will never be able to fit all of them later. What are the large stones — the priorities — in your life? The important thing is to give priority in your schedule to these large stones." If we give smaller things in life (the pebbles and sand), our lives will be filled up with less important things, leaving little or no time for the things in our lives that are most important to us. Once you identify the large stones in your life, be sure to put them first.

For a bishop or a priest, to put the large stones first in the glass can mean, very concretely, to begin the day with time for prayer and dialogue with God so that the activities and various commitments of the day do not end up taking up all our time.

STAYING WITH JESUS MEANS GOING THROUGH A RADICAL CONVERSION

In this meditation I'd like to continue our reflection on what it means for the successors of the apostles, "to stay with Jesus" on a personal and existential level. All four evangelists underscore the special attention Jesus gave to the formation of the apostles. The central purpose of that formation was to lead his disciples from thinking according to the way of the world, to thinking according to God's way — literally, a *metanoia*, that is, a radical change of mind.

The Gospel of Mark is especially attentive to this aspect of the ministry of Jesus. The three central chapters of his Gospel, Chapters 8, 9 and 10, are dedicated to this issue. The fact that instead of omitting these rather embarrassing stories the apostles wanted them to be remembered by future generations of believers shoes the importance they attached to the lessons of the Master. We have heard them countless times, but we can't avoid meditating on them in a retreat like this. So let us quickly review them to pull together the essential teaching of Jesus.

After the confession of Peter at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus started speaking about his imminent trials; Peter began to rebuke him but Jesus

rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do.' He summoned the crowd with his disciples and said to them, 'Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the gospel will save it'" (Mk 8:31-35).

In the following Chapter the lesson continues:

"He was teaching his disciples and telling them, 'The Son of Man is to be handed over to men and they will kill him, and three days after his death he will rise.' But they did not understand the saying, and they were afraid to question him.

"They came to Capernaum and, once inside the house, he began to ask them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?' But they remained silent. They had been discussing among themselves on the way who was the greatest. Then he sat down, called the Twelve, and said to them, 'If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all'" (Mk 9:31-35).

The lesson reaches its peak in Chapter 10.

"They were on the way, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus went ahead of them. They were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. Taking the Twelve aside again, he began to tell them what was going to happen to him. 'Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and hand him over to the

Gentiles who will mock him, spit upon him, scourge him, and put him to death, but after three days he will rise” (Mk 10:32- 34).

It is very disconcerting to read what follows. James and John completely miss the Master's point and ask him to be allowed to sit, one at his right and one at his left, in his glory! But they were not the only ones to have such ambitions. The other ten “became indignant at James and John.” Why? Because they had the same aspirations! Here, for the first time, we have a candid manifestation of what will later become known as ecclesiastical careerism. The answer of Jesus contains a complete “inversion of values” in the history of the world:

"Jesus summoned them and said to them, 'You know that those who are recognized as rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones make their authority over them felt. But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all. For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many’” (Mk 10:42-45).

Frederick Nietzsche reacted to this and criticized Jesus for introducing the cancer of pusillanimity into humankind, discouraging people from aspiring to do great things and to excel. But Nietzsche was completely mistaken, even from a purely literal point of view. Jesus does not forbid his disciples to aspire to greatness or to want to be first. In fact he says: “whoever wishes to be great among you,” “whoever wishes to be first.” So, it is OK to want to be great and even to want to be first. But the way of achieving that goal is what has changed, from climbing over people in order to dominate, to serving others out of love. Hitler embodied the ideal of Nietzsche, Mother Theresa of Calcutta the ideal of Jesus, and even the secular world recognizes where true greatness lies.

Lest we be mistaken about the mind of Jesus, we need to clarify what the expression “to deny oneself” (cf. Mt 16:24) really means. What do these words tell us? They tell us that if I want to follow Christ I must not side with myself or defend myself or my nature, or cling to myself in an attempt to make my life more secure. On the contrary, I must deny myself and my natural tendencies, renounce myself in an openness to God, until death. Denial is never an end in itself, nor is it an ideal in itself. The most important thing is the positive aspect: “If anyone wants to come after me;” it is to follow Christ. To say "no" to oneself is the means; to say "yes" to Christ is the end. Take up our cross and follow Jesus: Where? to Calvary? No! Calvary is not the finish line; the resurrection is!

This saying of Jesus goes to the heart of the matter. It’s a question of knowing what we want to build our existence on, whether it’s on one's self or on Christ; of knowing who we want to live for, whether it’s for ourselves or for the Lord. This is a dramatic choice we see in the lives of the martyrs. On one particular day they found themselves in a situation of either denying themselves or denying Christ. In a somewhat different way, every disciple faces the same choice every day and even at every moment.

Christian asceticism, therefore, is substantially much more than renunciation. It’s much more than self-inflicted suffering. It means putting off the dirty rags of our sinful nature and restoring in us the beautiful image of God, like removing the rust to let the real metal shine

again. The amount of joy we can experience in life is in proportion to the object of the choices we make. If we choose ourselves, we would have a very miserable source of nourishment, a dry nursemaid, "broken cisterns that cannot hold water," as Jeremiah calls them (Jer 2:13). But if we choose Christ, we have chosen the source of eternal and endless joy because he is risen!

Back to us!

Let us turn our attention from the apostles, back to ourselves. Since it's rooted in our fallen human nature, the struggle is the same for us as for the apostles. Our natural inclination is to dominate rather than to serve. One of the most illustrious scholars of ecclesiology at the time of the Vatican Council, Louis Bouyer, pointed to the abandonment of the evangelical concept of spiritual *potestas* as service, and its slow assimilation to the worldly idea of dominion. He described it as the true cancer that has afflicted the life of the Church, causing endless conflicts between popes and emperors, between popes and councils, and between popes and local bishops. Schisms are the most harmful consequence of this "secularization of ecclesiastical authority".¹ Reading the Syriac *Constitutions of the Apostles* and other liturgical and disciplinary books, we see how the local bishop, already in the fourth century, was transformed into a *dominus*, a lord, on whose will everything depended. I won't even mention what came later in the history of the Church.

We are overwhelmed nowadays by the moral scandals involving the clergy, and rightly so; but we fail to see how much more gospel-like and humble the Church of Christ has become, how more free from worldly power. I would even say that, in some respects, this is a "golden age" compared to past centuries when many bishops were more concerned about governing their territory than caring for the flock. In the past, to be a bishop was an honor; today it is a burden. In Italian the two words are very similar: honor is *onore*, burden is *ònerè*. But precisely because of that there is more merit in being a bishop nowadays than in all the past centuries, with the exception perhaps of the first three centuries when bishops stood first in line for martyrdom. Today we can repeat without reserve what St. Paul wrote to Timothy: "If anyone aspires to the office of bishop, he desires a noble task", "bonum opus desiderat" (1 Tm 3:1, Vulgate). A noble task because a demanding task!

But we should not deceive ourselves. The struggle is not over. Human nature has remained the same. Maybe the temptation is more subtle nowadays. The battlefield is in the heart and mind of each person more than in the external, public arena. Ambition, careerism, desire for promotion and prestige are present at every level of Church life, not just among the ranks of the hierarchy. Blaise Pascal once wrote:

Vanity is so deeply rooted in the heart of man that a soldier, a churl, a cook, a picklock, boast and wanty have admirers; and philosophers expect to have them too; and those who write against them want to enjoy the reputation of writing well; and those who read them want to enjoy the notoriety of having read them; and I, who am writing this, have perhaps the same desire; and perhaps those who will read it.²

¹ L. Bouyer, *L'Eglise de Dieu*, du Cerf, Paris 1970.

² Blaise Pascal, *Pascal's Pensées*, trans. Martin Turnell (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), p. 134; Braunschweig ed., #150.

This human tendency doesn't disappear with priestly ordination or episcopal consecration. So we need to find the weapon that the Word of God provides us with to fight it. I believe that the account of Pentecost has something to say to us on this topic. It is well known that, in Acts 2:5-13, Luke wanted to draw a contrast between Pentecost and Babel. This interpretation—common in both Eastern and Western Christianity—was welcomed into the liturgy which included the episode of Babel among the readings for the vigil of Pentecost. What happened at Pentecost was the undoing of everything that was the result of Babel. That is why Luke places so much stress on the phenomenon of tongues. At Babel, everyone started out speaking the same language, but at a certain point no one could understand anyone else any longer. At Pentecost, the people at first were divided into many language groups (Parthians, Elamites, and so on), but at a certain point they all began to understand one another. Why?

The people of Babel had set about building a tower, saying to one another, “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the sky, and so *make a name for ourselves*; otherwise we shall be scattered all over the earth” (Gen 11:4). What they wanted was to “make a name for themselves.” They were concerned, above all, with their own desire for power and to ensure their own dominant position. But turn now to Pentecost. Why was it that they all began to understand one another? We find the answer in what the people were saying to one another: “We hear them speaking in our own tongues *of the mighty acts of God*” (Acts 2:11). They all understood the apostles because the apostles were not talking about themselves, but about God. They had set out, not to make a name for themselves, but for God. A short time before, they had been discussing among themselves who was the greatest, but not anymore. They were dead to any glory of their own. That is why the Spirit was able to put effective words in their mouths.

The Fathers had many profound things to say about Babel, but on one point they were mistaken. They thought that the people who set out to build the Tower of Babel were atheists, titans who wanted to challenge God. But that is not the way it was. They were pious and religious people. The tower they wanted to build was one of those famous temples of stepped terraces, called *ziggurat*. The ruins of several of them can still be seen in Mesopotamia today. Where, then, was their sin? They wanted to build a temple *to* God but not *for* God. It was their own glory that they were seeking, not God's. They thought that, by building a temple higher than any other in that region at that time, they would be able to deal with God from a position of strength and so coax favors and victories from him.

At a stroke, this brings the whole affair close to us. Babel and Pentecost are two construction sites still open and still working in our own history. Augustine based his great work, *The City of God*, on this fact. In the world, he says, people are building two cities. One is Babylon, founded on love for oneself pushed to the extreme of despising God (“*amor sui usque ad contemptum Dei*”); the other is the City of God, the new Jerusalem, and its foundation is love of God taken to the extreme of disregard for self (“*amor Dei usque ad contemptum sui*”). Every person is called to choose in which one of these two building sites he or she wants to spend his or her life. The famous meditation of the two battlefields and the two banners developed by St. Ignatius of Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises*, is inspired, in my opinion, by the vision of St. Augustine in the *De civitate Dei*.

Pastoral initiatives, missions, religious undertakings, no matter how holy, may contribute to the building of the city of God, or they may contribute to the building of Babylon. If those involved are seeking to affirm their own reputation and make a name for themselves, they are for Babylon; if those involved are seeking only God's glory and the coming of his kingdom, they are for Pentecost.

But we need to be realistic. Is it possible to extinguish in us every desire to do well, to be approved by our superiors, in short to make a name for ourselves? The answer is, no, we cannot. Only the saints at the end of their spiritual journey arrived at the point of being completely indifferent to the opinion of others. Saint Paul could say, "Am I now currying favor with human beings or God? Or am I seeking to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a slave of Christ" (Gal 1:10). I have certainly not arrived at that point. I even wonder if Saint Paul, with his words, was expressing an acquired spiritual status or rather a firm resolution of his will.

In fact, the word of God does not ask us not to experience these feelings, but that we continually rectify our intentions. We are not asked to renounce our natural desire to be affirmed, to be valued and to have our ideas move forward; it is a question of knowing what the underlying intention of our will is: what it is that we *want*, not what we *feel*. Jesus made a statement one day that has the power of accomplishing what it signifies and that we can make our own in every circumstance: "I do not seek my own glory" (Jn 8:50). In him, for sure, this was not just a simple desire but a lived reality.

Our battle is not just against our inner self, it's against the world! As I mentioned earlier, according to the words of Jesus, the essential conversion, true *metanoia*, consists in passing from thinking according to the way of the world to thinking according to God's way. St. Paul takes up this teaching in the Letter to the Romans where he says,

"Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect" (Rom 12:2).

In the Letter to the Ephesians we read,

"You were dead in your transgressions and sins in which you once lived following the age of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the disobedient" (Eph 2:1-2).

The exegete Heinrich Schlier has done a penetrating analysis of this "spirit of the world" whom Paul considers the direct antagonist to the "Spirit of God" (1 Cor 2:12). It plays a decisive role in public opinion, and today it is literally the spirit "of the air" because it spreads itself electronically through the air. Schlier defines "the general spirit of the world" as

the spirit of a particular period, attitude, nation or locality. Indeed, it is so intense and powerful that no individual can escape it. It serves as a norm and is taken for granted. To act, think or speak against this spirit is regarded as nonsensical or even as wrong

and criminal. It is “in” this spirit that men encounter the world and affairs, which means they accept the world as this spirit presents it to them. It is their [spirits’] nature to interpret the universe and human existence in their own way.³

This describes what we call an “accommodation to the spirit of the age.” That spirit operates like the legendary vampire. The vampire attacks people who are sleeping, and while he is sucking out their blood he simultaneously injects a sleep-inducing liquid into them that makes their sleep sweeter, so that they always sink into deeper sleep and he can suck out all the blood he wants. The world, however, is worse than a vampire because the vampire cannot make his prey fall asleep and can only approach those who are already asleep.

The world, on the other hand, first puts people to sleep and then sucks out all their spiritual energy, injecting them with a kind of sleep-inducing liquid that makes them find sleep even sweeter. The remedy for this situation is for someone to shout in the sleeper’s ear, “Wake up!” And this is what the word of God does with us: “Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead” (Eph 5:14); “it is the hour now for you to awake from sleep” (Rom 13:11).

Today we have a new image to describe this corrosive action in the world, the computer virus. The virus, for what little I know, is a maliciously crafted program, which penetrates into a computer through the most unsuspected ways (through the exchange of e-mails, information and programs); and once it has penetrated, confuses or blocks normal operation, altering the so-called "operating models". The spirit of the world does the same. It penetrates us in a thousand ways, like the air we breathe, and, once inside, changes our models; the model "Christ" is replaced with the "world" model. John wrote that all that is in the world is "sensual lust, enticement for the eyes, and a pretentious life" (1 Jn 2:16), in other words, sex, money, prestige.

The Bishop and his praesbyterium

Before concluding, I want to point to an important pastoral lesson we can derive from the Gospel. In the first meditation I said that in the Gospel there are two Jesuses: the Jesus who preaches and works miracles, and the Jesus who prays. I should correct myself; in reality there are three Jesuses: the Jesus for the Father, the Jesus for the crowds, and the Jesus for his apostles. The last one occupies no less than one third of the Gospel. It is moving to see Jesus sitting with the Twelve, instructing them, going fishing and eating with them, explaining to them the parables and, as we have seen, correcting them.

I see in this a model of how a bishop should act with his priests. I see three priorities in the life of a bishop: communion with God, communion with the Church entrusted to his care, and communion with the pope. In the communion with his own Church, a priority is no doubt fellowship with his priests. Pope Francis very often urges bishops to spend time with their priests, even at the expenses of other engagements.

I have personally witnessed how important it is for a local praesbyterium that the bishop be with them at some events, especially at a retreat. I remember once preaching a retreat to the

³ Heinrich Schlier, *Principalities and Powers in the New Testament* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1961), pp. 31-32.

clergy of a Spanish diocese. There were over 200 priests: the bishop came at the beginning, said a prayer, then saluted the audience saying that he had to preside over a Mass at a local monastery of sisters. I asked myself: was his presence at the monastery more important than to be with his clergy? At other times I have seen how more seriously the clergy takes a retreat when the bishop is among them. His presence gives to the event an ecclesial character, makes the Church present there.

Of this intimate communion between the bishop, the priests and the deacons of a Church, we have a moving testimony in the letters of Saint Ignatius of Antioch. Let us conclude by listening to what he wrote to the Church in Ephesus as he were speaking to us today:

Wherefore, it is fitting that you should run together in accordance with the will of your bishop, which thing also you do. For your justly renowned presbytery, worthy of God, is fitted as exactly to the bishop as the strings are to the harp. Therefore in your concord and harmonious love, Jesus Christ is sung. And do you, man by man, become a choir, that being harmonious in love, and taking up the song of God in unison, you may with one voice sing to the Father through Jesus Christ [...] Let no man deceive himself: if anyone be not within the altar, he is deprived of the bread of God. For if the prayer of one or two possesses such power, how much more that of the bishop and the whole Church!⁴

May our local churches today be blessed, in some measure, with such divine harmony! We can, at least, pray for that.

⁴ St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Ephesians*, IV-V.

TO BE WITH CHRIST MEANS
TO SHARE HIS CELIBACY FOR THE KINGDOM

Let us resume now our journey through the Gospel. Jesus revealed to his disciples a special way of being with him, a more radical way of sharing in his mission, without however imposing it on everyone as a “*conditio sine qua non*.” This more radical way consists in choosing to renounce “marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (cf. Mt 19:12), that is, in order to be totally dedicated to the Gospel, as was Jesus himself. For Catholic clergy this is no longer an option, but an integral part of our vocation.

This is neither the time nor the place to discuss when and why obligatory celibacy was introduced into Canon Law. What I would like to do is to make a contribution to our understanding of the value of this aspect of our priestly life. Priestly celibacy has become the topic of numerous debates within the Catholic Church today; and outside the Church, it is often looked upon with suspicion and pity. Given this atmosphere, the very word “celibacy” evokes the idea of an unresolved problem or a “burning” issue rather than a freely embraced commitment and a gift of grace.

Whether because of all the fuss surrounding it, or the thought that perhaps one day—who knows?—church law might change, celibacy today is not experienced with a sense of serenity, and the depth of its spiritual fruitfulness fails to be realized. As a consequence, candidates for the priesthood, and even many priests, are left without the necessary, spiritual support required for living this very important and difficult aspect of priestly life.

What we need, I believe, is a complete reversal of our mindset. I think this can only happen through a renewed contact with the biblical and theological roots of this state of life. We live in a time when we can no longer rely on the external support mechanisms and safeguards that used to undergird the observance of chastity, especially the supports that were rooted in traditional asceticism and canon law. Forces that have created this new situation range from the ease of communications to a certain “aura of promiscuity” that intrudes on every aspect of our lives. Television, the Internet, advertisements, movies, newspapers — all things that, with the power of a tsunami routinely flood our homes and our minds with the world and force us to look. Maintaining chastity is now left to the individual for the most part, and cannot rely on anything except firm personal convictions drawn from the Word of God.

So I want to speak about ecclesiastical celibacy in entirely positive terms because perfect chastity for the sake of the Kingdom was, is and always will be part of Christ’s design. No one will ever be able to uproot from the Church this plant that Jesus himself sowed. As Church law, of course, mandatory celibacy can be abolished, but celibacy itself, that is, the possibility of choosing to follow Jesus in this radical and beautiful way, can never be eradicated.

In the history of the Church, mandatory celibacy for priests is just one of many forms that the Gospel proposal of perfect chastity for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven has taken. We need to return to the text in order to understand its meaning and value. And it's the text itself that allows us to speak interchangeably about priestly celibacy, consecrated virginity and the vow of chastity. One text from the Second Vatican Council summarizes this Gospel value in this way:

Chastity "for the sake of the kingdom of Heaven" (Mt 19:22) which religious profess, must be esteemed as an exceptional gift of grace. It uniquely frees the hearts of men and women (see 1 Cor 7:32–35), so that they become more fervent in love for God and for all humanity. For this reason it is a special symbol of heavenly benefits, and for religious it is a most effective way of dedicating themselves wholeheartedly to the divine service and the works of the apostolate. Thus, for all Christ's faithful, religious recall that wonderful marriage made by God which will be fully manifested in the age to come, and in which the church has Christ alone for her spouse."¹

This text highlights the various dimensions of celibacy and consecrated virginity that I intend to explore: the prophetic dimension, the apostolic or missionary dimension, and the spousal dimension. To these three dimensions, I will add a fourth, the charismatic dimension.

The Prophetic Dimension of Priestly Celibacy

The prophetic dimension of celibacy is the one that emerges most clearly from Christ's saying about those who are "eunuchs" for the Kingdom of Heaven:

The disciples said to him, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry." But he said to them, "Not all men can receive this precept, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to receive this, let him receive it" (Mt 19:10–12, RSVCE translation).

The word "eunuch" was as jarring and offensive in those days as it is for us today. When Jesus used it in this context, it was probably because his adversaries were accusing him of being a eunuch because he was not married, the same way they accused him of being a glutton, a drunkard, and a friend of tax collectors and sinners (cf. Lk 7:34). In taking up what his adversaries were saying, however, Jesus conferred an entirely new meaning to the word, "eunuch", a spiritual meaning rather than a physical one. And early Christian authors always understood the word "eunuch" in this Gospel text in a spiritual way,

¹ *Perfectae caritatis (Decree on the Up-to-Date Renewal of Religious Life)*, 12, in *The Sixteen Basic Documents: Vatican II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations*, gen. ed. Austin Flannery (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996), p. 393.

except for Origen who, contrary to his habit of explaining everything spiritually, interpreted this passage literally, mutilated himself, and paid a high price for it later.

Jesus endorsed a second state of life in this world, and this Gospel text is its “Magna Charta”. Perfect chastity does not mean that you have to disavow marriage. Quite the contrary. Perfect chastity is meaningless unless you also affirm marriage! If marriage were something negative, renouncing it would not be a free choice but a duty. It is precisely the recognition of this second state of life that elevates marriage to being a “vocation” and not simply a natural obligation.

To understand the inner logic of this new state of life, we need to start with the motive Jesus offers for it: “for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven.” The Kingdom of God (which Matthew, following Jewish custom, calls the Kingdom “of Heaven”) has a dual characteristic that theologians today generally express by using the terms: “already” and “not yet.” In one sense, it is “already” here; it has come and is now present. But in another sense, the Kingdom of Heaven has not yet come; it is still on its way. That’s also the reason why Jesus invites us to pray, “Thy kingdom come” (Mt 6:19).

Since the Kingdom of Heaven has already come and, in Christ, ultimate salvation is already at work in the world, it is possible that some people, called by God, may choose to live, here and now, as people will live in their longed for state in the Kingdom where people “neither marry nor are given in marriage [for] they can no longer die” (Lk 20:34–36; see also Mt 22:30).

The *prophetic dimension* of virginity and celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom lies precisely in this. Through its very existence, this state of life shows what the ultimate state of human beings will be. This prophetic state of life, far from being opposed to married people, is instead to their advantage. It reminds them that marriage is holy, beautiful, created by God, and redeemed by Christ, but that is not the whole story; it is not “the end of the story”. Marriage is something tied to this world, and therefore is transitory.

Many people aim to make a good marriage their ultimate goal in life. A successful marriage is equated with success in life. The problem is that when they make marriage unduly absolute, unreasonable expectations arise, expectations that could never possibly be met. And the first thing that suffers under the crushing weight of those expectations is the marriage itself which undergoes a crisis at the first sign of difficulty. That is why I say that the alternative state of life affirmed by Christ is a help to married people themselves. It frees up marriage and each of the two spouses from the unbearable burden of having to be everything to each other and to take God’s place.

In light of this prophetic character of virginity and celibacy, we understand how misleading and false is the claim that celibacy as a state of life is contrary to nature and hinders people from fully being themselves, from being a “real” man or a “real” woman. This concern weighs terribly on the minds of young people today, and is one of the major reasons that holds them back from responding to a religious or priestly vocation.

This claim, made by the founders of modern psychology, was based on a materialistic and atheistic view of the human being. What psychology has to say on this issue might carry some weight for someone who does not believe in God or in the immortality of the soul, but it carries no weight for those who view human beings from the perspective of faith, or at least from a perspective other than a completely materialistic point of view.

Rather than deny human nature, virginity and celibacy actually fulfill it at a deeper level. To know what a human being is and what is “natural”, human reasoning (especially when influenced by Greek philosophy) has always based itself on its analysis of human *nature* (*physis*). And according to the etymology of the word “nature,” it means what a person is bound to be by *birth*: a rational animal.

But the Bible does not understand human nature in those Western philosophical categories. From the Bible's perspective, an individual is not only what he or she is determined to be by birth, but also what he or she is called to become through the exercise of freedom in obedience to God. To be a human being is a vocation! Existentialism came close to this vision when it placed freedom and self-determination at the center of the meaning of human existence.

If nature were the only consideration, there would be no valid reason to resist natural tendencies and impulses. However, there's also the question of vocation. In a certain sense, we could say that a human being is most “fulfilled” precisely when living “single for the sake of the Kingdom” because people are not called to live in an eternal relationship as a couple, but to live in eternal relationship with God.

In the past, there was a lot of discussion about whether or not virginity-celibacy is a more “perfect” state than marriage, and if so, in what sense. I believe that celibacy is not *ontologically more perfect*: each state of life is perfect for the person who is called to it. Virginity-celibacy is, however, *eschatologically more advanced* in the sense that it more clearly approximates the definitive state toward which we are all journeying. Saint Cyprian, a married bishop, wrote to the first Christian virgins, “What we shall be, already you have begun to be.”²

The Missionary Dimension of Celibacy

This dimension reflects the rationale for celibacy derived from the fact that the Kingdom of God has “already” come. In another sense, though, as we have already said, the Kingdom has “not yet” come but it is still on its way. It must come in *intensity*, to permeate the whole of life, within the Church and within every believer, and it must come in *extension*, that is, until it reaches the ends of the earth. Since the Kingdom of God has not yet fully come but is still coming, there need to be men and women who dedicate themselves full time and wholeheartedly to the coming of that Kingdom. This is the *missionary* or apostolic *dimension* of virginity and celibacy.

It is difficult to imagine what the face of the Catholic Church would look like today if

² St. Cyprian, *De habitu virginum* (*On Virginity*), 22.

there had not been a host of men and women throughout the ages who had renounced “house or wife...or children for the sake of the kingdom of God” (cf. Lk 18:29). The proclamation of the Gospel and the Church’s mission have in large part rested on their shoulders. They were the ones who advanced our understanding of the Word of God through their studies; they were the ones who opened up new paths of Christian thought and spirituality; they were the ones who brought the proclamation of the Kingdom to far-off nations; they were the ones who brought into existence almost all the charitable institutions that have so enriched the Church and the world.

From what we have seen so far, it is clear that celibacy does not imply sterility but, on the contrary, it bespeaks of enormous fertility. It entails, however, a different type of fertility, spiritual rather than physical. But a human being is comprised of both spirit and body, not just a body. So, by its nature, this spiritual fertility is also exquisitely *human*. That's something that Catholics have known very well all along, and in every culture they have spontaneously called celibate men “Father” and virgins, “Mother.” How many priests are still simply called “Father”, and in many countries women religious are still called “Mother,” even after they have been proclaimed saints by the Church! We continue to speak of “Padre Pio” or of “Mother Teresa” as if the title “Father” or “Mother” were more important than the title “Saint” with which the Church has adorned them in the meantime.

It is this conviction that allowed Saint Paul to address the Christians in Corinth, saying: “Even if you should have countless guides to Christ, yet you do not have many fathers, for I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (1 Cor 4:15). It allowed him to call the Galatians “My children, for whom I am again in labor until Christ be formed in you!” (Gal 4:19). For a priest, the absence of experiences of spiritual fatherhood in generating children in the faith through his proclamation of the gospel represents a true “impotence.” We all know priests who have faced crises on this account, with all their disastrous consequences.

People today talk a lot about “the quality of life.” They say that the most important thing is not to increase the *quantity* of life on our planet but to raise its *quality*. Over and beyond what they have done and continue to do to raise the medical, social and cultural quality of life, celibates and virgins for the sake of the Kingdom are also called to pour themselves out in an effort to raise the spiritual quality of life.

At times people criticize the Catholic Church for having given too broad an interpretation of Jesus’ saying about being celibate for the Kingdom by imposing it on all her priests. It seems to me that it is far more serious that some Christian churches claim to preach a “full gospel” yet lack any way of fulfilling this evangelical directive of celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom. For more than ten years I have been a member of the Catholic delegation to the ecumenical dialogue with Pentecostals. Because of the friendly atmosphere among us, I once allowed myself to joke in our meeting, “You always talk about the ‘full gospel’ that you preach,” I said to them with a smile,” but it seems to me that your gospel is indeed full...but full of holes.”

Since it is not of divine origin, mandatory celibacy for priests can, of course, be changed by the Church, if at a certain point she thought it necessary. I do not consider it within my purview to deal with this issue. However, no one can honestly deny that, despite all the difficulties and defections, celibacy has benefited the cause of the Kingdom and of holiness enormously, and is still today a very efficacious sign of the Kingdom in the midst of the Christian people.

The Spousal Dimension of Celibacy

Paul's text in 1 Corinthians 7 permits us to move now to another dimension of celibacy and virginity, the dimension I have called "spousal":

The world in its present form is passing away. I should like you to be free of anxieties. An unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord. But a married man is anxious about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, and he is divided. An unmarried woman or a virgin is anxious about the things of the Lord, so that she may be holy in both body and spirit. A married woman, on the other hand, is anxious about the things of the world, how she may please her husband. I am telling you this for your own benefit, not to impose a restraint upon you, but for the sake of propriety and adherence to the Lord without distraction (1 Cor 7:31–35).

I would call your attention to a development here in the meaning of celibacy and virginity. The text of Matthew 19 states that one foregoes marriage "for the sake of the Kingdom," that is, for a *cause*. The text of 1 Corinthians, however, states that one foregoes marriage "for the Lord," that is, for a *person*. This development is not, however, due to Saint Paul, but to Jesus himself because, after dying and rising for us, he has become "the Lord" and made the Church his spouse (see Eph 5:25ff).

Let us examine a bit more closely what this implies. It is not entirely true that celibate people and virgins do not marry. We speak metaphorically about people who have "espoused" a cause when they have given themselves completely, body and soul, to a cause and made the interests, the risks, the success of that cause their own. Don't we say that Karl Marx espoused the cause of the proletariat and Simone de Beauvoir that of feminism? How even more appropriate is the claim, then, that the celibate and the virgin are married to the kingdom, having given themselves not just to a "cause" but to a person.

Having risen from the dead, Jesus is alive and present in the world. He is the jealous spouse who reproves the Church at Ephesus for having abandoned its "first love" (see Rev 2:4). It is not a question, then, of the celibate or the virgin renouncing a "concrete" love for an "abstract" love, that is, of renouncing a real person for an imaginary one. It is a question of renouncing a concrete love for another concrete love, of renouncing a real person for a person who is infinitely more real.

Love suffers at times from an unfortunate division which the theologian Anders Nygren

sought to justify theologically in his famous work entitled *Agape and Eros*.³ On the one hand, there is agape, divine love that comes down, which is pure gift, compassion, and grace. On the other hand, there is human love, eros, which instead involves a search, desire, and a presumption of saving oneself through one's own efforts, giving something back to God in exchange. The relationship between agape and eros, according to Nygren, is modeled on the relationship that Luther sees between faith and works. There is no place for eros in our relationship with God, says Nygren, as the New Testament demonstrates by excluding this word from its vocabulary.⁴

The result is the radical secularization of eros that is now made completely worldly. And while a certain dialectical theology was excluding eros from agape, secular culture was only too happy to exclude agape from eros, thereby removing every reference to God and grace from human love. Freud followed this line of thinking to its extreme, reducing love to eros and eros to libido, to mere sexual instinct.

In his encyclical *Deus caritas est*, Pope Benedict XVI rightly rejected this opposition and spoke of eros and agape as two dimensions or movements of love that are both present whether in God's love for human beings or in human beings' love for God and for one another.

Eros and agape—ascending love and descending love—can never be completely separated. ...Biblical faith does not set up a parallel universe, or one opposed to that primordial human phenomenon which is love, but rather accepts the whole man; it intervenes in his search for love in order to purify it and to reveal new dimensions of it.⁵

This reconciliation of the two loves has implications not only for spousal love but also for celibate love. I know there are other ways of characterizing them, but somewhere I read the following description of the two musical genres “hot jazz” and “cool jazz.” “Hot jazz” is passionate, fiery, expressive, arising from outbursts of feelings and leading to original improvisations. “Cool jazz” occurs when the music turns professional: the emotions become repetitious; technique is substituted for inspiration; virtuosity is substituted for spontaneity; and the musician plays more from the head than from the heart.

Often the love in which celibates are formed has something of “cool jazz” about it. It is a love that comes “from the head” and more through the exercise of the will than from any intimate movement in the heart. It is shaped in a pre-set mold, rather than each person giving expression to his or her own unique and unrepeatable love that corresponds to the uniqueness of each person before God. Acts of love toward God in this case are like those of inexperienced lovers who write their beloved a love letter that has been copied out of a book.

³ Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, trans. Philip S. Watson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953).

⁴ I have responded to this last argument in one of the meditations addressed to the papal household during Lent 2011 [English text in: <http://www.cantalamesa.org/?p=1331&lang=en>].

⁵ Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est (God Is Love)*, 7, 8.

If worldly love is a body without a soul, this kind of religious love is a soul without a body. A human being is not an angel, not a pure spirit. Rather, a human being is a body and soul that are substantially united. Everything a human being does, including love, necessarily reflects this structure. If the human component linked to affection and to the heart is systematically denied or repressed, there are two results: people either wearily drag themselves forward out of a sense of duty or to protect their image, or else they compensate in ways that range from what is more or less licit all the way to those very sad cases we all know so well.

The strength and beauty of priestly celibacy consists in a love for Christ that is comprised of agape and eros, that is, of sacrifice, of the gift of oneself, of faithfulness, but also of desire, joy, passion, and admiration. Nicholas Cabasilas writes, "From the beginning, human desire was made to be gauged and measured by desire for Christ, and is a treasury so great, so ample, that it is able to encompass even God. ...He, then, is the [soul's] repose because He alone is goodness and truth and anything else it desires."⁶

People ask, "In this life, is it possible to fall in love with someone who cannot be seen or touched?" This is the crucial point. The resurrection allows us to think about Christ not as someone in the past but as a person who is alive and present, with whom I can speak, whom I can also "touch" since, as Augustine says, "Whoever believes in Christ touches Christ."⁷ We need to remember what we have said about the difference between a *personality* and a *person*. Jesus is not just a personality, a celebrity, a memory of the past; he is a living person.

Jesus is the perfect man. In him are found, to an infinitely superior degree, all those qualities and expressions of personal attention that a man looks for in a woman and a woman looks for in a man. His love does not necessarily insulate us from the attraction of the opposite sex. This is part of our nature that God himself created and does not want to destroy. However, his love gives us the strength to overcome these other attractions because of an attraction that is more powerful. "A chaste man," writes John Climacus, "is someone who has driven out eros by means of Eros,"⁸ meaning in the first case carnal love and in second case love for Christ. Celibacy without an ardent love of Christ—or at least a strong desire for that love—is an empty shell, comparable to a marriage without love.

The Charismatic Dimension of Celibacy

We come now to the last dimension of celibacy, the pneumatic or charismatic dimension. Let us begin with the passage from Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:25: "Now in regard to virgins

⁶ Nicholas Cabasilas, *The Life in Christ*, 2, 19, trans. Carmino J. deCatanaro (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974), p. 96.

⁷ St. Augustine, "Sermon 243," 2: "Tangit Christum, qui credit in Christum." See *Sermons (230-272B)*, trans. Edmund Hill, vol. 7, *The Works of Saint Augustine*, ed. John E. Rotelle (New Rochelle, NY: New City Press, 1993), p. 89.

⁸ John Climacus, *Scala Paradisi*, 15, 98.

I have no commandment from the Lord, but I give my *opinion*" (*gnome*, translated in the Vulgate as *consilium*). In the past, perfect chastity—as well as voluntary poverty and obedience—was explained mostly in the category of “evangelical counsels.” A clear summary of this doctrine, to which we always return, is that of Saint Thomas in his *Summa theologica*.⁹

The limitation of the concept of “counsel” is that it belongs more to the realm of law than of grace, more to duty than to gift. I would suggest that, to get a fresh perspective, it is worth our while to make use of a different category, the one that the apostle himself uses: the category of charism. He says, “Each has his particular gift [*charisma*] from God, one of one kind and one of another” (1 Cor 7:7), that is, the married person has his or her charism and the virgin has his or her charism.

If celibacy or virginity is essentially a charism, then it is a “manifestation of the Spirit,” because that is how a charism is defined in the New Testament (see 1 Cor 12:7). And if it is a charism, then it is more a gift *received* from God than it is a gift *given* to God. A charism is a *gratia gratis data*, a free gift. The saying of Jesus that “It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you” (Jn 15:16) applies, then, to celibates and virgins in a special way. One does not choose celibacy in order to enter into the Kingdom but because the Kingdom has entered into him or her. You do not remain celibate to better save your soul but because the Lord has taken hold of you, has chosen you, and you feel the need to remain free to respond fully to this calling.

What stands out here is the need for a conversion that consists in moving from an attitude of someone believing he has offered a gift and made a sacrifice to a completely different attitude of someone realizing he has received a gift and must first of all express thanks. I do not think there is a single consecrated person who has not understood or intuited at some time, especially at the blossoming of their vocation, that what they were receiving was the greatest grace from God for them after baptism. At any rate, this is what I understood when I first received my religious and priestly vocation at the age of 12!

If celibacy is a charism, then it must be lived charismatically, that is, the way a person usually relates to a gift. First of all with *humility*. “What do you possess that you have not received? But if you have received it, why are you boasting as if you did not receive it?” (1 Cor 4:7). The martyr Ignatius of Antioch wrote, “If anyone is able to persevere in chastity to the honor of the flesh of the Lord, let him do so in all humility. If he is boastful about it, he is lost.”¹⁰ Some Fathers of the Church, like Saint Jerome, Saint Augustine, and Saint Bernard, ended up even saying that an incontinent person who is humble is better than a proud celibate.

Celibates are more exposed than other people to the temptation of pride and self-sufficiency. They have never knelt before a creature acknowledging their incompleteness and their need for the other. Like a beggar, they have never stretched out their hand to

⁹ See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, I-IIae, q. 108, a. 4.

¹⁰ St. Ignatius of Antioch “Letter to Polycarp,” 5, 2, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Francis X. Glimm et al. (New York: Christian Heritage, 1947), p. 126.

another human being, and said, “Give yourself to me because I, by myself, am not complete,” which is what a young man says when he declares his love to a young woman.

To live chastity with humility means not presuming on one’s own strength, recognizing one’s vulnerability, and leaning only on God’s grace through prayer. Saint Augustine said,

I believed that continence lay within a man’s own powers, and such powers I was not conscious of within myself. I was so foolish that I did not know that, as it is written, no man can be continent unless you grant it to him [see Wisdom 8:21]. This you would surely have given, if with inward groanings I had knocked at your ears and with a firm faith had cast all my cares upon you.¹¹

We know Augustine’s cry of victory once he discovered this truth: “Oh, God, you command me to be continent; well, give me what you command and then command me as you will.”¹²

Secondly, if celibacy is a gift of the Spirit, it must be lived with *freedom* because “where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Cor 3:17). This liberty is, of course, internal, not external, and signifies the absence of psychological problems, scruples, uneasiness, and fear. A great wrong was done to celibacy and virginity in the past when that state of life was enveloped by a swarm of fears, misgivings, and admonitions to “be careful about this; watch out for that!” making this vocation a kind of path where all the signposts read, “Danger! Danger!” It ended up moving sexuality into a completely profane context in which God is in the way and must be excluded. It has become a topic that is spoken about through subtexts with double meanings and always with some malice and guilt. This is an enormous wrong against God. It is as if the devil, and not God, were the specialist in love! We need to stand against this usurpation.

In order to live the charism of celibacy with freedom, it is helpful to have a healthy consciousness and acceptance of the sexual dimension of our lives. Human sexuality, as we know today, is not confined solely to its procreative function but has a vast range of possibilities and resonances within a person, some of which are fully valid for celibates and virgins. The celibate and the virgin have renounced the active exercise of sexuality but not sexuality itself. It is not something we leave behind. It remains and “informs” so many expressions of a person. The celibate does not cease being fully man, nor does the virgin cease being fully woman.

This fact is also recognized by psychology which acknowledges the possibility of “sublimating” sexual instinct without destroying it, of spiritualizing it and making it serve goals that are equally worthy of human beings. The sublimation process can be ambiguous if it is unconscious and directed toward creating surrogates, but it can also be positive and indicative of maturity if it is supported by sound motives and lived in freedom. There are celibates not only for the sake of the Kingdom; there have been

¹¹ St. Augustine, *Confessions*, 6, 11. p. 150.

¹² *Ibid.*, 10, 29.

celibates for the sake of art, for scholarship, and for other noble goals in life.

Insofar as possible, given our present condition compromised by sin, a healthy understanding of sex also helps a person to have a calm, clear picture of the whole of created reality, including the transmission of life. We need to look at the opposite sex, falling in love, and procreation with clear eyes. We need, in short, to have eyes like Jesus. What liberty he had in speaking about all these things and in using them as metaphors and parables for spiritual realities!

We should not be surprised or unduly worried if at certain times we experience the strong “appeal” of the opposite sex and, for us priests, an attraction to women. That is not wrong; it is simply natural. It goes back to the fact that in the beginning, “God created them; male and female he created them” (see Gen 1:27). We should not hide behind a screen of false “angelism.” Instead, we need to make use of that “appeal” and attraction to the other sex and offer it as a special part of our “living sacrifice.” We need to say to ourselves, “Well, this is exactly what I have chosen to offer up for the Kingdom and for the Lord.”

I have spoken of attraction to the other sex. We are well aware today that it is also possible to feel attracted to someone of the same sex. I will completely avoid entering into this delicate matter which requires a pastoral discernment far beyond my competence and the scope of a retreat. I only want to point to a misunderstanding I have frequently discovered in my ministry. I’m referring to the conviction in some priests with a homosexual orientation that, because they are attracted to the same sex, they are permitted or at least excused to act out accordingly. In other words, that the law of priestly celibacy doesn’t apply to them. I once had to say to someone who expressed this opinion: “Dear brother, I too am attracted to women but this doesn’t mean that I am allowed to have intercourse with a woman; when you asked to become a priest you accepted celibacy just as I did.”

Finally, if chastity for the sake of the Kingdom is a charism, it should be lived with *joy*. The best advertisement for vocations is a joyful, calm, peaceful priest. Through his simple life, he testifies that Jesus is capable of filling his life and making him happy. Sometimes when participating in events promoting vocations I have had the impression that the invitation to a priestly vocation and to religious life has been made with the following unspoken but clear subtext: “Embrace our life, even though it entails celibacy; you will be able to contribute to the coming of the Kingdom, help the poor, raise people’s consciousness, live free from slavery to things, and promote social justice.” I believe we should simply repent of having such little faith and have the courage to invite young men to embrace the vocation of priesthood not *in spite of* celibacy but *because* of it, or at least *also* because of it.

Celibacy and Marriage

One of the most important consequences of speaking about virginity and celibacy in terms of being a charism is the decisive elimination of the latent opposition between

chastity for the Kingdom and marriage, an opposition which has plagued both these Christian vocations.

If we begin from the vantage point of charism and vocation, these two states of life can finally be fully reconciled and even build each other up. A charism, Saint Paul says, “To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit [*i.e., the common good*]” (1 Cor 12:7). Saint Peter affirms the same thing when he writes that “As each one has received a gift [charisma], use it to serve one another” (1 Pet 4:10). Applied to our situation, this means that celibacy is also for the sake of married people. It is not a private affair or a choice for one’s personal path to perfection. It is “for the common good” and “for the service of one another.” The same is true for marriage.

Consecrated persons remind married people of the primacy of God and of that which does not pass away. They introduce married people to a love for the word of God, for which consecrated persons have more time and availability, and are able to study more in-depth and to “break open” for their brothers and sisters. But celibates also have much to learn from married people. From married persons, we learn generosity, self-forgetfulness, service to others, and often a certain human quality that comes from direct contact with the tragedies of life.

A better understanding of married people’s lives helps us not to have a false idea of marriage, such as portrayed in films and on television. It teaches us a healthy realism; makes us discover the benefits of celibacy, and not just its sacrifices, and it makes us aware of the problems and difficulties married people go through. In my opinion, those who are urging the abolition of mandatory celibacy for priests should beware of the illusion that all the problems of the clergy would be resolved by its abolition.

I conclude with an eulogy of Catholic priesthood and celibacy written by the famous French Dominican Henri-Dominique Lacordaire. Particularly during these times, it may seem idealistic and unrealistic, but it is completely true and deserved by so many priests. It is good for everyone to hear it again, at least as an ideal to pursue and as something to point out to young men who will come after us.

To live in the midst of the world, with no desire for its pleasures; to be a member of every family, yet belonging to none; to share all sufferings, to penetrate all secrets, to heal all wounds; to go daily from men to God, to offer Him their homage and petitions, to return from God to men, to bring them His pardon and His hope; to have a heart of iron for chastity and a heart of flesh for charity; to teach and to pardon, console and bless, and to be blessed forever. O God, what a life is this, and it is thine, O priest of Jesus Christ.¹³

¹³ Henri-Dominique Lacordaire, qtd. in David Rice, *Shattered Vows* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1990), p. 137.

TO BE WITH JESUS
IS TO SHARE HIS POVERTY

Let us turn now to our leading theme. For the apostles, to be “with Jesus” meant, among other things, to share his poverty. In the Gospel of Luke we read, “As they were proceeding on their journey someone said to him, ‘I will follow you wherever you go.’ Jesus answered him, ‘Foxes have dens and birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head’” (Lk 9:57-58).

The successors of the apostles, bishops and priests, can no longer live this kind of poverty. No doubt, there are countries where bishops still live a poverty very close to that of the time of Jesus, but this is certainly not the case of your country nor of mine. For us, to share the poverty of Jesus means, first of all, to uphold his teaching on riches and poverty; it means keeping alive in the world the cry, “Blessed are you who are poor, for the kingdom of God is yours. ... But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation” (Lk 6:20, 24).

“Rich” and “poor” are ambiguous terms. Both can have a positive and a negative meaning. In other words, there is a type of human wealth which, in the eyes of God, is appalling poverty; conversely, there is a human poverty which, in God's eyes, is enormous wealth. Indeed, “What does the rich man possess if he does not have God? And does a poor man lack anything if he has God?”¹ Bad riches, says Jesus, consists in “storing up treasure for oneself” and good riches in “being rich in the eyes of God” (cf. Lk 12:2-11). Saint Francis of Assisi used to say that good poverty consists in being “poor in temporal things and rich in virtue.”²

But we need to make a preliminary observation to clear the ground of possible misunderstandings. The Gospel never condemns earthly goods and riches in themselves. Joseph of Arimathea, “a rich man”, was one of Jesus' friends (cf. Mt 27:57). Zacchaeus was declared “saved” even though he kept for himself half of his goods, which must have been considerable (cf. Lk 19:8). What Christ condemns is attachment to money and goods, trusting in them as if “one's life depended on them” (cf. Lk 12:15). Such wealth is variously called “deceitful” (cf. Mt 13:22), and those who pursue it “foolish” (cf. Lk 12:20).

This evangelical denunciation of wealth has a double motivation: one depending on *wisdom* and the other on *eschatology*. The first is based on the fact that it is folly to spend one's life amassing wealth when we know we could be summoned to leave this life at any moment without knowing who would inherit our wealth: “You fool, this night your life will be

¹ St. Augustine, *Sermo* 85, 3.3 (PL 38, 521).

² St. Francis Of Assisi, *Approved Rule*, Chapter 6.

demanded of you; and the things you have prepared, to whom will they belong?" (Lk 12:20).

This motive is already found in the Wisdom Books of the Old Testament. "[The rich] say: 'I have found rest, and now I shall feast on my goods!'. They do not know how long it will be till they die and leave them to others" (Sir 11:18ff). "Do not fear when a man becomes rich,," says one psalm, "At his death he will not take along anything. ... In his prime, man does not understand. He is like the beasts—they perish" (Ps 49:17ff).

The eschatological motivation, on the other hand, is absolutely new, and once again has to do with the coming of the Kingdom. It is here that all the tragic danger of wealth is revealed. Wealth makes it hard to enter the Kingdom, more difficult than it is for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle (cf. Lk 18:24).

Blaise Pascal formulated the famous principle of the three orders or levels in which a person can be great and outstanding: first, the material or bodily order; second, the order of the intellect or genius; and third, the supernatural order of holiness and grace. Just as in nature there is a chasm separating the three kingdoms: animal, vegetable and mineral., so too, there is a gulf separating each one of these levels from the other two. Material riches neither add to nor subtract from genius, which moves on a different plane. Neither material nor intellectual greatness adds to or subtracts from the holy, which belongs to a different order of greatness which is witnessed by God and not by curious human eyes or minds. "Some," concludes Pascal, "are able to admire only bodily greatness, as though intellectual grandeur did not exist. Others admire only the intellectual, as if in the order of wisdom there did not exist some instances of greatness that are far superior."³

In light of this classification, we might define someone who places all his boast in material wealth as a person who is "rich but in a poor order!" The rich person deludes himself that he has reached the summit of the scale of greatness, unaware that above him are worlds of which he knows nothing, similar to someone who spends his life in the stables of a castle, without knowing what happens on the upper floors, in fact unaware that they even exist.

If we ask on what do we base this scale of values, the answer is simple. Material goods are, by nature, self-regarding and private. They cannot be shared with others. Very often huge riches are accumulated at the expense of others. In this sense Christ was right to use the word "dishonest" when describing this type of wealth (cf. Lk 16:11). It always creates inequality and is a source of endless jealousy, envy and division. It is therefore unjust, not merely because it is the fruit of injustice, but because it causes it.

Intellectual riches (art, philosophy, inventions) are at the half-way stage. They can enrich others (think of the pioneers of modern technology), but they may also harm others. How many scientific discoveries have been used for war or to manipulate life! By contrast, spiritual resources, by their very nature, are always transmissible and able to be shared. They never enrich one person without simultaneously enriching all. They unite rather than divide. If I enrich myself in faith, hope or charity, or grow in the grace of Christ (which are

³ B. Pascal, *Pensées*, n.793.

the things that Scripture calls true riches), not only do I deprive no one of anything, but, being absolute human values, they make all humanity grow.

Riches and poverty appear for what they really are if we consider them in the light of eternity. Here, we are touching the core of the problem. Anything said about poverty stands or falls by one's idea of time and eternity. Without eternity it would be hard to escape the conclusion: "Eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!" (Is 22:13; 1 Cor 15:32). This is why I believe no word more urgently needs to be brought back to life and put back into circulation than the word "eternity".

In light of eternity, the rich man, says Saint Augustine, resembles a poor beggar who one night had a beautiful dream. He dreams that he has suddenly inherited a huge fortune. In the dream, he is covered in splendid clothes and surrounded with gold and silver, the owner of fields and vineyards, so proud of himself that he even despises his own father and pretends not to recognize him... But in the morning, he wakes up to find himself clutching a handful of flies.⁴ And so it is with the rich man; he wakes up in eternity to discover that it was only a dream.

The idolatry of money, root of all evil

The word of God goes even further in its denunciation of unbridled attachment to riches. It calls it idolatry: "the greed that is idolatry" (Col 3:5; Eph 5:5). Mammon, or money, is not simply one idol among many - it is *the* idol par excellence. It is, literally, a "molten god" (cf. Ex 34:17). We can understand why. Who is God's real enemy in this world, his competitor, objectively if not subjectively (in other words in reality, if not intentionally)? Is it Satan? But no man decides to serve Satan without a reason. He does it because he believes there will be some temporal advantage in it for him. Christ tells us clearly who the real alternative master, who the anti-god, really is: "No one can serve two masters. He will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon" (Mt 6:24).

Mammon is the anti-god because it sets up a sort of alternative world, it changes the object of the theological virtues. Faith, hope and charity are no longer placed in God, but in money. All values are perniciously inverted. Scripture says: "nothing will be impossible for God," (cf. Lk 1:37) and again: "Everything is possible to one who has faith" (cf. Mk 9:23) But the world says: "You can do anything if you have enough money." And, on a certain level, all the evidence seems to agree.

Karl Marx spoke of "the alienating omnipotence of money." He wrote: "Money, having the particular attribute of buying everything and appropriating every object, is therefore preeminently an object. The universality of this characteristic which it possesses constitutes its essential omnipotence... I am, in essence, that which is available to me through money, which I can pay for. My power is as great as the power of money. What I am and what I can do are not determined by my individuality at all. I may be ugly, but I can buy myself the most beautiful woman, therefore I am not ugly."⁵

⁴ Cf. St. Augustine, *Sermo 39,5 (PL 38, 242)*.

⁵ K. Marx, *Economic and philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*.

But Marx' critique, though penetrating, is powerless and self-contradicting. If the only human needs are the economic ones, how can one prove that the power of money is in fact alienating and inhuman since, as he admits, it serves wonderfully well to satisfy those needs? On that basis one will not get much further than the traditional tirades and condemnations of money by poets and philosophers. Already, Virgil spoke of the "abhorrent greed for gold."⁶ In a powerful synthesis, Shakespeare calls money "the visible god."⁷

Such cries of revolt as these are powerless. An effective critique of the alienating power of money is only possible if we know another order of wealth, a higher instance which stands in judgment over money and makes it relative. Christ did not confine himself to describing or condemning the power of money: he crushed it. The Book of Daniel tells of an enormous statue with a gold head and feet of clay, symbolizing the kingdoms of the world (cf. Dn 2:31-45). A stone, detaching itself from the mountain, struck the statue at its weakest point and smashed it to pieces. In the Christian interpretation of the story, the stone is Christ. His coming has smashed even the hardest empire to put down, which is the empire of Mammon.

Not only has he smashed it, he has given countless disciples of his the power to do the same. Money, which to the mass of people meant everything, to them meant nothing at all. Francis of Assisi's attitude of total refusal of money⁸ may appear outdated nowadays, but we have more recent witnesses in this regard. I knew an English businessman, a man of deep faith, who died some years ago. He wrote an article on the use of money, and at the end of it there is a kind of personal testament, which read:

Money is a tainted thing, and the only way in which I will not be tainted by it is to use it honestly and generously. I must see it as a means to do good for others, and not as the foundation of my own happiness and security. I am only a steward called by God to use the talents and wealth that he has loaned me to build his kingdom here on earth. I shall be judged for my stewardship and not for my wealth. I cannot use money to pay for a better lawyer, nor to bribe the judge. I can only use it to lay up treasure for myself in heaven by every little act of love and unselfishness towards the least of Jesus' brothers and sisters whom he sends to me for help.⁹

Those who knew him knew that this really was his rule of life. He, too, was one of those to whom Christ gave the power of conquering the god of money. Scripture says "the love of money is a root of all evils" (1 Tm 6:10). When I was young, I used to think this statement was exaggerated and, therefore, to be taken relatively, not absolutely. Now I am more and more inclined to take it literally. There are few sentences in Scripture that people today would be as happy to subscribe to, as this one.

Behind every evil in our society there is money, or at least there is *also* money. Money is like Molech of biblical memory, to which young sons and daughters were offered up (cf. Jer 32:35), or the cruel Aztec god who had to have his daily quota of human hearts offered in sacrifice. What else lies behind the drug trafficking which destroys so many lives, or the

⁶ Virgil, *Aeneid*, III, 57 (*auri sacra fames*).

⁷ W. Shakespeare, *Timon of Athens*, Act IV, sc.3.

⁸ Celano, *Second Life*, XXXV,65.

⁹ R. Hobbs, *Money: a tainted thing?*, in "The Month" 2 (1989) 77.

Mafia, political corruption, and the arms trade? Once a doctor who worked as a volunteer in Rwanda, was interviewed on television. He showed the mangled bodies of people blown up by mines - mostly children who had been playing or mothers who had gone out in search of food or firewood. "To think," the doctor commented, "that for every one of these mangled bodies someone is making millions selling explosives and mines!"

Faced with a crime or a mystery, it used to be fashionable to say "*Cherchez la femme*," look for the woman! It would be much more accurate to say: "*Cherchez l'argent*" - look for the money!, "follow the money trail"- because money is nearly always the instigator or motive. In the 70s and 80s of the last century, an almost mythical idea of the "arch-Manipulator" gained ground in Italy: this was supposed to be a cunning and extremely powerful character who was said to be working behind the scenes, pulling the strings and controlling everything for purposes known only to himself. It was a way of explaining the sudden political upheavals, the hidden power games, the terrorism and all kinds of mysteries afflicting society at the time. In fact, this "arch-Manipulator" really does exist, and his name is Money!

How often these days have we felt like crying out like Christ: "You fool!" when we see people in responsible positions who hardly know which bank to use or where to hoard the proceeds of their corruption? Suddenly they find themselves in the dock or in a prison cell, just as they were about to say to themselves: "Now, my soul, enjoy yourself!" Who did they do it for? Was it worth the trouble? Did they really benefit their children or their families, or their party, if that's what they intended? Or did they instead ruin themselves and others? Money is a cruel god who seeks to punish himself his worshippers.

And what is the point of it all? Saint Francis of Assisi, with a severity unusual in his writings, describes the fate of someone whose only purpose in life is to increase their "capital". Death is approaching, the priest is called and asks the dying man: "Do you want to be absolved from all your sins?" And the man answers, "yes." The priest continues: "Are you ready to make restitution for all the wrongs you did, and give back everything you gained by cheating your fellow men?" The man answers: "I can't." "Why not?" "Because I have left everything in the hands of my relatives and friends." And so he dies unrepentant, and as soon as he is dead his relations and friends say to themselves: "A curse on his soul! He could have made much more and left it all to us, but he did not!"¹⁰ (A similar story is told by John Grisham in his novel, "The Testament").

If we move from what happens in the world and to consider what happens in the Church, we can see how much evil has been caused over the centuries by attachment to money, even in the Church. What was behind the centuries of debilitating struggles between Church and Empire throughout the Middle Ages? Or behind the decline of dioceses, abbeys and monasteries at certain periods? "Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather," Jesus said (cf. Mt 24:28). Wherever riches are concentrated, there the greed of the kings and lords (nowadays we should probably add "and lawyers!") of this world is targeted.

¹⁰ Cf. St. Francis of Assisi *Letter to all the Faithful*, 12., in "Omnibus", cit., p. 98.

The effect of the beneficiary and prebendary system in past centuries was such that offices were not assigned on the basis of the sanctity and the merits of individuals, but on the rights and customs that had nothing at all to do with the life and interests of the Church. Ecclesiastical *offices* were reduced to ecclesiastical *benefices* occupied by people who often never set foot in the diocese or abbey where they held titular office, and all they did was send their trustees out in due course to collect their revenues.

In the struggle over Investiture, Pope Gregory VII sustained an epic contest with the Empire to remove ecclesiastical offices from the control of the secular powers. The abuse soon resurfaced in another form during the rise of the nation States in Europe; and we know how the Protestant reformation itself took the turn it did because many bishops were conditioned by their rich possessions and had to obey laws other than those of Christ.

A message to be lived and proclaimed

We now come to the most important part of this meditation: what use can we make today of this whole section of the Gospel, with its denunciations of the alienating and destructive power of Mammon?

The first thing to do is to *live* it, to let it challenge and judge us. We must first free ourselves of Mammon, so as to free others! We should thank God for the present state of the Church and the clergy on this point. We often complain about the bad times we live in, and the decline of faith. All this may be true. But we too easily idealize the past. We forget what the life of the Church was like for many centuries, when the Church even possessed a "State" - the Papal States - and bishops were also "princes." Church appointments have long since become once more what they truly are: ministries or services, not offices sought after for the worldly benefits they confer.

It is obvious, of course, that we have not yet reached perfection and never will. It may be good to remind the clergy of the need to avoid bombarding people with requests for money at the parish, local and national level, because these requests often produce the opposite effect, giving a false impression of the Church and alienating the sympathy of many. Experience teaches us that where a good relationship exists between pastor and people, when the priest really gives his life for the flock, they not only provide for his needs but are happy to help and assist far beyond the bare minimum. It is so sad to hear that in some countries people (hundreds of thousands of people every year) leave the Church to avoid paying Church taxes, though I realize that this is a complex matter which cannot be blamed on any one single factor.

Saint Peter reminds Christians that they were ransomed "not with perishable things like silver or gold" (cf. 1 Pt 1:18), and a little further on he addresses this warning to the elders of the Church: "I exhort the presbyters among you, as a fellow presbyter and witness to the sufferings of Christ and one who has a share in the glory to be revealed. Tend the flock of God in your midst, [overseeing] not by constraint but willingly, as God would have it, not for shameful profit but eagerly" (1 Pt 5:1-2).

So money should be the last thing to keep people away from the fruits of redemption. We also have to avoid even the appearance of simony, that is, selling sacred things, setting too rigid a tariff for church services. Saint Paul writes: "I want not what is yours, but you.

Children ought not to save for their parents, but parents for their children. I will most gladly spend and be utterly spent for your sakes" (2 Cor 12:14-15).

This suggests an important consideration for us: the money earned or saved by a prelate or minister of the Church in serving the Kingdom can have no fairer destination than the poor, because Christ himself has made them his heirs and "collectors" (cf. Mt 25:31 ff.) Who should receive the royalties on everything that is written about the Gospel if not the author of the Gospel, and hence the Church or the poor? The minister of the Gospel has a right to support himself from the Gospel, but not his nephews and relatives!

But let us leave aside the negative aspects and dangers to be avoided, and concentrate on the positive ideal God's Word puts forward in this area for believers, especially for clerics and churchmen. Rather than in the renunciation of riches, it consists in replacing them with a different kind of wealth. We know that, in his letters, Saint Paul gives little space to condemning riches and money. He nearly always speaks about riches in a positive way, because for him they refer to a new kind of true wealth which he calls the riches of his *glory* (cf. Rm 9:23; Eph 3:16), of his *grace* (cf. Eph 1:7; 2:7; 1 Cor 1:5), and above all, of *Christ*. "The inscrutable riches of Christ" (Eph 3:8) is what counts for him. Since they have Jesus Christ, the apostles are people who "have no possessions, yet possess everything" (cf. 1 Cor 7:30).

The second task of the Church, after living Christ's doctrine on riches and poverty, is to *proclaim* it. The idolatry of money must be attacked as decisively as the idolatry of sex. St. John Chrysostom makes a comparison between the two and concludes that the love of money is worse than carnal love. In other words, avarice is a graver vice than lust. "The lustful man," he says, "loves bodies and the avaricious man loves riches, but the latter is worse because the power that draws him is smaller... On the subject of money, Christ says: 'If you do not give up all your possessions...'" (Lk 14:33), but nowhere does he say: 'If you do not give up women.'¹¹ No doubt, this statement of the saint needs some qualification, but it is significant that such a rigorous moralist as Chrysostom felt moved to speak in such daring terms.

Our model in this proclamation about poverty and riches is Mary. In the *Magnificat* (cf. Lk 1:46-55) she declares: "He has thrown down rulers from their thrones... the rich he has sent away empty." She does not say, "He will throw down...he will send...", but "He has thrown down...he has sent" - she proclaims something that is as good as done. However, we might object: "Where, Mary, has this revolution you speak of happened? You know very well that the mighty, such as Herod, have remained firmly on their thrones, while the humble, such as yourself and Joseph, far from being raised up were obliged to seek refuge in a stable and flee to Egypt?"

The fact is that Mary places herself on the level of faith where the change is actually under way, in fact it has already happened. She is a witness - for the moment, the single solitary witness - to the fact that the Kingdom has come and has created a new scale of values. The old greatness, the old riches, now count for nothing at all because a new greatness and a new wealth have appeared on the scene. It is like when there is a change of political regime in a country: the old currency is declared no longer legal tender and a new one is brought in.

¹¹ St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Letter to Titus*, 5,2.

Saint Irenaeus wrote that, on that occasion, "Mary cried out prophetically in the name of the Church."¹² She was the first to cry out what the Church is invited to repeat after her. We are coming to see more and more clearly that neither ideologies nor revolutions have succeeded in changing the situations of injustice and oppression of the poor which are a reality in so many countries of the world. Why don't we once more try Christ's method, which was to preach in the spirit of prophecy: "Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation" (Lk 6:24)? I never understood how strong this word is and how much power it contains until I once had to proclaim it in a place where the Mafia ruled undisturbed. There I understood that it was the only possible weapon we have when dealing with people who consider themselves believers in Christ.

On Christ's lips such a cry is far from being a cry of impotent anger. It is the pure and simple truth. Like all Christ's words it is a cry of love, a cry of sadness, and that is how it ought to sound on the lips of the Church. It would not then leave the rich so indifferent when they hear it. "Woe to you" indeed, because the calamity you are bringing upon yourselves is even greater than the misfortune you cause others. You have already received your consolation, you have nothing more to expect in future: you have no future, except the fearful future judgment.

Why do we not try to speak as the prophet Isaiah did against the big landowners of his day? "Ah! Those who join house to house, who connect field with field until no space remains, and you alone dwell in the midst of the land!" (Is 5:8). Or use the language of Saint James: "Come now, you rich, weep and wail over your impending miseries. Your wealth has rotted away" (cf. Jas 5:1-2). Here again, history does not record that in James' time corn suddenly began to rot in the granaries. But, like Mary, the apostle was standing on a level that is much more real than the level of history. From now on, the truly wealthy ones are the poor whom God chose "to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom that he promised" (Jas 2:5).

There are levels and aspects of reality that cannot be perceived with the naked eye but only with infrared or ultraviolet light. Infrared pictures of entire regions of the planet can now be taken from satellites. How different those regions appear! Well, thanks to the Word of God, the Church is able to give a different perspective on life and on the world as it really is - the picture that God has of them and the one Mary offers in her Magnificat. We must never grow tired of putting this picture before people's eyes, again and again, before the image of this world, as we know it, has passed away and it is too late to discover the truth.

We cannot avoid mentioning in this regard the so called "Prosperity Gospel". Maybe the expression doesn't reflect the real mind of those who preach it, and in any case we should refrain from judging our fellow Christians, nevertheless we must be clear about it. Objectively speaking, it is in total contradiction to the Gospel of Christ. It involves a going back from the New to the Old Testament, and not even to more recent Old Testament times where the poor and oppressed (the *anawim*) are God's favorite, but rather, to the archaic vision of the patriarchs, to a time prior to belief in a life after death and an eternal reward, to a time when riches and offspring were considered a sign of God's blessing. That "gospel", far from being "good news to the poor" (Lk 4:18), becomes good news for the rich.

¹² St. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* III, 10, 2.

As Christians, we are called to preach salvation for every human creature, including the rich. The disciples were dismayed at what Christ said about the camel passing through the eye of a needle. "Then who can be saved?" they asked. He answered: "For human beings it is impossible, but not for God. All things are possible for God" (Mk 10:26-27). God can save rich people too, we have many examples of this in the Gospel. The point is not "can the rich be saved?" (that was never in doubt in the Christian tradition), but "what kind of rich person can be saved?", which, by the way, is the title of the first Christian book written on riches and salvation.¹³

Jesus points to a way for the rich to escape from their dangerous situation: "Store up treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor decay destroys, nor thieves break in and steal" (Mt 6:20); and again: "make friends for yourselves with dishonest wealth, so that when it fails, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings" (Lk 16:9). Jesus advises the rich to transfer their capital abroad — not to some fiscal paradise, but rather to heaven! "Many people," said Saint Augustine, "are keen to bury their money in the earth [...]. Why not bury it in heaven, where it would be far more secure, and where they could one day find it again, forever?" How are they to do this? It's simple, continues the Saint: "God offers you porters in the person of the poor. They go where you hope one day to arrive. In the poor person it is God who is in need, here and now, and he will repay you when you reach your destination."¹⁴

The Bible sketches a kind of portrait of the rich Christian which lists the things he must and must not do in order to be saved:

"Tell the rich in the present age not to be proud and not to rely on so uncertain a thing as wealth but rather on God, who richly provides us with all things for our enjoyment. Tell them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous, ready to share, thus accumulating as treasure a good foundation for the future, so as to win the life that is true life" (1 Tim 6:17-19).

If the Apostle was writing today maybe he would tell the rich that one way of doing good is by creating jobs, rather than to store their money in banks and fiscal paradises, and by honestly paying taxes. But perhaps I should insist on this particular point when I am addressing my fellow Italians more than when I speak in the United States.

¹³ Clement of Alexandria, *Quis dives salvetur* 16,3 (GCS 17, p.170).

¹⁴ St. Augustine, *Sermo* 38, 8-9 (PL 38, 239 ff.).

SHARING JESUS' ARDENT PRAYER FOR UNITY

With this meditation, we go into the Cenacle with Jesus. Like a man on his deathbed surrounded by his children, it is here that Jesus lays bare his heart to the apostles. I would encourage you to read on your own Chapters 13-17 of the Gospel of John, paying attention to each word as if it were being addressed to you personally here and now.

There are two topics in these last discourses of Jesus on which I very much would like to meditate, one is Jesus' desire to reveal the Father to his disciples, the other his ardent desire for unity among them. Having no time to deal with both, I chose to reflect on the second one. Let us start by listening to some words from his "priestly prayer":

"I pray not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me" (Jn 17:20-21).

Certainly, among the primary responsibilities of the successors of the apostles is to carry out this last wish of our Savior. Let us focus therefore on communion or *koinonia* in the Church.

Unity and Diversity in the Church

Here is what St. Paul says about unity among believers in his Letter to the Ephesians:

"I, then, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to live in a manner worthy of the call you have received, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another through love, striving to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace: one body and one Spirit, as you were also called to the one hope of your call; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph 4:1-6).

At this point there is an abrupt linguistic change in the text. Words that indicate unity – *one, one*, are replaced by words that indicate particularity: *some, others, each one*:

"Grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.... And he gave some as apostles, others as prophets, others as evangelists, others as pastors and teachers" (Eph 4:7.11).

In this way, the two essential components of the Church, unity and diversity, are clearly expressed. It is not a matter of finding balance between two opposites. Because it deals with the unity of persons and not of things, diversity does not limit unity nor is it a corrective to unity. Diversity, in fact, is the only way of manifesting unity. Diversity exists for collaboration:

"to equip the holy ones for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of faith and knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the extent of the full stature of Christ" (Eph 4:12-13).

The theme of ecclesial communion, *koinonia*, had a central place in Saint John Paul II's letter *Novo millennio ineunte*. It represents a kind of agenda for the Church entering the new millennium.

"This is the other important area in which there has to be commitment and planning on the part of the universal Church and the particular Churches: the domain of communion (*koinonia*), which embodies and reveals the very essence of the mystery of the Church.... It is in building this communion of love that the Church appears as "sacrament," as the "sign and instrument of intimate union with God and of the unity of the human race" (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 1).¹

These words constitute the end point of ecclesiological renewal, initiated almost two centuries ago by Johann Adam Möhler,² and advanced by Cardinal John Newman. This renewal found universal reception in the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council according to which the Church is essentially a communion rooted in love.

There are two concepts that might help us better understand the novelty of this ecclesiology as compared to the previous one: the concepts of state and nation. The term "nation" suggests a people, a social reality and individuals, whereas a "state" points to how that reality is organized: the government that maintains it, the constitution by which it is governed, the various authorities (judiciary, legislative and executive) and the symbols that represent it. It is not the nation that is at the service of the state, but the state that is at the service of the nation.

By analogy, we might say that, where the Church was once primarily perceived as a state, it is now seen, first and foremost, as a nation, as the People of God. If at one time it was seen principally as a hierarchy, it is now seen primarily as *koinonia*. Clearly both are essential. What would a state be without a nation? And what would a nation be without a state, if not an amorphous multitude of people in perennial conflict with one another? So it is not the constitutive elements of the Church that have changed, but rather the priority among them. *Novo millennio ineunte* concludes:

While the wisdom of the law, by providing precise rules for participation, attests to the hierarchical structure of the Church and averts any temptation to arbitrariness or unjustified claims, the spirituality of communion, by prompting a trust and openness wholly in accord with the dignity and responsibility of every member of the People of God, supplies institutional reality with a soul.³

¹ Pope John Paul II, *Novo millennio ineunte* [At the Beginning of the New Millennium], 43, pp. 56-7.

² Die Einheit in der Kirche oder das Princip des Katholicismus, dargestellt im Geiste der Kirchenväter der drei ersten Jahrhunderte (Tübingen, 1825). English translation (1995): *Unity in the Church or the Principle of Catholicism: Presented in the Spirit of the Church Fathers of the First Three Centuries*, Peter C. Erb, trans., Catholic University of America Press, Washington, D.C.

³ *Novo millennio ineunte*, n. 45.

The relationship between communion and hierarchy has been inverted. The hierarchy is now in service to communion and not vice versa. Communion is seen as “the soul of the institution.” Hierarchy will fade away; communion remains for eternity.

Two Paths toward Unity

Let's return to the text of Ephesians. All of the reasons for unity listed there are summarized in the expression: “One body, one Spirit.” The word body, applied to the Church in the so-called “letters of captivity,” is no longer a simple metaphor indicating the interdependence and necessary collaboration of the various members, but indicates the reality of the Church, inasmuch as it is the body of Christ, organically united to the head.

This profound sense of “one body” is further revealed by the expression that accompanies it, “one Spirit.” The body of Christ has a vital principle that unites its various members with the head, and this principle is none other than the Holy Spirit, who is communicated by the head to its body. The phrase, so dear to the liturgy, “In the unity of the Holy Spirit,” signifies “in the unity which is the same Holy Spirit.” The Holy Spirit performs the same function in the Church that the soul performs in our physical body: he is the animating and unifying principle. “What the soul is to the human body, the Holy Spirit is to the body of Christ, which is the Church.”⁴

Therefore, in the theological sense, ecclesial communion is something we receive more than we build; it is mystical more than social. Saint Augustine makes this very clear. Before him, by St. Cyprian, for instance, the unity of the Church was thought of as something exterior and visible—the harmony of all the bishops among themselves. Saint Augustine contends, however, that it consists in something interior: the Holy Spirit. The unity of the Church is brought about by the same One who brings about unity in the Trinity. “The Father and Son have wanted us to be united among ourselves and with them by means of the same bond that unites them, namely, the love that is the Holy Spirit.”⁵ This explains why Jesus prays for a unity among his disciples that resembles the unity existing between him and the Father in the Trinity: “...that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you.”

The Holy Spirit works for unity in two different but complementary ways, one extraordinary and one ordinary. In the first way, the Holy Spirit alone creates unity; in the second the Holy Spirit creates unity with our collaboration. Extraordinary or charismatic unity is what the Holy Spirit accomplished on the Day of Pentecost among “devout Jews from every nation” (Acts 2:5). It also describes the unity among Jews and Gentiles that took place for the first time in the home of Cornelius the centurion (see Acts 10-11). At this stage of the Church's life there was a prevalence of divine initiative that manifested itself in unpredictable, powerful, creative ways. There is neither time nor need for discussions, deliberations or decrees. The apostles themselves are being carried. The Holy Spirit leads, and the institution can do nothing but follow. “Who was I to stand in God's way?”, says Peter to justify his coming to Cornelius (Acts 11: 17).

⁴ St. Augustine, *Discourses* 267, 4 (PL 38, 1231).

⁵ St. Augustine, *Discourses*, 71, 12, 18 (PL 38, 454).

The unity that results from this action is charismatic in nature. It is comprised of praise, enthusiasm, joy, stupor and proclamations of the Lord Jesus. It is not merely a doctrinal unity or a unity of faith, but a comprehensive unity: As stated in the Acts: "the community of believers was of one heart and mind" (see Acts 4:32). This unity was a kind of "fusion by fire."

But this type of unity by itself does not last long. A second movement of the Spirit is required to help the apostles overcome the tensions of living together. Soon after Pentecost, the question concerning the distribution of food to the widows arises (see Acts 6:1-6). How will the young community maintain its unity? The apostles gather and create the role of deacon. Authority intervenes when charismatic spontaneity no longer suffices.

Deeper tensions arise after the conversion of the pagans. The newly-created unity between the Jewish faction and the Gentile faction is threatened by schism (see Acts 15:1-31). Some of the Jewish believers insisted that the Gentiles should also practice circumcision and observe the Law of Moses. How did the Spirit move in that situation? "The apostles and the presbyters met together to see about this matter. After much debate had taken place," an agreement was reached and announced to the Church with the words: "It is the decision of the holy Spirit and of us" (cf. Acts 15:28). Thus, in matters of discipline rather than faith, the Holy Spirit also works through patient confrontation, mutual listening and compromise. He works through human structures and ministers selected by Jesus.

The Petrine ministry of the pope is precisely at the service of this unity which needs to be continually maintained and restored. Pentecost represents the solemn birth of the Church as an historical and visible community. At Pentecost, for the first time, we not only see the primacy of Peter being concretely exercised, but we also see the way in which it is exercised. Peter never acted alone: "Then Peter stood up *with* the eleven . . ." (Acts 2:14), and "when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and they asked Peter *and* the other apostles . . ." (Acts 2:37). It is clear that Peter takes the initiative, but he exercises his role in a collegial manner.

The traditional canonical formula for the relationship between the pope and the bishops is "*cum Petro et sub Petro*." In the past, the emphasis has been primarily on "*sub Petro*." The time is ripe to restore all the significance of "*cum Petro*," as well. The synods of bishops are the clearest sign of this innovation. Pope Francis has increased their importance. With him we now see collegiality implemented with concrete gestures and words. No "hot topic" is any longer excluded but instead becomes subject to discussion on the synod's agenda. It comes as no surprise that not everyone is as prepared as others for this innovation.

A look at the general situation of Christianity outside the Catholic Church demonstrates what an invaluable gift the ministry of the Roman Pontiff is for the unity of the Church. I believe that no one is more convinced of that and less disposed to abandon it than bishops. It is only a question of better combining this unity with diversity and plurality. Because of their diverse provenance and experience, bishops are the ones who can best help the Supreme Pontiff bring about this greater balance.

A Spirituality of Communion

The Letter to the Ephesians which we read at the beginning tells us how we can contribute to the unity in every situation, both at the universal and local level:

"I, then, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to live in a manner worthy of the call you have received, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another through love, striving to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace. [...] All bitterness, fury, anger, shouting, and reviling must be removed from you, along with all malice. [And] be kind to one another, compassionate, forgiving one another as God has forgiven you in Christ" (Eph 4:1-3; 31-32).

In *Novo millennio ineunte*, after stressing the importance of ecclesial *koinonia*, Saint John Paul II exhorts us to build a spirituality of communion, to move from doctrinal discussions and clarifications to actual practice:

Before making practical plans, we need to *promote a spirituality of communion*, making it the guiding principle of education wherever individuals and Christians are formed, wherever ministers of the altar, consecrated persons, and pastoral workers are trained, wherever families and communities are being built up.⁶

There is no spirituality without a corresponding exercise and discipline. So we need to practice exercises of communion. In this case, the exercise consists, above all, in the removal of obstacles. I find that one good spiritual exercise in this regard is to be honest with the person I am in contention with in the tribunal of my heart. When I have the feeling that I am taking someone to court inside myself, and I'm building my case, I make a determined stand against myself. I give up rehearsing all my arguments and I try to put myself in the other person's shoes to understand their reasoning and what that person might say to me. I shout to myself, as they do in ecclesiastical tribunals: "*Audiat et altera pars*," "Now let the other side be heard."

We know what a lethal danger embolisms pose to the human body. Abnormal particles called emboli obstruct veins and arteries and, if not cleared in time, hinder the free circulation of blood. They can cause great damage, leading to paralysis or even death. The Church, which is the body of Christ, faces its own kind of embolisms. These obstacles to communion include the refusal to forgive, lasting hostility and the bitterness, wrath, anger, slander and malice, as the Apostles has recommended to us.

The most dangerous obstruction, the one from which all the others spring, has a specific name. In Italian the name is almost identical to "Dio" ("God"), but is actually his worst enemy: "Io" ("I"), egotism. The text of Pope John Paul II's letter says this:

"A spirituality of communion means, finally, to know how to 'make room' for our brothers and sisters, bearing 'each other's burdens' (Gal 6:2), and resisting the selfish

⁶ John Paul II, *Novo millennio ineunte*, 43.

temptations which constantly beset us and provoke competition, careerism, distrust, and jealousy.”⁷

If we want to “preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace” (cf. Eph. 4:3), it is imperative that we periodically have an x-ray—that is, an examination of conscience—to be sure that there are no blockages for which we are responsible. This work has to take place at every level: between the different Christians Churches and denominations; within each Church, between clergy and laypeople, within a family between husband and wife, parents and children.

Love for unity multiplies charisms

Saint Augustine never grew tired of giving examples of the miracles that occur whenever love for unity replaces love for oneself. Someone, he says, upon hearing the awesome list of the charisms (prophecy, wisdom, discernment, healing, tongues) might feel sad and left out, thinking that he has none of these, but be careful,

“If you love, it is no small thing that you possess. If you love the unity, all that is in it and everything that belongs to anyone is your possession too! Cast out envy, and all that is mine becomes yours, and if I cast out envy, all that is yours is mine. Envy causes division but love unites. Of all the organs of the body, only the eye can see, but does the eye see for itself alone? Not at all, it sees for the hand and for the foot and for all the members. ...Of all the body, only the hand can work at things, but obviously it does not work for itself alone, but also for the eye. If a blow is aimed at your face, does your hand say, ‘I am not moving, because the blow is not aimed at me?’”⁸

Here we see, clearly revealed, the secret why love is “a still more excellent way” (1 Cor 12:31). Love makes me love the Church, or the community in which I live; and within that unity all the charisms are “mine.” There is more besides. If you love the unity more than I do, the charism that is given to me is more yours than mine. Let us suppose that I have the charism of proclaiming the Gospel. I may grow complacent in it, or pride myself about it (by no means an abstract hypothesis!) and so become “a clashing cymbal” (1 Cor 13:1). The Apostle warns me that my charism “will do me no good whatsoever.” But to you who are listening to me, it will not cease doing good, in spite of my sin. If you love, therefore, you possess, without any danger to yourself, what another possesses at great personal risk. Love multiplies the charisms, for it makes the charism of one the charism of all.

One thing in particular needs to be emphasized. The bishop does not face charisms and charismatics as if he were an outside party, like an orchestra conductor who leads the orchestra without playing any instrument himself. The episcopate is itself a charism. Saint Paul places the office of apostles as the first of the charisms (cf. 1 Cor 12:28-30), before prophets. He speaks of the office of “presiding” as a charism to be exercised with diligence (cf. Rom 12:8; see also 1 Pt 4:11). This means that you cannot exercise the episcopal

⁷ John Paul II, *Novo millennio ineunte*, 43.

⁸ St. Augustine, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 32, 8.

ministry if not “charismatically,” that is, with the power and the anointing of the Spirit, and not according to the criteria by which the office of governing is exercised in the world. It would be a big mistake to let the world impose its agenda to the Church.

A fundamental task of a person with the episcopal charism is precisely that of harmonizing and making all the charisms work together for the edification of the one body of Christ. This has never been and will never be an easy task. Charism and institution are like the two arms of the cross. Charismatics are a cross for the institution, and the institution is a cross for charismatics, but neither of the two categories can do without the other because the institutional and pneumatic dimensions of the Church, her “hierarchical and her charismatic gifts” (*Lumen gentium*, 4) cannot be separated from one another.

A good understanding and appreciation of charisms can help overcome many tensions in the Church. I once preached a retreat in Monterrey, Mexico, on the occasion of the 5th centenary of the discovery of America. There were 700 priests and about 70 bishops from all over Latin America. This was the time when Latin America was sharply divided between those who favored Liberation Theology and its social commitment and those, like the Charismatic Renewal and other movements, who cared more for spiritual life and evangelization.

I tried to explain how they could change this polarity into healthy collaboration for the good of the Church. Instead of looking at the other group as an enemy to destroy, I encouraged them to look at them as people exercising a different charism for the same body of Christ. No one in fact can cover all the requirements of the Gospel.

I am convinced that this way of looking at differences in the body of Christ could help in overcoming similar tensions present in your country, and in many other parts of the Church. Care for the hungry, the thirsty, the strangers, the naked and people in prison, certainly forms an integral part of the Gospel (cf. Mt 25:35f.), as well as defending moral values, the life of the unborn and the institution of the family. Not being able to fight with equal strength on both fronts, we must thank God that others members of the Church are doing what we ourselves are unable to do.

It is essential, however, to keep ecclesial diversities and debates distinct and separate from the political arena. Politics is a struggle for power and needs to maintain and exacerbate contrasts rather than to reconcile them.

Let us conclude by listening to the words Saint Augustine would often repeat to his people when the Church in North Africa was being torn apart by the schism of the Donatists:

"As at the beginning of the Church, the fact that one person was able to speak various languages was a sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit, so now *the love of unity* that makes many peoples one, is a sign of his presence [...] Know, therefore, that you have the Holy Spirit when you adhere to the *unity* by the sincerity of your *love*."⁹

⁹ St. Augustine, *Sermons*, 269, 2, 4 (PL 38, 1236).

WITH JESUS IN GETHSEMANE

Jesus' dark night of the soul

From the Cenacle Jesus went to the Garden of Olives. The apostles followed him, and sooner or later the successors of the apostles are called to do the same. So in this meditation let us try to grasp the immense grace hidden in it. In Mark's Gospel we read:

Then they came to a place named Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." He took with him Peter, James, and John, and began to be troubled and distressed. Then he said to them, "My soul is sorrowful even to death. Remain here and keep watch." He advanced a little and fell to the ground and prayed that if it were possible the hour might pass by him; he said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible to you. Take this cup away from me, but not what I will but what you will." When he returned he found them asleep. He said to Peter, "Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour? Watch and pray that you may not undergo the test. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak." Withdrawing again, he prayed, saying the same thing. Then he returned once more and found them asleep, for they could not keep their eyes open and did not know what to answer him. He returned a third time and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? It is enough. The hour has come. Behold, the Son of Man is to be handed over to sinners. Get up, let us go. See, my betrayer is at hand." (Mk 14:32-42)

Jesus' agony in the garden of Gethsemane is attested to by all four evangelists. In fact, even John speaks of it in his own way when he attributes to Jesus the words: "I am troubled now" (Jn 12:27), which recall the Synoptic expression, "he began to feel sorrow and distress," (cf. Mt 26:37) and the words: "Father, save me from this hour" (Jn 12:27), which recall "Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me" of the Synoptics (cf. Lk 22:42). There is also an echo of this fact in the Letter to the Hebrews where it is said that Christ, "in the days when he was in the flesh, he offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him from death" (Heb 5:7).

It's quite extraordinary that this not very "apologetic" fact should have been given so much importance in tradition. The emphasis placed on this moment in Christ's life can only be explained by a very strongly attested historical event.

At Gethsemane, the apostles found themselves in front of an unrecognizable Jesus. He, at whose beckoning the winds ceased, who drove out devils, healed the infirm, to whom the crowds listened, is now a pitiful sight asking them for help. Jesus - it is written - "began to be troubled and distressed." And he said to them: "My soul is sorrowful even to death. Remain here and keep watch" (Mk 14:34). The verbs used suggest the idea of a man who is prey to deep bewilderment, to a sort of solitary terror, as if he feels he is being dragged away from humankind. Jesus is completely alone, like one who finds himself suspended in some

remote point of the universe where every cry falls on deaf ears and where there is nothing to hold on to anywhere, neither above nor below, to the right or to the left. His gestures are those of a person struggling in mortal anguish; he "fell to the ground," got up to go to his disciples, went back to kneel down, then he got up again... From his lips came the cry: "Abba, Father, all things are possible to you. Take this cup away from me" (Mk 14:36).

In the Bible the image of the cup almost always evokes the idea of God's wrath against sin. The "cup of staggering," Isaiah calls it (Is 51:22); it is said of it that the wicked "will drain it even to the dregs" (Ps 75:9). Also the Apocalypse talks of "the wine of God's fury, poured full strength into the cup of his wrath" (Rev 14:10).

Christ, it is written, died "for sinners;" he died in their place and not only in their favor. He accepted to answer for all men; he is, therefore, "responsible" for all, the guilty one before God! It is against him that "The wrath of God is indeed being revealed" (cf. Rom 1:18), and that is what "drinking the cup" means.

Jesus is alone, facing the prospect of imminent suffering that is about to unleash itself upon him. The expected and dreaded "hour" of the final encounter with the forces of evil, of the great test (*peirasmos*), has arrived. But the cause of his agony is even more profound. He feels himself weighed down by all the evil and ugliness in the world. He did not commit any of this evil, but it is as though he did since he freely took it upon himself. "He himself bore our sins in his body" (1 Pt 2:24). According to the biblical meaning of this expression, he bore our sins in his very own person—soul, body, and heart together. Jesus, says Saint Paul, is the man "made to be sin" (cf. 2 Cor 5:21).

Sin and iniquity are too vague and general words. We should give a proper name to them. Jesus took upon himself all the hatred, the violence, the oppression of the poor and the defenseless, all the lust, the pride, the envy, the falsehood. And who can think that no one of these sins is present in his or her life? Once I was listening to this moving Negro Spiritual which says: "Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Were you there when they nailed him to the cross?...Were you there, were you there?" At a certain point an answer burst from the depth of my conscience: "Yes, I was there! My sins, too, were on his shoulders and weighted on his heart!"

Jesus enters into the "dark night of the soul" which consists in simultaneously and unbearably experiencing the proximity of sin and, because of it, the absence of God. We have two objective means for looking at this abyss the Savior now finds himself in: one is the words of Scripture, especially the psalms, which prophetically describe the sufferings of the righteous one and which, according to what the apostles and Jesus himself said, refer to him, and the second one is the experience of the saints, especially of the mystics, who received the grace to painfully experience Christ's Passion. The first is knowledge of the prophecies and the second is knowledge of "the fruits."

In Jesus, at Gethsemane, the words of Isaiah are completely fulfilled: "But he was pierced for our sins, crushed for our iniquity. He bore the punishment that makes us whole" (Is 53:5). Now the mysterious words of many psalms will come true, like those in Psalm 88:8, 17: "Your wrath lies heavy upon me; all your waves crash over me.... Your wrath has swept

over me; your terrors have destroyed me..” These words suggest the image of an island left desolate and bare by a hurricane.

What would happen if the whole physical universe with its billions and billions of celestial bodies rested on only one point like an immense overturned pyramid? What pressure that point would have to bear! Well then, the whole moral universe of sin, not any less boundless than the physical universe, weighed at that moment on the soul of Jesus. “The Lord laid upon him the guilt of us all” (Is 53:6); he is the Lamb of God who takes “away,” or better, “upon himself” the sins of the world (cf. Jn 1:29). Sin was the real cross that Jesus took upon his shoulders and which he carried all the way to Calvary and to which he was eventually nailed!

Because Jesus bears sin in himself, God is absent. In reality, however, God the Father was never more present to his Son than now and on the cross. Jesus himself had foretold: “you will leave me alone. But I am not alone, because the Father is with me” (Jn 16:32); but Jesus didn’t “feel” his presence. Moreover, God is the cause of his greatest torment, not in the sense that he is responsible, but in the sense that, by simply existing, he brings sin to light and makes it unbearable. The infinite attraction between the Father and the Son is now thwarted by an equally infinite repulsion. God's supreme holiness clashes with the supreme evil of sin, causing an indescribable upheaval in the Redeemer's soul, like when over the Alps a mass of cold air approaching from the north clashes with a mass of hot air coming from the south and the atmosphere is so disturbed by thunder and lightning that even the mountains shake.

How can we then wonder at the cry that came from the lips of Jesus: “My soul is sorrowful, even to death!” (cf. Mt 26:38 and Mk 14:34), and at his sweat of blood (cf. Lk 22:44)? Jesus lived what we call today a “limit situation,” but the “limit” he reached was not a relative one, but the absolute limit of any possible human experience.

Jesus and Jacob: Two Different Ways of Struggling with God

To remove any pretext for the Arian heresy, some ancient fathers explained the Gethsemane episode pedagogically through the idea of “concession” (*dispensatio*). According to this interpretation, Jesus did not really experience anguish and fear but merely wanted to teach us how to overcome our human resistance through prayer. At Gethsemane, writes Saint Hilary of Poitiers, “It is not for Himself that He is sorrowful, and prays: it is for those whom He exhorts to watchfulness and prayer, lest the cup of suffering should be their lot.”¹ After Chalcedon, and especially after the condemnation of Monothelitism (the heresy which denied the presence of a human will in Jesus), there is no longer any need to resort to this explanation. At Gethsemane, Jesus prays not just to exhort us to pray, but he prays because, being a true man, “who has similarly been tested in every way, yet without sin (Heb 4:15),” he experienced our own struggle against what is repugnant to human nature.²

¹ St. Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity*, 10, 37, trans. by E. W. Watson et al., vol. 9, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Grand Rapids, MI, 1963), p. 192.

² St. Maximus the Confessor, *On Matthew*, 26, 39 (PG 91).

Even though Gethsemane cannot be explained solely in a pedagogical way, it is clear that a pedagogical concern was also present in the minds of the evangelists who handed down the incident, and it is important for us to understand it. In the gospels, the narration of the event cannot be separated from the call to imitation: “Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his footsteps” (1 Pt 2:21).

The word “agony,” applied to Jesus at Gethsemane (Lk 22:44), should not be understood in its contemporary sense as the moment that precedes death, but rather in its original meaning of “struggle.” There comes a time when prayer becomes a struggle and an effort. I am not speaking here of the struggle against distractions, that is, the struggle within ourselves. I am speaking of the struggle with God. This happens when God asks you something that your nature is not ready to give him, and when what God is doing or permitting becomes incomprehensible and bewildering.

The Bible presents another instance of a struggle with God in prayer, and it is very instructive to compare the two episodes. It deals with Jacob’s struggle with God (see Gn 32:23-33). The scenario is also very similar. Jacob’s struggle occurs at night, on the other side of a river, the Jabbok, just as that of Jesus occurs at night on the other side of the Kedron River. Jacob distances himself from his slaves, wives, and children to be alone, and Jesus separates himself from his three closest disciples to pray.

But why is Jacob struggling with God? Here is the great lesson we must learn. “I will not let you go,” he says to the angel, “until you bless me” (Gn 32:27), that is, until you have granted what I ask. Jacob also asks him, “What is your name?” (Gn 32:28). He is convinced that by using the power that comes from knowing the name of God he will be able to prevail over his brother Esau who is coming to challenge him. God does bless him, but does not reveal his name to him.

Jacob struggles, then, to bend God to his will; Jesus struggles to bend his human will to God. He struggles because “the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Mt 26:41). The question naturally arises: “Who are we like when we pray in times of trouble?” We are like Jacob, the Old Testament man, when we struggle in prayer to persuade God to change his mind, more than to have ourselves changed to accept his will—when we struggle to have him remove the cross from us, more than to be able to carry it with him. We are like Jesus, instead, if, amidst groans and sweating blood, we seek to abandon ourselves to the Father’s will. The results of the two prayers are very different. God did not tell Jacob his name, but he will give Jesus the name above all names (see Phil 2:9-11).

Sometimes as we persevere in that kind of prayer something unusual happens that we should be aware of so as not to lose a precious occasion. The roles become inverted: God becomes the one who beseeches you and you are the one beseeched. You go to prayer to ask God for something, and as you pray you realize little by little that it is God, extending his hand to you, who is asking you for something. You went to ask him to remove some thorn in the flesh, some cross, or some trial, or to free you from some position, or some situation, or the presence of a certain person. And now it is God who is asking you to accept that cross, that situation, that position, that person.

The most sublime case of this inversion between parties is precisely Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane. He prays for the Father to take the cup from him, but the Father asks him to drink it for the salvation of the world. Jesus gives not just one, but all the drops of his blood, of which one single drop is enough to save the world from sin: "cuius una stilla salvum facere totum mundum quit ab omni scelere," as we sing in the *Adoro te devote*.³ And the Father repaid him by making him, even as man, Lord and Savior of the universe.

"In Agony Even to the End of the World"

We need to receive one last teaching before leaving Gethsemane. Saint Leo the Great says that "Our Lord's Passion has been drawn out to the end of the world."⁴ Blaise Pascal, the French philosopher, echoes this in his famous meditation on the agony of Jesus which can also nourish our personal meditation:

"Jesus will be in agony even to the end of the world. We must not sleep during that time... I thought of you in mine agony, I have sweated such drops of blood for you... Do you wish that it always cost me the blood of my humanity without your shedding a single tear? ...I am more a friend to you than such and such a one, for I have done for you more than they; they would not have suffered what I have suffered from you, and they would not have died for you as I have done in the time of your infidelities."⁵

This is not just a sentimental way of speaking, it corresponds mysteriously to the truth. In the Spirit, Jesus is even now at Gethsemane, in the *praetorium*, on the cross. And it is not only in his mystical body—in which his members suffer, are imprisoned, or are killed—but in a way that we cannot explain, even in his very person. This is true not "in spite of" the resurrection, but precisely "because" of the resurrection that has made the Crucified One and his entire mystery "alive forever and ever" (Rev 1:18). Revelation shows us the Lamb in heaven, "standing," that is, risen and alive, with the signs of his sacrificial death still visible (see Rev 5:6).

The best place to encounter this Jesus "in agony even to the end of the world" is the Eucharist. Jesus instituted it immediately before he went to the Garden of Olives so that his disciples, in every age, could become "contemporaries" of his passion. If the Spirit inspires us with the desire to stay for one hour by Jesus' side in Gethsemane, the simplest way of doing that is to spend an hour before the Blessed Sacrament.

Obviously, this should not make us forget the other way that Christ "is in agony even to the end of the world," that is, in the members of his mystical body. Quite the opposite. If we want to give concrete expression to our feelings for him, the necessary way is precisely to help a member of his body.

The word "Gethsemane" has become a symbol for every moral sorrow. Jesus in Gethsemane does not yet experience any physical torment; at this moment his pain is

³ From the Latin hymn, "*Adoro te devote*" ["I adore you devoutly"], attributed to St. Thomas Aquinas.

⁴ St. Leo the Great, "Sermon 70," 5, in *Sermons*, trans. by Jane Patrick Freeland, CSJB, and Agnes Josephine Conway, SSJ, vol. 93, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996), p. 309.

⁵ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, 553.

completely interior. He sweats blood because it is his heart, not his flesh, that is crushed. The world is very sensitive regarding bodily pain and is easily moved to compassion by it. It is much less affected or moved by moral pain and even derides it at times, confusing it with hypersensitivity, auto-suggestion, or weakness.

God takes the pain of a person's heart very seriously, so we should do the same. I am thinking of the person whose strongest connection to life is broken and finds himself or herself alone; of those who are anxious about something that threatens their life, or the life of a loved one; of the person, rightly or wrongly (it does not really matter from this point of view), who sees himself or herself held up to public slander day after day. How many hidden Gethsemanes there are in the world, perhaps under our own roofs, or next door, or at the desk next to ours at the office!

“He prayed all the more fervently”

The example of Jesus teaches us what to do in such circumstances: “He was in such agony and he prayed so fervently (*prolixius*).” These words were written by the evangelist Luke (22:44) with a clear pastoral intention. He wanted to show the Church of his day, already subject to struggle and persecution, what the Master had taught us to do in such circumstances. Jesus teaches us that the first thing we should do in such situations is to turn to God in prayer.

It is important to note how Jesus' prayer at Gethsemane begins, according to Mark, our most ancient source: “*Abba*, Father, all things are possible to you” (Mk 14:36). The philosopher Søren Kierkegaard offers illuminating reflections on this point: “The decisive thing is, that for God all things are possible.” A person is brought to utter despair when humanly speaking there is no possibility left, no action to take, when, as we say, nothing more can be done. But for a believer there is always a possibility at hand, prayer! And what if someone has already prayed without results? Pray again!⁶ Pray *prolixius*, that is with even greater intensity.

One could object that Jesus was not heard! But the Letter to the Hebrews says exactly the opposite: “He was heard because of his reverence” (Heb 5:7). Luke describes this internal help that Jesus received from the Father, adding the detail about the angel: “And to strengthen him an angel from heaven appeared to him” (Lk 22:43). But this is a *prolepsis*, an anticipation; the real answer to his prayer from the Father was the resurrection of Christ.

God, Augustine notes, also hears even when he does not seem to hear. For example, when we do not obtain what we ask, his very delay in granting our prayer is already a kind of hearing of our prayer so that he can give us more than what we are asking.⁷ If we continue to pray in spite of everything, it is a sign that he is giving us his grace. If Jesus at the end announces his resolve, “Get up, let us go” (Mt 26:46), it is because the Father has given him

⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, Part 1, C, in *Fear and Trembling and Sickness unto Death*, intro., notes, and trans. by Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), p. 171-172.

⁷ See St. Augustine, “Sixth Homily on 1 John,” 6-8, *Augustine: Later Works*, intro. and trans. by John Burnaby (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), pp. 306-307.

“more than twelve legions of angels” (Mt 26:53) to defend him. Saint Thomas says, “By the infusion of charity, He inspired Him with the will to suffer for us.”⁸

Jesus gave his disciples ahead of time the way and the words to unite themselves to his prayer during trials, the “Our Father.” There is no inner state that is not reflected in the “Our Father” and that cannot be translated into prayer: joy, praise, adoration, gratitude, repentance. But the “Our Father” is above all a prayer in a time of trial. There is a clear similarity between the prayer that Jesus gave his disciples and the one he prays to the Father at Gethsemane. In fact, he left us *his* prayer.

Jesus’ prayer begins, as the “Our Father” does, with the cry, “Abba, Father” (Mk 14:36), or “my Father” (Mt 26:39). It continues, like the “Our Father,” by asking that his will be done. He asks that the cup would pass from him, just as we ask in the “Our Father” to be “delivered from evil.” He tells his disciples that they should pray not to yield to temptation, and he has us conclude the “Our Father” with the words, “Lead us not into temptation.”

What comfort there is, in the hours of trial and darkness, to know that the Holy Spirit continues in us Jesus’ prayer at Gethsemane, “with inexpressible groanings” (Rom 8:26), that the Spirit’s intercession on our behalf at those times reaches the Father mixed together with “prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears ” (Heb 5:7) that the Son lifted up to him when “his hour” had come!

* * *

Before concluding, I want to tell you, dear brother bishops, why I think the Lord inspired me to dedicate this meditation to Gethsemane. It is because, due to the scandals of pedophilia, many bishops in the Catholic Church, starting with the Bishop of Rome, are experiencing right now exactly what Jesus experienced in Gethsemane. As we have seen, the ultimate cause of his suffering in the Garden of Olives consisted in taking upon himself sins that he had not committed himself and in bearing responsibility for them in front of the Father. There is a redemptive and expiatory power in doing this.

The Letter to the Hebrews contains an exhortation that seems to be written for the present situation. Alluding to the rite of the scapegoat that was sent away from the city, the author says: “Jesus also suffered outside the gate, to consecrate the people by his own blood. Let us then go to him outside the camp, bearing the reproach that he bore” (Heb 13:12-13), more literally, “sharing his shame.” For us, “outside the camp” means outside the world and its purely secular approach.

If we share in his sufferings, we will share in his glory and in the glory of the Church which will most certainly follow, after her purification.

⁸ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, III, q. 47, a. 3.

THE LAW OF THE SPIRIT

By the end of the time the apostles spent “with Jesus” in the Gospels, we might be surprised seeing how little progress they had made in the school of Jesus. In the Garden of Olives they were unable to stay awake with Jesus for one hour, even at the Last Supper they were still discussing who was the greatest among them (see Lk 22:24), and during the Passion they fled. What, then, was missing? And how is it that a few days later we find the Twelve completely changed and ready to die for Jesus? The answer, as we shall see in this meditation, is Pentecost.

The account of the coming of the Holy Spirit begins with these words: “When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, they were all in one place together” (Acts 2:1). It must be inferred from these words that Pentecost existed before Pentecost! In other words, there was already a Pentecost feast in Judaism and it was during this feast that the Holy Spirit descended. Actually, even for some years after the coming of the Spirit the apostles continued to celebrate the Jewish Pentecost (see Acts 20:16).

Everyone knows that a Hebrew paschal feast existed and understands what it commemorated; very few, however, know that a Pentecost feast also existed and what it commemorated. Yet, just as we cannot comprehend Easter without considering the Hebrew paschal feast, so we cannot comprehend the Christian Pentecost without considering the Hebrew Pentecost.

Pentecost and the Law

In the Old Testament, two fundamental interpretations of the feast of Pentecost existed. At the beginning, Pentecost was the Feast of the Seven Weeks (see Tb 2:1), the Day of First Fruits (see Nm 28:26ff.) when a sheaf of the new crop was offered to the Lord (see Ex 23:16; Dt 16:9). Later on the feast was given a new meaning. It was the feast celebrating the giving of the law on Mount Sinai and of the covenant, the feast, that is, that commemorated the events described in Exodus 19-20.

According to Biblical reckoning, the law was, in fact, given on Sinai fifty days after the Passover. From being a feast associated with the cycle of *nature* (the harvest), Pentecost had become a feast associated with the *history* of salvation. A text from the present Hebrew Liturgy of *Shavuoth* says: “This day of the Feast of Weeks is the time of the gift of our Torah.” When the people left Egypt, they walked for fifty days in the desert and at the end God gave Moses the law and he made a covenant with the people making them “a kingdom of priests, a holy nation” (see Ex 19:4-6). It would seem that in Acts, Saint Luke deliberately describes the descent of the Holy Spirit so as to evoke the theophany of Sinai. The Church's liturgy confirms this interpretation as it has inserted Exodus 19 among the readings for the Pentecost vigil.

What does the comparison tell us about our Pentecost? In other words, what is the significance of the fact that the Holy Spirit descends on the Church precisely on the day Israel recalls the gift of the law and the covenant? Even Saint Augustine wondered about this: "Why," he asked himself, "do the Jews, too, celebrate Pentecost? It's a big and wonderful mystery; if you think about it, they received the law written by God's finger on the day of Pentecost and the Holy Spirit also came on the day of Pentecost."

At this point, the answer to why the Holy Spirit descended on the apostles precisely on Pentecost day is clear. It was to show that he is the new law, the spiritual law, which seals the new and eternal covenant and who consecrates the royal and priestly people that form the Church. What a wonderful revelation on the meaning of Pentecost and on the Holy Spirit himself! Saint Augustine exclaimed:

"Who wouldn't be struck by this coincidence and at the same time by this difference? Fifty days pass between the celebration of the Passover and the day on which Moses received the law written by God's finger on tablets of stone; similarly, fifty days after the death and resurrection of the one who like a lamb was slaughtered, the finger of God, that is the Holy Spirit, filled the faithful who were gathered together."¹

Suddenly the prophecies Jeremiah and Ezekiel made about the new covenant become clear: "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days—oracle of the LORD. I will place my law within them, and write it upon their hearts" (Jer 31:33). He will no longer write it on tablets of stone but upon their hearts; it will no longer be an exterior law, but an interior one. Ezekiel explains what this interior law consists of when he reiterates Jeremiah's prophecy and completes it: "I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you so that you walk in my statutes, observe my ordinances, and keep them" (Ez 36:26-27).

What Saint Paul says about the gift of the Spirit in Chapter Eight of his Letter to the Romans can only be understood in the light of these premises on the meaning of Pentecost and the new covenant. In fact, he begins by saying: "The law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus has freed you from the law of sin and death" (Rm 8:2). The whole discourse on the Spirit in the Letter to the Romans is a counterpoint to the discourse on the law. The Spirit himself is defined as being the law: the "law of the Spirit" means in fact, "the law which is the Spirit." On the other hand, the fact that the apostle has in mind all the prophecies linked to the theme of the new covenant is clear from the passage where he calls the community of the new covenant a "letter of Christ...written not in ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets that are hearts of flesh" and where he calls the apostles "ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter brings death, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor 3:3-6).

¹ St. Augustine, *Sermo Mai* 158,4 (PLSupplement 2, 525).

In our spiritual journey this is an “illuminative” catechesis. It must serve to illuminate our minds rather than push to practical proposals. Its purpose is to broaden the horizons of our faith allowing our spirit, so to speak, to breathe deeply and fully so that we shall not settle for meaningless exterior practices of devotion but will embrace the fullness of the Christian mystery.

A new heart

When Christ's Spirit is poured into a believer through the sacraments, the Word and all the other means at our disposal, according to the measure in which it is welcomed and listened to, it is finally able to change the interior state that the law was unable to change. This is how it comes about. As long as one lives “for oneself,” that is, in sin, God is inevitably seen as an antagonist and an obstacle. Between oneself and God there is a silent hostility which the law does nothing but emphasize. We humans “lust” after certain things and it is God who, through his commandments, blocks our way and opposes our desires with his own “you must” and “you mustn't.” Saint Paul says: “the concern of the flesh is hostility toward God; it does not submit to the law of God, nor can it” (Rm 8:7).

The old self is in revolt against its Creator, and if it were possible, would even want him not to exist. As soon as either through our own fault or because of a contradiction or simply by God's permission, we lose the sense of God's presence, we immediately discover that we feel only anger and rebellion and outright hostility toward God and other people which comes from the old root of our sin.

When the Holy Spirit takes possession of a heart, a change comes about. If before there was a “secret rancor against God” in the depths of your heart, now the Spirit comes to you from God and attests that God is truly favorable and benign, that he is his your ally and not your enemy. Your eyes are opened to all that God has been capable of doing for you and to the fact that he did not spare his only Son for you. The Spirit puts “God's love” into your heart (see Rm 5:5). In this way he makes you a new person who loves God and who willingly does what God asks.²

God, in fact, no longer limits himself to telling you what you should or should not do, but he himself does it with you and in you. The new law of the Spirit is much more than an *indication* of a will; it is an *action*, a living and active principle. The new law is new life. That's why it is more often called grace than law: “you are not under the law but under grace” (Rm 6:14).

In a strict sense, the new law or the law of the Spirit is not that which Jesus proclaimed on the mount of the Beatitudes but that which he engraved in the human heart at Pentecost. The evangelical precepts are certainly higher and more perfect than the Mosaic ones were. Still, on their own, they too would have been inefficacious. If proclaiming the new will of God through the Gospel had been enough, we wouldn't be able to explain why Jesus died

² See Martin Luther, *The Whitsuntide Sermon* (Weimar edit. 12, p. 568 ff.).

and why the Holy Spirit came. But the apostles themselves show that it wasn't enough. Even though they had heard the Master proclaim the Beatitudes and had been instructed about his suffering, when the time of the passion arrived they still were not strong enough to carry out anything of what Jesus had commanded.

If Jesus had limited himself to proclaiming the new commandment saying: "I give you a new commandment: love one another" (Jn 13:34), it would have remained what it was before, just an old written law. It was at Pentecost when he poured his love into the hearts of his disciples that it became a new law, the law of the Spirit that gives life. This commandment is at the same time old and new: old by the written letter (see Lv 19:18!), new by the Spirit.

Therefore, without the inner grace of the Spirit, the Gospel and the new commandment too would have remained an old law, a written word. Saint Thomas Aquinas, commenting on a daring thought of Saint Augustine wrote: "By the 'letter' is meant every written law that remains external to man, even the moral precepts contained in the Gospel. So the letter of the Gospel would also kill if the grace of healing faith were not added interiorly."³ Even more explicit is what he stated a little earlier on: "Primarily the new law is the grace itself of the Holy Spirit given to believers in Christ."⁴

Saint Thomas rightly says "primarily" rather than "exclusively" because the moral precepts and the Beatitudes of the Gospel were already a "new law." Without them, the "law of the Spirit" would be an empty category, void of concrete, applicable objects and directions. According to Scholastic terminology, they were already a new law *materialiter*, but become a new law *formaliter*, that is effectively, through the sacrifice of Christ and the gift of the Spirit. The law without the Spirit is dead, but the Spirit without the law is blind.

We are dealing with a certainty of faith that is truly ecumenical, that is, with something that is the common inheritance of all the great Christian traditions. In fact, not only do Catholic and Protestant theologies, heirs to Augustinian theology, share this view, but Orthodox theology does as well. A great upholder of this tradition, Nicolas Cabasilas, explains why the formation of the apostles could not be completed during the earthly ministry of Jesus:

"The Apostles and fathers of our faith had the advantage of being instructed in every doctrine and furthermore they were instructed by the Savior himself; they were spectators of all the graces he poured into human nature and of all he suffered for mankind. They witnessed his death, resurrection and ascension into heaven; yet, having seen all this, they showed nothing new or noble or spiritual that was better than the old state until they were baptized with the Spirit at Pentecost. But when they were baptized and the Paraclete had been poured into their souls they were renewed and embraced a new life. They became guides for others and made the

³ St. Thomas, *S.Th.* I-IIae, q. 106, a.2.

⁴ Ib. q. 106, a.1; see S. Augustine, *De Spiritu et littera*, 21.

flame of love for Christ burn within themselves and in others .”⁵

But how does this new law of the Spirit work in practice, and in what way can it be called a “law”? It works through love! The new law is nothing other than what Jesus called the “new commandment.” The Holy Spirit has written the new law on our hearts by pouring his love into us: “the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Rm 5:5). This love is the love with which God loves us and through which, at the same time, he makes us love him and our neighbor. It is a new capacity to love. Love is the sign that reveals the new life given by the Spirit. Saint John writes: “We know that we have passed from death to life because we love our brothers” (1 Jn 3:14).

Those who approach the Gospel in a human way find it absurd that love should be a “commandment.” They question what kind of love it could be if it is not freely given but commanded. The answer is that there are two ways in which you can be driven to do or not do something: either by *force* or by *attraction*, either by pushing or by pulling. In the first instance, the law forces you under threat of punishment; in the second, love makes you act because you are attracted to something.

In fact, each one of us is drawn to what we love without feeling obliged by external factors. Show a child some nuts, said Saint Augustine, and he'll stretch out his hand to seize them. He doesn't need to be pushed; he is attracted by the object he desires. Show the Supreme Good to a soul thirsting for truth and it will reach out for it. Nobody pushes the soul, it is attracted by what it desires. Love is the “weight” of a soul which draws it as if by a law of gravity to what it loves and where it finds its rightful rest.⁶

It is in this sense that the Holy Spirit or love, is a “law,” a “commandment.” It gives the Christian an energy which makes him do all that God wants, spontaneously and without even thinking about it, because he has made God's will his own, and he loves all that God loves. Love draws God's will from its very source. Through the Spirit it reaches the living will of God. It's like “being in love” when everything is done joyfully and spontaneously and not out of habit or self-interest. We could say that to live in grace, governed by the new law of the Spirit, is to live “in love,” that is, transported by love. The same change that falling in love creates in human life and in the relationship between two people is created by the coming of the Holy Spirit in the relationship between God and ourselves.

Love Protects the Law and the Law Protects Love

In this new economy of the Spirit, what place is there for the observance of the commandments? This is a crucial point that must be clarified. The written law still exists after Pentecost: there are the ten God's commandments and the evangelical precepts. What is the significance of the Code of Canon law, monastic rules, religious vows, everything, in fact, that indicates an objective will which is imposed on us from outside? Are these things

⁵ N. Cabasilas, *Life in Christ*, II, 8; PG 150, 553.

⁶ See St. Augustine, *On the Gospel of John* 26, 4-5; *Confessions* XIII, 9.

foreign bodies in the Christian organism?

In the history of the Church, there have been movements that shared this idea and in the name of freedom of the Spirit (cf. 2 Cor 3:17), rejected all laws so much so as to call themselves “anomists,” that is without law. These movements, however, have always been repudiated by the Church authorities and by the Christian conscience.

The Christian answer to this problem is to be found in the Gospel. Jesus says he didn't come to “abolish the law” but to “fulfill” it (Mt 5:17). What is the “fulfillment” of the law? “Love is the fulfillment of the law,” Saint Paul answers (Rm 13:10). Jesus said that “the whole law and the prophets depend” on this commandment (see Mt 22:40). Therefore, love does not replace the law but fulfills it. In fact, it is the only force that can make it observed! In the prophecy of Ezekiel, the possibility of observing God's law is attributed to the future gift of the Spirit and a new heart: “I will put my spirit within you so that you walk in my statutes, observe my ordinances, and keep them” (Ez 36:27). In the same sense Jesus says: “Whoever loves me will keep my word” (Jn 14:23), that is, will be able to observe it.

In the new economy there is no contrast or incompatibility between the interior law of the Spirit and the written external law. On the contrary, there is full collaboration. The one is given in relation to the other. “Law was given,” says Saint Augustine, “so that we might seek grace, and grace was given so that we might observe the law.”⁷ As I said earlier, the law without the Spirit is dead, but the Spirit without the law is blind.

The observance of the commandments and, indeed, obedience, is the proof of love. It is the sign that shows whether we are living “according to the Spirit” or “according to the flesh.” “For the love of God is this, that we keep his commandments,” says Saint John (1 Jn 5:3). That's what Jesus himself did: he made himself the sublime model of a love which is expressed in the observance of the commandments, that is, in obedience. He says: “I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love” (Jn 15:10).

The *commandment* (singular!) doesn't, therefore, cancel out the *commandments* (plural!), but it guards them and fulfills them, not only in the sense that whoever loves has the strength to observe what is commanded, but also in the deeper sense that whoever loves realizes the ultimate end of every law: namely, being in harmony with God's will. If someone were to observe every law perfectly but did not have the interior disposition of heart that comes from love, they wouldn't in fact be observing the law but pretending to observe it. It would be mere legalism, like that of many Pharisees. Saint Paul was right then when he said that all his discourse doesn't “annul the law” but, on the contrary, it “supports the law” (see Rm 3:31).

As we can see, a wonderful exchange, a sort of reciprocity, exists between law and love. If it's true, as we have just seen, that love protects the law, it's also true that “the law protects

⁷ St. Augustine, *The Spirit and the Letter*, 19, 34.

love." Love is the strength of the law and the law is the defense of love. In different ways the law is at the service of love and defends it.

First of all, we know that "the law is meant for...the sinful" (see 1 Tm 1:9) and we are still sinners. It's true that we have received the Spirit but only as first fruits. The old self lives on in us together with the new self, and as long as there is concupiscence in us, it is providential that the commandments should exist to help us recognize it and struggle against it, even if under the threat of punishment. The law is a support for our freedom which is still uncertain and wavering in doing good. It is *for* and not *against* freedom. Those who thought that they should reject every law in the name of human freedom were mistaken. They ignored the concrete and historical situation in which freedom works.

Together with this negative function, the law also has a positive function, that of discernment. Through the grace of the Holy Spirit we adhere to God's will globally. We make it ours and desire to fulfill it, but we still don't know it in all of its implications and in a given situation. These are revealed to us both by the law and by the events of our lives.

But there is still a deeper sense in which we could say that the law protects love. Kierkegaard wrote: "only when the *duty* to love exists is love guaranteed for ever against every change; it is eternally liberated in blessed independence, assured in eternal beatitude against all despair."⁸ These words mean that the more a lover loves, the stronger is his anguished perception of the risk his love runs. This risk doesn't come from others but from himself. He is very well aware in fact of his own volubility and knows that when tomorrow comes, he could weary of the object of his love and no longer love it. Now that he clearly sees the irreparable loss that would be, he protects himself by "binding" himself to love through the law. In this way he is anchoring his act of temporal love to eternity.

Today people wonder more and more what relationship can possibly exist between the love of a young couple and the law of matrimony and why love has to "bind" itself. As a consequence, more and more couples reject in theory and in practice the institution of matrimony and opt for so-called free love or simply live together. Only by discovering, through God's Word, the deep and important relationship that exists between law and love, between decision and institution, can we rightly answer these questions and give young people a convincing reason for "binding" themselves to love for life and for not fearing to make love a "duty."

The duty to love protects love from "despair" and makes it "free and independent" in the sense that it protects from the despair of not being able to love for ever. Benedict XVI said something similar in his encyclical *Deus caritas est*: true love is intrinsically "forever."

"It is part of love's growth towards higher levels and inward purification that it now seeks to become definitive, and it does so in a twofold sense: both in the sense of

⁸ S. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, I, 2, 40.

exclusivity (this particular person alone) and in the sense of being 'forever'.⁹

This consideration is not only true of human love but also, and even more so, of divine love. We could ask ourselves: Why should we bind ourselves to loving God, submitting to a religious rule? Why do we, consecrated people, take vows that *oblige* us to be poor, chaste and obedient when we have an interior and spiritual law which can obtain all of this spontaneously and by *attraction*? It's because in a moment of grace you were drawn to God, you loved him and desired to possess him forever, and dreading the thought of losing him because of your own instability, you "bound" yourself to guarantee your love from every possible change.

Whether in marriage or in the priestly and religious life, people bind themselves for the same reason that the ancient navigator Ulysses bound himself to the ship's mast . He wanted, at all costs, to see his native land and his wife again, but he knew he had to pass through the place of the Sirens, and feared he would be shipwrecked like many before him. So he asked to be bound with cords to the mast of the ship, so that he could resist the entrancing chanting of the Sirens.

A pastoral lesson

Before concluding the present reflection, I would like to point to an important pastoral lesson we can learn from the experience of the apostles. We have seen how little of the teachings of Jesus they had been able to put into practice during their time with him and how all that changed after they received the Holy Spirit.

I see in this an implication for the formation of future priests in our seminaries. There is a risk that we could be leading our future priests to the point where the apostles were before Easter and before the coming of the Spirit. This would happen if we were to teach them dogmatic theology, canon law, moral theology, liturgy and everything else, without helping them to have a personal experience and a new anointing of the Spirit. They would know everything needed to function as a priest institutionally, without having the capability of putting that knowledge into practice, to resist temptation, and to persevere in their vocation.

Do you remember the episode of the contest between the prophet Elijah and the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel? Elijah gathered wood, prepared a sacrifice, doused the wood with water several times, and then calmly prayed to God and expected an answer. "The Lord's fire came down and devoured the burnt offering, wood, stones, and dust, and lapped up the water in the trench" (1 Kg 18:38). Read in spiritual terms, this episode indicates that everything we do through our own efforts, studies and projects is like collecting the wood. But in the end, it all depends on whether or not the fire of the Holy Spirit descends on it. Without the Spirit, it remains simply "wet wood," good intentions and proposals without the resources to put them into action. It would be like a Mass that had all the elements and in which all the rites were performed but without the consecration: the bread would remain

⁹ Enc. *Deus caritas est*, nr.6

mere bread and the wine mere wine. This doesn't diminish the importance of the study of theology and human formation, quite the contrary, without the wood, fire would have nothing to set ablaze!

The problem for the Church is the same as for the world, and it is the problem of energy. Where do we get the energy we need, and how can we assure energy for future generations? Jesus gave an answer to this question to the apostles before leaving them: "Stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high" (Lk 24:49). Quite strange! According to Mark and Matthew, the last command given by Jesus to the apostles is "Go!" "Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature" (Mk 16:15). According to Luke, the last word seems to be the opposite; "Stay, remain!" But the two are not opposed to each other. Together they mean: Go, but not until you have been equipped for the task.

How this renewed experience of the Holy Spirit can accompany the priestly ordination depends on many factors and can be achieved in different ways. The important thing is that the ordination not be just a rite or ritual, an anointing of the hands, but that it be accompanied by an inner transformation, a true anointing of the soul. The first step in the process is to be convinced of its necessity, to pray for it, and to approach the ordination with an expectant faith. Preparing seminarians spiritually for ordination should be a priority of every bishop and seminary rector. Once we have done this, we have to imitate Elijah on Mount Carmel: retire in silence and ask God to act according to his promise.

Let me end with the inspired words spoken by a bishop of an Eastern rite at a solemn ecumenical assembly:

*Without the Holy Spirit:
God is far away,
Christ stays in the past,
the Gospel is a dead letter,
the Church is simply an organisation,
authority a matter of domination,
mission a matter of propaganda,
liturgy no more than an evocation,
Christian living a slave morality.*

*But with the Holy Spirit:
the cosmos is resurrected and groans with the birth-pangs of the Kingdom,
the risen Christ is there,
the Gospel is the power of life,
the Church shows forth the life of the Trinity,
authority is a liberating service,
mission is a Pentecost,
the liturgy is both memorial and anticipation,*

*human action is deified.*¹⁰

¹⁰ Ignatius of Latakia, Discourse given at the Third World Assembly of Churches, July 1968, in The Uppsala Report, Geneva 1969, p. 298.

THROUGH THE HOLY SPIRIT
A Personal Testimony

This time we do not begin by singing a verse of the *Veni Creator*, because the entire meditation will be on the Holy Spirit.

As we heard last time, Saint Peter described the apostles as “those who preached the Gospel through the holy Spirit” (see 1 Pt 1:12). After meditating on the content of Christian preaching – the Gospel, or the *kerygma* - we want reflect now on its method or its medium - the Holy Spirit.

If I want to share some news, the first question I would ask myself is, “How will I transmit it? In the press? On radio? Television?” So important is the medium that our modern science of social communication has coined the slogan, “The medium is the message.” (Marshall McLuhan) And what is the first natural medium by which a word is transmitted? It is breath, a flow of air, the sound of a voice. My breath takes the word that has formed in the hidden recesses of my mind and brings it to the ears of the hearer. All the other means of communication only reinforce and amplify this first medium of breath and voice. The written word comes next. Since the letters of the alphabet are only symbols that represent sounds, the written word supposes a live voice.

The word of God also follows this law. It is transmitted by breath. And what, or rather who, according to the Bible, is the breath, the *ruah* of God? It is the Holy Spirit! Can my breath bring your words to life or your breath make my words come to life? No. Only my breath is capable of speaking my word, just as only your breath can articulate your words. In an analogous way, the word of God cannot be articulated except by the breath of God, the Holy Spirit.

This is a very simple and almost obvious truth, but it is of enormous importance. It is the fundamental law of every proclamation and all evangelization. Human news is transmitted by person or via radio, cable, satellite, etc. Divine news, precisely because it is divine, is transmitted by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the genuine, essential means for its communication. Without him we would only be able to perceive the human language in which the message is clothed.

This fundamental law is what we see in action concretely in the history of salvation. Jesus began preaching “in the power of the Spirit” (Lk 4:14). He himself declared that: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor” (Lk 4:18). Appearing to the apostles in the Upper Room on Easter night, he said, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the holy Spirit” (Jn 20:21-22). In commissioning the apostles to go into the whole world, Jesus also conferred on them the means to accomplish that task—the Holy Spirit—and, significantly, he conferred it through the sign of his breathing on them.

I know of two possibilities for illustrating the role of the Holy Spirit in our priestly ministry: either to go through the account of Pentecost to see how the coming of the Spirit transformed the apostles into ardent preachers of the Gospel, or to tell how he transformed me into a full time preacher of the Gospel. I have chosen this second way, also because this transformation began here in your country 42 years ago. My story has to do with the Charismatic renewal, but I don't intend to convince you to join the Charismatic renewal; simply because this is the instrument the Lord has used with me.

What is important is not to join one particular movement or spiritual experience, but that everyone experience, in his own way, the current of grace going through the Church. St. John XXIII asked God for a new Pentecost, and God has answered his prayer. There is a new Pentecost going on in the Church. Everyone is invited to enter into the Cenacle. It would be tragic if millions of believers would experience the current of grace of a new Pentecost, while their pastors remain outside. This would create a dangerous gap between the pastors and the flock.

My testimony is more a confession of sin than a subject of boast, because of the many resistances I made to the prompting of the Spirit. I was born in middle Italy, in a village of the city Ascoli Piceno, on July 22, 1934. I entered into a college of the Capuchin order but had not yet decided what to do with my life: whether to study and then go out, or if I should continue in this line. Three months after entering the seminary, we had our first retreat. For the first time, I listened to the great truths of our religion: the love of God, eternal life, the beauty of Jesus. Listening to these meditations, I perceived that the Lord was calling me to become a Franciscan religious priest. It was with such clarity that I could never doubt my calling after that. "This is the biggest grace the Lord could afford me after baptism," I used to say to my companions.

I started my formation, which lasted about fifteen years. I was ordained priest in 1958 which means that last October I have celebrated my 60th anniversary of priesthood. After my ordination, I was sent to Switzerland to graduate in theology. I specialized in the Fathers of the Church. My superiors then sent me to the University of Milan to specialize in Greek and Latin, in order to deepen my knowledge of the Bible and of the Church fathers.

After graduating with a degree in literature, I was asked to remain at the university. I became a professor at the large Catholic University of Milan. I was very happy there. My superiors were very proud of a fellow Capuchin in this position. I even became head of a department at that university, the department of religious sciences.

In 1975 a lady whom I had accompanied in her spiritual journey returned from a retreat in Milan and said to me: "I met some very strange people in that house. They pray with clapping and raising their hands. They even speak about miracles happening among them." Being a wise spiritual director, I said, "You never go again to this retreat house." She obeyed. But she didn't give up easily. She began inviting me to know these people who were among the first charismatics coming to Italy. One time she invited me to Rome for a prayer meeting. I was skeptical because I was a very traditional Catholic priest formed before the Council. I was afraid of every novelty. I went to the meeting but looked at the assembly rather critically.

The leaders of the group were aware of my position. They told the people, “Don’t go to this particular priest. He is an enemy.” But seeing a priest among them, some would come and ask for confession. And hearing their confessions was the first stroke of the Holy Spirit in my life. It was as if the Lord was shaking me up like a tree. I had never met such deep and true repentance! Sins seemed to fall from the souls of these people like stones, and at the end there was great joy, tears of joy. For the first time I understood what Jesus meant when He said, “The Paraclete, when He comes, He will convince the world of sin” (John 16:8). These people were really conscious of sin, convinced interiorly and I started to reflect on this phenomenon I witnessed.

As a teacher of History of Ancient Christianity I saw that what was happening among those people was very similar to what had happened in the early Church, in Corinth for instance. I was fascinated but taken back by the novelty. I gave a course at the university on the first charismatic and prophetic movements in the early Church, trying to understand something about this phenomenon. While I was in this position, the people of the renewal kept inviting me to give them teachings.

In 1977 another lady in Milan offered me a ticket to attend a Charismatic ecumenical rally in Kansas City. There were over 40,000 people, half catholic and half of almost all other Christians denominations. I was still an outsider, a very critical observer. There was a song sung by the multitude. It was the story of Jericho falling down at the sound of the trumpets. When the crowd sang the refrain, “Lift high the banner of love, Jericho must fall,” the persons who had come with me from Italy nudged at me and said, “Listen carefully, because ‘Jericho it is you.’”

Jericho eventually fell, but not without defending itself. After the rally we attended a retreat in a religious house at Convent Station in New Jersey. I decided to leave and join my Franciscan friary in Washington. An Irish priest, Fr. Brendan Murray, still active in Dover, New Jersey, to whom I am much indebted, invited me to stay and join a “Life in the Spirit Seminar” which was planned for the week. I said to myself: “After all, this is not a house of prostitution, it is a house of retreat; if I stay it will do no harm to my soul; so I will stay. “Lord,” I prayed. “I will give you one more chance to convince me that this is really your work.”

I began attending the sessions. One detail I still recall was the day we were in a prayer meeting in the hall. I was still struggling with objections. “I am a Franciscan, a religious priest. What am I waiting for? What can these people give me that I don’t possess? I already have St. Francis of Assisi as my spiritual father...”. At that moment, a lady opened her Bible and—not knowing anything about my thoughts—began reading a passage. It was the passage where St. John the Baptist says to the Pharisees, “Don’t say in your hearts, ‘we have Abraham as our Father.’” I understood the Lord was answering my thoughts. I stood up. I spoke no English. I spoke Italian, but it seemed everybody understood. “Lord,” I said, “I will never again say that I am a son of St. Francis of Assisi, because I realize I am not. If it is necessary to receive this grace of the Baptism in the Holy Spirit to become a true son of St. Francis, I accept.”

I prepared myself to receive this Baptism in the Spirit. As a theologian, I asked myself all the usual questions about what “baptism in the Spirit” might be. I found the most direct answer in what Jesus said to his apostles before ascending into heaven: “before many days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 1:5). It was a few days later that Pentecost occurred, so

Jesus was pointing to Pentecost by the expression “baptism in the Spirit.” It was that simple. I understood that action as a free, personal renewal of my baptism, confirmation, and First Communion, but also of my religious profession and my priestly ordination. It was permission for the Spirit to blow on the ashes and stoke up the fire deposited in me by the sacraments.

In the course of preparing to be prayed over, one evening I was walking in the park of the religious house when an image formed itself in my mind. The Lord sometimes speaks through images, which is a very simple way to communicate with human beings. Nothing miraculous, but altogether unforgettable. I saw myself internally as a man on a coach who is holding the reins of the carriage and is deciding whether to go to the right or to the left, whether to go quickly or slowly. I understood that it was the image of myself as a man who wants to have control of his own life. At a certain point it was as though Jesus climbed up next to me in the carriage and gently said to me, “Would you give me the reins to your life?” There was an instant of panic because I understood that this was serious. However, through the grace of God, I realized in the same instant that I could not be the one to control my life; neither could I be sure of tomorrow. Therefore I said, “Yes, Lord, take the reins of my life!” I share this very personal detail because I am convinced that surrendering oneself completely to the Lordship of Christ is a condition for a new release of the Spirit in one’s life.

During the prayer they asked me to choose Jesus as the personal Lord of my life. At that moment I lifted up my eyes and saw the Crucified One above the altar. There was a flash and an inner voice that said, “Be careful; the Jesus you are choosing as Lord is not a nice rose-water Jesus; it is I, the crucified Christ.” That was a help to me, because I still had some doubts that all of this could be something emotional and superficial. In that moment I understood, instead, that the Holy Spirit goes right to the heart of the gospel, which is the cross of Christ. How many times in later years did I need to remind myself of that word!

At the moment of the baptism of the Holy Spirit many people experience particular emotions; they can burst into tears of repentance or of joy. For me, nothing in particular happened outwardly except the clear decision of entrusting the reins of my life to the Lord and renewing my baptism. Some brothers, while the prayer was going on, spoke some prophetic words over me. Someone said, “You will experience a new joy in proclaiming my word.”

The next day I took a plane from Newark to Washington. On the plane I began to realize that, despite appearances, something new had happened. Opening up the breviary, the psalms seemed new to me, written just for me the day before. Later I realized that one of the first effects of the coming of the Holy Spirit is that the Bible becomes a living book. It is no longer a repository of doctrine, an object of study, but the living word of God that sheds light on situations and the state of one’s soul, and it opens up new horizons.

I remember a nice episode in this regard about the Bible. I was preaching a mission in Australia. On the last day an immigrant from Italy came to find me. “Father,” he said, “I have a serious problem in my family. I have an eleven-year-old boy who is not yet baptized. My wife has become a Jehovah’s Witness, and she does not want to hear anything about a Catholic baptism. If I baptize him it will create a crisis, and if I don’t baptize him I won’t be peaceful because when we got married we were both Catholic and promised to raise our children in the faith. What

should I do?" I told him, "Let me think about it tonight, and come back tomorrow morning and we will see what to do." The next day the man came to meet me visibly reassured and said, "Father, I found the solution. Last night, when I returned home, I prayed for a bit, and then opened up the Bible randomly. I came to the passage where Abraham takes his son Isaac to the immolation, and I have seen that when he takes his son to the immolation he doesn't mention anything to his wife." It was a discernment that was exegetically perfect. God had spoken to him through his word. I baptized the boy myself and it was a time of great joy for all.

Arriving at my community in Washington, there was another sign that something in me had changed: I felt a desire to pray that was quite unusual for me. I felt drawn to the chapel and my prayer began to take on a Trinitarian direction. The Father seemed eager to refer to the Son and the Son to the Father, and all of it through the Spirit. This is the secret of Christian prayer that distinguishes it from every other form of prayer. It does not involve a human being at one end of line who talks to the Creator at the other end. It is God praying in us, because it is the Spirit—as St. Paul explains—that prays in us "with sighs too deep for words" and intercedes for us according to God's will. (cf. Rom 8:26)

The Spirit doesn't stop at teaching us how to pray, but prays in us. He doesn't give a *law* of prayer but a *grace* and a gift of prayer. Biblical prayer doesn't come to us, therefore, through exterior and progressive learning. This is the "good news" concerning Christian prayer! The very principle itself of such new prayer comes to us and this principle consists in the fact that God "has sent into our hearts the Spirit of his Son crying, *Abba*, Father (Gal 4:6). This means praying "in the Holy Spirit" or "through the Spirit" (cf. Eph 6: 18; Jude 20). The three months I spent in Washington after the baptism in the Spirit were my "honeymoon" with God.

Having returned to Milan, I began to participate in some charismatic prayer meetings. The people who had known me as a critical observer were amazed and said, "What a miracle! We sent a Saul to America and they have sent us back a Paul!" One day I was in my cell in Milan when—I don't quite know how to express it—the Lord spoke to me again with an interior image. I seemed to see Jesus passing before me. It was the same Jesus who had returned from the Jordan River and was about to start preaching the kingdom of God. Passing in front of me, he said these words to me (at least I felt in my heart that was the case): "If you want to help me proclaim the kingdom of God, leave everything and follow me." Being a Capuchin Franciscan, I was presumed to have already left everything behind. But instead, in that moment, I realized how rich I was. I understood immediately what the Lord meant. "Leave your professorship, leave everything, become an itinerant preacher of my word in the same way as your father, Francis of Assisi."

For an instant I was afraid. Jesus seemed to be going by quickly. He invited me, but he did not stop. It was the strongest experience for me of what grace is and how it operates: not forcing someone but soliciting and attracting. At the end of this time of prayer, there was a full and total "yes" in my heart. My professorship fell away in an instant—the position obtained through a national recruitment and that was instituted specifically for me at Catholic University. Everything laid aside! "Begin again as an itinerant preacher of my word!"

I made a retreat to try to understand what was happening. I understood immediately that I could not act on the basis of my personal inspiration. This was an occasion in which I discovered the gift represented by the existence of authority and obedience in the Church. I went to Rome to my Minister General. He gave me the classic response, the one that every good superior and every good bishop usually gives in similar circumstances: “Let us wait for a year!” A very wise response! So I continued to teach for another year. Meanwhile my initial clarity had disappeared and doubts arose: “What am I doing? I have always been a researcher. . . . What does it mean to be an itinerant preacher?” It was obedience that saved my calling. After a year, I went to Rome again; we prayed and my Minister General in the end said, “Yes, it is God’s will. They will say we are both crazy, but after ten years perhaps they will change their minds.”

I was preparing for my new ministry in a small monastery in Switzerland when I got a phone call from Rome. It was my Superior General calling again to tell me, “The Holy Father John Paul II has appointed you as the Preacher to the Papal Household. Do you have any serious reasons to not accept?” Aside from an understandable apprehension, I could not think of any valid reasons to say no, and so in a few weeks I had to prepare myself to preach the first Lenten sermons to the Papal Household. That was in 1980.

I speak willingly about this ministry because it honors the pope more than the preacher. Currently the office consists in presenting a meditation to the pope, cardinals, bishops, prelates of the Curia, and superior generals of religious orders every Friday in Advent and Lent. The preaching takes place in the Redemptoris Mater Chapel. Prior to Pope Francis, the pope would listen in a small lateral chapel from where he could be seen by the preacher but not by the rest of the audience, generally a group of about sixty people. Francis instead sits in the first row, right in front of the preacher.

There is no fixed time limit to the office. When circumstances require a change, the Minister General of the Capuchins presents a short list of three names, and the pope selects one.

I am always amazed at how the pope takes the time to listen to a very simple priest of the Catholic Church and considers it such an important appointment that he never misses it, which is an extraordinary example for the whole Church. Sometimes, when I would meet John Paul II after my preaching and he would thank me for the meditation, I would be embarrassed and say, “Your Holiness, thank you because by coming to the sermon it is you who is preaching to me and to the whole Church.”

The first time I spoke in St. Peter’s—the sermon for Good Friday takes place in the basilica—I became aware that I needed to speak very slowly because there was an echo reverberating in the basilica. Because of that, my talk lasted ten minutes longer than I had expected. The prefect of the Papal Household (at that time Bishop, then Cardinal, Jacques-Paul Martin) was a bit preoccupied and nervous and kept looking at his watch because the pope was supposed to preside at the *Via Crucis* at the Coliseum immediately afterward. The next day, the prefect told some sisters what happened after the liturgy ended. Pope John Paul II called him over and smiling said to him, “When a man of God speaks to us, we should not be looking at our watches!” (Forget about “the man of God”, but retain the rest!).

During Lent in 1981, commenting on the episode of Jesus’ temptation in the desert, I had the opportunity to touch on the topic of the devil. That same prefect of the Papal Household confided

to me that in accompanying the pontiff back to his apartment, he said, “Your Holiness, now we know that the preacher believes in the existence of the devil; it is a good sign that he thinks like the pope.” John Paul II answered him, “It is also a good sign that the pope thinks like his preacher.” If that isn’t humility!

The last Lent of 2005 was particularly moving. John Paul II, as we know, was seriously ill and died shortly after, on April 2. During Lent his condition worsened and he was taken to Gemelli Hospital. Through his secretary Stanislaw Dziwisz he asked a couple of times that I fax him the text of the meditations I was giving on the Eucharist to the Curia in his absence.

Proximity to John Paul II has been one of the most wonderful gifts that my office has brought me. One had the impression in his presence of a gigantic personality. The thing that was the most impressive was his constant attitude of prayer. One would have said that he was always in dialogue with an invisible presence even when he was talking to people. But he was not absent: he was very present to whoever was speaking to him. He often astounded the bishops who had come for their *ad limina* visit, addressing them by name and recalling details of meetings in their respective dioceses.

Another thing that was striking was the absence in him of any elation or intoxication, even at moments of great success and popularity on the political scene. When, due in part to his influence, one communist regime after another in the east was falling, he never showed any sign of self-congratulation. Every time someone tried to move the discussion to these events, he would say, “Let us give thanks to God, let us give thanks to God!”

From the time he was a cardinal, Benedict XVI was one of the most regular participants at my sermons among the cardinals. He confirmed me in that office, and I had the honor of preaching in his presence until Advent 2012. I had also prepared five meditations for him for Lent of 2013, but they remained in my drawer because of his resignation of the pontificate.

Regarding Benedict XVI, I recall above all his extraordinary politeness and gentleness, whether in his personal or official relationships. So often his trips began under the worst circumstances but concluded with the best results. In the speech I was asked to give to the cardinals before entering into conclave in which he was elected pope, I said, among other things,

Every pope, in addition to the charism tied to that ministry, places his own charisms and personal talents at the service of the Church. It would be a mistake (and in the case of the deceased pontiff John Paul II it would also be impossible!) to want to imitate someone else’s charisms. It is the richness of the papacy to express from time to time an aspect of the multi-form grace of God and thus to meet the diverse needs of the Church that no single pope can completely satisfy by himself alone.

I believe that is in fact what happened. Benedict XVI’s knowledge of theological problems and of modern thinking allowed him to exercise—in the most literal sense of the word—a true doctrinal magisterium that, trimmed perhaps of more personal and contingent elements, will remain as a precious good for the whole Church. What I personally have most appreciated about Benedict XVI have been some of the homilies he gave during the major liturgical solemnities of the year. Because of their profundity and clarity, they deserve, in my opinion, to be placed alongside the famous homilies of the fifth-century pope, Leo the Great.

His resignation constituted a significant step on the path to humanizing and democratizing the papal office, bringing it closer to the modern sentiment that recognizes the right of every person to a deserved rest and a peaceful old age. It essentially involves the same principle that led the Church to limit the episcopal ministry to the age of 75, and the pope is above all a bishop, the Bishop of Rome.

On March 4, 2013, during the conclave to elect the successor of Benedict XVI, I was again given the task to give the first of two exhortations to the cardinals. The whole college of cardinals was present including those over 80 who were not electors. Cardinal Bergoglio was before me in one of the last rows of seats in the synod hall.

I was confirmed by Pope Francis on July 18, 2013, in the office of Preacher to the Papal Household. It has been over 38 years that I have held this office. Calculating about eight sermons per year, that means 272 sermons in total, corresponding to 136 hours of the pope's time. What a great responsibility! None of my predecessors has lasted this long in this assignment. When someone asks me why this is the case, I answer (and I am not merely joking) that the reason is that the popes have probably realized that this is the position in which Fr. Cantalamessa can do the least harm to the Church.

Many people ask me if the topics of the sermons are dictated to me or if I am the one who chooses them. I consider it is a sign of great confidence on the part of Vatican agencies to have left me always free to choose the topic of the sermons myself—even for Good Friday, which has more exposure to undesirable reactions because of its public and media nature. The only time that John Paul II forwarded a suggestion to me was in Advent 2001 on the occasion of the day of repentance and prayer that he called for in the aftermath of the attack on the Twin Towers. He wanted me to talk about fasting.

In choosing the topic for sermons I try to let myself be guided by the problems, graces, or specific occasions the Church is experiencing at that very moment or in that year, but not without first submitting it in prayer to the Holy Spirit whom the Risen One has left us as the interpreter and the prompter of truth.

Preaching to the Papal Household made me immediately appreciate how valuable my years of study at the university had been. They had furnished me a key, so to speak, with which I could now open up the storehouses of grace and distribute treasures to the people of God: the Scriptures, the insights of the Church Fathers, the great sacred and secular authors. I simply went from studying what the Church Fathers had accomplished to doing myself what they had done, that is, forming the faith of people and not just writing scholarly responses to other scholars. When I have the opportunity to speak to young people and seminarians, I tell them, “Do not follow my example (unless you have a clear calling to do otherwise); do not abandon your studies; apply yourselves to them as much as you can. One day you will distill all that you have learned and digested to people who will be grateful to you for it.”

Following my new openness to the Spirit and my conversion to the cause of unity among Christians, I began to receive invitations from leaders of other Christian denominations. I preached a retreat to seventy Lutheran pastors in Sweden. (Think about this a bit: a Catholic speaking to Lutherans and, on top of that, speaking about the Letter to the Romans!) I have had

the joy of exercising my ministry among Protestant brothers and sisters in other Scandinavian countries too like Denmark, Norway and Finland.

Preaching to brothers and sisters from other Christian denominations—Pentecostal, Lutheran, Anglican, Methodist, Baptist—makes up about a fourth of my activities, and I consider it one of the greatest blessings of my life. Often the event is jointly sponsored by the Catholic bishop and the leader of the local Protestant community, as was the case a few years ago in Birmingham, Alabama, and in Minneapolis- St. Paul, Minnesota.

My most exciting experience in this field took place in 2015 when the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, invited me to give the homily at Westminster during the Mass for the inauguration of the General Synod of the Anglican Church. Afterward queen Elizabeth, who had attended the service, said, “Something important must have taken place between Christians if a catholic priest has been invited to give a homily at Westminster”.

In 1974 there was news that astonished and amused the whole world. A Japanese soldier, who was sent to an island in the Philippines during the last World War to infiltrate the enemy and gather information, had lived for thirty years hiding here and there in the jungle, eating roots, fruit, and occasional prey. He was convinced that the war was still going on and he was still on his mission. When they found him, it was hard to convince him that the war was over and that he could go home.

I believe something similar has happened among Christians. There are Christians on both sides who need to be convinced that the war is over. The religious wars between Catholics and Protestants are over, and we have much better things to do than fight with one another! The world has forgotten, or has never known, its Savior, the one who is the light of the world, the way, the truth, and the life; so how can we waste time arguing among ourselves?

In 2009 there was a large demonstration of faith in Stockholm called the “Jesus Manifestation.” On the last day, believers from various churches, each coming from a different street, processed toward the center of the city. Our small group of Catholics led by the local bishop, the present Cardinal Arborelius, also processed down a street praying. Once at the center, the separate procession lines broke up and merged into one crowd that proclaimed the Lordship of Christ—a crowd of 18,000 young people and of astonished bystanders.

The way this event took place was for me a parable and a prophecy. Unity among Christians will be achieved if, coming from different streams, we Christians move toward the Centre which is Jesus Christ. In the measure we approach the centre we will come closer to one another, till, God willing, we can be again, as the apostles, the disciples and the women in the cenacle, “one heart and one soul” (Acts 5: 32). Hopefully before the second coming of the Lord!

“TEND THE FLOCK THAT IS IN YOUR CHARGE!”

Fishermen and Shepherds

Up until now we have reflected on the office of preaching, on its content “the Gospel” and in its method “the Holy Spirit”. But the role of the bishop does not end with the preaching of the Gospel. Besides being “fishers of men,” the successors of the apostles are also “shepherds of the flock.” Jesus said to Peter: “Feed my lambs; ...Tend my sheep” (see Jn 21:15-18) and Peter, on his part, exhorted the elders of the Church to tend the flock:

So I exhort the presbyters among you, as a fellow presbyter and witness to the sufferings of Christ and one who has a share in the glory to be revealed. Tend the flock of God in your midst, [according to some manuscripts, “*overseeing it*”, *episkopountes*, from which *episcopus*, *bishop*, is derived!] not by constraint but willingly, as God would have it, not for shameful profit but eagerly. Do not lord it over those assigned to you, but be examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd is revealed, you will receive the unfading crown of glory (1 Pt 5:1-4).

To understand the importance of the image of the shepherd in the Bible, we have to reach back into sacred history. At the beginning, Israel was a people of nomadic shepherds. Today’s desert Bedouins give us some idea of what life for the tribes of Israel once was like. In that society, the relationship between a shepherd and his flock was not simply based on economic interests. An almost personal relationship developed between the shepherd and the flock.

Spending day after day together in solitary places without a living soul around allowed them to observe and pay attention to each other. The shepherd ended up knowing everything about each individual sheep. And because he spoke to them often and even called each one by name, the sheep were able to recognize and distinguish the voice of the shepherd. This explains why, in order to express his relationship with humanity, God used this image which for us today has become somewhat ambiguous, confused at times with a “herd mentality” (nobody wants to be a sheep blindly following the flock!).

The image of the shepherd recurs often in the Bible. “You, shepherd of Israel, listen, you who guide Joseph like a flock” (Ps 80:2). One of the most beautiful psalms, Psalm 23, describes the security and serenity of the believer in having God as his shepherd: “The LORD is my shepherd; there is nothing I lack. In green pastures he makes me lie down.”

Later, the title of shepherd was extended to include those who take the place of God on earth: kings, priests, leaders in general. But in this case, the symbolism underwent a change: it no longer exclusively evoked images of protection and security, but also exploitation and oppression. Next to the image of the good shepherd appears his antithesis, the bad shepherd, the mercenary.

In the Prophet Ezekiel we find a scathing indictment against bad shepherds who pasture only themselves. They consume milk and dress in wool, but they fail to take care of the sheep, and even “ruled them harshly and brutally” (see Ez 34:1ff). This indictment against bad shepherds follows up on a promise given: one day God himself will come down to take loving care of his flock. “The lost I will search out, the strays I will bring back, the injured I will bind up, and the sick I will heal” (Ez 34:16).

In the Gospel, Jesus takes up this depiction of the good and the bad shepherd, but introduces a novelty. He says, “I am the good shepherd!” Beyond anyone’s imagining or expectation, the promise God made to take care of his flock himself has become reality. Christ does something that no shepherd, however good, would be willing to do: he gives his life for the sheep:

I am the good shepherd, and I know mine and mine know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I will lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. These also I must lead, and they will hear my voice, and there will be one flock, one shepherd (Jn 10:14-16).

The Mercy of Christ

One particular prerogative as a good shepherd stands out in everything Jesus did: to search for the lost sheep, to bind up their wounds and to cure the sick — in a word, to show mercy. Jesus encountered many people throughout Palestine. The Gospels record some of those people. In those encounters, one significant detail immediately strikes us: the individuals he met almost always found themselves in difficult situations or were burdened with sickness or grief or some other painful situation. And even worse, some were living in moral situations that contradicted the demands of the Mosaic Law and, therefore, were not living according to God’s will.

The people of Israel, including John the Baptist and the apostles, had their own preconceived notions about the future Messiah. They believed that he would be brandishing lightning bolts of divine wrath. But instead, Jesus deliberately aligned himself with the Father’s gratuitous love (*hesed*) and mercy for his people. At the center of Jesus’ message is not God’s anger but his merciful love.

Mercy was precisely the extraordinary aspect about Jesus that fascinated the crowds of poor people, sinners of every kind, and those excluded from society and religion. People of every sort flocked to Jesus. Sinners were people who were judged unclean because of their personal conduct or their disreputable professions, but he spent time with them. The scribes and Pharisees responded with murmuring protests, full of animosity. And from their vantage point they had good reason!

The very word “Pharisee” indicated a separate, distinct category of people. They were “clean” and obliged to flee even minimal contact with sinners. Jesus, on the other hand, not only did not flee from these people but even seemed entirely at ease in their company, even so far as sitting with them at table. He placed no pre-conditions on them before allowing them to approach him. In the eyes of the scribes and Pharisees, therefore, Jesus could not possibly be someone who came from God because it was simply inconceivable that God could be so nonchalant about the disregard for his laws or, even worse, approve of such people!

This seems to have been the agonizing difficulty that drove his precursor, John the Baptist, to send a delegation of his disciples to Jesus to ask him in no uncertain terms, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another” (Mt 11:3). John had announced the coming of one who would bring a sword and fire to the world, but instead he had to come to terms with someone about whom it was said: “A bruised reed he will not break, a smoldering wick he will not quench” (Mt 12:20). John’s bewilderment is understandable; not even Jesus himself was surprised by it. Knowing John’s question was asked in good faith, Jesus pointed to the signs that would identify him as the authentic Messiah announced by the prophets (Mt 11:2-6).

But who were the sinners? Who did this word describe? In line with the widespread tendency today to exonerate the Pharisees and to attribute the negative image of them to distortions

fabricated by the Gospel-writers, someone has maintained that the word “sinners” referred to “deliberate and unrepentant transgressors of the law.”¹ In other words, sinners were the common criminals and law-breakers of that time. If that were the case, Jesus’ adversaries were quite correct to be scandalized and to consider him an irresponsible and socially dangerous person. It would be as if a priest today were to make a habit of visiting known crime bosses and repeatedly accept their dinner invitations under the pretext of talking to them about God.

This, however, was not actually how things were. First of all, Jesus did not “frequent” the homes of publicans and sinners. He went only once to each of these houses, and on each occasion people ended up being changed. The fact is that the Pharisees had their own view of the law—what was in conformity to it and contradicted it—and, according to that standard, judged those who did not conform to their views as reprobates. Jesus does not deny that sin and sinners exist. He did not justify Zacchaeus’ fraudulent practices or the woman’s adultery. The fact that he refers to such people as “the sick” (Mt 9:12) and “the sinners” (Lk 5:32) demonstrates that.

What Jesus condemned was the Pharisees’ claim to determine on their own what true righteousness is and, based on that criterion, to consider all others as “greedy, dishonest, adulterous” (Lk 18:11), thus denying even the possibility that such people could change. This tendency is present in every society and religion, even today. People fashion for themselves a selective morality according to which what is “really evil” always happens to be what other people are doing and from which, very conveniently, they themselves are immune. The way Luke introduces the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector is revealing: “He then addressed this parable to those who were convinced of their own righteousness and despised everyone else” (Lk 18:9).

The second most important precept of the Law, love for one’s neighbor, almost always remains out of the picture for the Pharisees who consider themselves “just” even though they “devour the houses of widows” (Mk 12:40) and condemn as “accursed” the crowd that did not know the law (see Jn 7:49). According to an eminent biblical scholar Jesus was more critical of those who scornfully condemned sinners than of sinners themselves.²

When it comes to questions of morality in the Gospels, the one constant in Jesus’ actions can be summed up in seven words: “No to sin, yes to the sinner.” No one is more severe than Jesus in condemning unjustly acquired wealth, and yet he invited himself to Zacchaeus’ house. And simply by going there just to meet him, he effected a change. Jesus condemned adultery, even that of the heart, but he forgave the adulteress and restored her hope. Jesus reaffirmed the indissolubility of marriage, yet he engaged in a conversation with the Samaritan woman who had gone through five marriages. He went so far as to reveal something to her that he had not told anyone else in such an explicit way: “I am he [the Messiah], the one who is speaking to you” (Jn 4:26).

If we ask ourselves how we can theologically justify such a clear-cut distinction between the sinner and sin, the answer is quite simple: sinners are God’s creatures. They were created by God and made in his image, and they maintain their dignity despite all their aberrations. Sin, in the contrary, is not the work of God, it comes not from God, but from the enemy. For the same reason, the Son of God became everything we human beings are, “yet without sin” (see Heb 4:15).

¹ See E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 385.

² See J. D. G. Dunn, *Christianity in the Making*, vol. 1, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 532.

Compassion is a key word in the Gospel. Many miracles are attributed to the compassion Jesus felt in the presence of suffering and grief. In the year 2000, during the annual retreat given in the presence of St. John Paul II, the Venerable Vietnamese Cardinal F. X. Nguyen Van Thuan alluded to the opening of the Holy Door for the Great Jubilee and said: "I dream of a Church that is the Holy Door, always open, embracing all, full of compassion, that understands the pains and sufferings of humanity, protecting, consoling and guiding all people to the Loving Father."

In the Letter to the Hebrews we read, "Every high priest is taken from among men ...[And] is able to deal patiently with the ignorant and erring, for he himself is beset by weakness" (Heb 5:1.2). God seems more interested in having his priest be merciful and compassionate than he is in their being perfect. Our own weakness and fragility should teach us compassion and understanding.

Another peculiarity we observe in the pastoral style of Christ is the attention he paid to individuals. Although surrounded by crowds, he only see individuals. Let's look at some examples. In the Gospel of Luke (13:10-17), we read that "He [Jesus] was teaching in a synagogue on the sabbath. A woman was there. Jesus saw her. He called to her and said, "Woman, you are set free of your infirmity" (Lk 13:12).

Last October in a homily on this passage, a fellow Capuchin of my community in Rome shared some interesting observations. He noted, "In order to see her, Jesus would have had to lift his gaze. Then he would have had to be attentive... not to the crowd, to the majority, not to those who felt content and secure, but to the one person who was most in need. He would have had to put aside what he was doing, what he wanted to accomplish in order to be attentive to the needs of someone else. That woman who Jesus saw was more important than whatever he was doing, even more important than preaching."

And linking that message to the passage from Mark 10:46-52, he continued: "On another occasion, Jesus was walking down the street with his disciples. Suddenly a blind man invited Jesus to pay attention to his story, to feel his pain, and to heal him (see Mk 10:46-52). At that moment, his disciples became like bodyguards, wanting to protect him from the cry of the poor and isolate him from humanity. They said to the blind man: 'Be quiet,' 'Don't bother the master,' 'Don't attack our head.' But a siege mentality is never healthy. Instead, Jesus chose to be a good shepherd, that is, to be a shepherd for all of his sheep. Jesus stopped in his tracks, listened intently to the blind man and, moved by his pain, was able to heal him."

He concluded: "If we want to be part of the healing process for the wounds of our society and the wounds of our Church, we must remain close to the people on the periphery without feeling threatened by them, and to give a voice to those who are hurting. In both Gospel passages, kindness, gentleness, compassion, charity, human warmth and healing begin with our being attentive to the people who appear on our path. As long as we do not pay attention to them, we cannot respond."

Pastoral Challenges of today

After contemplating the life and style of our "Chief Shepherd" let us turn to the pastoral office of the bishops to mention some of its present challenges. The first and more urgent one is how to protect from the wolfs the most vulnerable among the sheep, the children. I leave however this topic completely outside of my consideration, knowing how earnestly it is taken at present by hierarchy of the Catholic Church and knowing also my lack of competence in it.

A challenge I should like to mention is how to integrate the contribution of lay people into the pastoral ministry of the Church. As we have seen, Jesus wanted his apostles to be shepherds of the sheep and fishers of men. For the clergy nowadays, it's easier to be a shepherd than it is to be a fisherman! That is, it is easier to nourish with the word and sacraments those who come to church than it is to go out to seek those far off in the most disparate spheres of life.

In various parts of the Christian world, the Parable of the Lost Sheep is being lived out in reverse: ninety-nine sheep have gone away and only one has remained in the sheepfold. The danger is that we spend all of our time nourishing the one remaining sheep and, due to the scarcity of clergy, don't have time to go out in search of the sheep who are lost.

This is where, because of their position in the world, the contribution of the laity has proven to be providential. The grace that some ecclesial movements embody for the Church today consists precisely in this. Within these movements people finally have the opportunity to hear the *kerygma*, to accept or renew their baptism, to make a conscious choice of Christ as their personal Lord and Savior, and to commit themselves actively to the life and mission of the Church. Many conversions today, both of nonbelievers and of nominal Christians returning to the practice of their faith, occur in the context of these lay movements. In his homily for the Chrism Mass of Holy Thursday in 2012, Benedict XVI affirmed:

Anyone who considers the history of the post-conciliar era can recognize the process of true renewal, which often took unexpected forms in living movements and made almost tangible the inexhaustible vitality of holy Church, the presence and effectiveness of the Holy Spirit.

What might be called "frontline evangelization" is taking place among young people and in the streets today through the efforts of these movements. I have attended a number of recent youth gatherings in Europe, especially in Germany and Switzerland. I have seen the tremendous potential the Church has in her young people. We need to trust them and allow them run some events their own way. They know best how to attract youth; they have the "know how."

Prayer of Intercession

We seldom hear it talked about today, but one of the pastoral duties mentioned very often in Scripture is that of praying for and interceding for people. Making intercession means uniting ourselves, through faith, with Christ who lives forever to intercede for the world (cf. Rom 8:34; Heb 7:25; 1 Jn 2:1). In his so-called "priestly prayer," Jesus gave us the most sublime example of intercession. "I pray for them," he said, "for the ones you have given me...keep them in your name. I do not ask that you take them out of the world but that you keep them from the evil one. Consecrate them in the truth. ...I pray not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me through their word..." (cf. Jn 17:9f).

The efficacy of the prayer of intercession does not depend on using "many words" (cf. Mt 6:7), rather, it depends on the level of union one manages to reach with the filial disposition of Christ. Instead of multiplying the words of intercession, it would probably be more useful to multiply the number of intercessors, that is, to invoke the help of Mary and the saints, as the Church does on the feast of all Saints when she asks God to grant what is being asked "through the great number of intercessors." The number of intercessors is also multiplied when we pray for one another. Saint Ambrose remarked:

If you pray for yourself you are the only one praying for yourself and if each one prays only for himself, the grace he receives will be smaller with respect to that obtained by

him who intercedes for others. Now, as the individual prays for all, it comes about that all pray for the individual. Therefore, if you pray only for yourself, you will be the only one praying for yourself. If, on the other hand, you pray for all, all will be praying for you, as you are included in that all.³

Being free of self-concern, the prayer of intercession is very pleasing to God because it more closely reflects divine gratuitousness and is in line with the desire of God “who wills everyone to be saved” (cf. 1 Tm 2:4). Of the Suffering Servant of God – in reality, Jesus – it was written that God “would give him his portion...with the mighty, because...[he] *interceded* for the transgressors” (cf. Is 53:12).

God is like a compassionate father whose role sometimes includes punishing, but who makes every allowance possible to avoid having to do so. He is deeply satisfied when the sinner’s own brothers play a role in restraining him. Ezekiel records the following lament of God: “I have searched among them for someone who would build a wall or stand in the breach before me to keep me from destroying the land; but I found no one” (Ez 22:30).

By God’s own design, the prayer of those placed in charge over God’s people is extraordinarily powerful, as the word of God itself testifies. Remember how, after the Golden Calf incident, God “would have decreed their destruction, had not Moses, his chosen one, withstood him in the breach to turn back his destroying anger” (cf. Ps 106:23). So to the pastors of the Church I unabashedly tell you: When at prayer, if you feel that God is angry with those he has placed into your care, don’t side immediately with God, but with your people! That’s what Moses did, even to the point of protesting that if God refused to forgive them, he himself would prefer to be blotted out of the Book of Life with them (cf. Ex 32:32). And the Bible gives us to understand that Moses’ intercession on their behalf was exactly what God was hoping for because after it he gave up the idea of harming his people.

Following Moses’ example, once you are in front of the people you must side with God with all your strength. We’re told that as he approached the camp, Moses blazed with anger. He ground the Golden Calf into powder which he then scattered on the water and made the Israelites drink (cf. Ex 32:19f.). He rebuked Israel: “Is this how you repay the LORD, so foolish and unwise a people” (Dt 32:6)? Only someone who had defended the people before God and bore the weight of their sins has the right - and the courage - to reprimand them in defense of God, as Moses did.

Love for the People of God

Intercessory prayer must be accompanied by love for the people entrusted to us. We opened this reflection with the exhortation of Peter where he described pastoral care with the adverbs “willingly” and “eagerly” or generously (*prothumôs* in Greek). This is the key to success in pastoral care.

Experience has taught me that a person can proclaim Christ for reasons that have little or nothing to do with love for the people. You can use it as a way to proselytize, or to legitimize your own small church or sect or religious organization, especially if you’re the one who only recently founded it. You can also proclaim Christ in order to increase the number of the elect, or to bring the Gospel to the ends of the earth and thus hasten the Lord’s return.

³ St. Ambrose, *On Cain and Abel*, I,39 (CSEL 32, I, p. 372).

Some of these motives are not necessarily bad, but alone they are not enough. What is still missing is the true spirit of the Gospel, that is, a genuine love and compassion for all human beings. Why did God send the first missionary, his Son, Jesus, into the world? For no other reason but for the sake of love: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (Jn 3:16). And why did Jesus preach about the kingdom? Solely out of love, out of compassion. “My heart is moved with pity for the crowd,” he said. And why? “Because they were troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd” (cf. Mt. 9:36; 15:32).

It is only out of love that you can proclaim the Gospel of love! If we fail to love the people we encounter, not only are our words empty and ineffective, but they can very easily become like stones that do harm. Remember Jonah! Jonah went to preach to the people of Nineveh but he didn't love them. (Nineveh, present-day Baghdad, was Israel's main enemy). Jonah was obviously happier shouting, “Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” (cf. Jon 3:4), than he was when he had to witness God's forgiveness. He was more worried about the tree that offered him shade than about the salvation of the city. “You are concerned over the gourd plant,” God said to Jonah, “...should I not be concerned over the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot know their right hand from their left?” (Jon 4:10-11). God had more difficulty converting the preacher than he did in converting the entire metropolis of Nineveh!

If we don't feel that love for people, we need to ask the Holy Spirit to put the love Jesus has for his people into us. We can beg the Holy Spirit to teach us to be “paracletes” for our people. “Paraclete” is the term Jesus used to announce the work the Holy Spirit would do after his death. In the term “paraclete” we reach the apex of revelation concerning the Holy Spirit. The usual name of the Spirit in Greek is *Pneuma*. But the word *Pneuma* is neuter in gender; it is applied to things not to people. “Paraclete,” on the other hand, is a masculine in gender, and always applies to persons. It means both advocate and comforter, someone who defends and gives encouragement. The Paraclete is not merely “something,” but “Someone.” And this is fully in line with the Church's belief in the Holy Spirit as the Third Person of the Trinity.

I insist on this point because, in my opinion, the title “paraclete” is the most succinct and best description of the role of a pastor in relation to his flock: to be a protector and a consoler. Just as a Christian is called to be an *alter Christus*, another Christ, it is equally true that a Christian is called to be “another Paraclete.” Through the Prophet Isaiah (40:1) God cries out, “Comfort, give comfort to my people,” which in the Septuagint Greek version reads: “Be paracletes (*parakaleite*), be paracletes for my people.” On his part, the Apostle Paul wrote:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and God of all encouragement, who encourages us in our every affliction, so that we may be able to encourage (*parakalein*) those who are in any affliction with the encouragement with which we ourselves are encouraged by God (2 Cor 1:3-4).

In this passage the Greek word from which paraclete is derived is used five times, sometimes as a verb, sometimes as a noun. Consolation comes from God who is “the God of all consolation.” It comes to those who are in sorrow, but it does not stop there. Its purpose is achieved when the one who has experienced consolation gets up and in turn brings consolation to others. What kind of consolation? We console with the consolation we ourselves have received from God, that is, one that is divine rather than human.

In a certain sense, the Holy Spirit needs us in order to be the Paraclete. He wants to console, to defend, to exhort and encourage, but he does not have lips or hands or eyes to “embody” his

consolation. Yet, in us, the Holy Spirit assumes hands and lips and eyes! Just as the soul within us acts and moves and smiles by means of the members of our body, so the Holy Spirit works through the members of the Body of Christ, the Church. In one of his sermons, Cardinal Newman said:

Instructed by our own sorrows and our own sufferings, and even by our own sins, we will be trained in mind and heart for every work of love for those who are in need of love. To the measure of our ability, we will be consolers in the image of the Paraclete in every sense that this word implies: advocates, helpers, bringers of comfort. Our words and our counsel, our manner, our voice, our glance, will be gentle and tranquil.⁴

Love for Jesus

In the effort to evangelize, we must be motivated not only by our love for the people, but even more so by our love for Jesus. “Do you love me?”, Jesus asked Peter. If you do, then “Feed my lambs” (cf. Jn 21:15ff). The nourishment and preaching with which we feed them must flow from a genuine friendship with Jesus. We must love Jesus, because only those who love him can proclaim him to the world with deep conviction. You can’t speak passionately about someone you don’t love. Love transforms us into poets, and to spread the Gospel you need to be something of a poet. Søren Kierkegaard wrote:

As God has created man and woman, so too He fashioned the hero and the poet or orator. The poet cannot do what that other does, he can only admire, love and rejoice in the hero. Yet he too is happy, and not less so, for the hero is as it were his better nature, with which he is in love, rejoicing in the fact that this after all is not himself, that his love can be admiration. He is the genius of recollection, can do nothing except call to mind what has been done... He follows the option of his heart, but when he has found what he sought, he wanders before every man’s door with his song and with his oration, that all may admire the hero as he does, be proud of the hero as he is.⁵

In Kierkegaard’s view, Abraham was the hero and he himself the poet. But even truer still when applied to Jesus Christ the hero, and to his ambassadors, the preachers! Jesus is the one true hero of history and of the world — a unique hero because he is also God.

To be able to respond to the different pastoral challenges I have mentioned pastors need a renewed anointing of the Spirit. Here is how an Anglican bishop described his experience of a new anointing at a certain point in his life:

That afternoon I found myself in chapel, and the Lord anointed me in a very deep and loving way. With incredible joy, I found myself repeating, “I am your son. I am your son.” God had not just accepted me as a person, but had created me anew as his own son. Eventually I had no words left. The last words I could say with any authenticity was “God,” and I just said it very lovingly. ...This has involved first of all submission to the Lord, spirit of sonship, praise, the fruits of the Spirit being given instead of striven after,

⁴ J. H. Newman, *Parochial and plain Sermons*, vol. V, London 1870, p. 300 f.

⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (“Panegyric upon Abraham”) in *Fear and Trembling and Sickness unto Death*, intro., notes, and trans. by Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), p. 30.

and a wonderful sense of victory. The Lord has just taken away sins I have been battling for years.⁶

The bishop went on to describe the effect that the renewal of his anointing had on his diocese. Previously, he could only suggest to his priests with alcohol problems that they undergo clinical treatment, but now he would invite them to his house, pray with them, and some would be completely healed through the power of prayer. Previously, in pastoral meetings, people would talk about everything except the true spiritual mission of the Church and evangelization, but now everyone was in agreement that the thing the diocese most needed was to be renewed in the Holy Spirit. Ecumenism, rather than being an abstract doctrinal issue, became a living reality as new relationships were established among various Christian churches in the area.

The exhortation of the First Letter of Peter on the pastors begins by reminding pastors of their duty to feed the flock, but ends with the promise of a reward: “When the chief Shepherd is revealed, you will receive the unfading crown of glory” (cf. 1 Pt 5:4). Christ, the chief Shepherd, already gives this crown of glory to the successors of his apostles, allowing them to experience peace in the midst of all the raging conflicts. Yet even just one drop of consolation from Christ is enough to offset an ocean of bitterness caused by external difficulties. Jesus continues to tell his apostles: “In the world you will have trouble, but take courage, I have conquered the world” (Jn 16:33).

Let us conclude with a beautiful prayer we find in the liturgy of the Hours:

Father of All holiness, you gave us Christ as the shepherd of our souls; stay with your shepherds and the flock entrusted to them. Do not leave the flock without the loving care of its shepherd and do not leave your shepherds without an obedient flock to follow them” (Evening prayer, Wednesday, Week V of Lent):

⁶ Bill Bendyshe Burnett, Anglican bishop, in *The Spirit and the Church*, ed. Ralph Martin (New York: Paulist Press, 1976), pp. 255-256.

WITNESSES TO THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST

The most frequent definition of the role of an apostle in the New Testament is that of being “witness to the resurrection of Christ”. As a background to the election of Matthias to replace Judas, we hear the following: “It is necessary that one of the men who accompanied us the whole time the Lord Jesus came and went among us, ...become with us a witness to his resurrection” (Acts 1:21-22; see also Acts 10:39-41; 13:31).

In this final reflection, I would like to explore how the successors of the apostles might fill this role in today’s world. First of all, we need to immerse our minds and souls in the splendor of the mystery of the resurrection. To proclaim effectively the resurrection of Christ we need to be fully convinced of its truth and its power.

Let us return to the point in history when the event took place. The angel who appeared to the women on Easter morning said to them: “Do not be amazed! You seek Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified. He has been raised!” (Mk 16:6), and, “Why do you seek the living one among the dead?” (Lk 24:5). It’s easy to imagine what happened next. Sweeping up the hems of their long skirts to allow themselves to run faster, the women hurried downhill and breathlessly entered the Upper Room. Even before they started speaking everyone could tell from their expressions that something extraordinary had taken place. The women, gasping for air while talking over each other, exclaimed: “The Master, the Master!” “The Master, what?” “Risen, risen!” “The tomb, the tomb!” “The tomb, what?” “Empty, empty!”

The news was too overwhelming; they simply couldn’t express themselves in a calm and orderly manner. The apostles probably had to raise their voices to calm the women down. In the midst of it all, though, the sense of awe that filled the room must have sent shivers down the spines of everyone present. From that moment on, the world would never be the same again. The good news of the resurrection was beginning its long course through human history like a calm but mighty wave that nothing and no one would be able to stop until the end of time.

Christ’s resurrection was for the realm of the spirit what the first “Big Bang” was for the material universe. According to a recent theory a small super dense mass was transformed into energy by a cataclysmic explosion, thus starting the whole movement of the expansion of the universe that is still going on after billions of years. In fact everything that exists and moves in the Church — sacraments, doctrine, institutions, everything — draws its strength from Christ’s resurrection. It was the moment when death became life and history became eschatology. By choosing the story of creation from the first Chapter of Genesis as its first reading, the Easter Vigil liturgy indicates that this event brought about a new creation. It was God proclaiming anew: “*Fiat lux!*” – “Let there be light!” When he reached out to the body of the risen Lord, the apostle Thomas touched with his finger the source of all spiritual

energy and he received such a “shock” that all his doubts immediately disappeared. Doubting no more, but full of certainty, he exclaimed: “My Lord and my God!” (Jn 20:28). Jesus himself then told Thomas that there is a more blessed way of touching him, namely, through faith. “Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed” (Jn 20:29). The “finger” with which we, too, can touch the risen Christ is faith. It is with that finger that we must now reach out filled with an ardent desire to receive light and strength from our contact with the risen Lord.

The apostle Paul was overwhelmed by the power of Christ’s resurrection. He speaks of “the surpassing greatness of his power for us who believe, in accord with the exercise of his great might which God accomplished in Christ when he raised him from the dead (see Eph 1:18-19). In a single phrase, Paul consolidated all the words the Greek language had to offer to express might, greatness and power and he applied them to the event of the resurrection.

“If you believe in your heart...”

The resurrection of Christ can be approached from two different points of view: that of interpretation (or, as scholars say, hermeneutics), and that of faith. The first approach is based on the principle of “understanding in order to believe.” The second approach is based on the principle of “believing in order to understand.” The two are not irreconcilable, but the difference between them is considerable, and in certain extreme cases one might exclude the other.

Much of what has been written about the resurrection since the advent of the theory of demythologization belongs in the realm of interpretation. It attempts to throw light on the significance of the terms “he has risen” or “he appeared;” on whether these are historical, mythological or eschatological affirmations; and on whether Christ rose in history or in the *kerygma*, and whether it is the “person” of Christ that is alive now in the Church, or just his “cause.”

This approach is not without some utility. In fact, it helps us to overcome certain rough representations of the resurrection which are simply unacceptable to us today. In this way, this approach fosters a purification of faith itself. But there is also a great risk involved. The risk is that the next step, the leap of faith, might never be taken. Since the resurrection can never be rationally explained, attempting to understand it in order to believe in it, continually postpones the issue and we risk never actually arriving at belief.

“Faith,” says Kierkegaard, “wants to state the Absolute whereas reason wants to continue reflection.”¹ This explains a lot about the actual situation of theological discussion on Christ’s resurrection. As long as an individual is seeking truth, it is that person who is the protagonist; it is the human being who is in control of the situation. Rationalists are very comfortable with that and are willing to spend even their entire lives talking about God. But once something has been acknowledged as truth, it is truth that reigns and humans must

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Journal X,2A 624 (Papirer, vol. 13, p 448 f.)*

then be ready to kneel down before it. Very few are willing to do that.

Saint Augustine said, “Through the passion, the Lord passed from death to life thus opening the way for those who believe in his resurrection so that they too may pass from death to life.” The saint goes on to say that “there is nothing special in believing that Jesus died; even pagans and the Jews and reprobates believe this; everyone believes it. The great thing is to believe that he rose from the dead. The faith of Christians is the resurrection of Christ.”²

In and of itself, Jesus’ death is not sufficient testimony of the truth of his cause, but only of the fact that he believed in its truth. We know how many persons have died for a wrong cause believing, in good faith, that the cause was good. Christ’s death was the supreme testimony of his love, because “no one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends,” (Jn 15:13). It was however not the ultimate testimony of his truth. This was only adequately testified by the resurrection. In fact, on the Areopagus, Paul proclaimed that God “has provided confirmation for all by raising him [i.e., Jesus] from the dead” (Acts 17:31). God literally “vouches” for Jesus, he guarantees for him. The resurrection is like the divine seal which the Father places on the words and actions, and the life and death of Jesus. It is the Father’s “Amen,” God’s “yes” to Jesus. In obeying the Father even to dying, Jesus said “yes” to God. In raising Jesus, the Father said “yes” to the Son and made him Lord.

I think that the surest and most profitable approach is that of believing in order to understand. At the end of John’s Gospel, immediately after the account of the resurrection, we read: “these things are written that you may believe” (Jn 20:31). It does not say: “they are written that you may interpret them”, but that you may believe. The resurrection of Christ is an eschatological event. It happens between time and eternity. Approaching it is like running toward the sea. You start running but when you get to the water’s edge you have to stop. Your feet are of no use to you at that point. The only way you can go beyond is with your eyes.

It was not by providing scientific proof and demonstration of Christ’s resurrection that converted people in the beginning and changed the world and gave birth to the Church, but rather by its being proclaimed kerygmatically, that is, “with the Holy Spirit and power” (Acts 10:38). It is along these lines that I would like to explore with you how we might proclaim Christ’s resurrection to our secularized world today.

“Born anew to a living hope”

Hope is the key! In his first Letter, Peter makes the association between the resurrection and hope with particular emphasis. He tells us that by the great mercy of God, the Father “gave us a new birth to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Pt

² St. Augustine, *On the Psalms*, 120,6 (CC 40, p. 1791).

1:3). By resurrecting Jesus, the Father not only gave us “proof positive”, but he also gave us a “living hope.” The resurrection is not just a premise on which the truth of Christianity is based, it is also a power that nourishes its hope from within.

Easter marks the birth of Christian hope. It’s interesting that the word “hope” does not appear in Jesus’ preaching. The Gospels report many of his sayings on faith and charity, but nothing on hope. After Easter, however, we witness a literal explosion of the notion and sentiment of hope in the teaching of the apostles. Hope takes its place beside faith and charity as one of the three theological virtues (cf. 1 Cor 13:13); God himself is called the “God of hope” (Rm 15:13).

The reason for this is understandable. Prior to the resurrection, our source of hope had been sealed off from us. By his rising, Christ broke through that seal, that barrier, thus creating the object of theological hope, namely, life with God even beyond death. The longing expressed in a few of the Old Testament psalms when they speak of a life with God “forever” (see Ps 16:11; 73:23), has now become a reality in Christ. He has opened a breach in the frightful wall of death through which we can all follow.

As a result, we can open our hearts to the living hope that comes from the resurrection of Christ. Saint Peter speaks of a regeneration, of being “born anew” (cf. 1 Pt 1:23). This is what actually happened to the apostles. They experienced the power and sweet relief of hope. It was newborn hope that brought them together again, gleefully crying out to each another: “He’s alive! He has risen! He appeared; we saw him!” And it was hope that made the despondent disciples of Emmaus retrace their steps to Jerusalem.

The Church is born of hope. If we intend to give new momentum to faith to empower it to conquer the world again in our age, we will need to rekindle hope. Nothing is possible without hope. A Christian poet, Charles Péguy, wrote a poem on theological hope. The three theological virtues, he says, are like three sisters: two of them are grown and the other is a small child. They advance together hand-in-hand with the child Hope in the middle. At first glance it might seem that the older ones are pulling the child, but actually, it’s the other way around. It is the little girl who is pulling the two older ones. Hope draws faith and charity forward. And without hope, everything would stop.³

We see examples of this in daily life. When someone loses all hope, it’s as if he or she had died. In fact, some people actually do take their own lives at that point. If a person were on the verge of fainting, with urgency we would attempt to revive them with smelling salts or something strong to drink. That same sense of urgency is needed with those on the verge of giving up the struggle. We must revive them by offering a reason to hope. Someone needs to hold out to them the possibility that things can be different, to offer them something in which they can take heart, a reason for not giving up.

³ Cf. C. Péguy, *Le porche du mystère de la deuxième vertu*, in *Œuvres poétiques complètes*, Gallimard, Paris 1957, pp. 538 ff.

Every time a seed of hope blossoms in a person's heart a miracle takes place. Life seems different even if nothing has actually changed. When hope is released, entire communities and parishes come to life, religious orders revive and begin to attract new vocations. Hope animates the young, and no type or amount of recruitment material can out-produce the results that hope brings. That's true of families as well. Where there is hope, people stay and return home gladly.

To give someone hope is the most precious gift you have to offer. Just as once the faithful passed the holy water from hand to hand as they were leaving church, so Christians must pass divine hope from hand to hand, from parent to child. During the Easter Vigil, the presider receives light from the Paschal Candle and then it passes from each of the faithful to the others until the entire space is aglow with light. So must theological hope be passed and spread.

Never before has eschatology been so much spoken about among Christians but so little experienced as in our day. Perhaps out of fear that it might give rise to a lack of commitment and alienation, eschatology – that is, being open to the future, to the final and eternal future, – has disappeared from life and been relegated to theology books. In some cases, it has become an ideology which focuses on a restricted future all of which is contained in history.⁴

As I said, the object of Christian hope is resurrection from death. “The one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also” (2 Cor 4:14). Christ was the “firstfruits” (cf. 1 Cor 15:20) and being the first fruit contains the promise that a full crop will follow. But the resurrection of the body is not the only resurrection. There is also a resurrection of the heart. The resurrection of the body takes place on the “last day;” the resurrection of the heart can take place every day. Saint Leo the Great said: “Let the signs of the future resurrection now appear in the holy city and that which must be accomplished in the body be now accomplished in hearts.”⁵

“I will hope in Him!”

I don't think I have to explain to you why a resurrection of the heart, a rebirth of hope, is the one thing that the Catholic Church in America needs most at this point. The Bible describes how the entire People of Israel experienced a resurrection of the heart. I'm speaking of the prophecy of the dry bones in Ezekiel 37. It describes not a resurrection of the body, but of the heart. The dry bones were not those of the dead, but of the living. They were the People of Israel who during the Exile had lost all hope, and wandered about saying: “Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost, and we are cut off” (Ez 37:11).

God said to the Ezekiel: “Son of man, prophecy to these bones”, and the prophet cried out: “From the four winds come, O breath (*ruach*), and breathe into these slain that they may

⁴ See Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (1959), Cambridge, Mass. (MIT Press) 1995.

⁵ St. Leo the Great, *Sermons* 65, 3; PL 54, 366.

come to life...and the breath entered them; they came to life and stood on their feet, a vast army” (Ez 37:9-10). In this occasion I am this “son of man”, this poor sinful creature sent to you, and I dare to repeat to you what Ezekiel said: “Spirit of God, come from the pierced side of the Crucifix, and breath upon the Church of this country that it may revive and flourish again”.

Fortunately for us, hope is not the product of some kind of mental effort on our part. Theological hope, precisely because it is theological, is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Saint Paul reminded us of that in the concluding words of his Letter to the Romans: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the holy Spirit” (Rm 15:13).

What is asked of us is what was asked of Abraham and, to even a greater extent, of Mary as she stood by the cross: “He believed, hoping against hope” (cf. Rm 4:18). To hope against all hope means to keep on hoping even when we no longer see any reason to hope, even when everything seems to contradict hope. To hope means being convinced that God always has one more possibility “up his sleeve,” something totally unexpected by us, as was the case with Mary to whom, after three days, he gave back her Son, risen and alive.

We have a very strong reason on which to base our hope. Jesus said:

Everyone who listens to these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and buffeted the house. But it did not collapse; it had been set solidly on rock (Mt 7:24-25).

The house built on rock is the Church and the rock upon which it is built is Christ. In another sense, the “rock” is Peter on whom Christ founded his Church and to whom he gave the certainty that “the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it” (cf. Mt 16:17-18). “The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew”. The fiercest winds are not those that lash the house from the outside, but those that cause a tempest within. They are the “dead stones” of the building. But not even they can bring down the house. This week of prayer and listening will have achieved what the Holy Father and you desired, if it helps to bring about a rebirth of hope in the hearts of pastors.

I’d like to end by sharing a personal story which might also have a message for you. The day my General Superior allowed me to leave my teaching position at the university to become a full time preacher of the Gospel I went to St. Peter’s Square. I wanted to pray at the tomb of the apostle to obtain the gift of faith in preaching. I had just read in the Liturgy of the Hours the passage from the Prophet Haggai that says,

“Now be strong, Zerubbabel... be strong, Joshua, son of Jehozadak, high priest, Be strong, all you people of the land and work! For I am with you—oracle of the LORD of hosts” (Hag 2:4).

At a certain point I felt moved to look up at the pope's window and to shout out: "Take courage, John Paul II; take courage, cardinals, bishops, and priests of the Catholic Church and work, because I am with you, says the Lord." It was raining and no one else was around, so nobody could hear me. Within a few months, however, I found myself in the presence of John Paul II, set to preach my first Lenten sermon to the Papal Household. I told those present what I had done in St. Peter's Square and then I once again proclaimed that word from Haggai, not just as a quotation, but as a prophetic word for that moment.

Now every time I have an opportunity to address priests or bishops I proclaim that word of God again. And once more, not as a quotation, but as the living, active word of God. And so I dare to do it again at the close of this retreat: Take courage, you bishops of the United States; take courage priests, deacons and all the people of this land: and work, for I am with you," says the Lord.