

# "Be still and know that I am God"

*Letter of the Abbot General OCist for the epidemic*

Dearest,

the situation that has arisen with the coronavirus pandemic pushes me to look for contact with all of you through this letter as a sign that we are living this situation in communion, not only among ourselves, but with the whole Church and the whole world. Finding myself in Italy and in Rome, I experience this test at a crucial point, even if it is clear that most of the countries in which we live will soon find themselves in the same situation.

## **To be of help to all**

It is evident that the first correct response that we must have, even as an Order and monastic communities, is to follow the directions of the civil and ecclesiastical authorities to contribute with obedience and respect to a rapid resolution of this epidemic. Now more than ever, we are all called to become aware of how personal responsibility is a good for everyone. Those who accept the rules and behaviors necessary to defend themselves from infection also help to limit it for others. It would be a rule of life to observe always, at all levels, but in the present emergency it is undeniably clear that we are all linked for good and ill.

But apart from the medical aspect of the situation, what does this dramatic moment ask of us in regard to our vocation? To what is God calling us as Christians, and especially as monks and nuns, through this universal trial? What witness are we invited to give? What specific help are we called to offer to society, to all our brothers and sisters in the world?

I am reminded of the words of the Charter of Love which I have often emphasized in the course of the past year, particularly in the Christmas letter 2019 which, among other things, was published just when the contagion of COVID-19 began in China: "Prodesse omnibus cupientes - eager to be of help to all" (cf. CC, chap. I). What help are we called to offer to all of humanity in this precise moment?

## **"Be still and know that I am God"**

Perhaps our first task is to live this circumstance giving it a sense. After all, the real drama that society is currently living is not so much or only the pandemic, but its consequences in our daily existence. The world has stopped. The activities, the economy, politics, travel, entertainment, sports have stopped, as if for a universal Lent. But not only that: in Italy, and now also in other countries, public religious life, the public celebration of the Eucharist, all Church gatherings and meetings, at least those in which the faithful come together physically, have all stopped. It is like a great fast, a great universal abstinence.

This stop imposed by the contagion and by the authorities is presented and experienced as a necessary evil. Modern man, in fact, no longer knows how to be still. He stands still only when he is stopped. To be still freely has become almost impossible in today's western culture, which has also become the global culture. Not even for the holidays do we truly stop. Only unpleasant mishaps can stop us in our increasingly frantic race to take advantage of life, of time, and often of other people. Now, however, an unpleasant mishap like an epidemic has stopped almost all of us. Our projects and our plans have been canceled, and we do not know for how long. Even though we live a monastic vocation, perhaps even a cloistered one, how much have we too become used to live like everyone else, to run like everyone else, to think of our lives always projecting ourselves towards a future!

To be still, instead, means rediscovering the present, the moment to be lived now, the true reality of time, and so also the true reality of ourselves, of our life. Man lives only in the present, but we are always tempted to hold on to the past, which is no longer here, or to project ourselves toward a future, which is not yet here and which perhaps will never be.

In Psalm 45, God invites us to stop and recognize His presence among us:

“Be still! Know that I am God,  
exalted among the nations, exalted over the earth.  
The Lord of hosts is with us;  
our bulwark is the God of Jacob.” (Ps 45.11-12)

God asks us to be still; He does not compel us. He wants us to be still before Him and remain there freely, by choice, that is, with love. He does not stop us like the police arresting a criminal on the run. He wants us to become still

as one does before the beloved, or as one does before the tender beauty of a newborn sleeping, or before a sunset, or before a work of art that fills us with awe and silence. God asks us to stop recognizing that his presence fills the whole universe for us, is the most important thing in life, which nothing can exceed. To stop before God means recognizing that his presence fills the moment and therefore fully satisfies our heart, in whatever circumstance and condition we may find ourselves.

### **Living the constraint with freedom**

What does this mean in the current situation? That we can live it with freedom, even if constrained. Freedom is not choosing what you want always and in any case. Freedom is the grace to be able to choose what gives fullness to our heart even when everything is taken away from us. Even when freedom itself is taken from us, the presence of God protects us and offers the ultimate freedom of being able to be still before Him, to recognize Him as present and a friend. It is the great witness of the martyrs and all the saints.

When Jesus walked on water to reach his disciples in the midst of the stormy sea, he found them unable to move because of contrary winds: "The boat (...) was struck by the waves: for the wind was against it" (Mt 14,24). The disciples struggle powerlessly against the wind that opposes them in their project to reach the shore. Jesus reaches them as only God can come close to man, with a presence free from any constraint. Nothing, no contrary wind, nor any law of nature can oppose itself to the gift of the presence of Christ who has come to save humanity. "Toward the end of the night, he went toward them, walking on the sea" (Mt 14,25).

But there is another storm that would oppose the friendly presence of the Lord: our diffidence and fear: "The disciples were terrified and said, 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out with fear" (14,26). Often, what we imagine with the eyes of our diffidence transforms reality into a "ghost." Then, it is as if we were ourselves feeding the fear that makes us cry out. But Jesus is stronger than even this inner storm. He comes nearer, causes us to hear his voice, the calming sounds of his friendly presence: "But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'Take courage, it is I, do not be afraid!'" (14,27).

"Those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, 'Truly, you are the Son of God!'" (Mt 14,33). Only when the disciples recognize the presence of God and welcome it as such, that is, they become still before it, the wind ceases to

counter them (cf. Mt 14,32) and “immediately the boat was touched the shore toward which they were going” (Jn 6,21).

Can this happen in the situation of danger and fear that we now before the spread of the virus and the consequences, certainly serious and long term, of this situation for the whole of society? To recognize in this circumstance an extraordinary opportunity to welcome and worship God's presence among us does not mean escaping reality and renouncing the human resources that are put in place to protect us from this illness. This would be an insult to those who now, like all health workers, sacrifice themselves for our good. It would also be blasphemous to think that God Himself sends us this kind of trial in order then to show us how good He is in freeing us from them. God enters into our trials, suffers them with us and for us even to death on the Cross. He thus reveals to us that our life, both in trials and in consolation, has an infinitely greater sense than the resolution of the present danger. The true danger looming over life is not the threat of death, but the possibility of living without sense, of living without tending toward a fullness greater than life and a salvation greater than health.

This pandemic, then, with all the corollaries and consequences that it entails, is an opportunity for all of us to really stop, not only because we are forced, but because we are invited by the Lord to stand before Him, to recognize that He, precisely now, comes to meet us in the midst of the storm of circumstances and of our anxieties. He proposes to us a renewed friendship with Him, with Him who is certainly capable of stopping the pandemic as he stopped the wind, but who above all renews the gift to us of his friendly presence, which defeats our fragility full of fear – “Take courage! it is I. Do not be afraid!” - and He wishes to lead us immediately to the ultimate and full destiny of existence: He himself who stays and walks with us.

### **We ought always to live like this**

This scene from the Gospel, as also the scene of today's troubled world, ought not seem so foreign to us. In fact, our vocation as baptized, like our vocation to the consecrated life in the monastic form, ought always to call and help us to live this way. The current situation reminds us and all Christians a little of what St. Benedict says of the time of Lent (cf. RB 49.1-3): we ought always to live like this, with this sensitivity to the drama of life, with this sense of our structural fragility, with this ability to give up what

is superfluous in order to safeguard what in us and among us is deeper and truer, with this faith that our life is not in our hands, but in God's hands.

We ought also always to live with the consciousness that we are all responsible for each other, in solidarity in the good and the evil of our choices, even in our most hidden and seemingly insignificant behaviors.

The trial that comes to torment us must also make us more sensitive to the many trials that strike others, other peoples, upon whose suffering and death we often look with indifference. Do we remember, for example, that while the coronavirus rages among us, the peoples of the Horn of Africa have been suffering for months a plague of locusts threatening the livelihoods of millions of people? Do we remember the migrants left hanging in Turkey? Do we remember the ever-open wound in Syria and throughout the Middle East? ...

A period of trial can make people tougher or more sensitive, more indifferent or more compassionate. In the end, everything depends on the love with which we live it, and it is this above all that Christ comes to give us and to arouse in us with his presence. Any trial sooner or later passes, but if we live it with love, the wound that the trial cuts in our life can remain open, as on the Body of the Risen One, as a perennial flowing source of compassion.

### **Ministers of the cry begging salvation**

But there is a task that we are called to take up in a specific way: the offer of prayer, of the supplication that begs for salvation. Jesus Christ, through baptism, the faith, the encounter with Him through the Church and the gift of a particular vocation to be with Him in the “school of service of the Lord” (RB Prol. 45), has called us to stand before the Father asking for everything in his name. To this end, He gives us the Spirit who, “with unutterable groans, comes to the aid of our weakness, for indeed, we do not know how to pray in a convenient way” (Rm 8,26). Before entering upon his passion and death, Jesus said to his disciples: “I chose you (...) so that whatever you will ask the Father in my name, he may grant it to you” (Jn 15,16). He has not only chosen us to pray, but to always be heard by the Father.

Our wealth then is the poverty of having no other power than to beg with faith. And this is a charism that we are not given to us only for ourselves, but in order to fulfill the mission of the Son who is the salvation of the world:

“For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world might be saved through him” (Jn 3,17). Even the need to maintain or regain health, which all feel at this time, perhaps with anguish, is a need of salvation, of the salvation that may preserve our life from feeling senseless, tossed by the waves without a destiny, without the encounter with the Love who gives it to us at every moment to come to live eternally with Him.

This consciousness of our primary task of prayer for all must make us universally responsible for the faith that we have, and for the liturgical prayer that the Church entrusts to us. At this time, when it is imposed on the majority of the faithful to give up the community Eucharist that gathers them in the churches, how responsible we ought to feel for the Masses that we can continue to celebrate in the monasteries, and the prayer of the Divine Office that continues to gather us in choir! We certainly do not have this privilege because we are better than others. Perhaps it has been given to precisely because we are not, and this makes our begging humbler, poorer, more effective before the good Father of all. We need to be more aware than ever that none of our prayers and liturgies should be lived without feeling united with the whole Body of Christ which is the Church, the community of all the baptized tending to embrace all of humanity.

### **The light of the eyes of the Mother**

Every evening, in all Cistercian monasteries in the world, we enter into the night singing the Salve Regina. This, too, we must do thinking of the darkness that often surround humanity, filling it with the fear of becoming lost in that darkness. In the Salve Regina, we ask that, over the whole “valley of tears” of the world, and all the “exiled children of Eve,” there shine the sweet and consoling light the “merciful eyes” of the Queen and Mother of mercy. In every circumstance, in every night and danger, may the gaze of Mary shows us Jesus, show us that Jesus is present, that He comforts us, that He heals and saves us.

Our whole vocation and mission is described in this prayer.

May Mary, “our life, our sweetness and our hope,” grant us to live this vocation with humility and courage, offering our lives for the peace and joy of all humankind!

Rome, March 15, 2020, 3rd Sunday of Lent

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