

Monastic Life and Christian Unity

How monastic life, according to your experience can help Christian Unity.

Dear brothers in Christ,

I received the invitation from the organisers of this Congress with pleasure, to share my monastic experience with you under the heading 'Monastic life and Christian Unity.'

What I want to share with you is a response to the particular theme of how monastic life can, in my experience, help Christian unity. I begin by saying that it is a delicate theme and an ambitious one. I often ask the Lord to make me capable of living whole-heartedly the contemplative life towards which I feel drawn and, I dare say, to which the Lord has called me. I do not understand the mystery of this vocation of mine; I only feel the need to be, to stand with God in prayer, always to unite myself more closely to Him, in Christ.

In truth, this is the single motive that animates the daily life of the monk: it is not about looking for alternative ways of living one's own union with God. God is enough! It is the search for and the desire to stand with God, in Christ, in prayer – this is how the monastic vocation is realised. The continual point of reference for the journey of a monk is Christ: His Word, participation in the mystery of his Body and Blood. In Christ we find ourselves filled with the Holy Spirit, which culminates the joy of our whole lives.

Indeed, the longer we spend with the Lord, the more the desire to know and to love him burns in us. There is the story in the Sayings of the Fathers of the desert that Abba John of Panefisis. He received the monk Lot, who asked him: 'Abba, I celebrate my liturgy as best I can, I fast, I pray, meditate, live a life of recollection, seek to be pure in thought. What more must I do?' The old man stood up and opened his arms to heaven and his fingers became as flames: 'If you want,' he said, 'be completely ablaze.'

Yes, to be a good monk means to become fire; the fire of God who burns with love. There is no other attraction, no other ambition that animates the daily life of the person who has decided to follow Christ and to make the Beatitudes his personal lifestyle. It can happen that in the historical experience of a monk, the Church can ask for particular services; but the monk remains firmly anchored in this continual nostalgia for God.

My monastic experience has been characterised by this desire to adhere continually to God, to know him and to love him as he deserves. The search for silence, for prayer – for me they have been the source of my being [as a man] of God. Not that I am capable of this: God sets fire to the desire for him in me, helps me in the daily struggles to detach myself from the things of the world. To detach myself from the world to be raised to heavenly things; to struggle to overcome the deceits of this age, in order to share in the Kingdom of heaven. It is a tiring journey made joyful by the grace of God who calls us to share in the eternal joys that know no end.

Last year I had occasion to say to the *Congress for men and women engaged in formation*: If I had to find a way of measuring the pace of my adhesion to ascetic life, the measure is Christ in me. I pray so that there may grow and mature in me the awareness that 'I am not the one that lives, but Christ lives in me' (Gal. 2.20). This desire to live in Christ and for Christ in the most Holy Trinity is not an end in itself; it does not exhaust itself in a vision of personal beatitude. Slowly, as one 'grows', the awareness matures, of being called by God to be a servant, a gift for others. The whole of my experience tends to unite my personal desire for God with being an

instrument of God, placed in the Church to make every Christian, each of the faithful, aware, that the actual goal of our faith is not in conquering the world, but in reaching the fullness of communion with God, with the Holy Trinity.

To the extent that a monk becomes a '*witness*' to that to which every man and woman is called to be, united to God in eternity (1 Cor. 15.28), he lives his vocation to the full. This is why it is possible to say that in monastic experience the monk becomes an example of that *Theosis* (divinisation) [that is?] the vocation and mystery of Christian experience.

From this perspective, you will clearly appreciate that monastic consecration, or the tonsure, in the Orthodox church, is considered a sacrament, and the monk has the knowledge of being called to be in the Church a model of that eternal kingdom, inaugurated by Christ, the incarnate Son of God, prepared for all people. This is the dynamism in which I live my monastic life. Although I long for silence and time for a deeper reading of the Holy Scriptures and of the *Philokalia* (a point of reference for the path of divinisation – the saints are a fundamental example for a monk) I live my [monastic] service as an offering to God for the good of his Church. I strive to live silence in the roar of exterior tensions, and to pray in the midst of a jungle of words. Apart from anything else, service is part of the monk's vocation in the Church, whether it is in the monastery or the diocese. The '*ora et labora*', a dimension not only suggested by St Benedict of Norcia but also by St Basil the Great in the monastic rules, is the pole star of the journey.

That said, in spite of the embarrassment to someone who knows himself to be slight before God, and certainly of not being better than other Christians – indeed, the whole duty of asceticism is nothing else than the effort to raise oneself up to God by following Christ and his Gospel – I would like to address the challenge of the topic of my contribution, how monastic life in my experience can help Christian Unity.

I believe that the best way is living our vocation to contemplation to the full. Prayer makes surprising things happen, things that no pastoral strategy can begin to envisage. To follow the example of a well-known Father of modern spirituality, like Charles de Foucauld, who discovered in the fathers of the desert the way of prayer and of contemplation as an effective response to human egoism: he wrote, 'From the moment I knew God I have felt a desire to live for him alone.' To live only for Him is what must unite us. It will not be words, nor theological discussions to construct the unity that is more dear to the Lord than to us.

If we, consecrated persons, live fully the vows that we made to God on the day when we died to the world and were reborn in Him and for Him, we will be able to be instruments of peace in our Churches and for our Churches. Again Charles de Foucauld writes, 'I have just been ordained priest to continue in the Sahara the hidden life of Jesus of Nazareth, not to preach but to live in solitude the poverty and humble work of Jesus, knowing that I will do good not by words but by prayer, by the offering of the Holy Sacrifice, by the practice of charity,' in order 'to radiate the love of Christ' by means of gratuitous friendship, 'the apostolate of goodness.'

As the holy Fathers and the great contemplative masters teach us, solitude in prayer is the great treasure, the strength of our being friends of God in the service of unity. As I was able to say on another occasion, if God is with me, in contemplation and prayer, it is not the world that governs me, but I govern the world by the power of the Spirit that is abundantly given me day by day in prayer and in the celebration of the Holy Mysteries. The world represents division; faith in the Kingdom of heaven is the force that unites us.

I have been much impressed by the stories of so many monks who, in the communist period, were obliged to and were able to live their asceticism in spite of persecution. I

would like to conclude this talk with one example among many – Father Arsenius Boca, whose canonisation is under consideration. A charismatic monk, perceived to be a danger to the regime, he was obliged to leave his monastery and even to shed his monastic habit, but he never stopped being a monk. The world did not overcome him, but he overcame the world; for more than forty years he never ceased being an example of evangelical charity. He prayed for his persecutors; he volunteered, during times of forced labour, for the heavier jobs destined for those weaker than him, his brothers. He always had a word of hope for any who were unable to foresee a future of freedom or dignity. How did he do it? He never ceased being a monk. He lived his desert in the chaos of atheism and totalitarianism. He never stopped searching for the one who had attracted his heart from the beginning, for God.

I hope, with the help of so many brothers, those of yesterday (the saints) and those of today, to be found worthy, every day, of worshipping God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and of serving him in the way he wants in the Church and in the brothers.