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St. Scholastica's Priory

Manila

Dear Sisters,

I wish you all a Blessed New Year—a Year of Hope, Peace, and Joy. Our Statio Conferences during this year will focus on the fruits of the Holy Spirit. We have experienced three phases of our Priory-wide Renewal and we hope to see the fruits of our reflection and resolutions. And so we implore the Holy Spirit to help us in this. This year will also be our canonical visitation year. Again we need the Holy Spirit to make these visits fruitful for all our communities.

Six months have passed since the inauguration of the new President. Although he still enjoys a high rating in the survey, there are those who are not satisfied with the new administration's performance. We really have to pray and do our part to make this government truly work for the poor and to exert more effort in eradicating corruption in all levels of society. So again we need the Holy Spirit to make this happen.

So even if this not Pentecost time, let us raise our minds, hearts and voices and pray;
COME HOLY SPIRIT, FILL THIS NEW YEAR WITH YOUR INSPIRATION !

Sincerely yours,



Sister Mary John Mananzan, OSB

STATIO CONFERENCE

ON CHARITY

SR. MARY JOHN MANANZAN, OSB

INTRODUCTION

We begin this month the statio conferences on the Fruits of the Holy Spirit. The first one on the list is: CHARITY- *CARITAS*. As you know this is one of the aspects of LOVE, among other nuances such as EROS, PHILIA, AGAPE. *Eros* is associated with physical, sensual love characterizing love between couples. *Philia* is used for love between friends. *Agape* is associated with a deeper or higher love or divine love and *Caritas* is the altruistic love among human beings.

Caritas is what is used to designate one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. In modern usage, it has come to mean the giving of dole outs for the needy but this is not what it originally means. So we have to go back to the scriptural use of the term.

There can be no better, more profound description of the qualities of charity than 1 Corinthians 13. So let us quote here the relevant parts, using the word love for charity:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.

Each phrase of this canticle of love is a well-spring of deep and inspiring insights that is worthy of our reflection especially in the context of our religious life.

1. Love is patient

In the course of our daily life as religious there are many occasions of irritations and cause of impatience in our dealing with Sisters, Co-workers, clients, people we serve. *Caritas* makes us control our tongue that is about to utter an exasperated word, makes us control our disapproving looks, judgmental thoughts, impatient gestures. It helps us to stop in our haste to show real concern for the people who come to us, listen to their problems and sorrows with patience and empathy.

2. Love is kind.

There are people who are kindness personified. It exudes from their whole being—an aura of benevolence, of gentleness, of generosity. Some of us whose temperament are more

choleric have to make real efforts to practice these traits of kindness. It is of the greatest compliment when someone says of us: You have not one mean bone in you. Yes, because meanness is the opposite of kindness. Can we religious be mean? Definitely. Meanness is being stingy, ignoble, petty. I am sure we have many examples of these in community living. The antidote to this is kindness. But whether by nature or with effort, kindness is the oil that facilitates community life, that linders the wounds that makes us feel we belong and that comforts us in our trials. Whether by nature or with effort, kindness is the oil that facilitates community life, that linders the wounds that makes us feel we belong and that comforts us in our trials.

3. Love does not envy.

Just because we are religious, let us not delude ourselves that we are beyond envy and jealousy. We do envy that Sister who is so much more gifted than we are. We sometimes feel we are more fitting for a position given to another. When we are newly appointed to an office, we tend to downgrade what our predecessor did before us and we try to “make all things new” instead of building on her real contributions to the institution. We can be jealous if someone we are close to seem to favor somebody more than us, and so forth and so on. Of course intellectually, it is easy to demolish envious and jealous thoughts since most of the time they are illogical, sometimes truly petty and ridiculous but our feelings do not always follow our thoughts. It is good to think of positive things about the person we are envious or jealous about and if it persists we take as the sting in the flesh that God leaves with us to show his strength in our weakness.

4. Love is self-effacing (does not boast)

It is not often that we meet Sisters who actually boast. We can however be very self – centered and self-absorbed. We can exaggerate our perception of our capabilities and capacities. If we are honest we tend to always compare others with ourselves—rating them higher or lower than ourselves. Maybe if we internalize the fact that we are really interconnected with each other we will stop comparing ourselves to others negatively or positively. The opposite of boastfulness which is the actual quality of love is self-forgetfulness, realistic perception of ourselves, and gratitude for whatever good qualities we have acknowledging these as coming from God.

5. Love is humble (is not proud.)

There are several nuances of being proud. Boastfulness is a kind of pride. Vanity is also a kind of pride. Touchiness, oversensitivity, inability to acknowledge our faults, inabilities and weaknesses are signs of pride. Arrogance is another manifestation of pride which makes us treat others as if they are lower than us, showing a tendency to a sense of entitlement that we do not deserve. The actual quality of Love is the opposite of pride and is of course humility. When one loves, one puts oneself in the position of wanting to serve, wanting the well being of others. When we love we are ready to acknowledge our failings and are ready to ask apology or forgiveness for them. One is also ready forgive those who have wronged us.

6. Love honors others (not ill-mannered, not disrespectful)

We notice that all these characteristics tend to blend into each other. It is only subtle nuances that differentiates them. Respect for others is akin to humility . Our respect for others should not be dictated by social status, wealth, intelligence, etc. We respect others because we are all children of God and all our capabilities, good qualities are divine gifts. Our natural tendency is to kowtow to the rich, famous and powerful and to condescend to the poor and lowly. Ironically when we blatantly show disrespect for others especially in public, we are the ones who are shamed and disgraced because it shows how lacking in character we are. To be respectful, courteous, well-mannered are not only signs of good breeding. They are rooted in our genuine regard for others.

7. Love is forgetful of self (not self seeking)

There is something in parents that show this trait of love. It is very natural for parents to be always thinking of their children. I remember my mother during the liberation time. When the American G.I.'s were passing by our barrio, they threw candies at the crowd. I was so tiny, I was not able to catch one. When my mother saw that I did not have one, she took the candy out of her mouth and put it into mine. I also know that she likes the eggs (roe) of the dalag. But when we are dining together she always puts it in my plate. We celibates, if we are not watchful, can develop self-centeredness because we have no one depending on us. So we have to make efforts to forget ourselves and St. Benedict's chapter on the Good Zeal are concrete practices in self-forgetfulness.

8. Love does not easily give in to anger, does not keep a record of wrongs.

Of course there are times when we have a cause to be angry. But love helps us to overcome this, helps us to forgive the one who hurts us and helps us not to put into a card catalogue all the offenses people have done to us. I attended once a trial against Ampatuan and I was invited to sit beside Gov. Mangundadato, the aggrieved husband of the woman brutally killed by the baby-monster. He asked me how I keep my serenity and check negative feelings because he confessed that it is still difficult for him to overcome his anger and to really forgive. I said, I meditate. And right there and then before the trial, he asked me to teach him how to meditate. For me that is a sign that he wants to overcome his anger and that he wants to forgive. But for such a heinous crime, this needs time.

9. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.

If we are honest with ourselves, when we are angry with someone or if envy or are jealous of somebody, when something negative happens to that person, we feel some kind of inner satisfaction or wicked pleasure. "Mabuti nga sa kanya" is a spontaneous reaction. But Love enjoins us to rejoice with those who rejoice and to weep with those who weep. Truth, even if it hurts, is a cause of rejoicing. It can be a painful truth about our character that some people observe but belongs to our blind spots. Getting to know this truth is illuminating this blind spot and we should rejoice because it is the only way we can get rid of that negative trait.

10. Love is magnanimous (excuses all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things)

Love is against all pettiness and meanness of spirit. It expands our hearts so that we find the possibility of excusing offenses, of trusting people, of not giving up hope on anyone, and of suffering the pains that come from exposing one's vulnerability. It is unbelievable how people can take offense at the smallest things and how they can remember these even after decades of years. Some professed Sisters remember the littlest humiliation or unfairness they suffered from their Zelatrix or Novice Directress even when they are already celebrating their golden jubilee. Believing all things does not mean gullibility but more an expression of trust in stead of entertaining chronic skepticism or mistrust of people even if we hardly know them. Unconditional love which mothers are gifted with enable them to see hope in their most delinquent children. And all of us know that love is not always sweet. There is often anguish, suffering, disappointment, frustration that accompany human relationships and only genuine love can endure these things.

11. LOVE HAS NO END

This must be the most profound characteristic of love and that is why St. Paul puts it at the end to cap his canticle to love. Genuine love is unconditional. Sometimes people love those who to some other people are not "worthy of love". Well, no one is really worthy of love, One cannot earn love. It is freely given. And because it is freely given, it has no end. But this love can only be a gift from God. It is a participation in God's own love because experience shows that human love does end. That is why there is separation, there is divorce, there is "falling out of love". This is true of eros—but not of caritas or agape. When we love with God's own heart then truly LOVE HAS NO END.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

1. Which of the above characteristics of love do you resonate with?
2. Which ones do you find most difficult to practice?
3. Give examples in convent life (need not be your own but from your observation) how these characteristics of love are manifested.

Thérèse-Marie Dupagne, OSB
Belgium



Living in hope: rediscovering the art of living!

*The leaves and the flowers of a plant are its beauty,
the fruits, its riches,
but the root's strength is only faith.
The root is but hope
rising patiently in the darkness toward the day that it knows
not and will never see...*

toward the flower that it knows not, but which is nourished by its night.

*Help our roots, O Lord!*¹

Together, we have already taken a little tour of the region from which I speak. I told you how much “my hope is in the Lord”.² Next, we reflected about some attitudes of hope in the face of individualism and sectarianism. I suggest that we continue this reflection, perhaps more along the lines of learning to live in hope, by going more deeply into ourselves. Working at the root level is, after all, a major feature of our monastic life!

Hope in the face of ... indifference

“I want you to resist indifference.” This was the farewell message of a young 17 year old girl who put an end to her life last summer.



Indifference ranks high among our modern plagues of Egypt. Most often, it reveals a loss of savor, of meaning. When everything is all the same to me, when I don't care about anything, I am in great danger.

God? So what! My neighbor? So what! Having become fragile through suffering, worn out by living in a hard-hearted society, people create for themselves a shell of indifference, sometimes simply in order to survive, sometimes also as an excuse: “After all, we can't carry all the misery of the world on our shoulders,” they'll tell you, with a resigned, defeatist air, relieved to be able to sleep peacefully. Others will say, “You can't trust anyone.” But how will they ever be able to have the liberating experience of not coming away from an encounter untouched, of coming away bigger, happy, transformed?

In our monastic lives, do we not name this kind of indifference “acedia,” the plague against which our forbears waged spiritual combat? In the face of this plague, what can nourish and revive our hope? An attitude of respect that invites attention and consideration, it seems to me. Surely also a new way of looking at things that is capable of restoring a sense of enchantment to life.

A new way of looking at every object. In his marvelous chapter on the cellarer, Benedict invites us to consider *all the utensils of the monastery like the sacred vessels of the altar* and asks that *no negligence be committed!*³



¹ Marie NOËL, *Notes intimes*, Paris, Stock, 1995, p. 171.

² cf Ps 39,8.

³ RB 31, 10-11.

An invitation to restore savor to our mundane routines, through the consideration with which we treat even the smallest objects. An invitation to make every act a liturgy, i.e., a service which binds us to the Lord and connects us to others, as opposed to the “negligence” which breaks bonds!⁴

An invitation to live in a new relationship with things. Christian Bobin writes: *When you look hastily at something beautiful, you want to keep it for yourself. When you contemplate it with the slowness that it deserves, then it becomes luminous, and you no longer want to possess it. Gratitude is the only feeling that allows this brightness to become part of us.*⁵

A new way of seeing that discovers in each person a brother or a sister: Benedict, obviously quoting Matthew, but also the other Evangelists who say the same thing in their own way, asks us to welcome Christ in each person, especially the poorest, the least, the destitute.⁶ We can experience legitimate moments of discouragement and feel crushed by powerlessness in the face of so much distress in the world! It is then that Christ seeks us out: he is here, at our door, looking for a simple glass of water! What marvelous grace of beatific vision⁷ is offered us here! We had committed ourselves to searching for God in our whole lives, and now he gives himself to us in this simple encounter. As Christian Bobin would say, why raise your eyes to heaven to look for God when he is present in the least and the lowest?⁸ It is surely intentional that Benedict invites us to *incline the ear of our heart* in the very first verse of his Rule! To incline it toward the very low, the least, through whom our God whispers to us!

We can also learn a new way of seeing with each doxology. Do we not bow thus in adoration before the Triune God, before the beauty of our God as Poor? Can we receive the grace of Balaam, whose eyes were opened even as he prostrated himself?⁹ And then we would not see

⁴ I want to leave the debate open concerning the etymology of the words religion and negligence, but I like this reading of the two terms as opposites: that which binds and that which breaks the bond. See for example: Michel Serres, *Statues*, Flammarion, Champs, p. 47. : *The religious is the one who gathers or binds, requiring of us a collective, unceasing attention, just as our first inattentiveness or negligence [of Adam]? threatens to make us disappear (...)* This definition combines the two probable origins of the word religion: the positive root of binding with the negative opposite of neglect.

⁵ Quoted by Cécile BOLLY, *Magie des arbres*, Weyrich, Neufchâteau, 2008, p. 7.

⁶ RB 2,2 ; 36,1 ; 53,1.7.15 ; 63,13. Benedict also asks us to see Christ in the abbot, but for the abbot this is a big responsibility: because he recognizes that he is occupying the place of Christ, to the point of bearing his name, he has to be careful that what he says always reflects the Gospel. Only under that condition does he have the right to expect obedience from his monks.

⁷ On this subject see the superb chapter that Arthur Buekens devotes to Matthew 25 in his book: *Bivouacs... autour d'un Dieu solidaire des humains*, Bruxelles, Lumen Vitae, 2004.

⁸ Christian BOBIN, *Le Très-Bas*, Paris, Gallimard, 1992.

⁹ cf Nb 24,4.

with envy, but with desire!¹⁰ Still more deeply, do we not bow before God who is at our feet? Do we not thus bow as we search for God? And does this doxology not crush our indifference?

Hope in the face of ...violence



(Rouault)

Every day the media display images of violence, in our countries and all around the globe. Violence of retribution. Violence of armed conflicts. The insidious violence of poverty that kills a child every 5 seconds in our world! What cause for despair!

In our monasteries we are rarely at the front lines of the “hottest spots.” But might we be there to help behind the front lines? How many of those who are wounded by life do we welcome within our walls?

Are our relationships always informed by paschal peace? Is not the root of violence to be found at the bottom of our hearts? Is it not there that we first must wage our combat, in order to become beings of reconciliation, in justice and solidarity, to sow hope on our earth that is shaken by so many forms of violence?

It is when we encounter injustice and violence that Benedict exhorts us to choose hope: go reread the fourth degree of humility!¹¹

Beginning with the prologue, Benedict invites us to seek peace and pursue it.¹² Many monasteries have carved on the lintel of their entrance these three letters: Pax! How can we serve the cause of peace? How can we become peace? This is not the place to reflect at length on the violence that inhabits us or which comes to us as aggression from without. But is it not obvious that at the root of every sort of violence that I encounter there is a wound, an experience of having been treated with violence? Can we not all identify in our lives the violence we have experienced, and which might make us fragile and lead us to act violently in turn?

Jesus rose up in the midst of our suffering humanity, like a veritable barricade against which evil no longer found a support from which it could spread, which evil slammed into, obstructed from pursuing the spiral in which our humanity was held prisoner: the spiral of evil experienced but not integrated, not recognized, that pushes the wounded person to wound others, albeit

¹⁰ One could develop a whole reflection on the growth of desire as a path of re-enchantment in the face of indifference, and on the growth of desire by the work of asceticism (cf. the chapter on Lent, among others). Maurice Zundel, cantor of God as Poor, illustrates this idea. But we don't have time to go into this here!

¹¹ RB 7,38-39: Benedict exhorts us to: *endure everything for the Lord, even adversities. For Scripture indeed says: Because of you, we are put to death all day long, we are led like sheep to the slaughter.* And Benedict continues: *Strengthened by hope in Divine recompense, they add with joy: But in everything we are conquerors through him who loved us.*

¹² Prologue 17 quoting Psalm 33.

unconsciously. Can we become one with God's plan, welcoming life in all its density and bear it,¹³ in the fullness of our personhood in Christ? Can we go forth unarmed, in this universe of distress, recognizing the evil within ourselves so as not to reproduce it, so that, with Jesus, in him, we may become that barricade where the spiral of violence crumbles.¹⁴ To become, with Jesus, a new humanity.

When another person is aggressive towards me, if I can go beyond my fear, my pain and my initial revulsion, I can read in this act of violence a cry of distress, of despair, a call for help. I can recognize in the very one who hurts me a brother, a sister.

The testament of Christian de Chergé¹⁵ has traveled around the world; may it dwell in our hearts. You are familiar with it, so I shall remind you of only a few lines:



¹³ cf. the motto of movers: *Don't drag it, carry it. Don't throw it, put it down!*

¹⁴ Lytta Basset, a Protestant theologian, has shed much light on this theme.

¹⁵ Testament of Dom Christian de Chergé (opened on Pentecost Sunday, May 26, 1996), Facing a GOODBYE.... If it should happen one day - and it could be today - that I become a victim of the terrorism which now seems ready to engulf all the foreigners living in Algeria, I would like my community, my Church and my family to remember that my life was GIVEN to God and to this country. I ask them to accept the fact that the One Master of all life was not a stranger to this brutal departure. I would ask them to pray for me: for how could I be found worthy of such an offering? I ask them to associate this death with so many other equally violent ones which are forgotten through indifference or anonymity. My life has no more value than any other. Nor any less value. In any case, it has not the innocence of childhood. I have lived long enough to know that I am an accomplice in the evil which seems to prevail so terribly in the world, even in the evil which might blindly strike me down. I should like, when the time comes, to have a moment of spiritual clarity which would allow me to beg forgiveness of God and of my fellow human beings, and at the same time forgive with all my heart the one who would strike me down. I could not desire such a death. It seems to me important to state this. I do not see, in fact, how I could rejoice if the people I love were indiscriminately accused of my murder. It would be too high a price to pay for what will perhaps be called, the "grace of martyrdom" to owe it to an Algerian, whoever he might be, especially if he says he is acting in fidelity to what he believes to be Islam. I am aware of the scorn which can be heaped on the Algerians indiscriminately. I am also aware of the caricatures of Islam which a certain Islamism fosters. It is too easy to soothe one's conscience by identifying this religious way with the fundamentalist ideology of its extremists. For me, Algeria and Islam are something different: it is a body and a soul. I have proclaimed this often enough, I think, in the light of what I have received from it. I so often find there that true strand of the Gospel which I learned at my mother's knee, my very first Church, precisely in Algeria, and already inspired with respect for Muslim believers. Obviously, my death will appear to confirm those who hastily judged me naïve or idealistic: "Let him tell us now what he thinks of his ideals!" But these persons should know that finally my most avid curiosity will be set free. This is what I shall be able to do, God willing: immerse my gaze in that of the Father to contemplate with him His children of Islam just as He sees them, all shining with the glory of Christ, the fruit of His Passion, filled with the Gift of the Spirit whose secret joy will always be to establish communion and restore the likeness, playing with the differences. For this life lost, totally mine and totally theirs, I thank God, who seems to have willed it entirely for the sake of that JOY in everything and in spite of everything. In this THANK YOU, which is said for everything in my life from now on, I certainly include you, friends of yesterday and today, and you, my friends of this place, along with my mother and father, my sisters and brothers and their families. You are the hundredfold granted as was promised! And also you, my last-minute friend, who will not have known what you were doing: Yes, I want this THANK YOU and this GOODBYE to be a "GOD-BLESS" for you, too, because in God's face I see yours. May we meet again as happy thieves in Paradise, if it pleases God, the Father of us both.

AMEN! IN SHA'ALLAH!

My life has no more value than any other. Nor any less value. In any case, it has not the innocence of childhood. I have lived long enough to know that I am an accomplice in the evil which seems to prevail so terribly in the world, even in the evil which might blindly strike me down. I should like, when the time comes, to have a moment of spiritual clarity which would allow me to beg forgiveness of God and of my fellow human beings, and at the same time to forgive with all my heart the one who would strike me down...And also you, my last-minute friend, who will not have known what you were doing: Yes, I want this THANK YOU and this GOODBYE to be a "GOD-BLESS" for you, too, because in God's face I see yours. May we meet again as happy thieves in Paradise, if it pleases God, the Father of us both. AMEN! IN SHA'ALLAH!

This is neither poetry nor pious discourse; it is the true, Christified cry of a human heart. In the face of pain and violence, we have the power to stop it, or to amplify it. We have this power to pray God, who is the first among us, within us, to be struck down by evil, and to have pity on him, at least as much if not more than on ourselves, by allowing ourselves to love the very one who persecutes us. In the face of violence, can I accept being requisitioned with Simon of Cyrene to carry the cross?



(Feldmann)

See the look on the face of Christ who is waiting for this compassion, this help!



I have no solution to the problem of suffering, but I worry when God is forgotten in its midst, when he is not accused of it! When a child suffers, do his parents not suffer even more? What can one say about the immensity of suffering of our God and Father? To be bearers of hope for God himself...that is of primary importance!

Undoubtedly God is hoping that we will look at him with love to console him! More precisely, that we will look with *compassion!* With a look that we would give a brother or a sister who is hurting! A look that will raise him up.

Hope in the face of...death

Algiers, 1st December 1993
Tibhirine, 1st January 1994

Christian +

Our society refuses death; it tries to hide it, to deny it. Does death not make a brutal end of the most beautiful hopes? But to refuse death is to refuse reality. Benedict asks us always to keep it before our eyes!¹⁶ There is nothing morbid in this invitation; it is rather an invitation to give weight to everyday life and to assume in advance our own death, in order to make of it a hearth of life, of new hope. Before the barrier of death, I am confronted with perhaps the greatest form of limitation. And what if that were freedom?

On the day of my profession, as St. Benedict requires, I sang the *Suscipe*¹⁷. This chant grounds my life on the promise of God, on his fidelity towards me. On that day, God did not commit himself to preserving me from death, he did not guarantee me a life without failure, he did not guarantee that I would be in my community, or in the Benedictine order (or disorder!) forever. This chant gave me over to the fidelity of God. A God who is faithful to himself as well as to us, a God who created us free, as co-creators and not puppets in his hands. A God who continues to love us, no matter what we do. A God who, in faithfulness to his plan of love, did not save his Son from suffering, failure and death. We are forewarned!

During the 2006 symposium, we made a pilgrimage to Norcia. Together we renewed our profession and sang the *Suscipe*. This moment has stayed imprinted on my heart. Try to imagine it: how marvelous! A hundred or so Benedictines from all over the world reaffirming their commitment together. We should have asked the press to be there and go into ecstasy over Benedictine life, or I know not what other form of success! That would have been overlooking where our feet were. We were standing in the midst of ruins, in the church of St. Scholastica, a pathetic, abandoned church, without even a bench where the older sisters could sit down. The gardener, guardian of the place, must have wondered why we had chosen such a broken-down church for our liturgy! Weren't there enough sumptuous churches in Italy?



We didn't commit ourselves to succeed, but just to live! To live in the movement of the Spirit of God which blows where it will, even in ruins, even in a pile of dry bones! We committed ourselves to letting God dream in us his craziest dreams, his dreams that became Body and Spirit in a nomadic people, a fragile communion of sinners. *And hope does not deceive.*¹⁸ In risking our whole lives on this faithful God, we committed ourselves with our whole will, with a hope that does not depend on us! This could appear to be a bit contradictory. But such a commitment, by consenting to death in advance, acquires a liberty, an undreamed-of creativity. We can risk our life like a dance step in a field of ruins! *Suscipe me...* receive me, O Lord...or pick me up, O Lord!

¹⁶ RB 4,47.

¹⁷ Ps 118,116 : *Suscipe me, Domine, secundum eloquium tuum et vivam, et non confundas me ab expectatione mea.*

¹⁸ Rom 5,5.

(video clip of two handicapped persons dancing:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4fEz9xGRgCo>)

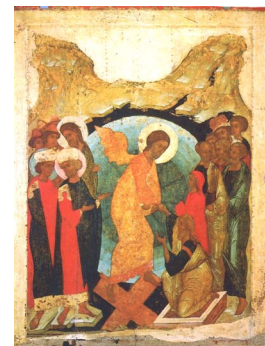
Hope in the face of...my sin



If there is one reality that is difficult to live with, is it not the consciousness of our own evil? It is there, present in my life. How can I continue to hope, when I discover the extent to which evil weaves its web and catches me in its nets? The consequences are sometimes not serious, sometimes disastrous; the evil that I commit disconcerts and discourages me.

Often, someone who wants to spare us guilt feelings will come up with an excuse or justification. Certainly, it is good to see the whole picture, to look accurately at the way in which we live, think, speak, act. But is there not also a place for the recognition of our fault in its nudity? *Those who live by the truth, come to the light.*¹⁹ Yes, in the face of sin, we need to be able to say, if possible, a little more spontaneously than David, *I have sinned.*²⁰ Benedict exhorts us to open our hearts²¹ with confidence, in order to dash our sins upon the rock of Christ. It is when the brother has passed this rung on the ladder of humility that he is called “monk,”²² that is, “unified”.²³ He has reached a stage of humble lucidity that speaks to us of God!

Indeed, St. Benedict invites us always *to ascribe to God the good I see in myself; as for the evil, I must know that I am the author.*²⁴ This verse can make us wince; certain people have read it as an unhealthy, pathological tendency to deprecate oneself and denigrate the human. But can we not read it through other glasses? Can we not affirm that Benedict is speaking, in fact, of something much more fundamental, that is, of the eternal innocence of God: God is innocent of the evil that reigns in my heart, as he is innocent of all evil. And it is a grace to discover this face of our God, because this God of eternal innocence cannot be the inflexible judge who condemns without appeal. This God of eternal innocence can be only goodness and beauty. Because he is Eternal Innocence, he brings forgiveness to his incandescence. Pure love, he can only purify, forgive!



¹⁹ John 3:21.

²⁰ 2 Samuel 12:13 ; 2 Samuel 24:10,17.

²¹ RB 4:50.57; 7:44-48.

²² RB 7:49; As Br. François Dehotte points out, in the chapter on humility, the term “monk” does not appear until the 6th degree, as if to tell us that it is only by going through the 5th degree (that of opening the heart, and the humble avowal of one's faults) that the brother becomes a monk!

²³ According to the etymology of the same word: “monk”. Not so much alone as unified.

²⁴ RB 4:42-43.

One can now understand the accuracy of this tool of the spiritual art: *Never despair of the mercy of God.*²⁵ If all the other tools fall from our hands, let us at least hold fast to that one! Dante in his *Divine Comedy* places this sign over the gates of Hell: *Abandon all hope, you who enter here.*²⁶ Yes, my faults place me in the non-love which is hell. But there is God, his eternal innocence, his crazy love as Father, who gives everything in giving his Son. There's this crazy love of the Son who shares everything, to the point of penetrating the lowest, most profound space in this hell which is mine. It is he who is my hope in the midst of hell! Ever since Good Friday, every sincere look at my fault shows me Jesus, who takes it on himself to free me from it.

Also, every moment offers us the possibility of starting over: *Today, again, I begin.*²⁷ To discover that in the very depths of my sin the face of my God calls me to contemplate his eternal beauty, his eternal innocence, to know that there is God, and that that is enough!²⁸ I can no longer sing the *Felix Culpa* of the Exultant without being moved! Is it not a marvelous song of hope?

Hope in the night

Finally, can we not consider a number of situations that we have to live as if in the night?

I would also like to end by evoking Chapter 15 of the Rule of Benedict: *When Alleluia Should Be Said!* The fact that Benedict has written a whole chapter on this question²⁹ tells us the importance he attaches to this song.

Alleluia: praise God. An exhortation that I send to my heart, and to others. At the same time: praise *to* God: God, you are marvelous, you enchant us! Benedict does not tell us: Praise God for this or that reason; it is rather a question of praising him in an absolute manner, because He is God, a really good God! There is in this song a consent to what God is, a consent that God be God according to God's understanding of what it means to be God.

Praise is expressed outwardly, the exact opposite of the sort of expression that Benedict dreads above all others: murmuring. This kind of furtive discontent, of unending criticism or incessant lamentation which causes the person, instead of joining in the singing with the fullness of his being, to turn back in on himself in a whispered, murmured grumbling that brings down and brings on, even cultivates, sadness that closes us up within ourselves instead of opening to the

²⁵ RB 4: 74 ; Centuries later, Silouane, witnesses to this: horrified by his sin, he did not dare to stand before God. He then received this word: *Keep your spirit in hell, and do not despair.* (cf. Archimandrite SOPHRONY, *Starets Silouane, moine du Mont-Athos*, Paris, Présence, 1973, p. 201 ff.).

²⁶ DANTE Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, Hell, 3rd Canto: *Lasciate ogni speranza, voi che entrate.*

²⁷ We know that the famous expression "Today I begin" has motivated many conversions, even though it is rooted in a probably faulty reading of Ps. 76 (77):11 (The Hebrew version does not contain this expression; it appears only in the LXX and the Vulgate).

²⁸ On this subject see: Eloi LECLERC, *Sagesse d'un pauvre*, Paris, Editions franciscaines, 1959, p.104 ff.

²⁹ Strongly debated during Benedict's era according to commentators.

other, to the absolute of the other. The murmur is perhaps the exact opposite of hope! It may even kill hope!



Alleluia: it is the paschal song *par excellence*, the victory song of life over death, the victory song of the Good, the True, in short, of Love, over evil, falsehood, hate, violence. This song reflects the choice of hope, the decision of faith: it is not just an emotion.

If this, then, is the meaning of alleluia, when should we sing it? When we are living on the path of the resurrection? When the sun is rising, victorious over night and darkness? It is the spontaneous response of liturgists: they'll tell you with conviction that one must sing alleluia on Easter Day, during Eastertide, on Sunday, which is the Easter of each week, and finally at the Eucharist, which is the Easter of each day. For the liturgy of the hours, they point to Lauds, which celebrates the rising Sun.

And what does Benedict say? For him, the alleluia is to be sung daily during the night office. In this choice, I see a profound realism rather than sweet dreams: an act of faith, a veritable participation in the work of salvation. Our mission is to lay before our God all of the areas of distress, of sadness in our world, so that the victory of Easter will come, and to be present to God in these situations, because God is the first to be affected by them.

Singing alleluia means becoming witnesses to the resurrection, along with the disciples. How? Not at all in triumph, in an insolence that ignores the distress and suffering of others. Becoming witnesses to the resurrection means to witness in the middle of the night, as it were. It is in the night of our world that monks must sing alleluia and proclaim their hope.

A hymn³⁰ for Vigils during Lent has us ask: *Do human nights lead to God?* The answer is not *Yes*, but rather: *The forgiveness that brings light to their nights comes from God.* Human nights do not necessarily lead to God; the night of the disciples of Emmaus went in the opposite direction, but God comes to us in the night, he comes to illumine our night.

For God, *darkness is not darkness at all.*³¹ Each night offered to God's gaze, open to his presence, is light, because it is presence and communion. The light of Christ broke in two the the darkness of our world. The Exultant sings: *O blessed night.* Blessed not by its darkness, but because it has opened itself to the light of Christ. Would it be too much to remember this every night? This is what Benedict asks of us: to be watchmen, and in the middle of this world's night to sing alleluia. To be those who offer the night to God without ceasing, who offer to God's redemption all human nights, who open them to the passage of his grace.

³⁰ *Les nuits humaines (Human nights)*, text of the CFC.

³¹ Ps 138 (139): 12.

If we are going to dare sing this song in truth, to utter it in deepest night, we need the courage to enter into the night, the courage to feel its heaviness. We must dare to share the night with so many of our brothers and sisters all over the world.

Are we capable of hearing their cry, *Watchman, tell us of the night*³² ? We could go back to the morning paper and read there about the nights of men, women, and children of our time...Can we hear their night? Do we share it? A Negro spiritual reproaches God for having made the night too long;³³ (Sr. Sheila: I tried to find the original in English, without success.) Father Duval sang it in his own manner: *Why Lord, you who made the world, why did you make the night so long, so long, so long for me!*³⁴ But isn't God the first to suffer from it?

Human night, God's night, it is all one. God knew the night which we experience, which our brothers and sisters go through, long before we did! As we listen to the heartbeats of our world's heart, let us try to hear the heartbeats of our God's heart. Let us welcome in its reality the night of our brothers and sisters in humanity. Yes, and read there the night of our God. Let us not take in the news simply to feed our curiosity, or more devoutly, to nourish our intercessions, but let us hear the cry of our God through the cry of our humanity. God penetrates our nights, inhabits them, lives them. There are not two nights, that of man and that of God. To paraphrase Lacordaire³⁵ : there aren't two nights; if you want to know the night of God, descend into you

³² Isaiah 21:11.

³³ “You made the rivers run, the flowers bloom;
You made the strong and the weak;
But Lord, you made the night too long.
You made the robins sing songs of spring;
 And me you made sing a solitary song,
 But why did you make the night too long...?
You made the high mountains, the earth, the sky;
Who am I that you should reproach me?
But Lord, you made the night too long.”
 quoted in Bernard BRO, *Dieu seul est humain (only God is human)*, Paris, Cerf, 1973, pp. 231-232.

³⁴ **NIGHT (for those who can't sleep)**

Words and music: Aimé Duval. © Auvidis

**Oh, why, why, why Lord?
Why, Lord who made the world,
Why did you make the night so long,
So long, so long, so long for me?**

1. You made the day and the sun
With dreams for sleep... Oh !
2. You made ivory, black ebony
With snow on the roofs... Oh !
3. You made one day from a bit of earth
The heart of man and its mystery... Oh !
4. You made, thank God, our friendship...
To share everything half and half... Oh ! **Amen.**

³⁵ Lacordaire says concerning love: “There are not two loves, my friend; the love of heaven and of earth are the same, except that the love of heaven is infinite. When you want to know what God feels, listen to the beating of your heart, and add to it only the infinit/ infinity.” *Lettre à un jeune homme*, 1838.

own, but just add to it infinity. Add to it infinity! Terrible and yet so true!!! Who better than God can live the night of so many of his children, who can understand with the heart, if not our God?

We shall not sing “alleluia” with exuberance, as if we had just emigrated to a 7th heaven, forgetting the reality of suffering, of sin, of evil, but in sharing with our God all the nights of humanity. In so doing, we console our God as best we can for all the nights we inflict on him on our earth, because in the night he often hears only our cries, and while he carries in his heart all of our wounds, who is there to console him?

Singing alleluia in the night means to let our ways of seeing and thinking be transformed; it is an intimate conversion which leads us irresistibly in the footsteps of the crucified and risen Jesus. This song invites us to watch for the signs of dawn, to remain standing like the watchman, like the bird, which by its song wants to wake the dawn. We have this power to make the day come faster, as St. Peter says: *Think what sort of people you ought to be, what holiness of life, what respect for God you should have, you who wait for the day of God and try to hasten its coming.*³⁶

Singing alleluia allows us to be at the side of our God at all times. For him also! This alleluia is given to us. It is confided to us. It is up to us to become it. It is up to us to be “alleluia” by our hope. Even if we are fragile! Because we are fragile!

(music: alleluia)

³⁶ cf 2 Peter 3:12.