

THE IDENTITY OF THE RELIGIOUS BROTHER:



A mystery of communion for mission

Memory of the love of Christ: "The same thing you must do ..." (Jn 13:14-15)

12. To deepen our understanding of the identity of the Brother, we will allow ourselves to be enlightened as we contemplate one of the most evocative icons of the four Gospels: *Jesus washing the feet of his disciples*.

The story that the evangelist John offers us regarding the meal on Holy Thursday begins with the solemn and intimate statement: *"Jesus... having loved those who were his own who in the world, loved them to the end" (Jn 13:1)*. The Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples takes place in an context of *commissioning*: Jesus urges his disciples and, through them, the whole Church, to continue the *ministry of salvation* which reaches its culmination in the death of Jesus on the cross, although he had developed it during his life, as reflected in his answer to John's disciples, *"Go back and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind see again, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life and the good news is proclaimed to the poor" (Lk. 7:22)*.

Thus the Church experiences itself being constituted as a *ministerial people* commissioned by Jesus. The evangelists represent the institution of the ecclesial ministry through two icons. The three Synoptics choose the icon of Jesus breaking and sharing his Body and Blood with his disciples, while requiring of them: *"Do this in memory of me" (Lk 22:19)*. Differently, the *Gospel of John* presents us with the icon of Jesus with the towel tied around his waist, washing the feet of his disciples, and making a request of them later: *"I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you" (Jn 13:14-15)*.

In the consciousness of the Church, it is in the light of this icon of the washing of the feet that the other icon, in which Jesus shares out his Body and his Blood, finds its full meaning. That is to say, the commandment of brotherly love gives us the key to understanding the meaning of the Eucharist in the Church. This is reflected in the liturgy of Holy Thursday.

This testimony which the Church receives from Jesus points to two aspects or dimensions of the *ministry of salvation* which unfold in the Church through diverse specific ministries. On the one hand, through the ministerial priesthood, instituted by a specific sacrament, the Church guarantees its fidelity to the memory of the surrender of Jesus, his death and resurrection, and makes it present in the Eucharist. On the other hand, the Holy Spirit stirs among the faithful the memory of Jesus showing the attitude of service, and the urgency of his mandate: *"by this everyone will recognise you as my disciples" (Jn 13:35)*.

Because of this, many charisms are raised up among the faithful to develop communion through fraternal service. That is how salvation comes to the poorest: the blind see, the lame walk, prisoners are released, youth are educated, the sick and the elderly are taken care of. Brotherly love is made



real in numerous services, many of which become institutionalized or recognized as ecclesial ministries¹.

Consecrated life arises in the Church in response to this call of the Spirit to faithfully keep alive the memory of the love of Christ who loved His own *to the end*². This response is expressed in many forms, but at the deepest level there is always the option of "a radical gift of self for love of the Lord Jesus and, in Him, of every member of the human family"³.

The vocation and identity of the Religious Brother acquire meaning in this dynamic, which is both inclusive of and complementary to the various ministries, but which also needs and promotes prophetic signs.

a. *THE MYSTERY: BROTHERHOOD, THE GIFT WE RECEIVE*

Witness and mediator: "We believe in the love of God"

13. What is the origin of the vocation of the Brother if not the experience of God's love? "*We have known the love God has for us and put our faith in it*" (1 Jn 4:16). That is also the source of every Christian vocation. "Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction"⁴.

The radical option proposed by the Old Testament for the people of Israel, and each Israelite in particular, is found in this context of the encounter between the believer and God, God who comes to meet the People with whom He has made a covenant. This is a total consecration of life: "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength*" (Dt. 6:4-5). Jesus reaffirms this requirement, but unites it with this one: "*You shall love your neighbour as yourself*" (Lv 19:18). From then on, both form one indivisible commandment (cf. Mk 12:29-31). "And since God has first loved us (cf. 1 Jn 4: 10), love is now no longer a mere 'command'; it is a response to the gift of love with which God comes to meet us"⁵.

The vocation of the Brother is not only intended to be that of a recipient of God's love, but also of being a witness and mediator of that same gift, of the project of communion which God has for humanity and which is based in the Trinitarian communion. This project, the Mystery which has been revealed to us in Christ, seeks to establish a horizontal relationship between God and humankind at the very heart of humanity, precisely where God wants to be present.

Relationships of affiliation are thus transformed simultaneously into brotherly relationships. For that reason, saying "brother" is like saying "mediator of God's love", the God who "*so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life*" (Jn 3:16).

To be a "Brother" is also to be a mediator of the love of the Son, the Mediator *par excellence*, who "*loved them to the end*" (Jn 13:1) and asked us to love one another as He loved us (Jn 13:34). In this world that God loves so much, the Brother cannot hide. On the contrary, he experiences the impulse to go out to encounter and embrace God. In contemplating the saving work of God, the Brother

¹ Cf. VC 60, NMI 46.

² Cf. VC 75.

³ VC 3.

⁴ Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est* (25 December 2005), 1.

⁵ Benedict XVI, *ibid.* 1.

discovers himself to be an instrument which God wants to use to make the covenant, God's love and concern for the weakest, more visible.

The Brother is aware that all creation is imbued with the love and presence of God and that especially whatever affects the human person is part of God's saving plan. Thus is born in the Brother and the community of Brothers the commitment to quality professional service in every task, no matter how profane it may seem.

Consecrated by the Spirit

14. There is nothing greater than baptismal consecration. Baptism "regenerates us in the life of the Son of God; unites us to Christ and to his Body, the Church; and anoints us in the Holy Spirit, making us spiritual temples"⁶. The whole existence of a Christian must be one of being in a process of integration into the plan of communion of which Baptism is a sign, taking on the baptismal commitment according to the vocation that each one has received from God.

The above statement risks not being understood if we read it outside the great story of the history of salvation, within which it comes to life and within which, through Baptism, each Christian finds his or her own unique place. This story tells how the Trinity transmits its own communion in the mission of the salvation of humanity, how it proposes the covenant in various ways, and commits itself to it to the extreme in the incarnation of the Son. This story of salvation continues thanks to the Spirit, who brings together and builds up the Church with his gifts, so that, through her, it can continue saving humanity.

We all participate in this great story, because "God calls the individual in Jesus Christ, each one personally by name"⁷. Each is actively involved and each one's influence on others is crucial. Each member of the Church is "entrusted with a unique task which cannot be done by another and which is to be fulfilled for the good of all"⁸. Each one, thanks to the anointing received in Baptism and Confirmation, can repeat the words of Jesus: "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; for he has anointed me to bring the good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives, sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim a year of favour from the Lord*" (Lk 4:18-19). Thus, the "baptized share in the same mission of Jesus, the Christ, the Saviour-Messiah."⁹

Public commitment: making the face of Jesus-brother visible today

15. It is in this personal story, which begins in Baptism, that religious consecration is inserted and finds its full meaning. This is "a special and fruitful deepening" of baptismal consecration, insofar as it expresses a vocation that involves "a specific gift of the Holy Spirit"¹⁰. This gift is experienced as a desire to proclaim with one's very life, to the Church community and to the world, what Jesus announced in the synagogue of Nazareth: "*Today this scripture is fulfilled before you*" (Lk 4:21). That desire, which characterizes the life of the prophet, is accompanied by a heartfelt interior invitation to demonstrate, through voluntary celibacy, embraced in love and lived in fraternal community, the new world revealed in Jesus Christ, the fruitfulness of his covenant with the Church beyond flesh and blood.

⁶ ChL 10.

⁷ ChL 28.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ ChL 13.

¹⁰ VC 30.



Each religious consecration expresses to the faithful that the mystery of Christ the Saviour *is being fulfilled here today*, in this world and through the Church today. In every time and place consecrated persons show their contemporaries the traits of Jesus with which he himself had made clear that the mystery of the Kingdom of God had broken into history. Visibility is achieved by a way of being present which reveals the charism of each religious family in the *here and now*. Therefore consecrated people should frequently ask themselves how to be witnesses of the Lord today. What kind of presence should we live so that the Lord Jesus can be seen, *experienced*, by people today?

Consecrated life is called to be "a living memorial of Jesus' way of living and acting as the Incarnate Word in relation to the Father and in relation to the brethren"¹¹. In particular, the Religious Brother, and also the Religious Sister, make visible in the Church the face of brother Christ, "*firstborn among many brothers*" (Rom 8:29), creator of a new brotherhood which he established with his teaching and with his life.

Exercise of the baptismal priesthood

16. The Second Vatican Council has highlighted the richness of Baptism and the importance of the common priesthood of all the baptized. It noted the mutual relationship between the baptismal priesthood and the ministerial priesthood, and recalled that the latter is fundamentally related to that of all the faithful.¹²

The Religious Brother, living his lay state through a special consecration, is witness to the value of the common priesthood received in Baptism and Confirmation: "*He has made us a kingdom of priests to serve his God and Father*" (Apoc 1:5,6). His religious consecration is in itself an exercise in the fullness of the priesthood of all the baptized. The essential act of this priesthood is the offering of the spiritual sacrifice by which the Christian places himself or herself in God's hands "*as a living sacrifice*" (Rom 12:1), in response to His love and for His glory.

The Brother lives in communion with the Father, source of all life, through the total offering of his life to God in an attitude of praise and worship. Rooting his life deeply in God, the Brother *consecrates* all creation, recognizing the presence of God and the Spirit's action in creation, in cultures and in daily events. Because he recognizes this active presence, he can proclaim it to his contemporaries. This ability is the fruit of an ongoing process of openness to God through consecration, that is, through the daily experience of his baptismal priesthood.

Like all his brothers in all things

17. Religious consecration helps the Brother to participate more consciously in the fraternal dimension which characterizes the priesthood of Christ. He "*had to become completely like his brothers, to be a compassionate and trustworthy high priest*" (Heb 2:17,18). To clothe us in his divine sonship, Jesus Christ first of all became brother, shared our flesh and blood and was in solidarity with the sufferings of his brothers and sisters. This is the title Jesus gives his disciples after his Resurrection, and Mary Magdalene is responsible for communicating it: "*Go to my brothers, and tell them: I am ascending to my Father and your Father*" (Jn 20:17).

In the fraternal community which supports him, the Religious Brother experiences the mystery of the Risen Jesus as a call and a sending forth in mission. This community is a theological space¹³ where Jesus makes himself present among the brothers (cf. Mt 18:20) to unite them in one heart, to give

¹¹ VC 22.

¹² Cf. ChL 22; cf LG 10.

¹³ Cf. VC 42.

them his Spirit (cf. *Jn* 20:22) and to send them, like Mary Magdalene, to announce that in Christ we are all brothers, sons of the same Father. Immersed in this experience, the Brother develops his baptismal priesthood through brotherhood. Through it he becomes a bridge between God and his brothers, anointed and sent by the Spirit to bring the Good News of the love and mercy of God to all, especially to the least of his brothers, the weakest members of humanity.

The Religious Brother and the lay Christian who is committed in secular society live the universal priesthood in different ways. Both express the complex richness of this priesthood which implies closeness to God and closeness to the world, belonging to the Church as servant of the Lord and to the Church which is built in the world, for God. The committed lay Christian effectively reminds the Religious Brother that he cannot be indifferent to the salvation of humanity, nor to progress on the earth which is loved by God and geared to Christ. The Brother reminds the committed lay Christian in the secular society that progress on the earth is not the ultimate goal, and that "the building up of the earthly city has its foundation in the Lord and tends toward Him, *lest perhaps those who build this city shall have laboured in vain.*"¹⁴

Profession: a unique consecration, expressed in different vows

18. The offering of oneself is made public and is received by the Church through the profession of vows. Consecration comes before the vows, includes them and goes beyond them existentially. This statement should be understood in the light of what follows.

To respond to God's loving action which *consecrates*, the consecrated person offers his life to God in religious profession, makes an offering, above all, of life itself, that his life might become a sign of the primacy of God, of a life only for Him, of the covenant, of the love of God for his people. It is a commitment to love as the fundamental orientation of life. It is the bond of brotherhood in response to the gift of sonship received from God in his Son Jesus.

This consecration, which unifies and integrates life, commits the person to live in the *here and now* of every day the sacrifice of himself in all the dimensions of his concrete existence. In this integrative dynamism *the vows* make sense, as a way of including, with different nuances, the whole of existence.

In the history of consecrated religious, public profession has been explained in various ways, but from the 13th century it became a common tendency to express it through the evangelical counsels, which highlight the intention to *conform* all existence to Christ¹⁵ in three essential dimensions: chastity, poverty and obedience.

The Religious Brother expresses his consecration by profession of the evangelical counsels, while at the same time aware of the unity of his life and his conformity to Christ through the central core of the Gospel, the commandment of love for God and neighbour. He lives chastity, especially, as an experience of the love of God by which he feels driven to a universal love and to become a promotor of communion through the testimony of his brotherhood¹⁶. He lives poverty as one who has received freely, in the person of Jesus, the precious pearl of the Kingdom of God. Because of it he makes himself available to build brotherhood and serve all in charity, especially the poorest. The vow of poverty opens the Brothers to each other and makes them aware that they need each other. He lives obedience, specifically, as a common search for the will of the Father, in brotherhood animated by

¹⁴ LG 46.

¹⁵ Cf. VC 16.

¹⁶ Cf. VC 46; 51.

the Spirit, with the commitment to walk together with one mind and heart¹⁷ and gladly accepting the human mediations indicated by the Rule of the Institute¹⁸.

The vows thus express the commitment of the Brother to living the mystery of God, of which he has been constituted, together with his Brothers, *sign and prophecy* for the Church community and the world¹⁹: mystery of love, covenant and brotherhood.

An incarnated and unifying spirituality

19. The prophetic dimension is an essential part of the identity of the consecrated person and it is developed, firstly, by listening. This has been the experience the Servant of Yahweh: "*Every morning when I wake up he makes my ear alert to listen like a disciple*" (Is 50:4). Just the experience of being centred in God and imbued by his Word can guarantee the living out of this dimension in the apostolate, for "true prophecy is born of God, from friendship with him, from attentive listening to his word in the different circumstances of history"²⁰. The ability to read deeply the signs of the times, to understand in them God's call to work according to His plan²¹, to discover the presence of God in people, especially among the poor, is all the result of cultivating contemplation, which helps us to see things and people as God sees them.

The spirituality of the Brother must lead him to emphasise in a special way the foundational Christian experience which the evangelist Matthew symbolically expressed as: "*The veil of the Sanctuary was torn asunder*" (Mt 27,51). This image suggests to us that Jesus, through his death, "*has opened for us a new and living opening through the curtain, that is to say, his own flesh*" (Heb 10:20) so that we can meet the Father. God's presence is no longer exclusively in a "sacred place". From then on "*God must be worshipped in spirit and in truth*" (Jn 4:24).

The Brother is called to live this incarnated and unifying spirituality which facilitates encounter with God, not only by listening to the Word, in the sacraments, the liturgy and in prayer, but also in everyday life, in all of his daily tasks, in world history, in the ongoing human enterprise, in material reality, in work and technology. This spirituality is based on a profound vision of the unity of God's plan. It is the same God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who created the world and who saves it. It is about bringing all of life to prayer and ensuring that prayer continues in life.

Religious Brothers integrate the official prayer of the Church with the dimension of service that characterizes their consecrated life. They cultivate a contemplative attitude capable of glimpsing the presence of Jesus in their personal circumstances, in their daily lives, in their work and commitments, in order to be able to exclaim with him: "*I thank you, Father ... because you have revealed these things to the simple...*" (Lk 10:21)

A spirituality of the Word in order to live the Mystery "at home" with Mary

20. The three Synoptic Gospels briefly narrate a scene in which Jesus establishes a clear distinction between "his mother and brothers" in the flesh and "his mother and brothers *who hear the word of God and keep it*" (Lk 8:21). In the story, Jesus speaks clearly in favour of the latter. The former are *outside the house*, they call him from outside; the latter are gathered around Him, *inside the house*, listening to Him. This new category of family relationship established by Jesus is where Mary

¹⁷ Cf. VC 92.

¹⁸ Cf. CICALSAL, Instruction *The service of authority and obedience*, 9.

¹⁹ Cf. VC 15.

²⁰ VC 84.

²¹ Cf. VC 73.

finds her true greatness and her profound significance for the Christian community. Regarding her, St. Luke says that "*she treasured all these things in the intimacy of her heart, continually meditating on them*" (Lk. 2:19, 51). Mary welcomes and fully lives the mystery of the love of God to the point of it becoming flesh in her. She is the bond of unity in the emerging community of brothers, which she accompanies and in which she is integrated as mother and sister; and in this prayerful brotherhood she receives the Spirit (cf. Acts 1:14; 2:1-4).

Like Mary, the Religious Brother is invited to live intensely the spirituality of the Word, to have this experience of *being at home* around Jesus, listening to his message, and living alongside him the mystery of the Father who makes us children in the Son and brothers among ourselves and with Jesus.

Like Mary, the Brother is invited to allow himself to be filled by the Spirit, to hear the Spirit within himself, crying in the depths of his heart: *Abba!* (Gal 4,6; Rom 8:15). This experience is the only one that can sustain his vocation.

Supported and inspired by Mary, the Brother lives in his community the experience of the Father who brings the brothers together with his Son around the table of the Word, of the Eucharist and of life. With Mary, the Brother sings the greatness of God and proclaims his salvation. Because of this he feels urged to seek out and to make a place at the table of the Kingdom for those who have nothing to eat, the socially excluded and those marginalized from progress. This is the Eucharist of life which the Brother is invited to celebrate in the spirit of his baptismal priesthood, reaffirmed by his religious consecration.