

CIRCULAR LETTER OF 2002

FROM THE ROOTS OF THE GOSPEL

(Circular letter to the members of the Order)

Rome, January 26, 2002

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

A year ago, the Lord Jesus' word to each and every one of us was : come and follow me! His word is living and active, so our response was not slow in coming. This year we again receive the same invitation, though in an even more radical way.

This is why I now want to write you about the **radical nature of the Gospel**. I am convinced that radical Gospel living is a basic and irrefutable demand for all Christians without exception, flowing from Christ's call to follow and imitate him. The wellspring of this demand is an intimate communion of life with Him, brought about by the Spirit.

In the major religions of humanity, monastic life has always been considered a radical way of life rooted in the Absolute. In our Christian tradition, the one desire of monks and nuns is to follow Christ, as the Gospel proposes, thus becoming "signs" of a Church anxious to commit itself to the radical invitation of the beatitudes.

Monastic life today, in its fascination for the Kingdom of Heaven, is invited to follow Jesus by embracing the radical nature of the Gospel in the spirit of the beatitudes. Our future depends on our response to this challenge. Young people are looking to us for this type of radical living. Those of us in middle age do not want to become settled in lukewarmness. Seniors want to go more deeply into the mystery they already live. The Church and the world need and expect us to be what we say we are.

1. A Demanding and Decisive Plan of Action

To say that something or someone is radical is to say many things at once. Above all, it is to state that something or someone is absolute, demanding, non-negotiable, and therefore breaks away from ordinary patterns. Measured against the superficiality of everyday life, anything radical seems unusual or paradoxical.

If we could once again read the Gospel with eyes illumined by our first love, we would discover that the Good News of Jesus is infinitely demanding and incisive because it pierces, cuts away and frees us from any kind of duplicity or falsification.

If we live the radical implications of the Gospel, we become true disciples of Jesus because it allows us to live as He lived. Those who live in this way do so with depth, coherence and firmness, not with showiness, intransigence or aggressiveness. Granted, it is something impossible for us, but this is not a cause of frustration, for being radical means never giving up. It is less a destination than a pathway. Moreover, it is possible, for time is short and the Lord is near. There can be no radical following without a passionate expectation of the Parousia of the Risen Lord!

The radical demands I wish to speak to you about in this letter constitute Gospel maximalism: a prophetic cry and an apocalyptic marginalism. To put it more clearly, it means living the Gospel one hundred percent. It means offering our lives so that God will make his voice heard and reveal his mystery, even though there be little faith on earth.

Radical Gospel life flowers and forms the fruit of eternal life from the roots up. The flowers and fruit do not hold up the branches, nor do the branches hold up the trunk, nor does the trunk sustain the roots. It is the root that sustains trunk, branches, flowers and fruit. Radical monks and nuns deserve the prophet's blessing: *They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.* (Jer 17: 7-8. Cf. Ps 1: 3).

Jesus our Teacher puts it unambiguously: *For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.... Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.* (Mt 5: 20, 48). A disciple of the second hour puts it even more clearly: radical followers are those *rooted and grounded in love* (Eph 3: 17), *rooted and built up in Christ* (Col 2: 7).

The demanding, non-negotiable, radical words of the Gospel are addressed to all Christians. They must be heard within the context of the Father's gratuitous merciful love, which saves us in Christ and gives us new life in the Spirit. These words presuppose conversion, faith in Christ, attentive listening, vigilance and love of God and neighbor. This is why they have always been a source of inspiration and renewal for monastic life.

2. Not All that Shines is Gold

Radicalism, in the sense of a life based on the radical demands of the Gospel, is one of the few "isms" marked by virtue, as opposed to the vices of so many other "isms." In the Romance languages, the suffix "ism" is used to indicate the corruption of something that of itself could be pure and whole. For instance, liberalism deifies individual liberty, communism impersonalizes community and nationalism refuses to recognize other nations.

The history of spirituality in general – and of monastic life in particular – shows that it is possible for Gospel radicalism to become corrupt and distorted. Here we have a prime example of the saying, "There is nothing worse than the corruption of the best." Let us try to discern some of the possible ways of being deceived in this regard. Genuine, radical Gospel life can be supplanted by other phenomena that frequently deceive those who are not alert and vigilant. Rigorism, fundamentalism and ideologies may have a certain shine, but they are not the gold of radicalism.

In fact, the radical nature of the Gospel is very different from **rigorism**, be it a rigorism based on law or on strength of will. Here is a schema of the contrast between them.

-Radical Gospel life is an invitation of the Spirit; rigorism is a willful imposition, often backed up by law.

-Radical Gospel life looks for long-term results; rigorism claims immediate results.

-Radical Gospel life puts its trust in the power of the Gospel; rigorism put its trust in human power.

-Radical Gospel life is open to new things; rigorism fears anything new.

-Radical Gospel life is pluriform; rigorism is monolithic.

-Radical Gospel life leaves room for freedom; rigorism smothers freedom.

However, rigorism is not likely to be the trap our desire for radical Gospel life will fall into today. In many places, a sort of *light* culture reigns, in which the coffee served is decaffeinated, with rigor and vigor being supplanted by their opposites. At any rate, by attempting to be countercultural, a radical monk might very well become an intolerable monk.

Various types of **fundamentalism** are quite current today. Religious fundamentalism abounds, and within our Christian tradition there are many forms of Protestant fundamentalism. If we observe these phenomena closely, we soon discover that they are diametrically opposed to the radical demands of Jesus' Good News.

The radical nature of the Gospel is characterized by simplicity, the kind of simplicity that comes from accentuating the fundamentals and leads to solid basic convictions. Quite another thing is the naivete of fundamentalism with its tactless and fearful rejection of reality, which seeks security rather than conviction.

Radicalism means going toward the roots, whereas fundamentalism gets stuck in the trunk. The radical Christian, therefore, is original whereas the fundamentalist is repetitive. The former fosters life in abundance. The latter gives way to dogmatism, perfectionism and fanaticism. The fundamentalistic fanatic considers all pluralism to be relativism, whereas the radical person is able to give due consideration to differences.

Don't we all know the total lack of originality and the repetitiveness of fundamentalistic discourse and behavior? Quite the opposite is the deep source of originality found in the radical living of the Good News.

I am afraid that certain monastic doctrines, at least in their theoretical presentation, have a certain fundamentalistic flavor to them. Concretely, and with fear and trembling, I am thinking of possible simplifications having to do with chastity, poverty, and obedience. For instance, "Particular friendships are dangerous," or "What matters is spiritual poverty, material poverty will come as a mere extra," or "To obey man is to obey God."

Let us say, then, that the radical message of the Gospel is not the equivalent of an **ideology**. Nevertheless, it is easy to slip from one to the other. A specific spirituality may even turn into an ideology! Monastic spirituality is not immune to this possibility, nor is radical Gospel life.

An ideology is an overall conception of life from the point of view of a specific group. It is absolute and obligatory in character. Its main attraction lies in the certainty and motivation it offers to those who adopt it. Following an ideology, however, is not without consequences, for ideologies end up turning persons and institutions into instruments to serve their own ends.

To keep our radical living of the Gospel from turning into an ideology, we must avoid replacing reality with ideas. Above all, we must never freeze persons into prefabricated schemes.

The ideological monk justifies everything – or condemns everything – by means of his own ideological conception, for instance, from his own total and imposing vision of the Cistercian charism and of the rule of Saint Benedict. Radical monks and nuns, on the other hand, discern

everything on the basis of the Gospel lived out in a monastic way, retaining whatever is good. The difference could hardly be greater.

3. Neither Hot nor Cold

Rigorism, fundamentalism and ideology are subtle, camouflaged enemies of the radical nature of the Gospel. There exists, however, another enemy that wears no disguise and which uses no strategy in its attacks: mediocrity!

Thanks be to God, unalloyed mediocrity is rather rare in our communities. So far, I have met few monks or nuns who live in foolish smugness or in complete conformity to what is finite and non-transcendental. A mediocre person is someone who has forsaken any kind of rootedness in his or her own inner life. Unfortunately, the seed of the Word cannot take root in such people because they lack depth of soil and have many stones. They are therefore inconstant and easily give in to the slightest temptation. Some may have fallen into such a state of spiritual resignation in reaction to an illusory ideal of perfection in their younger years.

Obviously, I am not referring to normal crises of fervor or to long periods of aridity, nor to the well-known emptiness of "acedia," which generally shows up as the "noonday devil," be it at midday or at mid-life.

Nevertheless, the "crisis of realism" that comes on between the ages of 35 and 45 is likely to be fertile ground for mediocrity. We have all had the experience that the community, the Order, the Church and the world in which we live our monastic life do not correspond to our ideals and desires, plans and projects. Thus begins the crisis of realism, which can last for several years in varying degrees of intensity. The primary question that stalks and corners us at this moment in life is: what is the meaning of my monastic life, of my consecration to God, of my belonging to this community? We are no longer asking ourselves what we will do in life, rather: why am I doing what I do, and for what reason am I going through this?

The Lord Jesus speaks of mediocrity when he says: *I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth* (Rev 3: 16). One comes to such a state by way of small infidelities blindly multiplied, by not using the *tools of the spiritual art* in a persevering way, by being remiss in practicing the *good zeal* and *fervent love* proper to Benedictine monks and nuns, by allowing *self-will* to become fattened on caprices, by abandoning prayer as a gift of self to the Lord. Enthusiasm, passion and daring can be misleading and dangerous, but worse yet is apathy, disenchantment, routine. A monk or nun without passion for the Lord and his Kingdom is a miserable failure.

Mediocrity can also be contagious and spread through a whole community, or, worse still, through a region or through the Order as a whole. It is easy to seek refuge in a risk-free life of economic security. It is much safer to stop dreaming and to abandon any kind of utopia for the sake of being prudent, practical, real and utilitarian. Monastic stability itself can turn into a trap that stifles hope and focuses only on the self-interests of a group. The worst thing that could happen to us as a monastic institution would be to stop believing in the monastic charism's humanizing and divinizing potential.

If we are *the salt of the earth, and if the salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?* Then we are *no longer good for anything, but to be thrown out and trampled under foot.* (Cf. Mt 5: 13).

4. Words that Go to the Roots

It is not my intention to list here all the radical sayings of Jesus in the program of life he outlines in the Gospel. Nevertheless, a simple reading of Jesus' message shows us that his teaching often goes against the grain or against the current of what happens in the world when life becomes worldly. Here are some texts grouped together under six headings.

-An invitation to **follow**: *Follow me, and let the dead bury their dead. He who wishes to come after me, must renounce himself, take up his cross and follow me. He who loves father and mother more than me is not worthy of me. He who finds his life will lose it; he who loses his life for my sake, will find it. Go, sell what you have and give to the poor; thus you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me. No one putting his hand to the plow and looking back is fit for the Kingdom of God.*

-An invitation to **self-denial**: *Whoever of you does not renounce all that he poses, cannot be my disciple. Try to enter by the narrow gate. Some there are who have freely renounced marriage for the sake of the Kingdom. Let him who can, understand!*

-An invitation to **littleness**: *He who does not accept the Kingdom of God as a little child cannot enter it. He who aspires to greatness must serve the rest.*

-An invitation to **love**: *Treat others as you would have them treat you. If you bring your gift to the altar and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift at the altar, go first to be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift. I do not tell you to forgive seven times, but seventy times seven times. Offer no resistance to injury. When a person strikes you on the right cheek, turn and offer him the other. Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you. Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgement you judge with, you will be judged, and the measure you measure with, will be the measure used to measure you. First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see to take the speck out of your brother's eye.*

-An invitation to **coherence**: *Whoever looks at a woman with an evil eye has already committed adultery with her in his heart. Therefore, if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into Gehenna. He who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.*

-An invitation to **gratuitousness**: *Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. Beware of practicing your justice (almsgiving, prayers, fasting) before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be given you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today. When you have done all that you were ordered to do, say 'We are useless servants; we have done only what we ought to have done. Give and it shall be given to you. Freely have you received, freely give.*

While meditating and praying on these texts in the past and once again today, I have often asked myself: What do I feel when faced with these texts? Which of them challenge me most deeply at this point in my life? What steps am I going to take to begin a process of conversion?

No doubt you will have noticed that I have not yet spoken of the "magna carta" of the Christian Gospel, the **beatitudes**. They deserve a whole other letter! In the version offered us by Saint Matthew the Evangelist, they have to do with the essential dispositions required of the disciple in order to enter the Kingdom. In this case, we can speak of "radical living" understood in the same terms we have been using.

Some of the beatitudes have to do with our relationship with God, others, with our interpersonal relations, and finally, others, with our relations both with God and among ourselves. All eight of them are telling us: blessed are radical monks and nuns!

-dispositions in relation to God

-**Those who weep**: those who are afflicted by the current situation of today's world, dominated as it is by evil, suffering and death. They suffer because the "hour" of the Lord is slow in coming, they await the consolation that will come fully when the Kingdom is established.

-**Those who hunger and thirst**: those who seek and long for justice of life, that is, the complete fulfillment of God's will. They want to be total disciples.

-**The pure of heart**: those who conform to God's will in all submission and uprightness. Their desires have already been fulfilled because they have found what they were looking for.

-dispositions toward the neighbor:

-**The meek**: their meekness is a form of patient, attentive love for others, like Jesus himself, meek and lowly of heart.

-**The merciful**: those who are able to forgive, who refrain from judging and condemning, who help others.

-**The peacemakers**: they forgive, they do not condemn, and are therefore bearers of peace and reconciliation among those divided by discord.

-dispositions toward God and neighbor:

-**The poor in spirit**: lowly persons who humble themselves and interiorly become like children, depending on everyone and serving everyone.

-**Those who are persecuted for justice' sake**: those who are persecuted for living out the new justice and the radical nature of the Kingdom proclaimed by Jesus.

The Evangelist Matthew presents us with the ideal disciple, and I do not hesitate to say, with the ideal monk and nun. These genuine monks and nuns hungrily seek for the justice of the kingdom, are whole and pure of heart, suffer from seeing that this world is far from such justice, and yet know that God will change this situation. Nevertheless, they remain humble before God and others, full of patience, giving themselves over to service of others without judging them, but rather forgiving

them, helping them and mediating their conflicts. If they are persecuted for this, they are to consider themselves fortunate and happy for being heirs of eternal blessedness.

The *poor in spirit* (first beatitude) and those *persecuted for justice' sake* (last beatitude) possess the *Kingdom of Heaven* as their own. This is the fundamental statement that provides the framework for all the other beatitudes. The promises that correspond to each of them appear to be embodiments of the effects stemming from possession of the Kingdom.

The beatitudes are a portrait of the idea disciple since they are a portrait of the Teacher himself, in whose footsteps we are to follow and whose sentiments we must make our own (Cf. Pt 2:21, Phil 2:5). However, we know very well that this is impossible for us. Yet for God nothing is impossible.

Perhaps we have not yet understood that the beatitudes are Good News or Gospel because they tell us what God wants to do for us in order that we may be happy. We tend to think of them as a code of rules laying down what we must do in order to merit God's beatitude or happiness.

In many of the writings of our Cistercian Fathers, the beatitudes are presented as a spiritual journey. For Bernard of Clairvaux, the blessedness of mercy is central in this itinerary. Jesus is the model par excellence of both human and divine mercy. He learned in time and through experience what he knew from all eternity. The Mother of Jesus is not only a model of mercy but also a merciful mediatrix between us and the Mediator. This is why we invoke her as "Mother of Mercy"! Mercy brings together in itself all expressions of love of neighbor, for it unites feeling and action, affect and effect. Mercy expands the heart and makes it fragrant, filling it with soothing ointment and purifying it in order that it may see God with eyes of love. Radically merciful monks and nuns are those who bear the most authentic fruits of peace and unity in the heart of their communities.

5. A Disciple Rooted in Love

Once again, I wish to illustrate doctrine with a living model, presenting someone who took Christ as a model and followed his footsteps to the very end of the journey, to the foot of the Cross. I am speaking of Mary of Nazareth, Joseph's wife, the mother of Jesus himself. No one in the history of Christianity has been more *grounded in love and rooted in Christ* as she was. In her life we find the perfect fulfillment of the abbot of Clairvaux' words: *The most eloquent and effective sermon is example itself, for those who practice what they teach convince us that what they are advising is possible* (Ben 7).

Let us contemplate Mary at a crucial moment of her existence, on **Calvary**. The Beloved Disciple tells us: *Standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.* (Jn 19:25-27).

The mother of the Crucified One was standing near Him, taking part and sharing in his cross. Her Son's words are fulfilled in her, an authentic disciple and servant: *Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also* (Jn 12:2). Mary was present at the hour when Jesus *gathers into one the dispersed children of God* (Jn 19:52). She was present as a woman in labor *because her hour has come*, yet who will be filled with joy when she has brought a child into the world (Jn 16:21). Looking upon *those who pierced him*, and she herself *pierced* by a sword (Lk 2:35), Mary bore witness by her presence: her Son is the true paschal lamb that takes away the sins of the world (Jn 19:33-37. Cf also 1:39).

Jesus then says to the disciple whom he loves: *Here is (ide) your Mother*. The Evangelist uses the expression "here is" to introduce a revelation, to bring something hidden to light (Jn 1:29, 35-36, 47). This is why we believe that Mary was already a mother to the disciple from the time of Cana, for from that moment on she had begotten him in faith by means of her own faith (Jn 2:1-12). Only a beloved disciple can be mother to another beloved disciple! Only a believer can beget another believer! At Calvary, what is hidden becomes manifest.

The disciple's response is immediate. From that hour, he **took her** as his own. These words are pregnant with meaning. The Evangelist uses this verb *to take* exclusively in relation to Jesus and in intimate connection with faith in Him (Jn 1:11-12; 5:43-44; 13:19-20). In this context, he is indicating an openness in faith with regard to Mary.

Many translations have: he *took her into his own home*, but this is a poor rendition. Literally, the text says he took her **as part of his belongings** (*eis tá ídia*). With an attentive reading of the entire Gospel, we can see that the belongings of the beloved disciple (representing all those who keep Jesus' commands) are the bread of his Body (Jn 6:51), the love of Jesus (Jn 13:1), the peace of Jesus (Jn 14:27), Jesus' word (Jn 17:8) and the Spirit of Jesus (Jn 20:22). And now we must add, the Mother of Jesus! Mary is also Jesus' gift and part of our Christian inheritance. No one can be Jesus' beloved disciple without receiving his Mother. And Mary let herself be received because she had already received and let herself be given over. Freely had she received, freely did she give herself.

On the day of Calvary, Mary did not waver in her faith, though it was the hour of temptation (Lk 22:46), when faith was sifted in the sieve of trial (Lk 4:13, 22:31, 46), when her son had been turned into something *despised and rejected by men* (Is 53:3).

At the foot of the cross, Mary bears in her heart the contradiction of all contradictions, the darkest of darkness, the iniquity of iniquities, for God had been condemned and killed for being Love, for being Innocent. For Mary, sin and salvation become one on Calvary, God sinking into death.

In the darkness of faith, Mary would have recalled the mother of the Maccabees who looked on as her sons were being killed, upheld by her hope in the Lord (2Mac 7:20). She would have recalled Abraham, the father of his people's faith, who believed that God was powerful enough even to raise the dead (Rom 4:17, Heb 11:19). Becoming a grain of wheat along with Jesus, they died together in the darkness of the earth in order to produce abundant fruit of eternal life. With total confidence, she once again sang the prophet's canticle of praise: *He has raised up the lowly!* However, she still had to wait, firm in her faith, for the "third day" to come. And that day did arrive, for God is totally faithful to his promises.

Brothers and Sisters, the radical passages of the Gospel are as a thorn that pricks every Christian man or woman that wants to be truly Christian. The Church's credibility in today's world depends on its radical living out of Jesus' teaching. Our monastic life appears meaningless if it is not a lived expression of the radical nature of the Gospel.

One of our Fathers, abbot of the monastery of Igny, invites us to radical Gospel life with these paradoxical words:

'Hear me, you divine offspring, and bud forth as the rose planted by brooks of water.' Sink your roots into the waters of life, that is to say, into the love of the land of the living, not into the love of this earth in which all things grow old and decay. The tree cannot bring forth fruit that will abide unless it fastens its roots above in the heavenly places, so that it seeks and tastes the things that are

above, not the things that are of earth.... The roots of love and desire must be fixed in heaven, in the highest of all things, our Head Jesus Christ. Whosoever sends his roots there and from that eternal source drinks in continually the sap of life and grace will not fear when the heat of the judgment comes; instead he will bring as offering the many fruits he has produced and will receive the reward of flowering forever before the Lord. To him is honor and glory for endless ages. Amen (Sermon 23 = Ben 2:7).

With a fraternal embrace, in Mary of Saint Joseph,

Bernardo Olivera