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ORDO
CISTERCIENSIS S.O.

ABBAS GENERALIS

Prot. N° 01/AG/05

THE PRAYER JESUS TAUGHT US

Circular letter to the members of the Order

January 26, 2005

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In my many visits to our communities I have often talked about the experience of prayer, understood as communication with God. I have not yet written a letter on this subject, although it is closely connected to what I wrote on *lectio divina*. Many young monks and nuns have asked me to write on prayer, so the time has arrived.

Perhaps you remember that I mentioned in last year's circular letter that the quality of community life depends on the quality of communication. Both communication with God and communication among ourselves consist in the double reality of listening in silence on the one hand, and of speaking with respect, on the other.

So our communion with God is based on our communication with him. *Lectio divina*, *Opus Dei* and *intentio cordis* are frequent forms in which we embody our listening in silence and our speaking with respect. That is how we usually live our contemplative love for God, source of the cenobitic love we share among ourselves.

My two predecessors treated the theme of prayer from different perspectives, which has given us solid doctrine and healthy practical principles. On the basis of what they said, and to avoid repeating it, the present letter is focused on a single theme: **the prayer Jesus taught us**.

1. Motivations

Three motives inspire me in making this decision. First of all, the plurality of cultures in the world of today and the de-Christianizing of western society invite us to "Christianize" our monastic life. In the second place, prayer and life are – and must be – inseparable, although we who are professionals in prayer usually divorce it from life, either because of self-centered piety or from a life of meaningless activity. My third motive will be clear to you if you finish reading this letter. It is my vision of the Our Father as utopian prayer.

It is very true that Christian life is not the same as monastic life. There are non-Christian monks and there are non-monastic Christians. Monastic life exists in all the major religious traditions and it is a way of life that came before Christianity as an historical fact. In our particular case, since we live in a Christian context, we are identified as monks, but in the global monastic context we are identified as Christians. Nevertheless, no matter where we are we usually say that we are Christian monks and nuns. It would be better to say, "We are Christians who live as monks or nuns." Christian life belongs to the substance of our lives. Monastic life is something that makes it specific.

Jesus taught his disciples to pray. His teaching on prayer was entirely coherent with his life, his words and his mission. He did not teach prayers, but taught how to live by praying and how to pray by living. When Jesus taught us to pray, he was giving us his own prayer life! Basically, Jesus left us his Eucharistic Prayer as a memorial of his life through death to resurrection. He taught us how to pray saying, “Our Father,” in order to hasten the coming of the kingdom of God the Father. In fact Jesus’ whole life was a continual, vigilant passion for establishing the divine kingdom. We pray as we live and we live as we pray.

2. Versions and their Structure

The text of the Our Father appears twice in the New Testament, in two different variations. If we put Matthew’s version (6:9-13) and that of Luke (11:2-4) in two parallel columns, we can easily see the similarities and the differences. Some present-day exegetes tell us that Luke’s version seems to be older, judging from its brevity, but Matthew’s could be closer to the original words in the part that is common to both versions. To find the Lord’s Prayer in its original form, then, would mean maintaining only those petitions contained in Luke, but expressing them according to the formulation of Matthew. However, there are other exegetes who have a different opinion. They think that Luke’s version is closer to the words spoken by Jesus. It is a disputed question which others can dispute.

A careful reading of the Our Father reveals its two-fold structure. The best-known elements are its two parts: a solemn invocation followed by three petitions (two in Luke) related to God, then a transitional phrase followed by four petitions (three in Luke) related to human beings. Thus we have the “Thy-petitions” and the “us- petitions.”

But perhaps the concentric structure of Matthew’s version is more interesting. Without going into all the literary and doctrinal reasons which underlie this structure, let us see how a literal translation of the text appears visually when we take into account its concentric thought pattern.

<i>Our Father who art in heaven</i>
<i>Hallowed be thy name</i>
<i>Thy kingdom come</i>
<i>Thy will be done just as in heaven so also on earth</i>
<i>Give us today the bread we need</i>
<i>And forgive us our debts just as we also forgive our debtors</i>
<i>And lead us not into temptation</i>
<i>But deliver us from evil</i>

You can easily see that, since there are seven petitions, the fourth one is in the center: “Give us today the bread we need.” It is worth at least noting the peculiar nature of this central petition as being the only one which refers to something material, *bread*.

Each petition evokes a divine name. For example: Holy One, King, Lord, Master, Merciful One, Savior. But what name of God does the request for bread bring to mind? If we take into account that in a Jewish family it is the father who earns the bread and distributes it to his sons and daughters, we can say that this petition takes us directly to the name of the Person to whom the prayer is addressed: the Father!

3. The Prayer of Jesus and of His Disciple

The Our Father is the prayer Jesus teaches in reply to a request from one of his disciples: “*Lord, teach us to pray*” (Lk 11:1). We can even say that it is the prayer which identifies the disciples of Jesus, as distinct from the prayer typical of the disciples of John the Baptist: “*When you pray, say*” (Lk 11:2).

If this prayer identifies the disciples of Jesus, it must also be said that it is the gospel prayer *par excellence*. The central message and grace of the Good News of Jesus is summed up in the Our Father. Thanks are given to the Father as we wait for the coming of his kingdom; then comes the request for what is needed to live and grow together in the kingdom; then the grace of mutual forgiveness as the source of freedom and liberation; and finally hope, since our faith rests on the certitude of God’s final victory and the fulfillment of his universal plan of salvation.

In fact we can say that the Our Father is like a summary of the entire Gospel. In it the outstanding features of the Master’s life become clear: his unlimited trust and intimacy with God, whom he calls, “*Abba*”; the unbreakable union which he establishes between his concern for the primacy of God and his concern for the primacy of human beings; the proclamation of God’s reign as the center of his message; his unquestioning submission to the divine will even to its extreme consequences; his unconditional forgiveness even of his worst enemies; his concern for human wholeness with necessary importance given to the material aspect of our lives; the eschatological urgency which so marked his Person and his mission; his battle against evil and the overcoming of temptation thanks to the assistance of the Holy Spirit.

It is interesting to see how the tradition linked with the disciple John Boanerges relates the Our Father to the “priestly” prayer of Jesus on the night of his Last Supper. The prayer of the disciples cannot be different from the prayer of Jesus himself and the prayer of Jesus, when “his Hour” arrived, is the same prayer that synthesized his life and mission. Perhaps we are in the presence here of the first “theological commentary” on the Lord’s Prayer. The following texts are useful for meditation and illustrate this point:

- Our Father: Jn 17:1,5,11,21,24,25
- Hallowing of his Name: Jn 17:6,11,12,17,19,26
- Coming of his Kingdom: Jn 17:1,5,10,24
- On Earth as in Heaven: Jn 17:4,5,22
- Lead us not into temptation: Jn 17:12
- Deliver us from evil: Jn 17:12,15
- Fulfilling the divine Will: Jn 17:2,4,6,9,11,12,24
- Forgiveness and Love: Jn 17:23,26
- Unity among children of the same God: Jn 17:21,23

We can go even further. The prayer Jesus taught us reaches its summit in the “Memorial” which he left us. The Our Father expresses all its meaning in the context of the Eucharist as sacrifice of thanksgiving.

- The *Name* of the Father is *hallowed*, that is, proclaimed as holy, his kingdom irrevocably established, on the cross and in the crucified Messiah.
- His *will* is done completely in the words, *it is finished*.
- The plea to *forgive us our debts just as we forgive...* is fully confirmed in the words of the crucified Christ, “*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.*”
- The petition for *daily bread* is especially eloquent in Eucharistic Communion, when we receive the Body of Christ under the appearance of “broken bread.”
- And the plea *not to lead us into temptation but deliver us from evil* obtains its maximum efficacy at the moment when the Church offers to the Father the supreme Gift that *delivers us from evil*.

4. A short commentary

The Lord’s Prayer begins with a solemn invocation, ***Our Father***. Jesus sidesteps other divine names and titles typical of the religious culture of his people. When our Master teaches us to pray, he puts us all without exception on the same level before God. We should also note that we are dealing with the very same Father that Jesus has. It is his Father, mine, yours and everyone’s. It is his Father consubstantially and ours by adoption in him.

Our God is not someone distant or unknown. He is Someone whom we treat intimately, meet with joy and know affectionately. Those who know him this way realize that God is also our Mother, because of the motherly action of the divine Spirit. He always goes ahead of us and takes the initiative. Our loving faith lets us see him at work in everything and know by experience that our lives are sustained and sparked by an almighty Father and an all-merciful Mother. That is how we know that our petitions will be heard and answered.

This invocation, which surpasses all human capacity, is only possible thanks to the assistance of the Holy Spirit and to our incorporation into Christ. It is the most holy and intimate element of the Gospel, which tenderly weaves together the experiences of fatherhood, divine filiation and universal brother- or sisterhood. Being a child of God divinizes us. Being brothers and sisters of each other makes us human. Both experiences teach us to live like divinely human beings.

Some contemporary cultures suffer from the lack of a father figure. Others know a twisted replacement of the father in the form of arrogant “machismos.” Without pretending to any form of inconsistent sublimation, unreal miracle or empty compensations, experience teaches that the grace of praying the Our Father often brings with it three precious gifts. These are the capacity for creative action, openness to running risks and a vision of reality which is open to the future. Paradoxically, when men let these typically masculine gifts take flesh in their own lives, women can be authentically feminine. Moreover, the experience of divine filiation is the most radical of all therapies. It allows one to taste the meaning of life in its dimensions of trust, affirmation, overcoming of difficulties and self-transcendence.

Let us see now the three “thy-petitions”. We should bear in mind that, in the original Greek, the verbs of each petition are in the passive voice. This has a special meaning. It signifies that the subject of the action is, above all, God himself. Without denying the action of those who are praying, the Father takes the initiative. It is he who hallows his own name, who makes it possible that his kingdom come and his will be done.

The first petition is: ***Hallowed be thy name***. God’s holiness consists of his glorious identity as Communion and as Father. We ask him to reveal that identity to us, that is, to gather into one

the dispersed children of God. We also know that we hallow the name of God when we praise and adore him as our one Father. We hallow it even more concretely when we collaborate with his sanctifying work in our hearts.

The three principal mysteries of Christian revelation and faith are the Most Holy Trinity, the Redemptive Incarnation and our divine sanctification. It is often easier for us to believe in what does not touch us directly, since the awareness of our own misery keeps us from believing in the divinizing work of God in our hearts. But the recognition and acceptance of our misery is precisely the condition needed for our divine transformation. Faith in this reality is a source of deep peace and happiness.

The second petition, *Thy kingdom come!*, is like a loud cry of hope. It is a shout of faith in the present, open to the abyss of the future: “*Reveal yourself! Show yourself as Conqueror and save us forever!*” The desired, longed-for kingdom is God himself as Ruler. It is the presence of a Sovereign who offers infinite mercy and urgently invites us all to conversion. We know that, if God does not establish his kingdom, if he himself does not reign, our lives and our mission in this world are useless.

The kingdom of God was why Jesus lived and died. His project was the inauguration of a new world in which all of us can be brothers and sisters, sons and daughters of the same divine Father. Our cenobitic monastic life is in direct continuity with this project. The experience of a cenobitic community’s communion in love is a guarantee of the future kingdom. Without filiation, sisterhood and brotherhood, we are nothing.

Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven, is what we say in the third petition related to God. In other words, “May your kingdom come once and for all! May all people accept your plan of salvation! May we fulfill, with a free and filial heart, your will as shown in the commandment to love without excluding anyone!”

The will of God consists in our salvation and happiness in Christ. The only thing required of us is to consent to him who said in agony, “*Not my will, but yours be done*” (Lk 22:42). Union with Jesus Christ is communion of love, that is, an agreement of wills with the same likes and dislikes. Consenting to Jesus in love is a kiss uniting two breaths, two spirits. The person thus “*joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him*” (1 Cor 6:17). This perfect harmony of wills, this welding together in a single spirit, is a true, indissoluble, eternal, spiritual marriage.

Christian authority is a mediation of this will of God and monastic obedience, too, is meant to express it. Unfortunately it is not always the case. There are some authorities who are not always at the service of life. Some have multiplied their commands for the most trivial reasons. On the other hand, there are some monks and nuns who shut themselves up in their own life. They can confuse obedience with asking for permissions. When this happens, we are far indeed from Christ the Spouse and his nuptial love!

In heaven, which is the home of those who already share divine life, God’s name is hallowed, his kingdom has fully come, his will is done. We wish and ask that this happen in the same way on the earth in which we live, which still groans with the labor pains of hope in the glorious manifestation of the children of God.

In these first three petitions we have concentrated on God’s interests. In the remaining four requests, we ask God to pay attention to our needs. That is why we can speak of the “us-petitions.” In them, the Father remains the principal actor and we act with him. Without human

collaboration the divine project is frustrated. The answer to the request begins today, but will be fully achieved only in the future. Thus the petitions integrate the present and the future. Let us, too, avoid both extremes: worship of the present and passive eschatology!

We thus arrive at the central petition, the fourth one: *Give us today the bread we need*. This is the only request for something material in our own behalf. The question arises, “What does *bread* mean here in the Our Father?”

Bread is something both material and symbolic. While being what it is, it points to something greater than itself. Bread, like basic foods in other cultures, is a combination of what comes from nature – grain and water – and what comes from human culture: baking, eating, family, table companions. This bread that we ask God for has the special quality of being *our* bread, that is, the bread which God the Father give us and which we make.

Let us go back to the beginning. God blessed our first parents with a blessing of fruitfulness and gave them almost every form of food, but after the original sin the soil becomes cursed and needs to be worked with sweat and labor as a necessary condition for humans to obtain their bread and their nourishment (Gn 1:28-30; 3:17-19).

It is obvious that our bodies are nourished by material bread. What is not so obvious is that our spirit also needs nourishment. We remember the words of Jesus to the tempter who suggested that he change stones into loaves of bread: “*One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God*” (Mt 4:4). The primary spiritual nourishment offered to us by God the Father is his Word, but it is not the only one. The bread which Jesus wants us to ask for is his *body given* (Lk 22:19)... *for the forgiveness of sins* (Mt 26:28). His disciple John, who rested his head on the chest of Jesus during his farewell supper, clearly understood that the bread which comes down from heaven and gives us eternal life is Jesus himself (see Jn 6:33-35).

Material bread is a gift from God and a fruit of human hands. We receive it as children and give it as a mother or father does. Our spirit also needs bread, that of the Word of God and the Body of Christ given for our salvation. On two separate occasions, Jesus multiplied bread in order to feed the crowds and, when he gave himself, he handed himself over until all was finished. Those who follow such a Master are invited to do the same, that is, to be sure that no one lacks bread – with a small “b” – and Bread with a capital “B”. Our monastic communities live in a communion of love, thanks to the Bread of Life. Because of this very Bread, they are invited to a generous solidarity, so that no one lacks bread. When this generosity takes place, many persons will be *blessed for having eaten bread in the kingdom of God* (Lk 14:15; cf. 13:29).

The fifth petition is: *Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us*. God in Christ loved us first and showed his love by forgiving us. From his agonizing destitution on the cross, Jesus asks the Father to forgive us because we are so ignorant. A miserable, tortured, dying thief is the first person to be saved by this forgiveness.

To be able to ask forgiveness without being hypocritical, we also must forgive those who offend against us. That is how the chain of hate and violence will be broken. Our forgiveness is a witness to our faith and love, thanks to which we will be able to stand with confidence before the Father on the last day.

Saint Benedict knew from experience that only forgiveness can restore peace among the brothers after their communion has been broken by hate or by passion. That is why he wants this prayer – especially its plea to forgive us our sins and trespasses – always to be recited by the superior at the end of Lauds and Vespers (RB 13,12-14).

In the sixth petition we plead with the Father: *Lead us not into temptation*. Unless this happens, or if we do not feel the Father's help – even though his aid is never lacking, – we would fail in the test and be easily tempted. The temptations which come most directly from hell are to faithlessness, lukewarmness and despair. Any type of arrogance or wealth in opposition to God's kingdom should also be included. For us monks and nuns, there are the special temptations of murmuring, keeping private property and hurting communal fellowship. Above all and for all of us, there is the temptation to fall away, to apostatize in the final days.

In the seventh and last petition we pray: *But deliver us from evil*. We do not ask that the Father take us out of the world, but that he make us strangers to worldly behavior and, above all, that he deliver us from the Evil One now, tomorrow and always.

If we want to paraphrase and synthesize the Lord's Prayer, we can say it like this: *Abba, your kingdom come! Gather us together in it, because you are our Abba. We want you and proclaim you as our King! Under your rule there will be bread, total forgiveness and complete liberation for all.*

5. Utopian Prayer

The radical spirit of the Gospel is utopian and the Our Father expresses it perfectly. For two thousand years now, we Christians have recited this prayer, and look: the Father's will is thwarted; his kingdom does not come and the kingdom of evil seems to prevail everywhere! What is more utopian than to work for putting enough bread on everyone's plate, when the truth is that we live in a world where a third of the population dies of hunger and another third does not have the food it needs? What is more utopian than to stake one's future on forgiveness and to forgive in order to make God's kingdom come, when we live in a world whose justice does not include forgiveness and often serves as an excuse for violence?

We should realize that utopia is not the same as what is non-existent or unachievable. The inner meaning of utopia is its critical stance toward what exists and its proclamation of a project that could exist for the enjoyment of all. A genuine utopia calls forth our creative imagination in order to perceive something that exists today but which remains unnoticed even though present, so as to guide us toward a better future. A true utopia also nourishes hope, by the confidence it bestows on the creative forces of the human spirit and heart.

If all of us humans believed in God and behaved as his sons and daughters, universal brotherhood and sisterhood would be a reality. No one would lack bread for the body and all of us would rejoice to share the same spiritual Bread. If we Christians prayed and lived as the Lord taught us, we would be more united. There would be more communion among the Churches, religion would never be the opium of the people, the whole world would be a *coenobium* and we would be, even now, the seeds of this new world. Whoever can dream, let him dream.

I confess, dear brothers and sisters, that I continue to dream about a new evangelization of our monastic life. I have often asked myself, "Are our *conversatio* and our witness "good news": for us, for the Church and for the world? I am certain that we are not lacking in fidelity to the charism of our Fathers of Cîteaux, although perhaps we have an overabundance of Cistercian traditions. What we really need is a bit more evangelical creativity. First comes the kingdom of God and his righteousness, the rest will be given to us as well! But it is often we ourselves who blithely add on things to God's kingdom!

In my last circular letter I presented four different ways to live some aspects of our community life, with the possibility of a few other complementary ways. Here I am interested in the utopian and evangelical way. I will simply recall it and add a few words about it. My intention is to stimulate your intuition and your reflections.

-Poverty. If our poverty does not make us happy, it is not evangelical, because it does not help us enter the kingdom of God. Evangelical poverty is not a question of multiplying miseries, but of increasing mercy, so that our solidarity be real and efficacious. The goods we share in community are not our own, but are common to all. When these common goods are shared with persons outside of the community, they become instruments of communion. This is what solidarity means. Communion of goods and solidarity with everyone is the new name of consecrated poverty in an unjust world in which exclusion prevails over communion.

-Chastity. Jesus invites us to love, not just to be chaste without brother- or sisterhood, or without friendship, that is, with no brothers, sisters or friends. Even less does chastity mean burying love for the sake of one's virginity. Chastity is love ordered to the service of personal integration and interpersonal harmony in the community. Love thus understood is mystical, because it lets the person enter the heart of the Mystery of God, who is love.

-Obedience. Obedience listens with assent to the merciful will of God. The obedient monk or nun wants to enter into communion with this divine will through a human mediator who is both responsible and purified. However, it is not easy to discern this will or be its mediator. If our exercise of authority is not at the service of life, it becomes that of a repressive dictatorship, full of polite manipulation protected by an institution invoking what is sacred in order to strengthen its control. The true milieu for this act of listening with free assent is our shared divine filiation, with its resulting brotherhood and sisterhood.

-Community. Just as Christ is the sacrament of the Father, so Christian community is the sacrament of Christ. The community is not a thing, but a Person. It does not matter how many we are. The decisive factor is how we live. To live in community means opening yourself to those who are different from you and enriching your own experience with those differences so as to create communion. Community has many eyes looking in the same direction with different, but converging viewpoints. It is a plurality of persons separated from the world in order to live in the deepest heart of the world and serve it.

-Liturgy. What is celebrated in the Liturgy is the paschal Christ living among us and in us. Liturgy is action and sign, the feast of communal salvation. It is the Good News breaking old wineskins when the true grace of the Spirit inspires it. It is a place of prayer and contemplation reaching its height in the ecstasy of the Eucharist as we reach out to our common Father. Better a sigh of love than a hundred routine psalms, even though they be the words of God.

-Virtues. There are masculine virtues and feminine ones, those of the young and others of the elders, virtues of the uncouth and others more sophisticated. Jesus held them all together in his heart and in his acts. They all come alive through love, but it is not enough simply to love. Good zeal means loving with passion, with most ardent love. Jesus was moved by this passion and suffered the Passion so that we could live and die of love.

The work of God the Father and our cooperation with it take place in the "now" of the present, as well as in the "not yet" of openness to the future. The Father is already at work, which explains the urgent importance of the present moment. However, his action has not yet displayed

all its power, since this will only be shown when the Risen One breaks into human history and establishes his full kingdom once and for all. The utopia of Christian and monastic life is situated between these two moments. It opens out toward the future promise from the realism of the here and now.

I conclude by recalling for you the words of Pope John Paul, when he described the Church's program for the new millennium: *our Christian communities must become genuine "schools" of prayer, where the meeting with Christ is expressed not just in imploring help but also in thanksgiving, praise, adoration, contemplation, listening and ardent devotion, until the heart truly "falls in love.".... Christians who have received the gift of a vocation to the specially consecrated life are of course called to prayer in a particular way: of its nature, their consecration makes them more open to the experience of contemplation, and it is important that they should cultivate it with special care.* (Novo Millennio Ineunte 33-34).

The Our Father, when it is prayed in spirit and in truth, is a seal of the person's Christian identity. It is the meeting place of prayer and action, the source of evangelization, the antechamber of what we hope for, the threshold leading into mysticism. This prayer of the Lord lets us taste the joy of witnessing to the Good News of the Kingdom and escorts us into the mysteries of the King.

With deepest fraternal affection in Mary of St. Joseph,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bernardo Olivera". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Bernardo Olivera
Abbot General OCSO