

ABBAS GENERALIS

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My dear Brothers and Sisters,

A year has ended and a new year has begun. It is another opportunity given to us by the mercy of God in order for us to continue the conformation of ourselves to his Son Jesus Christ. There is something in particular this year for each of us: we will celebrate another Mixed General Meeting and the two interdependent General Chapters. It will be an occasion, this time, for evaluating and enriching our community experience of the *Schola caritatis*. Thus, the central theme of the next Meeting is: The Community, School of Charity.

In my last letter I said that the Eucharist is the font and summit of the School of christian and monastic Love. It is not possible for us to love as Christ loved us if we do not nourish ourselves at this divine font. This present letter is to be understood in the light of the preceding one: there is no Eucharist without love and there is no love without the Eucharist.

The *Schola caritatis* is built upon the precept of the love of God and neighbor and it is wholly orientated towards this end. The goal of the "school of divine service", which is the Rule of Benedict, is the "preservation of charity" (*RB* Prol.47); or as the Abbot of Clairvaux would put it: "to increase and preserve charity" (*Prae* 5). For our Cistercian Fathers, the school of the Rule is a school of Christ, and in it one learns the love of neighbor, effect and proof of the love of God (Cf. Bernardo, *Div* 121; William of St.Thierry, *Nature of Love* 24-26). That is why our Constitutions present the cenobitic life as a school of fraternal charity (*Cst.*3,1).

Our whole monastic formation can be summed up in learning how to love: to stir up one's capacity for being by the gift of oneself and receiving from others, by being both the subject and the object of love. All teaching methods presuppose a doctrine and a practice. Saint Benedict, a practical man, does not linger over theories, he teaches us that one learns to love by loving. Chapter 72 of his Rule can be understood in this light: maxims on love to be put into practice.

The fourth precept of good zeal stands out among the rest for two reasons: its structure is different and it seems to occupy a central place. It says: "No one is to seek what is useful for himself, but rather what is useful for the others" (72:7). We have here a characteristic expression of cenobitic love. That will be the subject of this letter. But first, I must state a presupposition.

1. Cenobitic personalism

Each of us has his own theory about the human being. It matters little if we call it anthropology, a theory of personality, or principles of human and personal development. Knowingly or unknowingly we have all formed a set of ideas concerning our own human reality. Numerous and varied factors have contributed to this end: our reading, experiences, relationships, significant persons, personal interests, successes and failures, the flow of life.

It matters little if our "anthropology" is implicit or articulated, whatever it be its influence is everywhere in our lives. What is more, I almost dare to say that "anthropologies" float about in the very air we breath. Can we doubt then the influence of depth psychology, and behavioral, humanistic and existential psychologies, in North Atlantic countries and beyond?

Cistercian spirituality, from its very beginnings, had a solid doctrine on the human person as foundation and support for the search for God and union with Him in love. Numerous treatises "de anima" attest to this truth.

At various times and in other contexts I have called attention to the necessity for an anthropological model of a personalistic and cenobitic stamp in which to situate our monastic life in the times in which we live. Some persons and regions have already offered theoretical and experiential answers in regard to this need.

In a simpler form I, too, offer a first response in the form of thoughts. They may have little appeal but are not lacking in meaning; if you wish they can be called sentences. They will labor under a double deficiency: they are lacking a more feminine vision of reality, and the indispensable contribution of multiculturalism. All this may serve as an invitation to continue reflecting on this theme and to enrich it. I would like them to undergird the evangelical and cenobitical doctrine of the good zeal that seeks the good interest of others rather than its own.

A. Person -personalization

-It is proper to God to be a tri-unity of persons: and personhood (the fact of being a person) is an eminent sign of the image of God in the human being.

-To be a person in the image of God involves existing in relationship, as a unity of two or more people, one for the other.

-Only God and the human person are capable of life in communion; the divine WE is the eternal model of the human we.

-God is not an Other but a You to us which is the basis of all every other relationship.

-The human person finds his/her model in Christ, the incarnated and humanized divine Person.

-The person is:

-Someone in relationship to others.

-An autonomous being called to interdependence.

-A self-awareness which communicates and is open to the presence of others.

-Conscience and freedom in order to love in truth.

-One for all and all for one.

-The one who:

-Is master of himself in giving himself to others, receiving and sharing existence.

-Is capable of communion and community with God and with others.

-Predisposes himself in order to make himself available and puts himself at the disposition of others.

-The "I" is personalized by the "you" and the "they". This takes place in concrete and definite historical, social, cultural, political and religious contexts: if it were not for others we would not be anyone or anything.

-Our personal being acquires depth in the calm of intimate dialogue, free converse and united action: love, speech and cooperation create and sustain reciprocal and personalized relationships.

-The process of personalization is founded on our personal autonomy which is open to interdependence with others.

-We are autonomous through our individuality (I as a social being) and our authenticity (I being myself in relation to others).

-We are interdependent through the gift of ourselves in the service of fellowship and to a common project.

-Interdependence allows you and me to be an us and for the mine and the yours to be converted into an ours; this is strengthened and enriched through:

-Obedience: free setting aside of autonomy in favor of communion with God and the brethren: losing oneself in order to find oneself.

-Re-ordering: free relinquishment of what is ours in favor of divine filiation and human fraternity. Dying in order to live.

-Women seem to be more open to interdependence than men, the latter being more inclined to autonomy; this difference of emphasis is also found between cultures.

B. Liberty-liberation

-Authentic liberty is also an eminent sign of the divine image in the human being; it is rooted in our personal human condition and in it is rooted our dignity as human persons.

-No one is freer than Christ who lived spending himself to bring together the dispersed.

-Freedom is founded on truth and tends towards the good and to communion; it implies the capacity to give ourselves in order to:

-Be ourselves and find our identity.

-Actualize ourselves and shape our own destiny.

-Tend towards the goal by free election of the good.

-Build communion on four different levels and between the levels themselves:

-With God: as sons.

-With our neighbor: as brothers.

-With creation: as lords.

-With history: as co-protagonists.

-Our freedom is characterized by being a reality:

-In a situation: geographical, historical, cultural, generic, social, economic...

-Our freedom is real but conditioned by its context and not unconditional and absolute.

-It only exists in dialogue with circumstances. That is why it can be responsible.

-Before God: all free acts have reference to the ultimate end.

- The most liberated freedom is that which tends most strictly towards the final goal which is God.
- Freedom relates to good naturally and by its very being, and to evil by defect and corruption.
- Only the divine omnipotence of the Creator can create a being capable of saying yes or no to its Creator.

-Towards the definitive: the unrepeatable and irrevocable.

- To come to be "someone" one must opt freely and definitively for something and someone.
- We are merely "something" when we don't opt loyally for someone.
- The more faithful and lasting a commitment, the more human and personal.
- Without commitment and fidelity there is no mature freedom.

-Holistic: aside from being free we have freedoms and the need for all to be free and have freedoms.

- I am free if I also have religious, moral, political and economic freedom.
- Personal freedom decreases when social freedom diminishes.
- I am less free when each and all are less free.
- The struggle for my freedoms is authentic when it includes the struggle for the freedoms of others.
- The renunciation of some freedoms is justified by the strengthening of the freedoms of others.
- Freedom without order is anarchy and order without freedom is dictatorship.

-Under tension; consisting of pairs of tensions.

- Freedom is a gift: it is a grace of existential openness to all that is.
- It is also a task: we have to arrive at freedom by freeing ourselves continually, overcoming the opposition between determinisms and capabilities, limits and possibilities.
- We are free: capable of operating by inner conviction, knowing and willing what we do.
- And what is more, we have freedoms: religious, moral, political and economic as part of being free.
- We are free from: absolute determinisms.
- We are also free to: build communion practicing the truth in love.

-Full freedom is always a freedom of consent and not of option: he is not more free who chooses more but rather who is more committed.

-Women seem to be more committed than men, the latter seem more focused on the breadth of options.

C. Love-loving

-God is Love for He is total and eternal gift and acceptance; created in the image of God we have been created to love.

-In the death and resurrection of Christ we find the most telling example of the love for the Father and from the Father.

-There is nothing more important than to love; it is more important to love than to live, because to live without love is not life but death. One lives because of love and one lives to love. Love is the life of the dying and the death of the living.

-In loving, the human being discovers himself/herself in his/her deepest identity, as Lover.

-To love is:

- To extend the limits of the I in order to be reborn as persons: I, you, we.
- To affirm that one plus one is one and that the I and the you are not added together but are multiplied.
- To know that conviction and selflessness matter more than emotion.
- To give and receive what cannot be bought or sold but rather is given as gift and freely received.
- A self-gift, a giving of self more than just a gift, giving oneself in giving ... and with no end to the giving.
- To desire the good of the other and to do good to him.
- To affirm the other as worthy, unique and unrepeatable.

-The affirmation of love differs in its manifestations, it can be:

- Maternal: merciful and naturally unconditional, predominantly affective.
- Paternal: reliable and spontaneously conditional, with an accent on the effective.
- Fraternal: universal and friendly, emphasizing the developmental.
- Erotic: heterosexual and tending towards the carnal, predominantly unitive and possessive.
- Divine: absolute and free gift; in God the offering is uppermost, in us the receiving.

-Fraternal love is basically a developmental love, it is born of three attitudes in relation to others:

- Caring: affective and effective dedication to the life and well-being of the neighbor.
- Responsibility: a free, generous and prompt response to the needs of others.
- Respect: an attentive and delicate attitude towards others as they are and not as I want them to be.

-Fraternal love includes maternal mercy and affectiveness, paternal reliability and effectiveness, and can have unlimited growth in gratuitousness and unconditionalness, almost in the way that God loves us.

-Woman reveals to man, more than he does to her, that we are human in the measure we love and are loved, in the measure we give and receive.

2. The concerns of others

I hope that the thoughts or sentences above help to encompass anthropologically the doctrine of cenobitic love which I want to present to you. Let us now turn to the teaching of Benedict: "No one is to pursue what he judges to be better for himself, but instead, what he judges better for someone else" (*RB 72:7*)

This maxim on disinterested and selfless love, as well as the other eight maxims, incarnates concretely the good zeal or most fervent love proper to a heart overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love. It also allows the heart to expand, burn and boil with fervor. This love is quite different from new or first fervor. And what is more, it is compatible with the fact of feeling and judging oneself "a poor monk or nun", "just one of the community";

however, this love is not practised or experienced by those who simply vegetate or waste their days in mediocrity.

The practice of this specific kind of good zeal, as well as the practice of humility, purifies from vices and sins. And leads to God, as does the practice of obedience and the *dura* and *aspera* of the monastic *conversatio*.

What is more, given that Christ alone takes us to heaven, we can say that the exercise of most fervent love, that only looks to the good of others, conforms us to Christ, who strove for our good and not for his own, and brings us all together to the kingdom of heaven.

The cenobitic Patriarch also finds a model in the apostle Paul: "I try to please all in any way that I can by seeking, not my own advantage, but that of the many, that they may be saved" (1 Cor 10:33). The same apostle who sang "*Caritas non quarit quae sua sunt*" (1 Cor 13:5), never tired of urging: "Each of you should look to others' interests rather than to his own; your attitude must be that of Christ Jesus" (Phil 2:4-5).

It is easy to see that beneath this teaching lies the model of the primitive community of Jerusalem: "Those who believed shared all things in common... The community of believers were of one heart and one mind" (Acts 2:44; 4:32).

The maxim that occupies us has no direct parallel in the Rule, nevertheless we can say that all of the Rule is meant to educate us in how to live this disinterested love.

The more significant parallels would be: "to deny oneself in order to follow Christ" (4:10), "to hate one's own will" (4:60), "they are to obey one another" (72:6) and "prefer absolutely nothing to Christ" (72:11; cf. 4:21). Perhaps there is a connection also with what is said of the Abbot: "let him know that his duty is rather to profit his brethren than to preside over them" (64:8).

Without any pretence of playing the exegete, let us look with greater attention at what seems to me to be four key words in the benedictine text:

-*Nullus* (*no one*): Absolutely all are involved without exception; Benedict uses the same term in 3:8 where it seems to exclude the Abbot.

-*Utile* (*useful*): Referring to a physical-material good profitably useful, but also to moral-spiritual goods (cf 33:2; 42:4).

-*Sequatur* (*follow, seek*): Connotes the choice of a value (cf Prol.7,17; 3:7; 4:10;5:8) or the non-following of a counter-value (3:8).

-*Magis* (*even better*): Appeals to a value and a conscientious and free option, proper to a responsible person who uses his reason (and is not moved by passion only). The School of divine service is a place in which to grow in personal freedom and conscience.

But let us listen to the words of an authentic interpreter of Saint Benedict and of his Rule: Saint Bernard, abbot of Clairvaux. Bernard tells us: Because God is Love, and precisely because of this, He has love us first. And because He loves us first He loves us freely and disinterestedly. This is how we are to love one another! (*Dil*). It is not to be marvelled at, then, that Bernard quotes the Pauline texts mentioned above more than ninety times in his works.

In greater detail, the Abbot of Clairvaux teaches us that: charity is the unblemished law of the Lord because it does not seek what is useful for itself but rather for others (*Dil* 35). For this reason charity is "light" and "purity" (SC 63:8). The "pure of heart" are those who do not

seek after their own interests but Jesus Christ's, nor what is useful for themselves but for others (*Conv* 32). Consequently, purity of heart consists in:

-Seeking the glory of God and serving neighbor (*Mor* 10 = *Ep* 42:10).

-Pleasing God and saving souls, benefitting others more than presiding over them (*ad Abbat* 6; cf. *Div* 45:5).

This free and disinterested love, pure and just, characterizes the third degree of love in which God is loved for His own sake and not for our sake (*Dil* 26):

"This is the charity that does not seek after its own interests. She sees that the son does not preoccupy himself with his own affairs, but rather in loving his Father. Fear, on the contrary, forces the servant to seek after his own comforts, and ambition impels the mercenary towards greater gain" (*Div* 3:1).

But he who is imprisoned in his "self will", through which he seeks only personal benefit, does not give glory to God nor is he useful to the brethren (*Pasc.* 3:3), and can only be healed through the love that does not seek its own (*Asspt* 5:13).

Mary is the most sublime model of this love. She made herself, with "boundless love", "all in all" and surety for all (*OAsspt* 2). What Bernard says with respect to those who are dead to themselves and alive to others applies to no one more than to her :

"Happy the mind that has been wise enough to enrich and adorn itself with an assortment of spices such as these, pouring upon them the oil of mercy and warming them with the fire of charity! Who, in your opinion, is the good man who takes pity and lends, who is disposed to compassionate, quick to render assistance, who believes that there is more happiness in giving than in receiving, who easily forgives but is not easily angered, who will never seek to be avenged, and will in all things take thought for his neighbor's needs as if they were his own? Whoever you may be, if your soul is thus disposed, if you are saturated with the dew of mercy, overflowing with affectionate kindness, making yourself all things to all men yet pricing your deeds like something discarded in order to be ever and everywhere ready to supply to others what they need, in a word, so dead to yourself that you live only for others" (*SC* 12:1).

3. Some conclusions

I trust that I have not wearied you with the preceding passages. I realize that they were dense and I hope that they have also been rich, not because they are mine, which they are not, but because they come from the Fathers.

I would now like to offer some conclusions on the doctrine expounded; I say some because I want you yourselves to draw out the rest. To summarize:

-The practise of love restores the image of God in us and allows the community to become an icon of the trinitarian community.

-The maxim of St. Benedict on "seeking the interests or good of others" encapsulates the meaning of fraternal charity in its practice and exercise; as in the same manner the ultimate meaning of the benedictine-cistercian asceticism as a way towards the contemplation of God.

-The vision of God is the blessed reward of the pure of heart, that is to say, those who seek not their own interests but those of Christ and of neighbor.

-Without the reality of freedom and disinterestedness exercised for the benefit of the neighbor no common life is possible; we are here at the very font of cenobitic life.

-The process of personalization and personal liberation goes through a deliberate, conscious, and free setting aside of ourselves in order to serve and benefit others.

-Unfortunately our hearts are never free of "mercenaries" who traffic selfishly with God and with neighbor. Nor are there any lack of "bachelors and old maids" who have made themselves the center of their universe displacing God and neighbor.

-Worse still: "In all monasteries ... there are sarabaites, the self-interested (*seipsos amantes*, 2 *Tim* 3:2) who ever seek their own" (Bernard, 3 *Sent* 31).

-To seek after the interests of the others is the most efficacious and practical remedy for the disease of depersonalization, and the disintegration of a community afflicted with individualism.

-It means a love that liberates and decentralizes us from ourselves in order to center us on the Other and the others, putting us at their service. But beware of subtle forms of self-centeredness: what can I do to love others more? It would be better to ask oneself: what does my brother/sister need or how can I best serve him/her?

-There is no greater happiness than to make others happy: which does not mean inventing needs to satisfy and so self-satisfy oneself. It is in losing oneself that one finds oneself: one finds one's lifethrough others!

We are approaching the end of the letter, but not of love! May the Lord give us his Spirit so that the renewal of our spirits will shout out the news of the Gospel, as the Cistercian contribution to the new Evangelization, on the threshold of the ninth centenary of the foundation of Citeaux and the third millennium of the birth of Christ. Let us pray:

"O Lord my God, why do you not remove my sin, and why do you not take away my iniquity? so that having cast away the heavy load of my own will I may breathe under the light burden of charity, that now I may not be encompassed with servile fear nor seduced by mercenary cupidity, but that I may be led by your Spirit, the Spirit of liberty by which your sons are led and may it give testimony to my spirit that I am one of your sons since the same law is mine as is yours, and as you are so may I also be in this world."
(Bernard, *Dil* 36).

With a fraternal embrace in Mary of St. Joseph.

Bernardo Olivera
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