

# Oriente Lumen

Apostolic Letter of St John Paul II, 1995

## *Monasticism as a model of baptismal life*

9. I would now like to look at the vast panorama of Eastern Christianity from a specific vantage point which affords a view of many of its features: monasticism.

In the East, monasticism has retained great unity. It did not experience the development of different kinds of apostolic life as in the West. The various expressions of monastic life, from the strictly cenobitic, as conceived by Pachomius or Basil, to the rigorously eremitic, as with Anthony or Macarius of Egypt, correspond more to different stages of the spiritual journey than to the choice between different states of life. In any event, whatever form they take, they are all based on monasticism.

Moreover, in the East, monasticism was not seen merely as a separate condition, proper to a precise category of Christians, but rather as a reference point for all the baptized, according to the gifts offered to each by the Lord; it was presented as a symbolic synthesis of Christianity.

When God's call is total, as it is in the monastic life, then the person can reach the highest point that sensitivity, culture and spirituality are able to express. This is even more true for the Eastern Churches, for which monasticism was an essential experience and still today is seen to flourish in them, once persecution is over and hearts can be freely raised to heaven. The monastery is the prophetic place where creation becomes praise of God and the precept of concretely lived charity becomes the ideal of human coexistence; it is where the human being seeks God without limitation or impediment, becoming a reference point for all people, bearing them in his heart and helping them to seek God.

I would also like to mention the splendid witness of nuns in the Christian East. This witness has offered an example of giving full value in the Church to what is specifically feminine, even breaking through the mentality of the time. During recent persecutions, especially in Eastern European countries, when many male monasteries were forcibly closed, female monasticism kept the torch of the monastic life burning. The nun's charism, with its own specific characteristics, is a visible sign of that motherhood of God to which Sacred Scripture often refers.

Therefore I will look to monasticism in order to identify those values which I feel are very important today for expressing the contribution of the Christian East to the journey of Christ's Church towards the Kingdom. While these aspects are at times neither exclusive to monasticism nor to the Eastern heritage, they have frequently acquired a particular connotation in themselves. Besides, we are not seeking to make the most of exclusivity, but of the mutual enrichment in what the one Spirit has inspired in the one Church of Christ.

Monasticism has always been the very soul of the Eastern Churches: the first Christian monks were born in the East and the monastic life was an integral part of the Eastern lumen passed on to the West by the great Fathers of the undivided Church.(26)

The strong common traits uniting the monastic experience of the East and the West make it a wonderful bridge of fellowship, where unity as it is lived shines even more brightly than may appear in the dialogue between the Churches.

## *Between Word and Eucharist*

10. Monasticism shows in a special way that life is suspended between two poles: the Word of God and the Eucharist. This means that even in its eremitical forms, it is always a personal response to an individual call and, at the same time, an ecclesial and community event.

The Starting point for the monk is the Word of God, a Word who calls, who invites, who personally summons, as happened to the Apostles. When a person is touched by the Word obedience is born, that is, the listening which changes life. Every day the monk is nourished by the bread of the Word. Deprived of it, he is as though dead and has nothing left to communicate to his brothers and sisters because the Word is Christ, to whom the monk is called to be conformed.

Even while he chants with his brothers the prayer that sanctifies time, he continues his assimilation of the Word. The very rich liturgical hymnody, of which all the Churches of the Christian East can be justly proud, is but the continuation of the Word which is read, understood, assimilated and finally sung: those hymns are largely sublime paraphrases of the biblical text, filtered and personalized through the individual's experience and that of the community.

Standing before the abyss of divine mercy, the monk can only proclaim the awareness of his own radical poverty, which immediately becomes a plea for help and a cry of rejoicing on account of an even more generous salvation, since from the abyss of his own wretchedness such salvation is unthinkable.(27) This is why the plea for forgiveness and the glorification of God form a substantial part of liturgical prayer. The Christian is immersed in wonder at this paradox, the latest of an infinite series, all magnified with gratitude in the language of the liturgy: the Immense accepts limitation; a virgin gives birth; through death, he who is life conquers death forever; in the heights of heaven, a human body is seated at the right hand of the Father.

The Eucharist is the culmination of this prayer experience, the other pole indissolubly bound to the Word, as the place where the Word becomes Flesh and Blood, a heavenly experience where this becomes an event.

In the Eucharist, the Church's inner nature is revealed, a community of those summoned to the synaxis to celebrate the gift of the One who is offering and offered: participating in the Holy Mysteries, they become "kinsmen"(28) of Christ, anticipating the experience of divinization in the now inseparable bond linking divinity and humanity in Christ.

But the Eucharist is also what anticipates the relationship of men and things to the heavenly Jerusalem. In this way it reveals its eschatological nature completely: as a living sign of this expectation, the monk continues and brings to fulfillment in the liturgy the invocation of the Church, the Bride who implores the Bridegroom's return in a maranatha constantly repeated, not only in words, but with the whole of his life.

### ***A liturgy for the whole man and for the whole cosmos***

11. In the liturgical experience, Christ the Lord is the light which illumines the way and reveals the transparency of the cosmos, precisely as in Scripture. The events of the past find in Christ their meaning and fullness, and creation is revealed for what it is: a complex whole which finds its perfection, its purpose in the liturgy alone. This is why the liturgy is heaven on earth, and in it the Word who became flesh imbues matter with a saving potential which is fully manifest in the sacraments: there, creation communicates to each individual the power conferred on it by Christ. Thus the Lord, immersed in the Jordan, transmits to the waters a power which enables them to become the bath of baptismal rebirth.(29)

Within this framework, liturgical prayer in the East shows a great aptitude for involving the human person in his or her totality: the mystery is sung in the loftiness of its content, but also in the warmth of the sentiments it awakens in the heart of redeemed humanity. In the sacred act, even bodiliness is summoned to praise, and beauty, which in the East is one of the best loved names expressing the divine harmony and the model of humanity transfigured,(30) appears everywhere: in the shape of the church, in the sounds, in the colors, in the lights, in the scents. The lengthy duration of the celebrations, the repeated invocations, everything expresses gradual identification with the mystery celebrated with one's whole person. Thus the prayer of the Church already becomes participation in the heavenly liturgy, an anticipation of the final beatitude.

This total involvement of the person in his rational and emotional aspects, in "ecstasy" and in immanence, is of great interest and a wonderful way to understand the meaning of created realities: these are neither an absolute nor a den of sin and iniquity. In the liturgy, things reveal their own nature as a gift offered by the Creator to humanity: "God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good" (*Gen 1:31*). Though all this is marked by the tragedy of sin, which weighs down matter and obscures its clarity, the latter is redeemed in the Incarnation and becomes fully "theophoric," that is, capable of putting us in touch with the Father. This property is most apparent in the holy mysteries, the sacraments of the Church.

Christianity does not reject matter. Rather, bodiliness is considered in all its value in the liturgical act, whereby the human body is disclosed in its inner nature as a temple of the Spirit and is united with the Lord Jesus, who himself took a body for the world's salvation. This does not mean, however, an absolute exaltation of all that is physical, for we know well the chaos which sin introduced into the harmony of the human being. The liturgy reveals that the body, through the mystery of the Cross, is in the process of transfiguration, pneumatization: on Mount Tabor Christ showed his body radiant, as the Father wants it to be again.

Cosmic reality also is summoned to give thanks because the whole universe is called to recapitulation in Christ the Lord. This concept expresses a balanced and marvelous teaching on the dignity, respect and purpose of creation and of the human body in particular. With the rejection of all dualism and every cult of pleasure as an end in itself, the body becomes a place made luminous by grace and thus fully human.

To those who seek a truly meaningful relationship with themselves and with the cosmos, so often disfigured by selfishness and greed, the liturgy reveals the way to the harmony of the new man, and invites him to respect the Eucharistic potential of the created world. That world is destined to be assumed in the Eucharist of the Lord, in his Passover, present in the sacrifice of the altar.

### ***A clear look at self - discovery***

12. The monk turns his gaze to Christ, God and man. In the disfigured face of Christ, the man of sorrow, he sees the prophetic announcement of the transfigured face of the Risen Christ. To the contemplative eye, Christ reveals himself as he did to the women of Jerusalem, who had gone up to contemplate the mysterious spectacle on Calvary. Trained in this school, the monk becomes accustomed to contemplating Christ in the hidden recesses of creation and in the history of mankind, which is then understood from the standpoint of identification with the whole Christ.

This gaze progressively conformed to Christ thus learns detachment from externals, from the tumult of the senses, from all that keeps man from that freedom which allows him to be grasped by the Spirit. Walking this path, he is reconciled with Christ in a constant process of conversion: in the awareness of his own sin and of his distance from the Lord which becomes heartfelt remorse, a symbol of his own baptism in the salutary water of tears; in silence and inner quiet, which is sought and given, where he learns to make his heart beat in harmony with the rhythm of the Spirit, eliminating all duplicity and ambiguity. This process of becoming ever more moderate and sparing, more transparent to himself, can cause him to fall into pride and intransigence if he comes to believe that these are the fruits of his own ascetic efforts. Spiritual discernment in continuous purification then makes him humble and meek, aware that he can perceive only some aspects of that truth which fills him, because it is the gift of the Spouse, who alone is fulfillment and happiness.

To the person who is seeking the meaning of life, the East offers this school which teaches one to know oneself and to be free and loved by that Jesus who says: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (*Mt 11:28*). He tells those who seek inner healing to go on searching: if their intention is upright and their way is honest, in the end the Father's face will let itself be recognized, engraved as it is in the depths of the human heart.

### ***A father in the Spirit***

13. A monk's way is not generally marked by personal effort alone. He turns to a spiritual father to whom he abandons himself with filial trust, in the certainty that God's tender and demanding fatherhood is manifested in him. This figure gives Eastern monasticism an extraordinary flexibility: through the spiritual father's intervention the way of each monk is in fact strongly personalized in the times, rhythms and ways of seeking God. Precisely because the spiritual father is the harmonizing link, monasticism is permitted the greatest variety of cenobitic and eremitical expressions. Monasticism in the East has thus been able to fulfill the expectations of each church in the various periods of its history.(31)

In this quest, the East in particular teaches that there are brothers and sisters to whom the Spirit has granted the gift of spiritual guidance. They are precious points of reference, for they see things with the loving gaze with which God looks at us. It is not a question of renouncing one's own freedom, in order to be looked after by others. It is benefiting from the knowledge of the heart, which is a true charism, in order to be helped, gently and firmly, to find the way of truth. Our world desperately needs such spiritual guides. It has frequently rejected them, for they seemed to lack credibility or their example appeared out of date and scarcely attractive to current sensitivities. Nevertheless, it is having a hard time finding new ones, and so suffers in fear and uncertainty, without models or reference points. He who is a father in the spirit, if he really is such -- and the people of God have always shown their ability to recognize him -- will not make others equal to himself, but will help them find the way to the Kingdom.

Of course, the wonderful gift of male and female monastic life, which safeguards the gift of guidance in the Spirit and calls for appropriate recognition, has also been given to the West. In this context and wherever grace has inspired these precious means of interior growth, may those in charge foster this gift and use it to good advantage, and may all avail themselves of it. Thus they will experience the great comfort and support of fatherhood in the Spirit on their journey of faith.(32)

### ***Communion and service***

14. Precisely in gradual detachment from those worldly things which stand in the way of communion with his Lord, the monk finds the world a place where the beauty of the Creator and the love of the Redeemer are reflected. In his prayers the monk utters an epiclesis of the Spirit on the world and is certain that he will be heard, for this is a sharing in Christ's own prayer. Thus he feels rising within himself a deep love for humanity, that love which Eastern prayer so often celebrates as an attribute of God, the friend of men who did not hesitate to offer his Son so that the world might be saved. In this attitude the monk is sometimes enabled to contemplate that world already transfigured by the deifying action of Christ, who died and rose again.

Whatever path the Spirit has in store for him, the monk is always essentially the man of communion. Since antiquity this name has also indicated the monastic style of cenobitic life. Monasticism shows us how there is no true vocation that is not born of the Church and for the Church. This is attested by the experience of so many monks who, within their cells, pray with an extraordinary passion, not only for the human person but for every creature, in a ceaseless cry, that all may be converted to the saving stream of Christ's love. This path of inner liberation in openness to the Other makes the monk a man of charity. In the school of Paul the Apostle, who showed that love is the fulfilling of the law (cf. *Rom* 13:10), Eastern monastic communion has always been careful to guarantee the superiority of love over every law.

This communion is revealed first and foremost in service to one's brothers in monastic life, but also to the Church community, in forms which vary in time and place, ranging from social assistance to itinerant preaching. The Eastern Churches have lived this endeavor with great generosity, starting with evangelization, the highest service that the Christian can offer his brother, followed by many other forms of spiritual and ministerial service. Indeed it can be said that monasticism in antiquity - and at various times in subsequent ages too - has been the privileged means for the evangelization of peoples.

### ***A person in relationship***

15. The monk's life is evidence of the unity that exists in the East between spirituality and theology: the Christian, and the monk in particular, more than seeking abstract truths, knows that his Lord alone is Truth and Life, but also knows that he is the Way, (cf. *Jn*14:6) to reach both; knowledge and participation are thus a single reality: from the person to the God who is three Persons through the Incarnation of the Word of God.

The East helps us to express the Christian meaning of the human person with a wealth of elements. It is centered on the Incarnation, from which creation itself draws light. In Christ, true God and true man, the fullness of the human vocation is revealed. In order for man to become God, the Word took on humanity. Man, who constantly experiences the bitter taste of his limitations and sin, does not then abandon himself to recrimination or to anguish, because he knows that within himself the power of divinity is at work. Humanity was assumed by Christ without separation from his divine nature and without confusion,(33) and man is not left alone to attempt, in a thousand often frustrated ways, an impossible ascent to heaven. There is a tabernacle of glory, which is the most holy person of Jesus the Lord, where the divine and the human meet in an embrace that can never be separated. The Word became flesh, like us in everything except sin. He pours divinity into the sick heart of humanity, and imbuing it with the Father's Spirit enables it to become God through grace.

But if this has revealed the Son to us, then it is given us to approach the mystery of the Father, principle of communion in love. The Most Holy Trinity appears to us then as a community of love: to know such a God means to feel the urgent need for him to speak to the world, to communicate himself; and the history of salvation is nothing but the history of God's love for the creature he has loved and chosen, wanting it to be "according to the icon of the Icon" - as the insight of the Eastern Fathers expresses it(34) - that is, molded in the image of the Image, which is the Son, brought to perfect communion by the sanctifier, the Spirit of love. Even when man sins, this God seeks him and loves him, so that the relationship may not be broken off and love may continue to flow. And God loves man in the mystery of the Son, who let himself be put to death on the Cross by a world that did not recognize him, but has been raised up again by the Father as an eternal guarantee that no one can destroy love, for anyone who shares in it is touched by God's glory: it is this man transformed by love whom the disciples contemplated on Tabor, the man whom we are all called to be.

### ***An adoring silence***

16. Nevertheless this mystery is continuously veiled, enveloped in silence,(35) lest an idol be created in place of God. Only in a progressive purification of the knowledge of communion, will man and God meet and recognize in an eternal embrace their unending connaturality of love.

Thus is born what is called the apophatism of the Christian East: the more man grows in the knowledge of God, the more he perceives him as an inaccessible mystery, whose essence cannot be grasped. This should not be confused with an obscure mysticism in which man loses himself in enigmatic, impersonal realities. On the contrary, the Christians of the East turn to God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, living persons tenderly present, to whom they utter a solemn and humble, majestic and simple liturgical doxology. But they perceive that one draws close to this presence above all by letting oneself be taught an adoring silence, for at the culmination of the knowledge and experience of God is his absolute transcendence. This is reached through the prayerful assimilation of scripture and the liturgy more than by systematic meditation.

In the humble acceptance of the creature's limits before the infinite transcendence of a God who never ceases to reveal himself as God - Love, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ in the joy of the Holy Spirit, I see expressed the attitude of prayer and the theological method which the East prefers and continues to offer all believers in Christ.

We must confess that we all have need of this silence, filled with the presence of him who is adored: in theology, so as to exploit fully its own sapiential and spiritual soul; in prayer, so that we may never forget that seeing God means coming down the mountain with a face so radiant that we are obliged to cover it

with a veil (cf. *Ex* 34:33), and that our gatherings may make room for God's presence and avoid self-celebration; in preaching, so as not to delude ourselves that it is enough to heap word upon word to attract people to the experience of God; in commitment, so that we will refuse to be locked in a struggle without love and forgiveness. This is what man needs today; he is often unable to be silent for fear of meeting himself, of feeling the emptiness that asks itself about meaning; man who deafens himself with noise. All, believers and non-believers alike, need to learn a silence that allows the Other to speak when and how he wishes, and allows us to understand his words.