



CHRISTMAS LETTER 2023

On the way

"**Divinely gathered,**" at times we sigh!

And what if we returned to this certainty: all of us, each called by our respective names, one day heard this call as a confirmation: "You are my beloved daughter, in you I am well pleased." The fact that we have not chosen each other must constantly put this truth back at the centre.

For the same reason, we cannot see ourselves as "an adventuress of God", proclaiming and healing the world all by herself. Our witness, to be true, needs community. No community is ideal - not in numbers, in characters, nor in the enriching diversity of our missions -, quite the contrary: a community is often not quite "united", a little "scattered" or too demanding, invasive and ultimately heavy to bear!

In fact, we have not chosen to live concrete fraternal life on a daily basis. However, this is the backbone of the vows that we have made. Fraternal life makes the vows possible and credible.

In our Constitutions, fraternal life even comes before the vows! The Gospel, Augustinian spirituality and the Church affirm the primacy of fraternal life: "*To live as brothers and sisters is the universal vocation of every creature*" (Pope Francis).

A theologian added: "*The vows explain more concretely the freedom with which we open ourselves to who we really are, to understand the meaning of our identity.*"

However, let us not be afraid to admit that fraternal life is not naturally idyllic: from the very first pages, the Bible features the toxic jealousies that pollute relationships, sometimes to the point of death... And we continue to write the Bible today. No, fraternal life is not a safe haven, nor does it cover anyone in glory: it is rather a revelation of ourselves and of what we would rather keep secret. As if its primary function was to put us to the test, to put us in the crucible, the fire of the foundryman. As if the image we strive to give to others mattered very little. Is then fraternal life only masochism? It is undoubtedly sacrifice, on certain days!

What does it really show us? Just as a stained-glass window lets through a ray of light, fraternal life tells us that the horizon is not today, but it cannot be reached without today either. Since the Incarnation, we have known that we must renounce all angelic mysticism: we are bound by a law – the law of fraternal life - which is preceded and followed by love.

"The law is preceded by 'Thou art loved' and followed by 'Thou shalt love'. 'Thou art loved': the foundation of the law, and 'Thou shalt love': its transcendence.

Anyone who separates the law from this foundation and this term will love the opposite of life, basing life on the law instead of basing the law on the life received. Therefore, this law thus corrupted becomes a net that is all the more asphyxiating and deadly the finer its mesh. Its harshness is less to be feared than its thickness. It presents the idol as its worst avatar. However, what betrays it, - since, for our salvation, it must betray itself - is the pleasure of issuing accusations, as this way of conceiving the law necessarily plunges us into this. The Gospel focuses on this point" (Paul Beauchamp¹).

Fraternal life is the bedrock on which we live our vows without deceiving ourselves.

Our vows

- Poverty

"Blessed are the poor". Blessed are our poverties, our frailties, and weaknesses: they have their rightful place in the Kingdom. "For theirs is the Kingdom of heaven", it belongs to those who do not hide their poverties for fear of losing their face.

It takes time to achieve this kind of poverty: time for our rigidities to disappear and to no longer hide our vulnerabilities and the suffering they cause; time to learn not to "deceive ourselves" but to reread our history and discover God's

¹ D'une montagne à l'autre – Seuil 199, p.109

footsteps at our side. The patient, quiet presence of the One who accompanies us every day until the end of the world.

If God chooses us as we are, vulnerable as we are, why give us an armour?

There is also another dimension to our vow of poverty: gratuitousness. This is what we experience at every Eucharist: "Beyond the idea of utility, a thoughtful and gratuitous relationship offers itself as the principle of every word and gesture. This is why the Eucharist is essential. The source and the port."²

- **Chastity - Consecrated celibacy**

A difficult path! Between sinful sexuality and redeeming restraint, the abuse crisis brings us face to face with the paradox of life and, in particular, the life we have chosen: to be sexed and chaste; to be sexed and consecrated in celibacy. It is not a question of living according to the ideal of virginal purity, of idolising an original "spotless" life to which we should return. The religious woman is not the disembodied "bride of Christ."³

Being sexed will always mean to be unwhole, and to be chaste will always mean to refuse to engage with the other to fill this gap. Not only physically, but also mentally, in other words, it means to refuse to be controlled.

However, what makes religious life special is not just chastity - this is true for every human being -, but professing chastity in consecrated celibacy. To be unwhole and consecrated to God and to others in chastity and celibacy.

Choosing to remain unwhole in order to be in the presence of God, and to walk with Him. Choosing to remain unwhole in order to be in the presence of others and to walk with them.

Do not shy away, let yourself be touched like He did.

Putting relationships at the heart of every day is undoubtedly the best way to block out the human violence that undermines the creative project that brings blessings. It is hard, sometimes it hurts us, but that's how we do our part to give this world a human face: by honouring the image of God that dwells in each of us.

- **Obedience**

² Anonymous theologian mentioned by A. Riccardi in "L'Eglise brûle" Le Cerf 2022, p. 251

³ Our renunciation is not condemnation. Let us remember the genealogy of Jesus: Tamar, Rahab, Bathsheba, Ruth... Life - and life in abundance because it leads to Christ - passes through sexuality: "God saves us" in our very ambivalence.

“And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself” (Jn 12, 32).

The Lord is always at work: *“He is not late”*, Saint Peter tells us.

And what if obedience meant to look at everything in this way: to be - to stay - with him, to work alongside him, to engage in the work that He entrusts to us. It's not that simple! By listening only to our hearts, we throw ourselves into the water - like Peter - even if it means regretting it later, forgetting that even generous activism is not obedience. God does not push, but draws us. It's up to us to find what can "help" Him, as Etty Hillesum⁴ put it, and certainly not replace Him.

On the occasion of her 50th jubilee, a friend of mine said: "It took me years to realise fully that being a religious meant being a disciple of Christ and not just a militant for many causes and values, which are certainly very good in themselves but insufficient. I had to allow a certain degree of pruning in order to love as God loves. God reverses what may sometimes seem best, but is not sufficiently attuned to the Gospel. So, day after day, I have learnt to become a disciple."

"Get back to yourself" is what Saint Augustine once understood when he confessed: "I was beside myself."

Becoming oneself, a self "not colonised by others who have made it a stranger to itself"⁵, a self that has removed the obstacles to loving itself⁶, is the path to freedom that we choose by taking the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. We renounce the false gods three times, but we prioritise the true God three times.

Two women lead us on this journey: Mary and Alix.

They are so similar for

⁴ « Une vie bouleversée » - Seuil 1985, p. 175.

A young 27-year-old Jewish woman living in Amsterdam kept a diary from 1941 to 1943 while Europe was under Hitler's yoke. In September 1943, on the eve of her arrest and deportation to Auschwitz, where she died two months later, she wrote:

"Sunday morning prayer. Last night, for the first time, I lay awake in the dark, my eyes burning, images of human suffering flashing before me. I'm going to promise you one thing, my God, oh, a trifle: I'm going to make sure that I don't hang on to the present day, like so many weights, the anxieties that the future inspires in me; but that takes a certain amount of training. For the time being, each day has its own suffering. I'm going to help you, my God, not to extinguish yourself in me, but I can't guarantee anything in advance. But one thing is becoming clearer to me (...) with every beat of my heart: it's up to us to help you and defend the home that shelters you within us to the end."

⁵ Marie Balmory: Psychologie et vie spirituelle – Christus hors-série n° 276 novembre 2022

⁶ "If you hate yourself, you risk of hating all the rest" Maurice Bellet: *ibid.*

- the sobriety of the words that we received from them: five words from Mary and the "*Relation*" by Alix, "Daughter of great silence";
- their shared endurance in the Faith: after the Annunciation, Mary quickly set out on her journey and would tolerate everything without knowing what was to come.

What Alix experiences deeply is no less formidable: "*I am very often arid, devoid of devotion, clouded in understanding, filled with confused thoughts... At this time, I have great devotion for the psalm 'De profundis', because from the depths of my nothingness, I cry out to God of incomprehensible majesty and greatness.*" (Rel.34)

This closeness is confirmed in Alix's vision: Mary handed her the Child Jesus and, like Mary, she in turn received him to make him grow.

On the eve of the year 2024, which for us will be centred on Initial Formation with the Formators' session and the J3, let us remind ourselves that the characteristic of religious life does not reside its numbers or performance, in but its "prophecy."

Prophecy in daily, fraternal and community life: this is where we can discern the call of the Spirit today, this is where our life is a sign. Let's ask for this daily grace!

Merry Christmas!

With all my fraternal affection,

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