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What gives us hope as consecrated religious, especially in these difficult times?

Weathering the Storm

“The boat, already a few miles offshore, was being tossed about by the waves, for the wind was against it. During the fourth watch of the night, he came toward them, walking on the sea. When the disciples saw him walking on the sea they were terrified.” (Mt 14:24-26)

This image of the storm at sea touches something deep in us. It is natural to be afraid of the dark, and of the storm. The night and the stormy sea are primal images of chaos, representing that which lies outside of our control. For diurnal creatures such as ourselves, the night is not our domain. Our faculties of sight, hearing and smell are insufficient under these conditions. We find ourselves vulnerable to fear and anxiety, with spectres of ghosts or beasts or enemies lurking at the edge of our field of vision. As land-dwellers, we find ourselves likewise vulnerable upon the waters of the deep. Our craft is small, frail and assailed by violent waves. Should we capsize, we could not survive for long without a flotation aid, a means of propulsion, food and fresh water. The ability to swim is no guarantee against the raw power of wind and water, and the horror of drowning has to be universal.

This time in our world, our Church, our religious communities and perhaps also our personal lives, takes on some of the chaotic features of the darkness and the storm.

Our earth is threatened by destruction. Environmental degradation and climate change threaten to engulf us in mountains of waste and unpredictable changes to weather patterns, flood or drought, crop failures, famine and want.

Humanity is threatened by destruction. Global epidemic, terrorism, mass migration, war, social and economic injustice, ongoing failures to protect the weak from predation by the strong, ongoing attacks on the dignity of the human person make up the conditions of our time.

Our Church is threatened by destruction. Already disoriented and weakened by the pace of cultural change and secularization, the Church's credibility is undermined by scandal upon scandal, which in turn provides justification for removal of social privileges and immunities that could render us more vulnerable than we want to think about.

Our religious communities are threatened by destruction. A Regional Meeting of our Cistercian Order brought me face to face with the fragility of our communities – we are smaller, older and with fewer or no young people entering. Many are facing a real question of whether to continue, to combine resources or to close. Our last General Chapter speaks of poverty in financial, numerical, and spiritual terms. It is in many ways linked with the cultural poverty of our society. “On every continent the erosion of faith pushes monasticism towards society's periphery. It is where we say we wish to be, but how do we cope with finding ourselves there by relegation?” We have embraced voluntary poverty by vow, and yet the poverty we did not choose is the more searching.

All of this conspires to lay a heavy burden on our personal sense of well-being. Exposure to daily news and to our daily reality can give us the message that “we're all going to hell in a hand-basket.” We feel fear, confusion, helplessness, discouragement and doubt. How do we process all this, and how do we find a way to carry it without growing weary and turning away, or losing our sanity? The danger is that it all becomes too much and we grow numb, we give up, we become isolated, we turn us in on ourselves, we can no longer muster the energy to do the good that is within our reach.

One of our younger sisters asked me recently: “How can I come to believe, firmly and resolutely, that in the midst of all the terrible things that are going on, Christ is drawing all things to himself?” Even to ask such a question suggests that she is well

on her way to the faith she desires. My thought is simply this: to turn from newspaper to the Scriptures. We learn of the reality of our times from the newspaper; we seek the context, meaning and ultimate end of this reality in the Scriptures. What we need is to turn from the bad news to the good news, so that we can learn how God sees the conditions of our time and gather some hints as to what he has in mind to do about it.

So, let's turn back to the disciples in the boat, terrified by the darkness and the storm, terrified by this unknown figure approaching them on the waters. I think the most important thing we learn from this event is that the night and the storm actually bring not chaos and destruction and certain death, but Jesus. Jesus walks toward them out of the night, through the storm, treading underfoot the surging waters. In an earlier episode when the disciples find themselves in the midst of a storm at sea, Jesus is with them in the boat, but, mysteriously, he sleeps. We can understand this to mean that Jesus is so totally at one with his Father's providential will that the storm is of no concern to him. His head rests on the pillow as on the bosom of the Father. He falls asleep there as he will later do on the cross; he rests as in the tomb awaiting resurrection. For him, the storm means not destruction, but an opportunity to manifest God's majesty. Having been woken up by the panicking disciples, he "rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm" (Mt 8:26). How we long to see Jesus wake up and calm all our storms! But in the later episode, the second storm at sea, by contrast, there is no rebuke. Jesus is revealed as master of the elements, not by calming them, but by walking through them, and even more outrageously, by inviting Peter to join him on the waters. Fear itself turns out to be an illusion, a distraction from Christ's total mastery over the situation. But fear is also a clue: the place of our fear is the very place where Christ is to be found.

Can we choose to sit still with fear, confusion and helplessness in the darkness of night and the violence of the storm, feeling the waves of discouragement and doubt dashing over us? Could we be like the disciples at the fourth watch of the night, who fear destruction, but instead receive Christ? Could we even find ourselves propelled by desire out of the boat of our security toward the One who calls us to follow him?

Out of the Sea and Into the Desert

In our Cistercian/Benedictine tradition, the ceremony of Solemn Profession includes what is known as the *Suscipe*, a verse from Psalm 119 sung by a monk or nun three times after professing vows: “Receive me, O Lord, according to your promise and I shall live; do not disappoint me in my hope.” (Ps 119:116)

There was a time for each one of us, when the love of Jesus impelled us to step out onto the deep, to risk everything, to lay it all down at the feet of the One who loved us and sacrificed himself for us. We could not possibly know at that moment what would be the content of this “all” that we were giving over – every moment of every day from now until death. What would be asked of us in concrete terms, what challenges would come our way, what changes would be wrought in our life and the life of our community, in the Church and the world – this was not only unimaginable to us, but insignificant beside the consuming desire to give oneself and be received irrevocably by the One before whom our being finds its fulfilment, the One who gives life, the One in whom is all our hope.

I have been blessed to experience several distinct moments of call and dedication in my religious life, as I’m sure you have too. I share these with you as a way of evoking your own experiences, so that you may call them back to consciousness and be nourished by them once again. The decision to enter the monastery came to me with a mixture of fear and desire. Fear, because I had been given a taste of the all-demanding quality of the call into the monastic desert, that no quarter of my inner domain would remain untouched by the incursion of God’s majesty. Desire, because I knew there was nothing I wanted more, nor could I have accepted anything less.

Six years later, the approach of Solemn Profession found me likewise subject to fear and desire. Fear, because the novitiate and period of simple vows had given me a more palpable sense of what St Benedict meant when he spoke of “the hardships and difficulties that lead one to God” (RB 58.8). I was more aware of my own weakness and vulnerabilities, of how demanding is the struggle for integrity, or “purity of heart” as the monastic fathers called it. I was also more aware of the weaknesses of my community, the challenges of life together and the uncertainties of the future. But I desired Christ with a passion that could not be satisfied with a temporary engagement, and I felt invited by him to a progressive integration into his own life, death and resurrection. It was an offer I could not refuse.

At the time when our abbatial election drew near, some basic math and a little common sense was enough to tell me there was a possibility my community may choose to elect me, and dread began to stir within me. How could I say yes to such an unimaginable task, faced with my youth, inexperience and enormous limitations? I had all the prophets on my side, crying out: Too young! Only a child! Unable to speak! Unclean lips! If anyone here is thinking about electing a thirty-six-year-old as their superior, let me tell you: think twice! But then everything changed for me at the beginning of the fifteen-day period between the resignation of the former abbess and the election. During those days, God made it clear to me with an inner certainty that if I were elected, it would not be an accident or a gross indiscretion on the part of my community; it would be a call. Christ was inviting me again to go forward in faith, with desire deeper than dread, toward him, toward the life and mission he fashioned for me, toward the people he was giving me as my lifelong companions. During the election I felt as if I were in the midst of the Red Sea, with a wall of water to the left and to the right. I could not allow myself to dwell on the massive fears surging on either side, but only keep my eyes fixed on the One who walked before me. Now, whatever happens, whatever mistakes I make, whatever fears and doubts I have about my competency to lead the community and navigate the challenges we face, I cannot deny that God called me to this, and so I must believe that he is with me, with us on our desert journey to the Father's house.

The call to follow Christ as consecrated persons is a call to intimacy with Jesus that proved irresistible for all of us here today. As Hosea unforgettably puts it:

“Therefore, I will now allure her,
and bring her into the wilderness,
and speak tenderly to her....

There she shall respond as in the days of her youth,
as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt.” (Hos 2:14-15)

But the moment of call and commitment is not the end of the story; it is just a beginning. Having crossed the Red Sea, we set our foot on the desert road, and the wilderness begins to reveal its other face, its austere and all-demanding face. We begin to realize what we did not allow ourselves to see at first: that we are in a place of nerve-wracking insecurity and breathtaking vulnerability. We have fallen into the hands of the living God. Everything's fine, so long as we feel the hands, so long as we are suitably fed, watered and gainfully employed, so long as we seem to be in

control. The trial of the desert consists in the felt absence of God. In the anguish of silence, one is driven to find out if God really cares by pushing him to reveal himself, by trying to force his hand. We grab, we backtrack, we waver, and we doubt, we quarrel, we test God. This is what the Israelites did at Massah and Meribah.

When Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert after his baptism, his responses to the devil's temptations are direct quotations from the book of Deuteronomy. He recapitulates and reverses the people's rebellion:

"One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God." (Mt 4:4, Dt 8:3)

"You shall not put the Lord your God to the test." (Mt 4:6, Dt 6:16)

"The Lord, your God, shall you worship
and him alone shall you serve." (Mt 4:10, Dt 6:13)

God's Son chose not to grab something to fill his stomach, not to cast himself down in pride or despair before God's apparent failure to care, not to seek out alternate sources of security. In this he chose to be the Son of God, and not anyone else's son. He accepted the poverty and vulnerability of the human condition, embracing it with total trust in his Father's love. In taking on himself our desert experience and our temptation, he lets us know that we are loved enough to walk the same road he did.

As Christians, and as consecrated persons, we are called to "follow the Lamb wherever he goes" (Rv 14:4), whether out onto the waters, into the desert, up to Jerusalem, to the garden of trial, the cross, the tomb and ultimately to the garden of our eternal intimacy with the One who made us. Our faith gives us the possibility of recognizing every place, and especially the most fearful, as a place in which Christ is to be encountered. We need this sustenance for the journey of a lifetime, a journey we undertook in the fervor of youth with "no sack for the journey, or a second tunic, or sandals, or walking stick" (Mt 10:10). In the emptiness of the desert, we find ourselves asking: Did I make a mistake? Do the commitments I made in youth still hold under changed conditions, with the wisdom, or is it the disillusionment, of age? What was I thinking? This is not what I signed up for! Why am I here? Why do I stay? Why do I keep walking the road? Each of us here has our own answers to these questions. For me it is that to deny the call would be to deny Christ, to deny my reason for living. What sustains us on our journey is the bread of remembrance:

we remember the words spoken to us by the Lord, his promise of life and hope, his unforgettable acts in our lives. “On the strength of this food we journey forty days and forty nights to the mountain of God.” (1 K 19:8)

Jesus Christ and Him Crucified

Paul said to the Corinthians: “When I came to you, brothers, proclaiming the mystery of God, I did not come with sublimity of words or of wisdom. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear and much trembling.” (1 Cor 2:1-3)

Our call as Christians, and as consecrated persons, is to give Christ to the world. We may feel that we have nothing to give, that we are too caught up our own fears and too poor, weak and insignificant to be a source of hope for others. Paul says otherwise. He speaks of encouragement, the gift of hope, which is not impeded, but strengthened by poverty, weakness and affliction:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and God of all encouragement, who encourages us in our every affliction, so that we may be able to encourage those who are in any affliction with the encouragement with which we ourselves are encouraged by God. For as Christ’s sufferings overflow to us, so through Christ does our encouragement also overflow. If we are afflicted, it is for your encouragement and salvation; if we are encouraged, it is for your encouragement, which enables you to endure the same sufferings that we suffer.” (2 Cor 1:3-5)

Paradoxically, Paul seems to be saying that it is the experience of having the bottom fall out of our life, of feeling abandoned to destruction, which teach us that this is where Christ is to be found, where he draws closest to us. Paul goes on to say: “we were utterly weighed down beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, we had accepted within ourselves the sentence of death, that we might trust not in ourselves but in God who raises the dead. He rescued us from such great danger of death, and he will continue to rescue us; in him we have put our hope [that] he will also rescue us again.” (2 Cor 1:8-10)

When we have visited the pit of death and been delivered from it – and I believe each one of us here has some experience of this – we know with an indelible

conviction that just as God raised Christ from the dead, he raises us also, not only at the end, but also now, and even every day. We who have received Christ from the Father, in the intimacy of the early days of our call, and through the sharing of his sufferings along the way, realize that this gift is not just for us but for others, for all. Christ wishes to live in us his life as the Son of God. It is our proper mission. We learn that our call as Christians, and as consecrated persons is to walk on water: that is, to step out every day and in hope. We learn how to walk on the waters of our chaotic world, Church and life situation, to do the impossible in fear and trembling, perhaps also while being ridiculed or dismissed as fools. For this we have to really believe the gospel: that the poor in spirit are blessed, that the tiniest of seeds can sprout and grow – we do not know how – into a tree with large branches, capable of giving shelter. We have to believe that our smallest efforts bear fruit, that nothing is too insignificant to make a difference, in short, that nothing is wasted.

I would like to leave you with an example in the lives of some modern martyrs. The Martyrs of Algeria, with whom you are probably familiar, were beatified in 2018. They included seven Trappist monks of Our Lady of Atlas, whose story was told in the film Of Gods and Men. The Church of Algeria, after independence from France, found itself living as an extreme minority in a Muslim country, with little possibility of explicit evangelization at a time of mounting tension between moderates and extreme Islamists, when violence against foreigners became commonplace. It became so clear to those Christians who chose to remain in Algeria during those days that they were Christ's little flock, called not to a loud and imposing presence, but a quiet and hidden one, a greatly impoverished and limited one, in deep solidarity with the people they loved. They were to offer Christ to their Muslim neighbors simply by their lives of hope and fidelity in the face of violence and death. The community of Atlas challenges our definition of what constitutes a viable religious community. They were fragile; they were few, mostly older. They had no young members and no prospect of vocations from the country. They couldn't support themselves under the economic conditions in which they lived. We would not call them a viable community. And yet they lived this authentic witness of gospel poverty unto death and left an enduring legacy. A selection of writings by the prior, Dom Christian de Cherge, are published under the title L'Invincible Esperance (Invincible Hope). God accepted the lives of these witnesses to Christ as a fragrant offering and sacrifice for his people. May he accept our lives also, poor and limited as they are, offered in fear and trembling, but with invincible hope – hope in Christ, and him crucified.