

## CIRCULAR LETTER OF 2001

# OUR MONASTIC DISCIPLESHIP IN THE LORD JESUS

*(Circular letter to the members of the Order)*

Rome, January 26, 2001

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

My three previous circular letters were written within the context of the Jubilee Year and the end of the century. They therefore had very much in common, as is clear from their length and from the way each was presented in two parts.

I intended them to have a certain unity, as three chapters of one book, so to speak. To put it briefly, what I wanted to convey to you in those three letters is that our monastic life is rooted in mysticism and grounded in mystery, that is, the mystery revealed to us in the resurrection. Identity, mysticism, mystery and the resurrection are present and active in the culture and history of our human world. They are present and active in the Church, in consecrated life and in each one of us. An identity that is both well defined and open, a substantial mystical experience of the mystery, and a crucified faith in the Risen Lord allow us to face the uncertain and changing future creatively and unhindered by fear.

We are now in a new millennium. The "renewal" we have so often spoken of in the past in terms of an invitation, has now become imperative. The name we give it – renewal, reform or refoundation – is of little importance. It is a matter of reaching back to the source, of changing the way we do things, of letting new life emerge.

I am also particularly aware of our need for theological reflection on our monastic life. Any present day theology of monastic life, in order to be worth while, will have to emphasize a unifying theme that is capable of holding everything together. A variety of such unifying themes have been used in the course of our history. The main themes that should orient our vision and channel our energies today are the following:

-**Consecration**, understood as God's sanctifying work eliciting our response and, in turn, our self-offering to God our Father.

-**Discipleship (sequela Christi)**, that is, adhering to the person of our Teacher, which is both fostered and made manifest in a life of total self-gift to the Gospel.

-**Charism**, which is centered in the person of the Holy Spirit and thus makes our monastic life truly Christian, rendering us spontaneous, strong, bold, docile, free, and capable of originality and flexibility in the Spirit.

Whichever of these themes is taken as a starting point for a theology of our Cistercian life, it is necessary to integrate the other themes and, in the end, come down to the level of daily life.

It is within this two-fold context of renewal and theology that I now address you this letter on *following Jesus with the Gospel as our guide*. This will serve as the primary characteristic or basic starting point in our present day concern for enculturated spiritual renewal.

## 1. Discipleship and vocation

Listening to the "vocation stories" of brothers and sisters in the Order over the last few years, I have been amazed by the great diversity among them. The Risen Lord has used and continues to use any number of circumstances, be they ordinary or unusual, to convey his invitation to follow him. Sometimes the voice of Him who seeks us comes through forcefully or irresistibly. At other times it needs to be discerned in the midst of many other voices. There is likewise a great deal of variety in our way of responding: some respond quickly and clearly, others with delay and uncertainty, or even in a confused and reluctant way.

Material wealth tends to be an obstacle when it comes to responding to the call: *How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!* (Mk 10:23). Leaving behind one's family and profession makes it possible to answer the call and set out on the way of following: *Immediately they (James and John) left the boat and their father, and followed him* (Mt 4:22). In Luke's gospel there are three such episodes of calling and following, each accompanied by a saying of Jesus, the most radical of which is: *Leave the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God* (Lk 9:60). The freedom needed to follow Jesus always involves self-denial and letting go.

The call to radical discipleship tends to base itself on a radical experience of faith. Saint Paul is a clear example of this: *He arose from the ground; and when his eyes were opened, he could see nothing; so they let him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank* (Acts, 9,8-9). This radical call is likewise a call to conversion, a conversion that requires a radical and deeply personal change in the way we feel, judge and act. Welcoming the vocation or call is the first step on the way of discipleship.

Following Jesus always presupposes some form of calling. It is not just a matter of good will, generosity or determination. This call is never a source of privileges, rather, it involves demands and responsibilities. The initiative must always come from the Lord Jesus: He himself may advise against certain forms of discipleship if the call is lacking.

Discerning a vocation to monastic discipleship is no easy matter, since there tend to be many motivations at work, both natural and spiritual, in those who feel drawn to enter the monastery. It is essential to see God at work in the overall attraction being felt. The mere fact of being attracted to a deeper life of prayer is not in itself an indication of a call to contemplative monastic life.

Serious discernment is therefore imperative when considering the possibility of a God-given call to the monastery. In our day, it is indispensable to help discern the more or less unconscious and egocentric motivations that may hinder a true and free choice. Since this kind of discernment is such a difficult art, the positive criteria or signs of a monastic vocation can be of great help, namely:

- A sincere desire to embrace the life of the community as a way towards God.
- Physical, mental and emotional health in order to live this life fully.
- Humble docility, based on a God-centered life, which makes learning possible and which allows one to live both in solitude and in community without undue stress.

Human maturity, which has mostly to do with a person's affective life, is the foundation on which the monastic grace will build. The seed of a monastic vocation will produce a hundred, eighty, sixty, or thirty per cent, according to the soil that receives it. The emotional maturity needed at this early stage consists basically in a certain stability of the emotions, a clear and serene sexual identity as a man or a woman, and the ability to accept others as different.

## 2. Discipleship and the monastic state

The verb *to follow* in the New Testament, implies both a static dimension, or relationship of nearness, and a dynamic dimension, or relationship of subordinated movement. In other words, it is a matter of being with Jesus and of moving with Jesus. This nearness, however, depends on movement: to stop moving is to stop being near. This means that, in order to be near, one must be willing and available, and that in order to follow, one must be free.

Discipleship, or following Jesus, presupposes a *path* (Mc.1:2; 8:27; 9:33-34; 10:32,52), a way that is marked out by the one we follow, Jesus. The *path*, in a figurative sense, refers to a way of behaving, to a way of living. Nearness, then, becomes likeness, and the follower becomes a disciple.

The high-point of this *being-with-Jesus* is to share his destiny, a destiny of self-denial and of the cross that leads to glory. For this reason, the follower's cross likewise consists in self-denial in order to be with Jesus and to share his mission and his glory.

For any Christian, then, to follow Jesus is to imitate him, which does not mean "repeating" what he did, but rather arriving at the point of being able to say: *It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me* (Gal 2:20). It means, in other words, to be *conformed* to Christ, to *put on* Christ.

The Christian experience of following Jesus is multi-faceted and might be seen as:

- **Taking on** his attitudes and basic choices in a creative way: the Father, the Kingdom, the poor; Sonship, Brotherhood, *Kenosis*.
- **Embracing** his destiny: spending oneself for others unto death, nailed to the Father's will.
- **Belonging** to the Kingdom of God and to the God of the Kingdom, refusing anything contrary to it, rejecting any other kingdoms.
- **Being on the move** so as not to lose sight of Jesus, to walk with him and in him, to fix one's gaze on him. The follower is not simply an admirer, for an object of admiration does not make the admirer move. On the contrary, to be a follower is to allow oneself to be led.
- **Tasting** the mystery of God – *Abba, Father!* – and surrendering to God's will – *Fiat voluntas tua!*

Gospel discipleship in the Lord Jesus constitutes the very essence of any form of consecrated life. The relationship between consecrated life and the radical following of Jesus is not a monopolizing relationship but rather one of serving and enlivening, of making possible and manifesting the discipleship that all are called to. Thus, when all Christian faithful follow Jesus Christ in an authentic way, we can say that consecrated life has accomplished its mission, rather than think that it has lost its identity.

Consequently, our monastic discipleship in the Lord must be at the service of the one discipleship of Christ belonging to the whole Church. It is a service that makes it possible to carry out this discipleship and bear witness to it.

*Cistercian monks and nuns are called to follow Christ along the way marked out by the Gospel, as interpreted by the Rule of St. Benedict and the tradition of Cîteaux.*

(Statute on Formation, 1)

This monastic and cenobitic discipleship is an experiential reality lived out in our daily lives. We can consider it to be:

**-A shared vocation (con-vocation):** more than just a vocation, it is an invitation to live with Jesus by living together with others.

**-A way of living as Jesus lived:** being consecrated and consecrating ourselves by means of our vows of monastic profession.

**-A life oriented toward Jesus:** seeking and finding him, entering into his Mystery and being mystically transformed by it.

**-A sharing in his mission:** by means of the contemplative witness of our *conversatio morum* rooted in the Gospel.

Isaac, Abbot of the monastery of Stella, philosopher and theologian, offers us a concise teaching on the two-fold movement involved in our discipleship:

*Therefore let this be a model of life for you, brethren, for such is the true way of holy conversatio: to live already in the eternal homeland with Christ by thought and desire, yet never failing to exercise charity for the sake of Christ while still on this toilsome pilgrimage. To follow Christ upward toward the Father, refining, simplifying, enlivening yourself through the quiet of meditation, and to follow Christ downward toward your brother, actively extending yourself, dividing yourself in every which way, becoming all things to all. Disregard nothing where Christ is concerned, seek nothing that is not for the sake of Christ. Thirst for one thing only, occupy yourself with one thing only, in the one Christ, yet be willing to serve all in the manifold Christ.*  
(Sermon 12)

Clearly, our discipleship in the Lord is our "plan of life," an undertaking that also takes on a certain organizational form in order to become an historically instituted way of life. Moreover, our monastic profession not only allows us to follow the Lord in a radical way, it also places us in a sociologically marginal framework. We are a very small minority called to be *a splendid sign of the heavenly kingdom within the changing conditions of our times* (*Perfectae Caritatis* 1 and 2). Our very identity requires "relevance." Therefore, our visible form and our presence can either promote or undermine the deep longing for transcendence that is proper to humankind.

### 3. Discipleship and self-denial

It is impossible to follow the Lord according to the Gospel without renunciation and self-denial. Monks and nuns of all times, especially in periods when monasticism has flourished or undergone renewal, have been able to take their baptismal renunciation of the world and of the devil to the extreme. This is why early monks and nuns were known as *renuciantes*.

I am well aware that self-denial does not rate too highly in the scale of values of a *hedonistic* culture given to seeking pleasure, be it as an *affluent society* or a consumerist society. At the same time, it has to be recognized that certain extravagances or exaggerations in the past have contributed to this discredit. However, experience shows that the loss of faith or of monastic identity renders the self-denial involved in discipleship impossible or unbearable.

It therefore needs to be made clear that truly Christian and gospel renunciation means putting aside certain values, not in order to discredit them, but rather out of preference for higher values. Renunciation, then, is not justified by itself, but rather by the greater good being sought. The greater good and the preference that justifies renunciation is the God of the Kingdom and the Kingdom of God, it is Jesus dead and risen for our salvation.

At heart, discipleship and renunciation consist in taking up the cross of self-denial in order that the kingdom may come. Let us listen to the Teacher: *If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it* (Mt 16:24-26; cf. 6:10).

These words of Jesus are of such great importance for our ascetical discipleship and our mystical conformation with his person, that they deserve some commentary.

First of all, they must be understood within the context of the preceding passage where we find the reason for these words. Peter wants at all cost to prevent Jesus from going up to Jerusalem where suffering awaits him. By his attitude, he is interfering with Jesus' mission and God's plan. This is why Jesus says to him: *you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things*. It is precisely at this moment that Jesus began to teach his disciples how to think in God's way rather than in a human way: *If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves...*

Note the conditional "if." To follow Jesus is a free choice, we have to *want* to do so. However, simply *wanting* to is not enough: there is need to confirm the choice's authenticity. The fact of denying oneself and taking up one's cross brings out the truth of this choice. Discipleship and self-denial always go together.

Everything seems to indicate that the disciples were surprised at what Jesus required of them. Perhaps this is why he used a wisdom proverb to justify his demands: *those who want to save their life will lose it...*, even though the only valid justification here would be to lose one's life *for him, for Jesus*. It should be noted that *wanting* to follow Jesus is parallel to *wanting* to save one's own life. Note also the reversal of the situation: the one who wants to gain, loses, and the one who is willing to lose, gains.

The parable of the treasure hidden in the field can perhaps shed light on this radical and paradoxical saying of Jesus. The one who finds a treasure (the Kingdom of heaven) hidden in a field, *in his joy goes and sells all he has and buys that field* (Mt 13:44). Whoever loses everything or leaves everything behind, even by selling it, in order to obtain Jesus and his Kingdom, loses nothing but rather gains everything. This is the reason for joy and exultation.

In the light of what has just been said, I would like to redefine the monk or nun, not only as a *renunciante* but as someone who chooses, freely and in a radical way, to think and feel as God thinks and feels. This is why the monk or nun is willing to risk and lose everything in order to gain everything, and can therefore leap for joy because of being able to be with Jesus, to belong to Jesus, to be Jesus.

Saint Benedict is very clear when it comes to the necessity of self-denial. The tenth instrument of good works says, *Renounce yourself in order to follow Christ* (RB 4:10). Other passages in the Rule can also be read in this light: *No one is to pursue what he judges better for himself, but instead, what he judges better for someone else* (72:7); *hate the urgings of self-will* (4:60), *earnestly competing in obedience to one another* (72:6); *let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ* (72:11 and 4:21). Benedict's Rule, therefore, is addressed to *renunciantes*, to those who renounce their own desires and will (Prol. 3).

Within this context of self-denial, I would like to go back to what was said earlier about the criteria of discerning a monastic vocation. Saint Benedict puts it this way: *The concern must be whether the novice truly seeks God and whether he shows eagerness for the Work of God, for obedience and for trials* (RB 58:7). Exegetical discussions of this text aside, it seems clear that the way to discern the

authenticity of this seeking is to test it in the areas mentioned: the extent to which one is given over to a life of prayer, whether the will of others is placed over self-will, whether those things that cast pride underfoot are accepted. Benedict is very concrete and practical: seeking God bears itself out in the fight against selfishness and pride. As Saint Bernard says, these are the roots of the capital sins:

*There are two kinds of leprosy in the heart: self-will (propria voluntas) and attachment to one's own judgment (proprium consilium). By self-will I mean what is held in common neither with God or with others, but solely for ourselves. That is, when we do what we want, not to honor God nor to be of use to others, but only for selfish purposes, and this without the intention of pleasing God or of benefitting others, but only in order to satisfy our own impulses. (...) The leprosy of attachment to one's own judgment (...) is proper to those who have zeal for God but not enlightened zeal. They are so tied up in their own error and so obstinate in it, that they cannot accept any one else's judgement. They are divisive, enemies of peace (...). Full of themselves, great in their own eyes, ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, they seek to impose their own will. Can worse pride be imagined...? (Pasc 3:3-4)*

Jesus' and Benedict's teaching may come across as hard and demanding. Yet we have to recognize that our selfishness and pride are much harder on our brothers and sisters and place much heavier demands on them than does this gospel parable. I consider it a serious mistake to accept someone for monastic profession as long as self-will has not yet been dealt a mortal blow and subjected itself entirely to the common will.

We are all familiar with Cistercian doctrine on "self-will" and "common will." To renounce self-will, selfishness, and that self-centeredness which places us in opposition to others, is the to be on the path toward the common will, towards mystical union with God and union with others. Our asceticism consists in the progressive elimination of this self-centered *proprium* or unlikeness to God, in order to cling to God and reflect his image. Only in this way can we be of one heart and one spirit with others and with God.

At the same time, we must not forget that the young monks and nuns of our communities need affirmation, need to take an active role, to attain personal self-realization. They have a need to be someone, to feel as if they are someone and be recognized as such. This gives rise to a basic and unavoidable tension, the tension between affirmation of self and affirmation of monastic *conversatio*, especially with regard to the renunciation and self-denial it involves. Experience shows that only a deep interpersonal relationship with Jesus Christ can bridge the gap between these two realities. At times, they run the risk of canceling each other out. One young monk or nun who is forever "submissive" can have a more negative influence on a community than three young monks or nuns in a period of rebellion.

Self-denial and renunciation involve a basic shift from seeing life as a gift received to seeing it as a gift-to-be-offered. It means acting out of the knowledge that life flows abundantly when it is surrendered. Those who break free from their own center discover a center that has no bounds. Those who unbind themselves through self-denial are able to take on the ties of love.

#### **4. Discipleship and the women followers of Jesus**

As the saying goes, deeds speak louder than words. When it comes to following Jesus, models are not lacking, and we find many in the Gospels and in the Church. Jesus himself could even be considered a model of faithfully following the will of the Father. As for the men followers, I will leave them aside here, since, with one exception, they fled when faced with the cross and Calvary.

Instead, I'll choose the example of the women followers who did not weaken at the time of pain and death.

Let us take a look at what the Evangelists tell us. Luke associates a group of women with the Twelve who followed Jesus: *And the twelve were with him, and also some women*. We are told that these women had been healed of sicknesses or evil spirits and that they provided for Jesus and the group out of their own means (Lk 8:1-3).

It should be pointed out that the Gospels do not recount the vocation of any of these women. The apostles are "chosen" by Jesus and follow him in response to this call. The women "choose" Jesus and follow him out of love. They choose him and follow him because they have experienced his redeeming love: they had been *healed of evil spirits and infirmities* (Lk 8:2). They have experienced the victory of love over sin, sickness, the influence of evil spirits and death. They have believed in the coming of the Kingdom of God and have intuited Jesus' transcendency. For all these reasons, they more easily become mediators of love.

There is no doubt that these women were true *disciples*, for they *followed* Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem (Lk 23:49). All of them held firm when the time came for the cross. Thus they would be the first to announce the resurrection.

Mary Magdalene stands out in this group. The Magdalene, as she was known among the disciples, took part in the itinerant life of Jesus' group. Her name would indicate that she had left her village behind, since she would hardly be called the Magdalene if she still lived among the people of Magdala. Everything seems to indicate that she had no husband at that time: otherwise she would have been called by his name rather than by the name of her home town. This witness of the death and burial of Jesus is the one who found the tomb empty and received the Easter message. She is the first to have encountered the risen Lord and the first to proclaim the good news of the resurrection. Let us look into some of these events in further detail.

In describing the scene on Calvary, Matthew tells us: *There were also many women there, looking on from afar (...), among them was Mary Magdalene* (Mt 27:55-56). She was there, trying to get a closer look, trying to enter into the mystery of Jesus' death on the cross, the mystery of crucified love. Luke, for his part, tells us that the women *remained and looked on*, thus highlighting their condition as contemplatives and witnesses (Lk 23:49).

The Evangelist John adds an important detail: *Standing by the cross of Jesus... was Mary Magdalene* (Jn 19:25). That is to say, she left the group of women that were *contemplating* the scene from afar in order to be near Jesus and his mother. She drew near in order to be closer to the mystery, to love, to the One she loved. She is a witness of the dialogue between Jesus, his mother and John, and also a witness of two facts that fulfilled the Scriptures (Jn 19:33-37):

-*They did not break his legs*, which refers to the paschal lamb through whom the new covenant is established and sins are forgiven (Ex 12:46). This also refers to the *Righteous One*, whom Yahweh has set free and in whom all debts are remitted (Ps 34:21, Is 52:13 - 53:12).

-*They shall look on him whom they have pierced* (Zac 12:10). The death of the *Pierced One* is thus placed in an eschatological context: the siege of Jerusalem is lifted, national mourning is proclaimed (Zac 12:10-14), and a fountain is opened *to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness* (Zac 13:1; cf. Jn 19:34, *there came out blood and water*).

We might wonder to what extent Mary Magdalene – the one who had looked on from afar and drew near to be close to the mystery – had helped the beloved disciple understand the deep meaning of the events that fulfilled the Scriptures.

Once again, at the moment of Jesus' burial, *Mary Magdalene...saw where he was laid* (Mk 15:47). The adverb *where* highlights her role as witness, since she knew the exact place where the body of Jesus was laid. Luke also conveys this when he mentions that the women saw *how his body was laid* (23:55).

*And when the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought spices so that they might go and anoint him* (Mk 16:1). That is to say, prolong and complete the anointing that Mary of Bethany had begun (Jn 12:1-8) days before in the house of Simon the Leper (Mk 14:3-9) and which Joseph of Arimathea had not done. Mary Magdalene now wants not only to look on, but also to touch him.

*Immediately after, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the sepulcher* (Mt 28:1-8). She continued to look on (contemplate), even when there was apparently nothing more to see. Perhaps she recalled the words of the prophet: *You shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves* (Ez 37:1-14). And as she contemplated the sepulcher, something unexpected happened: *There was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone, and sat upon it* (Mt 28,2).

Mary Magdalene received a revelation and interpreted some of the signs. The *great earthquake* reminded her of what happened when Jesus breathed his last: the tombs were opened and many of the dead came to life (cf. Mt 27:51-52). She understood that the *Angel of the Lord*, symbol of the saving power of God, appears when there is an important revelation at hand. And, seeing the angel sit upon the stone, she intuited victory over death.

It is not surprising, then, that when the others had gone, since they expected nothing more, she stayed on, *weeping, outside the tomb* (Jn 20:11). She weeps because she is looking but not finding, but she does not despair. Her tears of suffering and pain purify her eyes and heart in order to meet the One she loved.

And the meeting is not long in coming. In John's account, behind the words, we can hear the bridal music of the Song of Songs (Jn 20:11-18). *As she wept she stooped to look into the tomb, and she saw two angels in white*. From considering the tomb, we pass to considering the angels: the whiteness of the angels already announces life. The angels say to her: *Woman, why are you weeping?* They call her "Woman" just as Jesus had called his mother at Cana and on the cross. Mary Magdalene symbolizes the "faithful bride" of the new covenant: *By night I sought him whom my soul loves, I sought him, but found him not. The watchmen found me "Have you seen him whom my soul loves?"* (S of S 3:1-3). Mary Magdalene answers the angels: *I weep because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him*. She calls Jesus "my Lord," using the term a wife would use for her husband.

Immediately after this, *she turned round and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus*. Jesus is standing, a sign of someone fully alive. Mary Magdalene does not recognize him because she had never before seen him this way, risen and in a different "form" as it were. The Risen Lord then pronounces his first words: *Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?* Jesus also calls her "Woman" and asks the same question the angels did. To seek Jesus is a sign of discipleship (cf. Jn 1:38) and of love: *By night I sought him whom my soul loves, I sought him, but*



*found him not* (S of S 3:1). Mary Magdalene, for the Risen Lord, is the "faithful bride" of the new covenant.

The dialogue becomes more and more intimate. Jesus calls her by name, just as the Good Pastor calls his sheep by name, for he knows *his own* (Jn 10:3-4), and says to her: *Mary*. This too is a sign of special favor as a disciple. *Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end* (Jn13:1). Mary Magdalene enters into the world of the Risen Lord through the intimacy of hearing her name pronounced, just as Lazarus, upon hearing his name, came out of the tomb (Jn11:43).

Thus recognized in the secret of her being, *she turned (drew near to him) and said "Rabboni!" ("my Teacher")*. Mary had recognized the voice of the Good Pastor, and as a good disciple, she followed her Lord and Teacher: *the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice* (Jn 10:3-4).

Mutual recognition spontaneously leads to an embrace. For Mary Magdalene, to see is not enough, she needs to touch. *Jesus said to her, "Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father.* The evangelist then goes on presenting the Good News. The relationship of Jesus with Mary Magdalene makes manifest the marriage covenant of God with his chosen people. At Passover, in synagogues, it was common to read from the Song of Songs, a poem of the mutual love between God and Israel, a poem that was also given a messianic interpretation in the first century. John has all of this in mind when telling of Jesus' encounter with Mary Magdalene. Mary Magdalene met her Lord and did not want to let go of the love of her soul: *When I found him whom my soul loves, I held him, and would not let him go* (cf. S of S 3:1-4).

Because of her unyielding faith, Mary Magdalene is also a beloved disciple. This is why we find her at the foot of the cross along with the mother of Jesus and the disciple whom Jesus loved. When Jesus says to his mother, *behold your son*, he was also saying, *behold your daughter*. Mary Magdalene too receives the mother of Jesus as her own mother and is received by her (Jn 19:26).

The goal of the journey for both Jesus and his followers is the Father. Nothing must hold us back before reaching Him (cf Jn 14:18-20): *go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God* (Jn 20:17). Even though Jesus is Lord, Teacher and Spouse, he calls his disciples and followers brothers and sisters. Jesus goes to the Father in order to present his own as brothers and sisters, as sons and daughters of the one Father (Jn 14:2-3). Mary Magdalene is given the mission of announcing the Lord and his Reign, a reign of universal sonship, brotherhood and sisterhood. This involves a new covenant (*my Father and your Father, my God and your God*): *I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people* (Jer 31,33; cf Zac 13:9).

Obedient to the Risen Lord, *Mary Magdalene went and said to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her*. She announced the good news, not only in this instance, but continually, as a messenger, as one sent, as an apostle to the apostles. She understood in that moment the words Jesus had used on the day of his farewell: *In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you* (Jn 14:20). The one who was looking and seeking finally found and "saw" because she believed so deeply (Jn 20:8). Jesus dwells in her heart, and she in his.

The evangelists present Mary Magdalene to us as a follower and disciple-bride of Jesus, the most important of the group of women, the one closest to the Teacher and most dear to him. She was witness of the crucifixion, death, burial and resurrection of the Lord. She was a very influential

person in the early days of the mission. Mary Magdalene is for us, monks and nuns, a model par excellence of contemplative seeking of the Lord, and a symbol of the marriage covenant of God with his people. She also teaches us that the encounter implies bearing witness afterwards. Saved in love through Him who is love, Mary Magdalene becomes a mediator of the good news par excellence: Love has conquered death and our human love has been transformed by the glory of divine love!

Deeds speak louder than words. Mary Magdalen was also inspired by the exemplary deeds of a model. The mother of Jesus, because of her faith and love, was the first disciple to follow her own son. Her example inspired both men and women followers at the very beginning, and also inspires us. Let us pray, along with Saint Bernard, that her mediation and the grace of Holy Spirit will not be frustrated.

*How few follow your footsteps, Lord Jesus! How few let themselves be drawn to you or be willingly led in the way of your commands! Some are drawn and can exclaim, draw me after you. Others let themselves be led and say, bring me into your chamber, my king. Some are caught up to the third heaven as was the Apostle. Happy are the first of these, for by their endurance they will gain their lives. Happier still are the second of these, for in him their heart trusts. And happiest of all are the third of these, for they have buried their own power of judgment, as it were, in God's unfathomable mercy. In their fervor of spirit they are caught up into the riches of God's glory, be it in the body or out of the body, aware only of having been caught up in him. They are happy who never cease to follow you, Lord Jesus, unlike that fugitive spirit who wanted to ascend straight away and instead was struck down by the full power of God's right hand. But we are your people, the flock of your pasture. With your help we will follow you, come to you, for you are the way, the truth and the life. You are the way by your example, you are the truth in your promises, and you are the life as a reward. You have the words of eternal life, and we know and believe that you are the Christ, the Son of the living God, God blessed above all things for ever (Asc 2:6).*

With my fraternal affection in Mary of Saint Joseph,

Bernardo Olivera  
Abbot General