

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I want to share with you something of our community life in these recent times marked by the crisis of the pandemic COVID 19, the beginning of which coincided exactly with my abbatial election (January 26, 2020) and the blessing that followed (February 23, 2020) just in good time before the great quarantine which we have all known in Italy and in Europe.

I am in the process of making my “novitiate” as a new abbot at this particular time, certainly not easy. I have put many questions to myself on these coincidences: these are God’s surprises! We must welcome them as they come. But I must say that I perceived immediately a great interior peace and trust in God, the support of my brothers, despite the problems and fragility of our community, and the somewhat painful vicissitudes of which I will speak to you. In faith we can only thank the Lord.

Abbatial Election As a prelude, it is important to mention the regular Visitation in May of 2019, because in listening to the brothers and with the discernment of the Visitors, it was decided that the abbatial election would take place in 2020, at the end of the mandate of Dom José as Superior ad nutum, before the General Chapter (later postponed to 2021). This decision represented an important moment for our community, highly significant and symbolic. After some years, we have a new Italian abbot, chosen from among the members of the community. All this has been possible thanks to the mercy of God and the patient and precious pastoral action of Dom José with us in these last years. We have lived a beautiful experience of faith and fraternal communion, a mutually renewed trust and unity of the community. We have all been happy and grateful for this gift, as all the brothers have said in our community exchanges and personal colloquies.

Pandemic At the beginning of the previous month of March, Brother Vincent (81 years old) fell gravely ill, [tested] positive for the Coronavirus, and was admitted to the Tor Vergata Polyclinic in Rome, in the Department of Infectious Diseases. His situation is very serious: he had brochopneumonia, a respiratory attack in a patient affected with heart disease, and already fragile in [his] bronchi and lung. At the end of three weeks he was in the process of healing from all that; he [tested] negative again for the virus and was breathing well without help but, unfortunately, his heart did not endure all this stress and he died of a heart attack. Starting from the day of his hospitalization, we no longer had the possibility of seeing him or listening to him; we had no information except by telephoning the doctors of the hospital, because he had to be in total isolation. He died alone, without any religious consolation. That caused us much pain.

Even after his death we had had been unable to see him, nor bless his remains nor celebrate his funeral, nor even to accompany him to the cemetery of Tre Fontane where he is buried. These were the most critical days of the pandemic and it was forbidden to go out of one’s home; besides, we were in “quarantine” from this positive case in the community. We have had the first-hand experience of an unaccompanied death, without the minimum of christian piety: a terrible thing, unimaginable. Truly, we have closely shared the experience of so many persons and families in the same conditions. I would say that, for us, this has been a strong communion with what all of society was living, perceived “in our own skin” and not just by hear-say or by reading in the newspapers.

But this was not the end of it. At the beginning of May, Bro. Mark, too, was found to be positive with the virus. For some time, he had intercostal pain, and our doctors sent him to emergency for examination. The first two swabs were negative. The lung scan showed nothing abnormal and the tests were good. For the third swab it showed positive. He has been in isolation at the monastery, with therapy, for two weeks, then, after having repeated the examination, he has been declared healed. I should say that all this has seemed a

little strange to us because the brother did not complain of anything in particular. On this occasion the whole community has undergone the swab, whence it has resulted that we are all negative.

Despite all this, the community has on the whole been quite serene. From a psychological point of view, there was more evident in some brothers a certain fear of the unexpected, from emotional pressure in the face of what was happening outside and in the heart of the community. The regular life continued as always with its horarium. The grace of the monastic conversatio, with the alternating rhythm between the Opus Dei, work, lectio divina and fraternal life has been our strength and our support. We have closed the church, the guesthouse and our little store. In this way, in fact, we have been brought back to our major and radical separation from the world, to solitude and to contemplative quiet. Holy Week and the paschal Triduum were lived with more recollection and a greater intensity. In our community meetings, my exhortation was to look with faith at these events and, also, at our “fears”: “God takes care of us and continues to care for us!”: more than ever, this is the moment to experience this! I have continued my Sunday chapters on the theme “Liturgy, Beauty, and Spiritual Meanings which I have commented on previously. It seemed important to me that, precisely in this moment — so sad, and in some ways “mortifying and depressing — we should hear a summons and a return to the deepest roots of our existence, to have our thoughts withdrawn a little from a certain materialism that is quite scientific and nihilistic. All that is true is beautiful!

At this time, with an attempt to return to normality, we have re-opened our store while observing the required safety precautions. The guesthouse remains closed. We decided not to use it except for some youths seeking a vocation. We have two aspirants who are having some experience within the community (they had previously passed some time in the guesthouse) and there are three or four others waiting. Our novice, Bro. Mario, is about to conclude his second year of the novitiate, and Bro. Emmanuel renewed his vows for the third year this last May 13th. Half of the community (14 brothers) is composed of elderly persons over 80 years of age, but still in good health, and who participate a good deal in the liturgical and community life by various services, according to their strength (all come to Vigils).

Dom José is doing well enough and will remain with us until next month, November. He needs his time and his rhythms. He helps in the area of formation.

Our transfer project, continues, little by little. The construction for the restoration of the house of Fano, after a two-month shut-down because of the coronavirus, resumed work at the beginning of May. The work is progressing very well and should be finished at the end of summer. There remains the black spot of the sale of Frattocchie which has not yet been made. I entrust myself to your prayers for this intention.

Some Personal Reflections For one who has faith, nothing happens by chance. For those who have an ear trained to listen, God speaks in history, in events. Covid-19 blocked us all, and us monks, also: not by choice, but by constraint. Where man does not manage, God manages, because He loves us: “Stop, know that I am God.” (Ps. 45:11)

In our western society the whole atmosphere we breathe is too frenetic, stressed by the wear and tear of the rhythms of modern life. It seems to me that this “pollution” has subtly and unconsciously penetrated our monasteries also. But precisely in such a critical time as this, and in some ways so painful, we have experienced that, in our monasteries also, one can recover some of the essential values of our monastic life and live with more intensity, more authenticity, (I would also say with more “radicality”) our common values like separation from the world, solitude, enclosure, while limiting going out [of the enclosure], and certain useless contacts, and with a calmer rhythm, less hurried, less breathless, in our day to day conduct. We must ask ourselves if we truly give all, and the best, to our contemplative monastic vocation.

Often the question comes back — which I also pose to myself — on what we are called to do, as monks and nuns, at this moment and when the crisis is passed. To continue to believe in what the Constitution [#31] asks of us: "Fidelity to the monastic life and zeal for the kingdom of God are intimately linked. Monks carry this apostolic concern in their heart. But their way of participating in the mission of Christ and of His Church, as well as inserting themselves in the local Church, is their contemplative life itself. To continue to believe that "by the faithful practice of their monastic life, as by their own secret apostolic fertility, they serve the people of God and the whole of humanity." [Const.3]

I think that all of us, precisely in this last period, have experienced the wisdom, the beauty and the goodness of the Cistercian *conversatio*, how it supports our personal and community life: a life hidden with Christ in God, but precisely for that, one highly fertile in the midst of a suffering and disorientated population. It is just in these days, that a young father of three children, a friend of the monastery, told me that the sole fact that we monks are here, with our prayerful fidelity, did him good, gave him courage in his faith and for his journey: it is a testimony that moved me and confirmed the importance and the goodness of our life given to Christ, in the heart of the Church and of the world. For me, for us, there, truly, is where we find our "treasure": Brothers "...we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and does not come from us." [2 Cor 4:7]

In Communion of Prayer

Br. Louis Maria

Frattochie, July 11, 2020