

LIFE IS THE ART OF ENCOUNTER

Formation programme
based on the encyclical *Fratelli tutti*



OCSO

2026

“Life, for all its confrontations, is the art of encounter.” [Vinicius de Moraes] I have frequently called for the growth of a culture of encounter (...) to create a many-faceted polyhedron whose different sides form a variegated unity, in which “the whole is greater than the part.” The image of a polyhedron can represent a society where differences coexist, complementing, enriching and reciprocally illuminating one another.

(Fratelli tutti, 215)

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Introduction

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Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Community life is at the heart of our Cistercian vocation. We do not seek God as isolated individuals, but as brothers and sisters called together by Christ, under a Rule and an abbot or abbess, in a daily school of charity. Yet we also know from experience that a community is never a finished reality. It is a living body that needs continual care, conversion and renewal. Belonging to one another is both a gift we receive, and a task entrusted to us.

For this reason, I am pleased to present this formation programme, inspired by Pope Francis' encyclical *Fratelli tutti*. The Holy Father's invitation to universal fraternity and social friendship speaks directly to our monastic way of life. The great questions addressed in the encyclical are not found only outside the monastery. They touch the daily reality of our communities: How do we create a genuine sense of belonging? How do we receive differences as gifts? How do we listen to one another? How can wounded relationships be healed? And how can our communities become places where peace is patiently learned and practised?

The five themes of this programme — belonging to a community, opening ourselves to cultural diversity, sitting down and listening to others, rebuilding community, and becoming artisans of peace — offer a rich and coherent path of reflection. Each theme brings the teaching of *Fratelli tutti* into dialogue with Holy Scripture, the Rule of Saint Benedict and our Cistercian tradition. The voices of Saint Bernard, Aelred of Rievaulx, William of Saint-Thierry, Thomas Merton, André Louf and Christian de Chergé and others remind us that fraternity, attentive listening, compassion and peace are not secondary aspects of our vocation. They belong to its very heart.

The questions proposed for dialogue are particularly important. This programme is not intended simply to provide material for individual reading or intellectual study. It invites each community to stop, listen and speak together. It asks us to look honestly at the quality of our relationships and at the concrete ways in which we welcome one another, especially in moments of fragility. It challenges us to recognise both the gifts and the difficulties created by differences of age, formation, nationality, culture and personal history. Such differences need not weaken communion. If they are received with humility and faith, they can become a source of enrichment and a privileged place where the Holy Spirit speaks to us.

No community can presume that the work of building communion has been completed. Even a community with a long and venerable history must continually learn how to be a community today. Changes within the Church, society and our own Order, as well as the growing cultural diversity and fragility of many of our houses, make this work increasingly urgent. The future of our communities does not depend only upon numbers, buildings or economic resources. It depends above all upon the evangelical quality of our life together: our capacity to listen, to forgive, to bear one another's burdens, to make room for difference and to begin again after failure or conflict.

I therefore warmly encourage all the communities of the Order to make generous use of this formation programme. It may be adapted to the rhythm and circumstances of each house. What matters is that sufficient time be given to prayer, personal reflection and genuine community dialogue. The aim is not to reach quick or easy conclusions, but to begin or deepen a process: a process of encounter, conversion and growth in communion. The programme will bear fruit when reflection leads to concrete choices in the daily life of the community.

On behalf of the Order, I express my sincere gratitude to the members of the Commission for Formation who prepared this material. I thank them for the time, care and discernment they have devoted to selecting these texts, bringing the teaching of *Fratelli tutti* into dialogue with our monastic tradition, and formulating questions that can help our communities speak together with honesty and hope. Their work is a valuable service to the life and unity of the Order.

May this programme help each of our monasteries become ever more truly a school of the Lord's service, a house of mercy and a workshop of peace. May it renew in us the conviction that community is not merely the setting in which we live our vocation: it is one of the principal ways in which Christ comes to meet us, forms us in love and draws us together into communion with himself.

Rome, 20 August 2026, Solemnity of Saint Bernard

Dom Bernardus Peeters OCSO
Abbot General

Belonging to a Community

1.1. *Fratelli tutti*:

This [global] culture unifies the world, but divides persons and nations, for “as society becomes ever more globalized, it makes us neighbours but does not make us brothers”. We are more alone than ever in an increasingly massified world that promotes individual interests and weakens the communitarian dimension of life. (12)

Individualism does not make us more free, more equal, more fraternal. The mere sum of individual interests is not capable of generating a better world for the whole human family. Nor can it save us from the many ills that are now increasingly globalized. Radical individualism is a virus that is extremely difficult to eliminate, for it is clever. It makes us believe that everything consists in giving free rein to our own ambitions, as if by pursuing ever greater ambitions and creating safety nets we would somehow be serving the common good. (105)

In today’s world, the sense of belonging to a single human family is fading, and the dream of working together for justice and peace seems an outdated utopia. What reigns instead is a cool, comfortable and globalized indifference, born of deep disillusionment concealed behind a deceptive illusion: thinking that we are all-powerful, while failing to realize that we are all in the same boat. (...) Isolation and withdrawal into one’s own interests are never the way to restore hope and bring about renewal. Rather, it is closeness; it is the culture of encounter. Isolation, no; closeness, yes. Culture clash, no; culture of encounter, yes”. (30)

How wonderful would it be, even as we discover faraway planets, to rediscover the needs of the brothers and sisters who orbit around us. (31)

Once more we realized that no one is saved alone; we can only be saved together. As I said in those days, the storm has exposed our vulnerability and uncovered those false and superfluous certainties around which we constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits and priorities.... (32)

The pain, uncertainty and fear, and the realization of our own limitations (...) have only made it all the more urgent that we rethink our styles of life, our relationships, the organization of our societies and, above all, the meaning of our existence. (33)

Love also impels us towards universal communion. No one can mature or find fulfilment by withdrawing from others. By its very nature, love calls for growth in openness and the ability to accept others as part of a continuing adventure that makes every periphery converge in a greater sense of mutual belonging. As Jesus told us: “You are all brothers” (Mt 23:8). (95)

Unless we recover the shared passion to create a community of belonging and solidarity worthy of our time, our energy and our resources, the global illusion that misled us will

collapse and leave many in the grip of anguish and emptiness. (...) The notion of “every man for himself” will rapidly degenerate into a free-for-all (36)

We forget that “there is no worse form of alienation than to feel uprooted, belonging to no one. A land will be fruitful, and its people bear fruit and give birth to the future, only to the extent that it can foster a sense of belonging among its members, create bonds of integration between generations and different communities, and avoid all that makes us insensitive to others and leads to further alienation”. (53)

This need to transcend our own limitations also applies to different regions and countries. Indeed, “the ever-increasing number of interconnections and communications in today’s world makes us powerfully aware of the unity and common destiny of the nations. In the dynamics of history, and in the diversity of ethnic groups, societies and cultures, we see the seeds of a vocation to form a community composed of brothers and sisters who accept and care for one another”. (96)

1.2. Our tradition:

There is among the brothers such great unity, such great harmony, that what each has is considered as belonging to everyone, and what everyone has to each one. What pleases me in a marvelous way is that there is no partiality and no favoritism because of birth [rank]. Necessity alone gives rise to diversity, and infirmity alone to disparity. What the common work of all produces is distributed to each, not as physical attachment or personal likings dictate, but according to the needs of each person.

(AELRED OF RIEVAULX, *The Mirror of Charity*, II.17.43, pp. 194-195)

For each one of us has his unique gift from God, one this but another that. One person can make an offering of more work; another, more vigils; another, more fasting; another, more prayer; and another, more lectio or meditation. From all these offerings let one tabernacle be made, so that, as our legislator commands: No one shall say or presume that anything is his own, but all things are common to all. This is to be understood, brothers, not only of our cowls and robes but far more of our strengths and spiritual gifts.

No one therefore should boast on his own about any grace given by God as if it were exclusively his own. No one should envy his brother because of some grace, as if it were exclusively his. Whatever he has, he should consider the property of all his brothers, and whatever his brother has, he should never doubt is also his. Or that Almighty God can immediately bring to perfection anyone he pleases and bestow all the virtues on any one person. But in his caring way dealing with us he causes each person to need the other and to have in the other what one does not possess in oneself. Thus humility is preserved, charity increased and unity recognized.

(AELRED OF RIEVAULX, *The Liturgical Sermons. The First Clairvaux Collection. Sermons One – Twenty-eight. Advent – All Saints, Sermon Eight. For the Feast of Saint Benedict.* pp.149-150)

Every other man is a piece of myself, for I am a part and a member of mankind. (...) Charity cannot be what it is supposed to be as long as I do not see that my life

represents my own allotment in the life of a whole supernatural organism to which I belong. Only when this truth is absolutely central do other doctrines fit into their proper context. Solitude, humility, self-denial, action and contemplation, the sacraments, the monastic life, the family, war and peace-none of these make sense except in relation to the central reality which is God's love living and acting in those whom He has incorporated in His Christ. Nothing at all makes sense, unless we admit, with John Donne, that: "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main."

(Thomas MERTON, *No Man is an Island*, pp. xxii-xxiii)

1.3. Dialogue:

- a) As a community, what steps can we take to foster a greater sense of belonging?
- b) Given the growing fragility of our communities, how do we see greater interdependence within the Regions and the Order as a whole? A threat? An opportunity? What forms might this interdependence take?
- c) Do we feel that *we are all in the same boat*? Are we genuinely engaged in the joys and sorrows of humanity? Are we attentive to *the signs of the times*? How do we integrate them into our spirituality?

Opening Up to Cultural Diversity

2.1. *Fratelli tutti*:

The arrival of those who are different, coming from other ways of life and cultures, can be a gift, for “the stories of migrants are always stories of an encounter between individuals and between cultures. For the communities and societies to which they come, migrants bring an opportunity for enrichment and the integral human development of all”. (133)

Indeed, when we open our hearts to those who are different, this enables them, while continuing to be themselves, to develop in new ways. The different cultures that have flourished over the centuries need to be preserved, lest our world be impoverished. At the same time, those cultures should be encouraged to be open to new experiences through their encounter with other realities. (...). That is why “we need to communicate with each other, to discover the gifts of each person, to promote that which unites us, and to regard our differences as an opportunity to grow in mutual respect. Patience and trust are called for in such dialogue, permitting individuals, families and communities to hand on the values of their own culture and welcome the good that comes from others’ experiences”. (134)

No one will ever openly deny that they [the migrants] are human beings, yet in practice, by our decisions and the way we treat them, we can show that we consider them less worthy, less important, less human. (39)

Mutual assistance between countries proves enriching for each. A country that moves forward while remaining solidly grounded in its original cultural substratum is a treasure for the whole of humanity. We need to develop the awareness that nowadays we are either all saved together or no one is saved. (137)

There is a kind of “local” narcissism unrelated to a healthy love of one’s own people and culture. It is born of a certain insecurity and fear of the other that leads to rejection and the desire to erect walls for self-defence. Yet it is impossible to be “local” in a healthy way without being sincerely open to the universal, without feeling challenged by what is happening in other places, without openness to enrichment by other cultures, and without solidarity and concern for the tragedies affecting other peoples. (...) A healthy culture, on the other hand, is open and welcoming by its very nature; indeed, “a culture without universal values is not truly a culture”. (146)

Let us realize that as our minds and hearts narrow, the less capable we become of understanding the world around us. (147)

The world grows and is filled with new beauty, thanks to the successive syntheses produced between cultures that are open and free of any form of cultural imposition. (148)

It is helpful to keep in mind that global society is not the sum total of different countries, but rather the communion that exists among them. The mutual sense of belonging is prior to the emergence of individual groups. Each particular group becomes part of the fabric of

universal communion and there discovers its own beauty. All individuals, whatever their origin, know that they are part of the greater human family, without which they will not be able to understand themselves fully. (149)

To see things in this way brings the joyful realization that no one people, culture or individual can achieve everything on its own: to attain fulfilment in life we need others. An awareness of our own limitations and incompleteness, far from being a threat, becomes the key to envisaging and pursuing a common project. (150)

Everything, then, depends on our ability to see the need for a change of heart, attitudes and lifestyles. (166)

2.2. Our tradition:

Well, yes, it helps us, to feel part of a compact fabric of humanity (...). It helps us, to be forced to remain small and dependent, with no control over the evolution of the country. And to be required to live by our official 'social purpose', which is prayer and agricultural work. And to have before our eyes the behaviour of our neighbours, which is generally that of modest and religious people.

It would be more scandalous if we were to fail to fulfil our vocation in such a context. They know how to share. Relationships and hospitality mean a lot to them. We practice this too, often learning lessons...

We accompany them in the situation of insecurity and great disarray that the country is currently going through. "How can you live in such an uncertain house?" a nun asked. But, even more, how could one remain contemplative in a house that is too certain, too benefundata? At the beginning of the Order, they left a stable and comfortable house in Molesme for a desert called Cîteaux "inhabited by wild beasts".

(Christian de CHERGÉ, *Sept vies pour Dieu et l'Algérie*, p. 93)

It is prayer that helps me give each of my brothers his proper place, beyond a life together that is often trying. It also allows me to better sense the things we have in common, despite a certain distance, and the things that complement each other, despite difference.

This unity of all peoples in the Heart of Christ seems even more evident when one loyally *listens to another people in prayer* and discover, through them, that the simplest attitudes and words of spiritual expression transcend religious boundaries, that they are a universal language.

(Christian de CHERGÉ, *L'invincible espérance*, pp. 50-51)

The Holy Spirit is the one who breaks down boundaries. Knowing how to recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit working in the heart of the "other": this adds charm and something evolves and grows in me. We are therefore invited to be continually in a state of VISITATION, like Mary with Elizabeth, to magnify the Lord for what he has accomplished in the "other" ... and in me.

(Christian de CHERGÉ, in *Bulletin du Ribât*, n° 8, janvier 1988, mentioned in MOINES DE TIBHIRINE, *Heureux ceux qui se donnent. La vie donnée plus forte que la mort*, p. 264)

We are not alone nor are we left to ourselves once we are granted an awareness of our interiority. It so sweeps over the person who experiences it that at the same moment he discovers what links him to all other human beings. In fact, because interiority is the life of God within us, it infinitely transcends each one of us, our age, our characteristics, the times in which we live, our culture. It constitutes a transpersonal reality which is also transhistoric. It is our share in eternity; by it we are in contact with all humanity and the universe.

(André LOUF, *Grace Can Do More. Spiritual Accompaniment and Spiritual Growth*, pp. 45)

2.3. Dialogue:

- a) Today, many communities within the Order have members from different nationalities and cultures. Do we see this as an enrichment, or do we accept it with indifference? What can cultural diversity offer us? How do we integrate it into community life?
- b) As members of an Order present on every continent, what would we like to learn from communities living in cultural and religious contexts quite different from our own? What values do we recognize in other cultures?
- c) Is there a group (association, religious community of another denomination, etc.) geographically close to us that we barely know, with whom we could organize a meeting to foster mutual understanding?

3

Sit Down and Listen to Others

3.1. *Fratelli tutti*:

The ability to sit down and listen to others, typical of interpersonal encounters, is paradigmatic of the welcoming attitude shown by those who transcend narcissism and accept others, caring for them and welcoming them into their lives. Yet “today’s world is largely a deaf world... At times, the frantic pace of the modern world prevents us from listening attentively to what another person is saying. Halfway through, we interrupt him and want to contradict what he has not even finished saying. We must not lose our ability to listen”. Saint Francis “heard the voice of God, he heard the voice of the poor, he heard the voice of the infirm and he heard the voice of nature. He made of them a way of life. My desire is that the seed that Saint Francis planted may grow in the hearts of many”. (48)

As silence and careful listening disappear, replaced by a frenzy of texting, this basic structure of sage human communication is at risk. A new lifestyle is emerging, where we create only what we want and exclude all that we cannot control or know instantly and superficially. This process, by its intrinsic logic, blocks the kind of serene reflection that could lead us to a shared wisdom. (49)

Together, we can seek the truth in dialogue, in relaxed conversation or in passionate debate. To do so calls for perseverance; it entails moments of silence and suffering, yet it can patiently embrace the broader experience of individuals and peoples. The flood of information at our fingertips does not make for greater wisdom. Wisdom is not born of quick searches on the internet nor is it a mass of unverified data. That is not the way to mature in the encounter with truth. (50)

Approaching, speaking, listening, looking at, coming to know and understand one another, and to find common ground: all these things are summed up in the one word “dialogue”. If we want to encounter and help one another, we have to dialogue. There is no need for me to stress the benefits of dialogue. I have only to think of what our world would be like without the patient dialogue of the many generous persons who keep families and communities together. Unlike disagreement and conflict, persistent and courageous dialogue does not make headlines, but quietly helps the world to live much better than we imagine. (198)

Some people attempt to flee from reality, taking refuge in their own little world; others react to it with destructive violence. Yet “between selfish indifference and violent protest there is always another possible option: that of dialogue. Dialogue between generations; dialogue among our people, for we are that people; readiness to give and receive, while remaining open to the truth. (199)

Indeed, “in a true spirit of dialogue, we grow in our ability to grasp the significance of what others say and do, even if we cannot accept it as our own conviction. In this way, it becomes

possible to be frank and open about our beliefs, while continuing to discuss, to seek points of contact, and above all, to work and struggle together". (203)

3.2. Our tradition:

Listen carefully, my son, to the master's instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart. This is advice from a father who loves you; welcome it, and faithfully put it into practice. The labor of obedience will bring you back to him from whom you had drifted through the sloth of disobedience. (RB, Prologue)

As often as anything important is to be done in the monastery, the abbot shall call the whole community together and himself explain what the business is; and after hearing the advice of the brothers, let him ponder it and follow what he judges the wiser course. The reason why we have said all should be called for counsel is that the Lord often reveals what is better to the younger. The brothers, for their part, are to express their opinions with all humility, and not presume to defend their own views obstinately (...) If less important business of the monastery is to be transacted, he shall take counsel with the seniors only, as it is written: *Do everything with counsel and you will not be sorry afterward*. (RB, III)

Speak the truth with heart and tongue. (RB, IV)

The second step of humility is that a man loves not his own will nor takes pleasure in the satisfaction of his desires; rather he shall imitate by his actions that saying of the Lord: *I have come not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me* (...) The eleventh step of humility is that a monk speaks gently and without laughter, seriously and with becoming modesty, briefly and reasonably, but without raising his voice, as it is written: "A wise man is known by his few words." (RB, VII)

For Benedict, listening means obedience—that is, the abandonment of one's own will. For him, it is necessary to strip ourselves internally of everything that prevents us from serving freely. But this obedience, or self-emptying, is a narrow path, a passage through the night, an act of faith. He has therefore marked this path with various recommendations concerning the use of speech and silence, establishing a kind of "road code" to attain interiority. This is why the practice of silence as listening appears to Benedict as an ascetic spiritual exercise, a path to liberation, and the practice of speech as an exercise of charity, a source of peace and unity. (...) The essential thing, therefore, is not that the monk should remain silent, but that he should know when to keep quiet, so that his words, like his silence, are acts of charity. However, the monk must also know how to engage in dialogue and exchange. For the proper use of silence and speech serves only the common good of the brothers and the peace of the heart. (...) The Cistercian community is not a hermit community but a community of brothers who have withdrawn into the desert. In this sense, Dom Bernardo Olivera likes to say, with a touch of humor, that Cistercians are not solitary but solidary, for the Cistercian charism is one of community life—more precisely, a life of communion. Silence establishes a kind of fence around the heart, but not one that shuts out the concerns of the world or

encloses the monk in isolation and disconnection. Rather, silence—this closure of the heart—opens us to the love of God and neighbor. (...) If silence is listening to the other, it becomes love, a gift of grace rather than mere observance. Silence is the act of "recollecting, paying attention, and concentrating on the other." "In silence, there is room for a multitude."

(Marie-Benoît BERNARD, *Le silence, c'est beau d'amitié*, pp. 225-229)

3.3. Dialogue:

- a) Silence, an atmosphere of serenity, listening, and dialogue go together. What are the noises within me that make it difficult to listen to others? Try to name them.
- b) Remaining open to dialogue means persevering in the search for truth. How do I welcome the motives and needs of others, even when they are expressed in a more forceful manner? What characterizes compassionate listening?
- c) As a community, what concrete steps can we take to foster a better atmosphere of listening and dialogue?

Rebuilding a Community

4.1. *Fratelli tutti*:

Only one person [the Samaritan] stopped, approached the man and cared for him personally, even spending his own money to provide for his needs. He also gave him something that in our frenetic world we cling to tightly: he gave him his time. Certainly, he had his own plans for that day, his own needs, commitments and desires. Yet he was able to put all that aside when confronted with someone in need. Without even knowing the injured man, he saw him as deserving of his time and attention. (63)

Caught up as we are with our own needs, the sight of a person who is suffering disturbs us. It makes us uneasy, since we have no time to waste on other people's problems. These are symptoms of an unhealthy society. A society that seeks prosperity but turns its back on suffering. (65)

The parable shows us how a community can be rebuilt by men and women who identify with the vulnerability of others, who reject the creation of a society of exclusion, and act instead as neighbours, lifting up and rehabilitating the fallen for the sake of the common good. (67)

The parable clearly does not indulge in abstract moralizing, nor is its message merely social and ethical. It speaks to us of an essential and often forgotten aspect of our common humanity: we were created for a fulfilment that can only be found in love. (68)

Each day we have to decide whether to be Good Samaritans or indifferent bystanders. And if we extend our gaze to the history of our own lives and that of the entire world, all of us are, or have been, like each of the characters in the parable. All of us have in ourselves something of the wounded man, something of the robber, something of the passers-by, and something of the Good Samaritan. (69)

The parable then asks us to take a closer look at the passers-by. (...) There are many ways to pass by at a safe distance: we can retreat inwards, ignore others, or be indifferent to their plight. Or simply look elsewhere. (73)

The guarantee of an authentic openness to God (...) is a way of practising the faith that helps open our hearts to our brothers and sisters. (74)

Let us seek out others and embrace the world as it is, without fear of pain or a sense of inadequacy, because there we will discover all the goodness that God has planted in human hearts. Difficulties that seem overwhelming are opportunities for growth, not excuses for a glum resignation that can lead only to acquiescence. Yet let us not do this alone, as individuals. The Samaritan discovered an innkeeper who would care for the man; we too

are called to unite as a family that is stronger than the sum of small individual members. For “the whole is greater than the part, but it is also greater than the sum of its parts”. (78)

This encounter of mercy between a Samaritan and a Jew is highly provocative; it leaves no room for ideological manipulation and challenges us to expand our frontiers. It gives a universal dimension to our call to love, one that transcends all prejudices, all historical and cultural barriers, all petty interests. (83)

If we go to the ultimate source of that love which is the very life of the triune God, we encounter in the community of the three divine Persons the origin and perfect model of all life in society. Theology continues to be enriched by its reflection on this great truth. (85)

Still, there are those who appear to feel encouraged or at least permitted by their faith to support varieties of narrow and violent nationalism, xenophobia and contempt, and even the mistreatment of those who are different. Faith, and the humanism it inspires, must maintain a critical sense in the face of these tendencies, and prompt an immediate response whenever they rear their head. (86)

Some peripheries are close to us, in city centres or within our families. Hence there is an aspect of universal openness in love that is existential rather than geographical. It has to do with our daily efforts to expand our circle of friends, to reach those who, even though they are close to me, I do not naturally consider a part of my circle of interests. (...) Racism is a virus that quickly mutates and, instead of disappearing, goes into hiding, and lurks in waiting. (97)

Solidarity finds concrete expression in service, which can take a variety of forms in an effort to care for others. And service in great part means caring for vulnerability (...) Service always looks to their faces, touches their flesh. (115)

4.2. Our tradition:

In the list of the beatitudes the merciful are spoken of before the clean of heart. The merciful quickly grasp the truth in their neighbors when their heart goes out to them with a love that unites them so closely that they feel the neighbors’ good and ill as if it were their own. With the weak they are weak, with the scandalized they are on fire. They “rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those weep.” Their hearts are made more clear-sighted by love and they experience the delight of contemplating truth, not now in others but in itself, and for love of it they bear their neighbors’ sorrows. A man who does not live in harmony with his brothers, who mocks at those who weep and sneers at those who are glad, has no sympathy with them because their feelings do not affect him, he can never really see the truth in others. The proverb fits him well: the sound man feels not the sick man’s pains, nor the well-fed man the pangs of the hungry. It is fellow-sufferers that readily feel compassion for the sick and the hungry. For just as pure truth is seen only by the pure of heart, so also a brother’s miseries are truly experienced only by one who

has misery in his own heart. You will never have real mercy for the failings of another until you know and realize that you have the same failings in your soul.

(BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX, *The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux*, volume five, *Treatises II*, The Steps of Humility and Pride, III:6, pp. 34-35)

He turned the house of Rievaulx into a stronghold for the sustaining of the weak, the nourishment of the strong and whole; it was the home of piety and peace, the abode of perfect love of God and neighbor. Who was there, however despised and rejected, who did not find in it a place of rest? Whoever came there in his weakness and did not find a loving father in Aelred and timely comforters in the brethren? When was anyone, feeble in body and character, ever expelled from that house, unless his iniquity was an offence to the community or had destroyed all hope of his salvation? Hence it was that monks in need of mercy and compassion flocked to Rievaulx from foreign peoples and from the far ends of the earth, that there in very truth they might find peace and 'the holiness without which no man shall see God.' And so those wanderers in the world to whom no house of religion gave entrance came to Rievaulx, the mother of mercy, and found the gates open, and entered by them freely, giving thanks unto their Lord. If one of them in later days had taken it upon himself to reprove in angry commotion some silly behavior, Aelred would say, 'Do not, brother, do not kill the soul for which Christ died, do not drive away our glory from this house. Remember that "we are sojourners as were all our fathers", and that it is the singular and supreme glory of the house of Rievaulx that above all else it teaches tolerance of the infirm and compassion with others in their necessities. And "this is the testimony of our conscience", that this house is a holy place because it generates for its God sons who are peacemakers. 'All' –he would continue– 'whether weak or strong, should find in Rievaulx a haunt of peace, and there, like the fish in the broad seas, possess the welcome, happy, spacious peace of charity, that it may be said of her, "Whiter the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, unto the testimony of Israel, to give thanks to the name of the Lord". There are tribes of the strong and tribes of the weak. The house which withholds toleration from the weak is not to be regarded as a house of religion. "Your eyes have seen me, yet being imperfect, and in your book all shall be written.

(WALTER DANIEL, *The Life of Aelred of Rievaulx*, ch. 29, pp. 117-118.)

4.3. Dialogue:

- a) How do I live the relationship between "my plans" and the needs of my brothers/sisters? What are my priorities in time management?
- b) « A brother's miseries are truly experienced only by one who has misery in his own heart. You will never have real mercy for the failings of another until you know and realize that you have the same failings in your soul. » How does this statement by Saint Bernard resonate with me, and what place does it have in my spirituality?
- c) What place do people in situations of fragility (social, moral, psychological...) have in our guest house, our prayer, and the priorities of the community?

Be Artisans of Peace

5.1. *Fratelli tutti*:

To speak of a “culture of encounter” means that we, as a [community], should be passionate about meeting others, seeking points of contact, building bridges, planning a project that includes everyone. (216)

Integrating differences is a much more difficult and slow process, yet it is the guarantee of a genuine and lasting peace. That peace is not achieved by recourse only to those who are pure and untainted, since “even people who can be considered questionable on account of their errors have something to offer which must not be overlooked”. (...) What is important is to create processes of encounter. (217)

Sooner or later, ignoring the existence and rights of others will erupt in some form of violence, often when least expected. (219)

This is the genuine acknowledgment of the other that is made possible by love alone. We have to stand in the place of others, if we are to discover what is genuine, or at least understandable, in their motivations and concerns. (221)

Saint Paul describes kindness as a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22). He uses the Greek word *chrestótes*, which describes an attitude that is gentle, pleasant and supportive, not rude or coarse. Individuals who possess this quality help make other people’s lives more bearable, especially by sharing the weight of their problems, needs and fears. This way of treating others can take different forms: an act of kindness, a concern not to offend by word or deed, a readiness to alleviate their burdens. It involves “speaking words of comfort, strength, consolation and encouragement” and not “words that demean, sadden, anger or show scorn”. (223)

Kindness frees us from the cruelty that at times infects human relationships, from the anxiety that prevents us from thinking of others, from the frantic flurry of activity that forgets that others also have a right to be happy. Often nowadays we find neither the time nor the energy to stop and be kind to others, to say “excuse me”, “pardon me”, “thank you”. Yet every now and then, miraculously, a kind person appears and is willing to set everything else aside in order to show interest, to give the gift of a smile, to speak a word of encouragement, to listen amid general indifference. If we make a daily effort to do exactly this, we can create a healthy social atmosphere in which misunderstandings can be overcome and conflict forestalled. (224)

In many parts of the world, there is a need for paths of peace to heal open wounds. There is also a need for peacemakers, men and women prepared to work boldly and creatively to initiate processes of healing and renewed encounter. (225)

The path to social unity always entails acknowledging the possibility that others have, at least in part, a legitimate point of view, something worthwhile to contribute, even if they

were in error or acted badly. "We should never confine others to what they may have said or done, but value them for the promise that they embody", a promise that always brings with it a spark of new hope. (228)

There is an "architecture" of peace, to which different institutions of society contribute, each according to its own area of expertise, but there is also an "art" of peace that involves us all. (231)

To be sure, "it is no easy task to overcome the bitter legacy of injustices, hostility and mistrust left by conflict. It can only be done by overcoming evil with good (cf. Rom 12:21) and by cultivating those virtues which foster reconciliation, solidarity and peace". In this way, "persons who nourish goodness in their heart find that such goodness leads to a peaceful conscience and to profound joy, even in the midst of difficulties and misunderstandings. Even when affronted, goodness is never weak but rather, shows its strength by refusing to take revenge". Each of us should realize that "even the harsh judgment I hold in my heart against my brother or my sister, the open wound that was never cured, the offense that was never forgiven, the rancour that is only going to hurt me, are all instances of a struggle that I carry within me, a little flame deep in my heart that needs to be extinguished before it turns into a great blaze". (243)

When conflicts are not resolved but kept hidden or buried in the past, silence can lead to complicity in grave misdeeds and sins. Authentic reconciliation does not flee from conflict, but is achieved in conflict, resolving it through dialogue. (244)

Forgiving does not mean forgetting. Or better, in the face of a reality that can in no way be denied, relativized or concealed, forgiveness is still possible. In the face of an action that can never be tolerated, justified or excused, we can still forgive. In the face of something that cannot be forgotten for any reason, we can still forgive. Free and heartfelt forgiveness is something noble, a reflection of God's own infinite ability to forgive. If forgiveness is gratuitous, then it can be shown even to someone who resists repentance and is unable to beg pardon. (250)

Those who truly forgive do not forget. Instead, they choose not to yield to the same destructive force that caused them so much suffering. They break the vicious circle; they halt the advance of the forces of destruction. (251)

5.2. Our tradition:

Having received that grace of which we have spoken, whereby they dwell in unity among themselves in God and enjoy God in themselves, they sense that all the contradictions of the flesh itself have disappeared, with the result that the general substance of flesh is not in them, except as the instrument of good work. For although they waste away gradually by its miseries and infirmities, by this very fact they grow stronger in the inner man. 'For when I am powerless, it is then that I am strong', says the Apostle. The senses themselves perceive near them some new and spiritual grace. The eyes are simple, the ears temperate. Sometimes in the fervor of prayer there is a whisp of fragrance of an unfamiliar scent, there is such a taste of

sweetness that cannot be tasted, there is through mutual touch such an incentive to charity that they seem to themselves to bring forth from within themselves a paradise of some spiritual delight.

Their countenance along with the bearing of their whole body, with the seemliness of their life, manners, and activities, even in their manifestations of mutual service, devotion, and gracious acceptance of one another, so unite and bind them one to another in this particular gracefulness, that they truly are one heart and one soul.

(WILLIAM OF SAINT THIERRY, *The Nature and Dignity of Love*, ch. four, 43, pp. 106-107)

To the degree that the heart is inundated by prayer, it gradually finds peace and becomes reconciled with weakness and sin. Or rather, in the end it turns its eyes away from its own misery in order simply to contemplate the face of God's mercy. Repentance then passes unconsciously into modest, quiet joy, into a shy sort of love and giving of thanks. No false step or sin is denied or excused, but all are drowned in mercy. Where sin increased, there grace abounds all the more (cf. Rom 5: 20). (...) from here on we are dealing with a blessed fault, a *felix culpa*, as we say in our songs on Easter night, a guilt that is taken up and devoured by love. (...) Gradually this feeling of joyful repentance gains the upper hand in one's whole spiritual experience. Each day, from the asceticism of neediness, *patientia pauperum*, a new person arises. That person is the embodiment of peace, joy, kindness, gentleness. (...) He has now attained a deep serenity, for he was broken down and rebuilt from top to bottom, by pure grace.

(André LOUF, *Tuning in to Grace, The Quest of God*, p. 76)

5.3. Dialogue:

- a) A monastic community would have no meaning if it were not a "workshop" where the art of peace is discovered and practiced. What are the fundamental tools of this art? What steps can we take to learn to use them better?
- b) As a community, beyond the sacrament, how do we live out reconciliation? Can we develop a pedagogy that fosters the healing of wounded relationships between brothers/sisters?
- c) As a community, how can we be makers and witnesses of peace in the social context in which we live?

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