

RETREAT OF THE FRATERNITY

PARAY-LE-MONIAL, 22-27 October 2019

Teachings of Bishop Emmanuel Dassi

I warmly thank Michel Bernard and all our brothers of the Council of the Fraternity for the invitation I was given and this service which has particularly made me want to be present at this retreat. And if I thank you for that, it is because I also have a different reason. In fact, I think you asked me to do this service in order to persuade me to come to be at this retreat with you, my brothers and sisters, who I miss so much, and to experience with you this unique moment around our great Brother and Lord, in order to replenish the reservoir, that is to say the heart, in order to go and spread His love in the world. This is the constant logic of the Lord - when he asks you to do a service, it is to lead you to open yourself to the immense gift he wants to give you, which surpasses infinitely the value of the service to be rendered.

=> **Testimony:** A wealthy man wanted to build a house in his village. He needed water for construction, and he was able to pay for water to be pumped or tanked while he waited for drilling. But he figured it would be good to take advantage of the need to involve his neighbours by asking them to help him for a day to draw water from a pond to fill the barrels he had provided. On the day, many people in the neighbourhood did not come to do this service - some said that the man should not exploit them when he had money to get water. But the others responded positively and came - some with large containers to draw water, others with just small bottles so as simply to register their presence. Some, with very good will, even came with all their children, simply carried away by the joy of rendering this little service to their neighbour. But the man reserved a big surprise. He knew that oil was a rare commodity, expensive and very prized in the village. And unknown to the others he had bought barrels of oil to reward them all. At the end of the day, he asked one of his employees to open the barrels and fill each person's container with oil. And what an immense joy there was for some, what sadness and regret for the others. They understood that the final gift was infinitely more precious than their entire day's work and the water drawn.

All our occasional or permanent services, large and small, in the Church and in the world, obey this logic. The scene of the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman constitutes a paradigm. When Jesus asks her for a drink, you know that it was because he wanted to quench the thirst of this woman whose thirst was for true love. Her disappointment in this quest for love made her look like a dry land needing water: 'If you only knew what God is offering and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me something to drink," you would have been the one to ask, and he would have given you living water.' (John 4, 10).

The time of the retreat of the Fraternity is surely, for all of us, the occasion to listen to the request of the Lord again, the request He made to the Samaritan woman at the well of Jacob. And what he asks of us is simple: to share his life and his mission as his brothers. That is why the retreat is also an opportunity for all, old and new, to repeat to the Lord, in the light of what he puts in the heart of each one, our total consecration to him and our active availability for mission, according to the formula well known to all. And we must also relativize questions of seniority because in reality it is never the duration that counts for the Lord except where it is a duration in grace, in our attachment to him and to the service that He gave us. He also warns us by telling us repeatedly that the first will be last while the last will be first (Mt 19, 30).

With this time of retreat, it is important for us to realize that our vocation as members of the Fraternity of Jesus puts us at the **heart of the vocation of the whole Church**. To abide not only with Christ, but even more deeply in Christ, and to share his mission of saving humanity, is simply to be the Church. I think that is why the Community has been recognized as a public association of the faithful, because it embodies the very essence and mission of the whole Church. This is obviously a big responsibility. You know that in the world in which we are immersed and for which we are sent, there are many divergent opinions maintained even by the members of the Church about its nature and especially its mission. As the Holy Father affirmed in *Evangelii Gaudium*, some, while being members of the Church, are won over by current religious relativism.

'Pastoral workers can thus fall into a relativism which, whatever their particular style of spirituality or way of thinking, proves even more dangerous than doctrinal relativism. It has to do with the deepest and inmost decisions that shape their way of life. This practical relativism consists in acting as if God did not exist, making decisions as if the poor did not exist, setting goals as if others did not exist, working as if people who have not received the Gospel did not exist. It is striking that even some who clearly have solid doctrinal and spiritual convictions frequently fall into a lifestyle which leads to an attachment to financial security, or to a desire for power or human glory at all cost, rather than giving their lives to others in mission. Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of missionary enthusiasm!' (Evangelii Gaudium No. 80)

As a result, missionary zeal becomes an outdated reality for them. Another trend that tempts us is a kind of spiritual accommodation like the chameleon that changes appearance depending on the environment. Thus one remains sociologically Christian, but without any tension with regard to holiness which is the essence of the life of a child of God. We can then understand the appeal of Pope Francis in this area. One could still mention the tendency to become so entangled in the realities of the world that one manages to lose this great hope which Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI spoke of in *Spe Salvi*. Conversely, we could be in so much expectation of heaven that we are disconnected from the temporal realities of our society, from the great preoccupations and anguish of the men of our time. All these tendencies obviously tempt us and challenge us especially in renewing ourselves in our plenary vocation to be the Church in the world of our time as the title of the Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* of the Second Vatican Council expresses so well.

One wonders what could explain these divergent currents that obviously have an impact on the Church in her communion and missionary dynamics. The answer seems very simple. And to evoke it, I permit myself to quote a well-known passage of the Gospel according to St. Matthew (Mt 16). We are at Caesarea Philippi. And to the question of Jesus, Simon Peter has just given the wonderful answer that we know and which is at the heart of our profession of faith – “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” - but as soon as Jesus announces to them what He will have to do to fulfill this mission which is his as Christ (the Anointed One of God sent for the salvation of the world), the same Simon reacts strongly by contradicting his Master. And Jesus says to him in substance: “Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle in my path, because you are thinking not as God thinks but as human beings do” (Mt 16:23). The Jerusalem Bible makes this enlightening commentary: ‘Peter, by claiming to put himself in the way that the Messiah must follow, poses an 'obstacle' to him (the first meaning of the Greek *skan dalon*) and becomes the unconscious henchman of Satan himself.’ The rapidity of the passage from the thought of God which led him to the profession of faith to a totally opposite thought, a diabolical thought, shows us acutely the grave necessity for Christians of all generations to be vigilant and **to take the necessary means to remain in agreement with the mind of God**, the thinking of the Gospel. Many other times, in the Gospels, Jesus will have to call back his disciples, won over by the thoughts of the world - this is the case when they talk to each other because of the lack of bread, or when they ask to send the crowd away so that everyone can go elsewhere because the food available is too small, or when they are torn between themselves over the question of precedence, each clearly wanting to be the greatest.

All this will disappear thanks to one event - Pentecost. Yes, with the gift of the Holy Spirit, those disciples who, until the end, had difficulty in accepting the thoughts of their Master, will really become the Church - they will have one heart and one soul; they will profoundly and happily accept the thoughts of Christ who will help them in the discernment of all the situations that will arise throughout their mission. With the Holy Spirit, they will simply enter the Truth and the whole truth. But what is remarkable is that the same disciples will constantly invoke the Holy Spirit as if they had returned to the Cenacle, especially in difficult situations, so that He will constantly maintain them in Christ and strengthen them, so that they will continue to bear witness to him. In doing so, they are constantly submitting to the Holy Spirit who inculcates and actualizes for the Church the thoughts of Christ and saves us from the invasion and control of the world's thoughts or better, from the spirit of the world.

Yes, born of the Outpouring of the Spirit which is the fruit of the Easter of the Lord, the Church that we are cannot fully assume its vocation of being in Christ and of perpetuating its mission except by renewing itself constantly in welcoming of the Holy Spirit and in docility to His inspirations, to his movements. This is why

we must especially be happy about the chosen theme or, better, which has been received by our brothers and sisters for this retreat of the Fraternity:

‘The future is in the hands of the Spirit, and it is our faithfulness in welcoming the Spirit that will permit the Church to be fruitful’

I believe that we must accept this affirmation as a challenge for us, as members of the Fraternity of Jesus, called, as pointed out above, to be standard bearers of the nature and mission of the Church to be the salvation of the world. We want to receive again the Spirit, I was going to say **the veracity of our reception of the Spirit**, in order to be to be the protagonists of the true fruitfulness of the Church which leads to the advent of a new world. And for that, we will have three articulations related to three facets of the same prism that is the Spirit given to us - fidelity to the reception of the Spirit as **divine fire**, as the **Paraclete** and as **living water**. Yes, each of these biblical images of the Gift of the Spirit tells us something essential in relation to the veracity of the reception which we give Him on a daily basis and which determines the fruitfulness of the Church.

But before addressing these three articulations, let us emphasize two crucial considerations in terminating this long introduction.

1* Just as the first disciples after the first Pentecost did not cease to pray for the Holy Spirit, we must live a permanent Cenacle if we want to live a continual Pentecost. St. John Paul II emphasized this very well in his encyclical on the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church and the world (*Dominum et Vivificantem*, published in 1986, but already in the perspective of the great jubilee of the year 2000 and the entrance of the Church into the 3rd millennium in which we are.):

‘In the midst of the problems, disappointments and hopes, desertions and returns of these times of ours, the Church remains faithful to the mystery of her birth. While it is an historical fact that the Church came forth from the Upper Room on the day of Pentecost, in a certain sense one can say that she has never left it. Spiritually the event of Pentecost does not belong only to the past: the Church is always in the Upper Room that she bears in her heart. The Church perseveres in prayer, like the Apostles together with Mary, the Mother of Christ, and with those who in Jerusalem were the first seed of the Christian community and who awaited in prayer the coming of the Holy Spirit.’ (Dominum et Vivificantem No. 66)

Faithfulness to the reception of the Spirit in view of the fruitfulness of the Church is therefore fundamentally dependent on our fidelity to prayer and especially to praise, adoration, to meditation of the Word of God and to intercession. In the light of these words of St. John Paul II, who so aptly preached by example, being both a man of prayer and a tireless missionary, can we really say that always and everywhere, the Church has never left the Cenacle? Can we really say that everywhere in our time, the Church has never left the Cenacle? I think that one of the temptations of our hyperactive hyper-mediated world is the abandonment or the decline of discipline in regard to prayer.

But in positively reading the signs of the times, St. John Paul II continued:

‘In many individuals and many communities there is a growing awareness that, even with all the rapid progress of technological and scientific civilization, and despite the real conquests and goals attained, man is threatened, humanity is threatened. In the face of this danger, and indeed already experiencing the frightful reality of man's spiritual decadence, individuals and whole communities, guided as it were by an inner sense of faith, are seeking the strength to raise man up again, to save him from himself, from his own errors and mistakes that often make harmful his very conquests. And thus they are discovering prayer, in which the a Spirit who helps us in our weakness" manifests himself. In this way the times in which we are living are bringing the Holy Spirit closer to the many who are returning to prayer.’ (Dominum et Vivificantem No. 65)

May these words of the Holy Pope stimulate and revitalize our life of prayer and our mission to lead the

whole Church in prayer and therefore in the Holy Spirit who is the Master and the fruit. This is the key to our true fruitfulness.

=> **Personal witness:** Once, while I was on a study mission in Paris, I went on holiday with a Community family in the south of France. I was struck by their radicalism in their fidelity to daily adoration. They had arranged to have access to the village church. And the first evening, after an exhausting day, the evening meal and prayer with the children, the father said to me, “we will take our time of worship, are you coming with us?” And in the cold winter night we went out. During the worship, I continued to marvel interiorly at this fidelity to a rendezvous with the Lord, thinking at the same time of what the gospels said about the nights of Jesus in prayer and the invitation he addressed to his friends, ‘Stay awake and pray not to be put to the test. The spirit is willing enough, but human nature is weak’ (Mk 14:38). In the same way, in my country, while passing through Douala, I spent the night with a family of the Community. We went to bed very late because of the pace of life and the difficult travel in this city at about 23:30. At 5 in the morning, the whole family was gathered in a very natural way for daily morning praise. Imagine my wonder!

2* And this brings me to the second consideration of fruitfulness. Because of the profound intimacy between the Church and the Spirit, the fruitfulness of the Church and of the Spirit are the same, like the fruitfulness of men and women in marriage - that is to say, the fruitfulness of the Bridegroom and the Bride. If the wife turns her back on the husband, there is no more fruitfulness! And we know that the fruitful alliance that unites husband and wife and brings true fruitfulness to a home is not only carnal - for more than the union of bodies, it is the union of hearts and lives that allows children not only to come into the world, but also to grow harmoniously and become well-made adults. Therefore, the future of the family that we form in the Church, and of the human family in general, really depends on the docility of the Church to the Holy Spirit who begets faithfulness to Christ and enables Christ to be born and to grow in souls. For this is the fruit of the fruitfulness of the Church: that Christ should reign directly or indirectly - through Christians and even through all human realities, even where we are engaged with non-Christians. The Gospel in its essence is good news for every man. The fruitfulness of the Church is the advent of this new world desired explicitly or implicitly by all!

This disposes us towards the three articulations proclaimed above. We will therefore return to our fidelity to welcoming the Holy Spirit in view to this fruitfulness of the Church under its attributes of living water, the Paraclete and divine fire.

I- To welcome the Holy Spirit faithfully as a divine fire

We will begin with the image of fire that was especially associated with the gift of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost. We are familiar with this and I will not go beyond this. I will simply rely on an image of ancient Africa to exhort us to take advantage of this retreat in gauging the state of the fire of the Spirit in our life. You know the saying of our founder: 'It must burn!'

Like the **big fire at the village square at night**. This fire drives out the darkness and releases a great energy that warms all around. Fire does not come from the wood, but the wood needs indeed to burn to give that light and heat! With a single piece of wood, it is difficult to have duration and density. 'One piece of wood is not enough to make a good fire'. Yes, the Church is like this wood gathered together to bring the fire of the Spirit that illuminates and warms the world. For that, it is necessary that each piece accepts to die to itself in order to burn well and to participate in bringing fire. If the wood is afraid of fire, there will be no light, no heat! The more wood there is, the bigger the fire, and the greater the light and heat. And every time we talk about fire, we obviously think of the one by which God began to make known his deepest identity (to reveal his Name) - the fire of the burning bush in the book of Genesis - a fire that burns without being consumed. And that's the difference with this image of our wood fires. It was **the forerunner of the Church**, the universal Church - but also the local Church and every cell of the Church (which also bears universality despite its smallness). At the advent of the new time, Jesus came into the world to kindle this divine fire, as he told us - that is, the fire of the Spirit. It was this fire that began at the Cenacle on the day of Pentecost, with these first logs prepared by the Lord. And thanks to the light and the heat that they released and spread, many others were not slow to be won over by this fire when entering the Church. This is the mission of the Church from age to age. To be the light of the world, we must let ourselves be constantly won over by this fire of the Spirit. Light and warmth are the signs of two great realities borne by the Holy Spirit: truth and love. The psalmist said it, 'love and truth meet', I was going to add: 'in the Holy Spirit'.

He is the Spirit of Truth who drives out the darkness of lies in all their forms. And all who really welcome Him become carriers of the Truth, which is Christ Himself. St. Basil expressed it very well in a beautiful image: 'Like clear and transparent objects, when a ray strikes them, they themselves become resplendent and draw from themselves another light. In the same way the souls who carry the Spirit, enlightened by the Spirit, become themselves spiritual and pass on the grace to others'. (Saint Basil, *Treatise on the Holy Spirit, the gifts of the Spirit*.) And so the mission is carried out by a contagion as we see so well in the Acts of the Apostles.

He is obviously the Spirit of love, and that is what symbolizes the heat of fire. Those who have truly received the Spirit have the burning heart of love as the Heart of Christ Himself. Love constantly drives them to compassion, to serve, and to sacrifice themselves so that others may be saved. That is why one of the signs that we are faithfully receiving the Spirit is the zeal we take in communicating God's love to others through evangelization. But this dynamic starts from a basic reality - fraternal charity maintained in our place of life and mission. Jesus reminds us of this constantly - without this truly sustained fraternal charity, we become losers. And to return to the image, it is thanks to the already burning logs that each new log catches fire.

May these days of retreat be a propitious time to rekindle this fire of the Spirit. For a wood fire to remain alight, it is necessary from time to time to push the logs towards the centre so that they are well together in the fire. And so that those that tended to burn down, or even those that were extinct, should catch fire again. And when they are well together, we see only one big fire burning among all the logs. To be together, carrying the Light of Truth and the Fire of Love - this is our vocation as Church. May Our Lady of the Cenacle help us in these days of retreat which are providentially happening here in the city of the Heart of Jesus. I conclude by quoting an extract from the valuable book of Mgr André Mutien Léonard, *Viens Esprit Créateur*, published for the year of the Holy Spirit in the perspective of the great jubilee of the year 2000:

*'The more we place ourselves under the protective mantle of Mary, the more we will live in her, the better we will welcome the Holy Spirit, for Mary is mystically the Bride of the Spirit, and where Mary is, there comes the Spirit. Nobody has said it better than Saint Louis Marie Grignon de Montfort: 'When the Holy Spirit, her Bridegroom, finds (Mary) in a soul, he flies there, he enters fully, he communicates himself to this soul abundantly and as much as it yields place to its Bride; and one of the great reasons why the Holy Spirit does not do wonders in souls is that He does not find there a great union with his faithful and indissoluble spouse.'*¹

Pray especially to Mary in these days of retreat. Let us unite especially to her whom we invoke in our consecration as our Mother and our Queen. May her intercession give us life in these days, in the city of the heart of Jesus, a new Pentecost. May the fire of the Spirit revive in us! And that it burns more beautifully!

¹ Mgr André Mutien Léonard, *Viens Esprit Créateur, Dix rencontres sur l'Esprit Saint dans la vie de l'Eglise et du monde* (Come Creator Spirit, Ten meetings with the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church and of the world) Editions de l'Emmanuel, 1997, p143