

## Homily of the Minister General to the Visitators General

General Curia, 19 November 2021

The first reading presents Judas Maccabaeus' concern to purify the temple, the centre of the people's religious life, after defeating the foreigner and consolidating his rule. Two verbs express this concern: *purify* and *reconsecrate*.

Purification means the removal of all idolatrous elements, while reconsecration means re-establishing the ancient order, according to the canons prescribed by the Mosaic faith. This is where the feast of Hanukkah will be established, one of the most recent and most heartfelt feasts in the Jewish calendar.

The story is also repeated in Jesus' time: the Temple, the centre of religious and civil power is desecrated, through illicit trade, becoming a den of thieves. "My house shall be a house of prayer", says the Lord forcefully! Now it is Jesus' turn to re-purify it, and he does it in a new way. No longer through complex external rites but with the strong and gentle power of his presence. His very body will be the home, the place of encounter and communion of love between God and man in the power of the Spirit. The words of John's Gospel come to us here, where Jesus says that neither Jerusalem nor Mount Gerizim will be the place of worship because God seeks *worshippers in spirit and in truth* (cf. Jn 4:23-24).

It is a new worship because God's presence and his way of acting in Jesus Christ, who is now the Temple for us, is new. And it is so in his crucified and risen body, "the One Who is not about to die but Who is to conquer and be glorified, upon Whom *the angels longed to gaze!*" (LOrd II, 23), as St Francis says. The temple of our life is continually purified and reconsecrated, not by external means, but in the living relationship, animated by the Spirit, with the Lord Jesus, and in him with that Temple, that House full of the Holy Spirit, which is the Church, a house with doors that are always open, doors of mercy.

In the face of this power of life, the forces of death make their way in. Jesus' prophetic gesture on the eve of his Passion brings the death threats of his adversaries to bear on him. It is as if a part of us cannot bear life, does not want to purify and dedicate once again what is dead in us to the living God. We have a kind of fate and fascination with death, a letting go of what is not life. It is the very presence of Jesus that makes the discernment, which reveals the desire for life that is in us and, in contrast, the forces of death that threaten it and would like to extinguish it. But in this struggle between life and death, Luke's conclusion is marvellous, noting that seeing Jesus' decisive word and gesture, "the people as a whole hung on his words" (v. 48).

Typical of Luke, listening to the word is the decisive element of the believer's faith. As with Mary at the beginning, as with Mary in the house of Bethany, so with the disciples and the crowds: worship in spirit and truth is qualified by listening, before the outward ritual. The purification and reconsecration of our lives as God's temple in the world are marked by the quality of listening to God, to others, to ourselves.

St Clare knew this well at the beginning of her vocation, as we read in her Legend:

“Burning with a heavenly fire, she so thoroughly condemned the glory of earthly vanity that nothing of the applause of the world would ever cling to her affections. Trembling with fear at the allurements of the flesh, she already proposed to be ignorant of the transgression of the marriage bed, and desired to make of her body a temple for God alone and strove by her virtue to be worthy of marriage with the great King.” (LegCh 6).

Clare, with Francis, understood that her whole life, summed up in the body, in the physicality which is a sign of our being in the world animated by the Spirit, is the home and the place where, through faithful listening, God takes up residence among people. Purifying and reconsecrating our life then means renewing this choice for the Lord through faithful listening to his word and caring for our life as a whole.

Dear Brother Visitators, as always, this word reveals glimpses of light, today in a special way at the end of our meeting on the service that the Minister General has entrusted to you: to visit, exhort and comfort the brothers according to the Spirit (cf. Rnb IV, 2).

St. Francis himself, in Chapter IV of the Earlier Rule, whose 800th anniversary we are commemorating, gives us some steps to experience the Visitation and Chapter as an opportunity to purify and reconsecrate the temple of the life of each brother and of that house inhabited by the Spirit which is our fraternity. Thus, listening to God’s word in the story and life of each one becomes the key to discernment and decisions to be taken.

The text of the Regula non-bullata continues asking the blessed friars to obey “in those matters concerning the well-being of their soul and which are not contrary to our life” (cf. Rnb IV,3): Francis biblically asks for this mature ability to listen, *ob-audire*, in everything that concerns the good of the entire life of each one. And all this must be done with great attention and care for mutual relationships, according to the golden rule of the Gospel, which Francis recalls. Therefore, not as one who remains outside the brother’s life only to control it, but as one who in whatever office is entrusted to him remains a brother and indeed grows and matures as a brother precisely in service.

The brother ministers and servants are reminded that “the care of the brothers’ souls has been entrusted to them”, rather than with any canonical list of things to do and not to do. So much so that “if anything is lost on account of their fault or bad example, they will have to *render an account* before the Lord Jesus Christ on the day of judgment” (cf. Rnb IV,6).

In the ministry of the friars, to whom it is entrusted in different ways, it is our eternal salvation that is decided, that is, that integral fulfilment of our life which in Jesus Christ living in the Spirit finds its fullness. No service, therefore, remains external to me and my life but involves it and touches it from within. Francis, in

the next chapter, continues with a very intense admonition: “Keep watch over your soul, therefore, and those of your brothers, because it is a fearful thing *to fall into the hands of the living God*” (cf. Rnb V,1). As we visit, listen to, and welcome the brothers, we allow them to do the same with us and grow together in our common vocation. This also applies to the brothers with whom the encounter and dialogue will be more difficult: all of them are opportunities for us to grow, listen, and say yes again.

In recent days we have said many things, and I do not want to repeat them now. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the word of God and the word of St Francis direct us to experience the time of the Visitation as a journey that is above all interior, spiritual, which touches each one of us. Therefore, I invite you to put yourselves in this frame of mind and immerse the service that you will undertake or that you have already begun in prayer. In prayer means in the heart of the relationship with God that each of us lives and in which and from which every service can take on light and true effectiveness, true fruitfulness.

Only God knows how much the temple of our life, of our Order, of the Provinces and Custodies, of this whole house that we inhabit, needs to be purified and reconsecrated! And He knows how many forces of death threaten and pierce it, and we have spoken of this. But we have confidence, and we want to renew it in this Eucharist, in the presence and the holy working of the Spirit of the Lord (cf. Rb X, 8) in our midst, because God is faithful to his people even when they have abandoned him. Nothing is lost, and we believe that we can once again be gathered around the heart of our charism and our vocation. That we still have the energy aroused by the Spirit to hang onto the words of Jesus, to live by listening to his word and in it finally find the motivation and strength to continue on our way.

This is my wish for myself and for all of you, blessed brothers, and this is the hope that we, as the General Definitory, wish to cherish during these years of service so that we may live together in this house that is our fraternity and in that temple that is the world, searching for the traces of God. For, as St Francis reminds us, “for this reason He has sent you into the whole world: that you may bear witness to His voice in word and deed and bring everyone to know that there is *no one who is all-powerful except Him. Persevere in discipline* and holy obedience and, with a good and firm purpose, fulfil what you have promised Him. The Lord God offers Himself to us *as to His children*” (LOrd 9-10).

In the name of St Francis, then, may I send you out to proclaim once again to all our brothers loved by the Lord, without fear and as minors, that his love for us is strong, an ever-faithful love.

We can always start from here, even in this time of “dark clouds” (cf. *Fratelli Tutti*, chapter 2) around us and within us. So go with confidence and allow yourselves to be surprised by the wonders that the Lord has already done and with which he prepares our way and opens up new paths for us.