

I have not recovered from it

Today (August 12, 93 at Tibhirine) I love you.

No, you ask me for no proof. You believe it infinitely.

It remains for me to fill this writing. To be converted today to what is written between us: binding me to you. And it is you who give the shape of love to my existence. Your "I love you" appeared to me one day. I have not recovered from it.

I stay next to "this well that nothing can empty".

(Blessed Christophe Lebreton, OCSO)

I am reading Blessed Christophe's, OCSO, journal. He called it "a notebook of prayer". There he gives voice to the stirrings of his heart during the last three years that preceded his martyrdom with six of his brothers in 1996. Lives given for God and the people of Algeria.

This "I love you" resonates all through the pages. It is first the "I love you" that God whispered to him as a student at the university of Tours, France. An "I love you" from which, as he wrote, he never recovered, because it changed his life for ever. It made of him the person he became, a monk and a priest, a true brother to his brothers, and a friend to those whom God put on his path, especially the "little people", as he liked calling the people with whom he often worked and suffered, the villagers who surrounded his monastery in Tibhirine, Algeria.

Truly, life is simpler than we often think. It comes to this: responding or ignoring this "I love you." At the end, Jesus only asks us one question, "Do you love me?" (John 21:15-17). Everything else depends on this answer. It is the one thing necessary (Luke 10:42) What would you say? What would I say? What it is also good to realize is that it takes our whole life to answer it, even though there needs to be a response, a decisive response in many ways, as soon as we hear it. Each day of our life and all eternity will be necessary to respond to God's "I love you", because his love is eternal. This is what heaven will be about. But heaven begins here, with our response today, or our lack of response...

The "I love you" that Br. Christophe heard and that we are also called to discover and embrace, echoes the unfathomable "I love you" that was pronounced before the beginning of time at the core of the Trinity, at the heart of a God who is love. We hear this "I love you" in the words of the Father at the time of Jesus' baptism and transfiguration, "This is my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17, 17:5) Jesus is the Beloved, his identity is no other than being the one whom the Father loves, and who loves in return. All he did and said, his prayer, his death and rising, stream from this eternal and interrupted "I love you." We were created in this love, created in the Son and for the Son, to be members of the one Bride, the Church, his Bride. But we turned our ear to listen to another, the tempter, who deceived us, who told us that God didn't really love us, that we could not trust him, that we were better on our own. And these two voices remain, echoing through history: the voice of love, and the voice of distrust and destruction. Can we not recognize them in our lives, and see the fruits of listening to one or the other?

During Lent we follow Jesus who is headed toward Jerusalem to suffer and die for us, to save us. How? Through his passion and death on the cross. But what is the cross? The cross is the absolute expression of the apparent triumph of evil and sin. The cross by itself seems to be the loudest cry that

proclaims that God has abandoned humanity, that he doesn't love us anymore, and evil has the last word. This is what the death and suffering of the innocent proclaim: God is either dead or he doesn't care for us.

Many saints affirmed that you can learn all truth and wisdom remaining at the foot of the cross. But we run away too fast. We don't truly spend time there because it hurts; it is a scandal. We want to look ahead to the resurrection, just as we do in Holy Week, often going from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday. This is why, when the cross is planted in our lives, we get paralyzed, incapable of understanding its meaning, incapable of hearing that under the cry of victory of evil and death there is a voice that speaks in silence, "I love you", the voice of the Father; and a voice that replies, "I love you", the voice of the Son.

It was not Jesus' suffering that saved us, but Jesus' love, his love for the Father and for us, which are one and the same. But why was the suffering, the cross necessary—as he told the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:26)? This is an incredible mystery, and I don't claim to have the answer. But I have experienced in my life, and I have seen in the lives of others, that it is precisely when we suffer, when evil and sin seem to have the upper hand, that we are tempted to doubt God's voice and promise, "I love you." And when we turn the ear of our heart to listen to the devil, and believe his lie, our being is broken in its core once again, as Adam and Eve, who were whole and perfect, were broken after the fall. This is the existence we have inherited, that of a broken humanity. But when we remain long enough before the Lord's cross in adoration, in thanksgiving, even if we are confused, even if we feel broken or tempted, we begin to understand why the Lord told us that. "If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me" (Luke 9:23). The victory comes from the cross, just as blood and water flowed from the wound inflicted by the soldier's lance the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist—and a new Eve, the Church, was born from the side of this new Adam.

Who doesn't want to be happy? We all do. Doesn't God want us to be happy? Certainly! Then, why the cross? Again, the response can only be learned in the silence of prayer. But I would like to cry out that when we focus on finding our own happiness as our ultimate goal, we take the wrong route, the one that will never lead to the joy we desire. The voice of the world tells us to grasp, to take "the apple" and despise the cross, despise the hand of God, ignore his promise of love. And when we do that, we break down more and more, victims of fear, anxiety, depression, and greediness under many masks, trapped in a world of fake connections and total isolation, the isolation of sin.

Happiness is a "side effect", the side effect of love, and in our broken world the only way to love is by taking our cross daily and following Jesus (Luke 9:23). This is the truth, the truth that makes us free (John 8:32), free to love, free to give ourselves, even when it hurts. When, in the Lord's grace, we take up our cross, the wholeness of our beings to be recovered. The eternal dialogue of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit is restored in our souls, and we can hear and truly pronounce, "I love you." Then we discover who we are, beloved in the Beloved, in whom our good Father is well pleased. This is the deepest desire in our heart, our true joy, because we were created in and for this love.

Each vocation is an expression of this primordial love, different paths where we are called to learn to love in the grace of our Risen Lord, but following the way of the cross. I often get the impression that it is somehow difficult to understand this as a reality in consecrated life. I underline the word reality, because it is easy to reduce religious life to a vocation where you have a spiritual husband, Christ, and spiritual children. For most people this doesn't look very appealing. After all, can't I have a real husband and Jesus too? And, as members of the Church and society as a whole, many committed Christians end up having spiritual children besides their biological ones. So, why religious life then? As a good husband and committed Catholic told me recently, "when you get married, at first, you don't feel like you are renouncing anything."

The personal story of each religious vocation is unique and precious, but sooner or later on our path we heard this “I love you”, and we never recovered from it, we didn’t want to recover. We realized it was totally undeserved, while, at the same time, this “I love you” claimed a response, an “I love you”, that had to be complete. Like a burnt offering, all our being needed to be consumed by this fire on the altar of love; all our life needed to become “a mad prayer of crucified love.” (Br. Christophe)

I have found in these words of our brother St Rafael Arnaiz, OCSO, one of the best expressions of this love that God gently but firmly claims from us, as the only possible response to his love. A love that is certainly in the sphere of faith, but that it is absolutely real. “The world doesn’t see it; it’s blind, and God needs love, a lot of love. I cannot give him all, I’m small, I go crazy. I’d want that the world would love him, but the world is his enemy. Lord, what a great torture; I can see it and I cannot do anything about it... I’m very small, insignificant, the love I have overwhelms me. I would want that my brothers, my friends, everyone, love him much, I would rest a little bit in this way... But the world, occupied with its interests, its business, its discussions, takes me for a crazy person...

Lord, what do I do? Love, love... I cannot, the treasure I have, which is your love, the world despises it, I suffer with this because you suffer.”

Does God need love? Your love? My love? Many would say “no”, God needs nothing because he lacks nothing. But what does the Lord’s thirst for on the cross? What is his desire to set the world on fire (Luke 12:49)? What is in the heart of the father in the parable of the prodigal son, waiting, always waiting, for both his sons to understand that he wants to give them all he has, moreover, all he is? God needs our love, not for his own sake but for our own sake. To discover your vocation, you need to discover in what way God wants you to love. He needs all your capacity to love, not just a little corner in your heart. He needs it to save you and as many as your love can bring into his love.

As religious we embrace the way of life that the Son of God embraced on earth, that is expressed by the three religious vows: chastity, poverty and obedience. This way of life not only allowed him to be freer for his ministry and to love all. More essentially, because Jesus never formed his own family, he remained who he had been and will be for all eternity: the Son, the Beloved Son of his Father. He lived and died to restore the relationship between God and humanity. He restored it loving to the end, loving as the Father loved him, even when everything seemed to say the contrary, even when as he carried our sins, he felt our own distance from God, abandoned and broken, as we feel ourselves, but multiplied in a pain unfathomable for us, because it challenged a love which is also unfathomable, the core of Jesus’ own being.

As religious we are called to enter in a privileged way into this relationship of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit, becoming one spirit with Christ. We are called to walk the way of the Son, loving as completely and ardently as he loved, a love that made him remain virgin, poor and obedient, in the total gift of self. This love crucifies us and raises us up, and becomes an offering for the salvation of all, because the best witness to a love stronger than death is to die for it, to live and die for love. God needs that we love him as his Son, in his Son, and we respond, “I love you.”

May Mary, Our Mother, she who is blessed-happy because she believed the promises of God (Luke 1:45) be always by our side, and teach us how to incline the ear of our heart to this “I love you” and respond as she did, “Fiat.”

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Our Lady of the Angels Monastery