

Children of the promises of God

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Dear Brothers,

You are receiving this letter around the time of the feast of the Presentation of the Lord in the temple in Jerusalem. This feast is also the day when we celebrate religious life. This day is an occasion for us to thank God, along with the Church, for the gift of all those religious women and men who have been called to serve in the Congregation.

The passage from Luke (Lk 2:22-39) that narrates the presentation can offer us some keys to understanding the present day journey that our religious life is undertaking. I invite you to focus your attention on Simeon and Anna. Both are ardently waiting for the consolation of Israel, for the redemption of Jerusalem. This is a waiting that links both of them to the great promises of God and to the journey of a people, the people of Israel and to the destiny of a city, Jerusalem. However, this people and this city carry within them a universal vocation that is open to God's time and to the fulfilment of his promises of justice and peace through the coming of the anointed one, the Christ of God, for all peoples. Both nourish their hope in the piety that they share with the people of God on pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem. Once again, the temple is extended in the footsteps of God's people on pilgrimage through history.

Ardent expectation of the promises

In addition, the text provides us with certain characteristics of Simeon and Anna and the way in which the ardent expectation of God's promises for his people is expressed in each one. Simeon is a just and pious man, observant of the prescriptions of God's Law and familiar with

the Spirit of God, with its promptings and callings, ready to be guided by it. Anna, on the other hand, appears as an elderly woman, who had been married to her husband for seven years before she became a widow. The emptiness left by her husband's death and her mourning did not shut her in. On the contrary, as the years passed by, she made herself available to God and his times. As a prophetess, she sought to attune herself to God's ever-unprecedented ways, placing herself at his service in the temple and preparing to meet him through fasting and prayer. It was as if her prayers and fasting mark in her own body the expectation of the one who is greater than the temple and who does not abandon his people.

Furthermore, Simeon and Anna, personally embodied the practices and rituals that gave identity to the people of Israel while at the same time they cultivated an openness to the unprecedented and unpredictable of God, who goes beyond borders. Thus Simeon, upon the arrival of these parents who, observing the Law, present their son to the Lord, recognised in the child the fulfilment of God's promises, the consolation for Israel and the light for all nations. In order to recognise in the child the anointed one of God, the fulfilment of God's promises, God enters long term into human learning. Such learnings are secretly maturing in a heart like Simeon's which lies in wait for the signs that God gives, and when they are recognised, then life, its mysteries, its contradictions and the long waiting, make sense. And there are also the learnings that are made through falls, stumbles and even pain that are not forgotten. This is what Simeon revealed to Mary: Israel will know the ways that God has prepared for his people, when they go through their own contradictions and rise from their stumbles. Mary will only come to fully know her Son when she herself participates in that other birth, when she sees her Son die on the cross, when she welcomes those who believe in him and in his love given to the end.

Anna, for her part, on seeing the child, praised God's actions on behalf of his people. The emptiness of her widowhood, her fasting and prayers took on meaning the moment she meets him. In him the redemption of Israel is already taking place. Her eyes intuited in faith what God will do with this child, his promises are already being fulfilled in the steps, groans, growth and learning of this child.

God never ceases to surprise us in the way he fulfils his promises. This child was entrusted to the care of his parents and to the recognition in faith of Simeon and Anna.

Children of hope in God

The uncertain times we live in because of the pandemic and its often dramatic consequences are calling us as religious men and women to be children of hope in a God who does not abandon his people. Like Simeon and Anna, we need to be more attuned to God's great promises of peace and justice for all nations, making our own the longing for a life of dignity for all that pervades our world. Should not our faith in Jesus make us always vigilant and attentive to the signs of God's consoling presence, ready to care for his manifestations and accompany his realisations, often fragile and small like the child Jesus presented in the Temple? The true "*nunc dimittis*" of religious life is that which emerges when our eyes also see the salvation that God continues to prepare in the midst of our falling and rising and in the pains that can pierce our souls and those of so many brothers and sisters.

In this sense it is moving to see the way in which our founders were attentive to the action of God in each brother and sister of the Congregation. In spite of the timidity and faint-heartedness for which the Good Father reproached himself and his constant concern for the fragile health of some brothers and sisters, he looked with tenderness on the progress of the religious family in the three years that had already passed since the first commitments of its members (20th October 1800, feast of St. Caprasius). He was grateful for the difficulties through which the Lord had made them partakers of his chalice. In a special way, he was grateful that God had entrusted the care of this family, which is God's work, to the Good Mother - '*Little Peace*' - alongside him: "It is true that Little Peace carries the light and I am only holding the candlestick" (Letter to Sister Gabriel de la Barre, 20 October 1803). Walking together, both were ready for God to do his work in them, making the Good Mother a sign of God's Peace, transforming the timidity of the Good Father into solicitude and care for the brothers and sisters. With this certainty, the Good Father thus renewed his most essential vow to accompany God's acting in the brothers and sisters, preparing them to venture confidently along his paths and to take on his timetable with serenity: "Nevertheless, I renew today my resolution to lead you, by my example, to all kinds of sacrifices which may give glory to our Good Master" (Letter to Sister Gabriel de la Barre, 20 October 1803).

May the Lord Jesus on this feast of the Presentation make us all sons and daughters of God's promises and renew in us the most essential vow of caring for God's acting in every man and woman, in our brothers and sisters, in his Church and in creation.

Faternally,

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