

In the shadow of the oak tree

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Dear Brothers,

As I write these few words Derek and I are undertaking the canonical visit to the Iberian province that will last until 20 November. The number of brothers living in the province are 70, 20 of whom are aged from 23-65. The other 50 are over 65 years of age. In general, it can be said that the "inner life" of the brothers of the province is in good health: there are communities with brothers of different generations, there are also other communities in which the majority are older brothers, over 70 years of age. And then there is the house for older brothers that welcomes those in need of medical care or who are in a situation of dependence. The importance of knowing how to grow old is evident in all of them. And this cannot be improvised. It is a process of human and spiritual maturity that concerns all brothers, of all ages.

Aging touches on dimensions of life ever present in our existence and that manifest themselves with clearer signs in later years. It is about recognizing that we are not complete persons, that we need each other. Even more, we need to learn to recognize and accept that

we are vulnerable and fragile - effectively hallmarks of human existence. This awareness, above all, opens us to understand ourselves, not each on our own, but in relation to others and to our world. It is precisely in the relationships that we weave with one another that we recognize that we are not complete, that we come to appreciate in others what complements us and that we contribute what we are to enrich others. The challenge is not only to recognize that we are fragile and in need of others, but also to know how to ask for help from others and accept it willingly. And this is part of the "craft of existence" where each and every one is important for the health of the whole. No one is surplus to requirements.

However, this reality check seems to be especially difficult for apostolic religious. We act from an assumption, sometimes "heroic", which makes us believe that we are capable of everything, capable of various tasks (multitasks). In some cases, this is reinforced at times by the feeling of being indispensable. Moreover, the ministry, which is a source of joy and growth, can lead us to identify with what we do. In a certain sense, this is true because we are what we do. Our letter of introduction is more about what we do and, rarely, what we are. And in what we are and what we do, we find it hard to share our fallibility, our failures. I understand that no one likes doing this. But, our not doing so, our not integrating them as part of our life, creates the illusion of being invulnerable. Thank God, life takes care to disprove that image, taking us down from the pedestal in order to embrace, little by little, our frailties: the ones that are always with us and those that we acquire over the years.

"People begin to age when they look at the ground and see an abyss," writes the Mozambican writer Mia Couto. Aging helps us to recognise our radical fragility and dependence on others. This is and will be the basic fact of our existence. It can present itself as an abyss, whose unknown depths can frighten us. But, could it not also fascinate us and invite us to a qualitative leap in our life and in that of our world?

Abraham's adventure in old age

Let us turn our gaze to Abraham's journey of faith. We call him our Father in faith. And it is true. He is so because he allowed God to burst into his life. His existence and that of his family is to be understood from the perspective of his relationship with this God.

God manifested himself to Abraham with an unprecedented proposal. He wanted him and his family to become a blessing for Israel and for all nations. But for this to happen, Abraham had to leave his land, his home and become a pilgrim, a seeker of God and his will. His humble walking with the Lord goes from surprise to surprise: God promises him a land and that in his old age he will have a son. From this offspring, the descendants will be numerous. At such unprecedented assertions from God, Sarah, Abraham's wife, laughs. And no wonder! At a time when the years are heavy and there is more past than future, God wants to make of them, "children of his promises". Moreover, for those promises to be fulfilled, they have to "leave", to "let go" of securities, houses, land, secure and domesticated images of God. They must be willing to enter into a relationship with the living God, who is to become a pilgrim

with them. Only then can they open themselves to the newness of God, to the fruitfulness that emerges when God occupies the centre of their lives and they make themselves available to His will. The centre is no longer Abraham, but God and the relationship they build in walking together. "Lord, if I have found favour with you, do not pass your servant by." (Gen 18:3) are the words spoken by Abraham to the three men who, at noon, pass by the oak of Mamre where Abraham was resting.

Commenting on this passage from Genesis, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews offers us a precious key to welcome the newness of God and his promises: "Do not forget to practice hospitality, for through it some have unknowingly entertained angels". (Heb. 13:2). We are to practice hospitality, then, among the brothers and sisters of different generations, with their riches and also with their frailties, and among the poor who are always with us, and towards the world, as it is, with its longings and its contradictions. We can show hospitality for the years we have received, with all that they entail, and gratitude for what we have lived and what we are, and for the fragility that has always been there and which becomes a companion on the way. We can also show hospitality to a certain loneliness, to the feeling that the flow of life is running elsewhere. Let us not be saddened as we become less proactive in our services. Our services are no less important, whether at home or in volunteer work or simply with other elderly people in the neighborhood or in the city.

The memorial of Pascal

Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), thinker and seeker of God, in the greatness of the cosmos and in the abyss of the human heart, had a deep spiritual experience on 23 November, 1654. This is part of what he wrote:

"GOD of Abraham, GOD of Isaac, GOD of Jacob, not of the philosophers and of the learned. Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace. GOD of Jesus Christ."

This is the irruption of God who entered into living relationship with him, as he did with the patriarchs, with his son Jesus, and as he does with the men and women who offer him hospitality in their lives. Pascal wrote about his experience on a piece of paper that he sewed to his clothes and carried with him until the end of his days. He allowed himself to be surprised by the living God who tirelessly seeks to enter into relationship with us. If we were to write our Memorial and sew it to our clothes, what would we write?

"Our entire being to God and to God alone".

180 years after Pascal's vision, our foundress Henriette died (23 November, 1834). One of the constants of her life was to be ready to welcome the unceasing novelty of God in her life and in the lives of the sisters and brothers of the Congregation. To this end, she insisted much on praying for one another, asking each other for the grace they needed, so that God would be more and more the centre of their lives. May the words that she writes to a sister of the External Society resonate with us:

“Pray that God grant us - to you, the grace of choice; to me, the grace of perseverance - in the state wherein all is death to nature, abnegation of self; actually, a state in which life is none other than a perpetual holocaust of one’s entire being to God and to God alone”.(Henriette Aymer de la Chevalerie, "Letter to a sister of the External Society", Poitiers, 1799; LEBM 5 in *Correspondance* Vol.1, Maison Générale, Rome 2015, 36-37).

On 18 October, our brother Chris Keahi passed away suddenly in Hawaii at the age of 84. Just before leaving for the hospital, Chris asked a brother, John Sawchenko, to please call the Parish of Star of the Sea to let them know that he would not be able to celebrate Mass with them that morning. What a beautiful testimony of such a life centered on God and those He loves.

A few days ago, Derek and I visited Father João de Brito de Almeida (99 years old). We asked him how is he preparing to meet the Lord. With the hint of a smile he told us that he goes in peace to meet the Lord and that he thinks about this meeting especially on liturgical feast days. May the Lord meet us like this, in festive dress, when he calls us to his definitive encounter.

The God of Abraham, the God of Pascal, the God of Henriette, of Chris, of João de Brito and of Lambert van Agt (the last Dutch brother in Portugal) becomes the guest who visits us and seeks to enter into relationship with us. And he expects us to offer him all that we are, leaving more and more space for him to be the centre of our lives and thus to bring to completion the work he has begun in us. So that his love may be known, welcomed and loved by all, let us not be afraid to offer him not only how much or how little we do, but also our serenely accepted fragility, seeing everything as sources from which we receive his patient love. Let us view our limitations as welcoming doors for our brothers and sisters to enter and support us and our intercession for the world as the way in which he associates us - until the end of our lives - to his reparative love.

Fraternally,

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