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Prot. n. 50/12/484 MO Letters to the Order

Laudare, Praedicare, Benedicere

Letter on the Liturgical Celebration of the Hours

My very dear brothers and sisters,

“Where are you going, Sir Henry?” “I am going to the house of Bethany, he replied.” As Blessed Jordan of Saxony recounts: When Brother Henry left his lodgings and one of his companions asked him where he was going he answered, “To Bethany.” He did not understand Henry’s reply after posing this question to him. Only later on did he understand, when he saw Henry enter Bethany, which means “the house of obedience.” It was Ash Wednesday and Brothers Henry, Leo and Jordan were entering the Order, the “house of obedience.” At that moment and in that place, while the brethren were chanting, they presented themselves before them, much to their surprise, and putting off the old man, they put on the new, thus fitting their actions to what the friars were singing. (Libellus 75) In this way, our brothers situated their vocation as Friars Preachers within the Paschal mystery and the journey towards Easter and rooted it in the common celebration of the liturgy.

I am writing this letter to you about our common celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours (ACG Rome 2010 n° 79). In so doing, I am mindful of this moment in the life of our first brothers and of our own experience as we begin that part of “Ordinary Time” which follows the great Feasts of Easter and Pentecost. I shall neither dwell upon the necessity of our celebrating the Liturgy of the Hours together, nor upon our promise to do so. Each of us knows the Constitutions of the Order and the Letters of Promulgation for the different liturgical books of the *Proprium OP*. What is more, each of us is aware of what it means when there is a lack of commitment to our common prayer. It is by building our regular life, personally and communally, upon this common celebration that we choose patiently to build the unity of our communities rather than to submit to the arbitrary subjectivism of the individual. Also, I have no wish to dictate the form of this celebration. Travelling around the Order the last year and a half, I can see how our customs differ. And yet, I can also see how much the unity of a community and a province can be fostered when care is given to our liturgical prayer. There is no doubt that we need well-prepared celebrations. We all know the delight of a beautiful liturgy, even when it is simple. At the same time, we all are painfully aware of the exhaustion, disappointment and tension that arise when our prayer is celebrated with excessive formalism or extreme casualness. At such times, the heart and reason for our celebration risks being displaced, causing us to turn our focus away from Christ and toward ourselves.

Instead, I would like to make two simple, yet radical points. The first is that our common celebration of the Hours is like a series of landmarks that direct our lives as we seek to give them over to our mission of preaching. Our prayer orients us on our journey of conversion, from Ash Wednesday to the Light of the Resurrection where we pass from the “old man to a man born anew” through the grace of that Breath of Life given by the Risen Lord. The second point recalls the expression used by Blessed Jordan: our common celebration of the liturgy allows us to encounter the source of our obedience and to draw from it. This obedience is to the mystery of the Word who comes to “configure himself” to

humanity, so that humanity might become configured to God. Our common celebration unites us in obedience to the Word to whom we have prayed for the grace of consecration (“Consecrate them in the Truth. Your Word is truth”). The liturgical celebration thus clearly leads us to the source of our obedience to the One who calls us to preach the Word of God and to participate in the work of evangelization.

As a “house of obedience”, our liturgical celebration invites us again and again to approach this call to unity, which I wish to consider from three points of view.

Celebration of unity in the Word

No doubt when each of us was moved by the deep conviction that we wanted to give our life over to preaching in the Order, we were also delighted by the joy of being able to pray with brothers and sisters. Together in listening to the Word of God, we become aware that this Word gradually comes to live in our own words. We bless and praise Him who unceasingly enters into the heart of humanity. Most often we pray in the choir which is arranged around a central empty and open space, open specifically to receive the One who comes. We do not go to the choir primarily to fulfill an obligation which we have assumed; but rather we assemble in choir to await together Him who comes, to welcome Him and, above all, to learn to recognise Him.

The liturgical celebration of the Hours, repeated several times a day in community, must be a time when the Word of God, and not ourselves, comes to be our center. It is when we allow the Word to seize us, to take hold of our desire to give our life and enable this desire to do far more than we could ever do ourselves. This celebration repeated each day and in each liturgical Hour gives us the courage to expose ourselves to the Word; to listen to the words of Scripture and the prayers of the tradition; to become accustomed to the familiarity that the Word wants to have with us; to discern through the words of Scripture the face of the Son that is revealed and who is the very source of obedience. We need constantly to regain our strength, to take heart. It is in this mystery of the liturgy that we learn how to do this, or better, in the liturgy we can implore the Lord to do it in us.

What is the work of grace that operates in us, both individually and communally, through the liturgy? I would venture to say first of all, that each celebration of the Office leads us once more to anchor our lives in those gestures of our profession. “What do you seek?” “God’s mercy and yours.” Who among us has not been touched to the core at the beginning of Compline, when placing ourselves in the presence of God, we echo that question and response by which we announced our desire to make profession? In the presence of our brothers, each of us is helped once again to receive assurance of that mercy and forgiveness which gives us the courage to raise our eyes. Each of the other Hours begins with the cry for assistance to Him who alone can support our life, our fraternity and our preaching. We all know those days of which we are least proud; the days when we would have liked to have been more just, more caring, more attentive, less complacent; those days in which we no longer expected anything from the Lord; those days when our enthusiasm to begin anew, the radicalism of response and the generosity of the gift of self were not brought to this daily encounter with Him. The Daily Office, the “sanctification of the hours”, is an act of faith for us that, despite our failings, brings us always into the Presence of God. It is this promise that we celebrate, doxology after doxology, bow after bow. “Rise, brothers”, is the response to us on the day of profession. “Rise”, heard Blessed Jordan, “and put off the old man in order to be clothed in that new man.”

The intuition of these young men going to the house at Bethany shows us the way that opened on the day of our profession, a way that leads to Easter. The liturgical celebration of the Hours writes this mystery of Easter on our heart even in the most ordinary part of our day. It envelops our own personal histories into a time that goes beyond us, and yet brings us into our true selves. It is the time of the promised covenant, heard in Scripture and sung in the Psalms, which gives us the words to tame and to be tamed by this Presence in every issue that confronts us and so enables us to respond to this call. It is the time of Christ present and recognised by those who were the first witnesses of his Presence and his mystery. It is the time of humanity who, recognising the Risen One, dares with the brothers of Emmaus to implore Him to stay with them. If we celebrate the liturgy of the Hours day after day and throughout the course of each day, it is so that our time is really, strongly, seized by this Presence and becomes a place to recall this mystery. To be clothed in the new man, it is best to let the mystery of Christ take the place of the clothes of the old man.

We know that the tradition of the Order stresses (and the Constitutions ask) that, at the heart of this celebration of the Hours, the brothers celebrate the Eucharist and that they do so together in the Conventual Mass. We must consider once more the strength of this demand, which many of us would emphasise in our retreat talks for religious communities. Fraternal communion is rooted and finds its vigour and joy in the communal Eucharistic celebration. On account of their ministry it may well be that brothers must offer Mass in their parishes or for particular groups. Nevertheless the communal Eucharistic celebration must not remain for us merely an occasion for each priest to celebrate Mass when he has not already said his Mass somewhere else. Rather, it should be a pressing invitation to each brother, priest or not, to receive the Lord's life in the Eucharistic sharing among his brothers. "Stay with us Lord..." we say together like those disciples on the road to Emmaus, and make our hearts burn, impatient to follow you in our apostolic journey! Our communal celebration of the Eucharist should make us impatient to live truly together, rooting our preaching in the unity of our community of brothers. This we receive day after day in the broken Bread and the shared Cup.

Celebration of unity in fraternity

The liturgical celebration of the Hours must be a fraternal event. With the passing years and centuries, perhaps the liturgical celebration has gradually taken on the appearance of an observance, an aspect of the regular life in which we are engaged, a formal rite that we must fulfil like ticking off an item on our daily *check-list*. But, if when celebrating the Hours we celebrate the approach to Easter, then we are far from formalism or an obligation to fulfil a rite, to 'say our office'. (Think of when we place the body of a brother who has died among us in the choir until his funeral. We do this less to indicate that the brother is still with us, than to return this brother, precisely because he is no longer with us, to Him who comes into our midst in order that He might bring this brother into His Easter.) It is Easter that urges us to hurry to the Office. It is the mystery of life always newly given that must make us impatient for this encounter. It is the joy of fraternity, sealed by the Eucharistic sharing, that unites us to celebrate together the hope of the coming of the Word of salvation.

Fundamentally, we celebrate the coming of the Word as that unseen source and foundation of our fraternity. Does not our coming together in choir several times a day give us the opportunity to recall the unfathomable mystery of grace? He comes to speak to the world and to us, giving us the strength and the words to dare to speak in our turn to Him. We

let go of our own discourse and wisdom and everything we think we know in order to let Him speak. Several times a day we should ponder the joyful mystery of the Finding of Jesus in the Temple: He alone is the teacher who opens the meaning of Scripture! Liturgical celebration is a constant thread running through our days so that we might be woven in our ‘consecration to the truth, which is the Word’. It is a consecration that we recall together, by which we are sustained together, and through which we are offered together. The liturgy of the Hours, tradition says, sanctifies our chronological time to God; in its repetition and duration, the liturgy consecrates our own interior “duration” to the truth that is the Word who comes.

It is in this perspective that our Constitutions invite us to base our communities around the common celebration of the Eucharistic mystery (LCO 3). We might have been particularly generous at the first or the sixth hour; we could have confronted apostolic or personal discouragement at the third or the ninth hour. But there is one hour, always favourable, when it is the right time to draw strength and joy from the source of life. There is the favourable hour to give in our turn the life that we have received with a firm heartfelt desire for the salvation of the world. Once again, of course, one can raise objections, such as the number of masses to be celebrated in certain apostolic and pastoral places, or the question of the rite one would like to celebrate. The Order is based upon the communal celebration of the mystery at the heart of all mystery and must lead us to renounce, absolutely, all temptation to relativism, which would favour our own work, choices or preferences over and above the One who is the source of our unity and the foundation of our community. There is a single unity between the celebration of the Liturgy that sanctifies the Hours and the Eucharistic celebration that brings communion. In the same way, when we live the apostolic life, there is a unity between our preaching about the issues we encounter in the world and the service of charity we give to the world. There is a single, profound unity that enables us to live within the liturgical celebration of the Hours our apostolic work and patient study. For it is always a question of our being ready to recognise and welcome the Word that comes. By seeking to live together in this unity, we celebrate the presence among us of Him in whose name we offer as the hope of salvation.

Celebration of a unity received for the salvation of the world

Into the heart of the community gathered for and through the celebration, it is not only Christ who comes, but also the world. The celebration is in fact the moment when love for the world is nourished in fraternity. We say of Dominic that he spoke either of God or to God; speaking of people to God or of God to people. We say of him, that he never ceased to intercede for the world. The liturgical celebration of the Hours is the place par excellence where our communities bring into the presence of God our aspirations for the world to which we are sent as Preachers.

We already bring these aspirations to Him by proclaiming the words of the Psalms that express man’s desires with so much insistence, his longings for salvation, and his frequent incomprehension at what makes up his story. We bring these aspirations for the world when, by singing the Psalms, we make the story of the people chosen by God our own story. It is in being in the world in this way that we are a sign of the promise that the world can become a ‘world for God’. Dare we say that, by singing the story of a people for God in the midst of the world, we can open a breach in our contemporary history? A breach that allows us to raise our eyes beyond what seems to be the limits of our destiny and beyond what appears as a ‘dead end’ or an absurd barrier from a worldly perspective? We sing of the promise of a Presence and a Coming that does not accept ‘dead ends’ from a human point of view, but on

the contrary, projects the Light of a promise of eternity onto ordinary situations. To sing the liturgy hour after hour calls us to be convinced that the world is saved and heard even in the midst of its own noise. For Preachers, therefore, the world is placed hour after hour under that sign which enlivens our consecration to the Word, namely, our desire for its salvation.

Of course, we again bring these aspirations for the world into the prayers of intercession, which are so important in our tradition. Since Dominic first cried “what will become of sinners” intercession has been a specific aspect of our spiritual tradition. The choice of the apostolic life brings with it as a consequence our acceptance of the sorrows and the joys of the world: its hopes and fears, certainties and doubts. Just as consecration to the Word invites us to let the Word take our lives, transform them and raise them up to the Father, so our shared destiny with the world must dwell in us and constantly invite us to new understandings of the Promise. It must teach us to raise our eyes to the Father, presenting him with the needs and concerns of the world. ‘I do not pray for them only, but for all those who have believed through them’. This is a double movement: the Word takes hold of us and in turn we speak a human word to God which recalls Christ’s concern for the world. This double movement “conforms” us to Him who has opened the way to apostolic life. It is one and the same thing to speak to the world the Word of God in which we want it to be consecrated and to speak to God the words of the world with its hopes and fears. Sometimes we are fairly timid in our intercessory prayer, or even quite formal. We should dare to engage more fully in intercessory prayer which is an essential aspect of the spiritual school of Dominic, because it was the prayer of the Lord whom Dominic wished to follow as a preacher.

Dominic asked his friars to celebrate the Hours publically. During the course of each day our communities are invited to open their prayer to the world. We recall in the presence of God the joys, hopes, pains and fears of the world. Liturgical celebration is thus a compelling part of our mission of evangelisation (to spread the Church to the ends of the earth). It is an aspect of our office of preaching. Glorify God and give thanks for the extraordinary love that He gave the world and by which, without ceasing, He sustains Creation. Humbly receive the grace God gives us to intercede with Him for the world and to speak to him of those whom we commend in our prayer. Accept as well that grace by which God touches our lives when we ask Him for the world’s salvation. Dare to believe that day after day through intercessory prayer the Spirit conforms us to the true image of the Son’s praying to the Father, despite the clumsiness and indignity of our words. ‘Father I desire also that those whom you have given me may be with me where I am.’ By our ordinary work being interrupted, by our ‘leaving’ the world to break into prayer, we give thanks for the sanctifying Presence of God who broke into our world. Are we not established as a community of preachers through the Spirit who patiently conforms us to the image of Him who is the only Preacher? Do we not allow Him to bring our awkward prayer to the Father and place in us that desire for salvation for which He gave his life and for which we wish in our turn to be preachers?

And so, with Him, let us proceed further each day towards Easter and let us ask for the Spirit, in order to preach.

On the Feast of the Visitation

Fr. Bruno Cadore, op

Master of the Order of Preachers