



UNION WITH CHRIST

“I am the vine; you are the branches” (Jn 15:5).

The very first words of the formula of our Profession highlight the importance of the theme: Union with Christ, which we have chosen for this monthly recollection and also for the initiation of the centennial year of the glorious passage of our Mother Foundress into the heavenly bliss. It reads: *“For the glory of God, in the firm resolve to give myself more intimately to Him and to follow Christ more closely for my whole life, ...”* (Const. Art. 67). This shows us that we begin our journey as Religious Sisters, embarking on sure foundation of being intimately united with Christ. Union with Christ is the vigour of our life, basis of all our missionary engagements and the source of our salvation.

In the Gospel of Mark, we read that “He appointed twelve, that they might be with him and he might send them forth to preach” (Mk 3:14). Sending forth is always preceded by being with him. The quality of our life and more so as Religious Sisters will greatly depend on the quality of our union with Christ; for greater the intimacy with the Lord, greater will be the outpouring of its effects.

We have not chosen him but he has chosen us to follow him. If we do not fix our gaze on him and remain intimately united with him, there is this danger of wandering from the right path, as the sheep get dispersed if they do not follow the shepherd. Therefore, it is very fitting to begin this centennial year by reflecting on the theme: Union with Christ, which is the very essence of our Christian living and moreover as persons consecrated to the Lord.

Biblical Images of Union with Christ

There are a number of passages throughout the Scriptures that help us gain some insight into this profound mystery. Jesus says: *“I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing”* (Jn 15:5). From this vital union with Christ, we draw our nourishment, our strength, our spiritual life and without him we wither away. Certainly, our experience of the Eucharist is to be a visible expression of this union with Christ.

The Apostle Paul presents several images for this union. He speaks of our relationship to Christ like that of our body’s relationship to its head. “He is the head of the body, the church” (Col. 1:18; 1 Cor. 12:12, 27; Eph. 4:16). We are in some mysterious way one with Christ, united as a body is united with its head. He also uses the image of a building more specifically, a holy temple. Speaking to the Ephesians, he writes, through Christ you “become members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. (Eph. 2:18-20; 1Pet. 2:4-5). We are united with Christ like stones in a building built on a cornerstone. Paul also uses a much more intimate and personal metaphor of marriage to picture our relationship with Christ. The union of husband and wife becomes an expression of an inward union of love, this pictures well our union with Christ (Eph. 5:32). Besides these images Paul also uses the specific phrase “in Christ” several times in his epistles to speak about the Union with Christ.

It must be also emphasized that our Union with Christ is the work of the Holy Spirit “we were all baptized in one Spirit into one body” (1 Cor. 12:13). The Holy Spirit bridges the chasm of space and time. He takes what happened then - the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus - and brings its saving power into our lives now, by uniting us with Christ. By the Spirit, Christ lives in us, and we in him. By the Spirit, we are now joined to Christ as a vine and its branches, as a body and its head, as a building and its foundation and as a husband with his bride. The Spirit himself unites us with Christ and so applies all his saving work to our lives. “We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit” (1 John 4:13).

Union with Christ in the Thoughts of Blessed Mary Theresa Ledóchowska

Our Mother Foundress said, when we go to Jesus “*we have to give to him what he expects of us. We have to offer to him our capacity, our intellect, our will, our memory. But especially our memory; not to think more of things of the past, not to allow ourselves to be distracted by things which may keep us from him*” (MTL. Conference to the Sisters Rome 19 April 1904). Through this assertion, she is inviting each one of us to totally surrender our lives in the hands of Jesus, offering all our faculties at his disposal and aligning our wills to his will. There could be no greater expression than this to talk about the importance of being deeply united with him, that we become with Jesus one mind and one heart. However, very often we have our own plans and patterns of life and remain immersed in it. Very often our egos become a hurdle to freely relate to the Lord. At times it becomes very difficult for us to offer our intellect, will and memory to the Lord, as we desire to have our own ways and harbour ill feelings of the past waiting for the right time to settle the scores. In fact, such attitude becomes a stumbling block to our Union with Christ. To help us get rid of such fixations, which leads us nowhere, the Lord has given us the Gospel. If we want to change our way of thinking and enter into a deep communion with the Lord, we need to engage in daily meditation of the Word of God, purify our minds and hearts and get rid of all that is against his love.

In a conference held in Venice during the month of March in 1907, our Mother Foundress spoke about the necessity laid upon us “*to transmit to others the fire of Christ that burns in our hearts, to spread ever further the love for the Mission so it may take root in all hearts*”. Infact, she made this statement only because she was enkindled by the love of Christ, being intimately united with him. Only when a wick comes in contact with a flame that it catches fire, so it goes with our lives. Unless we remain in continual contact with the Lord, we cannot be bearers of his light. Our Mother Foundress presupposes that our hearts be inflamed by the fire of Christ so as to consume the whole world with his love. Only by remaining intimately united with the Lord can we draw nourishment for our souls and spread love for the mission in all hearts, like a lit candle igniting other candles. She emphasizes the importance of putting Jesus at the centre of our lives, maintaining a deep communion and friendship with him, leading us to appreciate and to harmoniously integrate the demands of the consecrated life and the missionary apostolate (Cf. MTL, Notes on the Institute of intern members of the Sodality of the St. Peter Claver for the African Missions, Rome 1901, p.27).

The motto chosen by our Mother Foundress for our Congregation is “*The divine of divine thing is to cooperate for the salvation of souls*”. If we want to cooperate with Jesus our union with Him is essential. Our motto drives each one of us to remain intimately linked to Jesus in order to cooperate in his saving work. The moment we are slackened with dampened interest and withdraw into our own comfort zones, the whole purpose of our religious calling to collaborate in the salvific work of Christ

is defeated. Often with our careless life and tepid spirit, we skip many good deeds and perhaps we even miss good opportunities to save souls for Christ. If we desire to give sense to our life, we need to recommit ourselves to a deep union with Christ. We must have the courage to abide in him, no matter what consequences we will have to face in our lives. Our Mother Foundress exhorts us her spiritual daughters: *“having understood, that God Himself wants you in the Sodality of St. Peter Claver, do not let yourself be held back by anything in the world, from following the voice of grace. Remember, that [you need to work] not only [for] the salvation of your soul, but also the salvation of thousands and thousands of souls ...”* (Cenni, 1901).

Union with Christ and its Implications for our Daily Living

Union with Christ which produces no effect on heart and life is a mere formal union and is worthless before God. As mentioned above, regarding the vine and the branches, if a branch is not united with the vine, it becomes futile as it does not have life. We can do wonderful things with great success, but without our union with the Lord it becomes meaningless. All the deeds of those who do not have this union with Christ could be classified as St. Paul says *“If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal”* (1 Cor. 13). Even if the whole world applauds at what we do by our own making, it will not be acceptable in the eyes of God, but small things done in union with him becomes fruitful and brings graces. We need to immediately identify all those aspects which are slowly making us like withered branches and graft ourselves once again on Jesus Christ.

We read in Psalm 139:13 *“For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb”*. Blaise Pascal, a French Philosopher and Mathematician once said *“there is a God shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which only Christ can fill. Not a doctrine, a precept, a theology or a list of commandments but a Person.”* That means God has designed us in a special way and wired us to remain united with Christ. As St. Augustine famously said *“our hearts were made for You, O Lord, and they are restless until they rest in you,”* our hearts are in constant search to fill that vacuum, which only Christ can satisfy. However, weak as we are many times, we try to fill the vacuum in our hearts with all the worldly pleasures and comforts. Very often we fall prey to doing things without him; keeping aside our prayer life and religious duties, we focus on our excellence of work or become addicted to our own passions. Let us remain cautious by what the Word of God tells us *“Do not fall into the grip of passion, or you may be torn apart as by a bull. Your leaves will be devoured and your fruit destroyed and you will be left like a withered tree”* (Sirach 6:2). The deep thirst in our hearts can be quenched only by the author of life, who can give us water that wells up in our hearts.

Union with Christ is an on-going process of living the grace that we have received and learning to grow deeper in relationship with him. We grow in this relationship through growing in our prayer life. St. John Vianney, in reflecting on our call to pray and love, stated that, *“prayer is nothing else but union with Christ.”* This effect of prayer and union with Christ is part of the transformation that others see in our lives. To understand union with Christ is to understand the love of God, both in receiving that love and learning to love in return.

This love relationship is not only an interaction between God and myself, it must include and grow in the community where I am assigned. The more we are united to him by love, the nearer we are to those who belong to him. As we live in communities, we know that peace through our union

with Christ can be tested by our relationship with each other, especially when difficult situations arise. Too often we try to work through the situations by ourselves. It is precisely in the most difficult situations that we must rely on the grace that we receive as we grow closer to Christ. When our own love is lacking, we can lean on the strength and love that Jesus has for the other. As our capacity for love of Christ grows, so does our capacity to love others.

Our union with Christ and our unity with each other is a witness to the world. So, this call to unity is not only for our sakes but for the sake of the whole world, and it is a call to a union that is as complete as the union between the three persons of the Holy Trinity. Pope Francis has described the Church as a communion of love with Christ and with the Father in the Spirit, which extends to brotherly communion. As we grow in this union with Christ and with each other, God's love burns away our selfishness, our prejudices, our interior and exterior divisions. This journey of union with Christ and others is a journey of transformation. May we open our hearts and answer the call to be united with him and those around us for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

We also need the assistance of Mary, which we seek by praying the daily rosary. As the apostles prayed with Mary, we need to pray with her, receive the sacraments, make sincere confessions, read the Bible with love, and participate in the Holy Mass with sincere devotion. St. John Paul II in his encyclical, on the Eucharist and its Relationship to the Church, says the following: *"unlike any other sacrament, the mystery of Eucharist is so perfect that it brings us to the heights of every good thing: here is the ultimate goal of every human desire, because here we attain God and God joins himself to us in the most perfect union"* (Ecclesia de Eucharistia, 34).

Dear sisters, let us banish laziness from our life and let us fight war against all that divides. Often after our annual retreat or having listened to some talks, we desire to change our lives but we make no effort to attain what we desire. It is important to begin somewhere and remain consistent in what we commence, no matter how small an aspect of our life it may be, provided it is aimed at deepening our union with Christ.

Prayer: Lord I do not want anything, but I want the grace to unite my heart with yours and to abandon all that is against it. I do not want any other abilities but to remain in union with you.

Questions for reflections

1. Do I consider 'Union with Christ' as a priority in my life? What Concrete steps do I need to take to further my intimacy with the Lord?
2. Do the daily reflections and meditations on the Word of God enhance my life? Am I engaging myself in these spiritual activities faithfully in all sincerity and love?
3. Do I commit myself to work for the salvation of souls? What more must I do to cooperate in the salvific mission of Christ?

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