

Letter to our friend - Advent 2017

Dear friends, guests, and you who follow us from afar, for this Letter to our Friends, we propose to you a meditation of Father Andre Louf (1929–2010), abbot of the Trappist monastery of Mont-des-Cats, a dear friend of our community. These are thoughts written on pieces of paper, his “journal”, his diary, thoughts on repentance and on conversion to which our Lord calls us.

At one time I was somewhat irritated by some frequently quoted texts of Isaac the Syrian, before I perceived, through the light of experience, their profoundly evangelical spirit: “Blessed is the man who knows weakness”, or, “He who knows his own sins is greater than him who resurrects the dead”, or, “He who is able to see himself as he is, is greater than him to whom it has been granted to see angels”.

Isaac is inexhaustible on this topic, not pausing before any paradox. Another text intensifies his teaching: “He who is capable of true repentance is a living martyr... Tears are of greater efficacy than blood, and repentance of greater efficacy than martyrdom. The paradox of these aphorisms is meant to emphasize the evangelical character of the grace of repentance. Repentance, in fact, is not comparable with other values, with other spiritual experiences present in other religious traditions. Repentance can grow only in the furrow of the Gospel. It is, in fact, a fruit of the Holy Spirit and is one of the most authentic indications of the action of the Holy Spirit in a person.

Perhaps it is also the place where God reveals himself to man, because no one could recognize his sin without at the same time recognizing God. Not before and not after, but at the same moment, in the same spiritual intuition, a person recognizes his sin and experiences God’s mercifulness.

For man, sin is only a transgression of a law, of a precept; it may even torment his conscience and produce remorse, but only in repentance is there a privileged encounter with God. He who has sinned, in the same moment in which he presents to God his sin, and God forgives him, encounters God, beyond every expectation. Perhaps here on earth there is no other road to encounter God except repentance. Before experiencing repentance, God is only a word, a presentiment, a desire, but not yet the living God, the Christian God who reveals Himself in an excess of love and tenderness. Indeed, in repentance one discovers the abyss of one’s own weakness and the abyss of God’s mercy.

Only in this knowledge of the evil committed and of God’s mercy, which is never merited, can a change, one’s conversion take place, because then the believer strips himself of all his pretenses of justice, divests himself of all his ambitions of sanctity, abandons himself and submits to God. Then one perceives that the flame of God’s anger, feared for an instant, in reality is nothing else but the flame of tenderness, the Lord’s flame of love.

Until this encounter takes place, the spiritual journey and the effort to proceed remain ambiguous and full of risk. The fervent believer is threatened by scruples, the faithful believer may become an observant pharisee, the believer who loves liberty risks losing himself in a libertarian behavior.

In the encounter with God’s mercy, however, the heart of stone is shattered, it becomes a cor contritum, a broken heart, which God recreates in a heart of flesh capable of loving.

This is why, like the publican at the back of the temple, the Christian is found at the back of the church, but always in the heart of the Church, and says: “Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner”. He says nothing else, because he has need only of God’s mercy.