



CAMALDOLESE CONGREGATION
OF THE ORDER OF SAINT BENEDICT
Saint Romuald, 2025

Holy Hermitage and Monastery of Camaldoli, June 19, 2025
Solemnity of Our Holy Father Romuald

*« He appointed twelve (...), that they might be with him and that he might send them forth to preach »
(Mk 3,14)*

*« Rachel at times desires the mandrakes of Reuben, son of Leah (cf. Gen 30:14),
that is, she aspires to the occupations of external services and devout fruitfulness,
neglecting for a little while her constancy in contemplation,
but she must immediately return to the purpose of contemplation. »
(LER XXXVIII,1-7)*

Dear brother monks, sister nuns,
dear oblates, friends, and guests,

The solemnity of Saint Romuald coincides with the beginning of summer and therefore, for many of our communities and for many of us, with a time of particular commitment to welcoming guests and to the activities related to hospitality. In any case, this coincidence leads us to question our activities, both personal and communal, and their relationship with prayer, *lectio divina*, and community life. It is a theme that questions everyone, not only monks and nuns, not only those communities that have intense activities of hospitality and spiritual and cultural offerings during the summer, but also every single monk and nun, as well as every Christian engaged in their own activities and in the care of their spiritual life. How can we live the relationship between external commitments and community life in its various aspects, starting with the care for the spiritual dimension? As monks and nuns, as disciples of the Lord, how can we live a just balance between commitments, spiritual life, and community relations? I would like to reflect on this aspect, so central for us, through two texts: one biblical and one from the Camaldolese monastic tradition.

That they might be with him

First, let us start with the Gospel. In Mark, when Jesus calls the twelve (Cf. Mk 3:13-19), it is said that he does so for two reasons: "that they might be with him and that he might send them" (Mk 3:14). For every disciple of Jesus, it is always fundamental to hear this dual purpose of the call from their Master resonate. His is a decision that depends only on him—"he called to him those whom he desired"—and not on gifts or abilities.

While it is relatively easy to understand the second purpose of the call—to be sent to preach and to cast out demons—it is less easy to grasp the meaning of the first: "that they might be with him." One is tempted to give this first purpose of Jesus' call a very "spiritual" meaning in the weak sense of the term; however, if we read Mark's account as a whole, we discover that this "being with Jesus" has a much more concrete and, at times, even dramatic meaning.

"To be with Jesus" means, first of all, to share life with a Master: to live with him, to walk with him, to spend the moments of the day with him, the commitments of his mission, and the work to provide for the life of the group. "To be with Jesus" means learning to live by living with him, making his life, his lifestyle, our own. "To be with Jesus" means sharing his successes, but

also his failures; his prayer and his relationship with the Father, but also his fears and his decisions.

Along the road of "being with Jesus," the disciples will have the hard experience of feeling fear on the lake during the storm, while Jesus was sleeping (Mk 4:38), and of being reproached for their little faith. They will have to struggle rowing in the storm until he, the Master, gets into the boat with them, walking on the waves of the lake (Mk 6:45-52). Peter will find himself rebuked and called "Satan" because he will oppose, taking him aside, Jesus' announcement of the passion (Mk 8:32). The disciples will be caught by their Master arguing among themselves about who was the greatest (Mk 9:33-37). James and John will ask to sit one at his right and one at his left in his glory, without knowing that those places will be reserved for two criminals crucified with Jesus. All will have to follow their Master in silence without understanding his way, bewildered by his words (Mk 10:24), frightened (Mk 10:32) like "blind men" unable to follow him and in need of healing (Mk 10:46-52).

Moreover, the list of the Twelve, of those who were called to be with Jesus, paradoxically ends with the name of the one who would be the betrayer, Judas, and opens with the name of Peter who, when a servant girl states that he was one of those who "were with Jesus" (Mk 14:67), will publicly deny it. The first among those who had been called to "be with Jesus" will be the very one who will find himself denying that he had been with him (Mk 14:71), saying that he had never been with him.

This is the face of "being with Jesus" in the Gospel of Mark, where any easy spiritualism dissolves. To be with Jesus means to walk the path with him, with our limits, with our fears, with our indecisions, knowing that we are blind, in need of someone to restore our sight. But by being with him, by walking his path, we can also discover, despite all our inadequacies, the face of true life on his Face, and arrive at the profession of faith of the pagan at the foot of the cross: "Truly this man was the Son of God" (Mk 15:39).

But for us monks and nuns, disciples of the Lord, what does this side of "being with Jesus" that the Gospel of Mark speaks of mean in concrete terms? For us, "to be with Jesus" means to live the contradictions of community life, perseverance in prayer, the custody of silence. To be with Jesus for us does not only mean to cultivate prayer, *lectio divina*, the liturgy, but rather to remain in our concrete life situations in all their dimensions and facets, without fleeing. To be with Jesus means not to flee the community, not to flee the situations in which we are called to live, but to know how to live the following of the Lord, without seeking other contexts that may seem more gratifying.

Only in this "staying" in our concrete life can the "going" on mission find meaning. After all, what do we have to bring to others if not the fruits of the experience of "being with Jesus"? If we do not live this rootedness in the community, in prayer, in the Word, what do we have to bring?

The mandrakes of Leah

In the *Liber Eremitice Regule* (LER XXXVIII,1-7), the right relationship between external activities and the contemplative life—that is, the life of the monastic community in all its aspects—is discussed. It is a very balanced text that is marvelous for its discretion, even in reference to the austerity of eremitical life, and which possesses a surprising timeliness.

At the beginning (LER XXXVIII,1), the situation is described using a biblical image (Gen 30:14): there are those who wish to devote themselves to external services, neglecting contemplation for a while. By "contemplation," I believe we should not only think of prayer, but everything that constitutes the life of the monastic community, in all its dimensions. The text immediately adds: "but she must immediately return to the purpose of contemplation" (LER XXXVIII,1).

This is a situation that I think we experience in all our communities: we have external commitments that have been requested of us by the community or that we ourselves have procured, asking the community for permission to pursue them. They can be pastoral commitments, preaching services, *lectio divina* meetings, teaching, and so on: all occupations that in themselves are not in conflict with the monastic experience, but which in some way constitute its fruit. The text speaks of "devout fruitfulness": there is a fruitfulness that arises from the monastic life, from the relationship with God and with the brothers and sisters, which can be shared with others outside the community. This also applies to a family: in family life, too, there are internal dimensions, but also external commitments to the family that must be lived with balance so as not to harm internal relationships.

The text is very concrete, immediately pointing out two aspects of external commitments. First, it states that "the momentary interval serves for the most part as a respite from the main service" (LER XXXVIII,2). Certainly, external services are performed for a "devout fruitfulness," yet this can have a benefit for the monk himself: it can be a momentary "respite" that can also benefit his monastic journey, with positive repercussions for the entire community. External commitments can also be an enrichment for the individual monk who carries them out, as well as for the community to which he belongs.

However, the *Liber Eremitice Regule* immediately specifies that "a pause that is too long allows the previous purity to grow cold or be forgotten" (LER XXXVIII,2). A discipline is necessary in the commitments lived outside the community, to avoid what is called "growing cold," a loss of tension that gradually leads us to feel "alien" to the community. In this case, one would also lose that "fruitfulness" which is born from sharing the human and spiritual fruits of monastic life. Therefore, the text invites discernment so that the "external service" may be truly fruitful and not run the risk of becoming for the monk an "escape" from the community and the commitments of monastic life. What can we give to others if we do not first live our vocation with seriousness and radicality?

For the text, there are two wrong attitudes: "We know that some so ardently crave the mandrakes of temporal activities that they always want to find a way to be involved in them; others, instead, abhor them, so much so that they cannot even bear the sight of them." And it concludes: "Both attitudes deserve blame, both are undoubtedly guilty" (LER XXXVIII,3-4). There is neither a rejection of all external activity, nor a denial of the risk that a lack of discernment and discipline entails. External activities, rather than being done with a sincere desire to share one's spiritual and human experience, rather than thinking of the good of others and their growth in adhesion to the Gospel and in following the Lord Jesus, can simply become escapes, or occasions to gratify only oneself. If it is wrong to try to be always involved in "temporal" activities, the attitude of rejecting them *a priori* is equally condemned.

The text then offers criteria for discerning the relationship between contemplative life and external commitments: "The sweetness of contemplation must always be in the will, the occupation of activity, if ordered by the superior, in necessity" (LER XXXVIII,3-4). The criterion for discerning the goodness of external commitments lies in the fact that they are carried out in a spirit of authentic service, not disconnected from the community, but as an expression of it. Our activities, our services, are good if they are animated by a sincere desire to live our life as a gift, thinking of the good and growth of others. However, this is true only if the activity is "well-ordered": "The mandrakes, which cure sterility, have human features and produce fragrant fruits; they signify the services of well-ordered human activity" (LER XXXVIII,6). If lived with discernment, the activities that are "external" to the life of the community can "produce fragrant fruits of honesty and give good testimony to those outside" (LER XXXVIII,7).

In this perspective, the aspiration for external commitments, making use of one's own gifts and abilities, is praiseworthy and leads to a true enrichment of the individual and of the

community itself. We cannot, however, fail to make a serious examination of conscience, personal and communal, on the motivations that can make the desire for "occupations of external services" less praiseworthy. What is needed is that balance that excludes any extreme position—"both attitudes deserve blame"—and knows how to make a serious discernment that takes into account the growth of the person, the good of the community, and the service to the brothers and sisters, producing "fragrant fruits of honesty."

Saint Romuald

Saint Romuald also lived this tension between contemplative life and concrete action, to "convert" the Church and the society of his time to the Gospel lived in its essentiality. Saint Peter Damian, in the *Vita Romualdi*, writes that Romuald had a "passion to produce fruit so ardent that while he was doing one thing, he immediately hastened to conceive of another, never content with the results: one might even have said that he wanted to transform the entire world into a hermitage" (VR XXXVII,1).

It is a theme on which the figure of Romuald, as we approach the celebration of the Millennium of his death, invites us to reflect, as individuals and as communities. A theme that today is urgent not only for monks and nuns, called to take care of the fabric of their communities, but also for laity, families, pastors, who are increasingly caught up in an excess of frantic activity and are called to re-center on what is essential. Romuald's witness can help everyone to rediscover a "well-ordered" balance in our lives, for personal and community growth.

To all, I wish a happy feast on the Solemnity of Saint Romuald, remembering each other in prayer!

Fr. Matteo
Prior General

Liber Eremitice Regule, XXXVIII. The mandrakes of Leah

1. Rachel at times desires the mandrakes of Reuben, son of Leah (cf. Gen 30:14), that is, she aspires to the occupations of external services and devout fruitfulness, neglecting for a little while her constancy in contemplation, but she must immediately return to the purpose of contemplation. 2. The momentary interval serves for the most part as a respite from the main service, but a pause that is too long allows the previous purity to grow cold or be forgotten. 3. We know that some so ardently crave the mandrakes of temporal activities that they always want to find a way to be involved in them; 4. others, instead, abhor them, so much so that they cannot even bear the sight of them. 5. Both attitudes deserve blame, both are undoubtedly guilty. 6. The sweetness of contemplation must always be in the will, the occupation of activity, if ordered by the superior, in necessity. 7. The mandrakes, which cure sterility, have human features and produce fragrant fruits; they signify the services of well-ordered human activity. 8. Religious and contemplative persons at times aspire to them in a praiseworthy manner, to find where to make their virtue and holiness shine, to produce fragrant fruits of honesty and give good testimony to those outside.