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An Icon of Christ's Merciful Love

From an early age, about four, I felt within me a deep desire to come closer to God. This desire was vague but quite present. For several years I expressed this desire by saying that I wanted to become a priest. I think for me I understood that this was the most immediate way to be close to the Lord. It was only later, at the beginning of my adolescence, that I knew that there were men and women who consecrated themselves totally to God and they were called monks or nuns. I then realized that this was the life I wanted to live.

This desire has never left me! Why did God choose me? I have no idea! I'm no better than anyone else, I am able to sin...and I have often done so. But I always wanted to return to the Lord because without him I could not see any meaning in my life and I knew that He did not abandon me despite my weaknesses and poverty.

At the same time, I loved solitude. Being all alone in a small cove of the Brittany coast during our family vacation was a profound joy for me. Not that I was running away from the world, which I liked, but I found God...and I found peace of heart, of which Brother Roger said, "It is a mainstay of the inner life; it keeps us on the road leading up to joy." (*Love of All Loving*, p. 83).

I would add that this quest for God, which gradually brings great peace in the heart of the monk, leads him to verify the correctness of his choice. When we have peace in our heart, through our monastic journey, we can say that God is at work and we try to continue this work with him in a *synergia*, a joint action, a collaboration with him in response to his call.

I will not tell how this monastic life took shape in me; it would take too long. But God allowed, on 1 August 1990, when I was already a monk for a long time and serving a Parisian parish, my spiritual father to discern that God was calling me to found a monastic community. Faced with this proposal I should have run away because I never liked adventure...hitchhiking always scared me!!! The monk who was guiding me had his intuition verified by his own spiritual father, Archimandrite Sophrony of blessed memory, who was himself the spiritual son of St Silouan of Mount Athos.

Father Sophrony replied, "Tell Father Symeon this is something impossible to do, but let him do it." Then he added, when he met me the next day, "Know that this is done only by tears and blood...." The whole program was in place; it just had to be put into practice! I would not really understand this sentence of Father Sophrony until much later, after the experience of trial.

By grace, and I insist on this word, I had no fear. After a time of searching, having obtained the blessing of my bishop, I found a place in ruins, abandoned for over twenty years and we began a life searching for God like other searchers look for gold. There were three of us, two postulants—a man and a woman—and myself.

Our goal: “choose to love,” try to love God as Jesus asks us, and also to love our neighbors, whoever they are, whatever their origin, nationality, religion or way of thinking. In other words, try to live in communion. In the words of Brother Roger: “Communion is one of the most beautiful names of the Church. In it there is no room for harshness, but only transparency, goodness of heart, compassion.”

In trying to live in this way, we venture every day a little more towards Love, true Love, the Love that comes from God and that makes us free! It is partly for this reason that, having read a phrase of Saint Augustine of Hippo, I engraved on my Abbot's crosier the motto: “Love and do what you want!”

I had few opportunities to meet Brother Roger, but each time I saw on his face what he liked to say to his brothers, “The Lord Christ, in his compassion and his love for you, has chosen you to be in the Church a sign of brotherly love. (...) Stay simple and joyful, with the joy of the merciful, the joy of brotherly love.”

I think I can say that what we seek to live in the Monastery of Saint Silouan is to be, as Brother Roger was and remains, the Icon of the merciful love of Christ!

In closing I want to encourage you to become saints. That may surprise you, but that is our basic vocation and it is proposed to all without exception, whether we are in monastic life or God has called us to another way of life. Brother Roger often encouraged us to solidarity and well, Yes! Let us all be united in holiness and it is on that road that we will achieve unity.