

## 1. The yeast and the ship

During this year's Monastic Formation Course we will meditate together on the theme of mercy, seeking to let ourselves be accompanied by St. Benedict in an understanding of this mystery that helps us to live it, to experience it. Certainly, the Holy Year of Mercy pushes us toward this, but we do not need to deepen our consideration of mercy only because this year is consecrated to it, but because this deepening is vital for us. And I am sure that this theme will also help us understand St. Benedict more deeply, and his charism, and therefore to live our vocation with greater awareness and determination.

I would also like these meditations not to be separated from the main task of this Monastic Formation Course. The morning Chapter must not be limited to being a devotional, formal, theoretic gesture, because none of this aids life, and the whole Course, too, is a waste of time if it does not help you live with greater awareness and intensity. That alone is of service to life which enables us to follow a path, to advance in the "*conversatio morum*" that St. Benedict has us promise at the moment of our Profession, along with stability and obedience (RB 58:17). We know that "*conversatio morum*" should not be translated simply as "conversion of our ways of live," but implies the idea of a communal path of life that allows a transformation of ourselves, starting from our heart.

It is good to remember how St. Benedict conceives of the abbot's teaching, and thus the formation that the monks and nuns must always receive: "The abbot must never teach or decree or command anything that would deviate from the Lord's instructions. On the contrary, everything he teaches and commands should, like the leaven of divine justice, permeate the minds of his disciples" (RB 2:4-5).

The leaven, the yeast, is not the pasta or the bread, but that which makes the pasta rise, which increases its volume and enriches its quality. The leaven in the pasta begins a process that happens, however, in the pasta, in the grains that constitute it. St. Benedict asks the abbot always to offer a teaching that acts as leaven "in the minds of his disciples – *in discipulorum mentibus*." Hence, it must be a word, a doctrine, that instigates an interior task, of interior growth, of conversion of the thoughts and the heart. The teaching must activate in each of us a process that is meditative, and also contemplative, which is a task for each one's freedom. God also does this with his Word, and in fact the abbot must teach fundamentally with the word of God, with the Sacred Scriptures. In a certain sense, the good formator is the one who lets God speak, who lets the Word of God speak through his word. The true formation is that which leads us to listen to Christ.

The formator is the one who proclaims from the roof-tops what Jesus has whispered in his ear (cf. Mt 10:27), such that the one who listens hears Jesus whispering to the ear of his heart too, to make him a master in turn, an evangelizer on the roof-tops, in one way or another, because we are all called to evangelize the world, also from the silence of a cloister.

But we evangelize, we bear witness to Jesus Christ, Savior and Redeemer, if we permit him to “whisper to us,” that is, if we listen to him first of all, we personally, in silence, in personal dialogue with Him.

This is what St. Benedict invites us to from the first worlds of the Rule: “Listen, my son, to the master’s teaching and incline the ear of your heart to receive and put into practice willingly, with determination, the counsels of a loving, merciful father (*pater patris*)” (Prol. 1).

Our Master is a Merciful Father, it is God revealed in Jesus Christ who speaks to the ear of our heart, so that we can freely and joyfully (*libenter*) bring about in our life the will of God.

The first condition for receiving God’s mercy and for living in it is, then, the heart’s listening. God has mercy on our heart (*misericordia* is a word composed of *miserere*, to have mercy, and *cor*, heart) above all by speaking to it, by sending his Word, his only-begotten Son, to speak to man’s miserable heart. St. Benedict helps us understand right away, then, that our conversion, our return to the Father, begins with inclining the ear of our heart to the word of God, to Christ who speaks to us. And from there begins our Christian and monastic vocation. The vocation begins where our heart hears the voice of Christ who invites us to return to the good Father.

St. Augustine writes in the *Confessions*: “O Lord, continue your work in me and reveal to me these pages [of Sacred Scripture]. Behold, your voice is my joy; your voice is worth more than all pleasures put together. It satisfies my love: yes, I love, and this too is your gift. Do not leave aside your gifts and do not hold in disdain this blade of dry grass” (*Conf.* 11.2.3).

So, we must live our monastic formation like a blade of grass thirsting always for the word of God, for the joy that only the Lord’s voice gives us. Because God’s mercy for us begins precisely from the fact that He bends down to the earth to sprinkle with the dew of his beauty and truth the blade of grass that we are. God does not see humanity as an immense meadow composed of billions of indistinct blades of grass. God is a Father who sees distinctly each blade of grass and bends down to speak to it in his Word made flesh.

“I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Mt 11:25-27).

It is with this wonder, this surprise, this gratitude that we should receive the Word of God and every moment of formation that is offered us. Only thus will we not be distracted, superficial, hard of heart.

I was saying that the formation that comes to us from God and of the Church speaks to our freedom. This means that it must not be a seduction, but a provocation. It happens, and unfortunately not rarely, that superiors and founders manage to seduce, rather than form, their disciples, with serious consequences for the path of the disciples, who are like slaves who first endure to the point of suffocating and then rebel with violence.

On this topic, it seems important to me to meditate on a passage of the Gospel according to Mark:

“Jesus departed with his disciples to the lake, and a great multitude from Galilee followed him; hearing all that he was doing, they came to him in great numbers from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, beyond the Jordan, and the region around Tyre and Sidon. He told his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, so that they would not crush him; for he had cured many, so that all who had diseases pressed upon him to touch him” (Mk 3:7-10).

Jesus drew crowds, and he would have been able to seduce everyone with the power of his miracles. It was enough just to touch him to be healed. And his disciples must have been proud to have a Master who was so successful. But Jesus does not enjoy this almost magical cult of his person. Certainly He gave himself completely to the flock, because they were lost sheep without a shepherd, for whom he felt compassion. But he knows that if one obtains only miracles from Him, and miracles at merely touching him, this does not allow persons to grow in faith, to grow in a free relationship with God, a relationship of requesting and of gratitude, and hence in a relationship of love.

Jesus, then, asks the disciples to have a boat ready for him. It is not to flee that crowd, but to be able to speak to the crowd, to put between Himself and the crowd the distance necessary for speaking and being heard. He wants to create the distance necessary for the creation between Himself and each person's heart of a space of listening, of attention, and hence of freedom, and of responsibility regarding what Jesus was giving with his word, with the Gospel he was announcing.

So, if we want to form ourselves with freedom, if we truly want to be formed by Christ to a maturity of determination, of responsibility toward him and toward ourselves, we must accept that, between Him and us, there be created a space of silence, of listening, and not to pretend to take from Him feelings and benefits that are immediate, miraculous, devotional, that is, without the freedom of faith and of the conversion that faith asks of us, or makes us request from the grace of the Holy Spirit.

And the one who forms, who teaches, must do it by preparing this “boat” that allows Christ to speak to us freely, creating between us and Him the silence, the attention, the expectation that are like the good soil, ploughed, in which the seed of the Word of God can truly put forth roots and bear fruit. Only thus will we be able to receive and welcome the Gospel of Mercy with humility and fruitfulness.