

3. A path of conversion

In the Prologue of the Rule, the house of God which is the monastery is called “tent,” referring to Psalm 14, which speaks of the Tabernacle of the Lord on Mount Sion. This term gives us the idea of a house of nomads, in the desert, that Tent of God’s Presence which traveled in the desert with the people of Israel, precisely so that the people be converted and become the people of God ready to enter the Promised Land.

Our community is also a dwelling of God in which one travels, in which God walks with us to lead us to a fullness of life. To lead us to life, the merciful Lord makes himself a Shepherd, and accompanies us on a path of conversion that makes us truly return to the Father with our whole life.

St. Benedict says that the Lord shows us the “way of his tent – *viam tabernaculi*” (RB Prol. 24). It can be understood as the road to reach the tent, but also as the way that the tent makes us run by being moved in the desert.

In any case, the reference to Psalm 14 quickly allows St. Benedict to describe in these terms the conversion asked of us in order for us to dwell in God’s tent and rest on God’s holy mountain: “Lord, who will dwell in your tent, who will find rest on your holy mountain? (...) He who walks without fault, and acts with justice; who speaks the truth in his heart; who speaks no revilement with his tongue; who does no evil to his neighbor; who accepts no insult against his neighbor” (RB Prol. 23, 25-27; Ps 14:1-3).

With this quotation of Psalm 14 St. Benedict immediately thinks back to a path of conversion which is a path of truth and mercy toward others. From the very beginning of the Rule it is clear to St. Benedict that we need mercy, and that for this we need conversion, we need to make a journey in which our hearts are converted to God’s mercy toward others. It is as if Benedict wants to beget us to the same maturity and merciful paternity of the heart that enabled him to forgive the monks of Vicovaro and that enabled his charism to become fruitful.

But even before quoting Psalm 14, the Prologue cites Psalm 33, from which it even takes a question and answer. The question is: “Is there anyone who wants life and longs to see good days?” (Prol. 15; Ps 33:13). The answer is: “If you want to have life, true and eternal, ‘keep your tongue from evil and let your lips not speak a lie. Flee from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it’” (Prol. 17; Ps 33:14-15).

We should not take lightly this conversion to merciful truth in relationships, as described by Psalm 14 and Psalm 33, as if Benedict had cited these words only to put some biblical ornamentation on the text of the Prologue. The whole Rule, in fact, describes the path of this conversion. Without it we do not climb the Lord’s holy mountain to live with Him; that is, without it there is no true monastic ascesis, there is no Christian ascesis, one does not progress, one does not grow, one is not lifted up. And without it we do not reach true life, happiness, and peace.

Here we need to remember the situation of the world, of the society in which we live, whether in Europe or in the other continents from which you come. What violence, what lying, what harshness, what corruption, what evil! And society feels ever more powerless, does not know how to respond, how to defend itself, and ultimately does not

even know what it should defend... Every time there is a tragedy, the political authorities try to console the people, but we do not feel that their words are true, especially when they invite us not to be afraid because the evil will be beaten and we will know how to defend ourselves. The most they can promise is to be stronger than those who commit violence, making others' violence compete with our own. When defense from others' violence consists only in the force of our own violence, peace will never be reached, one lives in more and more tension, in an arm-wrestling match where only muscular strength counts.

The proposal of God, of Jesus, of St. Benedict, and today of Pope Francis, is to oppose to the violence of external force a force that is of another nature, an internal force, a force of life and not of death, a force of life that is stronger than death, the Paschal force of the Risen Christ who comes to say to his disciples closed up in their fear: "Peace be with you!", and does so as he shows them his hands and side, the wounds of the Cross, of the Passion and Death that conquer evil and death (Jn 20:19-20).

There is a weakness, a fragility, there are wounds, there is a death that conquer force, violence, the security of the world, and permit a peace that is true, profound, and fruitful.

This profound, inner force, however, demands a conversion, requires of us a path of conversion of heart, of life, of relationships. No politician proposes a conversion as a path to victory over evil. To meet violence with violence no conversion is needed: to the contrary, conversion seems negative, because one who is living a conversion is disarmed, has no outer defenses against violence, and is therefore more vulnerable than the one who arms himself, defends himself, who meets evil with evil, violence with violence. The one who accepts changing interiorly in order to conquer, above all, the evil within himself follows the path of Christ and embraces his vulnerability, that of the Cross, of letting his Heart be pierced even to the last drop of blood and water.

The way of conversion that St. Benedict proposes to us is of this nature, which is the nature of the Gospel. It is a way of conversion to mercy which makes us retrace the path of conversion that St. Benedict followed to the point of imploring God's mercy toward those who wanted to poison him.

In the beginning of the Rule, it is as if St. Benedict had told us: "If you want to reach this mercy of heart that pardons with a peaceful face and calm mind the one who threatens your life, that is, your worst enemy, by letting God's mercy act on him and especially in yourself, follow me on the path that I propose to you. Otherwise this is not your path, because it makes no sense to become a monk or nun for other reasons than this, and the Church and the world do not need monks except to live and give witness to this."

Especially today!