

9) “The earth has yielded its fruit”

In the last chapter we saw that lying prostrate on the earth expresses humility. Practically all the passages of the Rule where the word “earth” shows up are passages in which St. Benedict asks us to humbly lower our eyes, or passages where he asks us to prostrate ourselves in order to become humble again after an error or sin of pride.

We need, therefore, to touch the earth, to make contact ever again with the earth, through the eyes, the head or the whole body, in order to rediscover the true sense of what we are, of the earth from which we are formed; and we need this in order to demolish the imaginary constructions of our pride that falsify our relationship with ourselves, with others and with God. This leads us to rediscover our original truth, which is a fruitful truth, made fruitful by the Breath of God.

How many times we feel that we lack the Spirit of God. But we expect to find his Spirit only spiritually, only, so to speak, by jumping all the way to Heaven to search for it, as though to seize the Dove in flight... And we forget to begin with the earth, with that which is within our grasp, with that from which we are formed. The Spirit can make us fruitful if he finds earth in us, an earth open to the work of God who wants to form us in his image.

I believe one could read the whole Rule in light of this truth. St. Benedict wants us to be “pneumatophores”, bearers of the Spirit, men and women inhabited by the Holy Spirit, with a heart dilated by charity. He asks of us several practical “spiritual” things, such as the Divine Office, lectio and silence. But it is not so much through spirituality that he works for this end. He prefers to prepare in us the fertile earth; he starts with humility, and he restarts again always with humility, with the earth. And humility, for him, is not only an interior virtue. It is an earth that includes the whole of life in the monastery, all that one does and lives in the monastery, in the community and at work. Only if one prepares this earth, can the Spirit make us fruitful and bear fruit in us. In the Office according to the Rule of St. Benedict one sings Psalm 66 every morning at Lauds, which says: “The earth has yielded its fruit for God, our God, has blessed us!” (Ps 66:7).

Yet we think in particular of Mary. She is, above all, the fruitful earth who bore her Fruit through the work of the Spirit. St. Benedict, without ever naming her, wants to teach us to let ourselves be born through her to the humility of the earth that God blesses.

It is precisely at this point that we have to understand the importance of manual work in Benedictine monastic life. Work for Benedict is a return to the earth, it is like prostrating oneself on the earth in order to recover the humility that God can make fruitful with his Breath of life. “When they live by the labor of their hands, as our fathers and the apostles did, then they are really monks” (48:8). Here St. Benedict speaks about agricultural work, about working the earth. He says it knowing full well that this type of work will not always be for everyone the usual work. But he says it so that monks maintain an awareness that it is in this spirit that we have to work, even in those tasks that do not touch the earth, even in intellectual work or at the computer. In fact, working the land is the work

of Adam in the Garden of Eden; it is the work that humanizes us, that brings us to sense more truly what we are.

This affirmation, however absolute, St. Benedict expresses with respect to works that were not regular for the monks in his abbeys: those that pertained to the work of the harvest. On the other hand, it belongs to the nature of things that one does not harvest during the entire year. But it seems that Benedict wanted that his monks would draw from this experience, which was only occasional, an attitude to keep in all their works, and even in their relationship with the whole of reality. Just like gestures of prostration, which teach humility but cannot be done during the entire day, while one should nevertheless continuously be humble, so too it is necessary to let ourselves be taught a kind of constant relationship with reality by a manual work that is occasional and demanding like the harvests of the summer and autumn.

But let us read the sentence in Chapter 48 which precedes the one I cited earlier, "When they live by the labor of their hands..." (48:8). Benedict writes: "They must not become distressed if local conditions or their poverty should force them to do the harvesting themselves" (48:7).

This sentence tells us a lot about the relationship with reality that the Rule wants to instill in us. In the first place, it reminds us that reality is reality, and to flee it is an illusion, a departure from reality, a denial of reality, which could do nothing other than lead us into a blind alley, or even into nihilism. We all run the risk of wanting to live our vocation solely on the basis of what we think, of what we imagine, of our feelings and tastes. In this scenario, the reality in front of us can be only an obstacle, a series of inconveniences which one must continuously try to avoid, flee or censure. We have our project, our ideal project, and nothing can correspond to this project except an ideal reality that offers no opposition. But notice how reality troubles us, often from the moment we rise in the morning. Reality is terribly objective. And St. Benedict describes here that objectivity with two terms: "*loci necessitas* – local conditions" or necessities and "*paupertas* – poverty". Local conditions or necessities are the circumstances as they present themselves today. The grain is ripe; there is no one to harvest it for us, and yet we need to put it in the granary if we want to have bread for the whole year.

Connected to this necessity, there is poverty, which, before being an economic situation, is our true status in front of the real, in front of our circumstances. We are poor, we are limited, we do not have the means, the forces, the helps, in order to afford the luxury of living according to our dreams.