

13) "Do you want to get well?"

Humility does not consist "only in presenting oneself as the most lowest of all but in being convinced of it in the depth of one's heart" (RB 7:51).

Each of us understands that this humble inner knowledge of the heart is not in our power. This is certainly what is least in our power of all. Our heart, perhaps, is the reality of our life regarding which we are the most impotent. Our heart is free even in respect of ourselves. Yet it should not be free like a wild beast, but like a son. "The sons are free" (Mt 17:26). Therefore, our heart is indeed the main matter on which we need to let God act. One works on the heart above all through prayer. Our only power over our heart is to pray, to beg, with it and through it, that it become deeply humble in its affection, its feeling, its self-awareness. Asking God for lowliness of heart is the only power that we have over our inner conversion. But it is an immense power, which can change our whole life, free our whole life, and open it to the grace of filial life and to a true fecundity of love.

Although the good thief took the initiative to ask Jesus to save him, most of the time it is Jesus who takes the initiative to ask us if we want the Salvation that He came to offer us. In reality, it is always God who takes the initiative in Salvation, even if sometimes the opposite seems true.

In my youth, I used to sing an Italian religious song on this theme, which says: "In truth I was not there and He created me, I did not exist and He loved me, in truth He took the initiative, and so what do we fear? There was no light, there was no color, there was no friendship, time, or love, in truth He took the initiative, and so what do we fear? Only ingratitude makes us forget that God does not begin something except in order to finish it..." (Claudio Chieffo, *L'iniziativa*).

The paralytic of the pool of Bethzatha (Jn 5:1-16) was also, deep down, a crucified man like the thief. He had been nailed to his mat for 38 years. Up to the day when God takes the initiative to come to him personally, even if it is in the middle of "a large number of sick, blind, lame, and paralyzed" (Jn 5:3). The initiative comes from the heart of Jesus, which is an attentive heart, of Jesus who finds man with his attentive gaze: "When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, 'Do you want to be made well?'" (Jn 5:6).

Jesus saw him in the midst of them all and became interested particularly in him. He asked about him. Perhaps because he was the saddest, the most abandoned, the most alone. The interest Jesus shows in him becomes a relationship, dialogue, and a dialogue that right away invokes his freedom: "Do you want to get better?". Jesus invokes this man's will, his desire, what he truly wants. For Christ, nothing is taken for granted. Everyone would say: But of course he wants to get better! What a question! Who would not want to get better?

I see here a notable similarity with the question that St. Benedict asks of all in the prologue of the Rule, citing Psalm 34: "Who is he who longs for life and

desires to see good days?" (Prol. 15). It is as if the Rule and our Benedictine vocation begin right when Jesus sees the paralytic and asks him: "Do you want to get better?"

Who longs for life, who wants health, who wants salvation?

One always needs to return to this point in the path of following Christ. Life and internal and external circumstances leads us to this point constantly, whether we like it or not. One always needs to return to where Jesus, seeing our misery and having compassion on us, takes the initiative to become close to us and ask us: "Do you want to get better? Do you want life?"

The condition for all progress is to return to where God takes the initiative in invoking our freedom. Invoking it to call it to what? To receive the grace of health, of salvation.

Jesus will perform the miracle right away, but he asks the man's consent to his grace; consenting that his mercy and compassion be able to express themselves in the space of our misery. It is important to return always to where God has the initiative, because it is there that God manifests his grace, his original and eternal gratuity.

The whole Rule instructs us toward this. When we start the office, we return to the gratuitous font of the divine initiative; when we begin or end a service for the community; when we are asked for humility, poverty, obedience without delay, silence, mutual forgiveness... each time Benedict asks of us gestures, prayers, inner attitudes through which we return to where God took the initiative to save us, to heal us, to give us life. Each time a brother commits an error, even after having been excommunicated, healing, salvation, repair consist in returning to the grace of the Lord's salvific initiative. And this is humility.

But in order for this to be truly efficacious, we need a purification of the will. "Do you want to get better?" Jesus asks. The man could and should have answered simply "yes" or "no." It was enough to say "yes" for Jesus to heal him. He says it, but in a way that betrays in him a disposition that is not entirely just. He needs to be converted in the true freedom of his will to accept the grace of God.

He says: "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me" (Jn 5:7).

This man wants to get better, but, in the course of the years, the objections to this desire have become stronger than his trust in the possibility of its realization. When Jesus asks if we wants to get better, instead of simply responding "yes!", he sets forth some objections, those that are always there, everyday objections. And, in time, the objections coincide with others' fault: "I have no one to help me and the others pass in front of me; there is no one to love me and all the others end up better than me. Only the others' egoism gets in the way of my healing."

For him life is nothing but frustrated impotence, disappointed solitude, and jealous competition. We are all miserable, we all need healing, and this fact, instead of creating solidarity among us, sets us against each other.

But the real problem is that this man no longer expects anything from God. All focused on his own inability to reach the pool, on what the others do not do for him, on what the others obtain for themselves, he forgets that the miracle of the waters of Bethzatha is nothing but a sign of God's action, is nothing but a sign that should teach all the sick to look for health and salvation from the omnipotent love of the Lord.

We too, how many times and in how many ways do we fall into the inner state of that man. In this case, too, the Rule describes well all these attitudes of disappointed presumption which make the monk murmur interiorly, which paralyze him in a discontent for which only the others are made responsible.

Certainly our misery is real, our personal paralysis is a matter of fact, and it is true that we need help, love, attention, support. But we always risk forgetting that He whose help we truly need is God, and that God, if he took the initiative of creating us, of loving us, of redeeming us, and of calling us, surely will accomplish our healing, our salvation.