

## 14. Closeness with Christ makes us free

When St. Benedict asks his monks to “prefer nothing to the love of Christ” (RB 4:21), what does he desire but to educate them toward a Christian life in which everything favors and expresses the effort to cultivate a relationship of closeness with the Lord, with this Lord who sits at the right hand of the Father? St. Benedict succeeded in creating a realm of monastic life in which all that human life includes, great and small, strong and weak, is concentrated in living out the preference for the love of Jesus Christ. The whole path that he proposes is intended to teach us to be familiar with God, passing from servile fear to filial love. At the end of chapter 7, on the steps of humility, he writes: “Now, therefore, after ascending all these steps of humility, the monk will quickly arrive at that ‘perfect love’ of God which ‘casts out fear’ (1 Jn 4:18). Through this love, all that he once performed with dread, he will now begin to observe without effort, as though naturally, from habit, no longer out of fear of hell, but out of love for Christ, good habit and delight in virtue” (RB 7:67-69).

It is clear that, for Benedict, closeness with Christ is not only the peak of the path from fear to love, but is also that which permits and accompanies this path, this conversion of heart. By exercising this closeness with God, we become his close friends, and then it is as if fear disappeared on its own, like the clouds when the sun appears.

A problem that I notice more and more in living out the path proposed by St. Benedict, and by the Church in general, is often the fact that man today, even those who enter into monasteries or live other forms of consecration, often think they have no more fear of God, that they have no fear of losing God, of offending him. And then one thinks one is already familiar enough with Him, that it is not necessary to work towards greater familiarity with Him. In fact, man today is full of fears. He is afraid of everything and everyone, and he needs to insure himself in a thousand ways against every possible way of losing security, peace, serenity, and self-realization that he thinks he has, or obtains, with his own efforts. We feel safe about what we have and what we do, and we do everything possible to make this security unassailable, cultivating our own real and presumed abilities as much as possible, and constructing “invincible” protections around what we possess. And since this security turns out to actually be always insufficient to reassure us, the search for security becomes like a drug that we have more need of the more we consume it.

In reality, when we lose the reference to God as to one who alone can guarantee our life, as one who guarantees and saves our life even beyond death and the loss of all, losing the experience that God’s grace is worth more than life (cf. Ps 62:4), that the Father’s providence protects us more than all our securities and is stronger than all that we can have or do, losing all this, in fact, nothing remains for man but fear. The fear of God about which the Bible and the Church speak does not mean being afraid of Him, but is the awareness that without Him we are lost, we are abandoned to ourselves, we no longer have any true security. For this reason the fear of God is, in

reality, the antidote against every fear, against all of our fears. And if we understand it thus, we see that the fear of God, the awareness of our ontological dependence on Him, drives us to search for closeness with Him. Fear of God is the awareness that if I am lacking closeness with God, if I am lacking filial friendship with Him, my life is abandoned to itself and to the false securities that it constructs for itself and which make it a slave.

Everything in the methodology that St. Benedict proposes to monks who live according to his Rule is thus an education toward experiencing how this living as close friends of the Lord frees ever more life, expanding the heart in love. And a free life is not a life that has been freed from what is burdensome and difficult, but a life in which what is burdensome and difficult also becomes an opportunity to live with fullness. It is precisely to the letter what Jesus proposes: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Mt 11:28-29).

The yoke is not for escaping the burden, but helps us to face it together with Christ, to face it as He faces it. The yoke of Christ, but we could also say the Cross of Christ, is, for us, the possibility and grace of being able to face everything, even death, together with Him, and so like Him. And this is a victory, because the Cross has defeated death and sin, has beaten all the evil and all the burden of humanity.

This makes me think of the Cyrenian, who is forced to carry the cross of Jesus. First of all, imagine how unpleasant this must have been for him. There is nothing worse than being forced to carry the cross of one condemned to death. "What do I have to do with it? Did I commit his sins? Why should I be inflicted with his penalty? It is not just, it is an abuse!"

Simon of Cyrene could not rebel against the Roman soldiers, and he took the cross in silence, even if his heart was boiling over with rage and probably anger toward Jesus. He also had to fear that the people passing by would think that he was the condemned man, that he was the evildoer whom they were taking to crucifixion. At any rate, he found himself living in the same position as Jesus, at the center of widespread hostility. And surely he must have observed Jesus, as He advanced toward death, as He reacted to the torments of the crowd and of the soldiers, as He was suffering, with his body already bloodied by the scourging and the crown of thorns. Perhaps he witnessed Jesus's meeting with his mother.

We do not know anything about what the Cyrenian experienced, what that journey meant, carrying Christ's cross alongside Him. But the Gospel shows us see that something happened in him. Why? Especially because we know his name and where he comes from, Simon of Cyrene, and that he was returning from the country. The Romans certainly did not ask him for his passport before putting Jesus's cross on his shoulders. They saw this man, a countryman, muscular, poor, and that was enough. Once his service was done, Simon disappeared for the Romans and they did not think about him any more. Certainly they did not pay him for this service.

Instead, his name, his profession, his city of origin, and even the names of his two sons, – all this the first Christians knew. Mark writes: “They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus” (Mk 15:21).

What does all this mean? That, walking with Jesus, carrying his cross, looking at Jesus, and experiencing being looked at by Him, Simon made a journey of familiarization with Christ, he became close to Jesus, to the point of himself becoming close to His family, the Church. Mark says “the father of Alexander and Rufus” as if everyone would know who these two were. In the primitive community these two men were known, were brothers of the disciples of Christ.

The Cyrenian’s experience was certainly the discovery of a closeness with Christ generated by the awareness that His suffering concerns his life, his destiny; that it was not indifferent to him as he instinctively thought. On that cross, Jesus would soon be nailed and would die, suffering atrociously for him too, for Simon.

I often think of this, when I pray for sick and suffering persons, or I found myself doing something for them. They are thankful to us as if we had helped them to carry a weight that they alone had to carry. Instead, I understand that in reality we help them carry the cross that they bear for us, for all of us. In the mystery of the Cross, Christ bore all the sufferings of the world to give every suffering a redemptive value for all. If we are invited to see Christ in our brother who suffers, who is sick, who is a prisoner, who is naked, who is hungry or is without home or homeland, it is not only the suffering Christ that we must recognize in him, but the Christ who, by suffering, redeemed and saved the world.