

16. The test of waking up in the morning

St. Benedict writes in the Prologue of the Rule: “Brothers, now that we have asked the Lord who will dwell in his tent, we have heard the instruction for dwelling in it (cf. Prol. 23ff.), but only if we fulfill the obligations of those who live there” (Prol. 39).

St. Benedict says: “*si compleamus habitatoris officium* – if we fulfill the office of an inhabitant.” To inhabit is a task, a work, an asceticism. But in light of what we have meditated upon it is important to understand that the true substance of this work of our freedom is closeness with God. God does not call us to live in his tent, and even less to build his house, because tents or houses interest him, and even less because he wants the house to “function.” God wants to dwell in us by living out a familiarity, a relationship of friendship. Without this nothing has meaning, especially not living in community, living in a monastery or who knows what else. Everything in the Church is given to us by the Lord to live in communion with Him. For this reason, as we read in Revelations, Jesus stands at the door and knocks, and wants to enter for this purpose: to dine with us and we with Him (cf. Rev 3:20).

But closeness with God is not a dwelling place that we can inhabit when we have finished it. Closeness with God is built with closeness with God. It is like conjugal love: it is not built by first taking a course at the university and then going with your diploma to say to your beloved now we can love each other. It is constructed by being lived out, perhaps badly too, certainly one lives it badly at the beginning and with many moments of crisis, but everything is a part of the construction of a closeness that is an exercise. It is like learning to play an instrument: the theory is useful for reading the notes, and for not switching the cello for the drum, but you learn to play it by playing it, by familiarizing yourself with the instrument, even through the tiring efforts at the beginning, when you do not manage to play anything beautiful.

“*Si compleamus habitatoris officium* – if we fulfill the office of an inhabitant” (RB Prol. 39). Clearly behind this “if” of St. Benedict there is a provocation of our freedom. Do we *truly* want to dwell in the Lord’s tent, in the house of God? And, then, do we *truly* want to be close relatives of God in Christ?

It is not so easily taken for granted that we truly want it. We can all take a test. When we wake up in the morning, before getting out of bed, how do we think of the day that is opening? Why do we get up? I confess that I often begin to think of the things to do, the problems to face, the people to contact and meet, the thing that I should have done the day before and that I have not yet managed to do or finish... Then the first temptation arrives: to tell myself that today, again, I will not manage to do all that I should. Thus the day, even before it starts, becomes like the day of one who is condemned to forced labor. It is just “something to do,” and one’s own “I” that wakes up is as it were suddenly crushed by a mountain that crashes down upon it.

Solzhenitsyn expressed all this very well in his works on the *lagers*. I think, for example, of *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. The whole day is a struggle to survive, to save one's self and one's own interests in each little detail. Thus every little detail, what you eat, being able to heat yourself up a little from the Siberian cold, etc., in time becomes more important than life and freedom. The protagonist, Shukhov, in the end asks himself "if he wants freedom or not," and he does not know how to answer himself. But at least he admits: "Freedom meant one thing to him—home. But they wouldn't let him go home," that is, the desire for closeness which is fundamental to man's heart vanishes suddenly in skepticism.

Next to him, in the bunks of the *lager* dormitory, there is a young Baptist, who prays and reads the Gospel. From his faith, even if a little fundamentalist, he draws genuine strength to accept that his house is the *lager*, because he lives for Christ and with Christ. And the protagonist, even if he does not have this faith, recognizes that the young man lives a freedom and fullness that he does not have: "Alyosha was speaking the truth. His voice and his eyes left no doubt that he was happy in prison." And he says to him: "You see, Alyosha, somehow it works out all right for you: Jesus Christ wanted you to sit in prison and so you are—sitting there for His sake. But for whose sake am I here? Because we weren't ready for war in forty-one? For that? But was that *my* fault?" (A. Solzhenitsyn, *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, New American Library 2009, p. 164).

So, maybe even each of our days can be hard like a soviet *lager*, but the problem is the reason for which we dispose ourselves to live life, to stay in life, to face reality. "But was that *my* fault? What do I have to do with it?" we could tell ourselves, like Shukhov. What do we have to do with the reality that it is up to us to live, with the people with whom it is up to us to pass the day, work, with our community, or with our family, etc.? What do I have to do with the situation of society, with the situation of the whole world, or with the sickness that has come down upon me, or the problems with work? What do I have to do with the condition of the Church, with the situation of vocations, the condition of young people today, the aging of so many communities? What do I have to do with my character, with my psychological problems, and above all with those of others?

So, when we are about to get up in the morning, we could really say that, deep down, we have nothing to do with the day that is beginning, because we face the day as if through a filter, the filter of presuming to need to give the day value ourselves or that the day needs to give value to us. We have the presumption of needing to make the reality of this day beautiful or interesting through what we do and what we have. And we insist that the day's reality come to satisfy us with what it will be and will bring us. But this presumption tricks us, because it fools us into thinking we have direct contact with reality, between us and reality, and that all must be regulated between us and reality, between what we are and what reality is, on account of which it either goes well or badly, either pleases me or displeases me, there is no other value between me and reality than my own interest, my project, my pleasure.

When we face it like that, it is true that life sooner or later becomes frightening, one does not have the desire to live it, because this presumption is always disappointed. Because, we must recognize it, reality has not been made to satisfy us. Or better: we have not been made to satisfy ourselves with the daily reality in which we live. We have been made to be satisfied, to be happy, *in* the daily reality, but not *with* the daily reality.

It is the great error of the rich which Jesus condemns in the Gospel: they think that their full barns are a satisfaction, a joy, a fullness for their life. But this is not true, it is not ontologically true, because our heart is made for something else. Even if that rich fool had not died the following night, even if he had lived a hundred years to enjoy what he had piled up in his barns, even in this case he would not have been happy, he would not have been satisfied, because his heart was made for something else (cf. Lk 12:15-21).

But when one lives reality with the purpose of living *in* it, in the circumstances as they present themselves, that for which our heart was created, then everything changes. Then “we have something to do with” even the worst conditions, like those of the *lager*.