

18. The prayer of Christ and our unity

If Jesus' prayer coincided with his person and had the infinite dimension of his Trinitarian relationship with the Father, then we see that we must also understand ourselves, our nature and vocation, what we are and what we are called to be, in the light of Jesus' prayer. It is important, then, to *listen* to Jesus' prayer, to meditate on the words and the intentions that he put into his prayer. We truly understand ourselves if we let ourselves be described and changed by what Jesus asks of the Father for us and with us.

And it is here that the priestly prayer, which I would rather call "the filial prayer," of chapter seventeen of St. John is particularly precious. For in it Jesus asks the Father that the disciples be one as the Son and the Father are one. Jesus asks that we enter together, united to Him, into the communion of the Trinity. In this way, Jesus describes and defines our vocation as belonging to Him. We can truly become ourselves, we can enter into the fullness of life that Christ has made possible for us with the Cross and Resurrection, if we abandon ourselves to what the Son requests from the Father for us.

What, then, does Jesus ask for in his intense priestly and filial prayer, prelude to the whole paschal mystery?

Basically, he asks that all the disciples, and the whole world thanks to them, enter with Him into eternal communion with the Father, in the Son's "being ONE" with the Father in the Holy Spirit.

Jesus' prayer coincides with this eternal communion of love with the Father. Jesus shows us that, with his prayer, He wants to bring us all together into this communion of love, which coincides with eternal life, as Jesus says at the beginning of the priestly prayer: "And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (Jn 17:3).

"To know," in a biblical sense, does not just mean "knowing something," like when we claim to know a person because we know everything about them, or maybe know all the gossip about them, that is, we know all their defects. In the Bible, "to know" is rather the mysterious experience of the other that we are granted by love, by knowing the other with the heart, as God knows us (cf. 1 Sam 16:7). By asking that we have this knowledge of the Father and of the Son, Jesus requests for us the eternal communion of love between the Father and the Son, he asks, that is, for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus' prayer, then, intends to introduce us into this unique and eternal relationship of love, which is indeed the Trinitarian Unity between the Father and the Son. All of Christian mysticism is contained in this experience. "Contained" in a manner of speaking, for it is this experience without limits or boundaries that "contains" all Christian mysticism. In fact, the mystics say they "lose themselves" in this experience.

But this prayer of Jesus, which asks for everything for us, which opens us to the infinite experience of the communion of the Trinity, implies an aspect that is like a condition for us to be able to enter into this infinite and eternal experience: our unity,

unity among us, the unity of the disciples. And here it is as if we perceived the dramatic aspect of Jesus' prayer to the Father. We perceive that, if Jesus asks for this being "one" as the Father and the Son are ONE, this implies that this grace, this eternal and infinite experience, for the sake of which Jesus offers his whole life, is something we could refuse, it could fail to be realized for us. Perhaps it was this possibility that made Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane not only dramatic but anguished. For Jesus dies on the Cross to give the whole human race this eternal life in Trinitarian Communion, and in Gethsemane the temptation that Jesus underwent was probably that of having to suffer and die in vain, that is, to give to men a gift they would refuse. For eternal life in Trinitarian Communion is a life of pure love, and love is possible only if it is free. Hence the essential request of Jesus in chapter seventeen of John is not so much to convince the Father to give eternal life to the world, because the Father has decided on and wanted that from all eternity, to the point of sending his own Son to die for us. Jesus' essential request is that there be in the world a reality that makes the Trinity, the infinite love of Trinitarian Communion, visible and attractive. That there be in the world a living and real sign of the Unity of the Father and the Son, such that "the world may believe" (17:21), that "the world may know" (17:23) this love that is also for it, that is for all, and thus every freedom can accept in Christ the love that makes us sons of God.

Hence the great prayer of Jesus, burning with this passion for the salvation of all, ultimately asks for a single thing: the unity of the disciples, the fraternal communion of the disciples. In the priestly prayer it is as if the disciples' unity were the heart of the matter, because it is the reality suspended between the freedom of God and the freedom of man. On one side there is the Trinity, with its infinite love that desires the salvation of all; on the other there is humanity, the world, whose freedom risks not knowing and thus not receiving this immense gift. In the middle, so to speak, there is the Church, the mystery of the disciples' community, called as it were to act consciously as a bridge between the freedom of God and the freedom of the world, so that they can embrace each other eternally.

Thus the disciples' communion becomes the most important thing in the world, the most important thing for God and for the world. God knows it, the world does not; but we must be aware of it out of love for God and love for the world. Without the unity of the disciples, humanity cannot be drawn by and toward eternal Communion with God, toward the Communion that God is in the Trinity. And we too, if we refuse the communion of Christ among us, we also refuse it as eternal life, as the total and eternal fulfillment of our life.

What I would like to explore more deeply with you, then, is how St. Benedict, aware of this essential point of Christian and monastic life, would want always to educate us to live out this unity, this communion, deeply and without limits.