

20. The sacrifice of communion

In his immense treatise *The City of God*, St. Augustine says something that St. Benedict might have thought back to while he was composing his Rule: “This is the sacrifice of Christians: though being many, to be one single body in Christ” (*De Civitate Dei* 10.6; cf. 1 Cor 10:17).

The unity of the disciples in the one mystical Body is the grace granted us in the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, through the sacraments, especially Baptism and the Eucharist. It is a grace, but it demands an opening and a conversion on our part, and hence a sacrifice, as St. Augustine writes. The Rule guides our corresponding ever more to the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross with our conversion toward the unity of his Body. It is important, then, to be aware of how St. Benedict educates us to live this “sacrifice of communion,” to return to a fine expression of the Old Testament (cf. Lev 3), which means, for us, letting our life be ever more consumed by the fire of charity, which is a fire that, as in the burning bush of Moses, does not destroy that which it burns, but makes it ever more sacred. The etymology of “sacrifice” is *sacrum facere*: to make sacred, that is, divine. The man who sacrifices himself with Christ in charity rediscovers his life as eternal, assimilated to the life of God, rather than losing it.

So let us ask ourselves: how does the way that St. Benedict propose turn us toward the unity of communion, evidently realizing for us that which is the method for the whole Church?

I do not think I will get to the end of this topic, but let’s touch on at least a few aspects. What is the first sacrifice in favor of the unity of the body of Christ that is the community that St. Benedict forms us for? I think it is the sacrifice of one’s own will, of conceiving of our freedom as a wild dog that is only happy because it is autonomous, does what it wants, obeys its instincts, and never thinks of others.

It is enough to cite the bitter description that the Rule gives for sarabaites: “Without a shepherd, they pen themselves up in their own sheepfolds, not the Lord’s. Their law is what they like to do, whatever strikes their fancy. Anything they believe in and choose, they call holy; anything they dislike, they consider forbidden” (RB 1.8–9).

Each of us has more or less pronounced traces of this tendency in us, since you can say that it has been directly transmitted with original sin. It is, in us, a structural rebellion against being determined by another or by other people than ourselves, as if being made by another, being created, willed, and loved by God, and hence being dependent on Him, were not more original in us than the sin of Adam and Eve.

It is clear that this tendency is what makes the life of communion with others, fraternal unity in community, more difficult.

So, St. Benedict understands, along with the whole monastic tradition, that the fundamental work of conversion is work on our freedom, on our will, so that it accept belonging, depending, following. It is the asceticism of obedience that St. Benedict requires from the beginning of the Prologue, and then through the whole Rule, with a thousand facets (cf. RB Prol. 2). But from the very beginning of the Rule St. Benedict shows the positive aspect of obedience, the true face of obedience, which is listening

to the Master who tells us the truth and to a good Father (*pious pater*) who wants to communicate his love to us (cf. Prol. 1–2).

Then, throughout the Rule, this listening must shift into listening to the Abbot, listening to the brothers, etc., but ultimately it is always the Word of God, the Word of the Father, Jesus Christ, whom we are formed to hear.

And nothing leads to fraternal unity more than this listening, because it is a listening that leads us to recognize in all and in everyone the voice of the Bridegroom who calls us to be united to Him and in Him. Christ is the voice of the Father who calls all to be his sons, and hence brothers and sisters in Christ.

I often notice in communities where there is no education toward the obedience of listening, and hence toward silence, that they have a hard time being truly fraternal, being truly united. For where the Word of God is not listened to, the noise of rumors dominates, of chatting, of criticism, of lies, of murmuring, so detested by St. Benedict; and so, goodbye unity!

In the *Imitation of Christ* there is a phrase that perfectly expresses the unifying power of the Word of God, from whom all comes and from whom all receives substance: “*Ex uno Verbo omnia et unum loquuntur omnia, et hoc est Principium quod et loquitur nobis* – From a single Word all things come, and all things proclaim that single Word, which is the Beginning who has also spoken to us” (*De Imitatione Christi*, Lib. I.3.2).

The unity that obedience creates is not so much that, if everybody does their duty, the whole community functions well, because this would still be a unity made by us, depending on us, and which thus remains fragile: it is enough for just one to stop obeying or wanting or being able to do his duty to make the whole “mechanism” of communal life stop working or become chaotic. This would be the unity of a totalitarian state, or a sectarian community, not a community of communion, an ecclesial community.

The unity created by a free obedience that listens to the Word of God is, by contrast, a communion that builds itself up constantly, that continually grows and is reformed, because it is fed on the eternal Word of God who speaks not only at the start, but eternally, and by speaking creates that which we hear from Him together and with our heart. It is an obedience with the ears of the heart open, which keeps listening, and hence in the exercise of the freedom that at each step is called by Christ to say *yes*, to decide to follow him.

St. Benedict educates us always to listen to Christ, Word of the Father, in his polyphonic call to us. Since the Rule tells us that Jesus consults us in the abbot, in Sacred Scripture, in the brothers and sisters, in the Liturgy, in various circumstances, but also in the poor one who knocks at the door, as also in the ill, and in the brother who has made a mistake. For this reason, monastic silence is a constant dimension of the community’s life, to be exercised when we need to speak, too, because Christ speaks to us continually, in all and through all. Listening to this polyphony makes us enter into and live in the symphony of the Body of Christ’s communion.