

## 21. Service in unity

After the discipline of listening, of obedience, and of silence, St. Benedict teaches us that we can grow in the unity of the Body of Christ through service. Listening is a more passive dimension of communion, but when one listens to the Word of God, Jesus Christ, deep down, one cannot help but understand that he calls us to serve by giving our life like Him.

The last word of the Word incarnate before dying for us is: “It is finished!” and it is the word of a servant who has done his whole duty, who finished his whole mission. Before breathing his last, it is as if Jesus had said to the Father: “Mission accomplished!” But on his lips this means: “I have loved to the very end! I have given my whole life!” Not for nothing does chapter 13 of John begin with the words: “Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (Jn 13:1). And how does Jesus love to the very end? Certainly by going to his death on the Cross, but here the illustration of this total love is to put himself to service to the point of washing the disciples’ feet. For Christ, obedience is born from listening and is realized in service, in losing one’s life for others.

St. Benedict is so convinced of this that he also puts monastic prayer in the realm of service. He says that when the brothers are on a journey, they should be concerned to pray the divine office as they can, and adds: “let them not neglect their measure of service – *servitutis pensum non negligent reddere*” (RB 50.4).

Yes, for monks praying is also a service due, a task entrusted that must be obeyed. Often we have too intimistic and self-referential conception of prayer, as if we were only praying for ourselves, only to be okay ourselves, and not to serve the Church, the people of God and all humanity. Thus one often neglects prayer just because “one does not feel like it,” because it is not satisfying, because we are tired and must rest and distract ourselves. We do not think about the responsibility for a mission that has been entrusted to us, a task of service that God entrusts to us for the good of the whole Body of Christ. Certainly, prayer must not be just a penance, and for this reason in monasteries we have always sought to make it beautiful and pleasing. But the beauty too is pointless and wears us out if it is not lived out as service to the whole people of God.

The whole of life in a monastery is conceived by St. Benedict as a service. In the prologue he already defines the monastery as “school of the Lord’s service – *Dominici scola servitii*” (Prol. 45). In chapter 2, the Rule advises the abbot that it is precisely this common service that makes all the brothers equal in dignity, and that thus there is no place for arbitrary preferences in the monastery: “A man born free is not to be given higher rank than a slave who becomes a monk (...) because whether slave or free, we are all one in Christ and share alike in bearing arms in the service of the one Lord [*aequalem servitutis militiam baiulamus*]” (RB 2.18–20).

The service that unites everyone, which even when it is lowly to the point of foot-washing, is the highest dignity for us and the highest honor, is service of the Lord, serving the Lord in everything and in everyone. All the human differences of class or

dignity are undone by Him whom we serve, who is above all, the Lord of all. But they are also undone by the fact that the greatest of all became our servant.

In this, too, how many crises of unity in communities arise from not willingly putting oneself at the service of each other! But, positively, we often see that the unity of a community is restored and grows thanks perhaps to the hidden and humble service of just one brother or sister, who perhaps makes up for the others' lack of service. When Jesus made the disciples aware that He was in their midst "as one who serves" (Lk 22:27), he revealed the meek and humble heart that, in their midst, without their realizing it, kept them united for three years, notwithstanding all their deficiencies and shabbiness.

For this reason, St. Benedict asks the abbot above all to be a servant of his community, a serving, so to speak, hidden near the souls and characters of the brothers. He must in fact "*regere animas et multorum servire moribus* – guide souls and serve the characters of many" (RB 2.31). It is a "difficult and arduous" task, St. Benedict recognizes (*ibid.*), but it is precisely this humble service that overcomes division deeply and makes communion grow. I always admire superiors who have this patient charity that manages for years to bear the defects and often the whims of various brothers and sisters, to lead them ever anew to live in communion. Sometimes we consider these superiors who are always patient a little naïve, not very energetic. And in fact they often let themselves be "taken advantage of" and "tricked" by some brothers. Yet, they silently take on this scorn, of which St. Paul speaks regarding the apostles (cf. 1 Cor 4:9–13), which is the same scorn that Christ crucified underwent to love us to the end. Moreover, was Jesus not too patient with Peter and all the disciples, and especially with Judas? And yet, without this naïve patience, there would be no Church, we would not be saved.

But this service that builds communion is asked not just of the superior, but of every brother. Unity is built precisely by serving each other, as Jesus first of all washed the disciples' feet so that they would learn to wash "each other's" feet (Jn 13:14). St. Benedict emphasizes and develops this awareness in chapter 35 of the Rule, which speaks of services relating to the kitchen, which were services that the brothers had to perform for each other in weekly shifts. The chapter begins with the fundamental principle: "The brothers should serve one another" (RB 35.1). St. Benedict dispenses only the sick from this, and those who have truly absorbing communal occupations, because, he says, "such service increases reward and fosters love" (35.2). And a little later he repeats: "Let all the rest serve one another in love [*sub caritate*]" (35.6).

"*Sub caritate*": it is as if, serving each other, each one put himself at the service of charity, recognize, that is, that charity is superior to everything and everyone, is the greatest charism, the highest value (cf. 1 Cor 12:31, 13:13). There is as it were a sense of veneration of charity that St. Benedict asks for there to be in each communal service, as if the brothers, in their work, should never lose awareness that "*Deus caritas est* – God is love" (1 Jn 4:16), and thus should be able to live their service in adoration of God, without interrupting the service of adoration that they are consecrated to as monks.

Lived "under charity," fraternal service nourishes not only the unity of the community but also unity with God, in a single communion of love.