

22. "That all be common to all"

Another aspect that leads to growth in the unity of the Body of Christ is the communion of goods. It seems to us perhaps a less elevated level of unity than unity of will and mutual service, but in fact it seems that the first Christians insisted on this more, emphasizing how the sharing of material riches among members of the Church was a particularly telling sign for the pagans, perhaps because it was unusual.

Moreover, St. Benedict refers directly to the example of the first community of Jerusalem when he asks his monks to observe poverty, or rather, the non-appropriation of goods: "All things should be the common possession of all, as it is written" (RB 33.6). In fact he cites the Acts of the Apostles, where they describe the first community as a place of communion of hearts and goods: "Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common" (Acts 4:32).

It is meaningful and impressive how the Acts of the Apostles shift immediately from the union of hearts and souls to the communion of material goods. This reveals a precise awareness not only of the faith but also of man's nature. Faith in Christ, if it is true, changes not only hearts and souls, but the whole person and all the expressions of the person.

Man is revealed as a whole, as a person in relation, composed of spirit, soul, and body. Thus it is not strange to speak immediately of communion of goods when one speaks of communion of hearts and souls, because if one stopped at spiritual communion, not only would one limit the value and influence of faith in life, but one would also reduce man, cut him in pieces, reducing his nature and identity.

This arrangement becomes even clearer and more explicit in the Rule of St. Benedict, in particular in chapter 33, which I was mentioning above: "Above all, this evil practice must be uprooted and removed from the monastery. We mean that without an order from the abbot, no one may presume to give, receive or retain anything as his own, nothing at all –not a book, writing tablets or stylus– in short, not a single item, especially since monks may not have the free disposal even of their own bodies and wills. For their needs, they are to look to the father of the monastery, and are not allowed anything which the abbot has not given or permitted. 'All things should be the common possession' of all, as it is written, 'so that no one presumes to call anything his own' (Acts 4:32)" (RB 33.1-6).

For today's sensibility these words are unacceptable, to say the least. How can one not consider it an abuse of power to deny persons their freedom of will and the right of possessing their own goods? Are these not the characteristics of every totalitarian regime?

In reality, St. Benedict, following Jesus, desires to lead us into an experience of freedom and of possession that are quite larger than what the world offers. His concern is that we be truly free, and truly happy. And so it is from faith in Christ, who renounced his own will to obey the Father to the point of death and let himself be stripped of all, even of his life, that St. Benedict draws his awareness that one cannot be truly free and have

the right relationship to things and persons except through charity, except through a gracious gift.

But St. Benedict knows that, to understand this, it is necessary to experience it. How can one understand that “it is more blessed to give than receive,” as St. Paul has Jesus say (cf. Acts 20:35), unless one experiences it? Joy is never the fruit of reasoning, or the outcome of a calculated process. It is always a surprise. What we can accept from others, however, in particular from the saints, is their testimony that joy is connected to a certain type of experience, and thus to the choices that enable us to have that experience. Jesus and the saints bear witness in particular that, indeed, “it is more blessed to give than to receive.” Thus they invite us to experience this “giving” in order to discover a fullness of life that is otherwise impossible. In the end, the entire Rule of St. Benedict, guided by the Gospel, is an invitation to have a certain kind of experience, to make a certain kind of journey, promising us a joy that can be experienced now and that will be complete in Heaven.

St. Benedict is very strict about the private ownership of things, even of the smallest thing, like a “stylus – *graphium*” (RB 33.3), comparable today to a ball-point pen, which is worth two cents, or really: they give it to you for free. The Rule uses the quite harsh expression “*radicitus amputare* – to uproot” three times (cf. RB 2.26; 33.1; 55.18), referring to the monks’ vices that the abbot must rip up like weeds that, if you do not cut them at the roots, will always sprout back up. And practically every time the issue is the vice of taking possession of things, of wanting to possess something for one’s self.

Why this severity? St. Benedict’s desire is not to do justice, to make us respect the law, but to liberate us from something that imprisons our heart and makes us unhappy. St. Benedict is passionate about our happiness. If he is demanding and severe, it is only for this. So, he loves us, he wants our true good. Whatever we possess not for the good of all suffocates our heart, ties up our freedom, keeping it from becoming love. Whatever we grasp to ourselves with our hands closed keeps us from giving our life, from being truly alive. The closed-up possession of some good is like a tombstone over our life and over our freedom to love. We bury ourselves alive under material goods. And we remain alone, we do not form a unity with the others. The egoistic use and possession of goods becomes like a wall that separates us from others.

It is like the walls that the egoism of the powerful today wants to construct in order not to share well-being with poorer peoples. In theory it takes the same number of bricks and cement to build walls as to build bridges. But walls are built when someone says “my cement” and “my bricks.” Bridges, on the other hand, when we put the cement and bricks themselves in common with those on the other side, we say “ours” with them, we put them to the service of a common, supportive work, in such a way that the material goods also transform into instruments of communion, of encounter, of unity, for the good and joy of all, especially of those who give rather than wanting always and only to receive and possess for themselves.