

### 23. Prayer as Mission

When one looks at the structure of the Divine Office as St. Benedict wanted it, we realise that the litany of supplication of the *Kyrie eleison* was the conclusion of all the Hours: Vigils (RB 9:10-11); Lauds (12:4 and 13:11); Prime (17:4), Terce, Sext and None (17:5); and Compline (17:10). Even at Vespers, the litany with the *Kyrie eleison* is also at the end, but after that there is the Our Father (17:8). At the end of chapter 13, St. Benedict, after he said that the Office of Lauds ends with the litany, corrects himself and writes that at the end of Lauds and Vespers one must always pray the Our Father. It is as if for him the Our Father and the *Kyrie eleison* become confused. Indeed they express the same request for mercy.

In any case, it is clear that for St. Benedict the litany of supplication of the *Kyrie eleison*, if it ends the Offices in the choir, is not so much in order to conclude our prayer, but precisely in order to prolong it, in order to get out from the Office and from the church like the poor of the Gospel who continue to follow Jesus imploring His mercy for themselves and for all.

In chapter 17 of the Rule, on the number of psalms and the structure of the various Hours of common prayer, St. Benedict speaks four times on the closing of the Office using an expression similar to the dismissal of the congregation at the end of the Mass in the Roman rite: "*Ite missa est*". It is not an easy formula to translate and its origin and history are not very clear. Yet in general it is interpreted as a dismissal which dispatches, which sends to mission, from the Eucharist to the world that awaits communion with Christ. This idea also seems to me to be present in the sense that St. Benedict gives to this expression — "*missas*", "*missae sunt*", "*fiant missae*" — in chapter 17.

The common prayer, one must therefore conclude, to be complete, arrives at fulfilment ("*Completum est*", RB 12:4; 13:11), in the form of a dispatching to mission: the dismissal from the prayer of the Office is a dismissal of dispatching to mission. But for St. Benedict, as we have seen, the end of the Office coincides with the repetition of the supplication that asks for mercy from the Lord, the *Kyrie eleison*. The common prayer of the Church, and the monastic common prayer in particular, sends us out into the world with the mission to invoke over everything and over everyone the mercy of God. And the "world" is already our community, our work, our everyday life, the guests of the monastery, the ministries that the community exercises inside and outside the monastery walls. The important thing is not where we go, but that wherever we are, whatever we do, we carry within ourselves the continual supplication of the mercy of God, and therefore the certain hope that it will save the whole world.

Chapter 17 closes with a beautiful expression: "For Compline, we will limit ourselves to the recitation of three psalms, to say all in a row, without an antiphon. Then the

hymn of the Hour, only one reading, the verse, the *Kyrie eleison*, and with the blessing one gives the dismissal — *et benedictione missae fiant*" (RB 17:9-10).

In the Office therefore, we receive the blessing of being sent in the mission of mercy. We end the common prayer, and also the day, because here we are speaking of the Office of Compline, with the *Kyrie eleison* and the blessing, and it is with these that we are sent, dispatched, towards the whole world, towards what Pope Francis calls the "peripheries" of the world, which are not only geographical, but existential, spiritual. The peripheries are the places, the hearts, which have not yet received the blessing of the Father's mercy; they are the "distant lands" from which God's children have not yet returned, the dark and dangerous places where the lost sheep have not yet been found again by the Good Shepherd. We are sent there through prayer, with the pleading that begs for mercy, because these places are above all in the heart of every human being who has not yet received the light of Christ. In fact, after Compline we enter into night, into silence, into solitude, where we are called to feel the need that humanity has for the light and the love of the Word of God.

These places are also in our own hearts, in the "periphery" that our heart is often for us ourselves, because we live distracted from its thirst for God, from its need to receive His mercy and to be merciful in His image and likeness. St. Benedict makes us exit out of every Divine Office, from the public and vocal prayer, from the prayer sung aloud, bringing with us, as the "Russian Pilgrim", a prayer of the heart, an inner *Kyrie eleison!*, a continuous begging for mercy for us and for all.

Once yet again we can refer to the inexhaustible parable of the Prodigal Son, where this lost son finds again the desire for the Father, the desire to be a son, when he "returns to himself" (Lk 15:17), that is, he finds again a sensitivity and an awareness with regards to his heart.

How sad when one sees that the first concern of so many monks and nuns in the praying of the Office is formal, is of "praying it well", or of praying it in a hurry, instead of finding within it a continuous begging of the heart, a continuous *Kyrie eleison*, thirsting for mercy for us and for the world! One does not pray well when one prays well, but when one prays as the poor, when one prays in order to receive the gift of prayer, because in reality, as St. Paul reminds us, "we do not know what to pray for" (Rom 8:26). Of our liturgical prayer, we must not ask to become like the Pharisee who "prays well" in front of everyone, who is "formally perfect," but that we become like the publican who more prays and more realises his misery, and who is not able to do other than repeat his *Kyrie eleison*: "O God, have mercy on me a sinner!" (Lk 18:13). He does this "beating his chest," that is, awakening his heart from slumber, from apathy, inviting it to be open to God's mercy. St. Benedict, when he speaks of the "evangelical publican" in the 12th degree of humility, also asks us to repeat "*in corde* — in the heart," his plea (cf. RB 7:65).

This is our true poverty, our true obedience and chastity: to accept that the truest and most solid core of our Christian and monastic vocation is the begging of the heart, a heart that begs the Father's mercy. Because this was and is the Heart of Jesus, and the heart of the Virgin Mary, the heart of the Church.

Our vocation is not comfortable. We are always tempted to put a thousand other things at the centre of it. But the begging of the heart of God's mercy is not a sad vocation. Mary in the Magnificat makes us understand that only from the humble and begging heart gushes the overflowing joy of the praise of God, in the certain hope that His mercy has already conquered evil in the world. St. Benedict tells us that it is precisely on this path that the heart "expands in the inexpressible sweetness of love" (RB Prol. 49).

The begging of mercy indeed expands our heart to the peripheries of all humanity, that is, to embrace all humanity, its need for salvation, to embrace the measure without measure of the Heart of Christ. And this expansion is the expansion of love, and therefore of true joy.