

24. Two Dangers to the Fruitfulness of Love

There are two dangers to the fruitfulness of love that God wants to give us also through suffering, two dangers that are not absent in our communities and in each one of us. One is above all a danger to community life; the other is rather a danger to the life of prayer, for the mystical dimension of our vocation. The first is the danger of tyranny; the second is that of acedia.

St. Benedict speaks two times in the Rule of the danger of tyranny. In the very beautiful Chapter 27 On Concern for the Excommunicated Brothers, he reminds the abbot that “he has undertaken care of the sick, not tyranny over the healthy” (RB 27.6). And with respect to the Prior he makes this observation, which is valid for all those in office: “There are those, puffed up by the evil spirit of pride and thinking of themselves as second abbots, usurp tyrannical power and foster contention and discord in their communities” (RB 65.2).

Tyranny is a danger for all of us. It arises when our own will, our personal project, our tastes and opinions, and even our talents, charisms and virtues go so far as to shape us and tend to shape others more than humble obedience to the filial and fraternal communion in which our only Lord and King Jesus Christ lives and reigns.

The abbot and prior are invited by the Rule not to fall into tyranny but also not to let the brothers, not one of the brothers, become a slave of tyranny, to be dominated by it interiorly. There is no worse slavery than that which submits our hearts to the tyranny they desire to exercise. And we know that every tyrant always disguises himself as a benefactor, as “the good father of mankind,” as the benefactor who is convinced he alone desires and knows what the good of the others is. “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them and those in authority over them are addressed as ‘Benefactors’; but among you it shall not be so. Rather, let the greatest among you be as the youngest; and the leader as the servant” (Luke 22:25-26): Jesus says these words in order to contradict severely the ambition to dominate that divides his disciples.

The authority of Jesus, that which the abbot is called to exercise, should always be in contrast with the tyrannies, little and great, that destroy fraternal communion and keep the community from progressing.

There are in every community those who must be helped to examine themselves, to learn whether through their attitude, their ideas, their projects, their words or their silences, or simply through the face they make, whether through all this they are not setting up road blocks on the community’s path to communion. For this is tyranny.

The second point that seems important to me to underline in the present situation is the awareness of the danger of acedia. This year, in particular, it struck me while reading, at the beginning of Lent, the passage of Chapter 48 of the Rule that speaks of the Lenten reading. St. Benedict prescribes with particular authority (“*Ante omnia sane deputentur. . .*”) that one or two older monks go through the monastery during the times for lectio to see “that no brother is so apathetic (*frater*

acediosus) as to waste time or engage in idle talk to the neglect of his reading, and so not only harm himself but also distract others” (RB 48.18).

With the sensibility and the mentality we have today, we instinctively find these two older brothers disagreeable. We do not tolerate someone who checks up on, who plays the cop or, worse, who plays the role of a “spy” in the community. We therefore read this precept of the Rule with a smile, as if one were talking about “*Père Fouettard*,” who accompanies Father Christmas and dispenses coals to the naughty children on St. Nicholas’ Day. But ever since I have been traveling to communities in the whole world and have observed the very sophisticated dangers of distraction and dissipation that come from the means of communication and of information in the 21st century, I found myself reading these verses of the Rule in a less superficial way. Paradoxically, postmodernism makes current once again certain precepts of the Rule that we thought had fallen into abeyance. In fact, these two older brothers actually play the role for their brothers of “guardians of the soul”, for *acedia* is an illness of the soul, a danger to the soul. For this reason we understand that we should perhaps take this image seriously, perhaps not in the old form but as a role in the community, and we should take it seriously as a responsibility in our community relations.

We are “older,” we are “monastically mature,” when we possess and share with the others the concern that our brothers not fall into *acedia* or that they not remain closed in there and buried. How many monks and nuns, above all among the young, but also after 10, 20 or more years in the monastery, feel alone in the community, do not know who they can talk with, and search elsewhere, outside the community, for a hearing, for friendship, for consolation! They often seek false consolations in distractions that dissipate them and, as St. Benedict says, dissipate also the others. The superiors and the community are called more than ever to take up their guard against this danger, more pronounced today by the ease of access to means of . . . distraction.

Every community should ask itself if it is a community that safeguards the soul of the brothers, of the sisters, of every brother or sister. And whether it gives the means, the time, the encounters to exercise and express this protection for one another.

I underline these two aspects because they are two serious dangers to the fullness of humanity, in communion with one another and with God, that the Church and St. Benedict want to promote in us. These two dangers are the opposite side, in a sense, of the coin of community life and the mystical life to which we are called, and they show that these two dimensions, for good and for ill, are bound tightly together and interdependent.

Every tyranny is an idolatry, and in its betrayal renders void the adoration of the one true God. And *acedia* harms the communion of brothers from within, beginning with one member of the mystical and communitarian body in which an infection is lurking and can spread sooner or later to all. We cannot safeguard our vocation to live and announce a fullness of humanity in Christ by closing our eyes to these two dangers.