

25. Perfect Charity

The *Decree on the Renewal of Consecrated Life, Perfectae Caritatis*, begins by underlining that “the pursuit of perfect charity through the evangelical counsels draws its origin from the doctrine and the example of the divine Master and reveals itself as a splendid sign of the heavenly kingdom” (PC 1).

Some time ago a thought of St. Augustine in his *Commentary on the First Letter of St. John* struck me while praying the Office of Vigils.

He says, “What is the perfection of charity? To love one’s enemies so that they become brothers. Our love, in fact, should not be according to the flesh. Love your enemies so that they become your brothers; love your enemies so that they enter in communion with you. This is the way He loved who, hanging from the cross, said: ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do’ (Luke 23.34)” (I.9).

I realize that 50 years after the decree *Perfectae Caritatis* it might be above all on this point that religious, monks and nuns, should work consciously if we desire that renewal in communion with Christ that in so many communities does not seem as yet to be an experience.

Basically love of one’s enemies is the most important and decisive contribution that Christianity has introduced into the history of humanity. It is the true Christian revolution, a prophetic revolution that is always necessary, always to be renewed, today more than ever. And if religious should follow Christ more closely it is on this point that the accent, the priority, is placed. And life in community, cenobitic life, the life of communion, has been given to us above all in order to exercise this love, to grow in and toward this perfect love, the only perfection of love, the only divine perfection that is possible for sinners, if they forgive the debts of the others in order to see their own debts forgiven by the Father.

Shortly after having come across this thought of St. Augustine, I read in the *Apothegms* a saying of Abba Zeno: “The one who wants God to hear his prayer right away when he stands up and extends his hands to the Lord, should pray from his heart for his enemies before he prays for everything else and for his own soul. It is through this good deed that God will hear him, whatever he then asks of Him” (*Alphabetic Series*, Zeno, 7).

Perfect charity begins with an antecedent prayer for one’s enemies precisely because, as St. Augustine also emphasizes, it is the prayer of the Crucified Christ, the point of intersection in His heart between the love for the Father and the love for sinful humanity, and so the Eucharistic point in which grace is obtained for us from the Cross to be adopted children of God and brothers and sisters in Him.

When I read the apothegm of Zeno, I said to myself that something has to be changed in my prayer. I had truly tried all morning to cling to the prayer of Christ himself, and to get out of a certain formalism that is always lying in wait above all for us, who are in a certain sense “professionals” in prayer. I understood that the content

of the prayer should give life to the form of the prayer and not to always expect the opposite, that the form gives content to our prayer. The apothegm of Zeno makes us understand that what is asked of us is to begin anew each day to pray, beginning with the prayer of Jesus, illustrated by the Our Father, by his intercession for mankind, by his prayer as our Advocate before the Father. For in the end we are all enemies of God saved by the prayer and by the perfect charity of Christ crucified, risen and ascended to the right hand of the Father.

The world, I think, will be saved by love for one's enemies more than by beauty, by the perfect charity of Christ, which is the true beauty of God and of the world, by the love of Christ that prays for all human beings so that all might become brothers and sisters in the great family of the children of the merciful Father.

I think that the true and renewed reform of consecrated life should begin by undertaking first of all that which renews the world. The world does not need the renewal of religious life as such, does not need our "autoreferential" renewal, as Pope Francis would say, but it needs religious life to begin in itself the renewal of the world in the perfect charity of Christ that is the love of one's enemies so that they become brothers. And the love of one's enemies begins at the point that one begins to pray for them, for it cannot be a love that begins with us, but it begins as a grace from the charity of God that prayer begs for and receives.

Otherwise, we think about the renewal of religious life as cosmetics, even if spiritual. Instead, it has sense only if it is undertaken in order to live concretely the perfect love of Christ.

Recently, I spoke about the renewal of consecrated life with a bishop who was a religious. He told me that consecrated life now needs a reform more than a renewal. I agree, but I felt the need to say more precisely that reform is also not enough: we need instead a *regeneration* of consecrated life, in the service of the regeneration of the life of the whole Church. For regeneration is not possible unless Another generates us again, unless we are born again from above (cf. John 3:3). And this birth, this being born, which it is always possible for us to renew, is precisely the love of one's enemies.

It is the climax of the Sermon on the Mount:

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what recompense will you have? Do not the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what is unusual about that? Do not the pagans do the same? So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:43-48).

Here Jesus speaks of the regeneration by God that love and prayer for one's enemies makes immediately possible. But he speaks to us also of the consequent regeneration of the world, of culture. By introducing into the world this newness that is no longer content with the pagans' and the publicans' way of thinking and living, we are given the task of transmitting to the world that which regenerates us, and this regeneration in the Spirit, in the love of Christ, transforms an ever more divided humanity into a family of God. We are given Christ's filial power to generate brothers and sisters!

Perhaps it is in precisely this manner that we should think about the rekindling of our charism, specifically as a return to the charism of St. Benedict and our Cistercian fathers and mothers as paternity. Charism is a paternity that generates in the Spirit and in the love of Christ. Charism is a paternity/maternity that generates in the Spirit for the new humanity that is offered us in Christ, for the humanity of the "New Adam," of the New Man that is Christ himself and that the Holy Spirit wants to form, to generate, in us and in all, pouring into us the love of Christ for the Father and for the neighbor, the perfect love of the Son of God.

Omnis humanitas – Omnis humilitas

At the beginning of our journey I cited the beautiful expression that St. Benedict uses in connection with the reception of guests, in Ch. 53 of the Rule, when he asks that they be received with "all humanity – *omnis humanitas*" (Rb 53.9). And I asked the question: What does this all, complete humanity mean that should pass from our monastic experience to the others who meet us and to the world outside?

I do not pretend to have answered the question. The new humanity in Christ for which St. Benedict wants to form us is an experience, an awareness of human experience of which we will never reach the depths. By plumbing its depths, we begin to live it, and a new humanity that is lived is a witness that transforms and renews society, the world, culture.

I would like to note just one thing, concluding our journey for this year, a detail in Chapter 53 of the Rule that I think is important to remember and to go into more deeply. St. Benedict does not say to receive only the guest "showing him all humanity – *omnis ei exhibeatur humanitas.*" He also asks, using practically the same words, that we "show to all guests who come to us or depart from us all humility possible – *omnis exhibeatur humilitas omnibus venientibus sive discedentibus hospitibus*" (RB 53.6).

And it is as if for St. Benedict, in the light of the Gospel, the fullness of our *humanity* coincides with the fullness of our *humility*. We are fully human if we are fully humble. Why? Because humanity manifests itself and becomes real in relation with the other, and Christian humility is that attention to the other whom it recognizes as more important than oneself, in the light of the love of Christ who out of love for all humanity "did not regard equality with God something to be grasped,

but emptied himself” (Phil. 2:6-7), up to the point of dying on the cross for us. The human fullness of Christ and in Christ is his perfect love. But love, as the Gospel and the Rule teach, is the fruit of humility that accepts to be diminished so that the other can grow. Humility is the fruitful law of generation.

But in Chapter 53 of the Rule, complete humility and complete humanity are possible because there is a center that unites and defines them, and this center is the adoration of Christ. Benedict says that monks should greet guests in all humility in order “to adore in them Christ who is received – *Christus in eis adoretur, qui et suscipitur*” (RB 53.7). And it is in this attitude of adoration of Christ in the neighbor that St. Benedict asks that the guest be received “in all humanity.”

The humility to recognize and adore God in the human being is what renders us perfectly human, totally human. Human in the new relationship of communion, of honor, and of charity that we can offer to all, offering it above all to Christ himself. It is in this way that the Christian event, which St. Benedict leads us to experience, has transfigured, is transfiguring, and can always transfigure anew the human family. And today it is more necessary than ever. I invite you to go forth from here humanizing the world with the complete humility that adores and receives Christ in every person you meet.

Just like every year, my last Chapter is also an occasion to express, both here and through our website, our tremendous gratitude for all those who made this course possible by their graciousness and dedication. We are most grateful to Agnese for having organized everything so well and with such patience, as we are also grateful to Piotr, Fr. Lluc and Fr. Meinrad, and to our most dear and most generous sisters, Daughters of the Heart of Mary, in the kitchen and in the laundry, and to all the professors, in particular to Salvatore for his cultural guides.

Thank you to the interpreters, in particular to those of our Order who generously made themselves available, and thank you to their communities who allowed them to be with us: Fr. John from Dallas, Fr. Guilherme from Claraval, Sr. Aline from St. Giacomo di Veglia. All the translators of my chapters did a great job: Mother Eugenia of Talavera de la Reina, Annemarie Schobinger, Professor Antonio Tombolini and Sr. Aline. For English this year it was the community of Dallas that took up the task as a team, which even involved Abbot Peter, in addition to confreres Thomas, Joseph, Stephen and John!

We are grateful to those who took care of the liturgy: Fr. Galgano, Br. Agostino, Fr. Meinrad and Fr. Gerardo.

And we all have to be grateful for each other, and above all to God, for the gift of being able to meet each other, to know each other, to live this time of communion which formed us not only to know more, but also to live our vocation with more intensity, so that we might serve ever more as instruments for the evangelization of the world.

This year only four of you finished the three-year cycle: Sr. Elisabeth and Sr. Diane of Boulaur, Sr. Felicitas of Waldsassen and Br. Giacomo of Mogila. We say good bye to them with affection.

As for all the others, and for the new students who will come: we will see each other next year to continue together this adventure!