

2. A joy that takes account of our humanity

I was saying yesterday that joy is a serious matter, that is, it is important for our life and our vocation, for our vocation to live with truth and fullness.

We must meditate deeply on the passage of chapter 49 of the Rule of St. Benedict that I cited, where he asks that during Lent each monk “should deprive his body of some food, or drink, or sleep, or speaking, or joking, and with the joy of spiritual desire should await holy Easter” (RB 49.7).

The spiritual genius of St. Benedict, who brings together the genius of the whole apostolic, patristic, and monastic tradition of the first five centuries of Christianity, always succeeds in expressing in a few words the mystery of man in relation to the mystery of Christ. With this phrase about a topic that is basically secondary, like the penitential practices of Lent, Benedict enlightens us about how we are called to live out the fundamental and universal human drama: that of finding and cultivating a joy that is capable of conquering every pain and sadness, a joy that is greater than sin and than death.

Let us go more deeply into this teaching of the Rule that will then serve as the guiding thread of this month’s meditations.

First of all, this phrase reminds us of an aspect that is fundamental if we are not going to pass right by true joy: we cannot understand and live out an authentic joy without taking account of our whole humanity. To let “the joy of spiritual desire” come out in us, St. Benedict asks us not to censor our humanity. In order to be truly happy by desiring the infinite, we cannot leave out the fact that the human being lives in that which comes to an end, that is, has a body and a soul constantly dealing with a desire for satisfaction. We all eat, drink, sleep, talk, and entertain ourselves in search of satiety, of a satisfaction. Often we fool ourselves into thinking that in these aspects of our humanity we could be given a total satisfaction. It’s like the heart throws itself completely into the search for these pleasures, but then, in reality, it is not satisfied, it is not content. The more one abandons oneself to the search for a total satisfaction in eating, drinking, sleeping, talking, and entertaining oneself, the more the heart experiences dissatisfaction. Dissatisfaction with what? With oneself, with the heart itself. This is a positive experience, because in this way the human heart comes to know itself, recognizes itself as a mystery. There is something in us that nothing earthly or worldly manages to satisfy.

It is an elementary experience that we all have. I too, when I find myself in front of the spaghetti that our Sisters prepare, it seems to me that the more of it I eat the more satisfied I will be. But in the end, I find myself overly full and unsatisfied. Full stomach and empty heart. Or also when you sit down to chat with someone or to joke about everything and everyone. In the end you feel a kind of nausea, as if the words and feelings that we have expressed had accumulated in our heart, and we feel stuffed with emptiness, like a ball.

It is important, then, that, having these experiences of satisfactions that do not satisfy, of false fullnesses that empty us out, it is important that we listen to the true masters of asceticism, like St. Benedict, and learn from them to confront this

tendency that the human being has in itself since original sin. Indeed, this tendency goes back to when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, certain of finding in it the total satisfaction of their heart, and instead only found themselves empty, naked, sad, full of shame and fear (cf. Genesis 3).

The fathers teach us that the experience of dissatisfaction that we have must become our master. By continuing to experience that so many things never satisfy us fully, that so many things always delude us, the elementary wisdom would be to tell oneself: my heart is looking for something else, my heart must seek something else if it wants to be happy. This does not mean one must stop eating, drinking, sleeping, talking, and telling one's friends fun things. For these things pertain to our humanity and if I find a true joy and satisfaction, in one way or another, it must have to do with all this too. We should not seek a disincarnate joy, as if we were angels, but a joy in which our heart can find a satisfaction that, so to speak, resonates in our body too, in our thought, in our words, and in our feelings.

I think of one of the most joyous episodes in the Gospel: the Annunciation of the angel to Mary. "Rejoice, full of grace: the Lord is with you!" (Lk 1:28). The angel Gabriel certainly did not say these words with a funereal face. He himself was full and overflowing with joy, with angelic joy. But in Mary, this joy spread to her whole humanity, her body, her soul, her spirit. All the more since the motive for this immense joy was that the Word was becoming flesh in her. And Mary immediately bore witness to this total joy, running to Elizabeth and singing the *Magnificat* with her whole body, her whole soul, and her whole spirit (cf. Lk 1:39-55).

Joy took hold of the whole humanity of the Virgin, as it also took hold of the humanity of the little John the Baptist in the womb of Elizabeth: "For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy" (Lk 1:44). This baby conceived six months before did not exult just in the spirit: his whole little body leaps, jumps for joy, as far as it can, in his mother's womb. Christ is truly the full joy of man, of the whole man. In Him mysteriously the flesh also rejoices, not just the spirit or just the feelings of the soul.

But for this to happen, for us to be able to have this experience, that is, for the joy of Christ to be able to enter our humanity, what does St. Benedict advise us? He advises us to act shrewdly, to trick the partial joys and disappointing satisfactions. He asks us to act toward our physical and mental longings like thieves who snatch from their victims a part of their goods. Not all of a sudden, because they would realize it and call the police and you would have to give it all back. It is enough to snatch a little bit at a time. In Latin, St. Benedict really uses a term that is apt for theft: "*subtrahat* - let him subtract from his body something of food, drink, sleep, talking, joking" (RB 49.7).

It is an ascetic practice we could define as "the sacred scam." Pretending not to do anything, we snatch away from ourselves a little bit of false satisfaction. But to what end? Just to do penance? Just to make a Lenten sacrifice that we will then forget from Easter on? No, the point is to create an empty space, like a gap, in our life, in our body, in our soul, in our heart, in our self, finally in our freedom. And then, in

this space, even if it is really little, we see that a new reality succeeds in blossoming in us, through us, through our humanity, through our needs, through our eating, drinking, resting, talking, entertaining ourselves. A new reality but really one that is very old, because it is original, it is at the origin of all humanity, and at the origin of our person, of our heart. The joy of spiritual desire for holy Easter blossoms, the joy of desiring eternal life in Christ who died and is risen, the joy of spiritual desire to embrace Christ as complete and eternal joy of life.

Since I have to be absent for almost a week and will start back up with the Chapters on Monday evening, I advise you to meditate in these days on what I have told you so far, asking yourselves some questions. So that what I will try to tell you afterward can find in you something like plowed soil into which what we will meditate on can fall like a seed and bear fruit for your life and vocation.

- a. Are you truly happy? What role has joy played in the path of your life? Has the desire for complete joy determined your choices and renunciations?
- b. Has the discovery of your vocation been, and does it remain, a definite experience of joy? Is Christ truly the greatest joy of your heart?
- c. What makes you sad? In sadness, in dissatisfaction, do you go back to look for true joy? How do you seek it? What helps you rediscover it?
- d. Do you experience that St. Benedict's advice is right, that is, that there are some renunciations that encourage the resurrection in us of joy in the Paschal Christ, who died and rose again for us?
- e. Do you share this joy with the brothers and sisters of your community? In your community do you help each other seek, find, and celebrate true joy?

These are just some questions that are intended to help you bring to clearer light in yourselves whether you are living out your vocation in a way that listens to the fundamental demands of your heart, for joy in Christ is the fullness of the human heart, and deep down we live for this; and if we do not live for this, we are not truly living.