

6. All together

“Let them put absolutely nothing before Christ: and may he lead us all together to eternal life” (RB 72:11–12).

We have seen that when Jesus asks us to “remain in Him,” to “abide in his love,” that is to be his friends, he does so by asking us to love each other as He has loved us (cf. Jn 15:4–17). One does not love Christ, one does not cling to Him, one is not with Him without embracing his Body, the Church, the Christian community, the brothers and sisters that incarnate for us the real presence of the Lord. The whole Rule of St. Benedict educates, forms, and corrects us to live out fraternal communion as a real form of communion with Christ.

The chapters of the Rule dedicated to prayer, more than teaching us to pray to God teach us to pray to God *together*. All the chapters from 8 to 18 are dedicated to the organization of the divine Office prayed in choir. Chapter 19 treats of how to sing psalms, asking each monk to be interiorly aware of how he stands in the presence of God as he thinks of the words that are recited. This is certainly a personal labor, something to be done with one’s own heart, but one must not forget that Benedict is not talking about prayer in solitude, but rather of the choral prayer in community: “Let us reflect then on how we should be before God and his angels, and, when we sing the psalms, let us behave ourselves in such a way that our spirit be in accord with our voice” (RB 19:6–7).

Certainly, St. Benedict respects and favors personal prayer, the relationship of each heart with the Lord; but he also describes this prayer in the environment of the community, for example when he asks in chapter 52, which is dedicated to the oratory of the monastery, that the brothers “exit in great silence and in an attitude of profound respect for God, such that the brother who wants to continue prayer not be disturbed by the importunity of the others” (RB 52:2–3). And right afterward St. Benedict, after having affirmed that each monk is free to enter when he wants into the oratory to pray in silence, says that whoever enters to pray must do it in a way not to disturb the other (cf. RB 52:4–5).

It is as if the rule of prayer, both common and individual, were always fraternal communion. St. Benedict knows that authentic prayer is only that of Christ, and that the prayer of Christ is guarded and expressed by his mystical Body, the Church. The hermit prays with truth if he is in communion with the Body of Christ. The prayer of the Church is always enkindled by the gift of the Spirit, from Pentecost onward.

But we also know that the fraternal communion that coincides with communion with Jesus Christ unites us not only when we pray the divine Office or celebrate the Eucharist. The Work of God and the Eucharist are the central source of a life of communion with God that nourished by every moment and circumstance of life. The whole life of the monastery is liturgical in the sense that, in everything and always, the presence of the Lord calls us to be in communion with Him, and in Him with our brothers and sisters.

St. Benedict educates us to live out each instant and each circumstance with the desire to be with Jesus. The door on which is inscribed "*VOLO TECUM* – I want to be with you" is not only that of the church, but the freedom of our heart in its relationship with the reality of life. Our heart is the door by which we enter into each circumstance and encounter of the day, saying, "I want to be with You, Lord!" Whoever lives like this, whoever reawakens this desire in moments of prayer and meditation, finds himself living out an adventure without end, because everything is a space and occasion for meeting the Lord and living in communion with Him. Then everything becomes "paradise," a return to the original vocation of our humanity, made by God for God.

"We believe that the divine presence is everywhere and that the eyes of the Lord examine the good and the wicked in every place. Nevertheless, in a particular way without the least doubt we must believe it when we participate in the Work of God" (RB 19:1-2).

Between daily life and the time consecrated to liturgical prayer there is a constant connection. The presence of God is real, universal, and divine, always and everywhere. The places and times consecrated to choral prayer reawaken and deepen in us the preferential attention to the Divine Presence that we have the tendency to forget or neglect.

Often, in daily reality, the people and things with which we come into contact, instead of being occasions for encountering Christ, are often reduced to superficial contact that forgets His presence. But thus we neglect not only the Divine Presence, but also the people and the things that we spend time with, because Christ is the ultimate and profound truth and worth of all reality, and above all of each person whom we meet.

For example, when we need to take care of a sick brother. Certainly, we can take care of him well even if we see in him only the sick man, but it is a reductive way of looking, which deep down defines the other only by his sickness, and hence by that in him which is weak and burdensome to support. And this way of looking reduces us too, because we become just people who must render a service, even if with competence and generosity, but it is as if we treated the sick person from on high to down low, since he is the weak one and we who take care of him are the strong ones. But if we treat the sick man with the desire to be with Jesus, recognizing Christ present in him, it is as if the reality in which we live expanded and became much more intense and greater than the appearances.

The beginning of the chapter of the Rule about sick brothers reveals to us the secret of the intensity of a whole life: "The care for the sick must come before and above all, because truly there one serves Christ in person; he in fact said: 'I was sick, and you visited me' (Mt 25:36). And 'What you have done for these least ones you have done to me' (Mt 25:40). But for their part the sick must be aware that they are served in honor of God, and must not sadden the brothers put at their service with excessive demands" (RB 36:1-4).

Do you see how Christ changes reality? Or rather, how he enables us to see and live out reality in its true dimension? The reality that we see is a sick brother, perhaps difficult to take care of, because he is suffering and it seems to him he is undergoing neglect. The reality that we see is that we are appointed a burdensome task, at times really unpleasant, that does not gratify us. Often we are asked to occupy ourselves with brothers and sisters at the end of life who have lost the use of reason, who perhaps are in a vegetative state. But see that faith and prayer enkindle a new light on this reality, that which sees and recognizes Christ present. Suddenly the apparently negative human reality becomes divine, becomes like how God looks upon it and becomes God who looks upon us. From being negative, it becomes the most important reality that there is, a reality to be adored, because God is present within it. This does not take away the toil and difficulty of reality. But it changes everything, because, as St. Paul writes, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Cor 5:17).

The true novelty is Christ present and recognized in the reality that we live; Christ who asks us to be with Him, who offers us and asks for communion, friendship. Every becomes relational. Even the sick man, immersed in the negativity of this situation, if he thinks of this he realizes that his sickness is a space of communion with Jesus. Paradoxically, a sickness, or the prison of the incarcerated, or whatever other situation of constriction or of pain, become paradise, because they are recognized and lived out as a call and gift to be more intensely with the Lord.