

8. Helping someone not to flee

For St. Benedict, unity in Christ, in his perfection, is nothing other than love. He describes it at the end of chapter seven, on humility:

“Now, therefore, after ascending all these steps of humility, the monk will quickly arrive at that perfect love of God [*ad caritatem Dei*] which casts out fear. Through this love, all that he once performed with dread, he will now begin to observe without effort, as though naturally, from habit, no longer out of fear of hell, but out of love for Christ [*amore Christi*], good habit, and delight in virtue. All this the Lord will by the Holy Spirit graciously manifest in his workman now cleansed of vices and sins.” (RB 7.67–70).

Stability in the presence of God generates a humanity that is conformed to the Trinity, moved by the Trinitarian Love. The apex of Benedictine mysticism and morality is the unity of the person in the participation in the Love of the Three Divine Persons, where the relationship of love with the Father and the Son through the Holy Spirit defines the awareness of self and of God, of what one does and of what one is.

St. Benedict is eager to assure us that one reaches this goal “quickly – *mox*.” Of course this happens after one has climbed all the steps of humility, but it is clear that Benedict knows he is dealing with people who are in a hurry, who have a hard time engaging in long-term efforts. He has this concern at the end of the Prologue too: “Do not be daunted immediately by fear and run away [*refugias*] from the road that leads to salvation. It is bound to be narrow at the outset. But as we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God’s commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love” (RB Prol. 48–49).

We cannot endure on a path that intends to lead us so high, to this Trinitarian conversion of our whole person, without being sustained by paternal and fraternal encouragement that accompanies us, sustained by an accompaniment that teaches us not to yield to fear, not to flee “from the road that leads to salvation.” St. Benedict uses the verb *refugere*, which seems to give the idea of “fleeing again,” of fleeing a second time. We know that, for him, anyone who comes into the monastery is a lost son of the parable of the merciful Father, who is returning to the father’s house (cf. RB Prol. 2), to learn how to live there again, to become a son again, recovering the awareness, perhaps never truly acquired, of the goodness of the Father who wills his good, the fullness of his life, his joy, and his freedom to love.

Leaving the monastery, the path of conversion that should be proposed in the monastic life, is, for every monk and nun, like a second flight, from which one will return only with great difficulty. You know that St. Benedict nevertheless grants three chances of readmission to these unstable monks (RB 29). He knows that a path of permanent stability does not start easily for everyone. Often one needs to experience distance again, experience being lost, to return with a sharper awareness to the stability that makes us grow inwardly in patience.

I find that it is important for the men and women of today to treasure this capacity of encouragement, of accompaniment, and of patience to which St. Benedict bears witness. But we must realize that this demands of us a conversion, too, of us who live in the house of the father, perhaps for a long time, and who, like the elder brother in the parable, perhaps have never fled (at least exteriorly; but how many flights can we live out though remaining physically in the monastery!). Do we truly know how to assure this encouragement, this paternal and maternal help, and also fraternal, for those whom we would like to see come and stay to follow the road of salvation with us? Do we truly know how to bear witness that one “quickly – *mox*” reaches this experience of the love of God that casts out fear? And do we truly give witness to this Trinitarian unification of the person, however imperfect and poor it may be on this earth, but which St. Benedict attests to us is extremely real?

It is true that young people today are perhaps more unstable than young people of other generations. It would be easy to apply to them the definition of the gyrovague monks: “*semper vagi et numquam stabiles, et propriis voluptatibus et gulae inlecebris servientes* – always on the move, they never settle down, and are slaves to their own wills and gross appetites” (RB 1.11). But I prefer to apply to them the definition that St. Benedict gives of the excommunicated brother, who must be consoled by “*seniores sapientes fratres,*” by “mature and wise brothers” (RB 27.2): he calls him “*frater fluctuans* – the wavering brother” (cf. 27.3). To waver, to be tossed about on the surface of the water, like a shipwrecked person, is indeed an image of instability that is well adapted to many young people and not so young people of our time. And often it is an innocent instability, which they do not provoke or choose for themselves, but which they find in the life of a society, in a culture, in a dominant mentality that are “fluid” or vacillating, very superficial, and which do not allow one to be fixed in place, to come to the ground, or at least to throw out an anchor from some side.

But it is precisely this situation, this condition, that makes St. Benedict’s proposal of even more current value, even more urgent, even more necessary for truly consoling the human being of today. He says that the *senpectae* must “support the wavering brother “under the cloak of secrecy – *secrete consolentur*” (27.3). The contemporary human being, in fact, often does not realize that they need consolation, in the etymological sense of the word: of needing someone to accompany their solitude, to be with them in their isolation, in their destructive autonomy, in their individualism, which suffocates the image of God who calls them to the gift of self, to fraternal relationship, to find their life by losing it for others.