

10. The communal life is also transmitted

There is an aspect of the Christian and monastic communal life whose value has perhaps been neglected, especially in facing the spectacle of so many “new communities” which have arisen in the last decades. It is a fact that the communal life, Christian and monastic living together, is also a transmission as such, is also the object of a transmission, is also transmitted. And it endures only in the measure in which it is received as transmitted.

There is a profound and widespread crisis in this regard. The anxiety of old communities, the way in which so many new experiences of common life have been born, which call themselves monastic, have spread the feeling that a lively and fresh communal life that attracts the young must always be reinvented.

St. Benedict never considers himself the inventor of a new form of monastic life. He humbly obeys the Spirit who sends him to revitalize a gift that has already been given before him, and which he is not even the first to renew. He also receives and transmits.

The last chapter of the Rule expresses this humble conception that St. Benedict has of his own charism. His concern is to transmit a gift that the Church received from Christ and which, like a flame, is transmitted from generation to generation, starting with the Apostles, by the Desert Fathers, by Basil, by Cassian, by Augustine, by the author of the Rule of the Master, etc. Certainly, there are moments when this flame seems to have been extinguished. It is necessary to rediscover it like the sacred fire of the Second Book of Maccabees, that fire that became a thick liquid which the sun rekindled (cf. 2 Mac 1:19–22). In the time of Benedict one gets the impression that the flame is transmitted only by monks who live in solitude, like Romanus, whom the young Benedict encounters, by chance, you could say, in the mountains. But there is always a transmission that leads us to the origin of Christianity, an origin, however, that is not found so much in an historical past, but in the depth of the memory of the Church, of the Bride who is always united with the Bridegroom, eternal and always present.

Above all there is an essential aspect of the Christian experience that it is worth emphasizing. The communion of the disciples of Christ, their living together, is the very substance of the transmission of the Christ event, of salvation in Christ, of the fullness of the revelation of the Triune God to the world. There is no transmission of Christ and of Salvation in Him without the Church, without the Christian community, without the People of God which is the Body of Christ.

The Church *is* transmission of the Son of God sent by the Father to save the world. The Holy Spirit realizes this mission of the Church from Pentecost on, to incarnate the mission of Christ.

Understanding this is essential for grasping the value of the life of communion that is offered to us and that is asked of us, to follow our vocation, to live our charism. And every charism in the Church always presents this dimension, this communal demand. Not even a hermit can live out his vocation if he does not see himself as a member of the ecclesial body, of the Body of Christ.

St. Benedict clearly expresses this vision of the eremitic life in the first chapter of the Rule. “Having come through the test of living in a monastery for a long time.... Thanks to the help and guidance of many, they are now trained to fight against the devil. They have built up their strength and go from the battle line in the ranks of their brothers to the single combat of the desert” (RB 1.3–5).

You could think that the hermit passes to a level higher than that of the fraternal communion, as if the fraternal life had served only to prepare for a state of solitude, ideal and holier. But we should notice that, in the fraternal life, the hermit has learned to fight against the devil, “*contra diabolum... pugnare*” (1.4). It is against the “divider” that one fights in fraternal life. Now, if the hermit is mature enough to fight by himself against the one who divides, who creates division, this means he is also mature enough to live out, in solitude, a profound and solid fraternal communion, not only with the brothers of the monastery he has left, but also with all the members of the Church and with all of humanity.

Christ wants “to lead us *all together* to eternal life” (cf. RB 72.12), including the hermits, including those who live in one form of solitude or another, by choice or by force. And this is so precisely because it is communion that transmits the Savior’s mission through history to the end of the world.

Jesus expresses this during the Last Supper, especially at the beginning and at the end.

First of all in the scene of the foot-washing in John 13. This text is marked by a strong sense of transmission. John insists on emphasizing that what Jesus does and says, he does in the awareness of being sent by the Father to return to Him after having completed his mission:

“Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. [...] And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God” (Jn 13:1–3).

But it is the very gesture of washing feet that Jesus wants to transmit to the disciples so that they transmit it by living it out among themselves:

“Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them” (Jn 13:12–17).

What Jesus wants his disciples to transmit with the humble fidelity of a servant and messenger who does not presume to transmit more of or something better than what he receives from the master who sends him, is the fraternal communion whose regenerative force is humility, humble mutual service.