

12. Obedience is fitting

“Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (Jn 13:1). This phrase, at the beginning of chapter 13 of St. John, describes the freedom of Christ, the freedom of God. A freedom that transforms the world, the space of the world, this limited and often hostile space, in which the disciples of all times are found. It transforms it into a space of divine love. How many witnesses of Christ, put in prison for their faith, or condemned to immobility by sickness, have transformed their cell or their room into a space of infinite love! I always think back to the old nun of Sankt-Marienthal, Sr. Notburga, sunk deep into the covers and pillows of the bed that she could no longer get out of, when she told me with shining eyes: “I immerse myself in the will of God!”

This is the obedience that St. Benedict asks for, obedience to what reality and its circumstances, more than the superiors, ask of us in this moment. An obedience, indeed, of those who are in love with Christ: of men and women who hold nothing dearer than Him. Holding nothing dearer than Jesus does not detach us from reality; rather, it makes us cling with love to reality where it touches us and perhaps wounds us, like indeed a sickness, the weakness of old age, a distressing and unpleasant service to the community, or the world’s persecution. To one who holds nothing dearer than Christ, what reality demands, what the superior or the community demands, becomes what Christ himself demands of me, becomes an occasion to say yes to Him, in all things, completely, always. This obedience makes the love of Christ penetrate the whole reality that we live, even the negative, tiresome reality that limits our freedom and our interests. It is as if the limits of daily reality were expanded from within. Obeying something that limits me, that normally suffocates my life, reduces it, can also make it petty, can kill it. But if precisely there, within that limiting, hostile reality, my freedom says yes to Christ, to what my heart holds most dear, immediately the limits of this reality expand, actually disappear. The heart that consents to Christ within whatever circumstance, makes the limits of the circumstance become unlimited, expands them to infinity, for Christ is the Lord of all reality, the Lord in whom each person is created for the infinite and the eternal.

For this reason, at the beginning of chapter 5 on obedience, St. Benedict uses a particular verb that we must pay attention to. He says that obedience “is fitting”: *“convenit his qui nihil sibi a Christo carius aliquid existimant”* (5:2). It is like he were talking about an exchange, an exchange of precious things. The parable of the treasure in the field and of the precious pearl comes to mind (Mt 13:44–48). We are like that pearl merchant who finds one on the market, and esteems it for its great value. Then he goes, sells all that he has, and buys the pearl. Here too, St. Benedict starts with the esteem we have for Christ: *“existimant.”* To obey truly, to live out obedience adequately, and all the other vows too, one must start off with the esteem we have for Jesus.

If Christ is a pearl, a treasure, that is worth more than everything, that is dearer to us than all else, then obedience “is fitting”. This means that obedience is an appropriate price for “acquiring,” or “earning” Christ. Actually, if it is to earn Christ, whom I value as the most precious thing of all, then I gain something, the price is not at all too high. The pearl merchant who sells all, house, fields, goods, his donkey, his sheep, his chickens, – I hope he didn’t also sell his wife and kids! –, and all that he had, to buy the pearl, he certainly did it knowing that he would gain something by possessing the pearl in place of all the rest. It is fitting for him, and how!

How can we not think of St. Paul, in the letter to the Philippians still, when he says: “But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ” (Phil 3:7–8).

But then, why does everybody not make a vow of obedience, since gaining Christ is so fitting?

The problem is that Christ is a “precious pearl” that, when one sells everything to buy it, one indeed possesses a treasure infinitely more precious than what got sold, but Christ is not a pearl, so to say, that reenters the pearl market. It does not come to me naturally because I can sell it back and with the proceeds buy myself two houses, two fields, two donkeys, and twice as many sheep and chickens. Nor does it come naturally because by selling it I could by a hundred house and a hundred times all the rest. He who sells all to buy Christ, if he “resells” Christ, like Judas did, does not gain anything at all, because nothing is worth as much as He is, nothing can be more precious to us than He is. If I lose Christ, by selling him too, I lose everything, I will never find anything that suits me as much as He does. All will be without value if I lose the value of all, that is Jesus.

Because Christ is not the pearl that has an infinite value “in place” of all else, but He is in himself the whole value of everything. For this reason, whoever leaves all for Him, in reality does not lose anything, because the fixed value of all that I leave behind is Christ himself.

Only – I repeat myself, but I think it is important at least to get an idea of it – if I have already left everything for Him, perhaps not materially, but even just through the faith we have in Him as God and Savior of the world, if I in one way or another have esteemed him as the dearest thing I have, I will never be able to find a value in things and persons without esteeming Him above all, without grasping close to my heart the precious pearl that only Christ is for me.