

13. To endure in hope

For St. Benedict, this search that awaits is the substance of the monastic life, and hence of the Christian life that the monastic life desires to live out in its essential nature. St. Benedict asks us to verify that the novice “truly seeks God” (RB 58:7). And when he speaks of the virtue of patience that endures all things, and thus gives positive meaning to every experience, to every effort, thanks to Christ crucified and risen, he makes it coincide with awaiting the Lord: “*Sustine Dominum* – hope in the Lord.” The same Latin verb, *sustinere*, repeated several times in the fourth step of humility, which consists in enduring all things for the love of God, means simultaneously “endure” and “await” (cf. RB 7:35–43). What one endures are the negative experiences of life, but what one awaits is the coming of the Lord. It is as if St. Benedict wanted to tell us that the strains we endure with patience are transfigured into persevering expectation of the Lord, are an incarnation of waiting for the Lord, and hence of hope in Him who comes to free us, to console us, to bear the burdens of life with us. One who endures awaits, hopes, and manages to bear up precisely because his striving has the meaning of awaiting, has the direction of awaiting, the loving energy of awaiting, it is, in other words, imbued with faith and hope in an Other who is coming to save us.

Christ has come, he comes now and will come at the end of time precisely to give all human experience the meaning and significance of waiting for Him, and so of meeting Him. Christ is the Bridegroom who comes, who comes to meet us. The meaning of waiting is the encounter that gives it fulfillment.

Recently, at *Notre Dame des Neiges*, the monastery that the Trappists have given to our nuns of Boulaur to make a foundation there, the monastery that was the community that Charles de Foucauld entered as a novice, and to which he then returned to prepare himself for priestly ordination, I was able to celebrate with the chalice of St. Charles of Jesus, and I discovered that on the foot of the chalice was written: “*Ecce Sponsus venit* – Behold, the Bridegroom comes.” The Eucharist is the anticipation of the encounter that all human expectation is hoping for.

It is in fact the coming of Christ that creates, that sparks in us, the sense of waiting, of hope that gives flavor, fervor, and fulness to life. As the Prophet Isaiah suggests: “Before they call I will answer; while they are yet speaking I will hear” (Is 65:24). It is because God first gives himself that the heart of man seeks him. It is in fact the eternal God who creates in the human heart, or rather with the human heart, the expectation of Him. The Eternal creates time in order to create the space in which to await Him.

It is the heart itself that bears witness to this reality. Sin, however, has cheated time and eternity, because it has deceived the time of waiting for God. The hand of Eve and Adam, wishing to grab right away a fulfillment in itself an alternative to God, broke the sense of time, the significance of time, the beauty of time, because it betrayed waiting for God.

Original sin was a grabbing right away, a reduction of time's longing for eternity to a "*main-tenant*," a "now at hand" for the snatched fruit, without waiting for the Lord who sooner or later would have given it to us, who would have given it to us as an encounter with Him who gives us everything. "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (Rom 8:32). We can hope for everything from the Father, because he has already given us everything in his own beloved Son.

With their sin, time lost the fulness and beauty of being space for awaiting the God who creates us to draw us to Himself. After the sin, God comes to walk in the garden, that is, the Eternal expresses itself in time, makes steps in time, and look, he discovers that for the man and woman time is no longer an expectation of Him. Man no longer comes to meet him: for man time is no longer directed toward the encounter with his Creator. Man no longer lives time in order to meet the Lord; he no longer lives it by keeping awake for the Bridegroom's arrival. The time of human life thus becomes senseless, as if we were walking without direction in a desert.

What does God then do to call us back to await Him who gives meaning to our life? God lets effort, pain, and death enter into human experience: the effort of work, the pain of birth, the death that breaks human time (cf. Gen 3:8-19).

Effort, pain, and death unmask the illusion of possessing time, the meaning of time, the value of time, that is, the meaning and value of our life. It is a negative experience, certainly, but also positive, because in it man can discover, and God will not fail to reveal it to him, that effort, pain, and death can be occasions for rediscovering the true meaning of our lifetime. Man can discover that effort, pain, and death, if lived out once again in expectation of the Lord who loves us and creates us, can become a sign and experience of the eternal. Not just experiences in which time is grabbed from our hands, but occasions in which time can be given, offered; in which the time of our life can beg with empty hands for the Eternal who loves us and creates us even after sin, or rather, *especially* after sin. With empty hands, that is, with hands that no longer grasp, that are no longer like the talons of a bird of prey, but instead expressions of receiving a gift.

And in the end this is the discovery of love, of charity: that the effort, pain, and death we experience in time can become spaces for offering that affirm an Other, and hence become intense forms of awaiting Him; so intense that they coincide with the experience of the Eternal, of the eternal YOU.