

## 15. The chastity that the Bridegroom of the Church expects

When poverty is understood as liberation from all that gets in the way of the heart in its embrace with God, then we understand that poverty need not stop at the stripping away of material goods. Poverty must penetrate the heart. St. Benedict is concerned throughout the whole Rule with the monks' poverty of heart, that is that they live out the Beatitudes radically: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ... Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Mt 5:3,8).

This entails the vow and virtue of chastity. Chastity is certainly a renunciation, a physical and affective separation to love the Lord "with an undivided heart." A spirit of chastity is asked also of those who live in matrimony, so that the love between the spouses remain free and welcome, and be lived out as a space in which the love of God always has the first place and can nourish human love.

Consecrated chastity entails a poverty of heart, as I was saying, because renouncing affective possession is more radical than renouncing the possession of things. It is an interior poverty in relationship with people and with everything. At times it is a wound, a profound grief, a desert of the soul, a solitude that remains in waiting for Christ as the Bridegroom who sometimes "delays his coming" (cf. Mt 25:5).

Lived out like this, chastity shares in the great eschatological expectation of Christ, the expectation of the universe, of all humanity, of all history. Everything groans and sighs, as it is expressed on the last page of Revelation and thus of the whole Bible: "The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come.' And let the one who hears say, 'Come.' And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price. ... He who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen" (Rev 22:17, 20-21).

Ultimately, consecrated chastity, virginity for the sake of the Kingdom, is not a renunciation of being married. Rather, it means having Christ the Lord as one's only Spouse, and in this sense those people who live out a vow of chastity are not distinct from those who live the normal path of marriage, because all mankind, even without knowing it, awaits the eternal Bridegroom. In the world the Church is the Bride who awaits the coming of Christ. In this the Church is united to the heart of every human being, is the guardian of the deepest desire of the heart, and desires Christ for all, and wants to receive him from now until the end of time for all humanity. One who lives in consecrated chastity unites himself to every human heart, as a sign of what every Christian is called to be among mankind, like a leaven that makes the whole bread rise.

It is essential to be aware of this profound and universal dimension of the renunciation of matrimony, in order not to live out the vow of chastity in a petty and sterile way. As in poverty we renounced our own possessions in order to live from the monastery's possessions, in chastity we renounce our marriage to live from the wedding feast of the Church with Christ, and we renounce our children in order to be fathers and mothers of the children of the Church. We renounce what is our own, our own interests, to receive what is infinite and helpful for all.

I always think back to the phrase of the *Carta Caritatis* of the first Cistercians where the founding fathers express their desire to be helpful to members of the Order and to all children of holy Church: “*Prodesse enim illis omnibusque sanctae Ecclesiae filiis cupientes*” (CC 1.3). Only now do I realize that such an affirmation implies a desire for fruitfulness, for paternity or maternity, that derives from union with Christ, the Bridegroom of the Church, with Christ who comes to bring fulfillment to time by inviting us to his wedding feast, the wedding feast of the Lamb. One cannot be helpful to all the children of holy Church, which *per se* includes the whole of mankind, without a chastity that seeks the fruitfulness of one’s own life from Christ alone, that awaits from Christ the fulfillment of every life and of all history. It is a mysterious fruitfulness, for Christ will return at the end of time, and yet the fruitfulness of his eschatological coming is manifest already now, because the Church now begets children of her divine and glorious Bridegroom.

Virginity for sake of the Kingdom is a sign of this mystery, and it is in service to the fruitfulness of Christ in begetting children of his Father, in begetting his brothers and sisters in the gift of the Holy Spirit.

When Revelation ends with the Spirit’s and the bride’s outcry, “Come, Lord Jesus!” we must not understand this final invocation as a desire that asks for the end of the world, that asks for the coming of the universal Judge. The Spirit and the Church asks Jesus to come so that humanity can now be born to filial life. Jesus will come at the end of time, but he has also come in the wedding feast of Cana (cf. Jn 2:1–11), that is, he comes in the current life of mankind, to transform it like water into wine, to grant it the ability to live out the wedding feast with Christ also within the human wedding feast.

The wedding feast of Cana reveals to us that those too who get married cannot live a true fruitfulness of life, a true fullness of matrimonial relationship, and not even of paternal or maternal relationship, without “inviting Jesus” (cf. Jn 2:2), without desiring the coming of Christ. There is a dimension of chastity in Christian marriage that is more in the heart than it is physical. The point is not to forget that those who are married also live in the yearning for the coming of the Bridegroom. If they do not desire Christ, union with Him, the relationship with their own wife or husband, or the relationship with their own community, or with their own superiors, does not find fulfillment, does not have substance. Only Christ is the fullness of all.