

16. United in the prayer of Christ

St. Benedict has a very strong sense of the importance of prayer for the unity of the community. And indeed he is aware that common prayer, the liturgical prayer of the Church, the celebration of the Eucharist and the divine office, represent for us participation in the prayer of Christ, in the prayer of Jesus to the Father in the loving breath of the Spirit.

It would be necessary to go back to all the chapters of the Rule on common prayer to see how, for St. Benedict and for the whole tradition of the Church, man learns to pray and to pray more effectively only by “entering” into the prayer of Jesus, only by letting himself be taken and carried by the Holy Spirit into the prayer of the Son of God.

Thus, the liturgy is lived well not so much or only if “it is done” well, or if people feel particular sentiments of fervor, but if it is lived with the awareness of faith that it leads us into the experience of the prayer of Jesus. An experience that is progressive, that has its highs and lows, but, if it is lived as an experience, is always positive, is always something that makes us grow. For us, for each baptized person, praying always means being united to Christ in his being in the presence of the Father, entering, that is, into a relationship of adoration, of love, of trust, of the Son’s before the Father in the Spirit.

Recently I was struck by a simple but essential phrase of Fr. Matta el Meskin, a great Egyptian monk and spiritual father, who defines Christian prayer as a “living in the presence of God, aware of union with Christ.”

For a Christian, praying actually means entering into the filial relationship with God that Jesus Christ came to share with us by assuming our humanity. The eternal Son of the Father became man and lived out his communion of total love and trust with the Father within and through our humanity, our humanity that is also wounded by sin and death. The prayer of Jesus in agony in Gethsemane, the cry of Jesus from the Cross, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me” (Mt 27:46; Ps 21:2), show how the Son’s prayer lowered itself all the way down into our human condition, our misery that must cry out to God, begging for mercy.

The letter to the Hebrews expresses this with words that almost scandalize us, so much do they attribute our poverty, misery, and anguish to Christ’s prayer: “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission” (Heb 5:7).

St. Luke describes the first public appearance of Jesus, at the moment of his baptism in the Jordan, as an appearance of his prayer. Before starting to speak to announce the Kingdom of God, Jesus appears in prayer, a prayer at which Heaven opens to manifest the whole Trinity with Him and upon Him: “Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased’” (Lk 3:21–22).

Jesus, God made man, descends all the way into the bath of purification for “the whole people” who “were having themselves baptized” because they were aware of being a sinful people. And, when he came up out of the water, the whole Trinity manifests that what Christ has brought all the way down into our miserable humanity is his prayer, his being in the presence of the Father who infinitely loves him in the meek and humble, dove-like, tenderness of the Holy Spirit.

It is as if Luke paused at this image, as if he momentarily stopped the unfolding of the whole story that he will recount in the Gospel and in the Acts of the Apostles, so that this icon of Jesus’ Baptism can make its imprint upon us well. Here he inserts the long genealogy of Christ, as if to take time, to create silence and contemplation of this scene, which will not be repeated so explicitly or so publicly even at the moment of the Transfiguration, because in reality this scene, this Trinitarian icon, this theophany, will never end, will remain as the key image that all the rest of the Gospel and the New Testament will develop and show in every detail. Everything is contained in it, for here the whole Trinity manifests itself and at the same time manifests all the mercy with which Jesus reaches and saves the whole, sinful human race. One cannot manifest any more of God or of man than what is included and granted here.

But here everything is manifested as a hidden treasure, like a discreet and humble self-presentation of God in the world. Very few realized at that moment what happened at the Jordan. The Gospel of John informs us that only two disciples of the Baptist intuited something, and thus started following this man who came out of the water in prayer and over whom a strange dove appeared and a strange voice resounded from heaven.

And yet, in this Jesus who is at prayer, there is the hidden treasure, the precious pearl for which it is worthwhile to leave all behind to find all. The treasure, the pearl, are the Son of God’s prayer, which becomes a possible experience for sinners. For that prayer is a relation of infinite love between the Son and the Father in the Holy Spirit. Jesus came, descended to the very bottom of the abyss of death in which all sinners are found, to rise again with us to intimacy with the Father. Our whole salvation consists in entering into this experience of Jesus’ prayer.

When Jesus will teach the Our Father, precisely to help us enter into his prayer, he will teach a prayer that rises from the very bottom of our sin and our division, to rise, so to say, all the way to being able to say to the Father: We are your sons and you are our Father! We are always fragile, we fall into temptation; we are full of debts to each other, and it is hard to forgive each other; we need everything, daily bread, hence: we are humanly wretched. And yet, that is precisely where the prayer of Jesus comes to seek us, to create a ladder for ascending to the Father, and this ladder is Christ himself, who prays for us, with us, in us, and we in Him.