

18. A brotherhood open to the work of God

What the Rule asks of the community in chapter 22 to spur the sleepy, those who are too lazy, or perhaps too timid to face the day and life, indicates the profound sense of brotherhood that St. Benedict wants to encourage in communities, and so also the meaning for which Christian and monastic communities exist. The point, in fact, is helping each other believe the positivity and beauty of life, starting with this day that is given us to live, from its very first hours, comes from God, is and will be His work, and that all that is asked of us is to get up to go out and meet an event of grace that will be given to us. And this event is, first of all, the encounter with the present Lord, who awaits us, who is near and awaits us. He leaves between us and Him only a symbolic, insignificant space, to educate our freedom toward wanting truly to meet the Lord and let him act. In the monasteries of St. Benedict, between the dormitory and the oratory there is usually a direct path. In Cistercian monasteries of the 12th century we still see today that a stairway comes directly down from the dormitory into the church. So there were only a few meters to cross, and they were even downhill! An easy symbolic space for simply saying yes to the encounter with God and His work in our life.

How important it is to work toward communal relationships in which there is a living awareness that what God can and wills to do is more defining and effective than our thoughts and decisions about what we can and should do ourselves or what others can and should do! Often we condemn forever a brother, a sister, or even a superior, with closed and “catalogued” judgments about what they do or do not do, and we no longer believe in what God can always achieve.

“He is a sleepyhead, it is useless to wake him up, he will never change!” The brothers could say this while they go to vigils. St. Benedict asks instead for a tenderness of encouragement: “*invicem se moderate cohortentur* – let them encourage each other delicately” (RB 22:8); a gentleness in exhortation that is entirely imbued with an awareness of faith in the work of God, for whom everything is always possible, and who always makes all things new, even our fossilized behaviors, and especially our fossilized judgements.

God cannot act if our judgements are catalogued in molding archives. Let us think of when Jesus went to Nazareth. He would have wanted to accomplish great miracles there too, but his fellow countrymen, though admiring his wisdom and his wonders, have classified him according to what they already knew about Him and cannot admit anything new: “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him” (Mk 6:3). Their judgments close them off from the new reality that God can always enact, and this closed-heartedness prevents Jesus from working this newness for them: “And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them” (Mk 6:5). Jesus can only act divinely with those who, like the sick, have too much need for Him to allow themselves to be closed off in abstract judgements.

So, in the monastic community too Benedict wants us to fight against the thoughts and judgements that makes us “scandals” to each other, that is, which make us impede each other from let God enact the impossible that He can always fulfill.

At the end of chapter 7 on humility, St. Benedict says that the love of God without fear and stability in the exercise of the virtues is what God brings about through the gift of the Holy Spirit: “All this the Lord will by the Holy Spirit graciously manifest in his workman now cleansed of vices and sins” (RB 7:70). Our holiness is the work of God, and the condition for reaching it is docile abandonment to the work of God in us through his Spirit.

For this reason, at the beginning of the Rule St. Benedict asks us to begin the whole path of our vocation as he then asks us to begin each day: by praying that God bring to completion his work in us. “First of all, every time you begin a good work, you must pray to him most earnestly to bring it to perfection” (Prol. 4). Nothing new, nothing good can start in us if not by entrusting it right away to God, who alone can bring it to realization, if not as an abandonment of ourselves to the work of God. As I was saying: casting the net of our life’s work from the right side, that is, where the Lord loves us and expresses his omnipotence.

As St. Peter writes: “Clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another (...). And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the power forever and ever. Amen!” (1Pet 5:5b,10-11).

Humility in our relationships with each other, between members of a community, the meek humility of Christ’s love, is entirely founded upon the faith that each person’s life and vocation is in the hands of God, that God can and will always do marvels and does not let his children fall, notwithstanding everything, notwithstanding ourselves.

God is so powerful as to “restore, support, and strengthen” even our freedom. In our fraternal relations, we often despair about the possibility of a change in the one whom we see not corresponding to the vocation as we would want. We despair that the freedom of the “sleepyhead brother,” the lazy, indolent one, or the one who sinks into other vices, above all those related to pride, be able to choose anything but his own interest, or his own project. We despair of ourselves too often in the same way, for the obvious or hidden weaknesses from which we suffer. But when one entrusts it all to what God can do, our act of trust is not true unless we believe that He can do all, absolutely all. As the angel announces to Mary: “Nothing is impossible for God” (Lk 1:37).