

18. Profession of hope

How should the communal life that is asked of us in the monastery incarnate and express hope and make us walk in it, the communal life as is also asked of every disciple of Christ who in various ways and various forms is called to be Church in communion with others?

I think of the verse of Psalm 119 that St. Benedict asks to be sung at the moment of monastic profession: "Uphold me according to your promise, that I may live, and let me not be put to shame in my hope!" (Ps 119:116).

St. Benedict has this chanted three times by the newly professed, and each time the community must repeat it, adding the *Gloria Patri* at the end. Then the professed prostrates himself at the feet of each monk to ask for his prayer. St. Benedict adds, "And from that moment let him be considered a member of the community" (cf. RB 58:21–23).

Belonging to a community is asked for and lived out in the desire that the Lord's promise of life be fulfilled, and hence within a hope. One lives in community for the fulfillment of the promise of full life, of eternal life, made to us by the Lord who died and rose for us. By accepting this profession of hope for "true and eternal life" (RB Prol. 17), the community engages in helping each of its members to live out this hope, to cultivate it together, to revive it and renew it ever again.

How does this happen? How do we live this out?

I would like to outline a few aspects of this communal commitment to living out hope, to helping us be aware that it is precisely this that saves a community, always and everywhere, even if it must die, and that allows us to live out our vocation and mission with fulness, happiness, and freedom, whatever may happen.

The first thing that it seems important to me to underline is that we are called to look at each other mutually with hope. We have seen how St. Benedict has the brother welcomed by asking the community to appropriate his profession of hope in the Lord's promise. At that moment, after the whole path of formation in which his vocation has been put to the test, it is as if the community looked at nothing but his hope to determine the fittingness of the brother to follow Christ in the monastery. Suddenly, one does not look at what one is or is not, if he has qualities or defects, if he is basically already a saint or a poor sinner, but at his desire, his awaiting the fulfillment that only Christ can give us, hence his hope. Basically it is the community, and not God so much, who must not disappoint the hope of this new brother.

Looking at the other, not just the members of our community but everyone, putting their hope at the center of attention, uniting ourselves to their hope, is a gaze that expands human relationships, communal relationships, to the infinite. Of course, one can and must look lucidly at the limitations, problems, and miseries that are there in everyone, but a gaze at the hope and in hope permits us not to close up the other, or even ourselves, within the boundaries of our limitations. For the promise of life that the Lord makes to each of us is infinitely greater than our limitations.

We cannot believe more in our own limitations than in the Lord who promises eternal life and holiness.

Let us think of how Jesus looked at each person, but especially at his disciples. He called them to follow him to complete alongside him the mission without limits of love and gift of self. Limitations were continually emerging in them and among them. Humanly speaking they were a disaster, as we and our communities often are too. But Jesus never let his gaze be locked into the limitations of his disciples, of whatever person he met. For this reason, he could also be severe, correcting them harshly, as he did with St. Peter, but he did so precisely because he saw them without losing sight of hope.

The shortest letter of St. Bernard's consists of just 14 words. It was addressed to the Cistercian Pope Eugene III to recommend a young man to him, perhaps precisely so that he be formed for a vocation of service in the Church. Bernard writes:

"Mittimus ad te iuvenem pudicum, ut aiunt, litteratum, pro aetate. Cetera sunt in spe."
"We are sending you a modest young man and, as they say, already learned for his age. All the rest is in hope." (Lt. 537)

"All the rest is in hope." How beautiful if we knew how to look at each other's qualities and defects with this phrase which is always open, open to the infinite, to the impossible that the grace of God promises to each life and can always make real. Without such a gaze, without this opening of hope, communal relationships are not Christian, are not that for which they were given to us and asked of us.

With Jesus, too, if we do not have this gaze, we risk ending up like Judas. Instead, Peter, even without understanding, even though he is incapable of overcoming himself, always maintained this openness. Like when at Capernaum he answered him: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God" (Jn 6:68-69).

Do we have hope in our gaze upon others and ourselves?