

## 19. Christian Consideration

St. Benedict, in the wake of the Church fathers, christianised 'consideration', christianised desire. The pagans were living the thirst in their hearts — a thirst stirred by the beauty of the stars as an undefined longing — that went out and got lost in the starry space along with the gaze. In the heart only the sadness of not being able to reach the stars remained. With the Incarnation of God, it's not the stars that have come to us, but He who makes them, who counts them and calls them by name (cf. Ps 146:4). For this 'consideration', the desire, are "Christianised" when our eyes are turned to Christ, and extended to fix on the Incarnate Word, the Emmanuel.

The christianisation of the words of pagan religiosity, such as "consideration" and "desire", is a little like when the Christians of the first centuries transformed the pagan temples into churches. Even in this, there is a relevant episode in the life of St. Benedict. St. Gregory the Great records that when St. Benedict reached the site of the future monastery of Monte Cassino, he found a temple and an altar dedicated to Apollo. Benedict destroys the statue and the altar, and replaces them with oratories and altars dedicated to St. Martin and St. John the Baptist (*Dialogues* II, ch. 8). The temple and the place, consecrated to the pagan divinity of hedonistic beauty, of proud beauty that wants only to be admired, but which looks at nobody, are replaced with oratories dedicated to St. Martin — the saint of charity, the saint who saw the poor man and took care of him, the saint of sharing with the poor — and to St. John the Baptist, he who lived in order to indicate Jesus, to decrease so that Christ might grow. St. Martin and St. John the Baptist are truly the saints that overturn the values of pagan culture by putting Christ at the centre, directing the consideration and the desire for the stars, the desire awakened in us by the universe, towards the God who became man in order to love us even to dying on a Cross.

As with the temple of Apollo, even the word "consideration" has been "converted" from pagan to Christian use, putting it at the service of Christ, directing it to Christ. And it is "converted" without diminishing — rather accentuating — the infinite space towards which it is extended, because Jesus is greater and more wondrous than the stars, He who created them, He who gave them to us, He who is the origin and the end of all beauty, of all splendor, and of our heart capable of desiring the infinite.

St. Bernard, in the treatise *On consideration addressed to Pope Eugene*, distinguishes between contemplation and consideration. He writes: "Contemplation can be defined as immediate perception, exact and secure, that the mind has of whatever thing, or as certain knowledge of the truth; consideration is instead the thought intensely stretched out, or the stretching of the mind, to the seeking of the truth — *consideratio autem intensa ad vestigandum cogitatio, vel intensio animi vestigandis verum*" (*De consideratione*, II, II, 5)

Consideration is precisely the desire and the stretching of the mind in search of truth. Consideration is an intense search.

This sense of intense seeking, we have already seen in St. Benedict, even when he asks us to "consider the fragility" of our weakest and poorest neighbour. But if he uses this

term of seeking the infinite for looking at the brother or sister in need, it is because the Gospel reveals to us that it is in them that Christ is present and awaits our attention and our care. The pagan consideration is christianised because the Infinite became flesh, became man, and is now to be found where man is hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, in prison; as Jesus reveals to us in His description of the Last Judgment in the Gospel of Matthew (Mt 25:31-46). St. Benedict has this Christian, evangelical awareness of the infinite and therefore of our desire for fullness. We can no longer desire the infinite and welcome it, if not in the mercy with which we treat Christ in our neighbour. In our neighbour the infinite has drawn near, has come to touch us, and asks for our care. Jesus Christ, as I was saying, is greater, more beautiful, more luminous, more wondrous than the stars, and He came so that we can truly possess Him, so that we can really and truly possess the infinite that our heart desires. But as He has overtaken us towards the depths, He descended further down than us, and He awaits us on the ground, where the fallen brother lies, wounded, sick, fragile.

In the scene of the Last Judgment in Matthew 25, both the elect and the damned are amazed by the King's words, and ask, "Lord, when did we see you ...?" (Mt 25:37.44). It all begins with a gaze. One can see, and move on without getting involved in the needs of the other. One can see and stop, be a neighbor like the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37), and then cover oneself with astonishment that in the needful brother there was Christ, there were the stars, the ultimate destiny of life.

But if Jesus recounts us this parable, if St. Benedict reminds us that in the sick, in the guest, in the poor, there is Christ, it is so that we do not lose this opportunity, every opportunity of fullness of ourselves in the encounter with Him. In the parable the elect and the damned discover at the end that they have met Jesus, that they have served Him or neglected Him. We instead are evangelised by the Church, by St. Benedict, by saints like Mother Teresa of Calcutta, and therefore we are called on not only to recognise Christ when we meet Him by chance, but to seek Him, to consider Him, to exercise an intense "stretching of the mind" writes St. Bernard, in order to go to meet Christ hidden in the misery of our neighbour.

The "*pia consideratio*" towards the fragile is an active seeking of Christ, a conscious search, an act of faith and love. For this the consideration of the need for mercy of our brothers and sisters is not a temporary activity, at fixed hours, a hobby on the side of our business or our vocation, but must always be exercised: "*consideretur semper in eis imbecillitas* — may you always consider their weakness" (RB 37:2).

We know that in us, there is not this constancy in attention, just as there is not a constancy of prayer, silence, of listening to the word of God. But the Rule is given to us in order to grow in all of this. The "*pia consideratio*" is a virtue that must grow in us, on which we have to work, and work together, in community, with the help of superiors, with the help of the word of God, the sacraments and prayer, in order that mercy, and therefore the likeness with the Father that is our perfection in Christ may grow in us, because the Gospel reveals to us that we are perfect like the Father if we are merciful like Him (cf. Mt 5:48; Lk 6:36).