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Authority and freedom

Proposing a path of conversion

To understand what it means to exercise a responsibility in the Church and in the monastic environment without abuse of power and of conscience, it is more useful to consider the topic positively rather than negatively, in order to understand also that, if there are abusive deviations in our superiors and in our communities, the solution is more a conversion than a correction. Often we try to correct the wrong attitudes without particularly noting that conversion is necessary for a person, a community, or a situation to be able to be corrected. Christ came instead to correct humanity by proposing a path of conversion, and a path of conversion toward following Him.

It is important to understand this. I think we all experience, at whatever level of pastoral work that has been entrusted to us, that every effort of correction without proposing a path of conversion remains sterile, does not bear fruit, does not change anything, makes the situation worse. The temptation to want to correct without proposing a path of conversion contradicts a principle that is fundamental for me, expressed by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*: that it is more important to initiate processes of life than to conquer spaces of power.

Let us reread this paragraph of *Evangelii Gaudium*: “One of the faults which we occasionally observe in sociopolitical activity is that spaces and power are preferred to time and processes. Giving priority to space means madly attempting to keep everything together in the present, trying to possess all the spaces of power and of self-assertion; it is to crystallize processes and presume to hold them back. Giving priority to time means being concerned about *initiating processes rather than possessing spaces*. Time governs spaces, illumines them and makes them links in a constantly expanding chain, with no possibility of return. What we need, then, is to give priority to actions which generate new processes in society and engage other persons and groups who can develop them to the point where they bear fruit in significant historical events. Without anxiety, but with clear convictions and tenacity” (EG 223).

When I analyze the situations of abuse of power and of conscience that get to an extreme crisis point, like an abscess that ruptures, I do not find it difficult to recognize at the level of a specific person or community what the Pope describes here for the whole of society. So often it happens that also in monasteries certain people, “trying to possess all the spaces of power and of self-assertion,” set themselves against encouraging processes that patiently generate the life of the community, even in the economic realm, but which are necessarily processes of communion, of mutual service, of humble affirmation of the other more than of oneself.

A danger already foreseen in the Gospel

But well before the Pope, the whole monastic tradition speaks to us of this, the Rule of Benedict speaks to us, and first of all and throughout all, Jesus himself speaks to us of this in the Gospel.

It is interesting to note that when Jesus is speaking of authority and power in the Christian community, he immediately warns against the danger of abusing it:

“Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. But if that wicked servant says to himself, ‘My master is delayed,’ and begins to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know and will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (Mt 24:44–51)

Nourishing and guiding

The first aspect that makes every responsibility in the Church at all levels dramatic is the eschatological framework in which it is entrusted and requested. Jesus asks us to live it out within our watchfulness for the coming of the Son of man. Whoever receives a power in the Church is not invited to think first of all of the *space* within which it must be exercised, but of the *time* determined by the unforeseeable imminence of Christ’s coming. Authority is to be lived “by keeping oneself ready” to welcome the Son of man, who comes to bring fulfillment to the universe and to history. This “keeping ready” is a very thick attention, which does not restrict itself to looking at the clouds in expectation of Christ, as the Apostles instinctively did after his ascension: “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11).

In the parable that we have just read, Jesus explicitly says what one must look at instead of at the clouds: “Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes!” (Mt 24:45–46).

The servant is put at the head of his fellow servants “to give them their food at the proper time.”

This image can seem a bit down-to-earth for us, and yet also to the first of the Apostles, Peter, that is to the greatest authority in the Church, at the culminating moment of his vocation, no other task was entrusted to him by the Risen Jesus than this: “When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ He said to him, ‘Feed my lambs.’ He said to him a second time, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ He said to him, ‘Tend my sheep.’

He said to him the third time, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' and he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep.'" (Jn 21:15-17)

Jesus has just given his disciples something to eat: "When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter...". A meal of fish, prepared by Jesus himself and increased by the fish brought by the disciples, but caught by the grace of the miracle made possible by the presence and the command of the Risen One (cf. Jn 21:1-14). It is in this Eucharistic setting that Jesus asks Peter for his love to correspond to His own, who for him and for all gave His life on the Cross. And it is in this Eucharistic setting that Jesus gives Peter and the Church the mission to *feed* the flock. "To feed" means first of all to nourish, to make the sheep eat, to make sure they find pasture, places in which they can eat green grass and drink fresh water.

This is what the beautiful Psalm 23 expresses:

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake. [...]
You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows." (Ps 23:1-5)

In the three commands "Feed!" that the Risen One gives to Simon Peter, the Gospel uses two Greek verbs: *boskō* (Jn 21:15,17) and *poimainō* (Jn 21:16). The first alludes to the fact of "procuring food" for the flock, the second seems to refer more to the whole task of "tending" the flock, that is, guiding it, watching over it, protecting it, but always also procuring fresh food and water for it. Why, indeed, does one tend a flock, guide it, if not to lead it, as indeed Psalm 23 says, to green pastures and still waters? Every pastoral role in the Church, every authority given by Christ over the sheep and the flock, always includes the fundamental task of nourishing the lambs, the sheep, the flock, so that they live, so that they grow, so that they be able to be fruitful and become capable in their turn of tending other sheep, of nourishing and guiding other flocks.

The essential role of a pastor (whether a man or a woman) is to nourish the sheep so they have life.

Jesus says it and repeats it in chapter 10 of John: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (Jn 10:11). How does he lay it down? By making himself living Bread, by giving his Body and pouring out his Blood like food and drink of eternal life (cf. Jn 6).

The Bread is the Word of God

This sacramental gift of Christ is not simply bread, is not simply wine. It is the Word of God made flesh (Jn 1:14). In fact, as Jesus himself reminds the devil to oppose his temptation, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Mt 4:4). In the source of this saying in Deuteronomy, Moses explains that also the gift of manna, of the physical nourishment that God gives his people, is meant to lead us to nourish ourselves on the word of God: "And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord" (Dt 8:3).

The bread of God's word nourishes and guides his people, and only by putting himself at the service of listening to the Word of God, to the Word of God that is Christ, in the Gospel, does the pastor truly feed the sheep, nourish them, guide them, protect them, and free them.

Thus, when some discontent arose in the Christian community regarding the distribution of material food, the Apostles understood right away that the essential thing for them was serving the bread of the Word: "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables" (Acts 6:2).

It is interesting to note that also then for the deacons, instituted to serve at table, the ministry on which they mostly will insist will not be this practical service, but again and always that of the Word of God, of proclamation, of catechesis, of public witness. The example of St. Stephen shows clearly that for the deacons too it was especially with the proclamation of the Word that they give their life for the sheep.

I cannot go into this topic as deeply as it would deserve. But I will limit myself to underlining that, if we want to understand how we are called to carry out a pastoral responsibility in our communities and in the Order, at all levels, and if we want to understand how to avoid or repair abuses of power, it is important to focus on this aspect. If authority in the Church is called to feed the sheep, the flock, if it is called to nourish and guide the brothers and sisters, we must not forget that this ministry is, for Christ and for the Church, essentially a service of the Word of God, of the Word that alone truly nourishes the heart of men and guides them on the right path.

I have already repeated on various occasions the last words that abbot Godefroy of Acey told me before leaving Hauterive's mountain house for the outing on bicycle and in the mountains on which he met his death on the afternoon of last August 3. He had reached me and another confrere the day before and he had to stay with us for a week. As I have retold, at the moment of his departure I was painting a watercolor of a shepherd on a path surrounded by a dozen sheep. He had leaned down to look at it, and I told him that I had not succeeded because something was not satisfying me in the proportions between the shepherd and the sheep. He told me, and it was practically the last thing he said in his life: "No, it's fine. But one would have to put ears on the sheep!"

From then on I do not tire of meditating on this advice, and I understand that it alludes to the essential task that St. Benedict assigns to the abbot of the monastery. I was speaking of it recently in the homily for the Benediction of the abbess of Seligenthal: «St. Benedict was extremely aware that the first service of authority is service of the Word of God to be offered constantly to the brothers and sisters like a light on the steps of the path that leads us to eternal life. Or rather it seems that the whole responsibility of the superior, that concerning which he will be judged at the coming of Christ, is precisely the responsibility for a teaching that allows the brothers and sisters to listen to the call of the Word, the call of the Bridegroom to union with Him. St. Benedict writes in chapter 2 of the Rule: “The abbot should not teach, establish, or command anything that would be foreign to the commandment of the Lord; rather, his arrangements and his teaching should fall into the disciples’ souls like a leaven of divine justice. Let the abbot always remember that in the fearful judgment of God both these things will be evaluated: his teaching and the disciples’ obedience” (RB 2:4–6). The disciples’ obedience is “listening” more than “doing,” as is suggested after all by the well-known etymology of the term *obedience*: *ob-audire*. Obedience is an intense listening, which involves one’s whole freedom and decision, involves the heart. Without it, one can hardly follow Christ with one’s whole heart, that is, not only exteriorly, apparently, but really, with one’s whole self. The disciples’ listening, then, must be the principal concern of the one who guides them.» (Benediction of Mother Christiane, Seligenthal, 19.08.2023)

The field of authority is freedom

Being aware that St. Benedict makes the superior of the monastery responsible before the final judgment of God “for his teaching and the disciples’ obedience [that is, their listening]” (RB 2:6) means being aware that the field of authority in the Church, before being discipline, the good functioning and order of people and communities, is essentially *their freedom drawn by God to friendship with Him*.

Our responsibility is not first of all disciplinary, that is: we are not responsible in the first instance for what the brothers or sisters do or do not do. St. Benedict was more concerned that the sheep of the flock “should have ears” to listen to the voice of the Lord, and this is the responsibility that each shepherd of a community must have, a responsibility that is exercised first of all with one’s own obedience, one’s own listening to the word of God, to the voice of the Bridegroom.

This means that one does not fight against the abuse of power mainly with protocols for behavior to avoid errors and wrong attitudes. Of course, these are needed too, but they are like embankments that have meaning and serve some purpose if the river is running. If the river is dry, the embankments are useless.

St. Benedict too warns the abbot against possible deviations in the exercise of his authority, for example preferring certain persons (RB 2:16ff.), or preoccupation more with the “transitory, earthly, passing” things than for souls (RB 2:33). Or rather a tendency to perfectionism that leads one so to scrub the rust that the vessel is broken (RB 64:12). Or jealousy toward one’s collaborators (RB 65:22). Also not turning to the

council of the community or of the elders is an abuse into which the abbot can fall (RB 3:13). Also not correcting the vicious brothers out of cowardice can be a grave abuse, an abuse of omission in the exercise of the authority that is entrusted to us (RB 2:26). In the Rule one can find many examples of how a superior or person in charge of a sphere of community life can fall into a wrong use of their responsibility.

But the great and constant concern of St. Benedict is that the abbot build up the brothers' listening with a wise teaching drawn from the Word of God and of the Church. The teaching that truly transmits the Word of God, that truly transmits Christ, the Word of life, frees the heart and the soul of the people because it does not draw them to itself, to the one who teaches, to the one who governs, but to the Lord who calls each one to follow him, who draws each one toward friendship with Him.

When this task gets neglected, and unfortunately I see that it is often neglected, then all that a superior asks for, demands, advises, decides, permits or forbids, all of it can become abusive, because it is as if it were not addressed to the freedom of the persons; not so much to the freedom of choice, but to the freedom that God draws to Himself with love and as love. If one does not address oneself to this freedom, if one does not address oneself to the heart made by God, one ends up addressing oneself only to the will to accept or refuse to enter into a framework.

In other words: whoever does not transmit the voice of the Bridegroom who calls and draws hearts to union with Him and in Him, unfailingly proposes a moral system, rules of behavior, not a life, that for which we have been created by the Father and called by the Son in the gift of the Spirit.

A humble and poor authority

To live authority like this requires not so much capability but poverty, humility. First of all a poverty before God, the humble poverty of listening first, of having first of all hunger and thirst for the Word of God more than anything else. The poverty of renouncing first of all to satisfy ourselves with other things, with other satisfactions, that are not Christ himself, the Bridegroom who comes.

The faithless servant of the parable that I cited at the beginning is condemned because, in addition to mistreating his fellows, he sets about feeding himself and getting drunk with what he should be giving to the brothers, and he no longer desires for the master to return. "But if that wicked servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed,' and begins to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know and will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Mt 24:48-51).

Jesus defines him as a "hypocrite." In his case the hypocrisy consists in taking advantage of a position that the master entrusted to him for the good of others. He abuses the power by seeking his own interest instead of exercising it for the interest of his neighbor and of the master himself. He eats the food himself that he should be distributing. He takes for himself what he should be donating if he were obedient and

faithful: “Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time?” (Mt 24:45).

God grants us an authority, a power, to give our brothers and sisters food at the proper time, to transmit to others the nourishment they need according to the moment and the circumstances of life. To be deficient in this for the sake of one’s own interest is a hypocritical abuse of the responsibility received. The authority, the responsibility, is less a function than a charism. God gives us the talents and gifts necessary for the good and the growth of the brothers and sisters. It is a gift of the love of Christ, a gift of the Good Shepherd, a gift that, when it is missing, we must ask for, certain to receive it, because God does not ever deny us what is necessary for the good of others. The Spirit never denies to the shepherds the gifts necessary for the growth and the path of the sheep.

Often, when I remind superiors of their task of teaching so that the brothers and sisters can “have ears” to hear the Lord and follow him with love, and hence live out our vocation with love and joy, they tell me that they are not capable of it, that they feel empty, dry, that they have no ideas. This is a response that betrays a false formulation and understanding of authority. Actually, we are not called to give what comes from us, to transmit our ideas, our words. We are called to transmit the Word of God. And this is not possible without our receiving first of all that which we must give. It is not possible to give without asking for this gift to be transmitted. And here I often see that it is at this level we find the real problem of us superiors: we do not ask God for his Word. In other words: *we do not listen*, or, in still other words, *we are not silent*.

Giving the shepherds ears

I was telling a superior general the words that Dom Godefroy had told me about the sheep’s ears. And he told me: “Quite true! But it’s not just the sheep that need ears, but the shepherds need them too!”

Of course! Or better: especially the shepherds need ears, ears directed to God, to Christ, but also to the brothers and sisters; ears turned toward the poor. So many abuses arise exactly from the fact that some superiors do not listen to anyone, listen only to themselves. They do not listen to God in prayer, they do not listen with humility to superiors above them, they do not listen to the community, they do not listen to their councilors, etc.

Again in the parable that we have meditated on there is a phrase that helps us understand where abuse of power starts from one who has received some authority. It is there where Jesus says: “But if that wicked servant says *to himself* [verbatim: in his heart], ‘My master is delayed’” (Mt 24:48). It is right here that abuse begins: in saying to oneself what is convenient, what seems to give us more power, more security, in cultivating in our heart a false truth about Christ and hence about everything and everyone, a lie that does not correspond to the reality of the Kingdom of God. In fact the Master in reality comes soon, unveils the hypocrisy of the wicked servant, and makes him account for everything.

This phrase helps us understand that, to exercise our responsibility with truth, the most important thing is closely guarding the truth of our heart, of our thoughts, and hence the constant readiness for conversion of heart. It is also in this that the superiors must help each other, with fraternal friendship. One who has authority must not watch over the flock only: they must watch especially over their own heart, over what their heart says to itself. There are discourses we make to our heart that do not listen to the voice of God, that listen more to the voice of the tempter, of the devil who always comes to trick us with the offer of his worldly power as if it were greater and truer than the humble power of Christ crucified, of Christ who washes the disciples' feet, of Christ who stands in the midst of the others as the one who serves, who loves, who sacrifices himself, who bears fruit by falling into the earth and losing his life for us.

This work of conversion of heart is not an intimistic, individual asceticism: it is the "basso continuo" of a *synodal path*, on which we discover that walking with the others, listening to each other in turn, sharing, is what makes us grow in depth, what makes us progress and purifies us interiorly, making us instruments of communion. For God has given us a heart that thirsts for communion, a heart in the image of the Trinitarian Heart of God, in which no Person can say "I" without thinking of "us."

But this is an aspect that I can only hint at, even if it is fundamental. Thanks be to God that we are exploring it more deeply by walking together with the whole Church in the synodal journey of these years, of which we all have great need.