

3. Examining oneself about one's vocation

“Bernarde, Bernarde, ad quid venisti?”

This question is a constant examination of conscience about the truth of our vocation and of our discipleship.

If we examine ourselves only in our own light, we always end up mistaking the will of God and hence our vocation with our proud presumptions. We examine ourselves like when a business does its balance sheet and is going well if it profits ever more and more for itself, if it satisfies its own interest. Rather, the measure of the fruitfulness of a Christian vocation is never profit, or success, satisfaction just for oneself, but fidelity to the One who calls us, readiness to lose our life for Him and as He wants, abandonment to his plan. Basically, always telling him yes, renewing the yes, the “Here I am” at his call. Deep down, the truth of a vocation is measured by the ever renewed listening to the voice of the Beloved who continues to call us to be with Him and be his friends.

For this reason, when we speak of Sacred Scripture, of the importance of meditating on it, of listening to the Gospel, the Fathers, and the Church, for example the magisterium of the Pope, we must not think that the point is just a formation concern, to acquire a good Christian and monastic culture. The issue, rather, is to verify that we are living our vocation while continuing to listen to the One who calls us, remaining in a living listening that nourishes and enlivens our fidelity. It is like for those who live a matrimonial vocation: a formal fidelity is not enough, a formal respect for the marriage contract: the matrimonial relationship remains faithful if it is nourished on mutual listening, on an affective relationship, on real communion of life.

A community in which there is not silence and meditation on the Word of God, not only with the head but with the heart, does not just become an ignorant and superficial community: it becomes unfaithful to its vocation, to the calling that makes the vocation a life that is always new.

“Why have you come?”: so we must not hear this question as if it were a question on an exam, an insidious question that wants to catch us in error. Jesus, St. Benedict, and St. Bernard know perfectly well that on our own we are not capable of fidelity to the love of Jesus without betraying him, without denying him. Jesus knows that even if we promise like Peter that we will give our life for Him, left on our own we always end up denying him. The true, just response, the only one that makes sense, the only one that responds to our vocation, the only one that truly says “Yes” to Christ, is: “Jesus, I have come because you love me! I am here because your friendship has drawn me and I want to accept it, and so become, thanks to You, a faithful friend of yours, capable through grace of giving my whole life for You, capable of becoming ever more fully a friend who is faithful to your infinite fidelity, on which I must support myself totally if I want to love you to the end!”

For this reason, after the Resurrection Jesus asks Peter again in a more explicit way the question to which Judas did not want to respond. “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” (Jn 21:15). As if he said: “Friend, have you come to love my love or for something else?” He asks him three times if he is with Him to correspond to his friendship. For Jesus it’s enough for Peter to remember that he has followed Jesus from the very beginning because Jesus chose him gratuitously. There’s nothing to marvel at nor is it a serious issue if one falls, if one denies. The important thing is that our love be born again, rise again from the love of Christ, from the friendship of Christ who poured out all his blood for us on the Cross. And Peter now understands that this is all that is asked of him, only this fidelity: “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’” (Jn 21:17).

It is from that point alone that Jesus can renew everything, starting with our heart, and so renew our response to the vocation that he has offered us.

When the monk Romanus encountered the young Benedict of Norcia, who had fled from the distractions of Rome, the first thing he asks him, literally, is “where he was headed, toward where was he aimed”: “*quo tenderet requisivit*,” and “once he knew his desire” he gave him the monastic habit and helped him find a place and a form for living the monastic life in the solitude of Subiaco (St. Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*, 2.1). Basically he asked him “*ad quid venisti?*” while he was still on the path toward the monastic life, as if to verify right away the desire that would have enabled him to go all the way to the depth of the calling of his vocation.

Romanus did not simply ask where Benedict was going in a geographic sense, also because St. Benedict did not know where he was going. He knew what he was fleeing, Rome and the snares of a worldly life, but as direction for his path he had only his powerful desire for God and for life in fullness.

This desire for the absolute, infinite, is not just a hagiographic theme: it is the nature of our heart that, thanks be to God, we encounter often in so many young people, or people who have remained young at heart. The problem is that often they do not meet anyone who is interested in this desire and not something else, and who therefore would know how to orient them toward a life that could help this desire bud forth, blossom, and bear fruit.

The most serious aspect of the decline of religious life, today as always, is when, encountering or perceiving this desire in young people who wander without knowing where to go, the proposal of the “masters” whom they meet entices partial interests instead of taking seriously their desire for the infinite, that is, for God and for his friendship.

When St. Benedict speaks of receiving candidates into monastic life, in chapter 58 of the Rule, he is very strict about this. He does not want the deep desire of the human heart to be fooled, and if this desire is not there, he prefers for the candidate to go away: he asks the master of novices to check “*si revera Deum quaerit* – if he truly seeks God” (RB 58.7). And he adds: “Let him be shown ahead of time all the hard and burdensome realities through which one goes to God – *per quae itur ad*

Deum" (58.8). And it is as if one started right away to educate him to repeat to himself the question "*ad quid venisti?*": "After six months let the Rule be read to him so that he might know for what one enters into the monastery – *ad quod ingreditur*" (58.12).

St. Benedict is concerned that one keep alive the desire for the ultimate goal for which one embraces a vocation, above all if it is a monastic vocation, consecrated to the search for God, to the love of God.

So true is this that at the moment of definitive profession, the novice sings three times together with the community a verse of psalm 118: "Receive me, Lord, according to your word and I shall live: do not disappoint me in my expectation – *ab expectatione mea*" (RB 58.21, Ps 118:116).

Yes, God must not let down the desire for which we come into the monastery, but we first of all must not let down this deep desire of our heart. That is, we must not remain on the path of our vocation while betraying that for which we came, that by which we felt attracted and to which we said yes. And whoever must lead the community, whoever must form it, must not forget to ask for himself and for the brothers and sisters entrusted to him: "*Ad quid venimus?* – For what have we come?"

How can we not remember the somewhat exasperated phrase of St. Paul: "For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ" (Phil 2:21).

What does it mean to "seek one's own interests"? It means diverting toward ourselves, or toward a passing and fleeting personal advantage, the direction that aims our heart toward God, toward Christ, toward his friendship. Instead of remaining directed toward Him for whom we came, came not only into the monastery but into the world, for whom we were born, we bend ourselves back onto benefits, interests, values, that are no longer Him, are no longer for Him, that are no longer his friendship.

To notice this, to gain awareness of this "betrayal" of God and of what we have been made and called for, can however be the beginning of a renewal, of a new life, of a true and proper resurrection.