

## 20. The maximum universal care

This gaze of compassion, this merciful consideration that Christ teaches us, with which Christ is always watching us, must lead us to not forget to look at Christ, in turn, avoiding to afflict Him with our distraction and ingratitude. He looks at us, He cares for us. And we, We look at Him? We care for Him?

Speaking of consideration, St. Benedict educates us to take care of the brothers and sisters with our eyes fixed on Jesus Christ present in them. When one has awareness that in one's neighbour there is Jesus, when we are attentive to Him in the brother, the sister, for St. Benedict it is as if the just care that we have for one another and towards all might already be accomplished. St Benedict calls on the abbot, the cellerar, the infirmarian, the novice master, the guestmaster, the spiritual elders, and the whole community to take care of our neighbour, as part of one's own responsibility and at every opportunity. But he does not go into too much detail on how one has to take care of everybody. The Rule does not give us treatises on medicine, psychology, hotel welcoming, economic management or youth training, etc. All this, as Jesus says, even the tax collectors and the pagans do (cf. Mt 5:47). It is the gaze on the person that changes the care that we ourselves are called to offer. And the novelty of this gaze is to recognise Jesus in every human being, especially he who is most in need of our care and love.

For this reason, St. Benedict asks of the abbot, the community, the cellerar, a "care before all and above all — *ante omnia et super omnia*", a "maximum care — *cura maxima*", for example towards the sick brothers (RB 36:1.6.10). Simply because Jesus said: "I was sick and you visited me" and "What you did to the least of these little ones (*minimis*), you did it to me" (RB 36:2-3; cf. Mt 25:36.40 ).

The abbot must have, even for an unruly flock, a "universal care — *universa cura*" (RB 2:8), that is, a care in which he expends all, all his strength, all his means, in order to save the sheep.

I don't want to dwell on this, because the essential thing is the awareness that the novelty of Christian care for the neighbour is the intensity of the attention and concern that should provoke in us the recognition of Christ, the faith in His presence that asks us to love from the depths of the human misery that He embraced on the Cross.

St. Teresa of Calcutta lived all her life and mission hearing in the poorest, and in all those she met, the cry of Jesus on the Cross: "I thirst!" (Jn 19:28). And the "maximum care", the "universal care" that she had, was motivated by that cry, was all in response to that cry.

When one cares in this way for his neighbour, one does not give to him anymore only the care which he needs at that moment, but mysteriously one also gives Christ to him, the encounter with Him within the misery that he lives, within the fragility that he lives. One helps him also to recognise Him present in his life, in his heart, in his suffering and in his desire for salvation. As we saw for the sick: they too, writes St. Benedict, must be helped to recognise Jesus present in themselves, and to find fulfillment in this that may help them to not lament about everything: "Also the sick must realise that they are served in honor of God, and are not to sadden the brothers put at their service with excessive demands" (RB 36:4). But if the sick fail to recognise this, we must continue to

serve them with patience, because only the "maximum care" of Christ in them can help them to recognise Him (cf. 36:5-6).

All this reminds us that what makes us truly merciful, what makes us truly capable of caring for the other that goes beyond our strength, our feelings, and the measure of our love, is the whole journey of training to prefer Christ that the Church and St. Benedict help us do. If we want to grow in the capacity of taking care of the other, of being "neighbour" of being the "Good Samaritan" to others, we have to begin and restart always from "preferring nothing to the love of Christ" (RB 4:21).

Significantly, St. Benedict put this instrument of good works in Chapter 4 of the Rule as the culmination and summary of a list of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy.

“To restore the poor.

To clothe he who is naked.

To visit he who is sick.

To bury the dead.

To aid he who is in difficulty.

To comfort the afflicted.

To make oneself an outsider to the acting of the world.

Preferring nothing to the love of Christ" (RB 4:14-21)

It's like at the end of the whole list of the instruments of the good works, when Benedict sums up every precept and council inviting us to the invincible hope in the mercy of God: "And never to despair of God's mercy" (RB 4:74).

In the souvenir card of my Solemn Profession, I put these two sentences: "Preferring nothing to the love of Christ" and "Never to despair of God's mercy." I think it is important not to separate them, and to let them mutually illuminate one other, illuminating all the other obligations related to our faith and to our vocation.

The love of Christ, to be preferred before everything, is His love for us, but also our love for Him. Moreover, it is His love towards everyone. And God's mercy, of which we must never despair, is the mercy of God towards us and towards everyone, and His mercy towards us that we are called to transmit to everyone. We must not despair that God has mercy on us, but not even that God grants to us the being merciful to all, for example towards our enemies. In fact, this last instrument of the good works comes immediately after two instruments on the loving of enemies:

"In the love of Christ, pray for our enemies.

Reconcile yourselves before the setting of the sun with those whom you've had a disagreement.

And never to despair of God's mercy" (RB 4:72-74)

We could summarise, that we are called to not prefer anything to the love of Christ (4:21.72a), praying for reconciliation of all and with everyone (4:72b-73), with total faith and hope in the mercy of the Father (4:74).

And in this the whole Rule of St. Benedict seems to me to be synthesised, as well as the Christian vocation that calls us to be in the world as people and communities in which the mercy of the Father is incarnated in charity, like in Jesus Christ who loved us even unto death, death on a Cross.