

21. Youth is not the ideal of life

In the light of what I was saying yesterday, I would like to dedicate the last two Chapters to St. Benedict's conception of youth, in order also to conclude this Course by opening ourselves up together to concern for the young, their faith, and their vocation, which the Church will express in the next Synod of Bishops.

How did St. Benedict consider youth, the young? It is interesting that in the Rule the term "*iuvenis* – young man" occurs only a single time, where it says that one should only rarely allow the young to take a bath (RB 36:8). The term "*iuventus* – youth" never occurs. Instead St. Benedict often uses the comparative of "*iuvenis*": "*iunior*." It seems to me that this means that, for St. Benedict, and perhaps for the whole era and culture in which he lived, the ages of man were never considered absolutely, as concepts in themselves, but always in relation with other ages, and so youth was defined in connection to maturity and old age. One is not "young" in himself, but "younger" than one who is older. This is true for the old too: in the Rule the term "*senior* – older" occurs above all, and only three times is the term "*senex* – old man" used.

But, independent of this study of vocabulary, it seems sufficiently clear to me that the human ideal, according to St. Benedict, is not youth, but old age. The whole complex of the Rule suggests that the ideal man, the ideal monk, is not the young man, but the old. In chapter 4, on the instruments of good works, it is significant that St. Benedict asks that we "respect the elders – *seniores venerare*" and to "love the young – *iuniores diligere*" (RB 4:70–71). The young are to be loved because they need affection to grow, a merciful affection for their immaturity and weakness. But, by asking to "venerate" the older monks, St. Benedict shows that he sees a value in the old one that is to be respected. The point is not especially to love them because their strengths are declining and they are always becoming weaker, but to look to them as to a treasure one can reach, as a precious and sacred model that the young must look to and visit.

For this reason, when, in the Rule, a young person is esteemed, for example when it says that all the brothers must be called to counsel "because the Lord often reveals what is better to the younger" (RB 3:3), or when it says that even the last in order in the community can be elected abbot (cf. 64:2), it is not so much their youth that is set at value, but the fact that, though young, they have the counsel or wisdom of the old, as the Bible says of Samuel, or Daniel, or the young Solomon.

We, at least in the West, live in a culture in which youth is presented as the age or condition that has value, and getting older, instead, is seen as a progressive loss of value. For the most precious value for western society, and the globalized culture of the media, is exteriority, appearance, physical strength and beauty, instinctiveness. Thus, the predominant culture presents as an ideal the feelings of instability or insecurity which the young actually live out dramatically, and with suffering too. Thus the media, films, advertisements, essentially present model adults who act like adolescents, who are pleased to be and to show themselves to be immature. Instead, in true adolescents, the immaturity of their relationships, their awareness, their judgement, is, in reality, a drama, a condition full of tensions, of need for help and companionship. The true crisis today is not in the young, but in adults, or in those who should be adults.

In cultures where the old person is venerated, and where the old person is “venerable,” that is, worthy of being looked upon as a model of human maturity, of interior maturity, in such cultures youth, too, can be lived out better, because it does not need to be embarrassed to be immature, to need to grow. Where being old, being mature, is a value, youth can be truly lived out, and live as an adventure, as an opening up to a valuation of self and of all that one stands before and toward which one is content to go, to progress. Pope Francis is right continually to remind about the value of grandparents for the good of families, because in their relationships with the older people the children and young people find their place, and see that their spiritual and physical dynamism is directed toward a beauty that is not the beauty that passes, but the deep beauty of the heart. The young person in touch with the old has proof that all the psychological, intellectual, and affective insecurities inherent in his age have a horizon, are like mountain streams that do well to be turbulent, because they are going with energy toward the profound vastness of the sea.

For this reason, one cannot concern oneself with the young in any way better than by concerning oneself with valuing the old, with creating communion between the young and the old.

In this, as in so many other areas, the Rule of St. Benedict can be a ferment of cultural and social renewal, which the world today vitally needs. One could say that the contribution of St. Benedict, which is the Christian contribution, but which we find in other religious traditions too, is to propose an ideal of youth illuminated by the ideal of old age. Not for nothing does St. Gregory the Great begin to describe St. Benedict as “a man of venerable life (...) who had from his youth the heart of an elder – *ab ipso pueritiae suae tempore cor gerens senile*” (*Dialogues* II, Prol.).

In chapter 63 of the Rule, which deals with the order that should be kept in the community, the theme is basically the relationship between the younger and the older. First of all, St. Benedict says that being older in the community does not depend so much on age but on the time lived in following one’s vocation. The one who entered the monastery first is the older than the one who entered later, even if he is younger in age. This presupposes that life in the monastery is a time of constant maturation, and that the experience of monastic life should make people grow.

Here St. Benedict recalls again the example of youths who were more mature than older people, like “Samuel and Daniel, while still young, judged elders” (RB 63:6; cf. 1 Sam 3 and Dan 13). St. Benedict, however, grants the abbot the ability to make exceptions, to advance in community rank one who, with well founded judgement, he considers more mature. It is clear that not all the older monks are necessarily more mature than the younger; you see it, unfortunately, in all communities. There are adult and older monks who have not mature in the value of their experience, and for this reason, even if one should not fail to respect their age, the “veneration” for them that the Rule asks for, even if charitable, becomes formal, without content, since the sacred value of the person does not emerge, does not shine out.

But St. Benedict is an optimist, on account of which he repeats: “The younger monks, then, must respect their seniors, and the seniors must love their juniors – *Iuniores igitur priores suos honorent; priores minores suos diligant*” (RB 63,10). He knows that the older monks can also become more worthy of veneration if spurred on by the expectations of the younger monks in their regard.