

21. Ways of closing off hope: greed

Another attitude opposed to hope that we need to be aware of is greed. If complaining often arises in us from what we are missing, greed is the fear of missing what we have, a fear that keeps a tight grip on what is possessed. More than the fear of lacking something, greed is the fear of losing something. Sometimes the greedy person does not even fear losing anything, so certain is he that he has in his hands for ever what he possesses. This is the foolishness of the rich man of whom Jesus speaks in the Gospel: “And he told them a parable, saying, ‘The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’” But God said to him, “Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.” (Lk 12:16–21)

Greed is accumulating treasures for oneself. It is a solitary vice that makes us more and more alone, more and more isolated, sheltered within the walls that are built to protect these false treasures. The greedy person isolates himself because for him the others are always a danger for what he possesses. It is as if for him everybody were a potential thief who wants to take away his treasures. For the greedy man, sharing, giving, means losing his security, losing what fills up the horizon of his desires. For this reason, for the greedy man the poor person is the number one danger, because the poor man’s indigence, his need for vital goods, always threatens his superfluous goods, which he does not truly need in order to live.

We must honestly admit that each of us has smaller or bigger spaces of greed, each has his granaries uselessly full and uselessly defended; each of us has his treasures that he is not ready to share. Poor people can also be greedy to each other. These treasures can be material goods, but often they are also intellectual goods and spiritual goods.

St. Benedict, together with the Apostles and the fathers of the desert and of the Church, warns very decisively and stubbornly against this vice. His chapter on the vice of having anything of one’s own, that is, just for one’s self, is sharp as a razor: “Above all, this evil practice must be uprooted and removed from the monastery. We mean that without an order from the abbot, no one may presume to give, receive or retain anything as his own, nothing at all—not a book, writing tablets or stylus—in short, not a single item, especially since monks may not have the free disposal even of their own bodies and wills. They are to hope to receive for all their needs from the father of the monastery, and are not allowed anything which the abbot has not given or permitted” (RB 33:1–5).

In precisely this chapter of the Rule, St. Benedict speaks of hope: “They are to hope to receive for all their needs from the father of the monastery” (RB 33:5).

Using these terms, “hope” and “father,” the Rule teaches us to live also our relationship with material goods in a theological way, that is, referring oneself to God, whose paternity the abbot represents, mindful, that is, of God who provides all for us, just as he nourishes the birds of the sky and clothes the lilies of the field (cf. Lk 12:22–30).

It is nice to note how in this chapter St. Benedict helps us live out our relationship with our basic needs as a way of expressing in consecrated life our vows of obedience, poverty, monastic conversion, and stability in community: “They are to hope to receive for all their needs from the father of the monastery, and are not allowed anything which the abbot has not given or permitted. All things should be the common possession of all, as it is written, so that no one presumes to call anything his own” (Acts 4:32). (RB 33:5–6).

The vows are not only a spiritual commitment, with the risk of becoming abstract. They are to be incarnated in our real life, and this means that our belonging to Christ must give form to our relationship with everything, even with our need for necessary things like food and clothing. But along with the vows, it is hope that awaits everything from God, who is incarnate in our life, in our flesh, and becomes a palpable reality for ourselves and for others.

If the greedy man is the person closed in on himself who loses communion with others, the poor man who hopes for all from the Father is the one who does not fear sharing what he has or what he is. He also receives his body from God, on account of which he does not consider it just his own, but a good granted for completion in giving, in serving, in offering oneself, which can mean, for example, offering one’s own efforts, one’s sickness, and for some even martyrdom.

Greed is like a cage that impedes the hope of flying. Following Jesus, St. Benedict proposes freeing ourselves from this tendency, educating ourselves to request this bread each day from God the Father and receiving all from Him, through the one who represents him for us.

And each of us is a representative of the Father for the poor who knock at our door. It is not just a question of money or material goods, but of all that is given to me and that my neighbor needs. For example, my time, my listening, my attention, a smile, a service. At times we are asked to give our patience, as the Father is patient with us, or our pardon. In all these cases too, however, we are never the source of what is asked of us. But hope is granted to us, the awareness in Christ of the Father’s goodness, and then we are called to live out this hope for others too, to hope for everything from the Father, also for the others who do not know him.

As we read in the Letter to the Hebrews: “Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’ So we can confidently say, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?’” (Heb 13:5–6; cf. Deut 31:6; Ps 118:6)