

22. Pleading for mercy

"May God Almighty have mercy on you, brothers!" (St. Gregory the Great, *Dialogues* II, 3)

I was saying yesterday that these words of St. Benedict addressed to those who wanted to poison him, are at the same time an intercession and a blessing. They are words that place themselves between God and the brothers, between God and our neighbour, even between God and our enemy, and he who utters them joins the great prayer of merciful intercession of Christ crucified: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do!" (Lk 23:34).

Jesus on the Cross, Jesus the Son of God made man to die for us, is the mediator between God and man. He is the great intercessor and advocate between humanity and the Father. The Father knows what we need, knows that we need mercy, forgiveness, and wants nothing more than to forgive us, to reconcile Himself with us. But it is we who have need of intercession, who need the intercession of Christ, of the Church, the saints, of our brothers and sisters; precisely in order to discover that the mercy we receive is the gift of the Father, and that it was enough to ask for it in order to receive it, that He had already heard us before we had asked Him. As Jesus helps us to understand it at the moment of Lazarus' resurrection:

"Jesus then lifted up his eyes and said, 'Father, I thank you because you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the people that are standing around me, so that they may believe that you sent me.' Having said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!'. The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with bandages, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Free him and let him go'" (Jn 11:41b-44).

The "people standing around", then as now, need to see the mediation of Christ, His prayer to the Father that obtains everything, that obtains life, even when one is already dead and decomposed. Jesus is the first who "never despairs of God's mercy" (cf. RB 4:74), of the mercy of God towards all. The prayer of Jesus is, as I said, an intercession and a blessing; it is an *epiclesis*, literally an "invoking above", an invocation of the Holy Spirit which from the Heart of God pours itself out on the world, on humanity, in order to transform it, like the bread and wine of the Mass, into the one Body and Blood of the Son of God.

"May God Almighty have mercy on you, brothers!". When Benedict prays thus for and over his enemies, he makes an *epiclesis*, he invokes the Holy Spirit so that it may heal the profound division that the corruption and sin of these monks created in themselves and in the Body of Christ.

We must realise therefore, that all the prayer instilled in us by the tradition of the Church, the monastic tradition, Benedictine and Cistercian, is of this nature. It is always as if all of our personal and community prayer were nothing other than the continuous repetition of this *epiclesis* of mercy over this world: "May God Almighty have mercy on you, brothers!".

An invocation, mind well, that we do not do only over the others, but also over ourselves, as when King David prays Psalm 50, the *Miserere*, because often we too "poison" with our evil, with our envy, with our meanness, with our bad speaking, the "good wine" of the wedding of the Lamb, the Blood of the covenant and the communion that Christ has shed for us unto the last drop.

The Psalms, evidently, are the great inspiration for St. Benedict's prayer. When I arrived at *Hauterive* one still prayed the whole Office in Latin, in the Vulgate version. Even if I knew Latin, I must confess that it did not help me much to be attentive to the text of the Psalms and to make them mine, but at least in those years I was struck by the enormous frequency in the Psalms of the word "*miser cordia*", and from there I started to meditate on this theme throughout the Bible. The Psalms are a constant begging for mercy and a continuous praise of God for His eternal mercy. "Never despair of God's mercy", basically means to not distinguish the asking for mercy from the praise of having receiving it. Hope, like faith, is a desire that is already sure of being received. As when Jesus says to the Father: "I knew that you always hear me." (Jn 11:42).

For the ancient monks — and for St. Benedict — the Psalms were a school of prayer. After the recitation of every psalm, one remained briefly in silence to pray, to express with the heart the prayer inspired by the psalm.

One of the expressions that prolonged and dilated the pleading and the praise of the Psalms to the mercy of God was and is certainly that which the Rule calls "Litany", which St. Benedict makes coincide with the prayer of supplication. He speaks of a "*supplicatio litaniae* — the supplication of the litany" (RB 9:10), which in English one normally translates as "the litany of supplication". This is a repeated plea, prolonged by the repetition of set formulas of invocation. In the Rule, this litany of supplication is fundamentally the *Kyrie eleison*. St. Benedict indeed writes, on the way to end the night Vigils, that after the reading of the Apostle comes "the verse, the litany of supplication (*supplicatio litaniae*), that is, the *Kyrie eleison*. And thus one concludes the night Vigils" (RB 9:10).

The *Kyrie eleison*, as you know, means "Lord, have pity, have mercy!". It is a cry that expresses our dependence and our confidence in the *Kyrios*, in the Lord. It is therefore also a shout of praise, that recognises that the Lord is God, that the Lord is great and good. It is enough to think of the Gospel passages in which the poor cry out "*Kyrie eleison!*" to Jesus in order to obtain forgiveness, healing, salvation (cf. Mt 9:27; 15:22; 17:15; 20:30-31; Mk 10:47-48; Lk 17:3; 18:38-39). These men and women who suffer misery, the torment of evil, blindness, leprosy, that is, all the situations before which man cannot do anything, cry insistently "*Eleison! Have mercy!*", following Christ, constantly repeating their cry, calling him "*Kyrios-Lord*", "Son of David", "Master", or simply "Jesus." Theirs is a plea full of faith, that Jesus rewards. Jesus makes us understand that faith is also expressed by the constant invocation, the asking of mercy. This means that one way of "never despairing of God's mercy" is also, and perhaps above all, that of never tiring of asking for it, of begging it from the Lord. One never despairs when one prays always. The invincible hope is the tireless prayer. He who prays, hopes; and he who hopes, prays.