

22. An empty and open heart

The Rule of St. Benedict is wholly imbued with the awareness that, if we do not convert to having the sense of the things of God, we are not truly monks, we do not live our vocation with truth. And the consequence of this is that we are not happy, that our vocation does not fill us with joy, because it does not give meaning to our life. I remind of the questions I posed at the beginning, thinking of our Bro. David: "What meaning does the monastic vocation give to human life? And what meaning does human life give to the monastic vocation?"

See, I think that the monastic vocation has been given by God to the Church to help everyone, us first of all, to live human life with the sense of God, thinking about the things of God just as Christ, who died and rose for us, makes possible. Monastic life should be for us and for all a "memorandum" that makes us think about the meaning and value that human life has according to God and not just according to men.

For this reason, the primary ask of monks is remembering Christ, dead and risen, the paschal Christ, a memory that penetrates all of life, all of one's time, all human activities, all the dimensions of human life. It is this that the Rule of St. Benedict wants, this that it demands, this that it educates us toward day after day, in each instant and situation of life. We are not monks because of what we, unlike others, are, or because of the "alternative" to the life of all that we are, and even less in order to be or feel better than others, but because of that which we are called to keep aflame in the heart of the human life that we live like the other 7.5 billion human beings who, at this moment on earth, live, breathe, think, feel, love, desire, rejoice, suffer.

Certainly, living in a monastery normally means making particular choices that the greater part of men and women are not called to make. But they are choices whose goal is to give us, even through sacrifice, the discipline and freedom that are necessary for being able to nurture as a priority that which gives meaning to each person's life, that which allows each human being to live according to God and not according to men or the world. Everything in our vocation, or at least everything that regards the spirit and charism of the Rule of St. Benedict, is intended to help us keep lit, to relight and always stoke the flame of a memory of the mystery of Christ, dead and risen, of Christ the Redeemer of man, that fills human life with meaning.

To illustrate this in the Rule would mean that the Course would last at least another ten years... But I think I have always insisted on this in the Chapters, in the past conferences or letters, as I will continue to do in future ones, however long God lets me do it.

If we read the Rule attentively, we see that each chapter asks of us a conversion from "thinking according to men" to "thinking according to God". St. Benedict faces every aspect of human life with the illumination of the new light of the Gospel, of

the Psalms, of the whole word of God, and with the light of the Church's word, of the patristic and monastic tradition. One feels that, regarding everything, St. Benedict is truly preoccupied with helping us judge and taste our humanity in the new way that Christ the Redeemer revealed to us by becoming incarnate, living, dying, and rising for us. And the first reality that receives new light from the event of Christ, of Easter, of the Redemption, is we ourselves, our "I".

Chapter 7 on humility would be enough to illustrate the extreme novelty of the conception of one's self that Christ brought into the world and which the monastic life wants to form in us and help us to live. Because the great change of a person, as I have tried to illustrate in the preceding chapters, is precisely that of the conception of self. A conception of ourselves that is determined by pride, by vanity, a conception of self that is narcissistic or greedy and lustful, a conception of self that is pharisaical, or clerical, or careerist, etc., negatively defines our whole life, much more than the exterior circumstances or what others can do to us. In fact, the Church, and in particular religious Orders, have always been ruined more by the vices of their members than by persecutions. But the same is true above all in a positive way: When one lives out, or at least desires, a self-conception that is transformed by grace, by the Gospel, by the encounter with Jesus, one's whole life radiates this light, this beauty, this newness.

There is nothing sadder than a person who embraces a vocation like the monastic one – which *per se* should be entirely consecrated to thinking of oneself and of everything according to God and not according to men – and lives it out with a self-conception defined by mundane values, by pride, by vanity, etc. We are all sinners, of course, and to renounce this worldly *phronein* we must be converted for our whole life. But it is sad to see that often one does not accept living our vocation in such a way that we would allow the light of Christ to reveal us to ourselves, to manifest our shadows, our pettiness, to make us aware of it, and therefore to make us contrite and desirous of conversion.

So many works of St. Bernard, and of other fathers and mothers of monastic life, are dedicated specifically to helping us become aware of the disordered conception we have of ourselves, and so also of our life and vocation, and to guide us to accept a different light, a new and true light that would then allow God's grace to transform our life and also the people around us.

When St. Paul writes to the Philippians an invitation to have in themselves "the very sentiments of Christ Jesus" (Phil 2:5), right away, as I said, he describes the humble conception that Christ had of himself, and how this conception defined his human life: "who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness" (Phil 2:6-7).

St. Benedict wants precisely to guide us to having this sense of ourselves and of life, which is certainly according to God, because it is that which God expressed with his whole self, making himself a man and dying for us. Whoever accepts this life on the sense of self and of life, understands that the secret of the new life that Christ transmits to us is exactly in “emptying ourselves”, in the *kenosis* that Jesus chose and incarnated up to death on a Cross, to allow the Father to exalt him (cf. Phil 2:9).

That human life, the identity of a person, finds its fulfillment, its fullness, in this *emptying of itself*, is the great Christian paradox. The Christian paradox is that the secret of the fullness of the human self is an *empty heart* that lets itself be filled by God. That is what St. Benedict is suggesting from the very Prologue of the Rule, when he says that, the more one progresses in the monastic life, the more “one runs on the way of the Lord’s commandments with a heart expanded [*dilatato corde*] by the inexpressible sweetness of love” (RB Prol. 49). An expanded heart is an empty heart that lets itself be filled by a love greater than itself, that lets itself be filled by the love of God, of the Holy Spirit. And this is the self-conception that is new, the new, redeemed “I” that the encounter with Christ and the path after Him make possible.

In the letter to the Colossians, St. Paul speaks of him who, rejecting salvation as a grace, is “swollen with vain pride by his carnal mind” (Col 2:18). A heart swollen with pride is not an expanded heart. The puffed up heart is full only of itself, of vanity. And vanity is a closed-off emptiness. It is like the air that puffs up a balloon. The heart expanded by love, rather, is a heart that opens up, that is totally open to make space for love, for joy, for encountering the other. It does not swell up with what emanates from itself, but is filled with all that it receives, that it accepts, that it gives away in order to be filled even more. The human heart is a beautiful symbol of love, because the heart works and lives by filling back up and emptying itself back out constantly. And it is this constant “exercise” of filling up and emptying out, of filling up in order to empty out and emptying out in order to fill up, that expands it, that makes it ever more capable of giving life to the body, of making it *run*, as St. Benedict says, “on the way of the Lord’s commandments” (RB Prol. 49), that is, in following Christ and his charity.

Jesus lived by emptying himself of himself continually to be refilled with all that the Father was giving him, above all to be refilled with the Father’s love, with the gift of the Holy Spirit. To have Christ’s own sentiments, to have his very *phronein*, the same sense of the things of God that Jesus had, also means for us to cultivate a freedom of heart from all that is not of God to be filled back up with all that is His, and that which is most especially “of God” is love, charity, emptying oneself out to love others, fraternal communion. What can be more “according to God”, and according to a God who is Father, than fraternal love?