

## 1) Who is man?

This year I would like to hold a series of Chapters dedicated to the meaning of being human, as expressed by Saint Benedict in his Rule – Chapters seeking out the type of humanity that Saint Benedict, followed by the Cistercian fathers, would like to cultivate in each one of us. What is Saint Benedict’s vision of man? What is his anthropological outlook? How does one learn “to be human”? In what way is Saint Benedict’s pedagogy oriented towards the unification of our being in all of its dimensions?

I think of the beautiful expression that Saint Benedict uses regarding the welcoming of guests in chapter 53 of the Rule. He says that it is necessary to witness to them “with all possible humanity – *omnis humanitas*” (RB 53:9). What is the meaning of this complete humanity, which should pass from our monastic experience to the others who meet us and to the outside world? This is a very important question, because considering the human impoverishment of contemporary man – that same man who we are, and who visits our monasteries – considering the mob of people who live a “reduced” humanity – disoriented, uncentered, ruined, and wounded – it is urgent for each one of us and for everyone together to understand well the human stakes of the charism of Saint Benedict. I believe that if the Rule of Saint Benedict has held up so well through 15 centuries and remains current for man in the 21<sup>st</sup>, this is not due principally to the fact that it gives us the true and just image of God, but to the fact that it offers us the true and just image of man.

This search is not theoretical. Its goal is that each one of us should be able to live our own monastic life with all of its humanity, and allow him or herself to be led by the monastic *conversatio* indicated by Saint Benedict, that is, by the monastic life inspired by him, to the fullness of humanity for which we are all destined. Not to commit our entire humanity in the *conversatio*, in the conversion of life that our vocation calls for, is equivalent to impeding the Benedictine charism from showing its full measure and from bearing its full fruit in and through ourselves. In fact, precisely this is one of the most important characteristics of the Benedictine charism: that it employs through Christ our entire humanity, and thus consents to Christ’s gift of life to the whole and entire man that we are, and that we must become.

Now, which is the fundamental fact that pushes a human being to accept the challenge of the journey proposed in the Rule of Saint Benedict? I have often had occasion to emphasize it: it is the desire for life. It is not an accident that the first appearance of the term “man – *homo*” in the Rule is the citation of a verse of Psalm 33, which becomes the fundamental question proposed to the person who presents himself to the monastery: “Who is the man who longs for life and desires to see happy days?” (Prol. 15; Ps. 33:13).

“Who is the man – *quis est homo?*” Not “*quid est homo* – what is man?”, but “*quis: who* is the man?” The accent is placed on an identity, not on a philosophical or structural question. Saint Benedict, and Psalm 33 before him, does not seek a definition; he seeks someone. He does not want a philosophy, or an ideology, about man; he wants a man, a person, a presence.

And when does one encounter someone? When does one encounter a human being, a person? It happens when one encounters his desire, when one encounters a man who longs for life and happiness, who longs for a happy life, the fullness of life. The angel that appears to Daniel approaches him calling him, in the Vulgate translation, “*vir desideriorum* – the man of longings” (cf. Daniel 9:23, 10, 11, and 19).

Saint Gregory tells us in his Dialogues that the entire spiritual enterprise of Saint Benedict was started with a strong desire for God that took the place of worldly longings. The young Benedict leaves Rome at the beginning of his studies, “*soli Deo placere desiderans* – longing to please God alone” (Prol.). And when the monk named Romanus encounters Benedict in the moment in which he has left not only Rome and his studies, but also his own nurse, he asks him, literally, “toward where was he stretched – *quo tenderet*” (Ch. 1). Benedict then reveals to him his secret desire, of which Romanus becomes for a certain time the custodian. Gregory writes: “When [Romanus] knew his desire, he not only kept the secret, but offered his help; he was the one to give Benedict the habit of the holy life, and insofar as he was permitted, he served him.”

The young Benedict received therefore two graces: a great desire for God and for life in Him, and a father who has taken this desire seriously, has kept it in his heart, and has helped Benedict to freely abandon himself so that this desire might come to fruition. At the bottom, Benedict encountered in Romanus a man who took seriously the deepest and dearest need of his heart and, consequently, took seriously his humanity. He took seriously the heart of Benedict, his heart created by God, and which finds no rest until it rests in him (cf. St. Augustine, *Conf.* I:1).

How did Romanus take seriously the deep desire of Benedict’s heart? Romanus did not preach a spiritual retreat for him; he brought him the bread necessary to survive. He took care of him like a mother of her own son, letting God worry about the rest, directly in Benedict’s heart.

I have the impression that it is through the witness of Romanus the monk, who devoted such care by going regularly to carry bread to the young hermit, that Benedict got his first strong experience of what it means to be “human”.

Many years later, when Benedict writes in his Rule that one must witness to the guests “with all possible humanity” (RB 53:9), it is as if he was remembering the

charitable and faithful humanity of Romanus, which took care of his material and nutritional needs so that he might go to the bottom of his desire for God.

There is in this episode and in this key period of the journey of Saint Benedict something like a synthesis of everything that will become the Benedictine experience: a taking seriously of the desire for God that lives in our heart, that does not forget the entire humanity of the person. A taking seriously of the heart of the human being, which arrives to the point of taking seriously the whole human being, including his stomach. A love of the heart which arrives to the point of love of the body. And a care of the body that arrives to the point of care for the soul.