

## 10<sup>th</sup> Chapter by the Abbot General OCist for the MFC – 04.09.2012

"Let a wise old man be placed at the door of the monastery, one who knows how to take and give an answer, and whose mature age does not permit him to stray about. The porter should have a cell near the door, so they who come may always find one present from whom they may obtain an answer. As soon as anyone knocks or a poor person calls, let him answer, *Deo gratias* or *Benedic*, and with the meekness of the fear of God let him return an answer speedily in the fervour of charity." (RB 66,3-4)

I repeat this passage of chapter 66 that we meditated on yesterday by drawing your attention to the fact that chapter 66 is probably the last of a first draft of the Rule, and the reason for why saint Benedict ends it by saying: "The monastery should be so situated that all the necessaries, such as water, the mill, the garden, are enclosed, and the various arts may be plied inside of the monastery, so that there may be no need for the monks to go about outside, because it is not good for their souls. But we desire that this Rule be read quite often in the community, that none of the brethren may excuse himself of ignorance." (RB 66,6-8)

It is interesting that the Rule should end by affirming at the same time the importance of the enclosure and the maturity of openness that each community should live. Saint Benedict ends the Rule by making us understand that a community is judged by its door, that is, the point of division and of communication between the interior and the exterior of the monastery, between the community and society, between the fraternal monastic intimacy of the community and the witness of welcome. A door is a very rich symbol, to such a degree that Jesus himself uses it to define himself: "I am the gate, if anyone enters through me will be safe: he will go freely in and out and be sure of finding a pasture." (Jn 10,9)

Saint Benedict wanted explicitly that, at the door of the monastery, there was not a simple bailiff or, as today, a tele-camera. He wanted a wise old man, filled with the "meekness of the fear of God". The door of the monastery was the point where the community expressed, through the way that this monk welcomed guests, his capacity to educate and to establish a balanced relationship between monastic membership and welcome, between silence and speech, between prayer and charity. Thus, in the same way one could achieve quite a good measure of maturity in fraternal life to choose the life of a hermit (RB 1,3-5), one could equally arrive at such a level of maturity by belonging to the community, in enclosure, to be able to live on the margin, at the door, in permanent contact with those coming from outside. Saint Benedict seems to prefer the second sort of maturity, because if he mentions the maturity of the hermit at the beginning of the Rule, it is at the end that he presents the maturity and wisdom of the porter monk, almost as though it was the achievement of all the monastic path that he proposed.

Of course we cannot all end our monastic life as the porter of the monastery. It is more a symbolic indication of the type of human and spiritual maturity to which the path of the Rule should lead us. I would qualify it as a maturity of communion in God and everyone. For the wise old porter, the contact with the others is not source of dissipation, distraction, but a continual opportunity to say "yes" to the Lord, to welcome Christ with gratitude. He answers in fact "*Deo gratias*" to the person who knocks and to the call of the poor, that is to say that he lives with gratitude the encounter with the requirements and needs of the other. He answers "*Benedic* – Bless me": He welcomes them as a divine blessing for himself and the monastery.

This joyful gratitude to welcome the other, above all when he is poor and thus brings nothing else but himself, is charity which comes nearest to the charity of God, to the gratuity of God who rejoices to create and welcome each human being. No man can give to God something that He has not already, something that we have not received from God himself. However, God's joy is to be able to welcome us, so we should go to Him, that we should love Him, and that we return to Him. At the beginning of the Prologue of the Rule, allusion is made to the lost son returning home to live in obedience (Prol. 2). Each monk is this lost son who, when entering the monastery, comes home. At the end of the Rule, this lost son, thanks to obedience to community life, has matured to the point of becoming himself a "*pius pater* – a good father", a father full of meekness who welcomes all the lost children who come to the door of the monastery. It is this paternity that allows him, "with all the meekness of the fear of God" to "return an answer speedily in the fervour of charity – *reddat responsum festinanter cum fervore caritas*" (66, 4).

Yesterday I quoted a phrase of a personage in Dostoyevsky: "It is an absolute necessity, that everybody should have a place where they are pitied." (*Crime and Punishment*, First part, II). This place is not so much a location, but a link, a relationship, a friendship. True paternity, the true house in which mankind would like and ought to be welcomed is the joy to see you on the face of the person who opens the door. One feels at home, one feels welcome if the person who greets you surprises you by the joy and gratitude that your presence gives him. The same overflowing joy that the father of the prodigal son wants to transmit to all: to the son who has returned, to the servants, to the older son (cf. Lk 15,23-24.32). The "fervour of charity" that saint Benedict mentions here is basically the joy of being able to welcome and love the other as a gift from God, whoever he may be. Saint Benedict became conscious of this at the end of his experience as a hermit at Subiaco, when he received at Easter the surprise visit of the priest who brought him food: "Now, I know that today is Easter, as I have the joy to see you!" (Gregory the Great, *Dialogues II*, ch.1). This meeting and the experience of communion in Christ revealed itself to young Benedict as the accomplishment of the eremitical solitude, and the figure of the porter monk incarnates exactly this consciousness and mature experience of the monastic research for God.

Now, we are all conscious that this charity is not easy. Perhaps, not so much towards the people from the exterior, but rather, towards our brothers and sisters in community. How many times have I found monks and nuns who no longer want to have anything to do with this or that brother or sister of their community! We are far from the joy of welcoming the other! But this joy for the other is, as I was saying, and as saint Benedict wants us to understand, true maturity of charity amongst us, the accomplished maturity of our monastic vocation, because it is as if we were living the glory of Trinitarian communion in human relationship. It is a maturity and above all a grace, to which we are called to open ourselves lifelong. However, it is important to be conscious that we are called to that, and it is there our maturity and our wisdom, and it is that which leads us to the fear of God lived in meekness, leaving us to be led with docility and guided by Him to the fullness of charity.

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