

11th Chapter by the Abbot General OCist for the MFC – 05.09.2012

There is at least one other person in the community from whom saint Benedict asks that he should live and act in the fear of God: the abbot. I should perhaps have spoken about him before the others, but what we have seen in connection with the other tasks and situations helps us to understand better the quality of the fear of God asked for from the abbot, because, it is as if, basically, the abbot is called to encourage and solicit by his fear of God, the fear of God in his brothers.

In a certain sense, the abbot is created from the community's fear of God. At the beginning of chapter 64, saint Benedict demands effectively that should be established he "whom the whole community with one consent, has elected in the fear of God – *omnis concors congregatio secundum timorem Dei*" (RB 64,1).

This concord of the community in the fear of God is a clear allusion to the first community in Jerusalem, the community of the Cenacle, of Pentecost. In the Acts of the Apostles, there is a beautiful description that epitomises the Church in the early years: "The churches throughout Judaea, Galilee and Samaria were now let in peace, building themselves up and living in the fear of God and filled with the consolation of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 9,31)

The community lived with one heart in the fear of the Lord, that is to say, being in the presence of God, adoring and expecting grace from Him, to multiply and continue with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, animated by the Holy Spirit who consoles and sheds light and gives strength for the road ahead. The election of an Abbot must always be lived in this climate of ecclesial concord. To live the choice of an abbot in a climate of the fear of God signifies asking this choice as a gift from God, that is to say that He, principally, should make the right choice, that the choice should be made by the Holy Spirit. The fear of God is the criterion of discernment that allows the Lord make the choice he wants. The community makes itself the instrument of the Spirit so that God's choice can be revealed and manifested. It is in this way, for example, that the first Christians drew the short straw, after having prayed, to designate the apostle Matthias. (Acts 1, 24-26)

I often ask myself, when I find myself in communities that cannot come to an agreement on a choice, to be in agreement on the election of a superior, if the true problem, rather than a lack of people capable of assuming the responsibility, is not precisely the lack of concord in the fear of God. That is to say that, before pretending to agree on a choice, a decision, a person, it is necessary to be established in the same heart in the fear of God. What does that entail? It means to be in agreement and united by faith that the Lord is present, that He acts amongst us, that He wants our good to realize his Reign. When a community works at this concord that allows us to recognise in faith the presence of the Lord, then the right choice arrives almost miraculously, a miracle of communion, fraternal unity, that all perceive with stupefaction and cannot ascribe only to their good will, to their efforts: it is the Lord who acts, it is the Holy Spirit who manifests himself.

This attitude should thereafter stay as a rule of life for the abbot, a pastoral method. Saint Benedict often reminds the abbot that he must render account to God for his ministry, his choices and decisions, and the way he has treated each brother.

The clearest passage of the reminder of the responsibility of the abbot before God is in chapter 3 on the convocation of the brothers to counsel: "Let the Abbot himself, however, do everything in the fear of the Lord and out of reverence for the Rule, knowing that, beyond a doubt, he will have to give an account to God, the most just Judge, for all his rulings." (RB 3,11)

We should not interpret this reminder of divine judgement as if saint Benedict wanted to frighten the abbot so that he should behave well, as a child which is menaced with punishment if he has not done his homework correctly. The God who will judge us at the end is not a God we only encounter at the end, after death, but he is God with us, who lives with us and carries with us the tiredness and responsibility of the way. He himself gives us the grace to be faithful, and fruitful in the task he entrusts us with, and if at the end he should exercise a severe judgement, it will be because we have not welcomed the grace to be always helped by the Lord to live to the full our vocation.

"Let the Abbot himself, however, do everything in the fear of the Lord and out of reverence for the Rule": all that the Rule asks from him – and the Rule asks an enormous amount from the abbot, it asks the abbot to make his brothers follow the Rule well – this should be fed with the fear of God. It is as if saint Benedict asked the abbot to follow and make his brothers follow the Rule in the presence of the Lord without whom we can do nothing (cf. Jn 15,5) and who gives us his Spirit who "puts both the will and the action into you according to the well intentioned plans of the Father."(cf Ph 2,13)

Living in the fear of God, depending on God, the responsibility of the abbot, like all responsibility in the community or in the Church, is no longer a burden, but a path on which one experiments the friendship of the Lord and his goodness that provides everything. In chapter 2, given up to the abbot, saint Benedict invites the abbot not to worry too much about things that are "passing, earthly and void" and to concentrate with solicitude on the souls of the brothers entrusted to him. He adds: "and for fear that he be preoccupied beyond measure because of the smallness of the monastery's resources, he will recall that it is written: 'Set your hearts on his kingdom, and all these other things will be given to you as well' (Mt 6, 33) and also 'They lack nothing those who fear him' (Ps 33,10)." (RB 2,35-36)

And saint Benedict says that just between two phrases in which he reminds the abbot that he will be accountable to God for the brothers who have been entrusted to him (2,34 and 37). Confidence in God, faith in Him, are the foundation of the soul of the ministry of the abbot. The fear of God expresses this confidence and becomes the attitude that welcomes everything from God: "They lack nothing those who fear him". The fear of God does not take anything away from us. The fear of God gives us all, obtains everything. Instead of being a servile fear that removes us from the Lord, it is a filial fear that feeds and expresses our confidence in Him, in gratitude for receiving everything, and so be free from every attachment to the securities of the world.

This conversion from a servile fear to a filial fear is, for saint Benedict, the fruit of the path of humility that from tomorrow we shall try to meditate together.

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