

12th Chapter by the Abbot General OCist for the MFC – 06.09.2012

I shall start today by going with you through chapter 7 of the Rule, the chapter on humility. Until now we have followed the theme of the fear of God, and we have seen how this should determine and animate the different duties and functions of community life according to saint Benedict. In the Prologue we found a definition of the fear of God inspired by the Magnificat: "Those who fear the Lord are not puffed up by their goodness of life, but holding that the actual good which is in them cannot be done by themselves, but by the Lord, they praise the Lord working in them saying with the Prophet: "Not to us, O Lord, not to us; but to your name give glory." (Prol. 29-30)

The fear of God is an attitude of glorification of God that becomes real in us in the measure that our humility grows, that is to say the renunciation of self-glorification. The Virgin Mary is the model of this correct and true conception of oneself before God, of true humility that magnifies the Lord.

For Saint Benedict, the fear of God has not only the function of making someone a good abbot, a good cellarer, a good infirmer, a good porter. It is the condition to be true monks and, basically, true men. The long chapter on humility wants, explicitly, to help us be true in the way we follow our vocation. Humility is for the truth of our being, of our heart, of our "me". To seek it, to convert to it means to say that we find again the truth of our "me" in Christ, as Christ makes us find it again, the truth of our "me" that pride, in a thousand ways, has deviated and degraded in us. To find again the truth of our "me" in Christ leads us to rediscover the truth of our relationship to the other, with the others, with God, with our neighbour, with everybody. And saint Benedict helps us understand that this truth, is love, the charity of Christ in us.

Chapter 7 on humility is the ascetic and mystic heart of the Rule, it is the soul of all the monastic "*conversatio*" that saint Benedict proposes. It is the soul of all Christian morality which wants to lead people to sanctity, that is to say to the truth of humanity that reflects in us the life of God, of the Trinity. We cannot follow our vocation in truth and depth without doing the work saint Benedict asks of us in the chapter on humility. This work is a path, a path with degrees, a path of conversion in our very depths. Without this path, all our monastic life is vain. We do things and observe the observances, but everything is but a performance, a sort of sacred theatre, which, however, does not concern our heart, and in consequence does not change anything in depth, does not make us new men, new women.

What is the new man for saint Benedict? We can guess at it if we read the end of chapter 7, it is worth meditating on it before the rest of the chapter, because a road is easier to follow when one knows where it wants to lead us.

"Having, therefore, ascended all these degrees of humility, the monk will presently arrive at that love of God, which being perfect, casts out fear. In virtue of this love all things which at first he observed not without fear, he will now begin to keep without any effort, and as it were, naturally by force of habit, no longer from the fear of hell, but from the love of Christ, from the very habit of good and the pleasure in virtue. May the Lord be pleased to manifest all this by His Holy Spirit in His labourer now cleansed from vice and sin." (RB 7,67-70)

The first thing we see is that the new man formed by the path of humility is a man in whom the action of the Trinity is manifested, of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The action of the Trinity is always an action of love and communion. The charity of God the Father, the love of Christ his Son, and the Holy Spirit who is love, are manifested and at work in a humble man. The charity of the Father chases away fear and makes us live in confidence with him, and this confidence becomes interior strength that allows us to live "for the love of Christ", and so live

gladly, with joy and attraction, what God wants us to be and to do, namely the virtues. It is no longer fear that drives us, but the desire, because the aim of our life is no longer to avoid the worst, but to embrace the best. In filial confidence, we live like the Father "for the love of Christ", that is to say by loving Christ. And the Holy Spirit manifests his work in us, makes of us the labourers of his work, that is the love between the Father and the Son.

This is the great work of God in us, which, in the fear of God makes us magnify the Lord (cf Prol. 30).

Saint Benedict helps us understand that the true image of God in us is realised, or as he says, "shown" (7,70) when, thanks to all the free space in us that we give to God in humility, the Trinity is able to express in us the exchange of love both paternal and filial, in mutual confidence, without fear.

It is as if our life and our heart became the dwelling place of Trinitarian Love, a place of meeting and exchange between the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit. William of Saint-Thierry, one of the deepest Cistercian fathers, writes that "(the Holy Spirit), who is the love of the Father and of the Son, their Unity, their Suavity, their Goodness, their Kiss, their Embrace and all that can be common to one another, (...) becomes in his way for man in regards to God, that which in virtue of the consubstantial union is found to be for the Son in regard to the Father, and for the Father in regard to the Son." (*Letter to the Brothers of Mount-Dieu, (The Golden Letter)*, § 263).

In simpler terms: the Holy Spirit makes us live in our relationship with God the connection that He is between the Father and the Son. It is given to us to be able to love God as the Father and the Son love each other in the communion of the Holy Spirit.

These things seem to be a spiritual abstract, out of reality. But in fact, if we have this feeling, it is because we are living outside the Reality of realities, the Trinity. It is us who are abstract in connection to the Reality of God and not God who is abstract in connection with our reality.

In the Trinitarian experience that saint Benedict describes, and all Christian and monastic mystic, basically, it is as if the Trinitarian Reality of God entered into us and removed us from the abstraction, or the distraction, in which we normally live.

I believe that the whole path towards humility that the chapter 7 of the Rule proposes is exactly the path to convert us from lies to truth, from the dreams of our pride to the reality of the love of God. And a mature adhesion to the reality that saint Benedict describes is confident love, or if you prefer, faith in the love of God.

The short reading at Vespers yesterday, taken from the first letter of Peter describes this well: "Wrap yourselves in humility to be servants of each other, because God refuses the proud and will always favour the humble. Bow down, then, before the power of God now and he will raise you up on the appointed day; unload all your worries on to him since he is looking after you." (1Peter 5,5b-7)

Saint Peter, as Benedict, proclaims to us that humility is abandonment to the good and providential solicitude of God. Often we do not realise that the condition of this confidence, this confident placing of all our worries in the Lord, is above all humility, because to be confident signifies renouncing to want to save our life ourselves, signifies affirming that God is always greater than us, more powerful than us and, above all infinitely better than us.

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