

13th Chapter by the Abbot General OCist for the MFC – 07.09.2012

"Divine Scripture, my brothers, cries to us: 'Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the man who humbles himself will be exalted'." (RB 7,1; Lk 14,11; Lk 18,14; Mt 23,12)

Saint Benedict begins the chapter on humility with a cry that is a call: "*clamat nobis Scriptura divina*". One can cry to cry, one can shout phrases and sounds that are senseless, one can talk to a brick wall. Or else, as here, one can cry to make oneself heard by someone, so that he hears clearly that which is cried, the word cried. The cry of Scripture is God's cry, the call of God, and that which is cried is a clear and intelligible phrase. The addressees of this cry are, here, the "*fratres*", the brothers and sisters, the monastic community: "Divine Scripture, my brothers, cries to us..."

From the first sentence, saint Benedict expresses all that he wants to teach us in this long chapter 7 of the Rule. He makes us understand that we are faced by a cry from God which calls us, that questions us very clearly, and that word is addressed to us as brothers and sisters of a community, because, as we shall see, this strong word comes from God and demands from us that we should listen and give an answer in which we cannot consider ourselves to be alone, independent one from another, but members of the same family, the family of brothers and sisters in Christ, children of God in Christ. Saint Benedict with this phrase offers us an exegesis, an interpretation of the Bible, for he says that for him, Scripture as a whole cries out to us an unique message, an essential word, a word that calls us and must be in the centre of our vocation.

This word is a word of Jesus Christ, in which He calls us to let ourselves be judged by his mystery, by his mystery of God made man, who became poor and humble, who suffered and died on the Cross, who is resuscitated and is seated on the right hand of the Father. It is his life, it is his mystery that cries, that calls saying: "Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the man who humbles himself will be exalted." It is the mystery mentioned by Paul in the hymn in the letter to the Philippians: "Jesus, his state was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave and became as man are; he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a Cross. But God raised him high and gave him a name which is above all other names so that all beings in the heavens, on earth and in the underworld should bend the knee at the name of Jesus and that every tongue should acclaim Jesus Christ as Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Ph 2,6-11)

Saint Benedict reminds us that all Scripture must speak to us about this mystery, and, in fact, be a strong call for us, a vocation; a call to follow Christ in the mysterious trajectory from humiliation to exaltation for the glory of the Father. All Scripture speaks to us of the Pascal mystery, and must always be interpreted in the light of the death and resurrection of the Lord. It is in this way that Jesus explained the Scriptures to the disciples of Emmaus. The cry of Scripture even became for them a reprimand: "You foolish men! So slow to believe the full message of the prophets! Was it not ordained that Christ should suffer and so enter into his glory?" (Lk 24,25-26).

Scripture cries to us that those who humble themselves will be elevated because the Scriptures announce the Pascal Mystery, the Lamb immolated and resuscitated. And it cries this call to us so that as the mystery of Christ becomes the path and destiny of our life, and of our life as "brothers" in community.

All chapter 7 speaks about Jesus, Jesus who, by humbling himself in the incarnation, passion and death, leads us to the glory of the resurrection. Chapter 7 speaks about Christ and our total adhesion to him. For saint Benedict, humility being the form of the life and mystery of Christ, is the path of our conformation to him and our participation in the Pascal mystery, and so, the form according to which we freely and fully live the grace of our baptism. This means to say that the only reason to embrace humility and to progress in it is the desire for Christ, the desire to adhere and conform to Jesus Christ. It is only in Him and for Him that humility has a sense and can be lived as a fullness of life

This conception of humility also determines the meaning of Jacob's ladder of the degrees of humility that Benedict describes in this chapter. We often have the idea that the ladder of humility is an ascetic ladder already in place, which is in front of us and which we must climb.

Saint Benedict affirms to the contrary, that the ladder of humility is nothing else but our life, which becomes a ladder if we mount with our choices and actions following Christ. St Benedict writes: "Hence, brethren, if we wish to reach the greatest height of humility, and speedily to arrive at that heavenly exaltation to which ascent is made in the present life by humility, we must by our ascending actions erect the ladder Jacob saw in his dream" (RB 7,5-6). He adds: "The erected ladder, however, is our life in the present world, which, if the heart is humble, is by the Lord lifted up to heaven. For we say that our body and our soul are the two sides of this ladder; and into these sides the divine calling has inserted various degrees of humility or discipline which we must mount." (7,8-9)

For saint Benedict, there does not exist another ascetic way different to our life following Christ, in His steps on his Pascal road. Our own life, the "present life", the "life in this world", with its circumstances, its encounters, that which we are and are not, with our errors and our fragilities, our life as it is really, is the way in which the humility of Christ can always become a ladder, an ascent towards Heaven, towards eternal life with God.

What saint Benedict wants us to understand by guiding us, is that Christ's humility is the secret for transforming our life into an ascent towards Heaven, towards God, that is to say the secret for living in communion with the Lord all our life, at every moment. Each degree of chapter 7 helps us to understand how this happens in the divers aspects and circumstances of human life.

Fr Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori OCist