

14th Chapter by the Abbot General OCist for the MFC – 10.09.2012

The first degree of humility is the one on which saint Benedict expresses himself at most length. One understands that, for him, it is the fundamental degree, the basis for all the others, the one that offers a reason why one should climb the others, the reason to seek humility and to live in it. In this degree the theme of the fear of God returns, the fear of God that consists of recognising his presence and will in our life.

"The first degree of humility, then, is that a man always have the fear of God before his eyes, shunning all forgetfulness and that he be ever mindful of all that God has commanded, that he always considers in his mind how those who despise God will burn in hell for their sins, and life everlasting is prepared for those who fear God." (RB 7,10-12)

Then he adds: "Let a man consider that God always sees him from Heaven, that the eye of God beholds his works everywhere, and that the angels report them to Him every hour. The Prophet tells us this when he shows God thus ever present in our thoughts" (7, 13-14). After this, saint Benedict quotes some verses from the Psalms on this theme.

We are no longer used to this kind of speech and instinctively think, of this God, with a certain antipathy, who observes us unceasingly and makes sure that we are doing what he wants. We also find insupportable that the angels spy on us. We want to be free, independents, be treated like responsible adults.

These feelings within us however are not completely innocent, and, above all, do not correspond to the truth. They are like a prejudice, a prejudice about God and about his relationship with mankind. A prejudice that is, basically, born with original sin. The serpent inspired in Adam and Eve feelings of suspicion towards God, that they accepted until rebellion, and after the sin, this feeling of distrust of God became greater, to the point that, at the arrival of God in the garden, they hid themselves, filled with fear and shame (cf Genesis 3,1-10).

This distrust is born in the conscience of mankind as a consequence of pride wanting to become God without God: "and you will be like gods" says the serpent to Eve (Gn 3,5). But they had to do it by hiding from God, far from him, far from his sight. And God who, however, sees everything, leaves room to do something behind his back, as if He did not exist, and even, against Him. This freedom should remind us that God, despite being present everywhere, despite seeing and knowing everything, even our most hidden thoughts, does not want us to serve and obey him in fear. God does not want to be a prison guard nor a policeman, who sees all, ready to intervene and punish. God gives us the freedom to accept or to refuse that which He cannot not be.

God gives to our freedom the possibility to refuse reality, to deny that which is basically, evident. That God is everywhere and knows everything, is in itself evident. If God exists, if God is God, it is clear that he looks at us, "God always see us"

(7,13), and that he is "God thus ever present in our thoughts" (7,14). But we are free not to think about it, to forget, to live as if it was not so.

This is the beginning of the fall the fall of the proud. The serpent in Eden is nothing other but an angel, fallen through pride, denying the love of God, and which symbolically finds itself crawling on the ground.

All this is to say that the way back, of conversion in humility, must start from there. It is basically a question of finding the presence of God again, his eye on us, on our heart, not as something that stops us being ourselves, but as the condition of our happiness and fulfilment. It is a question of opening our eyes on reality, to come out from the shadow of lies and fears that hide the face of a good God who is looking for us to dwell with us.

This task for saint Benedict and all the Judeo-Christian tradition, is called "memory", make memory of God and his will. To remember someone, means placing this person before us and putting ourselves into his presence. But the memory of God does not put us in front of a remembrance, a thought about God, but in front of the fact that he is always present and looking at us. The remembrance of the Lord is to find once more the lost relationship with him. It is like waking up from sleep where we only had in front of us dreams, unreal presences, to find ourselves again in front of that which is really true: God, his plans for us, watching us, his love, the word he says to us. There is true reality, and we must wake up from forgetfulness and distraction that turn us away from it and make us drift among the dreams of our pride. When the serpent deceived her, Eve had a waking dream: "The woman saw that the tree was good to eat and pleasing to the eye and desirable for the knowledge it could give" (Gn 3,6). We too, as pride and vanity make us dream, the same as the things we think about without thinking about the Lord!

As the prodigal son, we need "to enter into ourselves" (cf Lk 15,17) and to think again about the Father to return to his presence, to the true reality of the presence and the love of God. "While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with pity. He ran to the boy, clasped him in his arms and kissed him tenderly" (Lk 15,20). It is in this way that God leans over us, it is like this that he misses nothing and he scrutinises our thoughts: not to judge us, condemn us and punish us, but in a hurry, to embrace and welcome us "to be always with us" (cf Lk 15,31).

Burning hell awaits those who scorn God, and saint Benedict asks us to think about this continually (RB 7,11) because this is precisely the state of degradation and sadness of those who turn away and keep a distance between themselves and the merciful love of the Father.

To the contrary, "eternal life is prepared for those who fear God" (ibid.), because the fear of God consists precisely of not forgetting the presence of God as the reality to which our life can attach itself for always.

This conversion, this return, saint Benedict asks of us even in our thoughts, that are the instruments of forgetfulness or of memory, so the estrangement from, or the return to the Lord. It is a great theme in all monastic asceticism. Without working on our thoughts, all monastic life would be a monastic fashion parade, because we would have no other function than that of wearing strange clothes...

However, I believe that the most important thing to retain from the first degree of humility is that humility, as any other Christian virtue, is a question of relationship with the Lord. It is not a spiritual state to attain, as one attains, for example the nirvana. Humility has a sort of fundamental degree, which in a certain sense supports all the ladder: the return to the remembrance of the presence of God in our life, and in all the other degrees of humility it will be nothing else but that, a deepening of that. In Christian life, we do not live anything else that is not relationship with the Lord

When saint Benedict came back from Subiaco, after his experience as superior of a community who had tried to poison him, saint Gregory the Great affirms, in an expression that has become famous, that "*Habitavit secum* – he dwelt within himself". These two words are not sufficient to describe the recollection into which saint Benedict retired; we must quote the whole phrase by saint Gregory: "*Solus in superni spectatoris oculis habitavit secum* – alone under the eyes of the celestial spectator, he dwelt within himself" (*Dialogues* II, ch 3).

It is under the eyes of God that Benedict found himself again and recollected himself, in the presence of the Lord leaning over him in love that he found again peace and the path of his vocation. It is the first degree of humility, the fundamental degree, the one we must not miss, if we want to attain the others. Saint Benedict, before asking it from us, lived it out in Subiaco and all his life.

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