

16th Chapter by the Abbot General OCist for the MFC – 12.09.2012

"The third degree of humility is, that for the love of God a man subjects himself to a Superior in all obedience, imitating the Lord, of who the Apostle said: 'He became obedient unto death' (Ph 2,8)." (RB 7, 34)

Saint Benedict asks us here to mirror in our community life the attitude of Jesus during his life here on earth, in particular during his passion and his death, as we have already seen. As Jesus was subjected to his Father by love in total obedience, so, it is asked from us also and is given to us to be subjected to our superiors for the love of God. So, if for Jesus the Superior and Beloved was the Father alone, for us, it is as if we have to live the same thing with a distinction: we should obey our superiors for the love of God, love God by obeying our superiors and obey our superiors by loving God.

What does this mean?

Perhaps saint Benedict wants to warn us against the danger of confusing obedience and affection. It is true in chapter 72, he will ask that the monks should "love their abbot with a sincere and humble affection" (RB 72,10), but rightly, here also he asks that the quality of the affection should be sincerity and humility, this makes us understand that between superiors and brothers and sisters, we cannot be limited to affection and sympathy.

To understand better, I think it would be useful to meditate, at the same time, on the third and the fifth degrees of humility: "The fifth degree of humility is, when one hides none of the evil thoughts which rise in his heart or the evils committed by him in secret but humbly confesses them. Concerning this the Scriptures exhorts us, saying: 'Reveal your way to the Lord and trust in him' (Ps 36, 5)." (RB 7,44-45)

Saint Benedict asks us for a relationship of transparency with our abbot or abbess, and, quoting Psalm 36, he helps us understand that this transparency, even if it reveals our hidden thoughts and weaknesses, is above all sharing with the superior of our path, the way of our life, of our vocation, of our inner life, with its highs and lows, and including the failures: "Reveal your path to the Lord and hope in him." The fact of examining together the path of our life is, basically, the condition for a true relationship of obedience with our superiors and also the condition for true reciprocal affection. The superior is not called to be our daddy or our mummy, our friend, but above all the father and pastor who accompanies us on the road of life and of our vocation. It is thus that he truly engenders us and he is truly our friend, because his company becomes the privileged instrument through which God makes us advance, grow and mature until we obtain our maturity in Christ, the maturity of our vocation.

Basically, "total obedience – *omnis oboedientia*", is truly total if it is not limited to particular acts and duties that can be asked of us from time to time, but is the confident and transparent obedience to a path. Life is lived in "total obedience" if all the path of life is animated by the concern to follow, not our own whims, but truly Christ who leads us to eternal life with our brothers and sisters. Obedience, in the Rule, signifies accepting to go on a path in which the superiors and the community guide us and accompany us to the fullness of our destiny. Superiors who give orders but do not accompany their brothers are perhaps good captains, but not pastors, nor mothers or fathers.

However, if there is not in us the receptiveness to be guided on a path, obedience is reduced to an automatism of which the only result is limited to the well oiled functioning of certain things. But monastic and Christian obedience is for life, so that life should be guided and carried by our docility to the Lord who is the Way, the Truth and the Life of our existence (cf. Jn 14,6). It is truly, as it was for Jesus, an obedience "until death" (Ph 2,8: RB 7,34), this does not mean that it is a obedience that makes us die, but an obedience of all our life.

When in the relationship with the superior sympathy or antipathy dominate, when flattery dominates, we lose the deep level of obedience. It is as if the path became less important than the personal relationship, so much so, that when sympathy disappears or the superior changes, one perceives that one has not progressed on the path of life nor of vocation.

It is what I see also as abbot general. I am magnificently welcomed, with many beautiful ceremonies and numerous signs of sympathy and affection that are certainly sincere and gratify me too. But sometimes it is as if all ended there, because when it is the moment to look at the problems and the fragilities of the communities, of the superiors and the members of the community, face to face, and the moment to honestly look at the way we are going or not going, we no longer agree to involve ourselves, or to be helped. The affection turns out to be basically not really "sincere and humble". We no longer show our hidden fragilities and our personnel failures to the superior, because when we are not ready to go on the way with him in the light that the Lord wants and does amongst us. Then, I understand that the relationship becomes useless, vain, and that after the fervour of the first "idyll", it is as if we had nothing else to say to each other or live together.

Luckily the experience inverse is the one I encounter the most often, if not it would depress me, but I aware that there are situations where people refuse tacitly to go on the way together, and stay, as it were, behind, even if apparently they are better than others, and one does not know what to do, except pray, to catch up on lost time.

But this must be, above all, a personal preoccupation of each and everyone, because, basically, in these degrees of humility, what saint Benedict asks of us is true freedom to live obedience. To obey as a machine, there is no need of transparency on what is happening in our heart nor in the stages of the way. A profound sense of freedom is needed to obey as Jesus obeyed the Father, with love, and by giving up his whole life, and we need a profound sense of freedom to ask as humbly for help for our own difficulties and miseries. Here saint Benedict invites us to transparency, but does not impose it: he asks for it as a choice that cannot be imposed. He who uses what saint Benedict says in the Rule to oblige someone to the open his conscience has understood nothing of the extreme respect that saint Benedict has for everyone's freedom on the path of conversion. That which is not freely confided in the patient construction for a relationship of confidence, and in the consciousness that such an attitude is positive for the growth and personal freedom, will never make anybody progress. If transparency is important to go on a path, one must not forget that there is a path in transparency itself, a path on which the confidence and humility of individuals must grow, as must the superiors. It is only if we respect the necessity of a path on all levels that one avoids abusing the freedom of individuals and allow them to grow towards a human and monastic maturity which is true and humble.

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