

## 17<sup>th</sup> Chapter by the Abbot General OCist for the MFC – 13.09.2012

"The fourth degree of humility is that he hold fast to patience with a silent mind when in this obedience he meets with difficulties and contradictions and even any kind of injustice, enduring all without growing weary or running away." (RB 7, 35-36)

This degree of humility is essentially the one in which the following and imitation of the Lord leads us to the confrontation with his passion and his death. It is the degree of patience, of the capacity to carry and suffer that which is heavy and tiresome, to be faithful to something more important than our wellbeing. It is a crucial degree of humility, but must be understood correctly, because there is always the risk of being deluded, to climb it relinquishing our freedom, our joy, in the complacency of victimisation, which is, in fact, a serious kind of pride.

Let us note, first of all, that for saint Benedict the subject of this crucial passage is mind, conscience (*conscientia*): "faced by hard and tiresome situations, even faced by all sorts of injustices, conscience silently embraces patience". Our conscience is in us the conscious subject of what we are living. Our conscience is a free subject. It is not a matter of being subjected to the contradictions and the difficulties as a mule that allows itself to be loaded without understanding what is happening. Our conscience is in us the subject conscious of what is asked of it and able to consent or refuse, and capable, above all, of loving. The essential phrase of this degree of humility is a magnificent synthesis: "*tacite conscientia patientiam amplectatur* – the conscience silently embraces patience" (RB 7,35).

This is not the case of what a slave is subjected to, or of the way that a slave suffers that which is imposed on him. These words of saint Benedict describe to the contrary, a free and conscious embracement, an act of love that renounces moaning and murmuring to assume and carry adversity by looking beyond the adversity itself. In this phrase, there is, as it were, the momentum of a lover, or better the fervour of motherly love that bears everything for her child. The "carry" and the "suffering" of patience is not presented as a passive and victimised attitude of someone who allows himself to be loaded, precisely like a slave or a mule, but as the embracement of a lover who endures everything for the person loved, as if love passed through the opacity of the ordeal, the fatigue of adversity, to join, consciously, the loved one.

Saint Benedict knows that in life, especially in community life, in the relationships with brothers and sisters and the superiors, the experience of the test of adversity is, sooner or later, inevitable. At this degree of humility he prepares us to live patience in adversity as a possibility of plenitude. A paradoxical plenitude, which for the world is foolishness and scandal, but which is directly linked to the Pascal mystery, to the death and resurrection of Christ.

Christ, through love of the Father and of mankind, silently and patiently embraced the Cross, and in this obedience his love vanquished death and hatred. This victory, Jesus transmits to his disciples, and to all the martyrs and saints, equally to the numerous

"saints" not canonised who lived or are living in our communities, witnessing that, when patience is embraced by love, nothing is ever mortification of the person, but a source of positivity that nothing can take away from us.

Saint Benedict asks us to work at the love with which we affront the adversities of life and people. Quoting saint Paul, this giant of patience embraced by the love of Christ in all his adversities, he reminds us that if this embracement is possible in us, it is not because of our merit, but because Christ first embraced the Cross to love us: "and to show us that the faithful servant must endure everything for the Lord, even adversities, Scripture says in the name of those who suffer: 'It is for your sake that we are massacred daily, and reckoned as sheep for slaughter' (Ps 43,22; Rm 8,36). And those who are animated by the assured hope of the divine recompense add with joy: 'These are the trials through which we triumph, by the power of him who loved us' (Rm 8,37)" (RB 7,38-39).

The victimisation that flattens and spoils people is vanquished when the consciousness awakens in itself the exchange of love with Christ, that transforms all experience into an embrace with Him, in possession of Him, who is the greatest treasure of life. Pius XII, when he welcomed in 1948 a group of children mutilated by the war and looked after by the blessed Don Gnocchi, said a phrase that seems to me to resume this degree of humility: "Nothing lacks for those who possess Jesus Christ. And nothing makes us more capable of this possession than the suffering and sorrows of each day." (11.07.1948)

Of course, to say such a thing is foolishness, the foolishness of the Cross, the foolishness of the Gospel. In practise, it is with this degree of humility that saint Benedict leads us to follow Jesus in the Sermon on the mountain. The fact of going above and beyond the calculations and the logics of this world has no sense except for Christ and if the plenitude of life is the charity that "excuses all, believes all, hopes all, supports all" (1 Corinthians 13,7).

Saint Benedict quotes the Sermon on the mountain at the end of the fourth degree of humility: "Thus by patience in adversities and injustices, the humble practise the precepts of the Lord: if someone hits them on the cheek they offer him the other, if someone takes their tunic, they let him have their cloak as well, if they are constrained to go a mile, they go ten; with the Apostle Paul they support false brothers and they bless those who curse." (RB 7,42-43; Mt 5,39-41; 2 Col 11,26; 1 Co 4,12).

Patience is the secret of perfect charity, charity that does not pretend to possess, but waits for God in silence, at the same time, accepting neither to subtract itself, nor to shun all that is heavy and disagreeable. Patience is also a relationship with time, a conception of the time of our life, which hopes and waits from God the grace to carry everything with the love and fecundity of a mother carrying a child in her womb to give birth to him with joy and gratitude.

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