

18th Chapter by the Abbot General for the MFC – 14.09.2012

"The sixth degree of humility is that a monk is content with the poorest and worst of everything, and that in every occupation assigned him he consider himself a bad and worthless workman, saying with the Prophet, 'I am brought to nothing and I am without understanding; I have become as a beast of burden before You, and I am always with You' (RB 7,49-50; Ps 72,22-23).

The seventh degree of humility is that he consider himself lower and of less account than anyone else, and this not only in verbal protestation but also with the most heartfelt inner conviction, humbling himself and saying with the Prophet, 'But I am a worm and no man, the scorn of men and the outcast of the people' (Ps. 21,7). 'After being exalted, I have been humbled and covered with confusion' (Ps. 87,16). And again, 'It is good for me that You have humbled me, that I may learn Your commandments' (RB 7,51-54; Ps 118,71-73).

In these two degrees of humility also, the words and the ideas used, seem to us to be difficult to accept and to live as a way of realising our life: To love what is vile, contemptible, abject; to estimate oneself an unworthy and incapable workman; to feel inferior, a nobody, the most unworthy of all, to feel like an animal, even a worm, all that seems more like the symptoms of psychological illness, unfortunately very common in today's society. It seems rather to describe inferiority complexes, a lack of confidence in oneself, misanthropy, burnout syndrome.

However, we must not forget that in the degrees of humility, saint Benedict makes us travel through the parable of the kenosis of Christ, and perhaps in these two degrees we have arrived at the lowest point on this path of conversion following the Pascal Christ. In the fourth degree the humiliation was still, on the whole, exterior, and our conscience, thanks to patience, had started to open the door of our heart. In the fifth degree, the degree of the confession of bad thoughts and hidden faults, it is as if the heart was wide open, totally, to the truth about oneself, able to fully recognise self-reality. In the sixth and seventh degrees, it is as if humility had reached the heart and self-knowledge. A monk sees all his wretchedness, sees what he is before God, and he sees what he is as a man before God, and he sees it as a feeling of himself, as an experience in which he perceives himself as he is, out of our dreams of ourselves and the masks that, in our own eyes, pride makes us carry. Saint Benedict describes this conscience as a "belief", as an act of faith: "The seventh degree of humility is, when, not only with his tongue but also in his inmost soul he believes, that he is the lowest most vile of men – *sed etiam intimo cordis credat affectu*" (RB 7,51).

Maturity, as all monastic tradition teaches us, does not only consist in knowing God, but truly knowing oneself, in the light of God. Faith in God who created us out of nothing, who, at each instant gives us the being, and at each instant forgives us, loves us, loves our nothingness, should increase in us the "*intimum cordis affectum*", the inner feeling of our heart, this deep emotion for the mystery that we are. It is true that we are nothing, that we are a misery, but a nobody, a misery, infinitely loved, wanted

and loved personally, one by one, by He who created the universe and all the stars to speak with his beauty to the heart of every man.

We understand, then, that the feeling of contempt for oneself expressed in these two degrees of humility is not a sentiment of being closed in on ourselves. In depression or other psychological troubles, people feel that they are alone confronted by the feeling of being nothing, alone faced by the feeling of being incapable, alone confronted by the loss of self-esteem. The feeling of human misery is totalising in them, as a huge black coat that hides any possibility of seeing any other reality outside themselves.

In these two degrees of humility, to the contrary, the consciousness of human misery is put into evidence as a place where we perceive in truth, and I would say in a concrete way, the infinite and merciful Presence, who loves us as we are and lowers himself to us so as to dwell with us.

As Psalm 72 that saint Benedict quotes, says: "I am brought to nothing and I am without understanding; I have become as a beast of burden before You, and I am always with You" (Ps 72,22-23). He could have added the 26th verse: "My flesh and my heart are wasting away: but God is the Rock of my heart and my eternal heritage".

It is precisely in the surprising experience of God's proximity that gives consistence to our ontological and existential inconsistency, that the seventh degree becomes also positive, it is there where saint Benedict makes us cry with psalm 118: "It is good for me to have been humiliated by you, the better to learn your statutes" (Ps 118,71).

It is good to have the experience of the nothingness that we are, to learn how to live things correctly, life, relationships, work, all, all in which God instructs us and guides us. We cannot and do not know how to live correctly ourselves, guide ourselves, following our own plans and projects. There are setbacks, experiences of rejection, humiliations and failures, for which, in time, we are able as the psalmist to bless – "It is good for me to have been humiliated by you!" – because otherwise we would have gone straight ahead on a road planned by ourselves and not guided by the Lord; we would have followed ourselves and not Christ. We would have perhaps gained the whole world, but we would have lost our life, as Jesus warns us (cf. Mt 16,26).

The intimate sentiment in the heart of our structural misery becomes the secret of joy. Saint Benedict uses the term "*contentus*". The Monk who recognises that he is a nobody loved by a God who is always with him, becomes happy with everything. There is nothing surprising that he should be contented with everything which is valueless, vile and base, because his joy is all in the fact that God likes dwelling with his lowliness, in the fact that God is always with him. I always think of a phrase by the Orthodox saint, John of Kronstadt: "He who has Christ in his heart is happy with everything". Of what should we be discontent if God is close to us to the point of living in the poverty of our heart?

We understand then, that these degrees of humility are not only important for us, but for everybody. This means that it is important for us to be a witness to this happiness to the man of the 21st century who is unsatisfied, depressive, lacking in self-esteem. Faith allows us to see our nothingness and to live with it with realism and yet with joy, and this reconciled link with our structural misery is perhaps the most urgent proclamation of the Gospel for mankind today. And the path of humility that saint Benedict proposes wants to lead us to that.

Fundamentally, the fruit of humility described in the sixth and seventh degrees is what the French catholic author Bernanos makes his "Country Priest" say at the end of his diary, a short time before he died young because of a stomach cancer: "The sort of distrust that I had for myself, for my person, has dissipated, I think for always. This fight is finished. I do not understand it any more. I am reconciled with myself, with these poor remains.

It is easier than one thinks to hate oneself. Grace is to forget. But if all pride had died in us, the grace of all graces would be to love oneself humbly, as any other of the suffering members of Jesus Christ." (Georges Bernanos, *The Diary of a Country Priest*).

It happens to me, it often happens to us to meet people who carry the weight of their misery, theirs and ours, as if it were a tomb without an outlet, as if it were the last word on their life. Saint Benedict announces, with all the Gospel, that misery lived in faith becomes humility, and humility is a misery that accepts to be lived in Jesus' company. Then, comes a day when the friendship with Christ becomes more important than our misery, and His regard of goodness on us replaces the proud and negative judgement that we had about ourselves and also about others.

It is thus, as we shall see, that humility becomes charity.

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