

19th Chapter by the Abbot General OCist for the MFC – 15.09.1012

"The eighth degree of humility is that a monk does nothing except what is commended by the common Rule of the monastery and the example of the elders." (RB 7,55)

In this degree of humility, after the preceding ones that seem to lean towards perilous, vertiginous extremes, saint Benedict seems to want to bring us back to the level of everyday life. It is like on an excursion in the mountains: there are passages at the edge of gullies or on ridges where the level of adrenaline rises in our body. Then we regain the normal, ordinary, familiar paths. But the fact of having managed to scale seemingly inaccessible places leaves us with a new energy to follow the easier paths.

A famous Swiss alpinist, one of the rare people to have climbed the fourteen highest summits of over 8'000 metres without oxygen bottles, said to me that up there, one feels terrible, but then, coming down again, one has a lot of energy because the body is used to producing more red corpuscles. Yet, this alpinist died last year during a simple excursion in the mountains. As the Russian cosmonaut Gagarin who was the first to travel in space and died while piloting a small plane...

Everyday life seems easy, but we can also stumble, or we can slip and fall on the path of everyday life.

John Paul II said in Nursia in 1980, talking about saint Benedict: "It was necessary that the heroic become normal, daily, and that the normal, daily should become heroic." (Nursia, Homily, 23rd March 1980)

I think it is precisely humility that is the secret of this heroism in daily life. So, we can say that this heroism asked for, by example, in the fourth degree of humility but also in other slightly extreme chapters of the Rule, such as the 68th "If one asks from the brother impossible things", saint Benedict helps us to cultivate it in the simplicity of a daily path. A simplicity that has the form of a docile follow up of normal community life. It is the theme of the eighth degree of humility that seems so simple that we risk to not to pay attention to it. And yet, if we do not go from there, if we do not accept to live this simple level of monastic asceticism, no other level will be attained in reality. Simple common life is, fundamentally, the ascetic requirement of which everybody is able to acquit himself, it is the gestures and forms of community life which in themselves, require no particular effort, but the pure and simple wish to live them or not. I said sometimes to my community: I can understand that someone has difficulties getting up everyday at four o' clock for Vigils, but that one does not come to half an hour of recreation is a greater offence, because it is always a choice that is possible, and if one does not choose it, it is because one does not want to.

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Essentially, this degree of humility is the one in which we are asked for spiritual childhood: "I tell you solemnly, unless you become like little children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt18,3). Because a child, by nature, grows by following his elders and develops by assimilating the usages and customs of his family. We too, we do not become monks and nuns by reasoning and theories about monastic life, but by living in the monastery, in a community that has its traditions, its rules, its usages and above all, its superiors and elders, that is to say those who have gone through and lived the experience of monastic life before us.

Of course, there are sometimes communities that are, for the young who enter, the equivalent of the divided and unstable families of the children of today. It is therefore important that this degree of humility should be taken seriously, first of all by he who is an "elder", who has been for a long time in the monastery and should transmit to the young a common rule and an example of life.

This degree is fundamentally the degree of communion that welcomes and integrates each monk in the body of the community. It is the degree of membership, of communion. The degree of humility that contrasts to singularity, autonomy, the desire to distinguish oneself, to be superior to the others. One is often more easily disposed towards extreme humiliations and penances, than to following this path of humility in everyday life in community, because this degree is the one in which one is not distinguished from the others, the one in which one does not emerge, one is not remarked upon more than any other member of the community.

Saint Benedict reminds us here that the real monastic tradition is not handed down by writings and theories, but by one experience of life to another experience of life. Monastic life, as moreover, Christian life, is always transmitted by a life in common, and hermitical life too, as saint Benedict reminds us, is always transmitted by a communal life (cf RB 1,3-5).

Each one of us allows himself to integrate monastic life in the measure that he exposes himself to exhortation, to the "*cohortatio*", to repeat the expression that saint Benedict uses, that comes to us from the common rule of the monastery and the examples of the older monks.

This too, however, is a choice of our freedom. The common Rule and the example of mothers and fathers are not imposed: they are an exhortation, a call to grow, to follow, to go on a path as they do, but above all, with them. Humility resides in the fact of recognising that we need mature company to realise our vocation, to grow and mature.

As I said, this degree of humility is perhaps the most... humble, the one that is seems the smallest, which does not emerge. If someone asked you to quote the first degree of humility that comes to your mind, I do not think that anyone would automatically think of this one. It is a forgotten degree, simple and daily, that makes no impression. And yet it is the most important. I would say, that if there were all the others but not

this one, all the ladder of humility would collapse, would fall to pieces because, without common life, without fraternal unity, without the example of brothers and sisters, without real, daily communion, nothing would be truly real in our life and vocation.

Without this degree, we would be members without a body. Perhaps we would be able to do some gestures, some movements, like the foot of a hen that moves after it has been cut off, but we would not be truly alive, and what we would do would have no sense, would be useless. It is only in the communion of a body that the members are alive and are themselves. Membership of a community conveys life and the sense of what we are and should be, of our vocation.

This being said, I think this degree of humility should be a constant subject of meditation in communities. Each community should always ask itself if it has a "common rule", a life project in common to propose to each of its members. Each community should ask if they have "elders" amongst them, if they are maturing in it and whose example is a true and fascinating exhortation for the younger members. Each community should always ask itself if all its life is for each member, new or old, an exhortation to grow and be fulfilled in fraternal communion and with God.

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