

1st Chapter by the Abbot General OCist for the MFC – 23.08.2012

We are starting the series of chapters in which I am going to try to accompany you during this month of listening, study and fraternal communion in prayer and in everyday common life. Life consecrated to God in fraternity needs to be constantly educated, to be constantly reminded, its sense and its value has to be constantly deepened, continually corrected and a call needs to be repeatedly renewed to conversion. In a life for God in community, we are always on the way. The important thing is not to stop, nor to believe that we have arrived. Our vocation demands a continual conversion, because the life to which we are called by the Lord is not a simple natural evolution of that which we are, but a new life in him, the life of Christ in us. As Saint Paul says: "I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2,20).

I feel, having visited numerous monasteries and having met many monks and nuns in the whole world, that we are often under the illusion of being able to live our vocation, to follow Christ, without conversion, without having to really and substantially change our person and our way of life.

You know that one of the three promises, the three vows that we make at Profession according to Saint Benedict's Rule is the "*conversatio morum*", as well as that of obedience and stability (RB 58,17). *Conversatio* is a difficult term to translate. It signifies "way of life", and in particular the monastic way of life, with a communitarian dimension, that implies a conversion of ourselves, of our heart and our life. Rather than our conversion, Saint Benedict asks us to commit ourselves to go, in the monastery, on the path according to the Rule that converts us to a new life, the life of Christ in us.

This means that we are not a mature monk or nun if we do not accept during our whole life to follow a path of conversion in the monastery, in community. The old man in us is called to die to let the new man be born, to grow and live (Cf. Ephesians 4,20-24).

This availability for the conversion of our life and the life of conversion is required of all baptised, but especially of the religious, who are called to live their baptism in a radical way in the service of the sanctification of all the people of God.

I stress these things because I so often see the contrary. There are monks and nuns who seem to have made Profession to have completed the process of their conversion the day of their Solemn Profession. At the moment of solemnly promising to go on a path of conversion until death, they feel that they have already arrived. It is as if from there on it was not necessary to change, to grow, to be corrected, to progress in their new life. This "new man" that started to live during the years in noviciate and formation, it is as if he had gone into retirement, just at the moment when, to the contrary, he should live and be fruitful in joy and gratuitousness.

Why is it? I think that we must seek the real problem in the question I asked yesterday in the homily: "Is Jesus for me, really the supreme joy? Is he really the joy of my life? (...) Is Christ truly the dearest thing in our life (Cf. RB 5, 2)?" (Homily for the opening Mass of the Monastic Formation Course, 22.08.2012).

The availability to continual conversion, the will to follow the path of conversion depends on where we have placed our joy. If someone starts to climb a mountain, he will walk to the summit if he has put his joy in reaching the summit. If he has put it in an intermediary stage, he will stop, he will no longer advance. But the problem is that the true joy of our heart is always greater than our immediate objectives. Christ is the summit of our life and our joy given to us at each stage, on condition that we continue walking so as to follow him until the end, until the fullness of joy and life.

Often, we stop on the path of conversion because we think that an external and superficial change suffices. We believe that we are happy when we only change the external aspect of our life, but it is not that which renews life, that changes it and makes it accomplished.

In the parable of the prodigal son and the merciful father in Luke 15,11-32, the younger son expects to find happiness by departing, by leaving his father, his brother, his house and his country. Afterwards he understands that it has not brought him happiness, on the contrary: he has become poorer, sadder and more alone. He finds himself living with pigs, and deep down equal to them, wanting to eat at least that which the pigs are eating. But the older son in this parable, he also, is seeking happiness only in things that change externally. He thinks he would be happy if he could party with his friends, to have a kid from time to time to feast on, if only he had not so much work... But he is not happy.

His father answers him by recalling that the only change in his life that can bring him happiness is not so much a change in circumstances, but a conversion of heart to the joy of being reunited with his brother, to the joy of his father, the joy of love, the love of the Father. A joy, which implies the older brother's conversion to fraternal love. Happiness is always the fruit of a change of heart. "You are with me always and all I have is yours. But it was only right we should celebrate and rejoice, because your brother here was dead and has come to life; he was lost and is found!" (Luke 15,31-32).

The father invites the older son to convert to joy by converting to love.

"You, my son, you are always with me": The true reason of our joy is "always with us" and is a stronger and more stable motive than superficial changes, and which does not depend on them. However, it is necessary that our heart should convert from the ephemeral joy of eating a kid with friends, to the joy of the father who finds again and forgives his son. Joy does not depend on that which we can grab and hold, but on that which is given to us and that we receive as a gift, even if it is a gift that takes something from us, as the return of the younger son took from his elder brother material goods which otherwise would have gone to the latter.

Saint Benedict wants to guide us in this way of constant conversion to true joy in filial and fraternal love. We are going to try during these days to help each other to allow ourselves to be guided by him on this path.

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