

4th Chapter of the Abbot General OCist for the MFC – 29.08.2013

We saw yesterday that among all circles radiating from the heart of monastic life, only the center, the work of God, is an action, something that happens, or rather Someone who works. All the other circles are places, spaces, areas which must simply receive, through the humble monk, the work of God. We can sense that if one has really understood this center of God's work, and really lives it, then it will not be difficult to understand how to live and radiate it. Radiation is a consequence, something that happens almost automatically, if the center is allowed to be truly what it is. If the center is a light, a flame, it will radiate out by its very nature. The important thing is not to impede this flame from burning, but to put it at the center of everything, and then not to put obstacles to the rays that it wants to send out everywhere. As Jesus says in the Gospel: "You are the light of the world; a city set on a hill cannot remain hidden, nor does one light a lamp to put it under a bushel, rather one puts it on a stand so that it gives light to all who are in the house. So let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Mt 5:14-16).

So we must begin to understand what is the work of God for St. Benedict, and what it means to put it at the center of one's life.

You know that St. Benedict calls "*Opus Dei*," or "*Opus divinum*," the Divine Office which is normally celebrated communally in the monastery's oratory. For St Benedict, then, prayer is a work of God, something that God does. This should make us reflect, because normally people understand prayer as their work, as a practice that they have to do. They do it for God, they do it in honor of God, but people do not instinctively see prayer as a work of God, a work that God does. But even for us monks and nuns who follow the Rule of Saint Benedict for about ... 15 centuries, I have the impression that we rarely live the Divine Office as a work of God. Each of us needs to ask ourselves this question: How do I understand the Divine Office ? For me, is it something that I do, that I have to do, or is it a work that God does?

Certainly, we have to pray the Office. St. Benedict wrote several chapters of the Rule to explain how we should celebrate the Office: at what times, how many and which Psalms to pray and sing, with which readings, antiphons, hymns, etc., etc. In Chapter 50 he speaks of the Office as a "*servitutis pensum*", that is, as a "duty of our service" (RB 50:4). In Chapter 50 there is also an expression that, when we think about it, it seems bizarre: "*agant (...) opus Dei* – they should do the work of God" (v. 3). Praying the Office for St. Benedict means "doing the work of God," we do the work of an Other. What does this mean? This is what we will try to understand, because I think it is fundamental for our life and vocation, and for the true vitality of monastic life, and even I think, for its rebirth.

A year ago in the Cistercian Order we launched a consultation on how the Divine Office, and the liturgy in general, is lived in its various communities. A quite detailed questionnaire was sent out and many have answered it. The Synod next year will especially discuss all the information gathered. I do not know what effect this research will have on the Order's practice of prayer, but at least we'll be a little more aware of how it is lived. What is already clear is that the practice of the Divine Office is manifold and varied, both in the form and in the way of celebrating it. I am witness to this multiplicity as I travel among the Order's various communities, and at times even in the communities of other Orders. And I have to say that often I am quite taken aback by the way in which the liturgy is lived in many communities. I see all the colors! But what I find problematic is not so much the form, the way, the number of Psalms, the times - but the relationship that the monks and nuns have towards communitarian liturgical Office. And I see that the quality of the Office does not depend so much on the form, but, above all, on the attitude that communities have towards their liturgy. I have seen communities of 4 or 5 nuns, almost unable to sing, to pray long liturgies, but who live their Office with an attention and a care that makes it beautiful and fervent. Instead, I have seen young, numerous communities, who sing and make beautiful ceremonies, but in which you do not perceive a love for the communal prayer, and therefore, you do not perceive a beauty. One has the impression that the Office is only a servile duty, a "*pensum servitutis*" and not a work of God in which we are called to participate as children and friends of God.

For this reason I believe it is important to understand what St. Benedict means when he calls the community liturgy "the work of God", and to understand why and how he puts it at the center of the radiation of our person in all areas of life. I believe that if we become more conscious of this, the Divine Office in our communities will become more beautiful, at least for us, because we will be more aware of its value, and then we'll have more care for it, like a hidden treasure that gives value and beauty to all the rest, to everything that we live, to everything that we do. If we possess and work a field in which we know that a treasure is hidden, the value of the field increases in our eyes, and we will cultivate it with more care, with more love and attention, with more gratitude that we own it.

In John's Gospel there is an expression of Jesus that St. Benedict seems to quote literally when he asks in Chapter 50 about "doing the work of God." It is Jesus' answer to the crowd that found him in the synagogue of Capernaum, after he had multiplied the loaves and fishes. The people asked him, "What must we do to accomplish the works of God?" (Jn 6:28). Note the emphasis on what the person must do: they do not just say, "How should we do the works of God?" But "What must we *do* to *accomplish* the works of God?". In the Vulgate this is translated as: "*Quid faciemus ut operemur opera Dei?*" The great concern of the Jews of Capernaum is what they must do in order to accomplish the works of God. This question is in contrast to what these people have just experienced. They saw Jesus multiply the loaves and fishes, and therefore, they

saw the work of God in action. And they saw that this work was accomplished only by Jesus. They had to just sit back, get the loaves and fishes and eat until they were full (cf. Jn 6:10-13).

Jesus was aware that humans always think and want to be able to accomplish the works of God. In fact, he even confronted his own disciples concerning this claim: "Where can we buy bread, that these may eat?" (Jn 6:5). In the Synoptic Gospels Jesus is even more direct in his provocation, "Give them something to eat yourselves" (Mt 14:15, Mk 6:37, Lk 9:13). And John comments immediately: "He said this to test them, for he knew what he was about to do" (Jn 6:6).

Jesus puts us to the test regarding our relationship with the work that only God can accomplish; he puts our faith to the test. And he gives us the same answer that he gives to the crowd who asks what they must do to accomplish the works of God: "This is the work of God, that you should believe in him whom God has sent" (Jn 6:29).

They asked what they should do to accomplish the works of God, that is, to accomplish the same works that God does. Basically, they want to have the power to act as God. It is a bit like the temptation of Adam and Eve: to find the way, the magic secret, to possess the power to be and act as God (cf. Gen 3:4-5).

Jesus opposes this temptation answering rather that the work of God that we must make our own is not omnipotence, that is, being able to do whatever we want, nor does it mean having the success of doing all that God commands with our own strength. The essential work of God that is given us to do is: faith in Him whom the Father has sent, faith in Christ the Saviour of the world. The work of God par excellence is our salvation wrought by Christ. Faith allows this work to be accomplished in us and through us.

St. Benedict also had to have this passage from the Gospel of John in mind when he thought of the Office as "*opus Dei*."

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