

5th Chapter of the Abbot General OCist for MFC - 30.08.2013

"This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." (Jn 6:29)

Yesterday, quoting these words of Jesus in John's Gospel, I perhaps touched on the essence of what St. Benedict intends when he speaks of the Divine Office as a "work of God". And we may have identified the core reason for which he puts it at the center of the monk's life of radiation. We will return to this text, because shortly after the above quote, Jesus will reveal that the work of God par excellence is his Eucharistic offering (cf. Jn 6:30-33), which also in Benedict is somewhat the Sunday and paschal center of the Divine Office, and therefore the center of the center of the life of the monastery.

But before continuing and deepening the sense of "the work of God" in the Gospels, particularly in the Gospel of John, it is necessary to do something like a preliminary biblical research on the texts which, with absolute certainty, have greatly influenced St. Benedict in his conception of the liturgy and of its role in our life. These texts are the Psalms. In the Rule, the Psalms are the substance of the entire Divine Office, of the whole work of God, that is, the Office. Suffice it to say that in the case in which the community gets up very late, St. Benedict allows the readings and responsories to be shortened, but he does not permit any Psalms to be omitted (RB 11:12). And you know that in Chapter 18 he says that the order in which the Psalms of the Office are prayed can be varied, if you do not agree with what he has established. But he absolutely does not accept that the whole Psalter is not prayed once a week (18:22-25).

Today, praying the entire Psalter once a week does not happen in almost any monastery, and there are good reasons. But I bring up this point only so that we do not lose sight of how important the Psalms are for St. Benedict. If we are dispensed from the weekly *number* of the Psalms of the Office, we try not to dispense ourselves from the *importance* that the Psalms must have in our prayer. If we lose in quantity, we try not to lose in quality the value that we are called to give to the prayer of the Psalms in the monastic liturgy and, in general, in the Liturgy of the Church. It is above all in this that we can remain faithful to St. Benedict, even if we recite fewer Psalms than those prescribed by the Rule.

Now, I think that the Psalms are what led St. Benedict to prefer the expression "*opus Dei*" to designate the community liturgy. In the Psalms, in fact, we speak a great deal about the work of God, about the works of God, about what God does.

During my annual vacation with some of the brothers of Hauterive in a pasture in the mountains of Gruyère, we often personally pray the greater part of the Divine Office in the midst of nature. This year I paid special attention to this theme of the work of God while praying the Psalms. Rarely have I prayed the Psalms with such intensity. It was as if the theme of God's work was the key to listen to the profound motives for the composition of the Psalms. Then, to hear in my life the correct resonance of their message, the reason why they were composed, and therefore what God wants to tell me and make me understand and live through them. Praying them with this focus, the message of the Psalms not only resonated within me, but also in all the creatures around me: meadows, trees, rocks, animals and insects, the mountain people, the mountains, the clouds, the sky. The Psalms are like the score of the symphony of God's work that every creature is performing by the very fact that it exists, that it is made by God in this moment.

But the work of God sung by Psalms is not limited to creation, to the created world, to nature. In creating humans, and their freedom, God's work has also become history, the journey of humanity, and especially the history and journey of the people of Israel.

And within this historical and existential level of God's work, the work of our salvation is revealed; it is the most sublime and profound work that God could do for us; it is the messianic and paschal work which culminated in Christ who died and rose for us.

All this is sung, revealed, announced by the Psalms. Thus praying the Psalms means to let the canticle of the work of God resonate within us; this hymn that manifests his love, his mercy, and therefore allows us to recognize this work in process now, today, for us, for each one of us, and for every human being, even the one who is most distant from the knowledge of God.

Now, all that is revealed to us about the work of God, reveals God to us. The Psalms are prayers which, singing about the work of God, put us into a relationship with Him, help us to recognize Him through his works. By praying the Psalms, the sense of God's work in us is deepened more and more, until it becomes a sense of His presence. The more we recognize God's work in our lives, in the world, in history, in creation, the more we will recognize the God who works, the presence of God who acts, creates, who leads his people, who saves.

As there is no difference in God between life and activity, God works with His Being, St. John will reveal the ultimate meaning of this mystery, of this simultaneity in God between being and doing, "God is love" (1 Jn 4:16). The works of God manifest his presence because God is love and everything he does, he does with his being which is love.

This emerges more clearly in the three levels of God's work that I have listed. In the work of creation, the beauty and goodness of creatures already manifest the beauty and goodness of God who makes them. In the history of Israel's salvation, the love of God manifests itself as a predilection that chooses a people in order to reveal himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of relationship, the God of personal communion. In the messianic and paschal work, the love of God is revealed in the extreme in the gift of Himself in the sacrifice that has already been mysteriously described in some Psalms, such as Psalm 21/22.

I will try in the next few Chapters, to retrace these three levels of God's work by referring to the Psalms themselves. This will help us to examine in depth the importance and the value of the liturgy that St. Benedict asks us to put at the center of our lives.

Fr Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori, OCist.