

9th Chapter of the Abbot General OCist for MFC - 04.09.2013

We have seen the level of God's work in which God is the creator of beings. Then we looked at the level of God's work in which He saves his people. For me there is another level of the work of God that the Psalms help us recognize. I would call this the messianic and paschal level, the Christological level. It is a level that we find, as it were, at the top or at the bottom of the work for the people's salvation.

This level is clearly mentioned whenever the Psalms remember the Passover deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt, with their passage through the Red Sea. In its essence it is the level at which the work of God is revealed to be the work that only God can accomplish, and therefore, the work of God par excellence. Of course, the creation of the world is also a work that only God can do, but the people of Israel are eyewitnesses of their miraculous deliverance. On Passover night the work of creation becomes a work of redemption, a work of the people's liberation.

Thus, the Church has us pray after the first reading of the Easter Vigil:

"Almighty ever-living God, who are wonderful in the ordering of all your works, may those you have redeemed understand that there exists nothing more marvelous than the world's creation in the beginning except that, at the end of the ages, Christ our Passover has been sacrificed."

In this regard, let me quote from Psalm 135/136, the "Great Hallel" of the Jews:

"Give thanks to the Lord for he is good, because his love endures forever. (...)

He alone has done great wonders, for his love endures forever. (...)

He struck Egypt through their firstborn, for his love endures forever.

And brought Israel out from that land, because his love endures forever.

With a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, for his love endures forever.

He divided the Red Sea in two, because his love endures forever.

And made Israel pass through the midst of it, because his love endures forever.

But He overthrew Pharaoh and his army, because his love endures forever.

He led his people through the desert, because his love endures forever. "(135/136:1, 4, 10-16)

This grateful memory of the people's redemption, of their liberation, is a sign of the eternal mercy of God. This mercy that personally touches the people and identifies them as the chosen people favored by the Lord, has already reached in the Psalms a level that will then only be fully revealed in Jesus Christ. It is the level of an Anointed One, a Servant of the Lord, that through an extreme humiliation and exclusion, will receive God's extraordinary salvation and exaltation, a victory over evil and a death that will be for all the people.

Let's look at two psalms, Psalm 21/22 and Psalm 117/118, which are certainly essential to express this mystery and this Christological and paschal level of the work of God.

Psalm 21/22, which Jesus himself quotes before dying on the Cross, is the most explicit messianic prophecy of the whole Psalter. It prophetically describes the passion and glorification of Christ, and the conversion and salvation of all peoples, and of all humankind, even those who "sleep under the earth" (21/22:30). This psalm's last words, the words that sum up everything that is announced and described, are: "This is the work of the Lord" (21/22:32).

St. Benedict makes us pray Psalm 117/118 on Sundays during Lauds because it is also a prophetic paschal psalm on the death and resurrection of the Lord. It sings about the victory and the liberation that the love of the Lord has given to His servant who has passed through the ordeal of the threat of death.

"I was pushed hard to make me fall, but the Lord was my help. The Lord is my strength and my song, he has become my salvation. There are shouts of joy and victory in the tents of the righteous: the right hand of the Lord has done valiantly, the right hand of Lord is exalted, the right hand of the Lord has done valiantly. I shall not die, I shall live and announce the works of the Lord. (...) I thank you that you have answered me, and have become my salvation. The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is the work of the Lord, it is wonderful in our eyes. This is the day that the Lord has made: let us rejoice and be glad in it "(117/118:13-17, 21-24)

Here too, the Psalmist exclaims: "This is the work of the Lord" (117/118:23), and refers to the rejected stone that becomes the cornerstone, that is the stone that carries the whole building.

Here, as well, the work of God par excellence is the paschal mystery; it is a new day made by God, as was the first day of creation; it is a new time in which God can recreate the world raising the human person to a new life. The work of God par excellence is the risen Christ in whom the universe is renewed.

We should notice all of this when St. Benedict speaks to us of the work of God. For him, the Divine Office of the monastic community has all these resonances described by the Psalms. The Divine Office, therefore, is at the heart of the life of the monastery; it is the moment when God works, and he works as the Psalms and the whole of Scripture teach us. He works as the Creator and Redeemer, as the God of the Covenant, as the Lord of the Passover, as the Lamb who is sacrificed and resurrected to save us from sin and death and make us children of God.

So, now we understand why the work of God is the source and center of radiation, above all, for the humble monk. We understand why the monk who has reached humility's twelfth step is the monk who lets himself be completely formed and recreated by the work of God up to identifying himself with the work of redemption in the death and resurrection of Christ.

The whole chapter on humility is a chapter on the paschal work of God. Humility is simply the disposition that renders us free to be docile to this paschal work. It makes us docile to Christ, meek and humble of heart, so that we let ourselves be led by Him and in Him along the path of the Beatitudes.

To put the work of God at the center of one's own life means to put God who transforms us into his Son, who died and rose for us, at the center of our lives. Now, it seems that for St. Benedict God concentrates this, his work, in the Divine Office. Of course, God is always working, and he is conforming us to Christ in every moment of the day. But it is as if the community liturgy were the most obvious time and action for this work of God; as if the community liturgy were the central moment, the moment when the work of God is essentially this paschal conforming of the human person to the Son of God.

God is always at work everywhere, and the Spirit blows where it wills; however, it is important for our freedom that it has clear indications of how and when it is called to explicitly consent to this divine work. St. Benedict identifies the Divine Office, the liturgical prayer of the Psalms, the prayer of the Church as this clear indication. If you understand this, you also certainly understand that for St. Benedict the Sunday Eucharist is the center of this center; it is the focus of this work; for just as Easter is the center of the liturgy of the entire year, so in essence the Eucharist is the paschal work of God par excellence.

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