

12th Chapter of the Abbot General OCist for MFC - 07.09.2013

Today, as promised, I would like to meditate with you on the theme of peace in the Rule of St. Benedict in order to get his help to live this intercession for peace that Pope Francis is asking of us, especially on this day of fasting and prayer for peace in Syria and in the world.

You know that peace, *pax*, has always been considered somewhat of a main characteristic of monasticism according to St. Benedict. But perhaps we haven't asked ourselves sufficiently why and in what sense this is so. Let's seek to understand peace according to the Rule.

The first time St. Benedict speaks about peace is in the Prologue of the Rule. He does so by quoting Psalm 33/34, when he gives his first instructions on how to "have the true and eternal life" to the person who said "I do" to the Lord who sought in the crowd "his worker" crying out: "Is there anyone here who yearns for life and desires to see good days?" (cf. RB Prol. 14-16). These first instructions taken from Psalm 33/34 are: "If you desire true and eternal life, keep your tongue free from evil and your lips from all deceit. Turn away from evil and do good, seek peace and pursue it" (Prol. 17, Ps 33/34:14-15).

As I said yesterday, peace is a form of relationship among human beings who renounce evil. Here St. Benedict insists on the necessity of this "innocence," this turning away from harming or doing evil to others, in order to begin a journey of peace. The evil that destroys peace is the evil that we can cause and have in relationships, especially with hurtful words, or with the evil that a lie utters. The word that causes evil is the word that hurts and kills a relationship, which severs communion with the other. Violence begins where we allow evil to sever the relationship with our brother or sister, to ruin it, to make it false. It is there that we reject peace.

However, the invitation that St Benedict addresses to us with Psalm 33/34 is an invitation to seek peace and pursue it: "*inquire pacem et sequere eam.*" Peace is not a good that we can hold in our hands, that we can possess; it is a good to seek and to follow, as if it were a loved one who walks in front of us. It could be said that for St. Benedict peace is the bridegroom in the Song of Songs that always seems to escape the grip of the bride, and whom the bride must always find again by seeking and following him along the city streets.

This is an aspect of peace that runs throughout the whole Rule. Peace is never a good possessed once and for all; it is not a treasure that we can close in our coffers. Peace is a reality that must always be sought. Peace, then, is not our work; it is not a product of our hands; it is not something that comes from us; we must ask for and accept it from Another.

In chapter 4 on The Tools For Good Works, St. Benedict offers us two very enlightening sentences about peace. The first is: "Do not give a false peace" (RB 4:25) and the second is: "Return in peace with whom we are in discord before the sun goes down" (4:73).

I often think of the first expression when we give the sign of peace before Communion. There have been periods in my life in the monastery where I have wondered if my sign of peace was not a false one. I think it's a very widespread experience. During the Eucharist of the conventual Mass we can often find ourselves giving the sign of peace to a brother or sister with whom we have some relationship problems. It is inevitable that we would have more problems with those closer to us than with those who are further away. It is the same in families; over time, the relationship with one's husband or wife is often more difficult than with anyone else in the world. In a community the relationship between an abbot and his prior is usually more difficult than between an abbot and the latest novice. This is because the closer you are to a person, the more real, and not ideal, the relationship is. Now, it is true that one can feel hypocritical in giving the sign of peace if one thinks at that moment of the words of St. Benedict: "Do not give a false peace." So, perhaps from time to time wouldn't it be better to abstain from giving the sign of peace during Mass?

But wait, when are we really giving a false peace? The Rule answers us wherever it speaks to us of peace. Peace is false when we pretend to give the other a peace that we possess, our peace, a peace that we would be capable of. But St. Benedict does not ask this of us because he knows that a human is not capable on their own to possess and give peace. True peace is not what we have, rather it is what we seek, what we pursue, and especially it is the peace that we ask, that we beg, the God of Peace for.

So, when we give the sign of peace to our brother or sister, and we perhaps feel like a Cain who embraces an Abel with the desire to give him a good blow on the head; when we give the sign of peace the sign will be true, it will always be true and never false, if at that moment rather than giving peace, we ask for it; we ask it of God, of the Holy Spirit, whose fruit in us is "love, joy, peace..." (cf. Gal 5:22). Falsehood is not crushed in our hearts when we pretend to have what we give, but when we ask for it, when we give as poor ones who beg from God the gift they are giving.

So, we can also understand the second expression about peace in the Rule's Chapter 4: "Return in peace with whom we are in discord before the sun goes down - *Cum discordante ante solis occasum in pacem redire*" (4:73). Peace is here presented as a dimension to which you can return and in which you can re-enter, like two brothers who return home in the evening after a day of separation and division. Return in peace: even here peace is not in us, it is not ours, it is not in our hands. Rather those in "discord" return to it as to their father's house and find communion there. "*Cum discordante (...) in pacem redire*". "*Dis-cordia*" or to be in "discord" is to have a division of hearts. Its opposite is *con-cordia*, "concord," the communion of hearts. In the dwelling of God's peace, that which is divided is repaired. In peace my heart finds again the heart of my brother or sister with whom I was in disaccord. I find their heart and my heart united beyond ourselves. As the sun goes down, then, the day does not end badly, and the night will be inhabited by a new light, brighter than our darkness.

Notice that St. Benedict inserts this tool of good works between two other very significant tools: "Pray for one's enemies in the love of Christ" (RB 4:72) and "Never to despair of God's mercy" (4:74). It is as if the peace of concord were here inserted between the love of Christ who prays for his enemies, and the merciful love of the Father which we must never despair of. Peace is possible only if it is generated and nurtured by the love and prayer of Christ and by the invincible mercy of the Father. These last three tools of good works form, as it were, a Trinitarian doxology of the Rule's Chapter 4: the love of Christ, the Father's mercy, and in the middle the peace of concord, the peace of the Holy Spirit; the Spirit who is the communion between the Father and the Son offered and given to sinners.

I won't be able to finish treating of peace in the Rule today. I will continue Monday. But for this day of prayer and fasting for peace requested by Pope Francis, I think that what we have seen today is enough to help us understand why we need to pray for peace. Peace is a gift to always seek and which only God can give to humanity. It is a gift to ask for and welcome.

We have true peace when we ask the Lord for it: when we ask it from the crucified love of Christ who prayed for his enemies, when we ask for it from the mercy of the Father who wants to reunite all his children in his house, when we ask for it from the communion of the Spirit that reconciles divided hearts.

Prayer which is open to the peace of God, has to be inserted into the wound of discord, the wound of division among people and nations, so that God can find at the bottom of this wound the humble consent that allows his peace to penetrate the world. We have to pray for this peace with Our Lady, Queen of Peace, trusting ourselves to her Immaculate Heart's complete "Yes" to the love of God.

Meditating on the Rule also makes us aware that for us this study and this tireless begging for peace is a duty, a responsibility, a vocation, to be incarnated in our daily relationships in community, but never forgetting that we are called to this in order to accept the peace of God for all humanity.

Fr Mauro - Giuseppe Lepori OCist