

13th Chapter of the Abbot General OCist for MFC – 09.09.2013

We are continuing to meditate on the theme of peace in the Rule of Saint Benedict. In addition to the passages I mentioned Saturday, there are other significant quotes that help us to understand that the search and the request for peace that originates in God is an attitude that is incarnated in daily life, in concrete human situations. Peace, therefore, is not a simple "spirituality" but a dimension of life.

Permit me a brief parenthesis. In monastic life, and consecrated life in general, we must always be careful because "spirituality" for us often corresponds to ideology in social life; that is, it is a construction of self-referential ideas and feelings that are not rooted nor incarnated in real life. Like dreams, abstract notions, which, unfortunately, have the power to affect our way of living real life by censoring, manipulating and deforming it. And this can last for years without us realizing it. And meanwhile those who live like this do not grow nor mature in their lives, not to mention the damage or the torment that they may cause in others. Close parenthesis.

I was saying that St. Benedict, for whom peace is not a spirituality or an abstract ideology, speaks of it in situations that help us to understand how to incarnate the need for peace in our lives.

In Chapter 34, "Whether All Should Receive in Equal Measure What Is Necessary," St. Benedict inserts a reference to peace when he talks about the distribution of goods according to the needs of the brethren. He prescribes, inspired by the communion of goods in the first Christian community described in the Acts of the Apostles, that the goods be distributed to each one according to their needs (cf. Acts 4:35), not by arbitrary preferences, but in the knowledge that the level of need is never equal, above all, when this need depends on whether one is infirm or not. This personal attention to the needs of each one can evidently cause feelings of division in hearts: jealousy, pride, criticism, frustration. St. Benedict recommends that the whole community see itself as a body composed of various members, in which life flows to the extent that love circulates. The fragility or strength of the members of a body is not in opposition, in conflict, but is shared in the one life of the body. When one has this awareness of communion in community living, feelings of division about what one has or does not have become absurd. Being happy or unhappy is no longer a feeling of one against the other, because the feeling of communion dominates, which implies sharing and compassion. St. Benedict, after recalling this communion of sentiments in the body of Christ, which is the community, concludes that only "thus will all the members be in peace" (RB 34:5).

Peace is described here like the feeling that the body of Christ of the Christian community itself experiences when charity circulates in it, when it dominates the benevolent gaze towards each other that does not let itself be disturbed by differences in talents, goods and rights.

Thus, St. Benedict makes us understand that we receive, keep, or reject peace, even by the way we think about things, goods, and our or other's needs.

To be aware of this is of "global" importance, because almost all the quarrels and wars arise from a thirst for possession and dominion that loses sight of people, that looks more at things than at people. Thus, the Pope, in his Angelus message of Sunday, Sept. 1, as in many other discourses, calls all, especially the powerful, to not forget that those who suffer in conflicts are people, above all, the most vulnerable, such as children. In conflicts, in wars in fact there is a tendency to depersonalize the so-called "enemies", who become numbers, digits, forces. The fact that any "enemy" is first and foremost a human being, a person, is censored, as well as the fact that a person cannot be reduced only to what they have, nor even to what they do. In the end, all wars are born by reducing the other to what they have, especially to the power they have. But this reduction of the other is also a reduction of oneself, because it means that even for oneself there is no greater value than that which comes from what one has or does not have. Victory is nothing more than taking for oneself what the other has.

Now you understand that what St Benedict describes in chapter 34 is essentially the crux of the matter: that a world war can come out of a human's small heart. Essentially, what is the difference between the jealousy and sinful desires that I can have regarding what my brother or sister has and the jealousy and sinful desires of a nation, of a superpower regarding what another nation, another superpower has? It is the same mechanism, the same logic of sin, with the only difference being that what happens between me and my brother or my sister is my responsibility. It's a responsibility that might seem insignificant, with no repercussions in the world; but who's to say that a world war is not the end result of many subtle conflicts of power and possession among which are also my secrets daily conflicts, my thoughts, my envious and contemptuous looks toward my brother or sister who is next to me?

In Chapter 34 St. Benedict asks us for a conversion in this area. He asks us to work to open ourselves to peace in the daily life of our community. He asks us to learn to look at people without reducing them to what they have. He asks us to look at their qualities and their fragilities, and to allow the abbot, or his delegate, to make decisions and distribute goods looking primarily at the persons' needs, not at things. Not because of any sympathy, for then he would be looking at people as if they were things that the abbot tries to possess with pandering, but with that gratuitous love that seeks the good of the other without advantage for oneself.

When in a community there is this way of seeing one's neighbor that thinks of the others and their wellbeing, then it is as if peace could come down like a dove and settle on the community, "thus all the members will be in peace" (34:5). And perhaps this is the way that all humanity, that the whole world, can be in peace.

This chapter 34 teaches us, then, that the mechanisms of war pass through the human heart. But it also teaches us, above all, that peace in the world passes through our hearts. A heart that says “no” to the sadness that comes from the sinful desire for possessions, which no longer sees one’s brother or sister but the things that they have; a heart that says “no” to the jealousy that made Cain the murderer of his brother Abel, becomes the seed of the victory of peace for the whole world.

The peace of God rests upon humanity when humans stop defining their own and other’s value by their possessions, by their power, by what they have: property, offices, honors...

So, we understand that what St Benedict is asking us here, with this continuous work on our desires and on the way we look at our brothers and sisters, is not only so we’ll be good monks and nuns, nor is it only for our own individual personal holiness, rather it is for the salvation and transformation of the whole world; it is to promote peace throughout the whole world.

And this is how God’s work of filial adoption in Christ begins to radiate out into the community. In the parable of the prodigal son, what the father says to the older brother is an invitation to convert, from an envious and conflictual look that thinks only of things, to a fraternal and filial way of seeing, that sees the person, that sees their brother or sister, that sees their father, that sees the hearts of others, discovering the true beauty of their own heart:

" Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours [all that I have, you have it too; do not worry about taking it, possessing it: you've already got it in my love for you!] but now we must celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again, he was lost and he has been found!" (Lk 15:31-32). Look at your brother, look at him here, he has come back home; don’t think about money, about the kid goat, about that ring that I put on his finger, about the calf I had killed for the banquet ... Look at him, go on in, see and embrace your brother. Let yourself be defined more by your relationship with him, and with me, than by the possession of things, because then you, too, will be more of who you really are, you will be more of a son and brother too, and therefore happier and freer. You will find peace and you will be able to give it to everyone else!

Fr Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori OCist