

14th Chapter of the Abbot General OCist for the MFC - 10.09.2013

Today and tomorrow I will continue to meditate on peace as it is presented in the Rule so as to complete our reflection on this theme which was stimulated by Pope Francis' appeal to pray for peace in the present crisis.

Another chapter of the Rule which refers to peace is the long chapter 53, which deals with welcoming guests to the monastery. As you know St. Benedict asks us to welcome all guests "*tamquam Christus* - as Christ himself," because Jesus told us: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (RB 53:1, Mt 25:35).

Then St. Benedict gives a short description of the way the community expresses this welcome. Among other things, he says: "As soon as a guest has been announced, the superior and brothers are to meet him with all the kindness of charity. First of all, they are to pray together, and thus be united in peace (*sibi socientur in pace*). Do not give the kiss of peace without having prayed first, because of diabolical illusions." (53:3-5)

Peace here is described as the culmination of an encounter and communion with Christ that we are asked to live by welcoming others, welcoming the person who is unknown to us. To go to meet a guest is to honor them (53:2) and show charity towards them (v. 3), culminating in the communion of prayer that unites us to the other in peace. It is the same concept of peace that I have described in the last chapters: a peace that is not ours, it is a gift of God, and so we must ask for it in prayer.

Benedict cautions us to not expect a relationship of peace with the other without prayer, that is, without going through a relationship with God, because, he says, of "diabolical illusions." The expression diabolical illusions is not so much about the danger of welcoming the devil instead of a guest. But, I would say, the danger of the illusion that we can live a relationship of fraternity and communion with only our good will, our generosity and goodness, or our ceremonies, because then the encounter and relationship with the other only has the consistency of our voluntarism. Therefore it is fragile, not free from our desire to be affirmed ourselves and to be flattered and admired by the other. It would be a relationship full of pretense of oneself and of the other, that is, it would not be a gratuitous relationship, a relationship between poor people. In short, it would not be a relationship between brothers and sisters because they are children of God.

This applies to every encounter, not only for the reception of guests, and above all, it should apply to relationships in the community. How many monks and nuns are angels of sweetness and charity with the guests and demons of harshness and contempt in the community! Often the peace and harmony that reigns in the guesthouse is not to be found in the community. We must not forget that, if here St. Benedict calls for a special prayer before meeting with a guest, then the Divine Office is the prayer that continual precedes and must characterize the thousands of daily encounters with the brothers and sisters of our community.

This rule, this discipline of prayer before meeting with another should be for us a "state of life," the true nature of our existence, the constant position of our hearts. I always think of when I met Blessed Mother Teresa a year before her death. What impressed me in her was that she was a person who always met you in her relationship with the Lord. So the feeling, even physically, stayed with you after you met her of having encountered Christ, His look, His word, His Heart. The person who meets you, recognizing Christ in you, gives you the possibility to meet the Lord in a more profound way, and leaves you with a greater awareness of always living with Jesus.

In Chapter 53 St. Benedict tells us that "*primitus orent pariter, et sic sibi socientur in pace*" (53:4). Literally: "first they should pray together, and then associate in peace." There is a nuance here that is important to note: the prayer that precedes communion in peace is already a prayer made together with the other, in this case with the guest. More precisely, it is a prayer made by the whole community with the guest. This is not always possible to practically achieve, especially if the guest is not a believer, but it is important to remind ourselves of this dimension of prayer and the encounter with the other. In a certain sense, we must try to unite ourselves, personally and as a community, to the prayer of the heart of the other. This prayer could be a deep groan of their soul, of their hidden suffering, that nobody sees, and of which they are often not even aware of. The Holy Spirit, St. Paul writes to the Romans, "intercedes with inexpressible groanings, and he who searches the hearts knows what the Spirit wants" (Rom 8:26-27). There is an unspoken prayer of the Holy Spirit to the Father in every human heart, a prayer that God perceives, and which we can always silently join. And in the end, this is the secret of an intense encounter with any other person, and of the communion of peace that we can live; it is deeper than any conflict, than every superficial division.

We should think about this especially when we pray the Divine Office and celebrate the Eucharist, because it is there that normally nowadays we pray with guests and visitors to the monastery, and that's where the whole community prays with them. This awareness, I think, can help us live the value and meaning of our community liturgy more fully.

In fact, more than saying that prayer must "precede" an encounter in peace with the other, we must understand that prayer must "carry" the encounter, being its deep source, its hidden and permanent root. The encounter itself is prayer for those who live with the desire to welcome Christ in the other, to "adore Christ" present in their guest (53:7). For Benedict each encounter must be like a prayer, because every encounter is a relationship with Jesus. We cannot "associate in peace" without uniting ourselves to Christ, because, as Paul writes to the Ephesians, Christ "is Himself our peace" (Eph 2:14).

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