

15th Chapter of the Abbot General OCist for the MFC - 11.09.2013

There is one last mention of peace in the Rule that I want to consider today because it gives us another important nuance of what it means to truly incarnate peace in our monastic life in the service of world peace. It is located in Chapter 65 which deals with the Prior of the monastery. It is a chapter of the Rule that warns us against the struggle for power in the community. St. Benedict speaks about the thirst for power elsewhere as well; but here it is as if he, with greater clarity and apprehension, is expressing his concern about this evil that is normally the cause of the worst divisions and conflicts in communities. One understands that St. Benedict has had and seen bad experiences and that he wants those who follow his Rule to avoid them.

From the beginning of Chapter 65 the crux of the matter is clearly expressed: "Too often it happens that grave scandals arise in monasteries due to the appointment of the prior. There are indeed some who, puffed up by the evil spirit of pride and thinking themselves to be second abbots, attribute absolute power to themselves (*adsumentes sibi tyrannidem*), thus they foster scandals and cause discord in the community." (RB 65:1-2)

In this chapter 65 St. Benedict analyzes all the mechanisms, both the psychological and relational, of this struggle for power and its consequences. But in these first two verses, what is essential has been said; evil, as Jesus says in the Gospel, comes out of the human heart: "For out of the heart, in fact, come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander" (Mt 15:19). Here St. Benedict speaks of those who are "puffed up by the evil spirit of pride – *maligno spiritu superbiae inflati*" (65:2). The image depicts "someone puffed up with pride" from the inside of themselves, someone puffed up with pride who is not breathing the fresh air of the good Spirit of God; but rather, sorry to say this!, puffed up as if by those gastro-intestinal gases that are formed by the internal fermentation of heavy foods. The "evil spirit of pride" puffs us up from within ourselves, in an unhealthy fermentation of our ego that no longer sees the others and the world as a space of service and gratuitousness, but as a power base to grasp and hold on to with one's own hands. One who lives a position, a responsibility, a job in the community in such a way will do it to assert themselves, and this will inevitably favor a division and conflict of power.

Also in Chapter 65, St. Benedict uses all the vocabulary of human hostility to describe the consequences in a community of such a self-centered option in living one's life and vocation: "From this source are born envy, quarrels, detraction, rivalries, dissensions, disorders – *invidiae, rixae, detractioes, aemulationes, dissensiones, exordinationes*" (65:7). It seems as if we were reading the crime section of newspapers! Instead Benedict is talking about monastic communities.

This obviously applies not only to the prior, but to everyone and everything. How does one avoid this, how does one go against this diabolic catastrophe in hearts and in communities?

It is here that St. Benedict again speaks to us about peace, and he does so by linking it to charity and obedience. He says: "Therefore, to us, it seems best that for the preservation of peace and charity (*propter pacis caritatisque custodiam*), the administration of the monastery depend on the decision of the abbot." (65:11)

Here, St. Benedict unites peace to charity, as fraternal love that reflects the Trinitarian and fatherly love of God in the world. Once again, peace, like charity, the peace of charity, is not our product; it is a gift to *preserve*, a grace of God which is given to every community convened in the name of Christ. And the main instrument here of the preservation of peace is obedience to only one shepherd of the community; to accept that the path of the community is determined, "ordered," to use the literal word in the Rule, by the only person who is ultimately responsible, the abbot. It is he who has the duty and the charism to govern the life of the monastery in such a way that in it the gift of peace in charity is preserved and grows.

This reference is primarily addressed to the abbot himself. It does not deal with simply having one head, only one administration. The aim of the head of authority in the community is not so that everything can function well to avoid problems. The purpose is the preservation of peace and charity. Even the abbot must obey this profound and essential intention of his ministry, of his responsibility. His authority is not for power, but for communion. It is a pastoral, fatherly and fraternal authority in peace and charity at the service of communion of the flock.

In this regard, St. Benedict refers to his concept of obedience which is not an obedience of submission, of the renunciation of freedom, but an obedience to freely renounce oneself for the love of Christ, an obedience of humility, which prefers Christ to oneself: "The first degree of humility is obedience without delay. It is the attitude of those who hold nothing dearer to themselves than Christ" (RB 5:1-2).

What for us really builds peace in charity, in the community and then in the world, is above all the preference for Christ. Only if we love Christ preferring him even over ourselves, do we then have in our heart the reason and the strength to not prefer power, to not prefer possessions, to not prefer our own glory and all that destroys peace in us, between us and in the world. "To hold nothing dearer than Christ" frees us from the desire of all that separates us from others, from every root of hatred of our brother or sister.

But since the preference for Christ is also a grace to be received, as we are incapable of it, we need a way to grow in it. This way for us is the humility of obedience to the superior of our community. It is the path of obedience that educates us to let the love of Christ prevail over the false love for ourselves, to let the love of Christ prevail over the values of the world that divide hearts. The preference for Christ frees us from all that divides, from all that is "diabolical" in the etymological sense of the word. It is not so much a violence that we do to ourselves that corrects the negative tendencies of our heart which destroy peace and charity in us; rather it is obedience: humble, daily, step by step, to our own community in as much as they are a flock guided and ordered by only one shepherd who represents Christ.

The abbot's major responsibility is to first live the preference for Christ in giving his life for the peace and charity of his brothers. The responsibility of the monks and nuns is to follow in truth and freedom the path of belonging to a community guided in the name of Christ. This frees us to actually be workers and builders of true peace in charity.

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