

## 18th Chapter of the Abbot General OCist for the MFC - 14.09.2013

Are we defined by the work of God? Does the work of God, the Divine Office, define our identity?

To understand what it means to be defined by the work of God, let's begin then to move with the humble monk of the 12th step of humility into the center of Benedictine monastic life and in the circles that radiate from it.

I believe, then, you have realized by now that the center is "*in opere Dei* – in the work of God," that is, during the communal Divine Office.

It is not by chance that the Rule's chapters on the Divine Office immediately follow Chapter 7 on humility; Benedict begins to describe exactly how the radiation of the humble monk moves out from this center.

One morning, while I was on an island retreat at Lérins during a week in August preparing some of these chapters, I was praying on the seashore at sunrise. The grey water, under a cloudy sky, had just been moved by a quiet ripple and the rays of the rising sun on the horizon began to penetrate between the clouds and the sea and to spread a mantle flecked with gold on the gray water. Near the shore I suddenly noticed a small rock whose top was just above the water, so that the ripples of the sea continually covered and uncovered the top of this rock. The result was that the rock continuously formed and reformed new circles in the seawater, which in their turn played with the fiery light of the rising sun.

Well, this is what the Divine Office for St. Benedict means. It is like a fixed and stable rock that emerges into the gray surface of our day, and emerging, it interacts with what we do, with what happens, in order to form in it a concentric design, a centered and harmonic structure which then spreads throughout the whole of reality. The light of Christ, like the sun, rises on everything that happens, on what we do and live, but it is, as if it were, only from the center of the Divine Office that this light can also become a visible radiation which orders and harmonizes our lives.

However, if the rock, the rock that emerges from the sea, which generates this concentric design was always immersed in the gray water that design would not be created, and the sunrise, too, would remain like a vaguely diffused light on the sea, but without a clear and ordered message, without being able to express a beautiful, centered and ordered design in the daily reality that we live.

In this sense, it's a bit how we must understand the rhythm and the frequency of the Divine Office in the monastic day organized by the Rule. It is not enough that the rock ripples the gray water of the sea once a day, nor even at the beginning and at the end of the day. It is necessary that it emerges regularly, otherwise the circles disappear and the

water becomes flat or has only the shape of the waves that the sea produces, not that of the radiation from a center.

In the monastic day according to St. Benedict the rock of the Office "re-emerges" regularly: Vigils, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, Compline. These times of prayer have also undergone changes and adaptations over the centuries and after the Council. Normally, however, the daily Eucharist is added. The Council has justly reminded us of the importance of respecting the true times in which the Hours are prayed. This deeply corresponds to the Benedictine concept of prayer as a center which must regularly renew the ordered radiation of God's work in our life. To be faithful to St. Benedict, it is not enough to maintain all of the Hours that he prescribes. The quality of prayer is more important than the quantity, and I would say that the quality consists precisely in the regularity and frequency of the prayer throughout the day.

For many communities that have important works on an educational or pastoral level, as well as economically, certainly, it is not easy to interrupt the day often to pray the Office. Sometimes old age or health prevents this regular frequency. But even here, it is important not to lose sight of the value and meaning of the actions that St. Benedict offers us, then everyone will do what they can. If in order to pray the entire Office, a community gathers the Hours into a couple of "blocks," this community is not faithful to the sense of the Office which St. Benedict wants, or even what the Church wants. The Hours become like "blocks of prayer" placed and moved where they are less disturbing, where they do not interact with the time of day, with daily life. It is no longer, like my sea rock at Lérins: something which emerges from the depths and perforates the flat and gray surface of living in order to renew and maintain the concentric and radiant design of God's work in it.

In fact, the real problem of our prayer life is its relationship with the reality that we live. The real problem of prayer in monasteries, and everywhere, is not primarily which Office to pray, in which language, with which melodies, with which ceremonies, etc. The real problem is what prayer has to do with life, what effect prayer has on the reality of the life that we live every day.

St. Benedict takes great care of this relationship between prayer and reality, of the relationship between the Divine Office and daily life, that is, of the relationship between the encounter with God and human life. When the life of the Benedictine monasteries, for example in Cluny, let the liturgy take up most of the day, so that it was impossible to do anything else, there, something essential was lost in the Benedictine charism. It was as if that rock emerging from the water and continuously creating concentric circles had been transformed into a mountain where the water bathes only the foot of the mountain, where the waves of daily reality only crash against it, without a circle being formed, without any radiation of the Office into reality.

The Cistercian reform wanted to return to the prayer–reality relationship wanted by St. Benedict, even if work, over time, became the mountain. The circles on the water will not form any more if the rock becomes a mountain, nor even if the sea water becomes so high that the rock almost never emerges...

For this reason it is important to learn from the Rule the balanced relationship between the Office and daily life.

In fact, St. Benedict never speaks of the Office without inserting it into the reality of the human life that we live. This is true beginning with Chapter 8, the first chapter that treats of the Divine Office.

First of all, reality means the seasons of the year, and the change in the atmospheric conditions and the length of the day. "During the winter season, that is, from the Calends of November to Easter, it seems reasonable to arise at the eighth hour of the night, in order to rest a little more than half of the night and get up with the food fully digested." (RB 8:1-2)

Before speaking of prayer, or rather, in order to speak about prayer, St. Benedict speaks of reality and humanity: the reality of time, the seasons, the reality of the body, the stomach, sleep.

He continues: "From Easter until the Calends of November the Office of Vigils should be adjusted so that, after a very short interval during which the brethren may go out for the necessities of nature, Lauds, which is to be celebrated at the break of day, may immediately follow." (8:4)

One can say that St. Benedict takes the whole process of digestion fully into account! with the naturalness of one who lives a unified human life, without schizophrenia. For prayer to be in relationship with the reality of our humanity, the first condition is not to censor anything, to not pretend to be angels. Those who pray live in time, in a determined climate, and have a body with its psycho-physical needs. If the human dimension is censored, the result is that one does not pray better. The result is that then prayer does not have a positive relationship with the reality of our lives and therefore it does not radiate in it the encounter with God who works.

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