

22th Chapter of the Abbot General OCist for the MFC – 19.09.2013

"...In the Work of God, in the oratory, in the monastery, in the garden..." (RB 7.63)

The monastery garden is the garden where ideally the monastic community begins to work, where it begins to manipulate reality in order to give it a form and a productivity that directly express the nature and purpose of a house consecrated to the work of God. It is still a cloistered space, or, at any rate, attached to the monastic building.

The monastic tradition has always loved to meditate on the theme of the cloistered garden, of the "*hortus conclusus*," which is inspired by the Song of Songs where the spouse says to his beloved: "You are a garden enclosed, my sister, my bride, a spring enclosed, a fountain sealed" (Song 4:12). We know that this verse was later used by the liturgy to sing of the Mother of God's inviolate virginity.

Medieval monasteries loved to create this space, this enclosed garden, not visible nor accessible from the outside, which also grew vegetables and herbs, and which offered a space of silence and prayer in the open air, but which was protected from noise and people. Thus, this garden often coincided with the cloister's garden.

What I think is important to emphasize is the idea that this garden or orchard was the first external space with respect to the oratory, and ideally the first natural space in which to radiate the *opus Dei* of the communal prayer. We must understand it, always ideally or symbolically, as the space in which the work of God of the Divine Office is transmitted to human work, where it is expressed in human work, as work, as *opus manuum*, as manual work. I repeat, I understand the garden here as a symbolic space in which we can include all work spaces inside the monastery cloister: the kitchen, the infirmary, the library, etc. The idea of *hortus*, however, helps us to think of each workspace as a space in which the monk, the nun returns, coming from the work of God who restores us in our filial adoption, to the original paradisiacal dimension of our relationship with reality. The earthly paradise is literally an earthly *garden*, an orchard and vegetable garden. It is the uncorrupted space in which God has placed Adam in order to work the garden in a climate of intimate friendship with his Creator: "The Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being. Then the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. (...) The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it." (Gen 2:7-8,15)

It is as if the Garden of Eden was the habitat in which man could live and work as a creature that breathes the Lord's breath of life. Eden is the space of life and work in which man can live according to his nature as the image of God, as the friend of God.

Communion with God is the true beauty of Eden, or better yet: the beauty of the friendship between God and man is reflected in the garden of Eden, a friendship that is not jealous because soon God creates woman so that man is not alone (cf. Gen 2:18,22).

In Eden, God himself even goes for a walk, in fact, after the Fall, Adam and Eve "heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze" (Gen. 3:8).

With sin, the man and woman lost that dimension. They lost it in their relationship with God, in their relationship between themselves, and in dealing with reality, that is, in work. Everything seems like it is detached from the life breath of their friendship with the Lord.

It could seem like Jesus Christ came to redeem the lost garden. The space where we can live, love and work is renewed in Gethsemane, in the garden of the Resurrection, the new garden of Jesus' intimacy with the Father, with the disciples, with Mary Magdalene. It expresses the "breath of life" that we receive from the Lord, that breath that Jesus on the evening of his Resurrection breathes on the disciples locked in the upper room out of fear and guilt (Jn 20:22).

With original sin the orchard, the garden, the paradise decayed and became a punishment. But Christ died and rose to restore it to us. It became again the human space for life and work where we can start living again animated by the Holy Spirit, animated by the communion of God and with God.

So, in a certain sense, the Divine Office in the oratory of the monastery becomes for us as the moment when Adam receives again the Word that creates him and the Breath of divine life that animates him, enabling us to live, as the Lord's child and friend, in the space of life and work that God gives us, symbolized by the garden. This is the radiation that the *opus Dei* should have there in the monastery where human work starts immediately after the work of God: there precisely in the orchard, in the garden immediately attached to the monastery's oratory. The cloister's garden is normally the space where we find ourselves immediately after leaving the church. It is a symbolic position that must educate us to move from prayer to work, moving from God's work to human work, or rather irradiating the work of God in human work.

Now, this "*hortus conclusus*" of the monastery is also traditionally a place of beauty, a place of beauty that is cared for. It is not the natural beauty of the fields or of the pastures, but the beauty of a garden where a person collaborates with the Creator, with nature, in order to make this space of his life beautiful. The garden is the space of work and life where the beauty of rediscovered friendship with God is expressed, where it gives shape to the space, to the things, to the stones, to the vegetables.

This is an aspect of Christian and monastic life and that we should not overlook. An ugly, uncared for monastery where it is thought that to be consecrated to God one can, indeed one should, live in ugliness, in disregard for the place, perhaps even in the name of poverty is, in reality, a monastery where Christ is not preferred; he is not the Spouse of the soul; he is not the friend we live with. Those monasteries that seem gray barracks, betray a concept of monasticism as if it were a vocation for slaves, for soldiers; it is without personality, without heart.

Ugliness is not a virtue, it is not poverty and simplicity. For beauty that radiates the relationship of love with the Lord is a beauty that is able to express itself even with the simplest means, with three flowers, a clean tablecloth, with a bucket of water and a bit of soap, with a little white paint on the walls, with a dust cloth, with a broom that takes away the cobwebs, pulling out weeds from the garden path, mowing the lawn, eliminating some kitsch plaster or plastic statues put there by the nuns 70 years ago...

I am always amazed when visiting medieval monasteries; how they made every space beautiful, even the stables. One really sees that for them there was no dichotomy between prayer and life, between the Divine Office and reality, between the work of God and human work. Everything was linked in a harmony of one love, in the preference for Christ that is expressed in every detail of life.

Is there this "garden" of beauty in our lives? In our monasteries? Do we work for it? Do we build this beautiful garden constantly, every day, like a loving bride who daily changes the flowers in the vase, or a mom who sets the family table every day with the same care and affection? Does our life, our monastery, this garden of beauty, which like the Virgin Mary symbolized by the moon, reflect and express the beauty and the light of Christ in the world?

"Beauty will save the world," said Prince Miskin in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*. I wonder sometimes if we monks and nuns are sufficiently aware of this. But it is an awareness which we must educate ourselves to, and allow ourselves to be educated to, with the "idiocy" of humility, so that the beauty of Christ can save not only the world, but also our vocation and our mission in the world.

Fr Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori OCist