

23th Chapter of the Abbot General OCist for MFC - 20.09.2013

"...In the Work of God, in the oratory, in the monastery, in the garden, on the road..." (RB 7:63)

Finally, our humble monk of humility's 12th degree goes outside the monastery and is called to radiate the work of God "*in via*," on the road.

St. Benedict, however, does not willingly let him go outside the monastery. He prefers everything to be within the monastery enclosure "so that the monks do not need to roam outside, because it is not at all helpful for their souls" (RB 66:7). Yes, because Benedict is allergic to wandering monks, who are "*semper vagi* - always roaming around" (RB 1:11). If St. Benedict would come back today, he would expel all the abbot generals from his Order, and it would be a good thing!

Nevertheless, going around for him is like wine (cf. RB 40:6): it is not ideal, but it is a reality that one will not succeed in eliminating from the life of the monasteries, so one might as well make the best of it. Perhaps today it is in this sense that we must address the use of the Internet, cell phones, etc. It seems that one cannot do without them (just look around!). Therefore, it is necessary that we might as well make the best of the situation; and to make the best of a situation for St. Benedict means to live within obedience, with transparency, within community discipline, so that the thing that we cannot do without, does not become the center of our life, an idol that isolates us from others and that slowly replaces the Lord in the infinite space of our heart.

So, Saint Benedict also proposes a discipline for travel. First and foremost, a person goes out of the monastery only through obedience, and then only if they are "sent": the title of Chapter 67 is: "*De fratribus in viam directis* - On the brethren who are sent on a journey." One does not leave the monastery because they want a change of air. One goes out because they are *sent* by the abbot and the community. What may be a temptation to escape, a temptation of dissipation and distraction, thus becomes a mission. The discipline of the road, the discipline of the monk on a journey is all about not forgetting or deceiving this "mission".

The community aids the brother who goes out of the monastery or who comes back to it because his journey concerns it, represents it. The brother who goes out must, for example, dress better than when in the monastery: "Let those who are sent out on a journey receive a pair of trousers from the wardrobe, which, on their return, they will return, washed. The cowls and tunics should also be a little better than the ones they usually wear, which they received from the wardrobe when they set out on a journey, and give back when they return." (RB 55:13-14)

But it is above all in prayer, and particularly in the Divine Office, that the community takes on the responsibility of the journey of a brother or sister who is away. St. Benedict states that the journey, that going on the road, in a sense "starts" right from the *opus Dei*. Here, then, as I said the other day, we see that each concentric circle of life is always radiated

from the center of monastic life: "Let the brethren who are to be sent on a journey recommend themselves to the prayers of all the brethren and of the Abbot; and always at the concluding prayer of the Work of God let a commemoration be made of all those who are absent. When the brethren return, on the same day of their return, at all the Canonical Hours, when the Work of God is finished, let them lie prostrate on the floor of the oratory and ask the prayers of all on account of the failings that may have surprised them on the road through seeing or hearing of something evil or through idle talk." (RB 67:1-4)

So here you have it: starting from the work of God we go out from the monastery, as if it were the work of God that sends us. And on our re-entry, we return to the work of God; in it we again find and are restored to the center of our life and vocation, a center that refocuses us after all the dissipation of sight, hearing and speech we could have encountered.

But above all, the work of God is like the invisible bond that holds the absent brother united to the community. The community takes on the responsibility of the brother's absence, his separation, remembering him in the prayer of each Hour of the Office. Thanks to the link with the prayer of the community and of the abbot, the absent monk can have a bit of Jesus' experience when he said of himself, about his mission in the world, which really is the biggest "journey" that you can imagine: "He who sent me is with me: he has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him" (Jn 8:29). The monk who is on a journey can also say this about his community, about his abbot, "he who sent me is with me," because in the work of God the community cultivates this communion with him in prayer. But he must be responsible for this bond, for this accompaniment, doing, as Jesus, what is pleasing to the abbot and the community, staying in obedience and in transparency.

When one is outside the monastery with this awareness, which the Divine Office should always nourish both in those who are present and those who are absent, the radiation of God's work is also verified outside, on the road, meeting people and external realities.

Benedict mandates that the person who returns from a journey is never permitted "to relate to another whatever he may have seen or heard outside the monastery, because this would be a great harm" (RB 67:5). It is evident that St. Benedict does not want to pollute the communal recollection and silence with vain and worldly distractions. But we could also interpret this indication as an invitation to live the journey as a real and gratuitous radiation of God's work that only humility makes possible, and not as a kind of hunt where one goes out to catch "prey" to take back home. The radiation is by its nature centrifugal, not centripetal. The witness that the humble monk must also give even outside is that of a gratuitous relationship with people and things, not the attitude of a possessive thief.

This radiation without a return that the humble monk must communicate to the world, is what St. Benedict, as we have just seen, asks as a discipline of sight, hearing and speech,

that is, as a discipline of the personal relationship. Normally the monk does not go out to distribute money, goods, particular services. Ideally, a monk only goes out by himself, with what he is, and it is in this that must be expressed through him the radiation of God's work which he has left and to which he remains connected through the communion of prayer with the community. In a certain sense, not being first and foremost a preacher nor a social worker, the monk is called to offer to the world essentially the witness of a gaze.

It is true that the monk of the 12th degree of humility keeps his eyes fixed on the ground (cf. RB 7:63), but this attitude is, in my opinion, just a reminder to cultivate a non-possessive gaze, a gaze that does not crave, which does not "absorb" and "consume" what he sees. The gratuitous look, like that of God, is the one that does not possessively stop at the surface of people, but that is attentive to the other's heart: "The Lord said to Samuel, "Do not look at his appearance or the height of his stature. I have rejected him because it does not matter what man sees: in fact, man sees the appearance, but the Lord sees the heart." (1 Sam 16:7)

This gratuitous look is also a radiation that St. Benedict teaches us to cultivate in the Divine Office, in fact, he tells us in chapter 19: "We believe that the divine presence is everywhere, and that the eyes of the Lord scrutinize the good and the evil in every place. However, in a particular way without the slightest doubt, we must believe this when we participate in the Work of God." (RB 19:1-2)

Real Christian beauty is not what one looks out for, what attracts attention, but what one looks at, that radiates on everyone and everything the gratuitous look of God who sees in every person a heart made by God and for God, a heart that suffers and rejoices, and that always needs to be loved and to love.

For this reason, when we are out of the monastery, we must not only learn how to gratuitously look at people, but also not to conceive our witness in a narcissistic way, believing that the more we attract the eyes of others, the more we witness. There is a bit of a tendency today: on the websites of the monasteries, in relationships with the media, in the way of presenting themselves and promoting vocations, that often ends in a "monastic hedonism" that betrays a lack of interior depth. The monastic witness is not a fashion show or a contest to elect Miss or Mister world. Being monks is not a "look," a beauty that wants to attract the attention and admiration of the world. As I said before, Christian and monastic beauty is not in being looked at, but in looking; like the beauty of Jesus. None of the Gospels tells us what color were Jesus' eyes, if he was blond or brown, and even if he was especially nice. Maybe he was short and fat, with crooked teeth. But the Gospels tell us constantly of the gaze of Jesus, of the way he looked at people. It was this that was impressive about Him, this was his beauty, even when on the cross, he was so disfigured and ugly that he did not attract people's eyes, as Isaiah wrote (cf. Is 52:14; 53:2-3), he looked with love at the repentant thief, Mary, John, the centurion and the crowd that insulted Him.

Fr Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori OCist