

## 24th Chapter of the Abbot General OCist for the MFC - 21.09.2013

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

The field, the countryside, symbolizes the productive work which is basically directed to the maintenance and subsistence of the monastery. The work in the fields is the work done for one's daily bread, which is economically profitable and allows the community to live. San Benedict in this list of the circles of radiation of the humble monk has placed the field after mentioning the road, evidently because the fields are outside of the monastery enclosure, and, at times, far from it.

The field in the Rule, as in the Gospel, is the property where you sow and reap, where at times the work is difficult, so much so that in Chapter 41, in which St. Benedict states the time for meals and the duration of fasting, work in the fields becomes a matter for leniency: "If there is work in the field (*operis in agris*) or the summer heat is excessive, continue the meal at the sixth hour" (RB 41:4).

Benedict makes an important allusion to work in the fields in Chapter 48 which is on daily manual labor. Here, too, the difficulty of these labors are emphasized: "If the circumstances of the place or poverty, should require that the monks do the work of gathering the harvest, let them not be sad; for then they are truly monks for they live by the work of their hands as did our fathers and the Apostles." (RB 48:7-8)

We must not forget that Benedict writes in a Roman culture, even if decadent, in which these labors were carried out by slaves. He knows that his monks are largely from this culture. For this reason he helps his monks to grow in awareness and values by referring them to the early monastic tradition of the fathers of the Egyptian desert, and the even earlier tradition of the Apostles, therefore to a Jewish and evangelical way of conceiving and living life. Just think back to all Jesus' references to the work in the fields, to sowing, to harvesting, to work in the vineyard, not to mention the references to sheep farming and fishing, to understand how through the apostles and the early monks of the Egyptian desert a much more positive conception of manual labor penetrated into the Greek -Roman culture.

The difficulty of the work in the fields to which the Rule refers, is, however, also that harshness that comes to characterize human work after original sin, when Adam and Eve had to leave Eden. In fact, God says to Adam: "Cursed is the ground because of you! With sorrow you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, until you return to the earth, for out of it you were taken; dust you are and unto dust you shall return" (Gen 3:17-19)

So we can guess that if the work in the monastery garden ideally recalls the work before original sin, the work of the fields reminds us of the condition of human labor after the Fall. Thus, the "road" that the humble monk travels between the garden and the field reminds us a little bit of the path that led out of paradise and of life in the human condition after the fall of Adam and Eve.

This space of the "field," which in a certain sense is born with the curse of Adam, in the history of humanity has often been the place, not only of fatigue, but also of man's sin. Just think that "while they were out in the field, Cain raised his hand against his brother Abel and killed him" (Gen 4:8). In the Bible we find many enmities and quarrels, and murders, caused by the lust for a field, such as when King Ahab had Naboth killed to take his vineyard (1 Kings 21). There is a whole macabre history of the field which culminated in the purchase by the chief priests of the "potter's field" to bury strangers, bought with the thirty pieces of silver from Judas' betrayal, so that field was then called "the field of blood" (cf. Mt 27:6-10).

The Rule, however, wants to teach us to live this relationship with the "field" as Christ has redeemed it, as the Gospel teaches us to live it, that is, not as a "battlefield," not as a "field of blood" where only the desire for power and possession is expressed, but as a field of God where the Father sends us to work, not to punish us, but because he wants to make us sharers in his work.

After the rich young man refused to follow him, Jesus promises his disciples: "Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life." (Mt 19:29)

The "fields" are the possessions or professions in which each of us works and from which we get our wealth, our patrimony. The person who leaves them to follow Christ finds them a hundredfold again, but a hundredfold that does not belong to them, but that belongs to the Father and that they receive from the Father. The areas of work, of responsibility, of the exercise of our talents in which we are asked to work in the community are these new "fields" to which God calls us to realize ourselves in giving our lives for Christ. This implies that we are not to decide which fields to work in and not even how we work. Whoever lives a duty or a responsibility in community as if they were their thing, their kingdom, betrays their vocation to leave everything to follow Christ, and over time transforms the field of God into a private field, and often into a battlefield where they fight against others. Inevitably one loses the experience of the hundredfold, and perhaps even eternal life. What should be a hundredfold given and received from God, we reduce to a unit, that then appears much less valuable to us than the "field" that one day we left to follow the Lord.

St. Benedict reminds us of this when he speaks of the brothers who know how to exercise an art: "If there are artisans in the monastery, they should practice their crafts

with all humility, provided the Abbot has given them permission. But if any one of them becomes conceited over their skill in their craft, because they seem to be giving some benefit to the monastery, let them be removed from that craft and no longer exercise it unless, after the monk has humbled himself, the abbot again permits him to do it." (RB 57:1-3)

The craft that we know how to do, the training that we have had, the talent that we have: all these are the "fields" of human work that we have left to follow Christ. To practice them in the monastery we need to return to them with humility and obedience, because these fields are no longer ours, nor for us. Now they are given to us and requested of us as God's fields where we are sent to work. If we do not lose this awareness that these fields now belong to God, we will experience the hundredfold of value, and beauty as well, of our natural talents.

But even here, we are educated to this free and fruitful relationship with things and with work only if we exercise and live human work as the field of the work of God. And here we return to our humble monk of humility's 12th degree, who sent to work in the fields, goes there without losing the awareness of the work of God taught him by the celebration of the Divine Office.

There is a very significant expression of what this means in Chapter 50 of the Rule, which I have already mentioned at the beginning of the course. It is the chapter that deals with the brothers who work far away from the oratory and who are traveling, therefore, in particular of the brothers who work in the fields far from the monastery. He says: "The brethren who are working at a great distance and cannot get to the oratory for the hour of communal prayer (...) they should celebrate the work of God there where they work, kneeling in the fear of God" (RB 50:1-3).

The expression in Latin, "*agant ibidem Opus Dei ubi operantur* – they should do the Work of God wherever they work" (50:3) is very significant. St. Benedict asks that the work of God be allowed to penetrate human work, to open the space and the place of our work to God who works. It is as if God's work and human work coincided, merged, so that human work could become an expression and instrument of God's work. This is the real radiation of the work of God, of communal prayer, that is requested and given to us in every area of life and work, and that the humility of kneeling so as to recognize the presence of God here and now in our lives makes possible. Even the hard work of the field, even the fatigue that instinctively we do not like, the fatigue of work that was the curse of Adam, can thus become the sacred place where God works and, in Christ, "makes all things new" (cf. Rev. 21:5).

*Fr Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori OCist*