

6th Chapter of the Abbot General M-G. Lepori OCist for the MFC - 30.08.2014

Are we friends of Christ or just servants? Are we spouses or slaves? To remind myself of the answer I find it helpful to often reread what Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta wrote to her Missionaries of Charity:

"I worry some of you still have not really met Jesus, one to one, you and Jesus alone. We may spend time in chapel, but have you seen with the eyes of your soul how He looks at you with love? Do you really know the living Jesus - not from books but from being with Him in your heart? Have you heard the loving words He speaks to you? Ask for the grace, He is longing to give it. Until you can hear Jesus in the silence of your own heart, you will not be able to hear Him saying "I thirst" in the hearts of the poor. Never give up this daily intimate contact with Jesus as a real living person - not just the idea.

How can we last even one day without hearing Jesus say 'I love you' - impossible. Our soul needs that as much as the body needs to breathe the air. If not, prayer is dead - meditation is only thinking. Jesus wants you each to hear Him - speaking in the silence of your heart. Be careful of all that can block that personal contact with the living Jesus." (25.03.1993).

But already in St. Benedict, not to mention St. Bernard and many other monastic authors, we hear this ardent call of the Bridegroom to the soul. Just think of the passages in St. Benedict's Rule where he asks us to prefer nothing to the love of Christ, to leave everything in order to hurry to meet Him in prayer, in obedience, in service, in welcoming, in reading and in meditation on the Word of God. It is as if St. Benedict is calling us each time to return to the Lord who wants to unite himself to us; this Lord who wants us not only as servants who work and sacrifice themselves for him, but who wants us at his wedding, not only as guests at his wedding, but in the wedding *with Him*.

We just have to think about how St. Benedict presents obedience. For him obedience is the firm foundation of monastic life: "The first degree of humility is obedience without delay. This is the virtue of those who hold nothing dearer to them than Christ" (RB 5,1-2). This is by no means the obedience of servants or slaves, rather it is the obedience of those who are lovers of the Bridegroom, it is the obedience of the men and women who desire Christ, who see in every occasion of obedience an opportunity to participate in a wedding with the Lord. And we know that for St. Benedict the whole of monastic life is a life of obedience, of a listening that responds to the call of God, to the will of God.

This is clear from the very first words of the Rule: "Listen, my son, to the precepts of the Master (...) so that you may return through the labor of obedience to Him from whom you distanced yourself due to the inertia of disobedience." (RB Prol. 1-2)

Disobedience is an escape from the presence of the Lord who calls us to come to Him, to be united with Him. St. Benedict speaks here of the "inertia of disobedience – *inoboedientiae desidia*".

The Latin word "*desidia*" literally means abandoning your own place, that is, failing in one's duties. It seems to be similar to the word, desire, but desire etymologically means that we lack the stars, that is, we do not possess the infinite, and therefore, we want it, we desire it. Instead, *desidia* is the abandonment of what we have, what we are given. Like the prodigal son who, through disobedience, leaves his place as a son in the household of his good father (cfr. Lk. 15:11 ff).

St. Benedict uses the term "*desidia*" two other times. In chapter 48, he adds this note where he speaks of the time on Sundays you must devote to reading: "If anyone should be so negligent and lazy (*desidiosus*) that he will not or cannot study or read, let him be given some work to do so that he will not be idle" (RB 48:23). Here it is very clear that those who abandon their place of a spousal or filial relationship with God – who should express and cultivate a reading and meditation of the Word of God, especially on the Lord's Day – find themselves in the condition of a slave, of a mercenary, of one who needs to work even on Sundays to avoid what is worst.

Finally, the word *desidia* returns in the last chapter of the Rule, where Saint Benedict makes a list of scriptural and patristic sources that should feed our monastic life. But then he adds: "But for us who are lazy (*desidiosus*) and ill-living and negligent they are a source of shame and confusion" (RB 73:7). And then St. Benedict invites us to at least follow his "little rule for beginners" (73:8), in order to return through it to that "place", to that fullness of life in God to which we are called and which we have neglected.

I think it is important in this regard to understand that much of monastic formation, both initial and ongoing, is also a struggle with our hiding from the Lord. The search for God that is asked of the novice – "if he truly seeks God" (RB 58:7) – will be real if the novice agrees to make an interior and exterior journey that will take him or her out of hiding from God to that of being in his presence, a being in his presence that is transparent, humble, as he or she really is, and that is also expressed in how he or she is transparent to the superiors, to the formators, to the community. What is important in the formation of a monk or nun is to strive to live a relationship with the superiors and with the brothers and sisters that is always more in the presence of the Lord, which will help us to convert ourselves from hiding from Him to being confident and humble in his presence. Throughout the Rule, St. Benedict asks us to walk this path in all areas and aspects of life. For Benedict, what is serious is not the fact that we make mistakes, that we fall, but that, like Adam in the garden, we hide ourselves, out of shame, out of pride, out of negligence. It is important then that every novice in the monastic life understands and learns that hiding themselves from the community, escaping from community

life, is hiding and escaping from the Lord, and therefore, it is also a spiritual regression, even in one's relationship with God. It is a "*desidia*", we are not at our place to meet the Lord.

The *desidia* is one of many ways to hide from the Lord. "Adam, where are you?" God called out in the Garden of Eden (cf. Gen. 3:9). If God is looking for Adam, if he does not find him, it means that Adam is no longer in his place in creation, in the place where God could and would meet him, be with him, converse with him. The "*desidiosus*" monk, who is not in his "place", is precisely the one who does not make the effort to be there where God wants to meet him; rather he runs to other matters and occupations. He is a man hiding, an Adam hiding from God.

It is from this abandonment of our place as a beloved of the Lord that Christ comes to call us to Himself: "O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the hollow places of the cliff, show me your face, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely!" (Song 2:14).