

14th Chapter of the Abbot General M-G. Lepori OCist for MFC - 09.09.2014

Perhaps the text that best describes the kind of heart that Christ wants to give us, and how it can become the center of a new life for us, of a life in Christ, is Chapter 2 of the Letter to the Philippians. First, Paul speaks of community relations, then it is as if he remembered that he must help his people understand how these relations are possible, and why they should be as he describes them. Then he talks about the "feelings" of Jesus Christ, or more correctly he speaks of "having the sentiments," of "feeling," of "thinking" like Christ. Literally: "to feel in you as in Christ Jesus" (Phil 2:5). That's just like saying, "have the Heart of Christ in you as a relationship with everyone, as a meek and humble love for others." The first part of the hymn of Philippians 2:6-11, the kenotic aspect of the paschal mystery, makes us understand how the meek and humble Heart of the Son of God became flesh and had a human life, a life of service and obedience, not only to lower oneself, not only to humiliate oneself, but in order to show us and give us His meek and humble Heart, or better his *being* meek and humble of heart. The human condition, the human condition of a servant, in becoming man on the part of God, even unto death on the Cross, has become a manifestation of His Heart, of the communion of the Son with the Father and with everyone.

"Who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself and became obedient
even to the point of death – death on a cross." (Phil 2:6-8)

From this contemplation of the manifestation of the meek and humble heart of the Lord, Paul draws all the meaning and the nature of the Christian life, of the life of the Christian community, which in a certain sense must make visible the feelings that are in Christ, that is, His Heart. The community must live in and show the relationships that constitute it, and which from it radiates the nature of the communion of Christ with everyone. This is what St. Paul expresses first, introducing the hymn, or rather perhaps it is this that has brought the hymn to the mind of Paul again:

"So if there is any consolation in Christ, if there is any consolation, the fruit of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if there are feelings of love and sympathy, complete my joy by the same judgment and with the same love, being in unanimous accord. Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but each of you, with humility consider others better than himself. Each one should not look only for his or her own interests, but also for that of the others." (Phil 2:1-4)

Precisely this ecclesial description of the meek and humble Heart of Christ is the ecclesial incarnation of his communion in preference for the Father and of the

brethren. Often one asks charity as a feat, when, instead, it is more a conforming of oneself to the humble sense of self with which Christ offered to all those whom he encountered the joy of existing, of feeling oneself called and attracted to live with the same heart, with the same feelings.

St. Benedict understood very well that humility is not primarily a moral aspect of the Christian life, rather it is its mystical heart, its wellspring. Christian morality lives the mystery, and the greatest mystery to be lived is that of the Son of God who communicates his life to us.

All the asceticism of humility, which St. Benedict in his Rule sets out as the most profound core of the monastic and Christian life, is precisely an asceticism of the forming of our proud heart to the meek and humble heart of Christ. But an adapting that is an adhering to His relationship with the Father, with ourselves, with the brethren, and also with the events and things. Each rung of the ladder of humility that St. Benedict proposes to climb describes a dimension of the relationship of the meek and humble heart of Christ to which to adhere to, to which to adapt to through the grace received. The "soundness" of the Benedictine method in living the Christian event, always relevant and effective for almost now a millennium and a half, I think comes from the fact that it is based, or is animated by a correct conception of the heart, that is, of the subject of every conversion and Christian life. The human "rightness" of the Benedictine method, which absolutely does not censor anything positive and negative of the human experience, I think is really due to how St. Benedict, listening obviously to the Gospel, to the Apostles and to the Fathers, conceives of the human heart in its relational nature, as the subject of human relatedness, and of a freedom called to be realized in the love of God.

In the Prologue of the Rule, with quotations from Holy Scriptures, St. Benedict speaks of the ears of the heart, of the eyes of the heart, of the speech of the heart (cf. RB Prol. 1,28,26). Elsewhere he speaks of the thoughts of the heart (4:50) and the affection of the heart (7:51). In summary, the heart is relational, it is the center of the relational capacity in us, who can choose good and evil, that is, to choose to open ourselves or close ourselves to the relationship, to love and to truth.

Christian and benedictine asceticism works on the heart, which is hardened (RB Prol. 10; 2:12), autonomous (3:8), murmuring, that is, it is negative in its judgment and in its view of reality and people (4:24; 4:50; 5:17-18; 7:44; 7:48), proud (7:3), weighed down (39:9); it can come to an expansion of itself to being an "expanded heart," of an athlete of Christ, a "heart dilated by the unspeakable sweetness of love", which allows one to "run the way of the commandments of the Lord" (Prol. 40). The expanded heart is a heart in love with Christ, imbued with the Holy Spirit. But this is the result of a process in which the heart accepts to be humiliated in its pride (7:8), practicing compunction (49:4), but in reaching out to God, I would say almost *intending* itself with God (*intentio cordis*) (52:4).

In the end, the heart changes, is converted, when it accepts not being a tank but a source. Compunction constantly "cuts" the heart so that it does not close, but remains open to being a source, even if wounded, as Jesus' Heart was.

It is the mystery proclaimed by Ezekiel: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you, I will take your stony hearts out of you and give you a heart of flesh." (Ez 36:26)

One might ask in what sense a heart of flesh is better than a heart of stone, or you can ask if the prophet, instead of saying a "heart of flesh", would not have done better calling it "a heart of gold", or a "heart on fire".... But a heart of flesh has two qualities, one active and the other passive, that no other substance or material has. The active quality is to give life, to give blood and life to the whole body. A heart of flesh works tirelessly to give life to the body. A heart of stone cannot do this, and neither can a heart of gold. The passive quality of a heart of flesh is apparently the opposite of the active quality, and that is, a heart of flesh can be hurt, it can bleed, it can be emptied in order to give its life for another. In a figurative sense the two capacities seem to coincide. A heart of flesh, which Christ chose to be incarnated with, is a heart that gives life, loving to the point of letting itself be hurt and totally emptied.