

20th Chapter by the Abbot General OCist for the MFC – 17.09.2012

"The ninth degree of humility is that a monk restrain his tongue and keep silence, not speaking until he is questioned. For the Scripture shows that 'in much speaking there is no escape from sin' (Prov. 10,19) and that 'the talkative man is not stable on the earth'. (Ps. 139,11).

The tenth degree of humility is that he be not ready and quick to laugh, for it is written, 'The fool lifts up his voice in laughter' (Eccles. 21,23).

The eleventh degree of humility is that when a monk speaks he should do it so gently and without laughter, humbly and seriously, in few and sensible words, and that he be not noisy in his speech. It is written, 'A wise man is known by the fewness of his words'." (RB 7, 56-61)

These three degrees describe the exterior attitudes in which saint Benedict sees the way that the humility of heart and conscience must become the expression of the person. An expression of the person as someone able to have a relationship with others. In these three degrees, humility becomes a different way of being in relationship with others. It is this dimension that must help us to understand them and to appreciate them, because normally when we listen to them it is with half a smile, as we listen to the reasoning of a child, or an old man recalling the customs of times gone by. But if we understand that in these degrees of humility, a conversion of our relationships, our way of being with others takes place, we understand that they are important, equally as a way of witnessing to others, as I said a few days ago, the new and evangelical feeling of life and the person, that humility should make grow and mature in us.

The theme of these three degrees, in fact, is not so much that we must not speak or laugh. The theme is that we mature in the consciousness of ourselves a way of being with others that is humble, and humble signifies here, an attitude according to which, in the relationship, we do not impose ourselves, we do not become the centre of attention. The Holy Trinity teaches us that the heart and the substance of a true relationship of love is Love itself, the Holy Spirit, and this heart and this substance renders relationships stronger and freer, when they are more silent, humble and peaceable.

These three degrees of humility reflect principally the qualities of the Holy Spirit, that the Spirit himself want to inspire in us and is what saint Paul describes in his letter to the Galatians. These qualities are all relational qualities: "What the Spirit brings is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self control." (Ga 5,22)

If we understand that these three stages of humility speak about that, then we realise that they are not exterior signs of humility, that they are not just "good manners" so as not to upset others, or seem superficial or coarse. In actual fact they are the degrees in which a deep humility, deeper than our heart, because it is God's humility, the humility of the Holy Spirit irradiates through our poor beings. It is a grace, a grace

that few people remember to ask for, but if we all ask for it, it could change the world, because it would change all relationships and, therefore, all humanity.

A grace that, essentially, has but a price: silence. Not a silence in the sense of an absolute, as an absence of noise and sounds, but a relational silence. Saint Benedict uses the magnificent term "*taciturnitas*", that means, if you like, to renounce our turn to talk, that implies a wish to be more attentive to what the other is saying than to what we want to say, a preference for listening rather than speaking. "*Taciturnitas*", as saint Benedict explains (7,56), is to wait to be questioned before speaking, that means, waiting for my word, rather than imposing itself, should be asked for, desired for by the other. It is a silence in which we do not impose ourselves, in which our bursts of laughter do not impose themselves, it is what stimulates my gaiety, but is perhaps not the cause of the other person's joy. It is a silence in which our own quantity of words or our own eloquence (*multiloquium*) do not impose themselves. A silence that allows words to be reasonable, "*rationabilia*" (7,60), that gives us the time to think about what we want to say, before saying it.

A taciturn silence is not for itself, it is not for silence, but is at the service of a humble and true word, attentive to others and that really aims for communion. As we see in the fruits of the Spirit, it is not about a silence that cuts short a relationship, but one that makes them truly themselves, truly relationships, truly possible, a true face to face.

If we meditate on our experience, we should admit that the people who strike us most are not those who talk a lot, but those who know how to listen to us. It is not those who make themselves seen, but those who see that we exist and give us their attention. And who, by this attitude, help us to always want this quality of attention in ourselves, despite our immature tendency to always want to impose and attract attention to ourselves.

Christian beauty, more than a superficial and empty beauty, that catches everyone's attention, is a beauty that looks, the beauty of a look.

Christian joy, more than in the laugh, is in the smile. One can laugh alone, or only for oneself. A smile is always for others, it is always a gift.

Christian truth, more than in speeches, is in listening, and in the words that create in us the desire to be silent to hear the word or the silence of the other.

In these degrees of humility, an allusion is made to a great depth of relationship and charity, because they describe an exchange between people in which, that which is given one to another is not just something, but the relationship itself. Humility is the depth of the relationship in which, essentially, what we give one to another is charity and prayer. It is the quality of the relationship that is nearest to the Trinitarian Relationship, or rather, allows the Trinitarian Relationship to draw near to our relationships and animate them with the "light breeze" (1Kn 19,12) of the breath of the Holy Spirit.

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