

## 21<sup>st</sup> Chapter by the Abbot General OCist for the MFC – 18.09.2012

"The twelfth degree of humility is that a monk should not only have humility in his heart but also in his body, and that this humility should be visible at all times to those who see him. That is to say that whether he is at the Work of God, in the oratory, in the monastery, in the garden, on the road, in the fields or anywhere else, and whether sitting, walking or standing, he should always have his head bowed and his eyes toward the ground. Feeling the guilt of his sins at every moment, he should consider himself already present at the dread Judgment and constantly say in his heart what the publican in the Gospel said with his eyes fixed on the earth: 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner' (Lk 18,13; Mt 8,8); and again in the Prophet: 'I am bowed down and humbled everywhere' (Ps. 37,9)." (RB 7,62-66)

"Not only in the heart...but also in the body" (RB 7,62). The last degree of humility is a degree of unity of the monk's whole person in humility. The truly humble man is unified and thus, truly a monk (from the Greek *monos*, one, unique). We should think, before anything else, about this unity of the person when we read this degree of humility, because, if we do not think of the unity, only attitudes, positions, a way of doing things remain, which instead of edifying, only annoy us, and get on our nerves. The attitudes of humility are disagreeable when they only stem from the body and not the heart, betraying a division of the person. When humility is true, it is in the heart, the signs do not bother us because they are sincere, a sincere radiance from the heart which commits the whole body.

Humility truly unifies the person, and makes them truly "monastic". Why is this? Why does humility unify both heart and body? In itself, it is not humility that unifies but Christ. Humility unifies our whole person because it makes us adhere to Christ, first of all with the heart and finally also with the body, with the body that expresses the heart. Pride does not unify, because pride is the attitude that separates us from God and from everybody. Man, created by God for God and in His image, has lost his unity through his separation with God. Man does not find his unity in himself; his communion with God unifies him. And humility is, precisely, the return to the humus that God can model in His image and resemblance by creating man, and who he vivifies by the breath of his Spirit (cf. Genesis 2,7).

The twelfth degree of humility does not speak to us, as we might think to start with, about exterior attitudes, but of the relationship with God, of the conformation to Christ who, from the heart radiates in the whole person. The body with the head inclined ("*inclinato capite*"), is not, first of all, the body of a pious monk, but the crucified body of Jesus, of the Christ of the Passion according to saint John: "After he had taken the vinegar, he said, 'It is accomplished!', and bowing his head he gave up the spirit." (Jn 19,30)

Everything, for Jesus as for us, is completed in the humility of a bowed head that allows the Holy Spirit to breathe on the world, to animate the Church, to fill us with

charity, that is to say, to renew in us the creation of mankind, of the new Adam, from the earth, from the humus of our human condition.

The new man who saint Benedict presents to us at the end of the degrees of humility is not an idealised man, a man who purifies himself to save himself: he is, to the contrary, the repentant publican in the Gospel of Luke (18,9-14), a man who does not deem himself worthy of lifting his eyes to God, who takes the last place, who beats his breast, who defines himself only as a sinner. This is the new man, the unified man, the true image of a Christian monk. Because he is a man justified by God, rendered just by God, pardoned by God, a man who God can remodel by the grace of his Spirit.

In fact, saint Benedict makes here an amalgam between the repentant publican and the centurion who asks Christ to heal his sick slave, and who says to Jesus "Lord, I am not worthy to have you under my roof, just give the word and my servant will be healed." (Mt 8,8)

The ladder of humility left from the degree where it is asked of us to remember that God is always present. At the end, the consciousness of this divine Presence has become clear to the point of filling the heart with the fear of God, with a feeling of indignity before a God who comes to dwell in us and wants to heal us. Like Peter in his boat, having seen the miraculous catch of fish: "Leave me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" (Lk 5,8).

But it is precisely the humble man, who knows himself to be a sinner, unworthy of God, the one to whom the Lord is the closest, because it is Jesus who takes before us the last place, the place of sinners and this place is the Cross. When he inclines his head and says that everything is accomplished, it is precisely the moment when the presence of God in our humanity justifies all sinners. To recognise oneself as unworthy of this divine mercy, at the same time asking for it like the publican, "God be merciful to me a sinner" (Lk 18,13), signifies, correctly, that we must, accept in our misery the humility of Christ, the one that saves and justifies us.

All the great monastic tradition which repeats Jesus' invocation, begging his mercy, the "*Kyrie eleison*", has understood that the repentant and humble publican, Jesus shows us the most true human attitude, the most faithful conception of our "me", that makes of our "me" a space which grace can invade, and fill with Pascal joy.

Saint Benedict asks of us this consciousness of ourselves and this opening of the beggar to grace everywhere, in each place and situation, making a detailed list: "In the Work of God, in the oratory, in the monastery, in the garden, on the road, in the fields, everywhere, be he seated, walking or standing" (7,63). When one has the right attitude of heart, one has it equally in the body, one has it in all the positions of the body and in each field of our everyday life. The man unified by humility unifies everything, lives a universal unity, which is that of the charity of Christ.

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