

22nd Chapter by the Abbot General OCist for the MFC – 19.09.2012

Today, as we have reached the end of chapter 7 of the Rule, I am giving you my last Chapter, this will give you a holiday of two quarters of an hour; and two calmer days for me and my generous and competent translators on line: Mother Eugenia, Annemarie, Gillian and Sister Michaela, without forgetting Agnese, who, as well as all she does for the Course, puts the Chapters on the homepage.

Yesterday, with the twelfth degree of humility we came to the figure of the repentant publican, in opposition to the proud Pharisee (Lk 18,9-14). Both these characters are a creation by Jesus, because it is a parable. Jesus makes a summary of his teaching by saying: "Whosoever exalts himself will be humbled and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Lk 18,14). It is the phrase that saint Benedict mentions in the first verse of chapter 7: "Divine Scripture cries: Everyone that exalts himself shall be humbled; and he that humbles himself shall be exalted." (RB 7,1)

So this chapter culminates there where it started. But at the end, saint Benedict does not quote the phrase: he prefers to show us, like Jesus, a model of humility to imitate. And he already asks us to have enough humility to accept that the model to imitate is not a virtuous man, but a repentant sinner. Benedict is conscious of the risk that each monk and nun takes to be satisfied with and be proud of his or her exterior observance, but also the interior one, and to consider it to be a quality thanks to which God should also bow and for which God should prefer us to everybody else. As the Pharisee prays: "I thank you, God, that I am not grasping, unjust, adulterous like the rest of mankind, and particularly that I am not like this publican here. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes on all I get." (Lk 18,11-12)

We have already seen this preoccupation of saint Benedict, that we should not be proud of our observance, in the Prologue of the Rule, when we find the reference to the Magnificat defining the fear of God. It is worth while coming back to this phrase: "It is they who, fearing the Lord do not pride themselves on their good observance; but, convinced that the good which is in them cannot come from themselves and must be from the Lord, glorify the Lord's work in them using the words of the Prophet: 'Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to Your name give the glory'." (Prol. 29-30)

Essentially, in the light of the mystery of humility, it is as if were superimposed the very pure figure of the Virgin Mary and that of the repentant publican to remind us that justification is always the work of God, that it is always like a surprise that God gives to the humble. Mary's Magnificat sings that surprise, the astonishment of the redeemed. The amazement faced by grace, in front of the fact that our salvation, our conversion, the change in our life, is grace, is a gift of the Spirit.

Humility has an immense value because it is the only price of grace, the only currency that can buy, can earn grace. Because the grace of God is free by its nature,

so the currency that buys it must be valueless. The humility of Mary, the humility of the publican, the humility of the good thief, or of Peter after having disowned Jesus, is precisely the realisation that nothing in us merits grace, God's charity. Grace can only surprise us, fill us with astonishment, and the humble heart is the heart of a child open to that surprise.

I already commented the end of the chapter on humility when we began it. But now we must reread it in the light of what we have seen during these past days: "Having, therefore, ascended all these degrees of humility, the monk will arrive straight away at that love of God, which being perfect, casts out fear (1 Jn 4,18). In virtue of this love, all things which at first he observed not without fear, he will now begin to keep without any effort, and as it were, naturally by force of habit, no longer from the fear of hell, but from the love of Christ, from the very habit of good and the pleasure in virtue. May the Lord be pleased to manifest all this by His Holy Spirit in His servant now cleansed from vice and sin." (RB 7,67-70)

In fact, saint Benedict describes here also, above all here, great amazement. He has hardly shown us the bowed, miserable figure of the repentant publican that, suddenly, he continues with the description of a monk who "straight away – *mox*" (RB 7,67) is overflowing with love, with confidence in the Holy Spirit.

It is precisely the experience of grace, the grace of God that surprises us. Up until the minute before, this monk was a repentant sinner, who did not dare to lift up his eyes, who struck his breast and who, perhaps, cried. Then, suddenly, he is overfilled with the joy of being saved, and above all transformed by the love of God. God's charity overwhelms him, and it is a surprise. And this charity "expels", "throws out" fear, as saint John says in his first letter quoted here by saint Benedict (1Jn 4,18).

Grace surprises us by removing fear, by filling us with charity which is not ours, but from God, and the first effect of this gift is that fear has no longer any place in us. The opposite of fear, of being scared, is not so much courage, but love. Because our greatest fear is that of giving our life. God's charity transforms this fear to desire. The offering of oneself that made us afraid, now we want it, and we are glad that the moment has arrived. It is the surprise of grace, and it is what we always need, what our communities need, our Orders, the Church needs. What fear of losing and giving our life is hidden behind all the forms of "crisis" and negligence that we see in ourselves and in our monasteries! Corrections are not sufficient, nor are reforms. A surprise is needed. We need men and women that are open to the surprise of grace, and often it is the one who is considered the least "worthy" who is the first to jump because of this surprise and to witness to others that one can believe in love: "We ourselves have know and put our faith in God's love towards ourselves. God is love and anyone who lives in love lives in God and God lives in him." (1 Jn 1,16)

In the novel by Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, the Starets Zosima, in one of his instructions, accurately summarises the attitude of the heart which the path of humility and love, that saint Benedict proposes, should lead us to:

"Sometimes, you will feel perplexed, above all on seeing the sins of men, and you will ask yourself: "Must I use force, or humility and love? Always choose humility and love. If you take this decision once and for all, you will be able to subjugate the whole world. Humility and love together are a powerful force, greater than anything else, there is nothing like it." (Dostoyevsky *The Brothers Karamazov*, Book VI, 3, g).

It is to this unity of humility and love that saint Benedict wants to lead us. To change the world with the power of God, starting, however, from the conversion of our heart that is, essentially, the true "world" that leaves us perplexed and in which we see the sins. Saint Benedict accompanies us, and lets us be accompanied, with humility and love; and he asks us to be companions each one for us the others, above all by mutually forgiving each other.

A few months ago, I was coming back from an appointment in the Vatican that had filled me with preoccupations and fear. I took the road beside the Tiber to get away from the traffic and the crowds. At a certain moment a very thin young man who looked slightly confused, approached me. He asked me if I was a "man of God" and if he could speak to me. He told me straight away that he was psychologically ill, and it was visible. Then he asked me if I agreed to accompany him part of the way along the Tiber. I could not say no. He added: "On condition that afterwards you come back here with me, because I have phobias, and I cannot go back alone. But for me it is important to go just to a certain place, I will tell you where". I hesitated, because for me, it did not only mean to go two miles with the person who asks you to go one, as Jesus asks us, but to do three as go there and back I would have still one more trip to go home. But again, I could not say no. On the way he told me of his fears and sufferings, fruit, amongst others, of the abuse he had suffered in his childhood. What he was really asking me, in fact, was just to tell him that he was not bad, that he was not the devil that he seemed to think he was. I felt how much Christ loved him in his poverty, and basically, he is one of those who carry the wounds of the world. At a certain moment, after a good way, we arrived at the point where we had to turn back. There, however, I realised that the route that we had done together did not need to be prolonged. I said to him: "Listen, I will willingly return with you if you like, but I am sure that now you can do it by yourself, you need not be afraid, the Lord is with you and we are united and friends even at a distance". "That's true, he answered, I'm not afraid any more, I can go back alone!". He knelt down and asked me to bless him. I gave him my Rosary and he gave me his, which he wore around his neck. Then he stepped out determinedly, without looking back.

I think that, in monastic life too, we must know how to accompany each other like this, with availability, but also towards freedom from our fears to go on the way of life, the way following the Lord. Saint Benedict teaches us this accompaniment. He teaches us to allow ourselves to be accompanied and to accompany others, in a long stream where nobody is superior and no one is inferior, because Christ, the most humble and great Lord, is always amongst us.