

2nd Chapter by the Abbot General OCist for the MFC – 24.08.2012

Yesterday we meditated on the fact that our availability to conversion depends on the kind of joy we are seeking for our life. In the parable of the prodigal son, we saw how the elder brother lived with a desire for superficial, ephemeral changes, that blocked him from a true conversion of heart which would have allowed him to enter into his father's joy, which is a joy of love always possible and always greater because its motive, its aim, is infinite and eternal.

In Luke's gospel, there is another very explicit image of the opposition between the concern for superficial change and the joy of conversion to Christ. This time it is not a question of two brothers but of two sisters, Martha and Mary (Luke 10,38-42).

The thing that really distinguishes the two sisters is not the action and the contemplation, but precisely the object of their joy, and thus the change they want in their life. Martha is completely taken up with the concerns that all immediate things should go smoothly. Her heart is occupied by the desire to offer a good meal to her guests. That, of course, is not a bad thing and can be a sign of great charity. It becomes a problem however, when this wish occupies and preoccupies all one's heart and all our joy stems only from that.

Her sister Mary, sitting at Jesus' feet and listening to his words shows that for her the dearest thing to her is Jesus himself, that her joy is Christ and all that comes from him. That is the "better part" (Luke 10,42) that nobody can take away from us, because the presence and the word of the Lord are a treasure that nothing can corrupt nor diminish. The "better part" is the preference for Christ. He who chooses it, who seeks it like Mary of Bethany, never loses his joy, whatever happens.

Jesus asks of Martha to live also this preference that is not ephemeral, to live for the "indeed only one" (Luke 10,42), without limiting the desire of her heart for infinite happiness to that which passes, which is corruptible, and does not give us freedom. The conversion that Jesus asks of her is not to make more effort, because Mary does not do anything except sit at Jesus' feet and to listen to him. Jesus asks of Martha not to limit her desire for happiness to that which she does, or to what others do or do not do, not to stop at the immediate situation, to her project on the way that things should go.

But there is another episode in Luke that brings to light the distinction between those who wait for joy from an exterior changes and those who are ready to convert their heart to Christ. It is the episode of the two criminals crucified with Jesus (Luke 23,39-43).

The first criminal wants Jesus to change the circumstances of his life, to free him from the cross: "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us as well!" (Luke 23,39). He wants to use Jesus to realise his joy, but Jesus is not his joy. Thus, there is no willingness in him to convert, to convert his heart.

The good thief, to the contrary, accepts that a change must take place above all within himself and not in the circumstances. This attitude towards conversion opens him to the joy without limit that only Jesus can give: to always stay with him: "Today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23,43).

The good thief defines the right attitude that I have tried to describe yesterday and today, the attitude of conversion that seeks until the end joy in Christ, using the expression, surprising on the lips of a poor criminal, of the "fear of God". When he explains to his companion why his demands on Jesus are erroneous, he defines as "the fear of God" the right attitude when dealing with Jesus-Christ and ourselves: "Have you no fear of God at all, you got the same sentence as he did?" (Luke 23,40). It is the "fear of God" that allows him to live in truth the terrible circumstances that he is suffering. And for him, the "fear of God" signifies, in the first place, to recognise the mystery of Christ who suffers and dies innocently for us and then to trust completely, in simplicity and confidence, to this mystery: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (Luke 23,42).

The good thief expresses the perfection of conversion by the fact of putting in Christ all the joy and the salvation of his life.

Well, this correct religious attitude when dealing with God and ourselves, the "fear of God", is very present in the Scriptures, above all in the Psalms and equally in Saint Benedict's Rule, and I would like to deepen our understanding of it in the next Chapters, because I think that it is fundamental to be able to live our vocation, and to live with true joy. In the story of good thief, the Gospel tells us that the attitude of the "fear of God" is the truly human accomplishment, is the fullness of humanity, is Christian saintliness. This is why Saint Benedict wants to teach us this attitude of heart and life, that today, we have the tendency to forget, to consider it to be out of fashion, because we do not understand it in the right way, and because, influenced by ideologies of modern times, we think that the fear of God is a mortification of our freedom, our intelligence and our happiness. Instead of that, the Word of God and monastic tradition tell us the contrary; that the fear of God is the fundamental condition of freedom, of wisdom and of the happiness of mankind, because the fear of God is the attitude of humility that opens us to the work of the very good Lord in our heart and in our life.

The good thief teaches us that the fear of God carries its accomplishment in our conversion, by bringing us to count totally on Christ and on the gift that he makes of himself, and of his friendship that desires us to be with him forever. When Saint Benedict, at the end of the Rule, expresses the desire that Christ, absolutely preferred above all else, "should lead us altogether to eternal life" (RB 72,12), fundamentally, he identifies us all with the good thief, he shows him to us as being the master of salvation welcomed with the humility of the fear of God.

We shall increase our understanding of this subject in the next Chapters.

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