

4th Chapter by the Abbot General OCist for the MFC – 28.08.2012

I said a few days ago that the fear of God is considered today as being an old fashioned attitude, because for contemporary mentality it seems to be opposed to freedom, to intelligence and to the happiness of mankind. The thing that leads us to this sentiment is the pretension that modern man should and ought to be able to develop himself all alone, to be his own creator and saviour. And we are still in this mentality, it determines the way we conceive science, politics and, in the first place ethics. From the moment that man creates and saves himself, it is also he who must give rules for this creation and this salvation. Moral rules, if there must be some, can be made, unmade and remade by a human being, it is only necessary to be in agreement thanks to a majority or to impose oneself by force on public opinion.

People often demand from the Church that she should also adapt to this conception of man, or at least that she should stand by and not disturb this great work.

Of course, we find traces of this mentality within ourselves and in our monasteries, and we find it difficult to admit a way of life such as the one inspired by saint Benedict should be any good for us today. We agree that saint Benedict should slightly inspire our way of life, that he should suggest in a small way monastic forms and customs, but that he should ask for a radical conversion of our conception of ourselves, of our conception of life, that, we find difficult to accept, or at least we do not find it very important. The entire monastic and community framework established by saint Benedict's Rule, is as if it were there only to help us do our work of developing our life and ourselves. We do not imagine it as being the educative environment in which the master craftsman is God and we ourselves the work, created and saved by him.

In parenthesis, it is good to recall, as the Church and so many people of good will have often done these last decades, that this conception of mankind capable of developing on his own his freedom, his wisdom and his happiness, capable of being loved by himself, has sunk long ago, has symbolically and really sunk at Auschwitz. After Auschwitz, but also in the Russian Gulags and the thousand other camps and ways of doing by which, on all continents, humanity has been exterminated and is still today with now more than a billion children aborted, after all that, he who pretends that mankind can guarantee by himself freedom, wisdom and happiness in his life, it is as though he did it by trampling with scorn and cruelty on the thousands, the billions of victims of human pride which is raised against God.

I say this because I think faced by the suffering of humanity, and especially innocent suffering, often we content ourselves with a little compassion, or anger and above all sentiments of helplessness. But we rarely think that the real the true reaction should be our own willingness to convert from the proud and autonomous position that lead to the Shoah, to convert to a conception of ourselves recognising once more that the truth of man is to be created and saved by God and not by oneself. Our willingness to live in the fear of God, asking of the Lord the freedom, the wisdom and the happiness that only He can and wants to give us.

This is the reason that the charisma of saint Benedict is paradoxically more up to date today than fifteen centuries ago. It is more topical after Auschwitz than after the fall of the Roman Empire. In Benedict's time it was urgent to reconstruct society, education, but today, there is above all an urgency to reconstruct mankind, the conception that man has of himself, the consistency of his "me" as God thought it, created it and loved it.

You understand that if we are conscious of this, we can no longer consider ourselves as having arrived at the goal when we make Profession. We can no longer measure our monastic path in determined stages. The engagement to *conversatio morum* in filial obedience and fraternal stability will never end. It is the whole image of God in our self that must be reconstructed and reformed, not by ourselves, but by God. We are, like Mary, called to consent, to desire life and happiness to the point of accepting them from God.

The fear of God coincides with this availability, with this conception of our self that recognises and accepts that freedom, wisdom and happiness are a grace, are the work of God in our heart, the creative and saving work of God who models us in love to lead us to the fullness of that which we are, to the complete image of Him in us, to holiness.

This disposition is evident first and foremost in the Rule. It is enough to reread the Prologue that presents us with the son gone far away and lost in disobedience, coming back home to restart building his life in obedience to the Father full of goodness (Prol. 1-2). This is why saint Benedict asks us in the first place "to beg of Him with most earnest prayer" that it should be God who perfects that which we undertake (Prol. 4).

Twice saint Benedict speaks about the fear of God in the Prologue, quoting the Psalms. The first time in a passage where he exhorts to decide for conversion: "Let us arise, then, at last, for the Scripture stirs us up, saying, "Now is the hour for us to rise from sleep". Let us open our eyes to the deifying light, let us hear with attentive ears the warning which the divine voice cries daily to us, "Today if you hear His voice, harden not your hearts". And again, "Whoever has ears to hear, hear what the Spirit says to the churches". And what does He say? "Come, My children, listen to Me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord." (Prol. 8-12)

He who opts for conversion, that is to say, a person hearing the call of Christ, who recognises that for his life to be true and full, must change, must renew himself, the Holy Spirit answers by offering the paternal formation to the fear of God: "Come, my sons, listen to me, I will teach you the fear of the Lord" (Ps. 33.12).

This formation allows us to grow in humility, without self-glory, that is to say without falling back into the autonomous pride that separated us from the Father. This is expressed in the second passage of the Prologue in which the fear of God is spoken about, in verse 29, but we shall see that tomorrow.

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