

5th Chapter by the Abbot General OCist for the MFC – 29.08.2012

““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."” (RB Prol. 10-12).

Saint Benedict, in this passage of the Prologue, manages to mix together four biblical quotations – Psalm 94,8; Matthew 11,5; Apocalypse 2,7 and Psalm 33,12 – to invite us to a true path of conversion, a path that opens the heart to God's call which is addressed to us by Christ and by the Holy Spirit. Lastly, saint Benedict makes God's invitation to conversion culminate by listening in a filial way that accepts to learn from the Holy Spirit the fear of God: "Come, My children, listen to Me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord" (Prol. 12).

This means to say that the Rule does not presuppose that we enter the monastery already perfect in the fear of God, but we enter to learn, to be educated in this correct attitude before God. We understand then that for saint Benedict the fear of God coincides with monastic life, that monastic life becomes our profound identity in the measure in which we grow in the fear of God. The Holy Spirit wants to form in us this virtue, wants to penetrate in our heart this relationship with God, and the whole Rule teaches us that.

The second mention in the Prologue of the fear of God helps us to understand better this availability to and conception of monastic life. Saint Benedict asks God through Psalm 14 the question: "Lord, who has the right to enter your tent or live on your holy mountain" (Ps 14,1). He asks this question to learn from God what kind of person could persevere in monastic life, in the monastery, to find there communion with God. The monastery, effectively, is for him "the house of God" (RB 31,19; 53,22; 64,5).

At a given moment, God's answer to that question states clearly that the condition to live in the house of God, on his Holy mountain, and thus in the Temple of his presence amongst us, is the fear of God.

““Lord, who has the right to enter your tent or live on your holy mountain?" (...) 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, magnify the Lord who works in them, using the words of the Prophet, "Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to Your name give the glory!"” (Prol. 23,29-30).

By these words, saint Benedict says from the beginning of the Rule that the condition for really living in the Lord's house is not so much the good observance but the fear of God lived humbly. And humility means to render glory to God for all that he operates in us.

Here saint Benedict identifies the attitude of the fear of God with the humble conscience of oneself that Mary expresses in the Magnificat: "They magnify the Lord who works in them – *operantem in se Dominum magnificent*" (Prol. 30).

The Virgin Mary is never mentioned in the Rule, but here the allusion to her is clear: "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord (...) The Almighty has done great things for me, Holy is his name." (Lk 1,46.49)

Saint Benedict speaks as well about the theme of the sanctification of the name of God, quoting Psalm 113b,1: "Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to Your name give the glory!".

Yesterday I spoke about the erroneous position that modern man has taken in the conception of himself. A position in which, when he says "me", God has no place. The 'me', it is as if it was defined only by itself. We are not longer used to define ourselves in relationship. For a child, it is natural that he defines himself in relationship to his mother and father. Later, little by little, we get used to defining ourselves only in relation to ourselves. The relationship with God, the relationship with others, even those we love, always becomes, in some way, absorbed by our ego, in a thousand ways. For that reason, to live prayer and live community life becomes more and more difficult. It is why we have so much difficulty in living the divine Office, which is the foundation of our life and the very essence of our vocation, because the Office is by its very nature the gesture above all else in which the relationship with the Lord and with brothers and sisters should be more important than ourselves. But it is rare that we live it like this. But to this theme of the divine Office we shall return later.

Now, I must insist on the fact that, on the threshold of the Rule, on the threshold of the monastic path that saint Benedict proposes and as a first stage in the return to the truth of our life that wants to accompany the Rule, the warning is not to have the illusion that we can walk this path if we are not willing, at least by desire, to convert in our relationship with the Lord the conception that we have of ourselves and of all we do. Saint Benedict states clearly that it is not possible to change if it is not the Lord that changes us. It is not possible that anything good should happen in us or through us if it is not God who does it. It is only if we magnify the Lord that we become great; it is only if we sanctify the Lord that we become holy; it is only if we live for the glory of God that we are glorified.

The fear of God coincides with humbleness, a humbleness that we can never define in ourselves, but only in relationship to the Lord. Humbleness is the fear of God that enables us to live for his glory, for the glory of his name.

In any case, saint Benedict helps us to perceive from the start of monastic life that God is working in us. The way he expresses it is very beautiful: "*Operantem in se Dominum magnificent* – they magnify the Lord who works in them" (Prol. 30). He invites us to contemplate God at work in our lives and contemplate this work by magnifying and glorifying the Lord. So that our life, instead of being that which prompts in us pride or disillusionment, vanity or discouragement, becomes the sign of a living God who creates and shapes his creatures, and above all mankind, so as to make something "very good" (Genesis 1,31).

This contemplation of God at work in our lives, this contemplation of the grace working in us and in others, is the secret of Christian joy that magnifies and sings the glory of God.

Fr. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori OCist