

## 9<sup>th</sup> Chapter by the Abbot General OCist for the MFC – 03.09.2012

Saint Benedict, asks for the fear of God not only from the cellarer and infirmarer, but from the brothers in charge of reception.

In chapter 53 on the welcoming of guests, he asks that: "The guest house also shall be assigned to a brother whose soul is possessed by the fear of God (*frater cuius animam timor Dei possidet*). Let there be a sufficient number of beds made up in it; and let the house of God be managed by prudent men and in a prudent manner (*et domus Dei a sapientibus et sapienter administretur*)." (RB 53,21-22)

In chapter 66, on the porters of the monastery, Saint Benedict asks that to guard the main door there should be "a wise old man – *senex sapiens*" (RB 66,1). And he adds : "As soon as anyone knocks or a poor person calls, let him answer, *Deo gratias* or *Benedic*. Then with the meekness of the fear of God let him return an answer speedily in the fervour of charity" (66,3-4).

In both chapters it is the question of the relationship of the monastery with those from outside, with strangers, and especially the poor. Sick brothers are the poor of the community; guests, pilgrims, those who ask for hospitality or help, those are the poor from outside. In each case Benedict quotes the parable of the Last Judgement in Mathew 25, in which Jesus identifies them with himself. We have already seen it concerning the sick. For strangers, the identification to Christ is established from the beginning of chapter 53: "Let all guests who arrive be received as Christ, because he will say: 'I was a stranger and you took me in'." (RB 53,1; Mt 25,35). Saint Benedict manages to say of guests that in them "let Christ be adored in them as He is also received" (53,7).

Once again then, the fear of God is necessary to recognise and treat Christ in those who come to us, above all those who come to us without the power of human honour, without riches: "Let the greatest care be taken, especially in the reception of the poor and travellers, because Christ is received more specially in them; whereas regard for the wealthy itself procures them respect." (53,15)

The fear of God that recognises Christ, allows one to see in the other a value that does not appear externally, allows one to see the value that each person has in the eyes of God, to see the value of each person for that which they are, because they exist, and not for what they own or do.

This view is wisdom, and in fact both chapters speak about wisdom: "Let the house of God be wisely managed by the wise" (53,22). The porter must be "a wise old man – *senex sapiens*" (66,1). This recalls the expression in Psalm 110: "This fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (v. 10).

I said in the preceding Chapters, this fear of God and this wisdom have their source in the Cross, in the identification of Christ with human misery. True wisdom is now seeing with the eyes of faith that, in a certain sense, sees human misery filled by the presence of the love of Christ. It is as if when a stranger arrives at the monastery door the length of space and distrust that humanly separates us one from another is filled with that which is dearest and most precious to us: Jesus, God amongst us. Whether a pauper arrives – the pauper in saint Benedict's time was filthy, stinking and in rags – and the space of contempt that humanly separated us from them is filled by Beauty in person, the total beauty of the Son of God. The fear of God which before the Cross became the principal of a new wisdom, the wisdom of faith, changes the kind of our relationship with that to which we felt to be distant, different, an enemy or repulsive, because Christ came precisely to fill with Himself the space of separation between men, and to transform it into a space of communion in charity, in His charity.

Thus these chapter of the Rule on the way of treating the sick, strangers and the poor, even if they speak about certain particular aspects of community life, and in fact aspects that do not seem to concern community life as such, these chapters describe in fact the start of a new world, a deep, limitless cultural and social revolution. It is in this way that a monastic community, as if by osmosis, starts to shed around it that which Paul VI, in his Christmas homily of the Holy Year 1975, defined as the "civilisation of love".

It is by a very beautiful expression that saint Benedict asks the porter brother to answer those who come to the door: "with the meekness of the fear of God" (RB 66, 4). One does not expect the association of meekness with the fear of God. But do not let us forget that for saint Benedict the fear of God is the stupefaction that magnifies the Lord at work in us (Prol. 30). And what more extraordinary work could Christ accomplish in us than the sweetness and humility of his Heart? When Jesus invites us: "Come to me all you who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest. Shoulder my yoke and learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your soul" (Mt 11, 28-29), he describes for us the way in which he himself welcome the pilgrims and the poor that we are, all of us. The porter at the monastery, with the meekness that the fear of God gives, should be nothing else than an instrument of Christ who opens his gentle and humble heart, and invites and welcomes all men to find their rest in Him. And the "light yoke" is perhaps the fear of God that we carry on our shoulders, as an ox that allows himself to be lead, a docility which allows Christ accomplish in us his charity towards everyone.

Dostoyevsky puts on the lips of one of his most miserable and degenerate personages, Marmeladov, the cry that gushes out from all the abandoned of the earth: "Everybody must be able to go somewhere! (...) It is absolutely necessary that everyone have somewhere where they are pitied." (*Crime and Punishment*, First part, II). Is it not perhaps that for which people ask or would like to ask, those who come to our monastery doors?

Saint Benedict knows that we cannot answer all the needy, but he would like that everyone who comes should always find, and not only from the porter, (who today is often no longer there), the meekness of a heart that keeps itself in the presence of God and adores Christ.

There is a strange detail in chapter 66, which I only observed yesterday. Saint Benedict says that the porter must answer with the meekness of the fear of God "as soon as anyone knocks or a poor person calls" (66,3). Why this distinction between those who knock and those who call? Why is it that the poor call instead of knocking like the others?

He who knocks dares approach the door, dares to present himself and enter the house. The poor, it is as if he should call from far, as a leper who does not dare to come nearer. There are the poor who dare not approach, but from whom we hear the call of need.

But perhaps both these ways of attracting the attention of the monks, on the part of those who are outside, are just an allusion to the two ways by which Christ himself asks for our hospitality. "Look, I am standing at the door, knocking..." says Jesus in the Apocalypse (3,20). But by dying on the Cross, Jesus is the poor who cries his feeling of abandonment on the part of the Father (Mt 27, 46) and then "*clamans voce magna, emisit spiritum* – crying out in a loud voice, yielded up his spirit" (Mt 27,50).

There is always Christ himself in the request for welcome from our brothers and sisters, and there is always His cry of abandonment and of death in the cry of the poor that requires from us a heart that listens.

This is why only the fear of God, that faith and the memory of Christ give, enables us to open the door and answer the cry of the poor with the meekness of Jesus.

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