

## Course for OCist Superiors - Rome 2013

### Chapters on the Rule of St. Benedict

July 6, 2013

For St. Benedict, the words of Romans 8:15 explain the name and the vocation of the abbot, *"You have received the Spirit of adopted sons in whom we cry, 'Abba, Father!'".* This verse sums up the heart of the Christian experience, namely, the grace of Salvation through which God not only restores to us the dignity lost by Adam through sin, but by virtue of Christ's death and resurrection freely makes us participants in his divine nature, conforming us to the Son through the Holy Spirit. As St. Paul expresses it again in Ephesians: *"He chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us to be his adopted children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he has freely bestowed on us in His Beloved Son."* (Eph 1,4-6)

The Christians' new redeemed life is a life lived in the presence of the Father in the filial love of Christ given to us in the Holy Spirit. It is a new relationship with God which involves one's whole life, in all its aspects, but which is expressed primarily in one's actual relationship with God in prayer. The whole life of the monastery is directed to sustaining this life of the adopted children of God, and the paternity of the abbot must educate to this, make this grow in his brothers, must correct for this, instruct for this, govern all in function of this.

Fraternal life is a consequence, or rather, it is like a radiation, or an incarnation of this filial life in the Holy Spirit. We are brothers of mutual adoption as we are God's children by adoption. The word "adopt" is composed of two parts: *"ad"* plus *"optare"*, which implies the idea of a free choice of something or someone for oneself and towards oneself. To adopt a child means to choose this child so that it can have a filial relation with those who choose it. To adopt is to choose a *"ad"*, a "to", a "towards us", of that person, it means, then, to open oneself to a particular relationship that was not there before, that would not exist without this option, without this choice, without this freedom. Without the freedom of God, without his gratuitous love, we could not be children towards Him, as the Son is, the Word who is from the beginning *"ad Deum"*, as John expresses it in the Prologue of his Gospel (Jn. 1:1-2). The Triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, has made the choice, the option, of our filial relationship towards Him. This is the life of the redeemed, eternal life, life in the love of God in us.

It is in light of this vocation and the grace of filial adoption that we must understand the meaning, beauty and fervor of monastic prayer, and the responsibility of the abbot or abbess in its regard. If St. Benedict entrusts this responsibility to the Abbot, and it remains his even when he delegates certain functions to others, such as giving the signal for the Office or assigning a Cantor, it is certainly not due to liturgical scruples, but precisely because the whole monastic prayer is aimed at forming and expressing the filial adoption that we receive from God, that is, it is directed towards consenting to this "option" of God for us and towards Him; and so it is intended to be a response of our freedom to the free adoption wrought by God.

This response to the divine adoption begins with the replication and continuous repetition of the call to prayer. The abbot has the primary responsibility of the signal that day and night calls the brothers to common prayer (RB 47.1). He is the first who intones the psalms and antiphons (47.2), and only the one who is designated by him may assume the roles of singing or reading in the Office (47.4).

It can be said that the abbot must constantly repeat to the brothers the free calling and election of God to turn to Him, to enter into a relationship with Him. The abbot always reproduces the original call of God to come to Him with our whole selves, with our body, soul, spirit, with all our qualities or with our faults. Even those who do not have the talent or skills to sing or read go to God with their humility, with their silence, with the sacrifice of themselves in favor of the beauty of prayer. In fact, it is God who calls us to our relationship with Him, which is his essential work, the *Opus Dei* par excellence. When the abbot signals for the Office, when he intones the chanting or authorizes it in the order of seniority in the community, or when he discerns whether the brothers have the required talents and qualities for this, he is just obeying the choices of God who calls all the monks to prayer, who calls each in the order He has willed, who distributes diverse talents, even the natural ones, to whom He wills. Respecting this order chosen by God allows everyone to approach God in creative and charitable unity, in humble unity. Thus, the superior only needs to incarnate the free and multiform call of God in the actual situation of a particular community.

In this regard, I think it is important to emphasise punctuality. The abbot is in charge of beginning and ending the Divine Office, and his first response to this call, as it is for each brother, is punctuality. In this case, the abbot is the one who should be on time before the others, urging each brother to imitate his punctuality. Punctuality is not only chronological, it is relational. The Office takes place at a time that St. Benedict calls "*competens*": "*ut omnia horis competentibus compleantur*" (RB 47.1). Literally it means: the hours in which we go together, God and us, that is, at the appointed time with God and with one another in order to be with Him. The hour of the Office is not only dictated by *chronos*: it is *kairos*, a moment of grace and relationship, a personal event, the coming of God into our lives. This appointment between the members of the community who together celebrate an Office is given to us as a symbol and sensible manifestation of our appointment with God. The fact that there is the abbot himself who is behind the signal given for the Office should educate us to not calculate our punctuality by the clock, but within a relationship. We do not have an appointment with an hour or with minutes, nor with something to do; rather we have an appointment with persons, with divine and human persons - and this changes everything. And I would say that all the meaning, all the beauty and all the fervor that community prayer should express begins here.

Only in this way can one understand that punctuality means, first of all, presence. However, the punctuality of a community cannot be measured solely by the arrival on time of all those who are at the Office, but rather, if all who are called to the Office are present. And this, absenteeism, not being present at the Office, even if one is not exempt, is a sad thing that I see in many communities. It is better that one always arrives late than that one does not come at all, don't you agree?

But it is a fact that there are some monks and nuns who do not give priority to their appointment with community prayer. It is a problem that gnaws at the heart of many superiors, even mine and that of the Father Procurator's here at the Generalate. But it is evident that if this is happening, the problem is not simply negligence towards the Office, but negligence towards God's call. It doesn't pay to complain about it, and by now, punishment isn't even useful. Rather, I think there needs to be a more visible witness on the part of the one who is first and foremost responsible for this community appointment with God, a more visible witness to the meaning and beauty of community prayer, and then, a more visible witness to the encounter with God that the Hours of the Office should be.

The great spiritual father of the Egyptian Coptic monastery of St. Macario, Matta el Meskin, said with acuity: "Every contact with God is prayer, but not every prayer is contact with God" (*Consigli per la preghiera*, Ed. Qiqajon, Bose 1988, p. 13).

Correcting lateness and absences is not just a matter of chronological punctuality and physical presence, it entails the recovery of the experience of prayer as contact with God, as a relationship, as an encounter. If one is not formed to this, it is useless to struggle for years against negligence and absences, because even if one can obtain something on a formal level, one does not get anything of the substance of what is asked or given us to live. It is absurd to go to the Office as slaves when it should be a time in which we accept and experience our adoption as God's children!

But if the abbot or superior, has the first responsibility to call the brethren to community prayer, then he or she is also the first to be responsible for living that prayer as a son, that is, like Jesus, to live it as a time in which we choose God and His choice, in which we opt for the option of God which is to have a relation with us of a Father with his children. The main attention that we should have during the Office is that of putting ourselves in the presence of the Father, like the prodigal son who returns home: "Father, I am not worthy, but I come to you, I'm here before you, I put my trust in you no matter what you will do with me." Then God can embrace and restore us ever anew in the grace of being his children; and he can take care of our fraternal relationships, restore them, reconcile them, deepen them, soothe them, as the father in the parable did when he spoke to his eldest son who was so angry and jealous that he did not even want to go into the house (cf. Lk. 15:11-32). This is how we should deal with all the "absences" from common prayer, whether it is ours or that of others. We have to begin to make ourselves truly present at this marvelous event that every Office, every liturgy, every Eucharist offers us again and again. If we superiors begin to make ourselves present at prayer as fallen men and women who return to the Father placing our lives and our destinies in his hands again, then, from here, from the heart of our monastic vocation, we can always make a fresh start of dealing with the material and spiritual absences of our brothers and sisters in the right way. From this point we can begin again to be made a bit more of an instrument in the adoption of the Father towards each member of our community, and every person entrusted to us or whom we meet; that is, we can be a bit more of an instrument in the mission of the Son and in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

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