

Course for O. Cist. Superiors - Rome 2013

Chapters on the Rule of St. Benedict

8 July 2013

We find the aspect of welcoming back the lost son in order to readopt and rebuild with him a damaged fraternal communion expressed in the role that St. Benedict assigns to the superior during the celebration of the Divine Office. In particular, I find the way in which St. Benedict requests the recitation of the Lord's Prayer at Lauds and Vespers meaningful: "The celebration of Lauds and Vespers must never conclude without the superior reciting the Lord's Prayer at the end for all to hear, because thorns of contention always spring up. Thus, those who find themselves together, may through the promise expressed in this prayer: '*Forgive us as we forgive...*' (Matt 6:12), cleanse themselves of this kind of vice." (RB 13:12-13)

Morning and evening, in the two principal Offices of the monastic liturgy, the Lord's Prayer, the Our Father, is the culmination of common prayer, as it should be. Benedict has the superior sing it alone, as if to emphasize the fact that it is Christ himself who first recites this prayer with us and for us. The main effect of this prayer of Christ in our midst is Redemption, that is, the fruit of the Cross, the forgiveness of our sins. The community, in fact, joins in the recitation of the Lord's Prayer where the petitions become the requests of sinners, that is, the point where the filial prayer of Jesus becomes the prayer of the adopted children: "*Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.*" The superior, who up to the petition for daily bread prays alone, prays, so to speak, in the place of Christ; he continues the prayer as a sinner, which he is, together with all his brothers. The choice to welcome us back as his children which we ask of God with his forgiveness of our sins against Him, with his forgiveness for our squandering all the blessings received, which distanced us from him in the process, this option to readopt us, which we beg from God's mercy, implies a responsibility for our freedom, or rather a consequence, a resonance in our freedom, which is the choice, the option, to reconcile ourselves with our brothers and sisters as we forgive their trespasses against us.

The term "thorns of scandals - *scandalorum spinae*" brings out the profound nature of sin, of vice. The thorns are the sharp points that impede bonding, union, a pleasant relationship. The thorns are a defensive and offensive outgrowth at the same time. It is an image with which Benedict summarizes all the attitudes, words, feelings, thoughts that we produce to defend ourselves from others and offend them at the same time. The thorns symbolize our fear of the other that is expressed in an offense way. And from these thorns, scandals are born. Scandals which make one fall, which give an occasion to each other of being unfaithful to the Father's love, an occasion of falling from the grace of being children of God.

I think that this morning and evening ritual in which the superior, in a sense, "celebrates" the Lord's Prayer as a sacrament of mercy, of grace, that comes down from the Father to penetrate the hearts and relationships of all the brothers, is like a Pentecost. I think that this ritual describes the meaning, beauty and true fervor of all communitarian monastic prayer. It is a prayer that tends to allow the prayer of Jesus to incarnate itself in us and among us; it allows the grace of being God's adopted children to penetrate our freedom until it embraces all the relationships that

we live, until it embraces our whole human life. I think that a deepening of this image of prayer can also be a method of conversion and healing for individuals and communities. It also helps us understand to what depth the abbot must go to be an instrument of the community's constant renewal as it humbly acknowledges itself to be full of the thorns of fear and violence in front of God and in front of others.

The superior's fundamental role as described in chapter 13's liturgical scene, and then replicated in all spheres of monastic life, is essentially to be a witness of the Redemption through prayer and word. This Redemption, thanks to the Son's prayer, descends from the Father as the grace of adoption that is fulfilled in us in the measure that we reconcile ourselves with our brothers and sisters. The filial prayer of the abbot must, it can be said, stimulate the filial and fraternal prayer of the whole community.

I think that starting from this core point we need to understand all the responsibilities that the abbot must exercise, including correction and punishment, to get all the brothers' attendance and fervor at common prayer.

In the end, the abbot must watch over, encourage and correct his brothers in order to help them utilize this wellspring which can bring about the transformation of their lives. And this wellspring is Jesus' prayer to the Father in which the Holy Spirit gives us the gift of uniting ourselves to the Christian community to which we are called to belong. It is precisely in the Divine Office, in the *Opus Dei*, with which we start and finish each day, that we are reminded that we have "*received the Spirit of adopted children in whom we cry, "Abba, Father"*." (Rom 8:15). And it is for this reason that we have a superior and community, that we are cenobite monks and nuns, to remind us to live this mystery. It is only by focusing on our humble and contrite participation in Jesus' prayer to the Father that we can live fraternal charity.

When St. Benedict tells us in no uncertain terms: "Nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God" (RB 43.3), that is, to the Divine Office, we have to think, first of all, of this mystery and event, even before we think of the forms, times and ways of celebrating the Office. We are not asked for a formal preference, a ritual, but for the preference for the mystery that the Office gives us to embrace and live always anew. This mystery is the grace of the filial life that we receive from the Holy Spirit uniting us to Christ's prayer so that we live it in fraternal charity. The whole liturgy is intended to make us remember, celebrate, accept and live this mystery, this grace, so that our life as adopted children may shine forth in all the moments and aspects of our existence.

I do not know how many of us are aware of this importance of common prayer and how many of us live like this, that is, living common prayer as the wellspring of constant renewal for personal and community life. We all suffer because of the many "thorns of scandal" that continually crop up in community. Many of these thorns are real "thorns in the flesh" for the communities, and especially for the superiors. They irritate us terribly and we justly want to be freed from them! We do our best to resolve, tear off, trim all these thorns, but the results are often disappointing, and the thorns always grow back.

How many of us pray the Office in general, and especially the Lord's Prayer, with faith, knowing that we are praying with Christ to the Father, and therefore we can be certain that only the Father can, if he wants, remove the thorns of scandal, heal the one who brings them and the one who it is injured by them, and reconcile the hearts and relationships in the grace of the Spirit that makes us adopted children of God?

How many of us live all the actions, conversations, meetings, corrections, exhortations that are inherent in the abbatial ministry, in this way, in this spirit, with this attitude of heart, as if we continually found ourselves in the presence of God praying the Lord's Prayer with Jesus until the point of being willing to forgive as the Father forgives us, and of welcoming the grace of being God's children and therefore brothers and sisters in Him?

Basically, all the Psalms, all the prayers of the liturgy, want to lead us to this height or to this depth. And it is from here that the transformation of all life, and therefore of the world, begins.

I think that it is possible to understand and interpret the Rule of St. Benedict starting from this wellspring. We do not have the time to do it now, but each of you will be able to do this study, and maybe I'll do it with the Monastic Formation Course in September. And since it is a study, a meditation, each superior must do it in the concrete situation of their community, with the problems and difficulties, the "thorns" and "scandals" that beset him or her as superior in that specific community.

Every superior needs only ask themselves whether or not they are collaborating with the Holy Spirit in the divine filial adoption of the brothers or sisters of their community. And this is a task that begins and is always accomplished in the prayer of Christ, because it is a work that only the Holy Spirit can carry out in us and among us. Conversion to this life is asked of each monk or nun; and everything in the monastery is aimed at this. The superior has the responsibility, through prayer, word, example, and love to constantly summon their brothers or sisters to this fundamental vocation and grace, which make the monastic life a sign of the truth of the Christian vocation to every man and woman, in any state of life and situation, in every culture.

For good reason, St. Benedict crowns the twelve steps of humility with the monk who is full of humility in heart and body, and who expresses it everywhere, "during the Work of God, in the oratory, in the monastery, in the garden, on the road, in the field and anywhere else" (RB 7:63). This attitude, he will say a little later, is that of the repentant publican at the back of the Temple whom God justifies. In St. Paul, justification, redemption, and filial adoption coincide. In fact, at the end of the chapter on humility, Benedict speaks about the filial love of God, which is the love of Christ that casts out servile fear in us. And this filial love is the manifestation of the Holy Spirit who cleanses us from sin, from the "thorns" mentioned earlier: "These things the Lord will deign to manifest through the action of the Holy Spirit in his worker, now cleansed from vice and sins." (RB 7:70)

I am beginning to think that the transition from servile fear to the trusting love of children is not only the interior transformation that must occur in every monk or nun who follows the path traced out by Saint Benedict, it is a transformation that must also take place in the relationships of every superior with their community, and with each brother or sister.

Only then can a superior begin to love their community in the love of Christ, that love bestowed by the Holy Spirit in which one loves the Father and others with the same love, or rather the others are loved loving the Father. I know it is not easy to love one's community without diffidence, without exasperation, without fear. But "*he who fears is not perfect in love*" (1 Jn 4:18), and this applies to the love of God, as well as to the love of one's neighbor. For this, I repeat, we first need to go to the source of charity, to that which John calls "perfect love" which "casts out fear" (ibid.). This perfect love is "*God who has first loved us*" (1 Jn 4:19).

I think it is this constant, and always deeper, return to the God who first loves us that St. Benedict asks and offers us with the role that he assigns to the liturgy and to prayer in general in the monastic life. The step in the twelfth degree of humility that I just mentioned, where it lists the places and moments in which perfect humility is manifested, is interesting. This list describes how a radiation from the center of the community liturgy goes out into the world: "during the Divine Office, in the oratory, in the monastery, in the garden, on the road, in the field and in any other place "(RB 7:63).

The center and fulcrum of this radiation of humble love that casts out fear, that is, of the life of the adopted children of God in the Holy Spirit, is the Divine Office. But a fulcrum of light is active if it truly radiates, and that's why the series of circles of radiation listed here are important. Without them the Work of God would remain a sterile practice, smoky, musty, concerned only with formalisms and religiosity, it would not be the source of a filial and fraternal love without fear that continually radiates from the choir to the oratory, from the oratory to the monastery, from the monastery to the garden, from the garden to the road, from the road to the field, and from the field to every place, that is, to the entire world.

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