

Chapters on the Rule of St. Benedict

July 5, 2013

The general theme of this course is prayer - prayer and how it impacts and influences our vocation. The idea to deepen this theme came out of our Order's 2012 Synod, when the question was raised of how the Liturgy, the Divine Office, and prayer in general is actually lived in our communities around the world. Thus the idea was born to create a small committee that would get an idea of the situation by organizing a survey into how the Liturgy of the Order is lived, and then, making the Liturgy the theme of this course and of the next Synod.

As Abbot General I see how the liturgy is lived in various communities throughout the world; and I feel it is urgent to raise awareness of and reacquire the importance and centrality of our community liturgical prayer so that the communities recover its meaning, beauty and fervor.

The chapters that I will reflect on during these days are intended to address and deepen this theme and concern with you in order to help us as superiors of our communities to encourage our brothers and sisters to live their lives of prayer and the liturgy with meaning, beauty and fervor.

In this sense, therefore, it is important to begin with the realization that for St. Benedict, the Abbot, the superior of the community, has the primary responsibility for prayer, and that prayer is the first responsibility of the abbot.

This is because the relationship with God is the essence of our vocation; this is why we are called and this is how we respond to God's call. Monastic life according to St. Benedict must always be understood and reformed beginning with the passage from the Prologue of the Rule in which, using the words of the Psalms and of the Prophets, Benedict helps us understand that God essentially calls us to a relationship with Himself, because therein lies the fullness of human life: "The Lord, searching his laborer in the multitude (...), says: Who is the one who wants life and desires to see good days? And if hearing Him, you answer: I am the one. God says to you: If you will have true and everlasting life, keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking guile. Turn away from evil and do good, seek peace and pursue it. When you have done these things, my eyes shall always be upon you, and my ears attentive to your prayers, and before you call upon me, I will say to you: Behold, here I am!" (Prol. 14-18).

This passage of the Prologue is important because it brings together and relates this call to life and happiness, and the fulfillment of this vocation, with the reality of entering into a life of prayer that puts us in a personal and living relationship with the Lord: "My eyes are always on you, and my ears attentive to your prayers, even before you call upon me, I will say: Behold, here I am. "

All the conversion work that the Rule asks us to do, all the strides we make to turn away from evil and do good, our decisively seeking peace in fraternal life and in obedience: this whole journey is in order to enter the "true and eternal life" of communion with God, which is a life of prayer, a prayer that is lived. God must become for us a Face who looks at us with his eyes and listens to us with his ears, someone who is present, who answers "Here I am!" to our need for Him. He says to us "Here I am" before we call upon him, before we desire Him, because we are made for Him even before we realize it, even before we are aware of our thirst for Him.

St. Benedict transmits to us God's call to enter into this relationship, which is prayer, which is the essence, the origin and the end of every prayer, of every liturgy, of every act of worship. If we neglect or forget this, we are out of line with our vocation, even if we do all the rest, even if we observe all the provisions of the Rule, even if we give our life to serve the monastery and its mission, its works and its liturgy. If all these things do not serve to lead us to an encounter with the God who looks at us and listens to us, who is truly present to us - everything else is emptied of its meaning and purpose.

Therefore, prayer as a relationship with God is the fundamental vocation of the monks and nuns who are called to follow the Rule of St. Benedict. With respect to this fundamental and common vocation, the abbot has a precise responsibility which St. Benedict presents at the beginning of the chapter on the abbot when he explains why the superior of the monastery is called "Abbot". As you know, St. Benedict refers to a passage in the Letter to the Romans: "He (the abbot) is believed to be the representative of Christ in the monastery, since he is called with a title of Christ, as the Apostle says: 'You have received the spirit of adoption of sons by which we exclaim: Abba, Father!'" (RB 2:2-3, Rom 8:15).

One may not have noticed it, but this biblical quote, in which St. Paul uses the term "Abba" in reference to God the Father and not to Jesus, inserts the name and role of the abbot into the context of Jesus' prayer, into the cry of love to the Father that the Son expresses in the Holy Spirit. More precisely, this biblical quote inserts the term Abbot into the context of the prayer that the Son of God shares with all humanity by virtue of the Redemption that makes us sons in the Son, adopted children of the Father in Christ who died and rose for us. It is as if in the name of the abbot there should be a constant reminder of the relationship between Jesus and the Father in the Spirit; and also in the dramatic nature of the cry in which the prayer of the Son had to enter in order to assume in the relationship of love with the Father all sinful humanity in order that it be reconciled with God. The gentle sound of the name of Abba that Jesus whispers to the Father in the Spirit, becomes a "mighty wind" or an "inexpressible groan" and cry in the Crucified Son who begs the Father to forgive the sin of the world which is concentrated in His crucifixion.

It seems to me that this quote from Romans 8:15 in this context, although it is not obvious and explicit in this meaning that is highlighted here, is very important to understanding the profound, mysterious nature of the vocation of the abbot, to which we must, as it were, entrust ourselves. From the beginning St. Benedict invites us to understand and live this responsibility in the community as we contemplate its Trinitarian, almost mystical, meaning, so that we let ourselves be penetrated by the knowledge of who we are and who we are called to be, both in relation to God and in relation to our brothers and sisters who are entrusted to us. It's not for nothing that in this passage of Chapter Two of the Rule, St. Benedict first asks the abbot, then the brothers, to remember this mystery in which the abbot partakes: "To be worthy of being the head of a monastery, the abbot must always remember what he is called - *semper meminere debet quod dicitur*" (RB 2:1). It is as if the abbot himself has to guard and cultivate in his own consciousness the meaning of who he is and who he ought to be, and he must always understand this meaning in relation to Christ; and he must always live his relation to Christ in its most profound and eternal dimension within the relationship of the Son with the Father in the Holy Spirit, that is, in the prayer of Jesus.

If you understand this, if you keep alive this awareness, the result will be that the duty or duties of the abbot will be experienced and lived in the ambient of Jesus' prayer, of the Spirit's gift, and of the mercy that comes from the Father. This is the hidden, but always fresh and abundant, source of vitality, truth and fruitfulness of the abbot's ministry. However, if this source does not exist, or if it is not always replenished, if one does not always remember it ("*Abbas (...) semper meminere debet*"), the entire ministry of an abbot or abbess degenerates into the exercise of a function, of a role, of things to do, into problems to solve,

difficult relationships to bear. If the superior does not live by this source, he only presents an image he has of himself that he will rarely succeed in actualizing it.

I think that Benedict's initial concern was that every abbot and abbess would live his or her paternal or maternal responsibility, as Jesus lived it during his life, that is, in a continual seeking for a relationship with the Father in the Spirit, in a continual act of prayer, of adoration, in a communion of love with the Father. Jesus daily lived his paternity and pastoral work, hassled by crowds of lost sheep without a shepherd, always drawing on his relationship with the Father. Jesus spent nights in prayer, got up early before daybreak in order to pray in deserted places, so that he could gently reveal to His disciples the source of real responsibility, of real paternity; a source that Jesus drew on constantly because it was in his heart, or rather, it was his heart.

So, I think the first responsibility of an abbot, of an abbess, or of the superiors of a community, should always be oriented towards the prayer of Christ, to enter and to help the others enter into the prayer of the Son, enter into the Trinitarian prayer of the Son of God. If this is not done, all the other concerns are just dissipations which deplete our strength and energies, instead of being opportunities to tap into the power of grace which is generously put at our disposal by God to love the brothers and sisters entrusted to us.

St. Benedict reminds us of this again at the end of Chapter Two of the Rule: "Above all let (the abbot) not neglect or undervalue the welfare of the souls committed to him in a greater concern for fleeting, earthly, perishable things; but let him always bear in mind that he has undertaken the direction of souls and that one day he will have to give an account of them. And if he be tempted to allege a lack of earthly means, let him remember what is written: 'Seek first the kingdom of God and His justice, and all these things shall be given you besides'. And again: 'Nothing is wanting to those who fear Him.'" (RB 2.33 to 36)

The responsibility of the abbot is therefore a reality, a grace, that by his prayer is transmitted to the prayer of his brothers, which from his union with God is transmitted to his brothers' union with God, that from his soul communicates to the souls of his brothers, that from his experience of the grace of adoption in the Spirit fosters his brothers' openness to the filial Spirit.

I think we must always understand the whole role of the abbot's responsibility towards community prayer, that we will see in the next chapters, in the light of the gift to humanity of the prayer and filial life of Christ described in Romans 8:15: "You have received the Spirit of adopted sons in whom we cry, Abba, Father." Only in this way will we not lose sight of the universal, missionary, and communitarian role of our monastic prayer.

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