

3) “Honor all men”

Man is the creature that one must honor: “honor all men” (RB 4:8) is an instrument of good works that Saint Benedict borrows from the first letter of Saint Peter (1 Pt 2:17). This universal honoring, which admits of no exceptions, ought to emerge in the monastery in the welcoming of guests, especially of the poor and of pilgrims (cf. RB 53:2, 15), and in the reciprocal relations that exist within the community. Chapter 63, on “The order of the community” is very rich in this sense. There, Benedict describes a sort of *circulation of honor* that we ought to concede to one another. The abbot must make himself worthy of the honor shown to him “out of honor and love for Christ”, whose representative he is (63:13-14). “The younger ones should honor the elders” (63:10). But all, according to an injunction of Saint Paul, should “seek to be the first to show honor to one another” (63:17; Rm 12:10). It is an expression that St. Benedict also takes up a second time in chapter 72: “they should each try to be the first to show honor to the other” (72:4).

Whence arises this movement, or this current, of esteem, of honor, of consideration, that the monks ought to allow to circulate among themselves and ought to transmit to those who come from outside and indeed to all men? It arises from and is nourished by the honor of God, by the honor owed to God who, through His charity, through His mercy, is reflected in all of His creatures, above all in the human being, created in His image and likeness. In fact, Saint Benedict asks us first of all to honor the Holy Trinity, rising to our feet for the *Gloria Patri* (RB 9:7), as well as for the proclamation of the Gospel, which represents Christ, the Word of God in our midst (cf. 11:9).

This honor for God, Benedict teaches us, so to speak, to pour out upon men. He asks, for example, that the ill should be served “in honor of God” (36:4). And wherever he asks that a service be completed or a responsibility be discharged with the fear of God, or where he asks us to recognize and adore Christ in our neighbor, down to the smallest ones, it is always this which brings it to fruition: a sort of diffusion towards men of the honor that is owed to God. Not in the sense of idolatry, in which honor is given to creatures and subtracted from God, but in the sense that God himself desires and loves to share His infinite dignity, His glory, with the misery of men.

This makes it such that this honor, this universal and inalienable dignity of man, is not simply in man, in man as such, but in man as a creature that is beloved and chosen by God to share in His glory. The dignity of every human being is wholly in his relation with the Lord, who makes him participate in His glory, in His own divine life, in His liberty, in His capacity for love. And sinful man does not lose the right to be honored, because he does not lose the love that God, in His mercy, reserves for him.

By means of the fact that the honor of man comes to him from God, is a free gift of God, the human being can and must be always considered in a positive outlook. The more a man welcomes this grace, the more his dignity will be visible and evident, as it is in the saints. But also when a man refuses this grace, his dignity remains, even if it may remain only slightly or not at all visible in him; it always remains, in God's relationship with him, in God's outlook and project for him.

For this reason no man should ever be despised or condemned. To despise a man does not mean to fail in charity alone, but first of all to fail in faith in God, as well as in hope in that which the grace of God will always be able to accomplish.

The first grade of honor that Saint Benedict asks us to confer upon one another is therefore the awareness that we are equals in dignity – or better, that the thing which decides our value and our dignity is not that which comes from men, but that which comes from God.

This is what Benedict reminds the abbot in a passage of Chapter 2 of the Rule, which is a small treatise of Christian theological anthropology: “In fact, whether slave or free, we are all one in Christ, and fighting under the same Lord, we offer an equal service; ‘God does not have preferences among persons’ [Rm 2:11; Eph 6:9], and only one thing distinguishes us in his sight: whether we are humble and better than others in good works” (2:20-22).

It is God who fills the emptiness of our misery among creatures and among sinners, filling it with the honor that belongs to Him. When one looks at this gift in man, rather than to what is lacking in him, unity becomes possible, because our misery in itself divides us, but our misery filled with the grace of God unites us in the action of thanksgiving. The love of God makes man share a space of glory and of honor that fills all of the abysses of his human misery. The love of God gives dignity, elevates every human being, makes him a child, a sibling, a friend. It is therefore this awareness and this experience that the Benedictine community is called to live and to transmit to the world, to this humanity, whose dignity no longer seems to stand either on its own, or by the good will of the dominant powers, or by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

And so we understand in what sense the difference among men is no longer so much a difference on the level of honor, or of dignity – as these are given by God – but rather of humility, of the space that every man opens to this grace. It seems contradictory that Saint Benedict asks us to honor all men, to anticipate one another in the showing of honor, and at the same time to cultivate profound humility, the awareness of being “the most miserable of all”, “a worm and not a man” (7:51-52), the awareness of not being worthy to lift one's eyes to heaven (cf. 7:65).

This contradiction, which is a gospel paradox, comes precisely from the mystery of man that I spoke about at the beginning. It comes from the fact that the dignity of man is wholly in the mercy of God, who fills the beloved space of man's misery. "Never lose hope in God's mercy" (4:74) thus means never to forget the immense dignity of every human being. It is necessary to always hope in the mercy of God if one is never to despise neither oneself nor others.

To understand a little the mystery of man, as such and in particular in the Rule, it is always useful and necessary to have recourse to Sacred Scripture, as Saint Benedict does, and in particular to the creation of man in the book of Genesis.