

24th Chapter of the Abbot General M-G. Lepori OCist for MFC – 23.09.2014

There are only 3 Chapters left, so it is clear that this year I will not succeed in "going" with you "to see" our mystic fathers and mothers, and maybe it will be better if in the next Formation Courses there are lessons on them, taught by those who know them well. But you should also try to personally read these mystic fathers and mothers in your monasteries. The Church needs now, more than ever, to regain a spousal sense of herself, as Bride of the Lamb, and as Mystical Body of the Lord, not only as a "society" or "people" where she easily comes to conceive and to treat herself with worldly standards, which come from civil society. The monastic life has normally had in the Church this principal task of keeping alive and reminding everyone of this spousal nature of the Church's mystery, of this Marian nature, in the beauty of the contemplation of Christ, of the liturgy, of the gratuitous fraternal communion. Only in this way does the Church live in the world as a Mother who forms a family, as a Mother who generates sons and daughters to a new life, to a life of communion, of responsibility in communion, by humanizing the world in Christ.

But I want to dedicate today and tomorrow's Chapters to at least one of our great mystics. And that great mystic is St. Benedict. We could spend a whole month, or even more, on him. But I will limit myself to casting light on the path that we have taken during this month, that is, on the prologue and the first chapter of his *Life*, in the second Book of the *Dialogues* of St. Gregory the Great. It is clear that there are other chapters that are even more "mystical" than these, but meditating on them I realized that Gregory synthesized in them all that will be developed later, also in the Rule.

Immediately in the first sentence of the Prologue, St. Gregory says that from childhood Benedict had the heart of a wise old person: "*cor gerens senile*." From the beginning, what arouses the saint, the mystic, is attention to his heart. What interests us in the saints is their heart, almost more than their lives. We cannot often imitate their lives, but their heart is the source of this new life that fascinates us, and we understand that we have to start from there, by giving attention to our heart. As Jesus says in the Gospel: Be alert, it is from the heart that evil thoughts arise, and therefore also good thoughts, and you must pay attention to your heart (cf. Mt 15:19). Pay attention to your heart! Because if the place in our human nature which is made to meet God and become His dwelling is neglected, everything else will feel the effect.

What does a "senile heart" mean? Certainly not a "sclerotic" heart. I would say that, first of all, St. Gregory wants to suggest that the heart of St. Benedict went against the current, against the current of nature, against the current of the dominant culture, perhaps even the dominant psychology. Surely he goes against the culture that dominates today, with its ideal focused only on being young, where there is no longer any effort and value on maturity, on the wisdom of elders.

Even in the monasteries, there is pride in *having* young people and apologies if one *is* old... In St. Benedict, instead, the ideal has been flipped around from the beginning, and St. Gregory presents this "aging of the heart" as a choice, or rather a discipline: "*cor gerens senile*". The Latin verb "*gerere*" gives the idea of a concern, of a government of oneself, of a "management", chosen, desired, pursued of one's self. St. Benedict is thus presented from the outset as one who plans his life with the awareness that our heart is a field of work, of responsibility, of conversion, and it is from there that one must begin and where one must focus attention, if one wants to live in truth and fullness.

We will later see in the life of St. Benedict, that this attention to the heart did not mean that he was perfect from the beginning, but that from the beginning he planned his life in the correct way. We, however, did not start as young children to take care of our heart as the source of true maturity in our relationship with God; nevertheless, it is never too late to start because you must always and only start or restart from there; there is no another point from where to begin to live in truth, in beauty and in the goodness of Christ. Do you remember what was said of St. Bernard? "He made himself the servant of all, as if he were born for the whole world, yet he kept his soul free from everything and everyone, as if he did not dedicate himself to anything but to the custody of his heart." (*Vita Prima Sancti Bernardi*, III, 8)

From this primary choice of applying himself to the maturity of his heart, St. Benedict was able to develop all the other choices in his life, in total freedom. For example, the choice of renouncing the values of the world: "He scorned what he could have freely enjoyed in the world," writes St. Gregory in the Prologue of the *Life*. The decision to give up academic studies in Rome; then the choice to leave his family, to progressively detach himself from everyone in order to seek God, who then gave him back to everyone, as we shall see.

St. Gregory has a beautiful expression to describe the reason for this gradual and total renunciation, and it is an expression that I really think completely defines the spousal meaning of Christian mysticism: "*solī Deo placere desiderans* – he desired to please God alone" (*Dialogues* II, Prol.)

This phrase is like a condensed version of the Song of Songs. The monastic life and mysticism of Benedict started from the desire to respond to the desire of God. God desires us; we have examined this point abundantly throughout these Chapters, and the Song of Songs gives to this desire of God the depth and the passion of the desire of the Bridegroom who unceasingly seeks his well-beloved, his dove. And he wants her and searches for her because he wants his wish. God encourages us to desire him because He loves us to the point of wanting our love, rather than "needing" our love. We are absent from him. "To please God" means to respond to his desire for our beauty, what He sees in us, what He has created in us. We are created to "please God", and in pleasing "God alone," we become "pleasant", "beautiful" to everyone, that is, we acquire our original beauty, the one for which we are created, which is the sanctity of love.

Christian morality should always be thought of and taught as a "pleasing God" who alone knows our real beauty. We should think of it as the efforts of a bride to please the bridegroom whom she loves. Otherwise it just becomes a morality of duty, not of love; a moral self-righteousness and not the fullness of the law which is the love of Christ.

Often, we want to please everyone, or at least to please those we love, and above all, we want others to please us, that they give us pleasure, that is, that they correspond to our selfish and proud plans regarding them. Instead, devoting ourselves to "wanting to please God alone," as St. Benedict did, frees us from every formal plan about ourselves and others, and allows us to live what we are or we are not, and what the others are or what they are not, with freedom, patience, but also with a real desire to change, to progress, because the goal is not just to satisfy our tastes and pleasure, but the pleasure of God, the infinite and eternal pleasure of God towards us.

Let us note that this is the morality and the mysticism of Jesus himself, who during his life sought nothing more than to please the Father: "'He who sent me is with me: he has not left me alone, for I always do the things that please him.' At these words, many believed in him." (Jn 8:29-30)

Trying to please God alone coincides with the awareness that God is always with us, that he does not abandon us. God sends us, but he remains with us, he does not leave us alone because we do not leave him alone with our desire to respond to his desire.

This makes it fruitful for the Kingdom: "At these words, many believed in him." Why? Because it is by expressing his union of love and obedience to the Father that Christ is drawing the world to himself and saves it. So, as it was for St. Benedict, it can also be for us. The more one desires to please God alone, the more one pleases everyone because one does not draw the others to oneself, but to God.

St. Gregory says that St. Benedict requested the monastic habit in order to implement his desire to please God alone: "*Soli Deo placere desiderans, sanctae conversationis habitum quaesivit* – Wishing to please God alone, he requested the habit of the holy monastic life" (*Dialogues* II, Prol.).

One chooses and asks for the monastic life in the desire to please God alone, to correspond to the expectations of the spousal communion of God with us. From this heart, from this center, from this source, came all Benedictine monasticism, as well as all monasticism in general.