

## 25th Chapter of the Abbot General M-G. Lepori OCist for MFC – 24.09.2014

"*Soli Deo placere desiderans, sanctae conversationis habitum quaesivit* – Wishing to please God alone, he asked for the habit of the holy monastic life" (*Dialogues II, Prol.*)

It all begins with a desire, a desire for God that makes us ask the Church through a monastic tradition for the help without which we could not live preferring God to everything else. The desire is to direct everything towards God. But to live this desire we need to ask the Church for a way, for help, for a way of life that helps us to truly live this desire for God, to turn this desire into an experience, an encounter and a relationship with Him.

The essential reason for the monastic life is to please God alone. But this is true for every Christian vocation, including marriage. Perhaps at the beginning, even in the monastic life, this motive is not as clear as it seems to have been for St. Benedict. But in every vocation a fidelity that is forever is only possible by retrieving and deepening this motive which is essential in every choice of life, which is fundamentally the nature of our heart. Our heart is by nature created for God. Within itself, our heart has this desire to please God who creates it for love. But as we have seen in these chapters, and in the mystics, such as St. Gertrude, we must be helped to understand this deep desire of our heart and to live this desire more and more in truth. In this, the Church helps us, and it should especially help the monastery and the community in which we live.

However, no one, except the Virgin Mary, is absolutely pure in this desire. Even St. Benedict, in his desire to please God alone, decided to "*petere deserta*" (Chap. 1), to retire in solitude to the desert, but, at first, he brought his childhood wet nurse with him, whom, St. Gregory wrote, "*hunc arctius amabat*". This could be translated as "she loved him, clinging tightly to him," that is, in a possessive way, as happens with many parents.

But how is this possible?! St. Benedict who had left everything: his family, his belongings, his studies, career, city, brings his tightly-clinging, emotionally possessive, wet nurse along with him, who from the time he was born pampered him, covered him with kisses, fattened him up with lots of sweets, and treated him as a child even when he was an adult?!

But we must be grateful to St. Gregory for not keeping silent about this episode, because it makes us realize that even when we "leave everything" to follow our vocation, we are not automatically completely free from what hinders our total following of the Lord. The desire to please God alone exists and is strong from the beginning, but even in the desert, we cannot dispense ourselves from having to deal with a conversion of our heart, with the work of liberating our hearts which will last a lifetime.

Each of us, whether in the monastery, or in marriage, are followed by a "possessive wet nurse" from whom we must work to detach ourselves and mature. The problem is not really the wet nurse, but we who leave everyone and everything for Christ, and without realizing it, we bring along with us ties that are stronger than those we have with him, strong bonds that cling tightly to our hearts.

But it is important to be aware of this, and to be aware that, with these possessive ties to one person or another, we will have to make a journey of maturing. The important thing is not to also "give the monastic habit" to the wet nurse, nor to dress her in a sacred garment, as if she were part of our vocation. It is important not to create sacred reasons to justify these possessive ties that do not free us, because then these ties will devour us, and the desire to please them will destroy the desire to please God, and thus, our most profound freedom and our capacity to love. The wet nurse whom we are not interiorly free from, if from childhood we sucked from her, will "suck" from us completely and not leave anything of us to please the Lord.

However, we note that St. Benedict, to detach himself from his wet nurse did not ... kill her. He secretly abandoned her – "*nutricem suam occulte fugiens*" – after making a miracle by fixing a broken object of the kitchen to console her. In short, he resolved the relationship with her in his relationship with the Lord who can do everything, and then by praying for her with faith. In a certain sense, he left her, entrusting her to God who performs miracles, including the miracle of consoling and filling with Himself the possessive relationships that we break, or at least those from which the Lord asks us to distance ourselves. If our heart experiences freedom while clinging to God, we must have faith that the Lord also wants to give this freedom to others by filling their hearts with His Presence.

However, all this tells us that the work on our affectivity is part of the mystical process of our union with God, and we must not be afraid. In fact, affectivity is necessary in mysticism. For this reason the mystics nourish themselves on the *Song of Songs*. Otherwise we only give Christ our head and not our heart.

By accepting this detachment, the young Benedict found Subiaco, which is a place defined by two elements: solitude and living water, "Secretly abandoning his wet nurse, he walked to a secluded place and desert called Subiaco (...) which was full of clear, cool water" (Chap. 1). Subiaco is not a dry desert without life. It is a desert from which rivers of living water flow. It is a place that is symbolic of the heart that clings to Christ (cf. Jn 7:37-38). At Subiaco, Benedict found in Christ the only source of life. There he followed the Lamb who brought him to a spousal union with Him: "The Lamb (...) will be their shepherd, and will guide them to the springs of the water of life." (Rev 7:17)

But attention please! Benedict did not leave on an adventure, instinctively. Subiaco is also the place where Benedict found a paternity, a spiritual guide in the monk

Romano: "As he was fleeing toward this place, he came across a monk named Romano, who asked him where he was going, and then, knowing his desire, he jealously guarded his secret and offered to help him, dressing him in the habit of those consecrated to God and providing him with all the things he needed" (Chap. 1).

So St. Benedict did not seek a *do-it-yourself* mystical life, like so many today. He was guided by a father, and through him the whole monastic tradition of the Church, even while living in solitude. His spiritual father, on his part, even if he gave him what was necessary to eat, was not possessive as the wet nurse had been. He guided him from a distance that respected the journey that Benedict had to make with God. Romano helped Benedict in his solitude, he did not fill it. What interested him was where Benedict intended to go: "*quo tenderet requisivit*", that is, Benedict's desire: "*cuius cum desiderium cognovisset...*". A good spiritual father or mother is not a man or woman who give us their answers, but those who help us get to the bottom of our desires, the deep desire of our heart, which is the desire for God. And we know that Benedict had left everything "wanting to please God alone - *solī Deo placere desiderans*" (Prol.). Romano was the father that God gave St. Benedict to help him in this desire, which is precisely the mystical desire, the desire to respond to the spousal desire of God towards us.

At the height of the consecration to this desire to please God alone, Benedict finds fraternal communion again, with the priest who came to visit him on Easter Sunday three years later. The person who goes to the roots of communion with Christ finds the joy of living it with everyone.

And at the end of the first chapter of the Life of St. Benedict in Book II of the *Dialogues* of St. Gregory the Great, Benedict is found radiating his paternity on the most miserable persons in his surroundings: on the poor shepherds. At first they were afraid, believing that Benedict was a beast; just imagine him with a beard and hair that has grown for three years, and dressed in animal skins! But then "recognizing him as a servant of God, there were many who moved from a bestial life to the grace of piety – *eorum multi ad pietatis gratiam a bestiali mente mutati sunt*" (Chap. 1).

The mystic humanizes people. I will not tell you anymore who wrote that "we need to recover a *contemplative* spirit which can help us to realize ever anew that we have been entrusted with a treasure which makes us more human and helps us to lead a new life." (*Evangelii gaudium*, 264)

That was exactly what happened as a result of Saint Benedict's mysticism. But in this episode we see that what humanizes the human being is mysticism itself, piety itself which the mystic has deepened by giving up everything else. St. Benedict humanizes the "bestial" shepherds who were around Subiaco by transmitting to them the grace of piety, the grace of life in Christ for which he himself had sacrificed everything.