

22. “The old is better”

“Let the younger monks respect the older, and the older love the younger” (RB 63:10).

St. Benedict asks that there be an exchange of respect and love between the young and old. It is as if the value that the young monk recognizes in the old be transmitted by the old to the young through affection. There is, then, a true exchange. If a youth admires an older person from afar, it is as if the value that he admires in him remains an unreachable goal. If, however, there is an encounter in community life, the older one can, so to speak, bow over the young and, loving him, offer him as a gift the value of his experience, of his wisdom, of his virtue. Then indeed the youth is helped by the old to grow, to mature.

This is a relationship of fruitful obedience, in which obeying becomes a possibility of receiving the good that the old can transmit. For this reason, in chapter 71, St. Benedict asks that “younger monks should obey their seniors with all love and concern” (RB 71:4).

Everywhere in the rule St. Benedict sets value on being old. At the door of the monastery there is need to place “a wise old man” (*senex sapiens*) “whose maturity keeps him from wandering about” (RB 66:1). It is the old above all who are called to give counsel to the abbot (3:12), and also as spiritual fathers of the brothers (4:50; 23:1-2; 27:2; 46:5; 58:6). The old are called to watch over the younger brothers, over their discipline too. In the dormitory they are charged with watching over the discipline and the nocturnal silence, and their beds must be interposed between the beds of the adolescents (22:3,7). During the hours of *lectio divina*, one or two older monks must go around to check if the brothers are focused on reading, “so that no brother is so apathetic as to waste time or engage in idle talk to the neglect of his reading, and so not only harm himself but also distract others” (cf. 48:17-18).

All this shows that, for St. Benedict, the older monks are called above all to *accompany* the young in their human and spiritual progress, to mature in harmony with their vocation. For this reason, Benedict wants the older monks to be always in contact with the young brothers of the community, to live with them, to share their life concretely, even in the dormitory or in the refectory. St. Benedict knows that one who is present, who shares the life of the young and the disciples, truly educates.

When I visit our communities, especially those that have more vocations, a complaint often arises from the young: “We are not sufficiently accompanied!” It is true that, in certain communities, the number of the young exceeds that of the more mature monks and nuns who can accompany them, but often it is as if the older ones prefer to occupy themselves with something other than the young members of the community. The true problem of clericalism is, deep down, that some want to be priests without being willing to be fathers and pastors. Clericalism is when you want to be priests for yourselves and not for others. Even many lay people and religious men and women sin often by clericalism, when they yearn for the self-referentiality of priests more than for turning themselves toward the priests to be accompanied on a path of faith and holiness. Priests whom one asks for Christ, whom one asks for the word and grace of Christ, do not run the risk of falling into clericalism, because what the flock asks them for is so great that it always transcends their strengths and qualities, on account of

which they always feel inadequate, “useless servants” (Lk 17:10), and therefore humbly begging for the gift of God that they are called to transmit.

But how important it is, and I try to recall this in all the communities where the young complain that they are not accompanied, that each one feel called to become “old” for love of the young brothers and sisters whom the community receives or would like to receive. In this we must go in a direction completely contrary to the tendency of the world, according to which getting old is a disgrace. Instead, as Jesus says when speaking of wine: “And no one after drinking old wine desires new wine, but says, ‘The old is good’” (Lk 5:39).

In the Rule it is clear that the older ones in monastic life, even if they are maybe older only by a year, are always mobilized by St. Benedict to exercise an accompaniment of the younger ones, at least the accompaniment of their example of life, and always and for everything the accompaniment of prayer.

“The eighth step of humility is that a monk does only what is endorsed by the common rule of the monastery and the example set by elders” (RB 7:55).

If we meditate on this very short step of humility, which, deep down, reflects the whole educative setting of the Rule, we understand that in the monastery we are practically all young and old at the same time. Everyone, for all of life, needs the example of the older ones to progress, to correct ourselves, to get started over again, to persevere. And at the same time, we are all called to incarnate this example of life for the others. We all together form this “common rule” that is transmitted from generation to generation, which defines the charism of each community within the charism of each Order. Without forgetting, however, that the first and fundamental “common rule” of each community is communion, fraternal charity.

When a community is in agreement in following a rule of common life, experiencing that this makes people grow and mature, then the influence of this experience is communicated outside the community too, is communicated also to the world. Every community that nurtures a common experience that makes its members grow as human beings and Christians, it is, on that same account, missionary, it builds up what blessed, and soon saint, Paul VI called “the civilization of love.” The civilization of love is a civilization in which communion among men reflects the communion of God and with God, in which human closeness reflects and incarnates the divine closeness.

For this reason, I would say that, for love of the young, for love of their faith, of their life and vocation, our first concern should be having and becoming good old people. Thus, at the end of this Course, I do not wish you that you remain forever young, since that is like wishing that a plant remain a shrub that produces only leaves and no fruit. Let us wish old age for each other, an adult humanity, ever more mature, capable of being a living accompaniment of those who are still new on the path of life and of our vocation.

An old tree, even if it produces no more fruit, even if it is maybe already dead and withered, can still burn and transmit the fire of the Spirit that warms up and illuminates the whole world!

The last Chapter and the last day of the Course are an occasion to say farewell to each other and express our gratitude.

Thanks especially to all of you for your participation and your communal service! Thanks to those who have prepared and enlivened our daily liturgy! The meeting of so great a variety of cultures, languages, monastic observances, has enriched us all.

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Certainly, at the end of this Course, each of us, and I first of all, is aware that he or she must ask forgiveness for every negligence, inattention, and distraction. But the awareness of our weaknesses is part of the formation that makes us mature with humility.

We thank all the benefactors who, in one way or another, sponsored this Formation Course, in particular the A.I.M., but also the private benefactors and individual communities!

I think, finally, of those who have finished the Triennium and whom we greet with affection, with whom we will remain in communion, certain that we continue together the path of our common vocation!

Above all, we thank God for having granted us this time of communion and formation, to grow in awareness and in experience of His truth and of His love!