

22) The Need of the Other: A Gift!

The Rule teaches us to receive the other's need as a gift.

We have seen, for example, that when sick confreres become too demanding if they do not realize it, "we ought to bear with them with great patience, for through them we acquire a greater reward" (RB 36.5). "A greater reward" means that we receive still more than we earn. We should be joyful for it, give thanks to God.

In Chapter 53 of the Rule, we read that guests are received with signs of celebration: everyone hurries to welcome them, the fast is broken, etc. For it is Christ who arrives. For this reason, in Chapter 66, the monastery's Porter is invited to respond *Deo Gratias* to someone who knocks at the door or to the poor person who cries out. The action of grace, in this case, precedes even the reception in so far as we are confident that in every pilgrim and in every poor person the Lord Jesus is hiding. Then the Porter "with all the thoughtfulness that the fear of God inspires [that is, in the awareness that God is present] will hasten to respond [and here is the responsibility of which I spoke in connection with the Samaritan] with burning charity" (RB 66.4). The reception is a celebration burning with love, and the reason is always and essentially the presence of Christ, his arrival in our midst.

We can therefore see that the worst temptation in receiving someone and in caring for the neighbor is that of complaining, of living this reality as a burden, as a disturbance, and so without giving thanks. And for St. Benedict this is before all else a lack of faith rather than a lack of generosity or politeness. We are lacking faith in the real presence of Christ there where the neighbor is asking for our love. In this way we are frozen, as it were, in the laborious aspects of our service, we complain and seek to avoid it, to run away, to have something less unpleasant to do, like the priest and the Levite in the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

To live charity, to live in giving thanks, we must ask for faith, for the faith in Jesus Christ present and living in our midst. Christ always manifests himself, in faith, to those who consent to love Him in charity in the other who has need of our love.

When Christ and St. Benedict ask us to become the neighbor of our confreres and, above all, of those who suffer, they are above all inviting us to love and to a love that in faith knows it is greater than suffering.

St. Benedict offers us a beautiful synthesis of the demands and the incarnate nature of love toward the neighbor in a phrase of Chapter 72 on the good zeal of monks: "let them bear with the greatest patience their own infirmities whether physical or moral" (RB 72.5). And he asks us to practice it "*ferventissimo amore* – with the most ardent love," as in all the directives of this Chapter 72 (see v. 3).

That this request to bear with one another patiently in all our infirmities reflects, in the spirit of St. Benedict, the Parable of the Good Samaritan is

perhaps clear from the end of this chapter, where the text seems to echo the question the scholar of the Law poses to Jesus: “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25). Benedict writes: “they put absolutely nothing before Christ who leads us all together to eternal life” (RB 72.11-12).

St. Benedict, like Jesus, responds that more than earning it with our merits we are led to eternal life by Christ, provided that we adhere to his love in our relations with others.

“That with the greatest patience they bear their own infirmities whether physical or moral.” “To bear” translates here the Latin verb *tolerare*. It is a word that means carry, bear, suffer. In its contemporary context, when one speaks of bearing or tolerating, one says it with a sense, with a connotation, of indifference. To bear, to tolerate that which bothers us in another means not to notice, to adopt a psychological distance, not to take oneself too seriously. For St. Benedict, however, “to bear” means to take upon oneself, to involve oneself in the suffering of the other, to carry in a real sense the weight of one another. It is a real compassion, a real “suffering with.” This is expressed also in St. Benedict’s invitation to patience: “*patientissime tolerant* – let them bear with the greatest patience.”

In this way love as patient compassion is not without suffering. But in as much as it is love it is always greater than suffering. It comes first and will have the last word. Suffering without love is the death of the soul, damnation. Suffering without love is absurd. It is the climax of the great temptation and interior test of Bernanos’ *Country Priest*: the temptation of a suffering without love that, in the end, no longer feels even itself:

Let me force myself to think of other agonies like mine. I can feel no compassion for these strangers. My solitude is complete and hateful. I can feel no pity for myself.

Supposing I were never to love again!

(...) What wouldn’t I give to be able to suffer! Even pain holds aloof. Even the most usual, the most humble, the ordinary pain of my stomach. I feel horribly well.

No fear of death, it is just as indifferent to me as life: that can’t be put into words. I feel as though I had gone right back all the way I’ve come since God first drew me out of the void.

First I was no more than a spark, an atom of the glowing dust of divine charity. I am that again, and nothing more, lost in unfathomable night. But now the dust-spark has almost ceased to glow, it is nearly extinguished.

(Georges Bernanos, *The Diary of a Country Priest*. Translated by Pamela Morris. New York: The MacMillan Company, 1948: pp. 105-106)

This separation of suffering from love is the sin in which the heart of the countess in the same novel closed itself off and poisoned all her relationships. She sought refuge in suffering, in that of her son who had died at a tender

age, to the point that she became insensitive to love. For love makes us feel suffering. For this reason in some relationships one becomes insensitive to suffering by suffocating love. One must hate the beloved who causes the suffering in order not to suffer more.

Jesus did not put suffering at a distance from himself because he did not want, could not, separate himself from love. He suffered until the end because he loved up to the end.

For this reason, every suffering lived out in Christ has become paschal: through this passage pain passes over to the joy of its victory. Every suffering, in Christ, can become the pain of child birth.