

24. Returning to the flock, merciful like the Father

Yesterday I was saying, regarding the conclusion of Lauds and Vespers according to St. Benedict (cf. RB 13:12-14; 17:8), that it is as though for him the Our Father and the *Kyrie eleison* get confused, because they express the same asking of mercy. To pray "Lord, have mercy!", is like concentrating in a single cry all of the Our Father. But at the same time we understand that without the Our Father, we would not know what to ask for when we cry "*Kyrie eleison!*".

What is the Our Father? The Our Father is Jesus teaching us to pray like Him. Jesus was praying, and when He comes towards His disciples, perhaps in the morning after a night in prayer, or returning from a deserted place, radiating the "fragrance" of His prayer and the "light" of His meeting with the Father – in that very moment one of His disciples finally asks the most important request a human being has ever been able to address to the Son of God made man: "Lord, teach us to pray!" (Lk 11:1).

What more do we want, or what better to ask of Christ, if not this? Yet — who knows why? — so far none of the disciples dared to ask this. It is the most important question, because it is a question that goes to the heart of the person of Jesus Christ, and also to the heart of God, to the heart of the Trinity. It is like shooting an arrow that homes in on the center of all reality: the uncreated reality and the created reality.

St. John Paul II wrote in his apostolic letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (at the beginning of the third millennium): "It is necessary to learn to pray, always almost learning this art anew from the same lips of the Divine Master as the first disciples: "Lord, teach us to pray!" (Lk 11:1). In prayer one develops that dialogue with Christ that makes us His intimate friends: "Abide in me and I in you" (Jn 15:4) This reciprocity is the very substance and soul of the Christian life, and the condition of all true pastoral life. Realised in us by the Holy Spirit, it opens us up, through Christ and in Christ, to the contemplation of the Father's face. To learn this Trinitarian logic of Christian prayer, living it fully, above all in the liturgy, the source and summit of ecclesial life, but also in personal experience, is the secret of a Christianity truly alive, that has no reason to fear the future, because it returns continually to the sources and regenerates itself within them." (NMI §32)

But notice how when Jesus teaches us to pray to the Father, the thing on which He insists the most, the thing on which He demands us to engage ourselves the most, is not about what concerns directly the prayer, but the readiness to forgive the trespasses, literally to "cancel the debts" of our brothers and sisters as the Father cancels our own debts. "For if you indeed forgive others their faults, your Father in heaven will also forgive you yours; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive you your trespasses." (Mt 6:14-15)

In other words, what Jesus insists on the most, once again, is that we are "merciful like the Father" (Lk 6:36). And that means "to pray like Jesus," to have a relationship with God the Father like Jesus, it means first of all living human relationships within the relationship with the merciful Father who forgives us, who cancels all the debts. The

parable of the debtor whom the master condones an immense debt, but who does not then condone the paltry debt of one of his companions is the illustration of the awareness and responsibility that must create in us the grace necessary to be able to pray to the Father like the only begotten Son (cf. Mt 18:23-35).

So let's retake the passage from chapter 13 of the Rule in which St. Benedict speaks to us of the Our Father: "One must never conclude the celebrations of Matins and Vespers without the superior reciting, at the end, according to the established order, the Lord's Prayer, so that all can hear it; and this because of the thorns of the scandals that are always sprouting: in such way that those who find themselves together by the promise that they express in the same prayer, 'Forgive us as we forgive', may be purified of this kind of vice." (RB 13:12-13)

What are these "thorns of the scandals that are always sprouting — *scandalorum spinas quae oriri solent*" (RB 13:12)? We may understand this by that which cures and purifies us of this vice: the promise expressed in prayer: "Forgive us as we forgive." It is a prayer (*oratio*) and it is a promise (*sponsio*), literally: "the promise of prayer — *orationis sponsio*".

Our freedom can promise, can commit, but it knows that in order to maintain the promise it needs to request, to ask God that He grant us the possibility of maintaining our commitment. Because here one is dealing with fighting against the thorns, against the brambles that are always growing, that one never ceases to cut or pull out, that always grow back. It is among these thorns, these brambles that the sheep gets lost and hurts itself, and remains always entangled, needing the Good Shepherd to come and extricate it, because the more it attempts to free itself from the brambles by itself, the more it remains there, entangled, hurting itself.

Only the promises that we make asking, can we keep, because we keep them relying on God's grace. In this case, it is possible for us to cancel the debts of others only asking God to cancel our own.

Our tendency not to forgive the debts of our brothers and sisters really is like the thorns and brambles that always grow back, and from which we cannot free ourselves without the help of the Pastor. If we pay attention, we realise that we spend time in accumulating the debts of others against us. Others "should" be or not be to us as we would like them to be or not be; to do or not do what we would like them to do, or not do; to say or not to say what we want, or we would not want them to say. We are almost always with notebook in hand to jot down the list of the debts of others, that is, of everything that we complain about in others. Try to be alert for only half an hour to how many debts in others we can enumerate! Of course, it is often true that others owe us this or that. But for Jesus, the real problem is that this tendency does harm to us, it is the brambles and thorns in which we hurt ourselves, in which we entangle ourselves, in which we lose our freedom to love, and above all we lose the freedom to let ourselves be loved without measure from the Father. This tendency keeps us from living the mercy, of welcoming it and living it in thanksgiving for its overabundance that permits us even to distribute it ourselves without measure, forgiving all the small or large debts of others.

The mercy of God is like an immense dam of divine love that awaits to penetrate into all areas of our lives to the extent in which we liberate them, forgiving the debts of our brothers and sisters. One becomes merciful like the Father only by forgiving in every moment the debts, real or imagined, that others have toward us. And this is precisely a constant exercise of our freedom which asks mercy of God and grants it; that lets flow out through us the infinite mercy of the Father.

God's mercy toward us, however, not only asks us to forgive the debts of the brothers: it makes us ourselves debtors toward all. All become our creditors: it is no longer they that owe us something, but we who are indebted toward others. St. Paul expresses the overturning of this situation very well. He writes to the Romans: "Do not be debtors of anything to anyone, except mutual love; for he who loves another has fulfilled the Law" (Rom 13:8).

He who loves "fulfills the law," that is, pays his own debt toward God, and toward all. But as St. Paul expresses it here, we understand that this debt of love will never be written off. Because the "Law" now is the new commandment of Jesus: "I give you a new commandment: that you love one another. As I have loved you, you also should love one another" (Jn 13:34).

Christ loved us and loves us without measure, giving us His life, giving us all of Himself, His humanity and divinity. He loves us infinitely. To love one another as He has loved us is, then, a "debt of love" that will never be cancelled, we will never pay it off with anyone. But we must, as we let our life — all that we are, all that we do, all that we say, all that we think, all that we possess — expend itself, to get lost, to pour itself continually into this being indebted to others because Christ has given all of Himself to us.

Jesus, and then St. Paul, like St. John, speak of "reciprocal" love, of loving "one another". Because all of us are saved by Christ, and each one of us is a debtor of the love of Christ to everyone else. The Church is — and should be — like a huge fire in which every baptised person is a piece of wood, no matter whether big or small, no matter whether valued or worthless, which one gives to the flames of Christ's charity. This is what makes the Church, and every community, a witness and instrument of the Father's mercy: "And the glory which you have given me, I have given to them, so that they may be one as we are one. I in them and you in me, so that they may be perfect in unity and the world may know that you sent me and that you have loved them even as you loved me." (Jn 17:22-23)

I have already pointed out that in chapter 27 of the Rule, St. Benedict writes that the Good Shepherd carries back on his sacred shoulders the lost sheep "to the flock — *ad gregem*" (RB 27:9), a detail that the Gospels do not express. But St. Benedict is keen to say explicitly that the merciful love of Christ brings those who are lost back *to the flock*, that is, into the fraternal communion of the Church, which every community represents and expresses. It is as if the fulfillment of Christ's mercy toward us, which is the fulfillment of the Father's mercy, were our belonging to the Christian community. The mercy of God is not accomplished in an individual salvation, which the Pharisees

believed they possessed, but is accomplished in a community of sheep who, in one way or another, have all been searched for, found and carried back to the flock. And for the lost and found sheep, the flock is then the real and visible sign that it is no longer lost, that it has been saved by the mercy of the Lord. The refound flock is for us the sign and the experience of Easter, of the salvation accomplished, of the new life to which we are resurrected when Christ forgives us and welcomes us back. And in this flock the sheep will be able to feel itself always carried on the sacred shoulders of Christ, and will be able to watch, now more than ever, the other sheep, above all those that are lost and whom the Good Shepherd always carries, gratefully, with joy, with hope.

Often communities do not live with this awareness, and then it is as if within them there are many unfulfilled debts, and above all many uncanceled debts. In the parable of the unforgiving debtor who has no mercy on his companion as the master had with him, Matthew writes that when the debtor met his friend who owed him some small change, "he grabbed him by the neck and choked him" (Mt 18:28). This man did not allow the mercy of God to "bring him back to the flock", that is, to become merciful like the Father with his neighbor, with his brother. Instead of strangling him, he should have said to his companion: "Rejoice with me, the Master has just forgiven me everything, let's come together to celebrate, I'll buy you a beer, or [seeing as you all prefer it!] an ice cream, and we'll speak no more of it! And from now on we will be truly friends, brothers, and we will walk together in endless gratitude that the master, cancelling my debt, has written off also yours, and that of all our companions who owe us something!"

The mercy of God becomes our condemnation if we do not transmit it, if it does not make us debtors of merciful love towards everyone, if we do not express it in the flock, if it does not bear fruit in the most fraternal communion in the great flock of humanity.

Now, after this monthlong course in Rome, all of you will return to your communities, in Brazil, Africa, Asia, Europe... In this month we have also been able to celebrate the Jubilee of Mercy in St. Peter's. Why not take advantage of this return to one's own community in order to let ourselves be carried back to the flock by Christ? Like lost and found sheep that return home with the desire to share with their own brothers or sisters the joy of being freed from every debt toward God and from every debt of our neighbour toward us. The paschal joy of not having another debt with God and with anyone but love; the joy of being able to be in Christ, by grace of the Spirit, merciful like the Father!

My last Chapter is always an opportunity to express here, and "*urbi et orbi*" through the website, our gratitude to all those who have made possible this 15th edition of the Course of Monastic Formation. I am thinking of Father Procurator Lluç, the most efficient Agnese with her husband Piotr, the most precious sisters, the Missionary Daughters of the Heart of Mary in the kitchen and laundry, all the teachers, in particular Salvatore Russo for his cultural guides; the interpreters, all very talented, especially those of our Order who have generously made themselves available, absenting themselves at length from their equally generous communities: Fr. Bazezew of Shola who has translated into Amharic for our Ethiopian brothers; Fr. Guilherme of Claraval and Sr. Aline of San Giacomo di Veglia for the large Brazilian group; Fr. John of Dallas for the English. All the translators of my Chapters did a great job: Annemarie Schobinger for the German, and also for the French which she shared with Sr. Michaela of Rieunette; Mother Eugenia of Talavera de la Reina for the Spanish; Sr. Aline for the Portuguese; Fr. Stephen of Dallas and Ben Harnwell for the English. We are grateful to Fr. Galgano who handled the Liturgy and other organisational aspects.

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I would also like to thank on your behalf all the benefactors who financially support the MFC. I mention only the AIM (*Alliance Inter-Monastères*) that every year, in addition to supporting many of you personally, helps us to meet the non-covered expenses.

This year you have rendered valuable services to the General House, working a little every day, under the direction of Fr. Lluç who is also very grateful to you along with me. I am also grateful to you for the quality of your community life and your commitment to study and in the other common acts.

This year as many as eight of you have completed the three-year period: Sr. Marguerite Marie OCSO, of Notre-Dame des Gardes, Sr. Marie Véronique OSB, of Jouques, Sr. Maria Luiza OSB, Mosteiro de Maria Mãe do Cristo, Sr. Maria Letícia OSB and Sr. Emanuela, of the Abbey of Santa Maria in São Paulo Abbey, Fra Bento OSB, of the Mosteiro da Transfiguração, Sr. Mariæ Lætitia OCist, of St. Marienstern, and Sr. Beatrice OCist of Boulaur.

It is always a little sad to say goodbye, but you will see that the communion and friendship born in these three years will not be lost, and will continue to weave fruitful ties in the great monastic family.

For the others, we will meet again, God willing, next year in order to continue this experience of formation in communion. And, as the Pope always does, may I ask you to pray a little for me and for all those who work in order to offer you this course. Thank you!