

2. The spiritual maturity of St. Benedict

You come to Rome to form yourselves for the monastic life. St. Benedict, by contrast, fled the studies he was doing in Rome in order to become a monk. But in the time of St. Benedict our Course did not exist, otherwise Benedict would certainly have remained to take it...

At any rate, Benedict left Rome to retreat to Subiaco, where he began a very demanding ascetic path, by which God purified him more and more to become the monastic father who gave birth to us too. It was from his hermitage in Subiaco, where “*habitavit secum* – he lived with himself” under the gaze of the Creator, that St. Benedict began to attract disciples and rapidly to found a good twelve monasteries (St. Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*, II.3).

This paternal fecundity of St. Benedict, which has never worn out since then, was certainly the fruit of his asceticism, of his solitude, of his combat against the vices, to the point of throwing himself naked into the thorns and nettles. But St. Gregory puts before the beginning of St. Benedict’s monastic fecundity an episode which, according to me, describes his true and definitive spiritual maturity. It is when the monks of Vicovaro, whose superior had died, ask him to be their father. St. Benedict tries to refuse, because these monks do not match his rigorous observance, but in the end he concedes to their insistence. Then the monks of Vicovaro regret having wanted him for abbot and they come to the point of hating him so much that they put poison in his glass of wine. As you know, St. Benedict makes the sign of the Cross and the cup breaks.

How does Benedict react to this attempted homicide? St. Gregory describes him thus: “He rose instantly and, with a friendly face and calm mind (*vultu placido, mente tranquilla*), he called the monks together, addressing these words to them: ‘God almighty have mercy on you, brothers (*misereatur vestry, fratres, omnipotens Deus*); why did you want to do this to me?’” (*Dialogues* II.3).

“God almighty have mercy on you, brothers.” It is like the formula of sacramental absolution. Benedict reacts to the evil, to hate, to persecution, with the mercy of God, asking God to pardon his enemies, like Jesus on the Cross: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Lk 23:34). His face is peaceful and his mind is calm, a sign that this mercy in him is deep, coincides with his heart. His face irradiates a mercy that has pacified his heart.

Benedict asks his enemies to be aware of the evil that they wanted to do him: “Why did you want to do this to me?”, as when Jesus asked the guards: “Why do you strike me?” (Jn 18:23). He wants them too to convert freely to mercy, that they open themselves consciously to God’s pardon, which he beseeches for them. But in his heart the pardon is perfect, and he calls them “*fratres* – brothers.”

Did you know that in the Rule St. Benedict calls us “brothers” 91 times and “monks” 36 times? This is indicative of how fundamental the fraternal relationship is for him. For St. Benedict we are “brother monks,” “sister nuns,” we are called to live our exclusive consecration to God, our Father, through fraternal charity, and this charity begins with the mercy with which we forgive each other. In the episode of Vicovaro,

Benedict recalls his worst enemies, those who wanted to eliminate him as a father, to a brotherhood that is still possible, and he does so by offering them God's mercy.

St. Benedict leaves these monks, he does not want to impose himself as their superior, but certainly in his heart he will always remain tied to them, will always pray for them, letting God's mercy act in them.

So, this is the profound spiritual and monastic maturity of St. Benedict. He retires into solitude, into the *habitare secum*, but right afterward his charism begins to blossom and the first monasteries are born. Benedict is already a father, and he is such because he is merciful, "merciful like God the Father" (cf. Lk 6:36). And it is this father who is merciful like God that we find at the beginning of the Rule. The Rule is the path of life and conversion in which a *pius pater*, a merciful father, is our master, instructs and directs us to live with fullness.

For this reason, as I was saying, mercy can truly be an interpretative key for understanding and following the path of our vocation, which is nothing other than a deepening of the Christian vocation of all. A deepening that is offered to us mainly because we are more fragile than others, but also to be witnesses of how God's mercy in Christ can truly save and regenerate human life in all its aspects. As when the prodigal son returns home, the merciful father's pardon was not only an embrace and a feast for a day, but an experience to live every day and to let bear fruit in relationships, in work and in rest, in eating and drinking, in the joys and strains of every day.

I have often noted that the beginning of the Rule of St. Benedict brings to stage the return to home of the prodigal son of Luke's Gospel: "The effort that obedience requires – writes St. Benedict – will thus be able to bring you back to Him from whom you fell away by the negligence of disobedience" (RB Prol. 2). The whole Rule is written to help this lost and rediscovered son to live in the house of the good Father, with his brothers, to be reborn to the filial life betrayed and which the Father gratuitously grants him again, in abundance.

In the Prologue again, in fact, Benedict links mercy to life in the monastery. He writes: "The merciful Lord [*pius Dominus*] says: 'I do not desire the death of the sinner, but that he convert and live'" (Ez 33:11). Therefore, brothers, to our question to the Lord about the conditions for living in his tent, we have heard what is prescribed for living there, as long as we fulfill the duty of one who lives there" (Prol. 38-39).

The task of our vocation is to learn to dwell in the Lord's tent, in which we are invited to turn ourselves from the death of sin to the life of children. Sin leads us to death, but God does not want us to die. God is Father and desires our life. This is God's mercy. But life means conversion, passing from death to life, from the death of sin to the life unto which God begets us himself, which is the life of sons and daughters of God in Christ. That this conversion is offered us is a sign of God's mercy. God loves us with mercy by offering us a path of conversion so that we can become merciful like Him. And this path is taken up in the "tent of God" which is the community, the monastery.