

3. The interests of Christ

“For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ” (Phil 2:21).

Let us situate this phrase in the time that St. Paul was living, and also in the letter to the Philippians in which it is contained.

Paul is in prison, we do not know whether in Rome, or Caesarea, or Ephesus. St. Paul says this phrase like a sudden outburst while he is talking about his disciple and son Timothy, whom he wants to send to Philippi, certainly with a sacrifice because he is comforting to him as well. He says: “I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be cheered by news of you. For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know Timothy’s proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel” (Phil 2:19–22).

Thus it is in a context of pastoral and missionary concern, of care for the Christian community and concern for the service of the Gospel, that Paul speaks of Timothy’s dedication and, in contrast to his attitude, laments over those who seek their own interests and not those of Jesus Christ.

But there is another element in the letter to the Philippians that underlines the importance of Paul’s judgment on all those who, instead of pursuing the interests of Jesus Christ, pursue their own interests. In fact, Paul writes this phrase almost immediately after the famous Christological hymn about the humiliation and exaltation of Christ in Philippians 2:5–11:

“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,
but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant,
being born in the likeness of men.

And being found in human form, he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Therefore God has highly exalted him
and bestowed on him the name that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.”

A little before the hymn, Paul invites the Philippians to renounce their own interests with a phrase that is similar to that with which we started: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Phil 2:3–4). In this case, he does not say to renounce one’s own interests to pursue the interests of Christ, but rather those of others, the interests of our neighbor, of the brothers and sisters of the community, the interests of all. It is clear that, for the Apostle, to follow the interests of Christ and of the others, especially of the brothers of one’s own community and of the poor, is the same thing. But the fact that the one for whom we renounce our own interests can vary highlights the urgency and importance

of the decision to live for interests other than our own. To pursue the interests of people other than ourselves is a fundamental decision of love, of charity. But above all it is the decision that allows our freedom, and our life, to cling to the freedom and life of Christ himself, of the Son of God whom the hymn of Philippians 2 sings of and celebrates as the one who renounced his prerogatives as God to empty himself, becoming a servant, a man, humbling himself even to death on a cross.

In the Rule, St. Benedict founded the whole of monastic life and asceticism on the humility of Christ. One does not make Profession according to the Rule without accepting the kenosis of Christ, described in the hymn, as one's own vocation and mission, as the form and substance of one's own monastic consecration to living out one's baptism.

So it becomes absolutely important to repeat to oneself the question I was asking earlier: What does it mean to pursue the interests of Jesus Christ and not our own? What does it mean to pursue the interests of another more than our own? If we do not understand this, we do not understand what it means to be monks and nuns, and not even what it means to be Christian.

In the two passages cited from the letter to the Philippians, Paul does not use the word "interest" that the translation has to use to make sense of the Greek and also Latin expression. For in Greek, literally, Paul writes:

"All seek their own things, not those of Jesus Christ" (Phil 2:21).

"Each seeking not what is his own, but also that which is the others'" (Phil 2:4).

What strikes me in these expressions is that they recall a phrase that Jesus said with regard to himself and to his position before God and before all. It is the answer that Jesus at age twelve gives to his agonized parents who find him again after three days in the temple among the scholars: "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be among the things of my Father?" (Lk 2:49)

When Paul complains that all pursue their own interests and not those of Jesus Christ, he is not doing it just because he finds himself with few collaborators whom he can trust in the great work of evangelization. He does it above all because he sees that all pretend to live out the Christian life and perhaps also responsibility in the community and in the mission without clinging to the position of Christ himself, to his deep and essential humility in conceiving of his mission, of his being in the midst of men, and above all in his position before his Father. Twelve-year-old Jesus does not say that he remained in the temple because he had things to do for the Father. He says that it is necessary for him *to be* among the things of the Father, that is, must attend to the Father's interests with all his person and all his life, even when it does nothing.

St. Benedict asks us, then, essentially to live out in this way our vocation and mission, our consecration to Christ. But when we say yes, when we make Profession, do we do this? And those too who engage themselves with the sacrament of matrimony, or ordination, do they do it thus? Are we conscious of choosing to renounce our own interests to live out the interests of Christ, and thus for the interests of the Father, and also for the interests of others, of the Church and of humanity, of the poor, more than for our own interests?