

#### 4. Being converted away from accusing the other

“Lord, who will dwell in your tent, who will find rest on your holy mountain? (...) He who walks without fault, and acts with justice; who speaks the truth in his heart; who speaks no revilement with his tongue; who does no evil to his neighbor; who accepts no insult against his neighbor” (RB Prol. 23, 25-27; Ps 14:1-3).

From the very beginning of the Rule, the first conversion that St. Benedict requires in order for us to be open to mercy is the conversion of refusing to accuse others. I spoke of this in my Pentecost letter this year, but I would like to explore this theme further with you by meditating on the Rule, because the whole New Testament, like the whole monastic tradition, insists greatly on this, and they insist on it as a condition for being saved, for being pardoned by God, for obtaining mercy ourselves, and for becoming truly merciful like the Father.

Accusing the other is the immediate consequence of original sin. Of course, there is first the shame of one's own nakedness (Gen 3:7), and then hiding oneself from God (Gen 3:8), but one could say that the first sin after original sin consisted in accusing the other in order not to have to take on the responsibility of one's own fault: “The woman that you put next to me, she gave me from the tree and I ate” (3:12). “The serpent tricked me and I ate” (3:13).

Innocent or blameworthy, since original sin there is in us the tendency to accuse the other, to want to be innocent by laying the blame on the other. Jesus put this tendency in a clear light in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector who go up to the Temple to pray (Lk 18:9-14). St. Luke also tells us for whom Jesus recounted this parable: “He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt” (18:9). And the words that he has the Pharisee say illustrate this presumption: “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income” (18:11-12).

This Pharisee is a heap of pride and scorn. His pride coincides with scorn. His feeling of being just feeds on the consideration of all others as unjust. He needs to scorn others to value himself. Ultimately, as often happens, he is a man with little self-esteem, even if he does not want to admit it to himself, and, not finding in himself motives for true self-esteem, he must seek them in what is lacking to the others, or what he thinks they lack.

He does not even need God. He thanks him for making him different from the others, but he does not ask anything of God. This is enough for him, it is enough that God serve to nourish his pride. He goes up to pray in the Temple, he puts himself in the first row, but he asks for nothing, he does not need God. He has no debts with God. He fasts twice a week, he pays tithes on all he possesses: he is in order; to God he owes nothing more, and from God he expects nothing more. Since God grants him to be better than all the others, he needs nothing else.

Here we must notice a very serious aspect of the pride that accuses others and not oneself which the pride itself keeps us from seeing: idolatry. This Pharisee, deep down, lives in idolatry, because he no longer adores God, but himself, the proud feeling that he

has about himself. In feeling better, more just, more honest, more pure than the others, this man adores himself, finds fullness of joy in himself. And he puts himself on display, he puts himself in the front row, to be admired and envied by all, and thus it is as if he asked the others to adore him too, to participate in his idolatry of himself.

In this parable Jesus makes something of a caricature of this Pharisee, but he does it so that each of us let ourselves be provoked by this grotesque image and examine ourselves honestly. For this tendency to adore ourselves is within each of us, and with it the tendency to scorn others in order to be worth more than they. Was it not the apostles of Jesus who argued among themselves even during the Last Supper in order to know “which of them was considered the greatest” (Lk 22:24)? They too, even in the presence of Jesus who begins to suffer for his imminent Passion, do not manage to hold back this unhealthy tendency to want to be more than the others, to esteem oneself by scorning others.

St. Benedict is aware that he who enters a monastery, who asks to live in community, who wants to deepen his relationship with God, must come to terms with this tendency that original sin has put in us, and therefore must prepare to be converted in this regard more than about other unhealthy tendencies of our heart. For this reason, the great ascetic labor that the Rule proposes is that of humility exercised in community, of humility, that is, which puts to death the tendency to scorn others to esteem ourselves. It's not for nothing that the steps of humility culminate, on the twelfth step, with the model of the tax collector who, “with eyes fixed on the ground” (RB 7:65), does nothing other than implore mercy: “O God, have mercy on me, a sinner!” (Lk 18:13).

St. Benedict calls this humble man: “*publicanus ille evangelicus* – that evangelical tax collector.” Of course he says it perhaps mainly in the sense that it is the Gospel that speaks of him. But perhaps we should really take the term literally, in the sense that the figure of this repentant and suppliant tax collector, who accuses no one, but only himself, and who for this reason is justified by God, is an “evangelical” figure, that is, he incarnates “good news” for us, he expresses Christ’s proclamation in a special way, that is, Christ himself, the Word of life. The Pharisee is a figure of death, of sadness. His pride that scorns everyone is not a “way that leads to life” (RB Prol. 20), the way on which we are, in fact, “guided by the Gospel” to follow Christ (Prol. 21) up to the point of dwelling in the Lord’s tent (Prol. 22).

In this St. Benedict is the heir of the whole monastic tradition which begins with the Desert Fathers. For the fathers, accusing oneself instead of others is truly the way to life, because it is the way to mercy, the mercy of God toward us and among us.

For example, Abba Poemen said: “We and our brothers are two images: when a man looks at himself and seems worthless, he finds his brother praiseworthy; but when he seems to himself to be good, he finds that in comparison his brother is bad” (Apothegms, alphabetical series, Poemen 148).

For this reason, to a brother who asks him, as one always asks the Abba, “What must I do?”, Poemen responds by citing Psalm 37: “It is written: I will declare my injustice and remember my sin” (ibid., 153; Ps 37:19).