

5. The self-accusation that justifies

The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector has taught the whole Christian and monastic tradition that self-accusation justifies, that is renders just, obtains from God's mercy the pardon that redeems the sinner, the pardon that saves the sinner from the condemnation he merits.

This theme is very present in the Rule. Meditating on the penitential chapters, which sometimes call for severe punishments, quite normal in the time of St. Benedict, what has always struck me is the fact that when a culpable brother admits his fault, when he accuses what he did wrong, he is no longer punished, he no longer needs to make up for his fault. And, ultimately, every punishment, including excommunication from community life, always has the goal of helping the brother be aware of his fault, admit it, that is, accuse himself humbly. Then, practically, he is immediately pardoned and reestablished in the communion of prayer and life with the community. In the humble accusation of self, there is a power of justification that requires no other works, other penances.

It is enough to quote chapter 46, which is something of a summary of all the penitential chapters: "If someone commits a fault while at any work—while working in the kitchen, in the storeroom, in serving, in the bakery, in the garden, in any craft or anywhere else—either by breaking or losing something or failing in any other way in any other place, he must at once come before the abbot and community and of his own accord admit his fault and make satisfaction. If it is made known through another, he is to be subjected to a more severe correction" (RB 46:1-4).

The first thing we can recognize in reading this chapter is that it concerns us all. Which of us can pretend never to make mistakes, never to be distracted, never to make a clumsy movement while working or simply living our day? Thanks be to God that we are not machines, we are not Swiss watches, and every day some small or big accident happens to us, some irregularity. And here St. Benedict speaks only of material, exterior, visible errors. At the end of the chapter he adds a phrase about hidden sins: "When the cause of the sin lies hidden in his conscience, he is to reveal it only to the abbot or to one of the spiritual elders (*spiritalibus senioribus*), who know how to heal their own wounds as well as those of others, without exposing them and making them public" (RB 46:5-6).

Whatever kind of error or sin we are dealing with, the treatment always begins with self-accusation, before the abbot and the community, or before a spiritual father.

Basically, one sees from this chapter that, for St. Benedict, it is not so serious a matter to make a mistake, or even to sin, because he knows that we are all fragile and sinful.

What is serious, however, and what must be punished more severely, is the tendency to hide our error, the tendency not to recognize our own sin. St. Benedict knows that a hidden error, a sin not confessed, rather than being merely an accident of our physical, spiritual, or moral fragility, becomes a project, becomes a choice, becomes in us like a path toward death that we decide to follow. The error and sin which we do not recognize as such which we do not accuse, for which we show no repentance and desire for conversion, defines us little by little, defines our person more and more.

In my community there was an old brother who bore the name and had the personality of St. Peter. Almost every day he had some problem with one or other of us, or with the guests, he would argue or break something because he wanted to do it on his own without help. And yet, after every failing he would always find a way to excuse himself, to make it known that he was sorry, to be reconciled. On account of which his failings, his character, never defined his person more than his vocation, and he left us the best memory of him.

The humility to recognize one's own failings redeems everything, and makes sure that life is never defined by our sin, but by our desire for the goodness, truth, and peace for which we have been made and called. Life remains full of errors and sins, but it remains a life of conversion, a life reaching for the good, that is, for God. And this changes everything, including the reality that surrounds us, and above all our relationships with others. A brother with whom you have argued and who comes to ask your forgiveness before you go ask it of him imposes himself like a strong testimony of the truth of life which fills you with repentance for not being yourself so disposed to conversion as he was.

It is like when the tax collectors and prostitutes would come ask pardon from Jesus, would come cry at his feet, like the sinful woman in the house of Simon the Pharisee (cf. Lk 7:36-50). Jesus always took advantage of the moment to call his disciples and the "righteous" Pharisees to examine their own lives in order to recognize that in them too there was impurity and sin, but unlike these sinners, they did not repent of them and did not accuse themselves of them publicly, and for this reason they remained slaves of sin. The pride that does not recognize sin, which does not accuse it, fossilizes the evil in our life, makes it rigid and solid, a weight that defines and intertwines with our whole path of life. We lose our freedom with regard to evil and sin. We become their slaves.

That which releases us, that which frees us from evil, is, then, the humility to recognize it. And St. Benedict teaches us that our community is the instrument for this liberation in the measure that we present ourselves to it like the sinners of the Gospel present themselves to Jesus. The Christian community is the Body of Christ, at whose feet we can express our repentance, accuse our faults, and the simple act of recognizing ourselves as sinners free us from sin, keeps sin from defining our person.

When the prodigal son returns to the father, the whole way he repeats to himself the accusation he wants to make before him: “Father, I have sinned against Heaven and against you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants” (Lk 15:18b-19).

We notice that the prodigal son expresses this humble accusation of his own sin at the moment of “returning to himself,” that is, when he begins his conversion (Lk 15:17). The decision to recognize one’s own evil is the beginning of conversion, of return to the Father. The young man, accusing himself, also suggests a punishment for his own evil: “Treat me like one of your hired servants.” He knows that he is no longer worthy to be treated as a son. When one accuses oneself truly, one is ready to atone for one’s fault, to receive a just punishment.

When the young man finds himself before his father, he repeats the accusation – “Father, I have sinned against Heaven and against you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son” (Lk 15:21) – but he does not manage to suggest the penalty he is ready to suffer in time: the father is already rushing to involve the whole house to receive the son with a feast and grants him all his filial dignity without asking even the slightest bit of expiation.

The accusation is enough; the humble accusation coincides with the return to the father which right away obtains pardon and reintegration into the family. Then we understand that St. Benedict repeats this same scene each time a brother, a sister, presents herself spontaneously to accuse herself of her own failings.