

## 6) “I did not come to do my own will”

The insistence or, rather, the focus of Saint Benedict on obedience as the path of man’s return to his nature as the image and likeness of God, derives from the fact that man is the image of God above all insofar as he is gifted with a will. Perhaps more precisely, he is gifted with the capacity to love, because God is love and man does not live out his nature as the image of God if his will does not adhere to the loving will of God.

This aspect is clarified in the Rule by passages in which the theme of the imitation of God occurs. As I have said, the term *imago* is not in the Rule, but the verb *imitari*, “to imitate,” is present; it derives from the same Indo-European root *im-*, which is also the root of *imago*.

The verb “to imitate” occurs four times in the Rule. I cite these passages because they are fairly illuminating regarding our theme of the image of God.

The first is in chapter five on obedience, where Benedict speaks of those who “remain in the monastery and desire to be subjected to an Abbot” (RB 5:12). “Without doubt,” he immediately adds, “these imitate that sentence of the Lord who says, ‘I did not come to do my own will, but the will of the One who sent me’” (RB 5:13; see Jn 6:38).

The second is found in the seventh chapter on humility, where San Benedict links imitation to this citation of John’s Gospel: “The second step of humility is that in which, not loving one’s own will, there is found no pleasure whatsoever in the satisfaction of one’s own desires, but in the imitation of the Lord, putting into practice the word of Him who says, ‘I did not come to do my own will, but the will of the One who sent me’” (RB 7:31-32).

The third use of the verb “to imitate” comes immediately afterward: “The third step of humility is that in which the monk, out of love for God, submits himself to his superior in absolute obedience, in imitation of the Lord, of whom the Apostle says, ‘He became obedient unto death’” (RB 7:34).

Finally, the verb “to imitate” is found again in chapter 27, on the Abbot’s care for the excommunicated: “Let him imitate rather the mercy of the Good Shepherd who, leaving the 99 sheep on the heights, went in search of the one who had gone astray, and had such compassion on its weakness that he deigned to place it on His own sacred shoulders and so carry it back to the fold” (RB 27:8-9).

These passages of the Rule, even if they are not numerous, are a precious way of clarifying what recovering the image of God in us means for Saint Benedict.

In the first place, let us note that we are always dealing with the imitation of Christ, specifically Christ in two mindsets: obedience and mercy.

The obedience of Christ is His obedience to the Father, who sends Him into the world to save human beings. We can say that Jesus obeys the Father out of His love for man, and He does this even unto death, the peak of the manifestation of obedience and, at the same time, of His love. Christ obeys out of love and in order to love lost humanity in its extreme depths. The image of the Good Shepherd is therefore similar: an image which speaks of the obedient love of Jesus toward sinful man, which allows us to imitate Him better.

Yet what seems particularly important to me in these passages on the imitation of Christ in the Rule is the fact that they are both Christological and Trinitarian at the same time. This has to do with the salvific and merciful obedience of Jesus, but it is an obedience to the Father. By imitating Christ in this way, we reach our Trinitarian image and likeness by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

This leads us to the first words pronounced by God when He creates man, the words from which we initially set out: "Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness" (Gen 1:26).

Who is speaking here? God, naturally. It is, as the Fathers have pointed out, the Trinitarian God who speaks in the plural. Yet we could pose an apparently banal question to ourselves which, in fact, is not banal at all, namely: regarding God who speaks, or rather who speaks first, is it the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit? Who is the first to say, "Let us make"?

Undoubtedly, in the dimensions of eternity, the Persons of the Trinity do everything in perfect and total synchrony. But Christ revealed to us that the Trinitarian relationships of the divine Persons are determined by the identity of each to the other. The Father is Father, the Son is Son, the Spirit is the Spirit of love.

The one who "governs" the perfect union of the Trinity is the Father, and this ensures that the Son places Himself eternally in an attitude of obedient love toward the Father, just as the Spirit places Himself in an attitude of obedience to the love between Father and Son. It is useless to further specify this point; we will never comprehend these mysteries!

Yet when God says "Let us make" in creating man, we must imagine that this "Let us make" is part of the Father's will, but also that there is no difference between this word pronounced by the Father and the echo of love and obedience with which the Son and the Spirit unite themselves to the Father so that they too can say "Let us make."

If I were a composer, I believe that I would pass my entire life composing a piece in which three voices would sing "Let us make," one after the other and yet together, with three notes and yet the same note, in three melodies and yet the same melody; this would not last more than a millisecond, so it would thus be a most beautiful piece to listen to, and yet you would not hear anything but silence...I don't know if I am explaining myself well. Perhaps Arvo Pärt is the composer who could draw closest to this kind of music, which is impossible for man but possible for God.

Nevertheless, it is this "Let us make" which makes man, and it is in this "Let us make" that the image of God inscribed on us is enclosed and expressed. When Benedict invites us to imitate Christ in the act of saying "I did not come to do my own will, but the will of the One who sent me," it is as if He were conducting us to harmonize ourselves through obedience to this Trinitarian symphony which creates us in the image of the immediate and eternal obedience of love, which lives in the thrice-holy God.

At bottom, we must live every instant by listening to this symphonic Trinitarian Harmony which creates us and is impressed upon us. I believe that the

entire Rule does nothing but trace the course of this listening, in order that this Trinitarian Harmony that says “Let us make” in creating us becomes once more the conscious Fount of our life, so that this Trinitarian Harmony can truly recreate us in every instant, in every circumstance and relation of our humanity. We must investigate further what this signifies. What is certain is that it is this sanctity to which we have been called and destined; it is to return to the splendor of this image of God in us that the Son made Himself the Shepherd obedient unto death, in order to carry the lost sheep that we are back to the Father’s House.

It is in this sense, I think, that we must also understand the meaning of the gesture of standing up when we sing the *Gloria Patri*, “to the honor and reverence owed to the Trinity” (RB 9:7). Standing up (and incidentally, note that Benedict does not say “bow”) is an action by which someone not only expresses respect for the person standing in front of him or her- to stand up also expresses a “Here I am!” of availability and service. Before the Trinity, those who stand up thus express their readiness for the will and action of the Trinity in them, and this will and action are always expressed in the “Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness.” When we stand out of reverence for the Trinity, it is as if we are saying, “Here I am, your image and your likeness. Let everything take place in me according to your loving and creative Word: ‘Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness.’!”