

7) Seeking God

What Saint Benedict proposes to us in his Rule is the imitation of Christ in His obedience to the Father as the space for the transformation of the image of God in us.

Joined to this space is also the aspect of the search for God. If man is the image of God, the desire to adhere to his Model is part of his nature, especially after sin obscured this image and estranged man from communion with his Creator. Seeking God, for the man created in His image, means seeking one's deepest identity, seeking who one truly is.

It is interesting to note that of the four occurrences of the verb "to seek," *quaerere*, in the Rule of Saint Benedict, two of them deal with God seeking man, and two deal with man seeking God.

In the Prologue, God is described as the One who seeks "His laborer" by posing the question that we know so well: "Who is the one that wants life and desires to see happy days?" (Prologue 14-15).

God does not seek a laborer for work, but to collaborate in His most exalted plan: the creation of man himself. He seeks a laborer who will work with Him to complete what He had wished to accomplish by creating man in His image. He seeks someone, therefore, who wishes to find the fullness of their humanity by becoming the living and whole image of the Creator. We have already seen this under diverse aspects, but here it is important to underline that the fact of being the image of God, prior to provoking or demanding the search for God, pushes God to seek us out first. And in seeking us out as belonging to Him, as creatures which are His own: God seeks "His *own* laborer." He doesn't seek us as a lost object, but rather as a lost laborer, as a collaborator absent from his or her job. And God cannot accomplish this work by Himself, without His laborer, because the work coincides with the laborer; it coincides with the human being. The work of God *is* His image in man, a work which man cannot carry out without God, nor can God carry out without man.

The man that wants life and desires to see happy days, therefore, corresponds to the man that wants the image of God that he *is* to be realized in him, as well as to the one who wills to collaborate with God so that this may come about. The idea of the human being as "God's laborer" should be kept alive in our spirit, because it allows us to read the entire ascetic aspect of the Rule as the collaboration of man with the work of the Creator. God rested after the creation of the human being. But we can say that after original sin, God did not rest until He had sought out and found someone available to continue and complete with Him the interrupted and broken work; this is the work of God expressed and contained in the "Let us make" of "Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness" (Gen 1:26).

The laborer, naturally, submits to his Lord and must obey Him, yet at the same time, when he labors at the work which the Lord does, it is as though he was working at the same level. When a leader commands and the laborer does the job, the two are not at the same level. But when the leader and the laborer work side

by side on the same task, from the point of view of the work itself, they are at the same level; the work unites them.

Having said this, Saint Benedict immediately begins to describe this work of the fullness of man, the image of God, citing once again Psalm 34: "Preserve your tongue from evil and your lips from lying words. Keep away from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it" (Prologue 17; Ps 34:14-15).

And when man sets himself to work, God reveals Himself to him as his cooperator, his fellow laborer, the Face of the One of whom man is the image: "If you act thus, I will turn my eyes to you and my ears will hear your prayers; rather, even before you call upon me I will say to you, 'Here I am!'" (Prologue 18).

Thus does the entire Rule describe the work that the laborer of God is called to accomplish with his Lord, in order that the image of God in him be restored and realized. It is enough to think of chapter 4, "The instruments of good works." Reading this whole list by thinking of God's desire to collaborate with His laborer in the work of the image of God renders all of these precepts and counsels less foreign, because they have to do with our own selves, of the work of God which we ourselves are and which we must become. And for Saint Benedict, everything contributes to this work; everything in the life of the monastery is part of the work which collaborates with God for our new creation. Even manual labor, even the most banal service to the community, is an integral part of this essential and fundamental work. For this reason, everything in Saint Benedict's monastery must be carried out with this awareness, with reverence toward God, and with profound respect for the human being, His image in the work area.

All of this, then, concerns the first use of the verb "to seek."

God seeks His laborer. The second use of this verb, in the second chapter on the Abbot, echoes this search. If God seeks the human being to work with Him, it is important that the one responsible for this workshop that is the monastery (see RB 4:78) also be seeking, a search which reflects that of God. The Abbot must, therefore, "seek above all else the Kingdom of God and its righteousness" (RB 2:35; Mt 6:33). And for what should he employ himself in this primary search for the Kingdom? He should employ himself on behalf of the souls entrusted to him, in order that they might be saved: "Above all, let him guard against losing from sight or undervaluing the salvation of the souls for which he is responsible, or excessively occupying himself with earthly, transitory and fleeting things" (RB 2:33).

Souls are precisely that which bear the image of God inscribed on them. The Abbot of the monastery must be, in a certain sense, the first of the laborers God seeks to work with in the creation and redemption of the image of God in every man. In this sense is he a pastor, and his work is that of the shepherd who watches over his flock.

"Thus in the constant fear of the test which the shepherd will undergo regarding the sheep that have been entrusted to him while worrying about the state of others, he makes himself more attentive about his own, and corrects his own personal defects as he helps the others to amend by his admonitions" (RB 2:39-40).

For the Abbot, seeking the Kingdom of God also means seeking the lost sheep. This is the third use of the verb “to seek” in the Rule; it is found in a passage that we have already seen in dealing with the verb “to imitate”: “Let him imitate rather the mercy of the Good Shepherd who, leaving the 99 sheep on the heights, went in search of the one that had been lost, and had such compassion on its weakness that He deigned to carry it back on His shoulders and thus return it to the fold” (RB 27:8-9).

Here, as I have said, it is God who seeks not only His laborer, but His work, His lost masterpiece: the human being, far from his image because it is far from his divine Model. In our compassion toward the guilty and the weak, toward “infirm souls” (27:6) who are the blurred image of God covered in muck, we rediscover that we ourselves are the image of the merciful God, and we help others make that discovery in the joy of forgiveness.

The fourth use of the verb “to seek” is the best known, where Saint Benedict asks the novice master to verify that the candidate for the monastic life “truly seeks God,” *si revera Deum quaerit* (RB 58:7).

Yet often we don’t think about the fact that it is precisely in the act of seeking God that the novice, indeed every monk, reflects in himself the God who seeks us. To the God who seeks “a man that wants life and desires to see happy days,” that is, a man who wishes to be fully human, the image of God, there corresponds a man who truly seeks God, because God Himself is the life and joy of man; the fullness of our humanity is in God, because we are created in His image and likeness.

God and man seek each other. God has need of man, and man has need of God. Each needs the other to accomplish the very same work: the image of God in man, to collaborate in the “Let us make” that God pronounced in creating the human being. I repeat, God cannot accomplish this work without man, and man cannot accomplish it without God.

For this reason, our entire life in the monastery consists in the encounter of these two reciprocal searches, of God and of man, which find peace not so much in rest, but in the common work of our conversion, of the restoration of the image of God in us during the course of our lives.

When we think about this, every aspect of our lives, our prayer, work, common life, solitude, rest and so on, becomes important, vital, even thrilling, because everything is nothing but constant collaboration with the God who seeks us to accomplish the work of His living and loving image in us.