

11) What we really need

In the light of Judeo-Christian revelation, we have seen that necessity is not a kind of condemnation, as it is in pagan religion, but rather the space in which our liberty is called to affirm itself; we saw that work is one of the principal affirmations of human freedom in the face of necessity. By working, the human being “tames” necessity and becomes its subject, or even its master.

Let me give an example: if the necessity of a place obliges us to take care of the harvest ourselves, obviously in front of this task we are not truly free. It is a necessity that imposes itself, that obliges us, that leaves us with no other choice.

But through the activity of work, necessity is so to speak tamed, and the human being rediscovers his position as subject and master in the face of reality.

In Chapter 7 on humility, St. Benedict quotes an expression drawn from the acts of the martyrdom of St. Anastasia (and not from Scripture, like he says): “Consent merits punishment; constraint wins a crown” (7:33).

This leads us to understand that if the necessity is accepted, if one accepts to work with it, then it wins for us a crown, which means victory, authority, a royal mastery over what we endure.

But in this second level of humility, this freedom is the fruit of the renunciation of fulfilling one’s own will and desires, imitating the Lord who says, “I did not come to do my will, but the will of the one who sent me” (Jn 6:38; RB 7:31-32).

Real necessities are the will of God, and by becoming an occasion for obedience, even with regard to our desires and pleasures, they become an occasion for freedom and for true authority. A freedom which is in that moment filial, because the necessary reality is recognized as such, accepted and taken up as a gift of the Father and an occasion for expressing to him our trust, our abandonment.

In this sense, all that we really need, all that is truly necessary for us, St. Benedict invites us to ask and to receive with a filial spirit. In Chapter 33, dedicated to monastic poverty as a renunciation of personal property, he says to us that “for their needs” monks should “look to the father of the monastery” and that nobody is “allowed anything which the abbot has not given or permitted” (33:5).

In the spirit of the Gospel, which the Rule wants to transmit to us, every necessity relative to our human nature, experienced in faith, in this way becomes the space in which we experience concretely the concern of the Father toward us.

This experience passes through the abbot, as we just saw, but it is also realized in the brothers who at table, for example, have to “serve one another’s needs as they eat and drink” (38:6).

That which is necessary to each thus becomes the space of our reciprocal attention to each other. In every environment, it is important that each brother should not think about what is necessary for himself, but about what is necessary for the others, in such a way that nothing is lacking to anyone, even if each has to receive what is necessary according to his own personal needs, according to the

measure of his own strength, and not according to some conventional measure which would eliminate personal differences (cf. RB 34).

The needs of each person are thus a good measure of our human reality, a measure of our poverty, contentment, satisfaction – a measure that each one is called to accept for himself just as for each of his brothers or sisters. The needs of each are a measure in which each of us has to accept himself: I am this way; I need this; I do not need that. Our tendency is often not to know or accept the measure of what is really necessary for us. There are always those who want more, and those who want less, than what is necessary for them. It is always difficult to be objective in the judgment of what is truly necessary for us. For this reason, St. Benedict asks us to delegate such judgment to someone other than ourselves: to the abbot, to the community, to each confrere, or simply to the Rule which establishes or suggests a few measures of needs with which it is always good to confront oneself, even if it is not always possible to respect them to the letter.

In Chapter 55, St. Benedict prescribes, “In order that this vice of private ownership may be completely uprooted, the abbot is to provide all things necessary” (RB 55:18). A list of clothing and personal objects follows this prescription. And then he adds that the abbot must consider “the weaknesses of the needy, not the evil will of the envious” (RB 55:21).

The necessary is that which truly corresponds to our human and personal needs. Accepting the limits which constrain us – this is for Benedict the measure and the truth of our monastic poverty. We are speaking about a measure that is adapted to each one, above all to the weaknesses of each one, and therefore a measure that is merciful, paternal, even maternal; a measure of poverty that takes care of each one, that recognizes each one as unique, and as worthy of special and personal attention. To grant what is necessary, for St. Benedict, does not mean first of all to reduce in a negative sense the use of things, but to make a positive act of attention to that which in each is most fragile.

It is true that the Rule knows how to tell us “Enough!” and that often the abbot or the community have to tell us this in the face of certain claims or demands that we may make, because there are many false weaknesses in us, many false needs, which we often do not realize.

Often it is only when we accept to be deprived of something – something which we think is necessary – that we realize that it actually was not indispensable, that we can do just fine without it.

We notice that the limit of true necessity is not applied only to the needs of food, sleep or clothing and personal objects. It is also applied to the amount of work. There are necessary works; there are times for necessary work; and therefore there are also superfluous works. In the chapter on manual labor, for example, Benedict says that monks, “From Easter to the first of October, [...] will spend their mornings after Prime till about the fourth hour at whatever work needs to be done” (48:3).

Work is therefore a form of attention to the necessities of reality. Work is a form of contact with the real, of stability in the condition of our humanity. To work on what is necessary is therefore a good way not to escape, not to withdraw

from reality – so long as work itself does not become an escape. It becomes an escape precisely when one works more than is necessary, ignoring other needs of our life and vocation.

Then there is the necessity of hospitality, *necessitas hospitum*, which sometimes obliges us to break evening silence (42:10). In this case, it is the need of the other, of our neighbor, of the pilgrim which imposes on the monastic observance of silence. Nothing is more necessary than the need of a neighbor, of the poor, because in him it is Christ himself who makes himself needy – He who is more necessary to us than every other thing.

However, St. Benedict insists in Chapter 66, dedicated to the porters of the monastery, that within the monastery, “all necessities [...] are contained [...]. Then there will be no need for the monks to roam outside, because this is not at all good for their souls” (66:6-7).

There is therefore a good necessity and a bad necessity. The monastery must always dispense all that is necessary such that there is no need to go out. Our relationship with reality is therefore defined, and it is defined by our vocation and the fidelity to our vocation is what does good to our soul, that which permits our soul to be saved and to find fulfillment. And our soul is ultimately our humanity in all of its dimensions, that which defines us as a unique person, created by God in his image and likeness.

This lets us understand how the life which St. Benedict proposes to us is a life unified by the totality of daily reality. That which is necessary is in the final analysis that which is really and truly willed by God, even if sometimes necessity has an unpleasant face. But if we allow ourselves to be helped by our monastic life, lived according to St. Benedict, to recognize the necessity which God offers to us and to consent to it, then we can experience that every necessity is good, every necessity is a grace, a gift of God which converts and saves our souls, rendering them a little more themselves, that is, images of God.