

15) Remaining with Christ

The decision to stay with Christ, near Christ, that decision which often requires much time in order for us to make it truly – but God is very patient with us – this decision is, in the end, the soul of our monastic stability, in a community, in a place.

The stability that St. Benedict has us profess cannot be a vocation for us if its foundation is not Christ. The vows do not have meaning or value except to the measure that they consecrate us to Christ, to the measure that they bind us to Him.

This is also true for the vow of stability. We make a vow of stability in order not to distance ourselves from Jesus, to give him the answer that we do not want to go away, that we are staying with Him. Peter makes this vow, inspired by the Holy Spirit, when he says: “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God” (Jn 6:68-69).

At the end of the beautiful chapter 72 of the Rule on the good zeal of monks, St. Benedict seems to speak of this decision when he writes: “Put absolutely nothing before Christ, and may he lead us all together to eternal life!” (72:11-12).

Stability in the community depends, in the first place, on the preference given to Jesus, on the decision to remain with Him. But this inner decision of freedom, of the will, Christ transforms and incarnates on a path of communion, in stability in a community on its way toward eternal life, that eternal life of which Peter speaks when he answers Jesus: “You have the words of eternal life!” (Jn 6:68). Eternal life, life in its fulness, is the goal of the path of a community joined together and guided by Christ.

In St. Benedict, too, stability is a participation in the path of the brothers or sisters of a monastic community. The idea of a path is fundamental for living stability in a monastery. If we do not walk together, joined together and guided by Christ, the Good Shepherd, we are not stable.

In the crisis of the group of disciples described in chapter 6 of John there is also mention of a path. Not to go away from Jesus, not to abandon him, does not mean to stay there without moving, but to start off on a path with Him, to continue to follow him, even if his path heads ever more decisively toward Jerusalem, which means his death, but also his resurrection.

With Jesus, everything revolves around the dynamism of a path. The problem is not so much how we are, what level we have reached, but remaining on the path behind Him, with Him.

The betrayal of those who leave Jesus in the synagogue of Capernaum is, in fact, described with these words: “Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him” (Jn 6:66).

They reversed the direction of their life. They no longer walk with Him. They will go no further with Jesus. They no longer take the path of letting themselves all be guided together by Him toward the eternal life which He lets us share.

Monastic stability is not being planted in some place, but remaining on Christ's road, just as St. Benedict helps us follow it and our community gives us the possibility of living it by belonging there concretely.

But chapter 6 of St. John can help us understand even more profoundly the meaning of our vocation to stability.

In the end, the disciples who go away and do not walk with Jesus any longer, why do they do it? They followed him up to then, faithfully. Why do they leave now?

Perhaps because at that moment, Jesus offered them not to be satisfied any more with following him, but with becoming his Body.

He had said: "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me" (Jn 6:56-57).

What Jesus offers here is much more than simply following him on the outside. It is receiving the grace to become Him, to become his Body, living with his life. This is also what St. Benedict is thinking of when he demands the work of stability on a communal path of obedience. He wants to help us be incorporated in Christ not only to follow his steps, but to make them with Him, in Him, through Him. Do you remember the beautiful expression of chapter 61 of the Rule, on how to receive and integrate monks from outside? Stability is defined in these terms: "*sociari corpori monasterii* – to be joined to the body of the monastery" (61:6).

It is important to preserve this image, because it can help us understand and judge our way of living stability, and therefore our whole monastic life. The ideal for Benedict is not to have a fine example of a monk according to the manual, but rather that each brother live with and in the body of the community. Therefore, if at times there are periods in which the body is a bit weak, stability means sharing this weakness and bearing it with the others. And if there are moments when the body must move a great deal, the ideal of stability is not to withdraw into a corner to seek one's own monastic tranquillity, but to move with the body and share its activity. It is a little bit the idea of community as a body which is implied in chapter 48, where St. Benedict says: "If the demands of the place or the poverty require that they handle the harvesting of agricultural products themselves, let them not lament, for monks are truly such when they live from the work of their own hands" (48:7-8).

When we live stability in this incarnate way, it becomes for us a source of life, of Christ's life. Far from getting fossilized in routine and duty, it becomes ever more a path of eternal life with our brothers and sisters.

Stability thus comes to coincide with the charity that agrees to take responsibility for the neighbor. And it is this deepening that we must make in the next Chapters, and we will do it starting from the gospel of the "Good Samaritan."