

17. The great choice of the morning

The great revolution, the one that enables each of us to get up in the right way each morning, is precisely the announcement of the Prologue of the Gospel according to St. John: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us” (Jn 1:14). From that instant, the whole daily, human reality is no longer the scene for our doing and our having, but is the place in which the Word wants to live with us, in which God wants to live out a closeness with us, with our heart, and the place in which to live out together with others this closeness with God that is the fullness of each life.

So, when we are about to get up each morning we must perform this test, to consult our freedom, our heart. Do I get up in order to face reality as something “to do” or to live out closeness with Christ in each circumstance, each encounter, each instant, in each gesture? Do I get up for *action* or for *encounter*?

The perspective of closeness with Christ gives the morning the joy of a beginning. The morning is a true morning, a new dawn. If, instead, I face the day with a demand for doing something interposed between me and reality, the first thing I think of is what I shall have obtained this evening, what I will have managed to do, to obtain, to profit from this day. And it is as if, instead of rising up at dawn, we rise up at sunset, when night falls, sad and disappointed even before starting the day, because in reality we do not begin anything.

St. Benedict had a keen awareness of the importance of the morning awakening. He dedicates a chapter of the Rule to the monks’ sleep, where he describes how the dormitories, the beds, and their arrangement should be. Various details show that sleep is not an end in itself, but is at the service of awakening. A candle must always remain lighted during the night; the brothers should sleep clothed, but without their knives in their belts to avoid hurting themselves during sleep. All is “for the purpose of being always ready” to apply oneself without delay to the *Opus Dei*, to the Work of God, that is, to the Divine Office (cf. RB 22:6).

The monks are thus educated to get up and start the day not for the sake of what they must do, but for the Work of God, that is, for what God is doing. Certainly, we too have to do the prayer, we are the ones who recite and sing the psalms, the readings, etc., but St. Benedict reminds us that God loves us first of all, that it is He who comes to meet man, that He became man to allow for an encounter with Him. Every prayer’s encounter with God is an appointment where God has arrived first, is a time when God welcomes us, when God awaits us. I think that we would have a much easier time granting time to God if we had a more vivid awareness that He is giving us that time, that He has prepared that encounter for us. “Everything is ready,” says the king in the parable of those invited to his son’s wedding feast who refuse to come, with various excuses (cf. Mt 22:1-10). They only had to come, be seated, and eat, and celebrate, participating in the joy of the king and his son. They do not go there because, as they say, “they have other things to do.” But God might also have other things to do than work for us and in us, give us his eternal time, grant us his presence, listen to our prayers, open his house to us to be with us, to live his divine closeness with us.

The freshness of the morning, the beauty of being able to start a new day in wonder, we do not form in ourselves with an effort of will, but by taking right back up the awareness that our daily task is not what we must do ourselves but rather letting the Lord complete his

work. It is a great conversion for us to pass from the value we ourselves give to thing and to time to the value that God gives, the value that is God. That which really matters in our life is not what we do ourselves, but what God does. And what we do ourselves has value if we accomplish it within an obedience, that is, making ourselves instruments of God, of God's work.

St. Benedict wants to teach all of this right from the morning, from the morning alarm, or rather, the night alarm. And he wants us to help each other with this in community. It is beautiful how the Rule describes the community's waking and rising to go to Vigils: "Thus the monks will always be ready to arise without delay when the signal is given; each will hasten to arrive at the Work of God before the others, yet with all dignity and decorum. (...) On arising for the Work of God, they will quietly encourage each other, for the sleepy like to make excuses" (RB 22:6, 8).

St. Benedict censures nothing in our humanity, and he knows that it is hard to get up early in the morning, that waking up is not always easy, and that often we are lacking the willingness to face the day. So, as for many other aspects of Christian and monastic life, he asks that the community be there to help us consent, to say yes to the newness of a new day, to bear witness, for whoever has forgotten it or not yet experienced it, that it is worthwhile being there at the invitation of God, that it is worthwhile to invest one's life in what God is doing rather than in what we think we have to do ourselves, which then, perhaps, is reduced to sleeping, to doing nothing through laziness or fear of life.

There is much tenderness in these counsels of St. Benedict, a manly gentleness, full of benevolence, you could almost say full of humor. It is not the unpleasant and violent alarm that is used in barracks or prisons. It is as if St. Benedict wanted everyone to get up freely, that he do it not just out of obligation, or duty, but willingly, notwithstanding the effort. Benedict always wants to make people's freedom grow, because if you do not go to meet God with freedom, if you do not consent in freedom to what he wants to work in us and through us, then encountering Him also remains sterile. But Benedict also knows that, often, freedom wakes up in us later than the body and the thoughts do. So, if you want to progress, it is important to have confidence in the one who is more mature in the positive experience that we are invited to. Then we will understand.

Personally, when I rise for prayer, I do not always have the willingness to pray, but I know from experience that it is during prayer that the willingness comes to me, that the taste for prayer comes from prayer itself, or at least you experience that we need it, that God grants us and works in us something good for the day, for life, for others, something much more precious than sleeping an hour longer.

The reciprocal encouragement to be at the Work of God that St. Benedict asks of the community makes me think of an encouragement that the holy Curé of Ars used to address to his soul, as if to "wake it up" to pray and work with God:

"Up then, my soul, you will converse with the good God, you will work with Him, you will walk with Him, you will combat and suffer with Him. You will work, but he will bless your work; you will walk, but he will bless your steps; you will suffer, but he will bless your tears. How great, how noble, how consoling it is to do all in company with and under the gaze of the good God, to think that He sees all, that he keeps track of all!"