

21) “Let them be served like Christ himself”

In the Rule, what makes it possible to live the relationship with God and human relations in a unified way is the recognized presence of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The beginning of chapter 36, as we have seen, expresses this very clearly; I repeat it: “Care of the sick must rank above and before all else, so that they may truly be served as Christ, for he said: ‘I was sick and you visited me’, and ‘What you did for one of these least brothers you did for me’” (36:1-3).

The absoluteness of the precept of chapter 72, “Let them put absolutely nothing before Christ,” is here applied to the sick, with the same insistence on the word “all”: the *omnino* of chapter 72 becomes here *ante omnia et super omnia*.

We know from elsewhere that St. Benedict also makes explicit reference to the parable of the last Judgment in Matthew 25 in order to lay the foundations of the reception of guests. “Let all the guests who arrive to the monastery be welcomed as Christ, for one day he will say: ‘I was a stranger, and you welcomed me’” (53:1). It is precisely in chapter 53 that St. Benedict asks us, among other things, to offer the guests the witness of “all possible humanity – *omnis ei exhibeatur humanitas*” (53:9).

Behind this last expression, how can we not see in the imagination of St. Benedict the image of the good Samaritan who does everything possible to be the neighbor, the host, and the friend of the man wounded by robbers?

Therefore, whether we’re dealing with the sick in the community or with the guests that come to the door, the faith that recognizes Christ in them is demonstrated by the humanity that is shown to them. Faith in Jesus Christ, true God and true man, is recognized in the humanity with which we welcome and take care of our human brothers and sisters.

Because, in the end, every time, in all these instances, the issue is receiving and taking care; which means receiving truly, concretely; which means receiving the other for who he is, in the state in which he finds himself, in the need he expresses or incarnates. In the logic of love, the other, the neighbor, is defined by his need, by his anguish, by his weakness, not as a deficiency, as a negative condition of his person, but as a question that demands my responsibility and my love.

Living poor in our midst, suffering abandonment and the Passion even to death on a Cross, Jesus took his place definitively in human weakness and need, and it is from that place that He calls and urges each of us to love.

By citing Matthew 25 to illustrate the situation of the brothers’ illness as well as that of a stranger who asks to be received in the monastery, St. Benedict makes us understand that in both cases the same mystery is at play. In each case the issue is opening ourselves up to the situation of another’s need that we have not foreseen, for which we are not prepared. No one can foresee more than a little when sickness comes, and when it puts a brother in a state of dependence on another’s help. The same is true also for guests, including those who are anticipated and whom we know; we really do not know ahead of time what they might need in that moment in their

lives. But these two examples of need sum up all others, and every human being whom God puts on our path is a sick and wounded pilgrim who will always need love. And we ourselves are this same pilgrim for all the others whom we encounter along their way, beginning with the members of our community. And this wounded pilgrim, thirsting for love, who depends on our love to live and be happy, is Jesus, is always Christ, is only Christ, He who is “all in all” (Col 3:11).

At any rate, there is a dimension of that encounter with the neighbor who is the wounded pilgrim that we do not think about enough, especially in the concrete reality of the situations in which it occurs: it is the dimension that I would call “eucharist,” in the literal sense of the term: the dimension of thanksgiving, of gratitude. Usually when we, or at least I, think of Christ’s presence in our needy neighbor, it is like we’re spraying perfume on manure. We use this thought to “deodorize” the encounter, to beautify the service that he asks of us, the charity that we feel obliged to practice. It is an effort of imagination, which is not so easy anyway or so long-lasting, to try to ignore the bothersome aspects of the issue.

So, no: it is not this that makes us become truly the neighbor of the other, of the poor, in Christ. A devout thought is not enough for recognizing Jesus in the other, in the sick, in the stranger, in the pilgrim, in the wounded brother. A devout thought, a pious inspiration, can never be stronger or more powerful than what can drive us away from the other, or at least wear us out. They will especially not be stronger than our egoism, than our desire for an advantage, for a profit for ourselves through what we do for the other.

Now, indeed, Jesus did not say, “Every time you did these things for one of the least of my brothers, it’s *as if* you had done it for me,” but rather, “you did it for me” (Mt 25:40). Only if Jesus is truly present for us in the other will love be possible, even if the sentiments of our heart often remain incapable of feeling true affection for the other, truly gratuitous love.

And how does the recognition of Jesus in our neighbor become the source and force of love for him in us? By leading us to give thanks. If we recognize a real presence of Christ in the other, our true reaction should above all be gratitude.

Indeed, Jesus Christ does not make himself present in our troubled neighbor simply to demand our service and our love: he does it above all to love us, to give himself to us. The presence of Christ is always a gratuitous gift that we never deserve. Receiving a poor man means receiving the gift of Christ, it actually coincides with receiving Christ. Christ offers himself to us through the brother who asks for our gift, our service, the loss of our life. Nothing can come from this but thanksgiving. And here the two meanings come together, the literal sense and the sacramental sense of the Eucharist: thanksgiving and the real presence of Christ.

St. Benedict is aware of this, and he teaches us to live love and service to our neighbor with thanksgiving. The more a neighbor needs, the more Christ is present in him, and that must fill us with gratitude.

The Rule thus teaches us to receive the other’s need as a gift.