

21. To incarnate mercy

"In the love of Christ, pray for our enemies.

Reconcile yourselves before the setting of the sun with those with whom you've had a disagreement.

And never despair of God's mercy" (RB 4:72-74)

St. Benedict basically asks us not to separate the love of Christ from the mercy of the Father. And he asks us not to separate them in the context of relations with our neighbor, from the most distant enemy to the brother or sister with whom we disagree in our community. It is as if he were to ask us to allow Christ to permeate the human world with Trinitarian Communion.

I am reminded of a phrase from St. John Paul II's Encyclical *Redemptoris missio*, dedicated to the mission field: "Christ is the revelation and incarnation of the Father's mercy. Salvation consists in believing and accepting the mystery of the Father and of his love that manifests and gives itself in Jesus through the Spirit." (§ 12)

Jesus Christ is the mercy of the Father who comes to save us, the Divine Mercy that reveals itself, incarnates itself, manifests itself, gives itself, through the gift of the Spirit, in the womb of Mary and the Church. All we have to understand, choose, welcome, in order to live the mystery of the mercy of God, we have to understand it, choose it, and welcome it in Christ, in relationship with Him, letting ourselves be loved by Him and loving Him, like Peter who had to accept that Jesus loves him even unto washing his feet and dying on the Cross for him; and in response to which Jesus asks nothing in return but to be loved, from the depths of Peter's misery and fragility, which led Peter to deny Him.

Here we must think of another place in the Rule in which St. Benedict speaks to us of God's mercy: when after washing the feet of the guests, the abbot and the community are invited to sing the verse from Psalm 47: "*Suscepimus, Deus, misericordiam tuam, in medio templi tui* – O God, we have received your mercy in the midst of your temple!" (Ps 47:10; RB 53:13-14).

In my 2016 Pentecost Letter, I underlined the fact that with the singing of this verse, St. Benedict makes us understand that the monastery is for him the "temple of God's mercy," and that this is the principle service that we can offer the world.

In the light of the verses of chapter 4 on which we are meditating, we can also understand that it is in experiencing the love of Christ in the washing of feet, symbol and realisation of the Eucharist, that we are given to experience the mercy of the Father who fills us with hope. The washing of feet is the love of Christ for us, but also the love of Christ in us, the love that He asks of us, like of Peter and the other apostles, when He asks us to love one another as He loves us. In the washing of the feet "we have part" (Jn 13:8) in Him, we are united to Him by the Father's mercy, and we can participate in His love for the brothers, for the whole world, and therefore of the mercy with which the Father wants to embrace all humanity.

To wash feet means to prefer the love of Christ to ourselves. It is the symbol of every act of charity that lowers itself to serve the other, mortifying our pride, our need "to be greater" than others, to beat the other by outdoing him. To wash feet means to renounce one's own interests, one's own gain. It is the incarnation of the humble love of Christ, that with which He loved us first, dying for all on the Cross. And it is through this love that the Father's mercy reaches us and defuses itself throughout the world. It is through this humble love that He reaches us and defuses the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Pentecost, as in the Virgin Mary.

The mercy of God the Father, in which we can always hope, comes to us when "in the love of Christ we pray for our enemies" (cf. RB 4:72); that is, when we join ourselves to the prayer of the Crucified One that forgives the trespasses of all sinners before God: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do!" (Lk 23:34).

St. Benedict had a strong awareness that this is the fundamental prayer that we need to pray, that we have to learn. Benedict himself — do you remember? — reacted to the attempted poisoning by the monks of Vicovaro with a prayer asking God's mercy on them: "He rose up suddenly and, with affable face and tranquil disposition summoned the monks, addressing them with these words 'May God Almighty have mercy on you, brothers; why did you want to do this to me?'" (St. Gregory the Great, *Dialogues* II, 3)

Benedict gets up to pray, as at the end of his life when he wanted to die standing up after having received the Body and Blood of Christ, in order to dwell in His love, with his hands raised in the *orantes* position interceding before God for the world: "He stood with hands outstretched toward the sky (*erectis in caelum manibus stetit*), and let out the last breath between words of prayer (*et ultimum spiritum inter verba orationis efflavit*)" (*Dialogues* II,37).

When Benedict says: "May God Almighty have mercy on you, brothers," he expresses at the same time a prayer of intercession and blessing. He addresses himself contemporaneously both to God and to his enemies. He addresses at the same time the Father and the brothers, like Jesus. After all, we ourselves should always speak like this, say words full of intercession and blessing, words imploring and giving mercy, mercy begged of God and immediately transmitted to others; to the brothers, sisters, enemies. All of our personal and community prayer, all of our liturgies, the Divine Office, and our meditation on the word of God, ought to form in us this contemporaneous relationship with the Father, and relationship with the brothers, this contemporaneous prayer and blessing, as in the prayer and blessing of Christ Himself. And it would always be a prayer and a blessing of mercy, lived in the faith — and certain hope — in the mercy of God towards us and towards others.

For this, it seems to me important that we deepen the meditation on mercy in the Rule, in the context of the prayer in which St Benedict wants us to be formed.