

23. "Our Friend"

To live out the conversion to communion, St. Benedict calls us back, then, to a method that has been clear since the first Christian community: the use of goods in light of others' need, in service of the good of all, in particular of those who are needier than we. He proposes that we exercise a relationship with things that changes the possessive adjective, as I was saying about the cement and bricks: he asks us to pass from "my" to "our." Before being a material shift, this is a shift of heart and freedom. For this reason faith is necessary. A change in the world does not come mainly from a change of the often empty mind of the powerful, but from the conversion of our heart.

Material poverty is true and possible only if it is searched for first of all as poverty of heart. Perhaps in the monastery we use for work or something else instruments and objects that we would never let ourselves have before. But the first conversion that the Rule asks of us is not in a material measure of poverty, but in educating us to treat these things with the awareness that they are "ours" and not just "mine." St. Benedict thus educates us toward the awareness and experience that goods are always a gift, received and to be passed on, and that they can be at the service of a good that is greater, eternal, that will not be taken away: fraternal communion. Possessing in communion is not losing everything, but possessing it a hundredfold. In fact, both "my" and "our" are *possessive* adjectives. We possess something both by saying "my" and by saying "our." But the difference is that in "our" we possess the thing a hundredfold, a hundred times more not in the thing itself, but in the possession of it, because we possess it in the communion that we express in the use of the thing. The hundredfold, but also eternal life, is in the communion that we experience (cf. Mt 19:29).

This choice, which especially for us monks and nuns must be radical and constantly renewed, is a sign of a new world that it is today more than ever necessary to start. We are asked to cultivate the urgent preoccupation for the "common home," for the resources of the earth, that Pope Francis's *Laudato Si'* calls everyone to, especially by converting our heart to a practice of communion of the goods at our disposition. The Church asks us to use everything in service of a universal communion, of the whole human race present and future. This is also how the kingdom of God grows larger and spreads.

But in saying "our" instead of saying just "my," there is a level that is even deeper than the communion of goods or activities, or that, rather, should be the deep awareness of the joint possession of every material and spiritual good and exercise of every task: it is when we say "our" together with Jesus Christ.

There is a word of Jesus's in the Gospel of John that recently struck me. It is in chapter 11, on the sickness, death, and raising of Lazarus. His sisters tell Jesus that he is ill: "Lord, he whom you love is ill" (Jn 11:3). Jesus decides to wait two more days, such that Lazarus dies without Jesus's having come to see and heal him. John

insists greatly, however, on the friendship that Jesus showed for the three: “Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus” (11:5).

So, the word that struck me is what Jesus says when he tells his disciples of his intention to go to Bethany to “wake up” Lazarus. He says: “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him” (11:11). Precisely what struck me is the expression, “our friend – ὁ φίλος ἡμῶν.”

He does not say “my friend,” but “our friend.” It is an extraordinary thing, even if, like me, we have all heard this Gospel thousands of times without noticing it. Jesus speaks of his friend, one whom He loved in a very personal way, yet he speaks of him as “our,” he defines him as belonging not just to Himself, but to Him with his disciples.

If we listen well to this word of Jesus, it seems to include as it were a key for living a new relationship with everyone and everything. For if Jesus said “our friend” when speaking of one of His friends, this means that we too can and must speak of our friends, of people we love, but also of every human relationship that our existence puts together, by defining them with an “our” that includes Jesus, which involves Jesus first of all.

Often, in particular in vocations that comport virginity and celibacy, when an affection arises, a particular friendship, we instinctively think: “My friend.” Then perhaps we recognize that our heart is not free in this relation, and then we say to Christ: this person is yours, only yours, I hand him back to you, I sacrifice him. But we do it with sadness, because it is a sacrifice that, after all, goes against a positive movement of the human heart, that is, friendship, affection. Behold, it is as if, between these two options, one that keeps too much for itself and another that sacrifices everything without letting friendship grow and also be purified, it is as if Jesus suggests a third way to us, which opens the heart without breaking it, which expands it: the way of living out this friendship, this affection, *with Him*, sharing it with Him, saying with Him and like Him: “Our friend.” And this makes it such that everything that we are instinctively tempted to possess to the point of suffocating our hearts, or which we would willfully renounce to the point of crushing our heart, we can fully possess, we can enjoy *by possessing it with Christ*, expanding our every affection in friendship with Him, our every friendship, our every relationship.

This horizon of love that defines the beloved persons as “ours with Jesus,” is valuable not only for those who make a vow or promise of celibacy: it is the horizon of graciousness, beauty, and fullness of every relationship, even a spousal one, even one between parents and children, even between brothers. Jesus teaches us to live all our relationships as “ours” together with Him. Did Christ not also teach us to say “our” to his Father, too?

This light on our life, on our heart, I commend it to you without going further into it. I will return to it on other occasions, and it could be the topic for a whole month of the Formation Course... But it is a word with which I would like us to start back toward our daily life with the desire of living all our relationships with the thought that we can live them as “ours with Christ,” and thus live them within His friendship,

His affection for people and for us. It is not just a feeling, for saying “our” with Jesus is something demanding, something that leads us toward the sense of people and things that is charity, the gracious love of Christ for us and for all. With Jesus my enemy also becomes “our friend.” So great is the love of the One who shared his whole self with us, along with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

When Jesus, speaking that day of Lazarus, said “our friend,” he imperceptibly but really began a new world, a new transmission of his love tending toward the universal, of Trinitarian communion, began a mission without limits, which is the mission of the Church, in which Christ communicates himself by the diffusion of a friendship that is His and everyone’s, because it is “ours” with Him and with all.

It is with this word that includes everyone in the friendship of Christ and sends us to transmit it to everyone, that I would like to express the traditional but never taken for granted thanks at the end of this edition of the Monastic Formation Course.

I thank God first of all for having given us this intense time of encounter, of formation, of fraternal communion. And thanks to each of you for having corresponded to this grace with your availability and your effort of living it all out, also through the communal services that each of you took on with joy and generosity, both in the house and in the liturgy!

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I think finally of those who have finished the Triennium and whom we greet with affection. It is always sad to say goodbye, but it is really a special effect of this Course that it creates intercontinental links of fraternal communion, and between the Orders and communities, always stronger than the distances of space and time!

Let us not forget to remain united in the prayer of Christ to the Father, in the joy of the Holy Spirit, which is the most important thing for us and for the whole world!