

4. The communion of the little ones

Yesterday, citing the homily I gave to the youth at Heiligenkreuz, I emphasized that Jesus praises the Father because he reveals himself to little children and I noted that the little child, the baby, by nature seeks joy in the relationship of love with others.

These are two aspects, closely connected to each other, that it is important to consider more deeply in order better to live out prayer as the Church intends it and in particular as St. Benedict intends and teaches it.

I was saying that sometimes I realize that in communities joy is lacking from prayer, even when it is well done. I was saying that perhaps this is a sign that they are not praying enough to seek the “treasure in heaven” that can truly fill with joy our heart that is created for God. Jesus was surely always happy, even when he was suffering or was saddened by seeing the evil of the world and the hardness of his disciples and of the Pharisees, because the treasure of his life was the Father.

I also notice that, in communities, the joy of prayer is often saved by a single brother, a single sister, who among the others lives out this joy of seeking and finding the treasure. They are like angels whom the Lord sends into the midst of the caravan that is tiresomely crossing the desert and who brings relief and peace with their mere presence. Perhaps they are brothers or sisters who formally speaking pray badly, who are often out of tune, or never find the right page, who make mistakes in the liturgical gestures, or even yawn or fall asleep during the Office, especially if it is sung in a language they do not understand. The only quality that they have is the littleness of which Jesus speaks. They are “like the little children” whom Jesus asks us to imitate, converting from our proud presumption of doing better than they, of praying better and especially of being bigger and more important than they.

“Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me. [...] See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.” (Mt 18:3–5, 10)

I would like us to notice how here too Jesus speaks of prayer, of joy, and of treasure in heaven. When he says of the “little ones” that “their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven,” we must think then of how important, beautiful, and alive the little ones’ prayer is, since there is an angel who directly links their heart to the Father, to the kind face of the Father, from whom they infallibly receive the fulfillment of every request and filial joy, like that of Jesus himself. We cannot but desire, then, that we too pray like this, or rather: be like this.

But this implies two qualities of prayer and of our whole life about which St. Benedict is always and completely insistent: humility and fraternity. To be little and in communion with others are the two great conditions for Christian prayer, for which monastic life should constantly educate us, correcting us each day. Suffice it to think of how the eucharistic celebration begins: with an act of penitence in which we humbly recognize that we are wretched and in which we entrust ourselves to the fraternal communion, requesting the prayer of Mary, of the angels, of the saints, and of “you, my brothers and sisters.” The little ones in our community – but obviously even the superior, the bursar, or the cantor can be little in heart – the little one deep down lives out common prayer by remaining in this humble attitude during the whole Mass or the whole divine Office, and always. The little one is the tax collector who, in the back of the Temple, beats his breast and repeats the prayer of the Russian pilgrim: “But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’” (Lk 18:13).

St. Benedict calls him “*publicanus ille evangelicus*” (RB 7:65), as if this attitude “evangelized” and transformed even a sinful occupation and life into Gospel. And it is so: humility that prays makes “Gospel,” makes “Good News,” of even the life of the worst sinner, like the life, for example, of the thief crucified next to Jesus (cf. Lk 23:40–43). In fact, the good thief also recognizes that he is a sinner and prays to Jesus to remember him, and this grants him right away the treasure of heaven, the joy of Paradise.

We must think of this, and be aware of it, because we know that our prayer, lived in this way, as little and humble ones, immediately becomes evangelization, gives the world Christ’s Gospel, even if no one sees us. St. Benedict asks us to repeat the tax collector’s prayer, “saying it always in the heart – *dicens sibi in corde semper*” (RB 7:65). He invites us to interiorize this humble littleness that evangelizes the world, to live it out during communal prayer, but indeed also as a continual prayer of the heart, following the whole monastic tradition that goes back to the Desert Fathers, which has always been cultivated in the Eastern Churches, but also in the Western tradition, as, for example, St. Bernard reminds us with his cult of the Name of Jesus.

But more than the formulas of prayer, it is important not to forget that it is above all the attitude of the heart that is asked of us in order for us to live out a continual prayer, not a prayer folded back on ourselves but truly an evangelizing prayer, a prayer that transmits to all the presence and word of the Lord Jesus Christ. We know full well, and we experience, often in the negative, that only humble littleness, that littleness that begs for mercy, truly evangelizes, and not the greatness and force of what we do, say, or think as we believe we are better than others.

But for this reason it is important to remember, as I was saying at the beginning, how little children naturally live out their littleness, and that is in a relational way, within a communion of relationships of belonging and trust. For this reason the humility that Christ and then St. Benedict ask of us is hardly ever described in an individual way, but as a position within a community. On one's own one can be proud even of one's littleness and humility. On the other hand, in the body of the community, humility is present or absent according to the manner in which we are with the others. We can develop a true humility as a personal virtue, as awareness and knowledge of self, only in relation to the brothers and sisters with whom Christ asks us to follow him.

This is also true for prayer, and perhaps above all for prayer. In the Rule it is clear that one learns to pray in community, in the common, liturgical prayer that is then the prayer of the whole Church. If one does not learn to pray in communion with the community and the Church, not even personal prayer will be true. Why? Ultimately because God himself is communion: he is the Father of all, who makes us his sons in the blood of his only-begotten Son, in the mystery of his mystical Body vivified by the Holy Spirit. In the Christian mystery, the relationship with God is not enough for prayer, because God is Relationship in himself and with all human beings.

We can say that the treasure in heaven that prayer seeks in order to find true joy is a treasure hidden in a field, and this field is, for each of us, a concrete community that prayer gathers together. This is true for the family too, which the Council defines as "like a domestic Church" (*Lumen Gentium* 11). At the beginning of the Church, communities often coincided with extended family communities, on account of which they met to pray and celebrate the Eucharist in their houses.