

The Temple of Mercy



Dearest brothers and sisters,

The jubilee year of Divine Mercy makes me attentive to the way in which St. Benedict asks us to live out this mystery of our vocation and our mission as Cistercian monks and nuns. We will further explore the theme of mercy during the Course for Superiors that will be held in July, the title of which is *Never Despair of God's Mercy* (RB 4:74), and certainly also during the Monastic Formation Course.

In every monastery visit, like those I have made this year in Vietnam, Brazil, and Ethiopia, and in Europe, this theme accompanies and guides my *lectio divina* and the meditation I seek to share with you. According to the model of Pope Francis, mercy must be for us an interpretative criterion of what we live, of the circumstances in which we find ourselves, and generally of the history of persons, communities, the Church, and the whole world. The humanity within us and around us, like that man who was robbed, beaten, and left “half dead” on the street, urgently needs Christ, the good Samaritan, to “make himself our neighbor” by becoming incarnate and dying on the Cross, to give us new life in his Resurrection (cf. Lk 10:30-37).

In the midst of the temple

Many passages in the Rule of St. Benedict treat the topic of God's mercy, as also the mercy of the abbot and mercy among the brothers. In this letter I would like to focus on a point that has made me think for several months. I said at Poblet: “In chapter 53 of the Rule, which deals with the reception of guests, and therefore with what the monastery is called to be for the world, St. Benedict prescribes that the abbot and the whole community, after having offered the guest every needed sign of spiritual and material welcome, repeat toward the guest the washing of feet handed on to us by Jesus. After this gesture, Benedict asks that the whole community sing a verse of 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). (...)

For St. Benedict, then, the monastery is the temple of God's mercy. The community becomes a temple of mercy when it bends down to wash the feet of its own brothers' and sisters', and everyone's, misery. And it is in this way that a monastery receives the mercy of God for the whole world. For St. Benedict the monastery is not (...) “a school of the

Lord's service" (Prol. 45) only in the sense that one learns to serve God in it, but also, and perhaps above all, insofar as it is a place in which one learns to serve man *as* God serves him, as Christ serves him, making a memorial, thus, of Jesus who died and rose for us, of the Son who is merciful like the Father whom the abbot has the vocation, the mission, and the grace to represent, to re-present constantly to his brothers" (Poblet, Homily for the Abbatial Benediction, 2.27.2016).

We notice above all the inversion that St. Benedict introduces into this passage of the Rule. After the abbot and the whole community have completed the humblest service of mercy toward the guest, washing his feet, the monks are invited to sing a verse which affirms that they themselves are the ones who have received God's mercy. Here we touch on the mystery of mercy as Christ announced and revealed it: our every act of mercy toward our neighbor will never be able to transcend the infinite mercy that God expresses toward us. Even when we wash each other's feet, or we wash the feet of guests, of the poor, of pilgrims, we must never forget that God loved us first, that Jesus washed our feet first, with his gift of himself on the Cross, in the Eucharist, with Baptism and all the sacraments.

The monastic life should always cultivate this awareness in us. A monk is one who remembers, precisely when he is serving his brothers and sisters, that it is he himself who has first been served, love, forgiven by God in Jesus Christ. While we are giving, we commemorate that we are receiving; while we are loving, we commemorate that we have been loved; while we forgive, we commemorate that we have been forgiven; while we offer mercy, we recall that we ourselves have received it. And not so much from men, but from God: "O God, we have received *your* mercy in the midst of your temple!"

This memorial is praise, a "thanksgiving," a "eucharist," an attitude of the heart that makes joyful and grateful every service and every patience exercised in the community and toward the outside. The spiritual and material works of mercy that we exercises personally and as a community should be nothing other than the overflowing of the mercy of God that always exceeds our measure, our heart, our merit. It's like being able to say to everyone: I can give you everything, even my life, because the Gift of God is always superabundant and inexhaustible. As a verse of Psalm 62 says it, which I repeat each morning as I get up to go to prayer: "Because your mercy (*hesed*) is worth more than life, my lips will sing your praise" (Ps 62:4).

St. Benedict, then, sets this awareness at the center of our life and of our vocation. We know that for him the Temple of God, the House of God, is not only the church, the oratory, but the whole monastery, to the point that he asks that every work-tool be treated like the vessels of the altar (cf. RB 31:10). Everything is sacred in our life, and in the life of each Christian, because everything is a temple of God's mercy. The mercy of God, reaching in Christ every lost man, every missing child, has made the whole world a sacred space of the Divine Presence. The whole world, then, is the Temple of God, a place in which God comes, stays with us, takes care of us, and asks us to receive him precisely as Mercy. Jesus Christ is the Mercy of the Father that reaches the whole of humanity always and everywhere, and which desires to be received as such.

The fact that St. Benedict asks us to commemorate this mystery not in the monastery's church, and not even in the monastic cloister, but in the place where the world enters into the monastery through guests, the poor, pilgrims, is intended precisely to teach us to put at the center of our life the reception of the mercy of Christ that makes the whole world sacred. Only thus will the specifically sacred spaces of the monastery, the specifically monastic spaces, not be "profaned" by the pharisaic attitude of believing that God can visit and love us for reasons besides our misery and his mercy. Only thus will our being consecrated by our monastic Profession not close us up in the ivory tower of our pride. St. Benedict reminds us that we are monks and nuns because we, more than everyone else, need to receive God's mercy by washing others' feet. The temple of the monastery is not a temple of justice, nor of perfection or sanctity, but is the temple of the Mercy that the Lord grants that we receive for us, among us, with all and for all.

The justice of accusing oneself

In this regard I am struck by the continual insistence in the apothegms of the Desert Fathers on the theme of accusing oneself. I continue to reflect on an apothegm in which Abba Poemen speaks about his community: "Into this house has come every virtue but one; and without this one man can hardly resist." They asked him what this virtue was, and he said: "That a man blame himself" (Apothegms, Alphabetical Series, Poemen 134).

We often find ourselves at a stand-still in the path of our personal or communal conversion. We do not ever manage to advance, and we ask ourselves why. Why does this person or that community never manage to overcome certain problems? Why are we always at the departure point? We try to understand what is not working and what solution to find, after trying so many others in vain. We become like the prophet Balaam who does not see the angel blocking his way. Then he becomes furious and strikes his poor ass, when it is really he himself who should see where the problem is, until the ass receives from God the gift of speech to reveal it to him (cf. Numbers 22:21-35). So also we and our communities, before wanting to understand at all costs and resolve what blocks the path of our conversion, should begin by humbly recognizing that the problem is in ourselves. The real obstacle to conversion is in the fact that we think we have no need of it and it is the others instead who should change. The obstacle stands in accusing others instead of ourselves.

And yet the whole monastic tradition, the whole Christian tradition, from the Desert Fathers to St. Benedict, to St. Bernard, and so on to Pope Francis, does nothing other than hand on to us this constant teaching of the Gospel: the just one is not he who is without sin but he who recognizes it in himself and does not accuse others. In another apothegm the father Anub says that there is a justice that can make our brother's deficiencies disappear. They ask him: "What is that justice?", and the elder responds: "Always to blame oneself" (cf. Poemen 98).

Clearly one must not confuse the self-accusation that the monastic tradition asks of us with an unwholesome self-contempt full of scruples and sadness, closed in upon itself, without hope or desire, because this does not open up with humility and filial confidence to the good Father's mercy.

The lack of readiness to blame ourselves, to recognize humbly our own limit and sin, and our own infidelities, leads to a blindness that obstructs a gaze of love and mercy toward the others. This attitude often leads to division in communities, or to the division of one community from all the others. The history of the Church shows this clearly, as does the history, even the recent history, of our Order.

This position is so serious because he who does not accuse himself, who does not recognize humbly his own misery and his own sin, his own need for conversion, remains closed to mercy, does not experience it, and in time this hardens ever more into a pharisaical conception of justice. Jesus revealed that true justice does not consist in thinking oneself just, but in recognizing that one is not, because this opens man to the gift of the Father's mercy. And he did this even up to the last moments before his death on the Cross, when he completely justified the good thief crucified next to him.

I understood this this year while meditating on the Passion according to Luke for the Palm Sunday homily: "There is always a debate about the relationship between justice and mercy. Now, this thief, speaking to his companion, affirms that the penalty they are suffering is just. For Jesus, on the other hand, it is unjust, because He is innocent. Before asking for mercy, the good thief recognizes and affirms justice. And he does so by being willing to accuse himself. Our justice consists in accusing ourselves, not others. And this is the justice that is enough for God too. God does not like to judge us Himself, but rather wants us to judge ourselves in truth and humility. When we have the justice of accusing ourselves of our own evil, of recognizing that we are not just, then we can also make the leap from justice to trust in God's mercy. The good thief accepts justice, but he begs for mercy. And his humility, which accuses itself, which confesses, earns him the mercy that he knows he does not deserve, the mercy of the embrace of Christ who receives us into eternal communion with Him" (cf. Lk 23:39-43; Palm Sunday homily, Rome, 3.20.2016).

God's intervention

Why does this attitude unblock the personal and communal situations that do not progress and do not grow? Simply because this attitude opens our life and the life of communities, and thus of the Order, to God's intervention, which is always an almighty and merciful intervention, an intervention unlimited in His love for us, in His giving us all of Himself, in multiplying the marvelous signs that only He can work in our midst. How marvelous is the fulness of eternal life in communion with Him that Jesus grants to the repentant thief! How marvelous is the father's feast for the son who has returned home recognizing that he is unworthy to be called his son! How marvelous is Pentecost for the disciples who had denied and abandoned Jesus, and now meet in the Cenacle with humility and repentance!

Self-accusation unblocks the situations that do not advance because God is not content to just pardon and move on. He wants a new path to start from pardon. How many times Jesus said to repentant sinners: "Your sins are forgiven, go!" Pride is a paralysis in the path of persons and communities. God's forgiveness is not only a washing that cleans off filth, but a healing that enables us to walk and run with Christ, following him on the way

of the good and merciful Shepherd who goes to reconcile the whole world. He who, recognizing his own misery, opens himself to the Father's mercy, begins a path of reconciliation without limits, following Jesus, who reconciled the whole of humanity to God.

A person or a community that walks in brotherly reconciliation always goes well, even if everything remains fragile, imperfect, full of limits. Reconciliation is like a constant resurrection, it is the ever-new regeneration of love, God's true miracle among us and, through us, in the world.

The love of Christ as our common project

St. Benedict asks us, then, to wash others' feet, that is to serve and receive everyone, with the awareness that it is toward us that the Lord shows mercy. And he wants this symbolic gesture to express the essential and profound nature of the monastery, of the community as a temple of God, as a dwelling in which the merciful God who creates and redeems the whole of humanity makes himself present.

The absoluteness of the Rule's prescription is striking: "*pedes hospitibus omnibus tam abbas quam cuncta congregatio lavet* – let the abbot as well as the whole community wash the feet of all the guests" (RB 53:13). *All* the community must wash the feet of *all* the guests! An exaggerated prescription, practically impossible to observe. What community with its abbot or abbess could manage to wash the feet of all the guests who come into the monastery? There is something extreme in this request of St. Benedict's. An evangelical extremism, the same one that disturbed the Apostles when Jesus set himself to wash their feet. The evangelical extremism of Christ's love: "Before the feast of Passover, Jesus, knowing that his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, loved them to the end" (Jn 13:1). And as the foot-washing was for Christ the symbolic representation of his death on the Cross, his Eucharist, his passing from this world to the Father, that is, of his Passover, so also for us St. Benedict's prescription must signify, more than a practice to enact literally, an attitude of the heart to live out in all circumstances and in all encounters, and to live out together, in community.

St. Benedict asks us to accept the foot-washing from the Paschal Christ as a community rule, as a community project, as an evangelical choice of life that can unite all of us toward all. The abbot and community are called to be united in the essential, universal project of the love of Christ, the humble love of Christ who became the servant of all to allow the Father's mercy to enter the world, rendering our life, our communities, and the whole human world a temple of the merciful God.

Thus, this prescription of the Rule is a provocation. St. Benedict seems not to give it too much importance. He does not put it at the beginning of the Rule, and he does not dedicate a whole chapter to it. But for this very reason it is important, because Jesus never imposes his love as an obligation. He humbly suggests it to our freedom, because one truly loves when one is free to do so.

Washing another's feet is not in itself impossible. It does not require great strength, great means, much time, great virtues. It is a choice of love, of the humble love of Christ.

St. Benedict, however, makes this choice coincide with the choice of community communion, of communion obedient to the superiors and to the brothers and sisters, which is a communion in a life project.

St. Benedict asks for this arrangement of the monastic life in the whole Rule, in every aspect of our life and vocation. But here there is as it were a symbolic summary that becomes a light on all the rest, on the whole fraternal life, on all the monastery's work, on the whole liturgical and sacramental life, on all the activities and ministries that a Christian and Benedictine community assumes in order to follow Christ who transforms with his paschal love the whole human reality.

The world is renewed by Christ the Redeemer insofar as the reception of the other, of all, becomes in the world an experience of receiving God's mercy. The newness of Christ is made known where service toward the neighbor becomes a free and welcome experience of the Father's mercy. Human space becomes a temple of God because in Christ we discover that what is truly divine, what is truly holy, is love, because God is love, God is mercy.

This discreet, humble suggestion of the Rule, as of the Gospel, we can either take or leave. We are free. But when our personal and communal freedom does not consent to this paschal light on the truth and fulness of our Christian and monastic vocation, it is like everything loses the center of gravity that makes life harmonious. People and communities that do not consent to the fundamental Christian project which is the Eucharist lived out by washing everyone's feet together cannot experience the mercy that comes to transfigure our life and community into a temple of God, into a holy and sacred place in the charity of the Holy Spirit. It is not for nothing that the Cenacle, the place of the foot-washing, of the Eucharist, is also the place of Pentecost.

Ministry, liturgy, communion

One could say that for St. Benedict communion, *koinonia*, breathes with the two lungs of ministry and liturgy. The ministry of washing everyone's feet together inspires the choral hymn of praise to God for the gift of his Mercy, and it is thus that the *koinonia*-communion of the community lives and grows, and is transmitted to others. Communion is the mercy of God that we receive by humbly serving others and praising God. Communion is the temple of God, the sacred place of his presence, in which the Divine Mercy is experienced in fraternal charity and in praise of the Lord. One could say that the community which seeks its unity in common, missionary ministry finds it and lives it in the resonance of the liturgy. The immediate movement from the foot-washing to the choral chant of the verse of Psalm 47 shows that ministry immediately becomes liturgy, a prayer of praise to God. Service toward man immediately becomes divine service. We are called to a communion of mercy that unifies not only people among themselves but also all that we do with our hands and with our heart, in action and in prayer.

The fact that St. Benedict asks that this symbolic gesture be made by the abbot with the whole community reveals to us also the profound sense of authority and obedience in the monastic community. The abbot does not lead an army, or a soccer team that must defeat everyone in order to win the championship – a group based on power, a closed society

that seeks its own interest and profit, or that works only for its own good image – but rather a community of servants of humanity, above all the humanity of the “poor and pilgrims” – perhaps today he would write “refugees and migrants” – “because in them more fully is Christ received” (RB 53:15).

It seems like we hear the echo of Jesus’s gentle reprimand to Peter, who does not accept that the Master stand in our midst “as he who serves” (Lk 22:27): “If I do not wash you, you will have no part with me” (Jn 13:8). And if the abbot must represent Christ, he does so precisely by preceding his community in the service of washing others’ feet. Superiors of monasteries are called to precede and guide their brothers and sisters on the way of humble and universal service, aware that this is the main way that the community goes out to meet Christ and receive Him, He, the incarnate Mercy of the Father.

Reconstructing temples of mercy

In a world where hate and violence continue to destroy the human community, sowing fear and mutual distrust; in a world in which already too many people are in physical and spiritual pilgrimage in search of a place to stay, of a meaning for their life, what needs to be built more urgently than communities that would be true temples of God’s mercy? The world needs for us to be faithful in building places in which human misery and divine mercy can meet and receive each other.

I think back to the times of St. Bernard. Then too society felt threatened, and Bernard also took up the task of preaching the crusade. But his main engagement was not war, which was in any case a failure, but the material and spiritual upbuilding of people and places of mercy. This is the best reaction to the violence, terrorism, and fear of the other that is invading society, and also the best reaction to a culture that has been dehumanized by its own technical perfection, which forgets the dignity and profound desires of the human heart. More than ever our mission is to live out our vocation in the charism of St. Benedict, to build up together dwellings in which God can live with man and comfort the misery of each heart.

May the Queen and Mother of Mercy obtain for us this fidelity and dedication to the love of Christ by interceding for us and for all, as in the Cenacle of Pentecost!



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