

4. Renouncing our own interests

What does it mean to renounce one's own interests to pursue those of Jesus Christ? Let's try to understand this because it is a vital question.

In Philippians 2:21 Paul laments that all pursue their own interests and not those of Jesus Christ. He uses the verb *zeteo*, which is translated into Latin with *quaerere*, which means "seek," to be in search of something or someone that we desire, that we are missing, that we cannot do without. It is the verb that the Bible also uses for the search for God. In the Rule, it is the verb that St. Benedict uses to express the fundamental condition that must be examined in the novice to determine whether or not he has a vocation: "*si revera Deum quaerit* – if he truly seeks God" (RB 58:7).

It is interesting to note how, in the Rule, there is emphasis on the aspect of renouncing the pursuit of one's own interests for the sake of seeking God and his interests. Whoever presents himself at the monastery to enter, in fact, must be badly treated, he must be made to wait outside the door (regardless of the weather, I imagine), and must even be put through "harsh treatment and difficulty" (RB 58:3). Today if a postulant comes, we roll out the red carpet for them and we tell them that monastic life is the best thing for him or her, and perhaps we tell them that they will be able to bring whatever they like or want into the monastery, cell phones, computers, daily contacts with all their friends and relatives, and if they have completed some education or are formed for a profession, we promise them that they will be able to put them to fruitful use in the monastery, practically right away. Yes, it's true they will have to do a little year of novitiate, a bit stricter, but it passes quickly, we will do everything to distract them from the boredom that comes with it, and immediately after they will be able to get right back to study and do what they like as before... I am exaggerating, but unfortunately... not too much! What has often been lost is the awareness that embracing a vocation of following Christ is not possible without renouncing the pursuit of one's own interests to pursue those of Christ.

The "harsh treatment" that Benedict envisions for the postulants – which today might end up in the denouncing and arresting of the abbot, of the porter, and of the novice master – is not meant to demonstrate rigidity or to discourage weak, indecisive characters. It is intended above all to make them understand from the beginning that entering upon a vocation must include a leap forward in the heart's search, in what we truly desire. The issue is verifying if we seek God to the point of sacrificing our interests to his, that which is for us to that which is for Him. One who finds himself "four or five days" (RB 58:3) at the gate of the monastery, perhaps in winter with snow, or in summer with the torrid heat, and every time he knocks or calls out they do not open the door to him, they tell him that there is no place for him, that he should go away, clearly he must ask himself: So what interest do I have in entering this place? What do I get out of this form of life that rejects me? Am I better off returning home, to my life, to my interests? What does it help someone to remain, to keep knocking until they open up to him and say: "Fine, stay!?" Maybe he remains because he is crazy or so desperate that even the mistreatment he undergoes is better than what he lives through outside; or he remains because he is searching for

something greater than his own interests, because he is seeking out the interests of Jesus Christ, he seeks God.

This putting to the test of what the heart seeks does not end when they finally let him enter the monastery: it will continue during the time of his novitiate. In fact, St. Benedict asks that “a senior chosen for his skill in winning souls” attend to examining with care whether the novice “truly seeks God, shows eagerness for the Work of God, for obedience, and for trials (*opprobria*)”, and he adds that one must tell him ahead of time (*praediceretur*) “all the hardships and difficulties that will lead him to God” (RB 58:6–8).

This putting to the test will not end with Profession: the whole of monastic life is this path that goes toward God, on which many situations and circumstances will always put to the test the deep reason for perseverance, for fidelity, and they will do so by asking us to choose over and over again to pursue the interests of Christ rather than our own. The whole path described by the Rule basically speaks of this choice of the heart that is not made once and for all, because we always seek a fulness, we always seek happiness. And this is good, for it is God who has made us thus, who gave us such a heart. Woe to us if stop searching for happiness: we would no longer be ourselves, we would no longer be human as God formed man and woman, filling them with the desire for the infinite.

But the point is really to understand, or better: to let it be announced to us by Christ, by the Gospel, that our true happiness does not consist deep down in the pursuit of our own interests, but in the pursuit of the interests of God and the others. This is the great mystery of life, the great mystery that Christianity came to bring to full light and that, for two thousand years, gets proclaimed along with the Easter proclamation, because it is a mystery that is inherent to the Paschal mystery: that man finds full satisfaction of the interests of his heart by renouncing the pursuit of his own interests and embracing those of Christ. It is a paradox, it is foolishness, but a foolishness in which the Paschal wisdom of Christianity is found, a reality inconceivable yet also real, so much so that it is possible to experience it, to verify that it really is so. Christ himself bears witness to this, becoming incarnate, living as a poor man and servant of all, and especially dying on the cross and rising. And, following in his way, all the saints bear witness of this to us, starting with the good thief who became a saint in a few minutes, not only because of the good luck of being crucified next to the Redeemer, but really because he understood that, confronted with Him who was dying on the cross, he did not need to pursue his own interest, which was surviving, like the other thief asked, but he needed to abandon himself to the interests of Christ, following him, letting himself be saved and carried into Paradise.

For – and here is the whole solution to the Christian paradox – what are truly the interests of Christ? The interests of Christ, the interests of God, are the salvation of the world, the redemption of sinners, our salvation. For this reason, no one can pursue his own interests more and better than by pursuing those of Jesus Christ.