

10. Journeying toward the fulfillment of self

May Christ “lead us all together to eternal life,” writes St. Benedict at the culmination of the Rule (RB 72:12).

Whoever follows Christ is led by Him to eternal life, which is not just life after death, but the fullness of life in Christ that we are granted a foretaste of together already in this earthly life. Here too St. Benedict is talking to us about a “synodal path.” Following Christ is *the* synodal way par excellence, which we cannot travel alone, that is, without Him and without the ecclesial company of people whom the Lord puts next to us.

It is clear from the very beginning that all the renunciation of self that the Rule demands of us so we can follow Christ is not for an obliteration of the self, but for its fulfillment. Our self is not fulfilled in itself, is not made to be fulfilled in itself: it is made to be fulfilled in the Son of God who leads us to the Father.

And it is thus that we must listen to the words of St. Benedict that we have cited: “Renounce yourself in order to follow Christ” (RB 4:10), that is how we are asked to understand and begin our following after Christ. Then, already in chapter 4 on the instruments of good works, the Rule begins to list a whole series of ways and practices of mortification and charity which instantiate in various circumstances and occasions our renunciation of ourselves to follow Jesus: “Discipline your body, do not pamper yourself, but love fasting, relieve the lot of the poor, clothe the naked, visit the sick, and bury the dead, go to help the troubled and console the sorrowing, your way of acting should be different from the world’s way” (RB 4:11–20). Then, it is like St. Benedict starts another section of instruments of good works beginning with: “Prefer nothing to the love of Christ” (4:21). Indeed, he then lists various instruments that work on our feelings, on our interior virtues, on humility, etc.

But what I feel the need to emphasize now is that the instruments introduced by the demand of self-renunciation for following Christ, after only three ascetical practices of mortification of the body, pass immediately to practices of charity and mercy toward the poor, the troubled, the sick, the sorrowing, the dead. In what follows in the Rule, Benedict always privileges a self-renunciation that is aimed toward fraternal love, especially of the poor.

Why is this? Simply because this is the way of the life of Christ, and if we must renounce ourselves to follow him, we must follow him on the way that He himself traveled, and the Gospel clearly shows us a path of charity, of service to needful and afflicted humanity.

Often Jesus and the disciples do not even have time to eat, but not because they are fasting or praying, but because they are seized by the need of the crowd (cf. Mk 6:30). We must not forget this, even we monks and nuns, and not even hermits, for if we forget this, we risk finding ourselves travelling individual paths, deluding ourselves into thinking we are following Jesus Christ. Rather, we follow only ourselves. Quite the opposite of renouncing ourselves!

To follow Christ, then, we must have a constant concern to follow him truly, to follow his real presence, truly to follow his footsteps, his life, and not a Jesus whom we conjure up according to our own conveniences and ambitions, even if spiritual and ascetic. There is no worse way to pursue our own interests instead of those of Jesus Christ than to fool ourselves into thinking that the interests of Christ coincide with our own, when they are just our own interests that we “dress up” with some evangelical slogan, some theory or pious intention. I am certain that Judas ended up betraying Jesus with the conviction that he was pursuing Jesus’s interests, following him truly, following him, in fact, better than the others.

What saves us from this misleading illusion, which can be catastrophic for our life and vocation, and also for those of others? It is here that we must meditate on the vows we profess and on the commitments we undertake. Why profess vows? Why promise obedience, poverty, chastity, conversion in monastic life, and stability? Why do lay people bind themselves with marriage vows? Why do all the faithful commit themselves with baptismal promises? Deep down it must be for a very simple reason: to be always guided in following Christ truly and not ourselves, to be certain of following the way of Christ and not our own, of pursuing the interests of Christ, his will and that of the Father, and not our own.

In chapter 72 of the Rule, St. Benedict writes on this topic: “No one is to pursue what he judges better for himself [*quod sibi utile iudicat*], but instead, what he judges better for someone else” (RB 72:7).

It is above all a question of judgment, of discernment. Of course, my interest always seems more interesting and more likely to bring joy than the interest of another. And yet, this feeling does not correspond to the truth. We often experience it, when we absolutely pursue our own interest, our pleasure, our advantage, and then we find ourselves empty, sad, disappointed, disgusted with ourselves and with what we have won in conquest. Our heart does not lie, it makes us feel the truth of things, of life, of relationships with others. It makes us feel that the Gospel of Christ, which often tells us the opposite of what would seem to be our own interest, is right, is the just and true judgment of ourselves, of our life, it makes us pursue our own true interest. Thus, in time we understand that if we truly want happiness, which is what should interest us above everything else, we must be helped to change our judgment about what is good for us and for all. We need to be helped and supported to follow Christ and the Gospel rather than what seems of interest to ourselves. For this, vows are useful.