

## 14. Free from everything to embrace the Father

“Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me.” (Jn 12:7-8)

This gift of Jesus, even to death on the Cross and burial, is an incalculable gift, because it is for everyone, it saves everyone. And the poor, too, all the poor in the world and in history, need this gift more than money. Of course, they do need bread, clothing, and so also money to buy them. But deep-down Judas gives the same value to the gift of 300 coins to the poor as he does to the gift of Christ himself, and of the salvation that He is for us and for all. The poor will always be with us, but they too, like the rich, like all of us, will always need salvation, will need Christ. And if Christ is not received in the gift that he makes of himself in the Passion and Death, we will not have Jesus to give to the poor along with money, bread, clothing, etc. No one is more concerned for the poor than the one who asks for Christ and lovingly receives the gift that He makes of himself, for his gift is never for just a few, just for Mary of Bethany, but is always a gift for all.

This is the only just and fruitful way to live out the vows and promises of our vocation: that they be full of requesting and receiving the paschal gift of Christ who saves all mankind.

If we do not make profession with this attitude of humbly asking for universal salvation, begging with love for the Savior’s gift to all, we reduce ourselves to being Judases who calculate even the value of Christ just for themselves, and if we want Christ just for ourselves, we reduce him to quite a paltry worth: 30 silver coins! At the time of Jesus, it was the value of a slave.

Perhaps it is in exactly this sense that we must understand and live out the vow of poverty, the poverty that the Rule asks of us even to the extreme of renouncing the free disposal of our own body (RB 58:25).

It is interesting to note that, in chapter 58 of the Rule, immediately after having described the ceremony of monastic Profession, St. Benedict describes being stripped of one’s own goods, as if it were in poverty that we are granted really to live out our consecration and belonging to God and to the Church in our community.

The newly-professed has just solemnly chanted: “*Suscipe me, Domine, secundum eloquium tuum, et vivam; et ne confundas me ab expectatione mea* – Receive me, Lord, according to your word, and I shall live; let me not be put to shame in my expectation” (RB 58:21; Ps 119:116).

He then prostrates himself at the feet of each member of the community, to ask each one’s prayers, and from that moment, St. Benedict adds, “*in congregatione reputetur* – let him be considered a member of the community” (RB 58:23).

It is at this point that the Rule speaks of the need to renounce all goods, and all properties, and all the things one has (58:24). Still in the oratory the newly-professed is disrobed and reclothed: “Then and there in the oratory, he is to be stripped of everything of his own that he is wearing and clothed in what belongs to the monastery” (RB 58:26).

This grouping of ceremonies that link consecration to God, belonging to the community, and the undressing and dressing, gives a very essential sense to monastic profession. It is as if there were nothing left to offer to God except the very person of the brother or sister, their person as they are, without what they have. It is as if, for God, and for the community that receives the professed, nothing but the person's heart remained.

We do not consecrate to God what we have, but only ourselves. He receives us. When we chant the "*Suscipe me!*", it is our heart, it is our life, it is what we are that we ask the Lord to take up, and this is what we desire, the expectation that we have and that we ask God not to disappoint. We do not make profession offering God our riches, our academic titles, our talents, etc. Profession is made by offering ourselves, in a nakedness more of the heart than of the body.

It is clear that we all also bring talents to the monastery, experiences, a formation, a craft, and also some material goods. But it is from attachment to these things that St. Benedict asks for a stripping away, symbolic, but which must make us ask ourselves what defines us in our own eyes? Are we defined by what we have or by what we are? God is not interested in what we have: he already has everything and he can create and multiply all things from nothing.

God is interested in our heart, an empty and humble heart, yet which for just this reason is full of desire for fullness, for the fullness that God alone can give: the relationship with Him.

When we cry out "*Suscipe me, Domine!*" it is like asking for an embrace, the Father's embrace, that embrace that the father in the parable gives to the prodigal son who returns home (cf. Lk 15:20). The son has lost all that was his own, all that the father had given him as an inheritance. He returns already stripped of all his goods. But to the father this does not matter. He does not put him to work to make up for his lost goods. Only the son is interesting to him, the son as a person, as a heart. The father is interested in the relationship with the son. The father is interested in love. How much more so God!

So, we must not lose sight of the fact that it is in this light that St. Benedict asks us to live out poverty, also the material poverty that, in other chapters, for example 33, he wants to be extreme. What urges St. Benedict on is not poverty in itself, but that nothing end up getting in the way of the embrace of our whole person with God, the good and provident Father who lets nothing be lacking to his children.