

16. Chastity and stability

Often, one who is in a crisis with their husband or wife thinks that another person would be the ideal spouse. But the other person will also have the limit that their actual spouse does: that of not being Jesus Christ, the Bridegroom for whom our heart has been made. It is pointless to change husbands, like the Samaritan woman who changed five of them without being satisfied even by the sixth man. Only meeting Jesus at the well of Jacob did the Samaritan woman find the living water capable of satisfying her heart's infinite thirst for love or, if you prefer, the thirst for infinite love (cf. Jn 4).

Someone who continually changes communities makes the same mistake. The mistake of thinking that we need someone other than Christ, of thinking that our life can find fulfillment without His coming, His presence, His love, the life that He gives us. Instead, one has this awareness, understands that to desire Christ fills with Him also the senseless husband or nagging wife, or the community full of defects, of pettiness, or the superior full of limitations.

We know that, to live out a true chastity entirely aimed at Christ, either in marriage or in consecrated life, we first of all need faith, faith in the objective and real presence of the Lord in the place of our vocation. Faith is needed for believing that if Jesus has called us to follow a path, to live in a specific community, to bind ourselves sacramentally with a particular woman or man to create a family, it means that it is there that He asks and grants us to let him be our Spouse, he who fills our heart. For each of us the eschatological coming of the Lord Jesus begins in the dawn of our community, of our family, of the vocation and mission entrusted to us. If Christ has asked us to follow him in this way, with these people, it means that it is there, and only there, that He wants to come continually to give fulfillment to our life, against all appearances or even all the contrary evidence that make us suffer.

For this reason, we must not think too much of chastity in ourselves, looking at ourselves, our heart and our body, our feelings and our emotions. St. Benedict asks us to think of chastity by looking at the brothers and sisters of our community, by looking at our abbot. In chapter 72 of the Rule this awareness shines through: "So there is a good zeal which separates from evil and leads to God and everlasting life. This, then, is the good zeal which monks must foster with fervent love: They should each try to be the first to show respect to the other, supporting with the greatest patience one another's weaknesses of body or behavior, and earnestly competing in obedience to one another. No one is to pursue what he judges better for himself, but instead, what he judges better for someone else. To their fellow monks they show the pure love of brothers; to God, loving fear; to their abbot, unfeigned and humble love" (RB 72:2-10).

There is a chastity that becomes real only within the stability in a community, within belonging to a concrete family of brothers, with a father, or a mother, which is the established superior. For St. Benedict the community is a place of relationships vivified by charity, by the love of God that Christ shares with us in the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The community in which we are called to fix our belonging with the vow of stability is the body of Christ of which we are a member. For this reason, the community has a solid and well-determined structure, like the skeleton of our body. But the skeleton is not enough for making a living body. It needs flesh, it needs nerves, and all the organs, and there needs to be a soul that puts all in relationship: the soul of Jesus Christ's filial and fraternal charity. Charity does not live outside the body, is not an abstract spirit. Charity is the life of the ecclesial body of Christ. Hence charity does not despise all the weaknesses of the body of flesh into which we are inserted by our vocation to live in Christ. Rather: charity is a fire that every frailty and difficulty make all the more ardent.

Stability in a community is not a choice of convenience, like closing oneself up in a hotel room to avoid all the problems that others can cause for us. Stability does not withdraw itself from the path that follows Jesus, and Jesus, we know, does not want to lead us to live a life of comfort: "As they were going along the road, someone said to him, 'I will follow you wherever you go.' And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head'" (Lk 9:57-58).

But the path that goes on, even for those who are called to the stability of the monastic cloister, is not a physical, geographic movement: it is the solicitude of charity. Jesus does not have anywhere to lay his head, that is he has no rest, not so much because he is agitated and running, but because his heart does not miss a chance to love. Hence, every person he meets provokes a movement of charity in Him. Also when St. Benedict asks the monks to "support with the greatest patience one another's weaknesses of body or behavior" (RB 72:5), he does not invite us to passivity, but to taking a step forward in the charity that "bears all things" (1 Cor 13:7), in the charity that goes two miles with him who asks one of you (cf. Mt 5:41).

Supporting something with patience often seems to us to be a position that oppresses us, that extinguishes life in us. Instead, it really is this way that the good zeal is enkindled with "most fervent love" (72:3). It is like blowing on the charcoals to make the flame come to life. And this is true for all that stability in community entails: being submissive to superiors, assuming the responsibilities requested, being always next to the same people, resuming every day to follow a schedule that never changes, etc. It all seems monotonous, it seems like it all degrades the vitality of our character, of our talents, of our ambitions, and of our passions. Instead, exactly this "staying put" in community stability allows the flame of charity to become ever more ardent, lively, capable of heating and illuminating the world.

Monks "show the pure love of brothers – *caritatem fraternitatis caste inpendant*" (72:8). St. Benedict is convinced that chastity makes love grow not so much by keeping one distant from people, but by letting oneself be invigorated and formed by fraternal relationships, by all that the brothers and sisters of my community ask of me, also and especially when they ask for my patience, mercy, pardon. A tiring relationship does not extinguish love. On the contrary: it makes it more ardent, more gratuitous, more divine, because more sought from God and received from Him, from the merciful Father, from the crucified Son, from the consoling Spirit.