

17. A vow of movement

We know that, to stay in good health, the doctors advise us to get ourselves moving, to walk. Analogously, in the spiritual life, too, if one does not make progress, if one does not walk, we do not live out our vocation in a healthy and wholesome way. The Church, too, if she does not keep her synodal nature alive, in which we walk together, she becomes an ever heavier body, which does not go forward, and above all does not run to announce the Gospel, the good and joyful News that Christ is risen and remains present with us until the end of the world (cf. Mt 28:20). If the Church wanted to remain faithful to her tradition without living out her mission, she would betray the heart of her tradition, which is the Gospel, that is, Jesus Christ come into the world to save all mankind. The true tradition of the Church is not a treasure that we hide under the ground, but a treasure that we hand on. At the end of time, Jesus will condemn us if we have buried the talent we received instead of making it bear fruit for the growth of his Kingdom (cf. Mt 25:14–30).

St. Benedict also asks us, so to speak, to make a “vow of movement,” the vow of *conversatio morum*, which we could translate with “conversion in following the path of the monastic community.” Basically, this vow includes them all, includes obedience, poverty, chastity, but also stability, because a monk is not truly stable in a community if he does not follow its path and the indications of the shepherd who guides the flock. For St. Benedict, the monastic community is a flock on a journey, guided by Christ, represented by the abbot or abbess. One who is not ready to be continually converted, by walking with the community, fails at obedience and all the other monastic virtues, and then he does not progress, does not improve, and will not reach the goal and aim of the life and vocation.

“*Conversatio*” is a difficult term to translate because it designates not so much a state of life, a condition, as rather a process in which life is transformed, progresses, is elevated and deepened. The vow of *conversatio morum*, framed by the vows of stability and obedience (cf. RB 58:17), is fundamentally a promise to live, not to stop in the process of new life that the Rule, following the Gospel, proposes to us. Basically we promise to change continually, to correspond day by day to the paschal grace that brings us to birth in the eternal life of the Risen One.

Obedience reminds us that life has laws that we are not the ones to make. Life is not an autonomous process: it is generated and must always be nurtured from springs and roots that precede us, that carry us.

Stability reminds us that life is an interior process: the constant change that it requires is not that of the external, superficial agitation of our projects, desires, whims, and fashions. Monastic stability chooses profound, silent change, that of a large tree that seems static but really lives interiorly by continuous biological processes, even in winter.

Conversatio morum in monastic life, but also in the life of every baptized person, is where we consent to the new life that Christ proposes to us, and that he proposes to us truly as life, as a profound, interior process that, day after day, until the eternal

Day, allows us to pass from earthly life to heavenly life, from the nothing from which we come to the totality of the divine life, when Christ will be “all in all” (Col 3:11).

But God proposes this process to us, he does not impose it. Making a vow of constant conversion in the monastic life is a free act, it is to say “yes” to the life of Christ in us, to say “yes” to a path, to follow “the way of life” that “the Lord in his goodness shows to us” (RB Prol. 20). To choose a path it is not enough to choose a direction: we must also choose to walk. And choosing to walk is a choice that is not made once and for all: it must be remade at every step, otherwise we stop. Obedience makes us consent to the right direction of the journey; stability makes us consent to putting our feet on the road, which is the very concrete terrain of our community, which can sometimes become steep, rocky, or slippery, according to the circumstances and people the Lord puts us among. But if I do not walk, all this is useless to me. If I do not walk, I stop. And stopping on the path of life means dying.

What fosters the decision to walk? What fosters the vow of conversion day after day, the vow of *conversatio morum*, the vow that cannot be promised once and for all and without which not even obedience and stability would be vows of new life? Understanding this is vital not only for each of us, but also for the renewal of the Church and of consecrated life. No true reform, no renewal has ever borne fruit in the Church without the soul of a renewed conversion, without the profound fervor of a commitment to *conversatio morum*, without a true consent to a transformation of life and of heart that is not content with exterior forms alone. Exterior, formal changes do not reform and do not renew the life of the Church and of our communities.

What, then, does foster the vow of *conversatio morum* day after day?

If we are dealing with a vow of life, a vow for living, in our heart there is a powerful motor, a potential energy: the desire for life, the desire for “true and eternal life” (RB Prol. 17), which St. Benedict requires as a condition for entering into the monastery. It is a desire that is certainly present in every human heart.

But why do so few people let themselves be really guided by this desire for a choice of a path of life?

Perhaps exactly because one does not choose true, eternal life without accepting the renunciation of false and temporal life, of worldly life, which original sin makes us desire in a mirage of illusory fullness. Everyone desires life, but few accept the way of conversion, which allows us to pass from the life of the old man to that of the new man (cf. Col 3:9–19), that paschal passage of death and resurrection to which Jesus always calls whoever asks him for life (cf. e.g. Mk 8:34–35).

Must we then choose death to find life? If it were so, how could we overcome fear in the face of Christ’s call? No, it is not about choosing death, but truly choosing Christ, our true life! When one understands that Christ is our true life, then it is not frightening to die to ourselves to be with Him.