

18. Everything becomes possible

Our conversion in fidelity to our vocation and its demands is not a process that goes from ourselves to ourselves, but is a work of grace, of the Holy Spirit who grants the humble heart the readiness to die with Christ to rise again with Him, that is to pass from death to life in the love of Christ who comes to live in us, through the Spirit, filial life toward the Father and fraternal life toward the neighbor.

Consenting to this transition opens our life to the impossible, makes the impossible possible. When Jesus said that a rich person can enter the Kingdom of God with difficulty, the disciples were alarmed, because they all felt incapable of detaching themselves from everything for Christ. But Jesus gave the consoling response, which is the secret of every completed vocation and hence of all sanctity: “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (Mt 19:26).

But this topic of the impossible that becomes possible through the grace of God brings to my attention a chapter of the Rule that I had to comment on recently in Vietnam and that I in a certain sense rediscovered. It is chapter 68, which considers the “impossible orders” that a brother can receive.

Let’s reread it:

A brother may be assigned a burdensome task or something he cannot do. If so, he should, with complete gentleness and obedience, accept the order given him. Should he see, however, that the weight of the burden is altogether too much for his strength, then he should choose the appropriate moment and explain patiently to his superior the reasons why he cannot perform the task. This he ought to do without pride, obstinacy, or refusal. If after the explanation the superior is still determined to hold to his original order, then the junior must recognize that this is best for him. Trusting in God’s help, he must in love obey.

This chapter of the Rule is full of humanity and of a Christian sense of freedom, of authority, and of obedience. For St. Benedict, it is never enough to obey on account of force, like machines that do not think and do not discern what they should do. St. Benedict wants the monk to be able to obey always with conscious freedom, even when obedience is hard.

St. Benedict speaks here of orders that are burdensome and downright *impossible*. How can one do what is impossible? A miracle is needed, that is, there must be an intervention of God. Perhaps here St. Benedict was thinking of the scene of the Annunciation, when Mary, after hearing the angel Gabriel’s message, did as the Rule asks us to do with the abbot: she humbly revealed the motives for her impossibility: “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” (Lk 1:34). Then the angel explains to Mary that it will be the Holy Spirit that acts in her, and that she can have confidence, for “nothing will be impossible with God” (Lk 1:37).

Then Mary obeys, without hesitation: “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Lk 1:38).

It is just like the end of chapter 68 of the Rule: “The junior must recognize that this is best for him. Trusting in God’s help, he must in love obey” (RB 68:4–5).

But from this we understand that what must happen between the monk and the abbot is a very important process. We are dealing, basically, with passing from the feeling of our own impotence to fulfill the will of God to confident abandonment full of love that allows the Holy Spirit to descend upon us to make the impossible possible, to give us the strength and capacity to do God's will.

I realize for the first time that, to arrive at this obedience full of love and trust in God, it is necessary that, between the monk in difficulty, who feels weak and afraid, and the abbot who is called to guide him, there must be a "synodal path."

This chapter reflects chapter 3 of the Rule, on the brothers' meeting in council. Reflected in the personal relationship of a monk with the abbot is also what happens between the abbot and the community when they meet in council. There too the will of God is sought and all are invited to express their opinion freely and humbly. The abbot is invited to listen and then meditate on and discern what he hears. So too the individual monk of chapter 68 goes to the abbot for a little personal synod. He explains his problem, with humility, without imposing his opinion, and then lets the abbot decide what he can truly do.

Both the monk and the abbot must be ready to make a journey in peaceful dialogue, listening to each other well, to the end. If this attitude is in both of them, then in the end the abbot's decision expressed an agreement, even if the brother will have a hard time doing what has been commanded him.

The synodal meeting between the monk and the abbot, even if maybe it does not change anything in the decision, that is even if it does not change anything exteriorly, if it is lived out well produces a very important result: the monk comes away from it knowing that the abbot is aware of all that his order entails, and he comes away above all knowing that that abbot walks with him, that they are making a "journey together," that they are living out in a synodal way, that is, their relationship and their vocation. And this is most important.

Often the Lord gives us the strength to bear with impossible things through the certainty that we are not alone, that we are accompanied, heard, and above all loved. Then one also experiences that the task that is beyond our strength is not a wall we go to slam against, or an abyss into which we toss ourselves, but a steep path that takes us up higher on the journey of our vocation, a path that allows us to follow Jesus beyond the impossible, that is, where the Holy Spirit leads us, the grace of God, and above all the charity that loves God and the brethren more than ourselves because we feel infinitely loved by the Father, like Jesus when he entered without hesitation into the Passion for our Salvation.