

Identity with Christ

Modeling Our Lives on RB 72

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Chapter 72 of the Rule ends with this beautiful sentence : « Let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ, and may he bring us all together to everlasting life ». Those are most probably the last words of the Rule written by Benedict, since, as you know, chapter 73, which is the last chapter in the present form of the Rule was written before, and concluded the Rule, after chapter 66. Later on Benedict added the chapters 67 to 72, (We will return to those chapters on Monday)

I quote this short verse of the Rule now, because it expresses the centeredness of Christ in the life of the Benedictine brother or sister, and, at the same time, it stresses the fact that preferring nothing to Christ means following Him on a journey that will lead us to everlasting life - and *all together* (which seems to be the best translation of *pariter*) since we are cenobites.

Therefore, when we speak of our « identity with Christ », that identity should not be understood in a static manner, simply in the sense of becoming more and more « christ-like » by imitating Him in everything we do. It should not be understood either simply because He is the First born, and we are all called to partake in His divine nature-- which, of course is true and important. It should be understood first of all in a dynamic way as **following** him on his own journey, leading us to the goal where he is going.

Christ is not Himself our goal. He is the Way. He is our guide on our journey to eternal Life, that is, to the Father. Without wanting to be provocative I would dare to say that sometimes Christ has taken too great a place in our Christology. In the Gospel, He is not Himself at the heart of his teaching. The Father is ! Especially in Mark's Gospel, Jesus does not teach about himself; He does not proclaim himself. He proclaims the Reign of God and he speaks about God. He speaks about his Father.

The core of Jesus' teaching is to be found in the parables ; and most of the parables are about the Father. Jesus wants to teach us what

type of a father God is. Of course, the great paradox - or rather the great irony - is that we most of the time read the parables as if they spoke about us (which is a manifestation of how self-centered we can be). We read the parables in order to find in them some moral teaching telling us how we should act. The parable of the prodigal son, for example, is not, in the first place about returning to God after our sins - although that message is implied as a consequence; the parable is about God's love and mercy towards us. We could say the same thing of most of the other parables.

In the New Testament Jesus is always on a journey. The first and most basic aspect of that journey is that He came from the Father and returned to the Father. That paradigmatic journey is described in a very majestic manner in the Christological hymn of Philippians II : "Though He was in the form of God, he did not regard (His) equality with God something to be grasped (something to cling to). Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness... He humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross"... That was the descending movement... Then comes the ascending one : "Because of this (and those words are very important), God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name - that is the name by excellence, the name of Lord or Yahweh - so that every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord..."

Christ's identity is inseparable from his mission. In Him the identity and the mission are the one and same thing. That Christological hymn of Philippians II, as well as Ephesians 1-2 give us a grandiose theological view of that Mystery. Nevertheless Jesus, in his human psyche, only gradually discovered his identity, and he faced great temptations at every step of that discovery.

Already at the age of 12, he "ran away" from his mother and his father to attend his Father's business; but his Hour had not come. He returned to Nazareth and he remained obedient to them, while growing in age and wisdom before God and human beings. Then there was the great turning point in his life, when he left his native Galilee to come to Judea and most probably made himself a disciple of John the Baptist (which seems to be the meaning of the words of John : "someone who comes after me - that is, someone who follows me, that is, one of my disciples - is greater than me". (... *translation - origin of monastic life*) And at the moment he is baptized, he hears the voice of the Father : "You are my most beloved son". He must integrate that revelation in his human psyche and therefore he goes to the desert where he will face the temptation that every human being faces every time he or she is confronted with an important moment of growth. The temptations he then faces are invitations to give in to as many identifications or false identities, rather than to accept his real

identity of Son of God. He has, as any of us, to renounce pleasure, power and fame. Then he can return to Galilee and be totally identified with his mission. There will be other turning points and therefore moments of temptation, like, for example, when the crowds want to make him a king, that is, a Messiah according to their expectations. Then, again, he runs away to the solitude of the mountain in order to pray. And when it is obvious to him that he will die soon he goes again to the mountain - the mountain of transfiguration - where he speaks with Moses and Elijah about his death, and his divine filiation is reaffirmed by the Father,

The question of His identity was as important for Christ as it is for any other human being. When he asks his disciples : "Who do people say that I am? and, then, "who do you say that I am - for you, who am I ?" - this was not a rhetorical question used as a pedagogical means. It was an important question for him, a vital one. At that time he already knew that he was going to die soon. From a human perspective his mission could be seen as a failure. He wanted - and needed - to know whether he would remain alive in the memory of his disciples and whether they would be able to continue his mission (= his identity).

Through the Incarnation, God did not simply become a man in Jesus. He became human; he assumed our humanity. In Him it is the whole humankind that is returning to the Father. So much so that he is our deepest own identity. He is the plenitude of the "self". We become ourselves in the proportion in which we assumed our own christ-identity - that is in the proportion in which we bypass all our false identities or our superficial identifications so as to reach the deepest level of our being where our own being grows out of Being (with a capital B).

I mentioned, at the beginning, that Christ did not proclaim himself; he proclaimed the Father. At times, however, he did reveal some aspects of his own identity; for example when he said : "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life", or again when he said to Martha : " I am the resurrection and the life". But it is only at the very end of his life that he said once or twice : "I am" (without any qualification) - for example when he said "Before Abraham, Isaac and Jacob existed I am" or, most significantly, when, asked very explicitly by the Great Priest, at the time of his Passion : "Are you the Messiah, the Son of God", he answered: "I am". By then, he was abandoned by all and was going to die. Everything that was not his deepest identity of Son of God had been taken away from Him.

That was His Journey. So, every time, in the Gospel, he says to someone : "Come and follow me", he is calling him to follow Him on that Journey. This is very clear especially in the call to the Young Rich Man. At that time Jesus is walking towards Jerusalem; and he has

already announced that he would be put to death. This has to be taken into account when we want to understand the full meaning of his call "Go, sell everything you have; then, come and follow me..."

Now, when we follow someone, we don't see his face. We see him from behind. Like Moses who could not see the Glory of God, if not from behind. Those who are called to follow Christ are not simply called to sit in front of him, admire his face and drink his words. When we follow Christ, we see his shoulders, not his face (we don't see him face to face yet). The shoulders we see are the shoulders that carried the lost sheep, and also the shoulders that carried the Cross.

This is also the meaning of our monastic journey, and especially of our monastic conversion. First of all, conversion means discovering our own true identity.

In that sense, Jesus' journey can be considered the paradigm of true conversion (which is not primarily a passage from sin to virtue but a passage through various phases of growth).

The conversion demanded of his disciples by Jesus is not simply a superficial modification of their moral behavior. It implies much more than replacing a personal "ego" by another one, more respectable or more in conformity to the dictates or the expectations of society. It requires a global and radical transformation touching all the dimensions of the human being, "spirit, soul, and body," to use the categories of St. Paul's anthropology (cf. 1 Thess. 5:23).

Of course, such conversion must be, first of all, a conversion of the heart, the source of everything that is either good or bad in human existence. Ezekiel described in beautiful and poetic terms the conversion that would be characteristic of the new Kingdom: "I will give them, a new heart and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the stony heart from their bodies, and replace it with a heart of flesh" (Ez 11:19). The journey to conversion is first of all an interior journey into the recesses of the heart, towards the discovery of our true self, that is, the person we are called to be by God, the unique image or word of God which we are, the name he has given us.

In that deepest part of ourselves, we may have to touch places that were unknown to us, unfamiliar and haunting lands where we are strangers. We may have to become nomads within our own world. The first reality we will encounter there will be our ego with all its limitations. When we venture to journey to our own interior world we must be ready to be confronted with fear and confusion, with temptation.

There is such an experience of the desert at the beginning of every great spiritual journey. After his baptism Jesus began a new period of his life by a journey into solitude - as I mentioned before. It was the experience of the prophet Elijah, going through the awareness of his own poverty, his fears and his weakness, in the desert before his encounter with the glory of God on Mount Horeb. It was also the experience of Paul who spent a few mysterious years in the desert of Arabia after his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus. And thousands of women and men, from the early days of monastic life in Syria and Egypt up to our times, have gone to the desert for the very purpose of living such an experience.

That transforming journey may start with a very deep or even shattering experience, like that of Jesus at the time of his baptism, or that of Paul on the road to Damascus, or that of Elijah on the way to Mount Horeb. Most of us however will embark almost imperceptibly on that journey, not after any radical mystical experience, but simply, gradually, as we go on in life: passing from success to defeat, experiencing failure in our academic career, in our friendships, in our moral life, and tasting the increasing frustration of unrealized dreams as we begin to count the number of our years by the mark they leave in our bodies. These may all seem at first superficial things but they touch us deeply, and if we accept them honestly they put us in touch with our deeper limitations, with our sinfulness, and with all the idols we have been worshipping secretly. And this is the first step on the path to conversion of heart.

When the Desert Fathers described their struggles with yawning beasts and slimy snakes and grimacing devils (or with seductive women), they were simply describing the various aspects of their own hearts that the experience of the desert had made them discover. These are what Jung call our shadow self, the unacceptable part of our personality with which we are now brought face to face.

Such an experience of our sinfulness is not a discovery to be made only at the beginning of our novitiate! It can be the sudden or lagging discovery, after many years of prayer and faithful service of God, that strong and persistent doubts arise in our hearts about God and our vocation; that intense passions flare, that meaning and truths grow stale, that questions abound and no answers appear. New kinds of darkness and sterility may then touch us deeply. These are not the charming little darkness and dryness of the first years, that reassured us because they somewhat convinced us that we were progressing towards the higher stages of spiritual life described by John of the Cross. We were a little proud of that darkness and dryness. The new ones are terrible. The love of God that once sustained us and motivated us seems now elusive and illusory.

When Jesus tried to describe the reality of conversion, he used images that were not images of smooth and gradual transformation, but images that reflected the two most traumatic events of human life: birth and death. He knew, more than anyone else, that the fullness of life cannot be reached without passing through the river of death.

To Nicodemus (Jn 3:5-6) he said: "I tell you most solemnly, unless a man is born through water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God: what is born of flesh is flesh; what is born of Spirit is spirit." But later on he described the condition for such a life: "I tell you most solemnly, unless a wheat grain falls on the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest" (Jn 12:24-25).

If in the darkness of our night, wanting to understand what is happening, we go to the Master for advice or solace, his response will probably be as enigmatic to us as to the poor Nicodemus.

Very often entrance into the monastic life is considered as "the conversion" (or "the second one," following the first one of baptism). The rest of our life is supposed to be a smooth, if not always easy, growth, development and faithful perseverance. Our vow of "conversatio morum" is understood as the commitment not to stop on our straight, smooth journey to perfection. Likewise, we tend nowadays to privilege "instant conversions," sudden transforming mystical experiences. The danger is that such conversions can be simply changes of behavior, the trading of an "ego" for another "ego."

In any case, even the most extraordinary experience of God is usually only the first step on a long journey toward conversion, and it does not exempt a person from entering into the desert of his or her own heart and wandering there, often for years, like the people of Israel in the desert. It is in that spirit that the first monks went into the desert, in order to get in touch with their own heart and to meet on that battleground the forces of evil and to defeat them after the example of Christ and with his grace, and so to hasten the coming of the end of time.

All the riches, the painful riches, of such human experiences of conversion can be lost when undue emphasis is placed on extraordinary mystical experiences, on unrealistic charismatic enthusiasm, or when ascetical practices substitute for the fullness of life to which we are called. Asceticism is necessary and indispensable, but it can also be a convenient excuse for escaping from the pain of growth. It can be a convenient way to exempt ourselves from the painful process of learning to care, to listen, to live, to love - in other words, to come "gradually" to the fullness of perfection.

Paradoxically, to try to look outside of ourselves and to attempt to live up to external ideals and expectations can prevent the authentic conversion we are talking about. And I am afraid that very often our monastic formation does just that. Instead of leading people to a painful conversion, we invite them to put on a nice new ego over their old one. When persons attempt to find the ground of their identity solely in doing things and living up to society's roles or community's expectations, they unwittingly promote a false self. Ideals very good in themselves, such as being a good novice, a good abbot, a good prioress, a good teacher, or a good pastor, can become obstacles to a deeper conversion. We are often too fearful to let go of our own creations and to allow God to touch us and to give birth to our true self.

If we courageously continue our journey through the desert of our hearts, we will eventually reach somehow the ground of our being, where it grows out of Being, where our own self is one with the One who is the plenitude of the Self, so that we can say with Paul: I do not live; He lives in me. Conversion leads us to a renewed image of ourselves, of God and of our neighbors. Or rather, it allows us to go beyond the images and to transcend in that blessed simplicity, which is the ultimate end of monastic life, all that keeps us away from ourselves, from God and from our brothers.

Monastic conversion therefore involves gradually renouncing all our false identities or identifications by growing out of them. *Identification* is the process of identifying to something or somebody *outside* of us; *identity* is the essence of who we are. A form of "imitation of Christ", *simply* trying to do what we think he would do in our situation, remains at the level of identification.

We know how a child normally identifies with his father or mother, how a teenager identifies with a sport star or a movie star, or simply with an adult whom he admires - who could be a teacher. Later on the young man will identify with what he does and achieves or what he acquires and owns; the young woman likewise or with her affective conquests. But when someone really becomes an adult - which is not simply a question of number of years - that person will discover and realize her identity : who she is - or who he is - independently of all the superficial egos and of all the images that she has or other have of her. She is the person who has some talents and does not have other talents; who has things and can lose them, who has successes and failures, and who always remains the same person through all the upheavals of life, while becoming more and more herself,

That process of becoming an adult and an autonomous person, both humanly speaking and spiritually is very well expressed in a number of

parables of the Old Testament as well as of the New Testament.

In the Old Testament, we have the story of Job. Job has everything in which people normally find their psychological, social and spiritual identity. He is a good man, he has a good reputation in the people of God, he has a wife and many children (seven sons and three daughters), numerous possessions - fields, camels, sheep, oxen, and also male and female servants to take care of all those possessions. He has a good health and good friends.

He loses all of this, including the understanding of his wife and of his friends and his health. Then he makes the wonderful discovery that, even after losing everything, he *is*. He exists. He is the same Job who had all those things and has lost them. The Job who now has nothing is the same person who was a rich, powerful and influent man. Having nothing to lose any more, he is free. Therefore, he can stand before God and speak very strongly to God. Nobody in the Bible speaks like that to God. This is not arrogance; it is *parrhesia* - confidence and freedom - the freedom of those who have nothing to lose. At the end he will be able not to recover what he has lost, but to acquire again similar riches (what is lost is lost). That will not change who he is. He is free.

In the New Testament, the same growth process is described in one of Jesus' parables : that of the prodigal son (better called the parable of the prodigal Father). We have there a family whose life seems to be happy and without story. It is a well to do family, since there is a fortune to divide among the children : there are fields, flocks and servants. There is evidently a mother and probably sisters (although they are not mentioned), and at least a brother. What the parable wants to show is the different attitude of three of the characters.

One of the sons has enough of that quiet family life, although it seems to have been harmonious, easy and pleasant. He wants to live his own life. The life he shares with his father, his brother, and the rest of the family does not fulfill him any longer. He needs personal achievement. He wants to be somebody and enjoy life. He wants to exist as an independent and isolated individual and not as a member of a whole. (Something we hear in our communities, at times).

What does the father do? He does not express any objection. He has certainly done his own mistakes during his youth, and he acknowledges his son's right to make his own. What is important to him is that his son have life. The conditions in which he will realize his life are important but secondary. The prodigal son then tastes all the pleasures of life. They are real pleasures, but at the superficial level of existence. Gradually he squanders everything he has and, as a matter of

fact, he experience the same losing of everything that Job did. The only difference is that he inflicts it upon himself while it was imposed on Job by the Tempter. Then, he comes to himself - he has therefore reached his identity in that way - He has found himself in his own way. There was someone who lived in the past with his father, and who left his father, who had a fortune that he has squandered, who has enjoyed the pleasures of life that he cannot afford any more. This person is capable of conversion and of returning to his Father. He is free enough to return. He does not fear to be disinherited, since he has already had his inheritance and wasted it. He does not fear to be rejected as a son, since he does not claim the right to be considered a son. He simply wants to be a servant (this word is perhaps the most important of the parable), And when the father sees him coming, he runs to him and embraces him, because his son is alive. The father does not see the ungrateful son, he does not see the fugitive, he does not see the debauched person. He sees his son who is **alive** and he wants to celebrate life with his family and servants.

Not everyone is able to celebrate life, especially life in others. The second son is the most pathetic figure of that parable. He is like the good Christian, or the good religious, always faithful to all his obligations, but who has not understood the meaning of life, and mostly has not understood anything about love and mercy. He is unable to celebrate. In fact he has nothing to celebrate. When he returns from the fields and he hears the music and the dance, he asks what is the meaning of that music and those dances. That poor man, with all his virtue and his faithful observance, has not made the journey to maturity and adulthood that his brother has made.

Let us now return to the story of the Young rich man . He asks Jesus what to do in order to have eternal life. His goal is certainly good - eternal life. He is very concerned about the "doing". He asks what he should do; and when Jesus quotes some of the commandments of the Decalogue to him, he says that he has done all of that since his youth. Then Jesus invites him to get rid of everything and come and follow him. In reality Jesus invites him to do voluntarily and freely exactly the same letting go of everything that was imposed on Job by circumstances and that the prodigal son imposed upon himself. He is unable to do it. He is not free. He has not achieved adulthood.

This is the process that is described through the whole Rule of Benedict and that finds its achievement, when it is lived in a coenobitic community, in what Benedict describes in his chapter 72, about which we will speak more explicitly on Monday.

We also find there an important teaching concerning spiritual motherhood or fatherhood and formation. Formation consists in helping

someone to acquire very soon in his/her monastic life a clear personal identity, that will be then gradually transformed or converted during the rest of his/her life. When someone has acquired that identity, he knows who he is before God, and does not depend on the appreciation of people on the image others have of him, on the appreciation of his superiors or of other members of the community.

In order well to understand that chapter 72, in the light of our identity with Christ, we have to consider another aspect of Christ's identity.

We want to identify with Christ. It is certainly a noble desire ! But perhaps it would be more important to ask ourselves, « with whom does Christ want to identify ». The answer is quite obvious in Matthew 25. Christ identifies with the little ones, the needy, the downtrodden. « I was sick, I was hungry, I was in jail, I was persecuted... What you did to the little ones, you did it to me. It is when we belong in one way or another, to one of those categories, that we can be sure that Christ identifies with us.

Ephesians 1-2 must also be read in that context. Identity with Christ is not something static simply to admire and be grateful for. It is something to achieve by following Christ in his Paschal Mystery, Paul, who wrote this to the Ephesians, knew very well what he was talking about, since this Christ's identity with the little ones was revealed to him on the road to Damascus : « Lord, who are you ? » And the answer was « I am the one whom you persecute ». That revelation that Christ identified with the persecuted ones changed Paul's life - and quite radically. Up to that time, Paul was a privileged person. He had studied with the best masters, had a good standing in the Jewish people. he had what seemed a clear identity. After he meeting with Jesus on the road to Damascus, he will be an erring Jew, rejected by almost everyone. He will never belong to a local community, although he founded many and supported many more with his teaching. The only important thing was then his identity with Christ.

I would like to reflect on yet another aspect of Jesus' journey - from his Father and to his Father. It is his passage through hell. In one of the earliest Symbols of faith, it is said that Christ, after his death, and before his resurrection, went down to the abyss of hell. The most common understanding, in the Latin tradition, is that he went to visit all the just who were in the bosom of Abraham and who were waiting for Jesus to come and bring them to heaven with him. Many of the early Eastern Fathers had a rather different interpretation. For them this going down to hell was a part of Jesus' emptying himself and assuming all the aspects of our humanity. It was the most radical kenosis.

Document extrait du [site de l'abbaye Notre-Dame de Scourmont](#), qui se trouve sur le territoire de Forges, à sept kilomètres au sud de la ville de Chimay, en Belgique. Notre-Dame de Scourmont est une abbaye de l'Ordre Cistercien de la Stricte Observance.

In the popular understanding, we can imagine that Christ had three days to fill or to occupy after his death and before his resurrection. So, he went down to visit and console those who had been waiting for a long time to be introduced to heaven. Then he rose from the dead - resurrection being understood as coming back to the life here on earth. He spent here another forty days in order to form his disciples before going up to heaven definitively. This, of course, is a form of caricature, but is not too far from the popular understanding. This understanding takes the earth as point of reference. After living some 33 years on earth, Christ, after his death, went down to hell, then came back to earth in a different form and then left earth for heaven. For the Greek Fathers, Christ, through his obedience unto death, went to depth of evil - which what evil is -- as a victim of that evil, and from there was risen by the Father to the heights of heaven. Resurrection is not a coming back to earth but a going straight to the Father from the depths of suffering and humiliation. (Cf. Philippians 2). The apparitions after the Resurrection are then something peripheral that happens really in the disciples rather than in Christ, who is with the Father.

The reason I mention this is that it may be of some help to understand what Benedict means when he speaks, at the beginning of RB 72 of the two forms of zeal, the one that leads to hell and the one that leads to eternal life.

That will be my next talk.

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