

RB 72 : The monastic way to eternal life

by : Armand Veilleux

As I mentioned Saturday, it is commonly accepted that the chapters 67 to 72 of the Rule were added by Benedict, later on in his life, to the main corpus of the Rule that ended with what is now chapter 73, which then followed chapter 66. That new series of chapters treat in a new manner many of the themes that were already treated in the preceding chapters, but underline in a particular way the horizontal relationships within the community. We can consider this chapter 72 as Benedict's spiritual testament. Furthermore, it cannot be read separately from chapter 71 on mutual obedience.

In the Prologue of the Rule Benedict imagined the Father going around and saying : « *Is there anyone here who yearns for life ?* ». And chapter 72 ends with the prayer that Christ may bring us all together to everlasting life. The whole corpus of the Rule between those two texts describes the means to be used on that monastic journey leading us to everlasting life.

Likewise, Benedict said at the beginning of the Prologue that he wrote his rule for those who wanted to return, through the labor of obedience, to the Father from whom they had drifted through the sloth of disobedience. And, at the end of the Rule, we have this chapter on mutual obedience; everything in the between being a description of that journey through obedience.

Benedict speaks of two forms of zeal. As we all know, the word zeal derives from the Greek *zelos*, which designates something that burns. It is fire. Benedict speaks of two forms of fire : one that can lead us downwards and the other that can lead us upwards. Let us be very attentive to the words he uses. I think that most of us, most of the time, when we read this text, think in terms of starting from where we are now, in the middle, -- on earth -- and going, after our death, either to hell or to heaven according to the type of zeal we have practiced. It is not what Benedict says. He speaks of a journey that goes either from God (above) to hell, or from hell to God. We are always on a journey - on one of these two journeys. We are never at a static point from which we can go either up or down, as a consequence of our acts (our zeal),

This journey has to be understood in the light of the one made by the Son of God, who came from his Father, shared our humanity, going through death to the abyss of hell and rising from the *ades*, not to our mortal life but to the Father. In that journey he assumed all our humanity and brought it up into the bosom of his Father. By the type of zeal we choose, we either ignore the Incarnation of Christ, and we continue our endless journey down to the abyss of hell, or we identify with Christ rising from the dead up to his Father. – It is not simply a question of meriting hell or meriting heaven according to the zeal we manifest.

In coenobitic life, this is not a solitary journey : it is a question of going *all together*. This is the fundamental meaning of our community life. All this is beautifully summed up in those few sentences : « to try to be the first to show respect to the other » ; « supporting with the greatest patience one another's weaknesses of body or behavior », « earnestly competing in obedience to one another », etc. etc.

« showing to the brothers a pure love, to God, loving fear, and to the abbot unfeigned and humble love ».

Those could be considered as simply some good advices for harmonious Christian social living. But they have also to be read in the general context of Benedict's clearly coenobitic orientation. One should never stress enough how Benedict belongs to the great coenobitic tradition that goes back not only to Pachomius but also to Basil and other early forms of Christian coenobitism. That tradition had been transformed somewhat by Cassian, first, and especially by the Master, into something more in line with a semi-eremitical orientation. Fortunately Benedict reintroduced a real coenobitic flavor taking his inspiration not only from Pachomius but also from Augustine and Basil. And that clearly coenobitic orientation of Benedict is found especially in the chapters he added to the first version of his Rule, most probably towards the end of his life.

I would like to take a few moments here to describe the early evolution of that coenobitic tradition, and perhaps this is the occasion to explain a little more what I said two days ago about the origins of monastic life going back to Jesus' baptism.

Our textbooks of some thirty or forty years ago for the history of monasticism used to give us a very simple picture. Monastic life was supposed to have come into existence suddenly, more or less as a mushroom, in Egypt, on a wet morning, along the Nile, a few days after the Constantinian peace. Anthony had first lived as a hermit with some disciples, and then came Pachomius who saw the dangers of eremitical life and founded community life. From Egypt monastic life spread

rapidly first to other countries of the East and then to the West, down to the time of Benedict.

That vision is too simple to be true, and even too simplistic.

The reality is much more complex and much more beautiful. In reality monastic life developed in all the local Churches both of the East and the West, more or less at the same time, and out of the vitality of each local Church - although it is true that it developed in a very special way in Egypt and that the Egyptian monasticism, therefore, had a special influence on the rest of Christian monasticism.

The common understanding that monastic life began at the beginning of the fourth or the end of the third century is a kind of convenient convention of historians. From the middle of the 20th century on, many good studies described what was then called pre-monasticism in Cappadocia before Basil and in all the Judeo-Christian Churches of the time. Then, many historians studied the various forms of asceticism that existed in the Church during the first three centuries, going back to the time of Jesus. And it became clear that we had the same spiritual movement gradually developing within the Church through those centuries, without any possibility of finding clear lines of demarcation between what was called early asceticism or pre-monasticism and then monasticism.

To make a long story short, we can say that the picture that emerges from all the studies is this : There existed in late Judaism and throughout Asia in the time of Jesus a large and strong ascetic movement, of which Qumran and John the Baptist were only individual manifestations. When Jesus chose to be baptized by John, he assumed that movement and gave it a new orientation. When some Christians of the first generation wanted to adopt as a permanent way of life some of the radical demands of Jesus in the Gospel, they had in the religious culture of the time a way of life in which to express it. Then, that great ascetical tradition, which went back several centuries, developed within the Church during the first few centuries at the same time as it continued to develop outside the Church, with mutual influences. Through the collective *sensus fidei*, a process of purification and clarification happened and, at the end of the third century a clearly defined way of living Christian life was recognized within the Church to which the name of "monasticism" was given. But that way of life existed before and went back to Christ. And if we want to find a specific moment when it began, I personally like to see that moment at the time of Jesus' baptism. (But let us close this parenthesis, which would, in fact, require a much longer development).

Now, I would like to add another previous note, concerning the specificity of coenobitic life.

The earliest known form of Christian monastic life, in Syria, was that of the wandering ascetic, after the example of Christ who did not have where to lay his head. Later on, in Egypt, at the time of Anthony, a large number left the cities to go and live in the desert. Life in the desert is difficult and dangerous. In the desert you can find yourself, just as you can lose yourself. Therefore, when someone wanted to go into a solitary journey beyond the supportive environment of the local religious culture, he usually felt that he needed some guidance. He looked for someone who had made that experience before him. He looked for an *abba*, someone who had been so transformed by that experience that he was full of the Spirit and bearer of the Spirit (*pneumatophoros*). He came and placed himself under the direction of that master.

Then, you have the relationship of the master to the disciple, a one to one relationship, very similar to that of the guru of India and his disciples. It is basically a temporary relationship, for the time of a spiritual formation. Even when a master has many disciples, and although there is some form of relationship between the disciples, the basic relationship is the one to one relationship between the master and each one of his disciples. And what the master does is to share *his* experience with his disciples, as a means of leading them in their own personal experience.

In coenobitic life you have a quite different situation. The great coenobitic founders, like Pachomius or Basil, to name only these two, realized that many disciples were seeking the same goal and were on the same spiritual journey. Their charism was to establish a way of life, expressed in a common rule inspired by the Gospel. The experience of the founder and of all his disciples was then embodied in that Rule adopted by the whole community of brothers (or sisters). The role that the spiritual master of the desert used to play was then transferred to the community. The role of the coenobitic abba was then a service *within* the community. In that context, you are formed as a Christian monastic by living the Gospel within a community, according to a common rule, under the guidance of an abbot.

This is the vision that you find in the Rule of Benedict. In the first chapter, on the kinds of monks, Benedict distinguishes between the hermits whom he appreciates although it is not for them that he writes his Rule, the gyrovague and the sarabaites, for whom he has nothing good to say, and the cenobites, for whom he is writing his Rule. He then mentions in a brief sentence the three basic elements of coenobitic life. A cenobite is someone who lives « in community, under

a rule, and an abbot »- and the order in which he mentions those three elements is very important. The basic element is the community, then there is the Rule, because a community is composed of brothers/sisters gathered around a common vision, a common rule of life ; then comes the abbot/abbess who is a member of the community and has the responsibility to see that each one will really be formed through the common life. The role of the abbot is no longer to share *his* own experience, as a guru, but to lead everyone in the common experience of the Gospel according to a rule of life freely chosen by all.

We have the same three elements expressed again a number of times in the Rule. For example, at the time of the profession, after the twelve months of formation and discernment : the candidate will promise his stability (in the community), his *conversatio* (that is, his life according to the rule), and his obedience to his abbot.

In that tradition, obedience is not seen as a tool of formation or as an ascetical practice. It is the constant search of the will of God, using some specific tools. Obedience is always to God, although some forms of mediation are given to discover it. Christ is the Father of the community. His fatherhood/motherhood is embodied in the community life and is exercised by the abbot or the abbess. Then the abbot shares this exercise of Christ's fatherhood with many persons, like the deans or the prior, the infirmarian, the guest master, and all those who exercise any type of service in the community. Eventually, he shares it with all the members of the community through the conventual chapter. And all the members exercise that same spiritual motherhood or fatherhood toward the whole community, through the exercise of mutual obedience, as mentioned in chapter 71, inseparable from chapter 72.

Now, after that long detour - which I don't think was useless - we are back to our chapter 72 on the good zeal ! With this spiritual orientation in mind, some of Benedict's recommendations take on a new dimension : "To their fellow monks they show the pure love of brothers; to God, loving fear; to their abbot, unfeigned and humble love". Likewise, the recommendation of "earnestly competing in obedience to one another, and for no one "to pursue what he judges better for himself, but instead, what he judges better for someone else".

All these recommendations and especially the one of "supporting with the greatest patience one another's weaknesses of body and behavior" have their full meaning only if they are read on the background of Matthew 25.

The goal is not so much to try to identify to Christ, imitating Him, that is, acting as we imagine he would act if he were in our

situation. No, the goal is to acknowledge those with whom Christ has chosen to identify. To see Christ in our abbot, but also in each one of our brothers or sisters, and most especially in those who are more in need - those who are suffering, who are poor and limited, physically, psychologically, even spiritually. (We have to see him also in the pilgrims and visitors who come to the monastery).

With this in mind, let us come back to the opening mention of the two forms of zeal that lead either downwards or upwards. Christ ascending to his Father is a journey that cannot be understood separately from his journey down towards us, even to death and to the abyss of hell. There is a way to go down to this abyss of hell, which is by refusing love and communion, and therefore refusing salvation. But there is another way to descend into the same abyss : *along with Christ*, with the same love and compassion as he did, and then, from there, to ascend to the Father.

Then, we can read in that light everything that is found in the Rule concerning the attitude towards human weakness - human weakness in each one of us as well as human weakness in others. We could mention here everything that the Rule says about the treatment of the sick - and that includes all forms of sickness; the respectful attention to those who are struggling with God, like Jacob; and the compassionate treatment of sinners (while being clear and firm about sin - including ours).

There are also the weaknesses of the community itself. In that context we can speak of all the forms of *precariousness* that we experience today in any of our communities. I must say that I have mixed feelings about the use of that word; because I have the feeling that often - at least in my Order - it is used to create a distinction between two groups of communities : those that are *precarious*; and those that are supposed not to be precarious... We are all precarious.

Precairousness is a dimension of human life. It is a necessary dimension of our beauty as creatures. There is nothing as precarious as a beautiful flower. The whole mankind is precarious. And the marvelous thing is that God, after creating a precarious universe, assumed Himself that precariousness through the Incarnation. As a man he lived a precarious existence and died at the early age of about 33 year old.

The Church is precarious; and it is its normal state. Recently I read again a patristic writing of the first centuries : The Epistle to Diognetos which may have been written by S. Justin, the martyr. It was published in the collection *Source Chrétiennes*, several decades ago with a commentary by a great patrologist and historian, Irénée Marrou. It is a beautiful document : a well cultured intellectual

Christian writing to an intellectual Pagan. He describes the very humble, precarious situation of the Christians. They are like any other citizens. They get married and have children. They work to make a living, they take part in social life, etc. Their difference is their faith in Christ and the love they show one another. Marrou makes the following commentary : That was, he says, the normal situation of the Church : the witness to Christ by a very small group of believers. Then, there was a long period of history during which the Church was influent and powerful. That was, says Marrou, a long parenthesis. Now the parenthesis is being closed, we are back to normal.

The future of all our communities is uncertain, as is the future of any human institution. Obviously it is more uncertain for some as for others. Some of our communities live situations more critical than others. It is not impossible that some will have to close or to abandon some of their forms of apostolate.

It would be a mistake, however, to try to treat that question as if it were a problem proper to some communities only or as a monastic or even a religious problem, to which we have to find our own solutions. It is a problem of the Church as a whole and a problem of the society in which we live. The problem is certainly more acute in Europe as in North America, but I am sure many of your communities face it too. What we can do is to bring our small original contribution to the solution of a global problem in dialogue and in communion with the other sectors of the Church and Society that are also affected.

The Church founded by Christ was precarious during several centuries. Today, in many parts of the world, it is again precarious - which is, according to the Gospel, its normal situation : a little handful of leaven in the dough of humanity. Between these two situations, as I just said there was a long parenthesis during which the Church was glorious and powerful. The present situation corresponds more to the very nature of the Church which was sent to be a visible sign of salvation in the midst of the nations, and not as a conquest enterprise.

What characterized the situation of Christendom during the Middle Ages, was that the Christian values were for everyone a point of reference. People were not better believers and did not have a better moral life than today. There was violence and there were constant wars (although less devastating as those of today). But the Christian values were recognized by everyone, including by those who did not live according to them. Those values were often imposed through the arms. During that period many external aspects of religious life (for example the material enclosure and the religious habit had for

everyone a symbolic value. The Church exercised a great power in the fields of education and in many aspects of social, political and economic life.

Whether we regret it or not, that situation does not exist anymore, at least in most of the countries of the Western World. Efforts to reestablish it are pathetic and useless in the long range. To consider that situation simply as "dechristianization" seems to me too simplistic an analysis. The Church -- that is, all of us -- must re-learn to live without power.

This is not the time or the place to analyse what our communities, congregations and Orders have lived through in the Church since the Council. It would be wrong to attribute to the Council and to the reforms provoked by it the great diminution of the number of vocations in many parts of the Church and the closing of so many communities and so many church-related institutions. What the Council asked for was a spiritual renewal; and I think that, as a whole, we put all our efforts into that spiritual renewal. But such a spiritual renewal required some structural transformations, which, for most of them, arrived too late. The *krisis* (in the etymological and positive meaning of the word) that such transformations provoked had a great purification as a consequence.

We have gone through the same experience as Job in the Bible... We realized that even without many of the things that gave us our social identity and of which we were proud, we exist. Most of our communities are no longer strong, powerful and influential as in the past centuries; but in their precariousness and their weakness, they continue to be witnesses to the *sequela Christi*. This is our vocation: To prefer nothing to the love of Christ, to follow Christ in a society that is itself in profound transformation and always seeking its own identity. Our communities can give that evangelical witness, whether they are small or big. Our identity does not reside in the services that we have fulfilled or are still fulfilling in the Church, but in what we are, spiritually.

One of the poverties that we experience is that we do not even have a renewed theology of religious life. In the whole contemporary theological reflection, there has not been any profound renewal of the theology of religious life - although there have been many good essays on it. But, has there been, really, a real renewal of the theology of marriage, of priesthood, of the ministry of the bishop? Has there been, since the Council a real renewal of theology?

Even with our weaknesses, and perhaps because of our weaknesses, we have also a mission to play in our suffering world. The present geo-

political evolution of the world has created an encounter on a massive scale of cultures and religions in all the parts of the world, but especially in our Western world. At the same time there are forces (we are tempted to speak of diabolical forces) that try to develop tensions, even wars between cultures and religions. Monks and nuns have certainly a very special role to play in this area. Not only because we are present in all the parts of the world and therefore have, as Orders and Congregations, a worldwide experience; but also - and still more - because what is at the core of our life, that is, spiritual experience, is also what is at the core of most of the great religions of the world. When it is difficult and at times impossible to dialogue at the level of philosophical and theological concepts, it is much easier to meet at the level of spiritual experience.

We can approach that question of the good zeal from many aspects that may seem unrelated. In fact, they all bring us back to the same reality of communion -- *koinonia*. Jesus said that he brought **fire (zelos)** to the earth, and that he wanted that fire to spread all over. If that fire is really burning in each one of our heart, it will develop into an ongoing communion : communion with God embodied in the communion with our sisters or brothers within each one of our communities. And that communion within each one of our communities is real only if it is a burning fire that spreads all over and develops into communion with the local Church, the universal Church, with other religions and with the world at large, and most especially with all those with whom Jesus chose to identify, the Little Ones.

February 5, 2007

Armand Veilleux

[return to list of articles on this theme](#)