

Monastic Life Today: Communion Enlightened by the Word of God

Introduction

Thirty years ago, when I was asked to be novice master, I accepted on one condition: that I be dispensed from teaching the Rule, a text that I found almost totally lacking in that mystical spirituality for which my ardent soul yearned. A month later, in the course of our regular visitation, I was told by the Father Immediate that I could remain as novice master only on the condition that I accept teaching the Rule: “It belongs to the novice master to teach the Rule.” The last thirty years have been spent gratefully finding my way into the Rule, and like a Theseus without his ball of string, I neither can nor wish to find the exit door. All this to say that this morning’s reflection will be made in the context of the Rule.

The Rule in the Prologue declares to man the great task of his existence: to make his way back to God from whom he has become estranged. In a single, unrepeatable life without a second chance, he has to journey from alienation to intimacy, until he arrives at God’s tent, his holy mountain, his kingdom, eternal life. To remove this imperative from the Rule is to deprive it of its dynamism and its meaning, to stick a pin in it and let out all the air, so that the Rule becomes essentially...nothing. Like the *pius pater* that he is, Benedict frequently reminds us of this defining work of our life throughout the course of the Rule, and in particular through some of the most powerful instruments of good works: “Live in fear of judgment day; have a great horror of hell.” (These are special favorites of mine because of their granite-like unyieldingness. Your preference may be different).

I. Communion

But *how* do we cover the distance from being “far off” to becoming “near”? Benedict offers a series of complementary answers: through the labor of obedience, through growth in faith and good works, through scaling the ladder of humility, through accepting and persevering in the *dura et aspera*. Close to the end of his Rule, he gives another answer, one which has become more and more precious to me: through “the good zeal which separates from evil and leads to God and eternal life.” This chapter 72, so familiar to us, is about the continual and increasingly spontaneous commitment to make of the monastic community a genuine communion, an interplay of loves in humble action: between individual monks in their daily interactions as the dominant

affectus within the whole community, between each of the monks and the abbot, between the community and Christ. This daily work and the daily fruition of it is the monastic *opus Dei*; engaged faithfully in it, we are rightly situated to be “brought by Christ all together to everlasting life”. As De Lubac sets forth in the beginning of his *Catholicism*: Just as the rupturing of our relationship with God in original sin is inseparably connected with the rupturing of relationships among human beings, so the restoration of our relations with one another is integral to the restoration of our relationship with Him. For those who wish to accomplish the return to God and eternal life, forming and abiding in communion is the indispensable way to the goal.

The Rule itself seeks to foster communion in innumerable ways, implicit and explicit. Unfortunately, for a long time we have read many of these “stimuli” as organizational details or as counsels to growth in individual perfection. As I understand it, something as simple as the injunction to observe punctuality at the Divine Office is not primarily concerned with “good order” or growth in self-mastery but rather with the creation of a spiritual climate in which we may “with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 15,6) – to His glory, yes, but also to our own tranquil experience of ourselves as a united community of praise. The “distribution of goods according to need” is not a Solomonic resolution of the squabbles that arise from jealousy and possessiveness, but a profound teaching about the construction of a joyful communion founded on mutual understanding and appreciation – understanding and appreciation of the reality of the needs of my brothers, be they greater or lesser than my own. “Not to act in anger” means much more than climbing a notch in the ascent to Evagrian *apatheia*; the emphasis belongs not on the self-transcendence of my personal anger, but rather on the blessing that my peaceful and invisible working through of my anger (face without anger, voice without anger, gestures without anger) will have on my community, hopefully without their being aware of the danger that they barely escaped. Certainly, Benedict’s stern warnings about *murmuratio* arise from his awareness that few self-indulgences are so guaranteed to diminish and dissolve communion as the thoughtless giving in to gossip and complaining.

Doubtless it would be a help to the building up of communion if we made a greater effort to put all these exhortations in practice. But these exhortations only truly make sense if they are the expression of profound underlying convictions and desires about the nature of the life of our communities. It is these that we need to understand and

strive to incarnate if we wish to restore vitality to our communities, and if we wish to reach our journey's transcendent end.

The first of these convictions has to do with *identity*, the freely-willed assumption of a common identity. As members of a monastic community, our individual identities are not detachable from our shared identity as a living *koinonia*. Just as there is no dotted line that marks the boundary between each human being and God, no way that a human being can separate himself from God without disastrously separating himself from himself- denaturing himself- so the members of a monastic community participate in a single, shared, corporate identity. We cannot be less one in our self-understanding than the Chosen People in the Old Testament, nor less organically united than the members of any Christian community, "one body, one spirit in Christ". Truly, "it is not good for man to be alone", and the monastic community has been given to us by God as the healing of our particular loneliness. For many years I have squabbled with a beloved senior of our community who in praying for a particular monk on a special occasion always prays for his "family and his community". My problem is with the order of his intercessions. The monastery is meant to become for us both our family and our community, our first interpersonal reference, our most important human interlocutor, the place which is irrefutably home, the gathering of people who are most dear to us. There is no sense in making a permanent home with "insignificant others", and young people today for all their apparent rigidity and formalism are intensely seeking the place of their "belonging". That is what will decide if they stay or go.

The second indispensable conviction for the formation of a genuine communion is that we assume a deep *responsibility for one another*. If there is a sloth, a *desidia*, that can distance us from God, there is likewise a *desidia* that hinders us from dedicating ourselves to the pastoral care of each other. It is an utterly unacceptable passivity to observe the gradual crumbling of a brother's vocation, his spiritual life, his moral behavior and/or his psychological health and blithely assume that all of this is being taken care of by the abbot. We who have become so free and comfortable in talking and opining about everything and anything cannot make the object of a unique taboo the endangered well-being of another member of the Body to which we belong. The official Vatican medal of the Year of Mercy shows the Good Samaritan. We dare not cross to the other side of the road when a brother has been assaulted, interiorly or exteriorly. For a monastic community to live in communion today, it is imperative that every member participate in the *cura pastoralis*, above all in the *cura*, the "caring". Many years ago,

shortly after arriving in Brasil, my sister telephoned me to say that my father, after being diagnosed with Parkinson's, had gone into a psychological crisis and overdosed on sleeping pills. After making travel arrangements to be with him, I spent some anguished time in prayer, trying to discern if I should tell the whole truth to the community before taking the plane. My decision was "yes": they are my community. They have a right and need to know and I have a need of their support. When I called them to chapter and told them, their response was...not. There *was* no response, apart from a word from one or two persons. I understand the dazedness and awkwardness of the situation for them, but for me that moment was a revelation of the long journey to communion that we had ahead of us. For Saint Bernard (if we go by the frequency of his citations), almost nothing is as important in a monastic community as to "Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep." Audibly. Palpably. As the visibility of the communion of caring.

The third conviction has to do with the *investment of our energies*. I read once in a biography of Edith Stein that in 1916 she interrupted her doctoral studies in philosophy to serve as a field-nurse in the First World War. Why? "All my energies belong to the great endeavor." The running of a monastery, on all levels- the work departments, the choral office, the outside pastoral commitments, the attending to medical emergencies, the explosion of a scandal- requires a community of Edith Steins, if it is to be a feasible enterprise. During my novitiate, I was told, "The monastery will demand all your talents, and more." Here in Novo Mundo we speak of the "law of the conservation of tasks". However few or many brothers give themselves generously to the accomplishment of the myriad obligations generated simply by constituting a monastic community, the number of obligations remains unchanged. It is simply a question of how much weight will fall on how many shoulders. Nothing contributes more to the establishment and vibrancy of communion in a monastery as the readiness of brothers to undertake tasks- expected and unexpected, long-term and short-term. Nothing deconstructs communion more than a self-defensive resentment on the part of brothers when they sense that a small favor might be about to be asked of them. I have heard that in many monastic communities today there is a population of "Thessalonians" who in no way participate in carrying out the manifold responsibilities of the monastery. It is impossible for communion to thrive in a monastery with a leisured class. And the question is not only the lack of manpower and the extra burden on the generous. In such

a community, no one lives communion, because its opposite has been accepted as the status quo.

The fourth and last conviction is the *acceptance of living for the community's future*. There exists a cluster of attitudes, habits, behaviors, beliefs, fidelities, self-discipline that constitute a prophecy and promise of continuity for the community. Many of these have to do with the content just presented in regard to the first three convictions. An irreducible sense of belonging to *this* community, a delicate but vigilant love for each of the brethren (I have come to see that to ask this “for each” without exception is not asking too much or the impossible, but precisely the just measure), an availability for the service that the community needs at this moment- taken together, these make up a kind of guarantee that this community will prosper – certainly prosper in the most important way by gradually becoming the kingdom to which it is advancing. Yet there does exist in some monks a certain “orneriness” –a refusal to take on the labor of conversion that is part of communion, an unwillingness to let go of what is obviously destructive for the unity of the brothers. It is this stubbornness in individualism that appears as the presage of a community heading towards decline, and even to extinction. At times one feels that this hardness expresses an underlying wish that the community cease to exist. “But if you bite and devour one another, take heed that you are not consumed by one another.” (Gal. 5, 15)

II. Enlightened by the Word of God

I wonder if any of you have ever participated in the synagogue service on Simchat Torah (“rejoicing with the Law”), the feast observed immediately after *Sukkoth*, the Feast of Booths. If you have, you will certainly remember the opening of the ark and the dancing and singing of the congregation in the synagogue and the outdoor procession with the Torah scrolls accompanied by the jubilant congregation, all attempting to kiss the Torah scrolls as they pass. What the celebration of this feast transmits so vibrantly is that the Word of God is not a book. It is God’s revelation of Himself, God’s making Himself present, that occurs time and again whenever the Torah is proclaimed.

This is the first way whereby the Word of God illumines our communion. The Word of God *generates* communion. The presence of the Word of God in the monastic church and the promise of its proclamation summon the monks to the church, to be with the God who reveals Himself. The reading of the Word of God in the liturgy is a unifying

personal encounter: it unites us to Him who speaks and unites us to each other as those who love Him and wish to be present to hear Him. This unity in the listening to God reveal himself in His word precedes all merely human and social considerations of communion. God in His Word is the source of our communion.

The Word of God is a light to our communion because it is His authoritative, living teaching about Himself, ourselves, our world and how He means us to live in His presence and as His people. The Word of God “speaks with authority and not like the scribes.” *He* is the sacred text; *they* (the scribes) are the commentary. For all the joy and intimacy that the monk can and hopefully will experience in his contemplative reading of the Scriptures, the Word of God is proclaimed not so much to be savored as to be *obeyed*. This is the primordial beatitude announced by Jesus in the Gospels: “Blessed are those who hear the Word of God and put it into practice” (Lk. 11,28). (Many icons of Saint Benedict show him holding a scroll with the words of the Prologue taken from Matthew 7: 24, “The man who *hears* these words of mine and *does* them”.) The Word of God illuminates our communion because it defines and orients it. We do not invent our communion or the terms of our communion. Hearing the Word is our commitment to carry it out, and hearing it again and again our commitment to carry it out ever more fully and purely, ever more in accordance with His intention. Think of the solemn binding of the people to obeying the Word of God at Sinai or the re-assumption of the covenant commitments following the reading of the Law by Ezra. Our communion would be largely guesswork if it were not illumined by the “precepts of the Lord”.

In the third place, the Word of God gives light to our communion because it teaches us continually that human life *is* communion. The Word of God is not a novel to be read in bed after Compline or a poem to be delighted in while strolling in the monastery gardens. It is “the Book of the Covenant” delivered to a people, and meant to be a primordial instrument in the building up and sanctification of this people. Every book of the Bible is remarkably “popular”. God never speaks to an individual to make a mystic out of him, to develop a “particular friendship” with him. His call and conversation with every one of them has as its purpose to make them judges, prophets, preachers. Elijah and John the Baptist, considered so consistently by the monastic tradition as solitaires, are preparers of God’s way for the people, teachers of repentance and proclaimers of His justice. Even the Song of Songs, as intimate and exclusive as it may appear, was accepted as canonical by the rabbis at Yavneh because it was understood as representing the passionate love between God and His people by means of the

universally compelling metaphor of romantic love. This is one of the ways in which the liturgical cycle does us so much good. As much as we might wish, we cannot remain “stuck” in those Scripture passages that lend themselves to a privatistic interpretation. We are constantly immersed and re-immersed in the story of the people of God, in order that we might come to understand that instead of being the locus for the “flight from the world”, the monastery is, in the words of Merton, the setting for “the flight to unity”, for the resetting and knitting together of the dislocated bones of a wounded and broken humanity.

On to a fourth way. I assume there are some Kierkegaard fans in the assembly. Those of you familiar with his “Edifying Discourses” or his “Works of Love” know that in these works his entire effort is directed to letting the Biblical word have its whole and undiminished effect. In order for the Word of God to be light for us in this sense, it first needs to be truly heard, in all its intensity and in the fullness of its demands. Kierkegaard frequently aims at this by breaking a biblical verse into individual words and forcing us to come to grips with what each of them means before almost overwhelming us by giving us the original verse in its complete form with its astounding accumulation of significance and divine summons. What does it truly mean to be commanded: “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” (the text treated in the first half of the above-cited “Works of Love”)? What does it mean to hear as God’s Word: “But when you are invited to a feast, go and sit in the lowest place” (Lk. 14,10), or, “Let love be unfeigned” (Rom. 12,9) or “Love one another with the intense affection of brothers” (1 Pet. 1,22)?

I am a great admirer of Kierkegaard, but to do what he is doing, to let the light of the Scriptures shine forth to illuminate our communion, you need not be a Dane nor an existentialist, but only a monk. The purpose of the constant repetition of the same texts, when in the Office, at the Eucharist, at *lectio divina* or in the day-long extension of *lectio divina* in the *memoria Dei* is exactly to permit an ever-expanding *sensus plenior*, an ever-greater comprehension of the implications of a scriptural text and an ever-greater will to “do this and you will live.” It seems that Pope Francis has spent decades of his life, perhaps his whole lifetime, allowing the Word of God and the Spirit of God to illuminate his intellect and re-make his heart, in order to enable him to penetrate a single biblical verse : “To do justice and love mercy” (Mic. 6,8) As monks we are called to “take our Scripture straight”, or rather, to pass from a very vague and diluted comprehension and motivation to a specific and concentrated grasp and

application of a text's true meaning. What would happen to a meeting of a conventual chapter- or to an abbots' congress- if all of a sudden as an assembly we were to "get the point" of "Love your enemies"? Wouldn't we become an instantaneous, glorious Bedlam, with all kinds of reconciliations and pardoning exploding on all sides? The Jews of Simchat Torah would have nothing on us!

But is the passage from illumination to praxis as natural as all that? With this come to the fifth way in which the Word of God lights up our communion. When we read that "the Word of God is living and active", I hope that we understand that its being sharper than any two-edged sword" (Heb. 4,12) has as much to do with the way it exits us as with the way it enters us. That is to say, the Word is power not only as God's plumbing us and reading us to our most intimate depths. It is also power that comes forth from us. As "power went out from Jesus", so power comes out from us, the power of the Word that has been received in faith and obedience and embraced in love. Everything that the Word orders us to do it empowers us to do. The hearing and assimilation of the Word of God is not a process that ends when we have heard it and been judged by it. That is not journey's end, but only journey's mid-point. Because of its infinite power, the Word taken into us is capable of overcoming all obstacles and of making of our whole existence a faithful expression, an icon, of itself. In his treatise *De Contemplando Deo*, William of Saint Thierry says that the gift of the Holy Spirit as the inner master of love is imparted not only to enable us to experience ourselves as loved by God or even to have some experience of how God loves, but rather to make us capable of loving God with the love of the Holy Spirit. Analogously, the gift of the Word does not fulfill its mission in being heard but in making us, in the fullest sense, "doers of the Word" (Jas. 1,22). This is a promise that the very Word has given to us in Isaiah: It does not return to God void, but only after having completed its mission of capacitating us to live it integrally. We see this in the early monastic literature in the "Life of Saint Anthony", when Anthony in the tombs sings "If an army encamps against me, my heart shall not fear "(Ps. 26, 3)... and by the power of the Scriptural word, he is not afraid.

The sixth way, the last one I will present this morning, is the way that the Scripture makes our communion shine through its *beauty*. Specialists in Scripture translation say that whereas the sixteenth century translations of the Scriptures spoke in moral terms, the Vulgate spoke a language of loveliness. I don't know of any modern language that has a word equal to the Latin "jucundum" for evoking the delight of our monastic communion. Nor do I know a translation that can communicate the piety and devotion

to the house where we worship God together than “Domine, dilexi decorem domus tuae et locum habitationis gloriae tuae” (Ps. 25,8). But Latinity apart, texts as different as Acts 4 and John 17 appeal to us particularly through their beauty. When we meditate on “Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul” (Acts 4, 32) or, “Holy Father, keep them in thy name...that they may be one, even as we are one” (Jn. 17, 11), we find ourselves not before an idea or a task but a vision of reality. And, if we can leave behind our wordly-wiseness and sadness, this vision ravishes us. This is what St. Ignatius calls the *id quod volo*. *This* is what we desire. And this desire makes us seek communion.

A final word about the abbot’s privileged part in all this. According to RB 2,5, it falls to the abbot to take the Scriptural word proclaimed in the liturgy and meditated on in *lectio divina* and “knead” it like leaven into the minds of the brothers, both through his teaching and by all the decisions he takes. He has been given the grace and responsibility of making the Word of God light up the reality of communion, of demonstrating by his words and his actions that the Scriptures- every page of them- are always about man’s return to his Creator, a pilgrimage to be made in common and in peace, a pilgrimage that coincides with the ripening of a community into *communio*. Despite all the dire warnings of the account that he will have to render on judgment day, for a true abbot the joy is greater than the risk. He does not demythologize the risk; but the joy of shepherding the brothers into true communion is irresistible.

Bernardo Bonowitz, OCSO
Abadia de Nossa Senhora do Novo Mundo
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