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Monasticism and Ecumenism

This paper seeks to highlight, beyond the contradictions of history, the deepest roots of the monastic experience – benedictine, in particular -, characterized by that openness to the Absolute, which gives rise to openness to all men and women, particularly those who share the same faith in the God of Jesus Christ, but, by extension, also to those who follow other religious paths. This theme, however, is not a foregone conclusion, as history demonstrates how, from this perspective, monasticism has been marked by a vibrant tension since its origins, driven by the apologetic desire to safeguard and preserve the "depositum fidei", which has very often led to the disavowal of this openness.

Here, in particular, I wish to evoke the figure of an archbishop of Palermo (even though he never took possession of his see, having been elected in 1049). This was the Lorraine monk Humbert of the monastery of Moyenmoutier (diocese of Toul). After the election of the Alsatian Bruno, bishop of Toul (Leo IX), as pope, Humbert was appointed cardinal bishop of Silva Candida, that is, of Porto and Santa Rufina. However, he remained in his abbey, and only towards the end of the year did he come to Italy as chancellor and librarian of the Roman Church, later becoming archbishop of Sicily, then under Muslim rule.

When the question of Petrine primacy arose, Pope Leo IX entrusted its resolution to Humbert, a scholar of Greek and a skilled scholar of the controversies between the Greek and Latin churches. The cardinal thus had reason to compose two lengthy memoirs in which he refuted the Byzantines' assertions: *Against the Graecorum Calumnias*, and *Against Nicetas*, a Studite monk of Constantinople. For these reasons, in January 1054, at the head of a papal legation and bearing a papal bull for Emperor Constantine and another for Patriarch Michael Cerularius, Humbert left for Constantinople, where on June 24 he accepted Nicetas's retractions. On July 6, 1054, despite the fact that Pope Leo IX had been dead for three months — he had died on April 19 — the legates excommunicated Patriarch Michael, leaving the bull on the altar of the Basilica of Hagia Sophia.

The attitude of hostility towards schismatics and heretics is found from the very beginning of the monastic experience, in a period of the Church's history marked by Christological controversies: what Athanasius wrote in the best-seller *Vita Antonii*, soon translated into Latin and made known in the West, is valid for all: "In his faith [Anthony] was truly exemplary and upright. In fact, he never had relations with the Meletian schismatics, knowing the wickedness they had demonstrated from the beginning and their apostasy, nor did he ever maintain friendly relations with the Manicheans or with other heretics, except to admonish them and exhort them to return to the true faith; and he thought that friendship and familiarity with these people cause harm and ruin to the soul. In the same way he detested the heresy of the Arians and exhorted everyone not to approach them and not to follow their perverse faith" (Athan., VA 68) and, close to death, Anthony recommended to his disciples: "have no dealings with schismatics, much less with Arian heretics. You know well how I have avoided them because of their doctrine, which is hostile to Christ and the true faith" (Athan., VA 91).

Later, Theodore of Studios (758-826), reformer of Eastern monasticism, writes in *Letter 39*: "the work of the monk consists in not allowing the Gospel to be subjected to the slightest alteration, to avoid that, by offering the laity an example of heresy and communion with heretics, one becomes responsible for their perdition".

With Barsanuphius of Gaza, who died in 540, a perspective marked by meekness and humility opened up. A believer asked Barsanuphius if he should anathematize Nestorius and his heretical disciples, but Barsanuphius replied that Nestorius and his followers were

already excommunicated and that excommunication was not a monk's job. He continued: "Do not anathematize anyone, because those who consider themselves sinners must mourn their own sins and nothing else" (*Letter* 699).

Barsanuphius himself advised those who wanted to help an Orthodox man arguing with a heretic: "If you truly want to help the Orthodox believer, speak in your heart to God, who knows hidden things and can do much more than we ask of him, and he will intervene with those who are in dispute according to his will... He wants all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth, and he will act with them according to his will" (*Letter* 695). These words have been defined as "the first trace of ecumenical prayer and for the unity of churches in the heart of a monk capable of sharing the sufferings of Christ"¹.

In the Latin West, the monk Martin, bishop of Tours, had already asked Emperor Maximus during the trial for heresy and magic held in Trier in 386 to grant clemency to Priscillian, bishop of Avila, and his followers, arguing that "it would be an unprecedented innovation to have an ecclesiastical matter adjudicated by a secular judge" (Sulp. Sev, *Chronica* II, 50). Martin's action, despite his harsh approach to the eradication of paganism, certainly did not express adherence to the Priscillianist movement, of which there is no trace in his life or teaching, but evidently it was respect for a religious experience as such, an experience that, although characterized by excesses and flaws, could not be stifled in blood.

Certainly, at the root of monasticism lies an openness to the Absolute, which is why it, in addition to predating the divisions of the Church, constitutes a human phenomenon even before it is a Christian one. Indeed, while it is true that monastic life was born within the one Church, assuming the essential and definitive characteristics that constitute it during the third and fourth centuries, it is also true that it is present in all the great religions, even those like Islam that have sought to deny it. It is nourished by its own anthropology: celibacy, community life or solitude, the search for the Absolute, asceticism in its various forms, are all elements of a life so marked in the body, in the entire person, that they actually induce an awareness of a similarity, of a "monotropy" among those who live them even in different religious contexts (Bianchi). It is no coincidence that the Trappist monk Thomas Merton could say he felt closer to a contemplative Buddhist monk than to a non-contemplative Christian, to a cleric of the clerical apparatus. In 1966, after meeting the

¹ E. Bianchi, *Non siamo migliori. La vita religiosa nella chiesa, tra gli uomini*, Magnano 2002, p. 243.

Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh, Merton wrote that "Thich Nhat Hanh is more my brother than many who are nearer to me by race and nationality, because he and I see things exactly the same way"².

If we turn our gaze to the Benedictine monastic experience, there too emerges the tension between the defense of the faith from non-Catholic doctrinal influences and the acceptance of all men regardless of faith. On the one hand, Saint Benedict prescribes the reading only of the texts of the "reputable and orthodox catholic Fathers" (RB 9,8; 73,4), on the other hand in his life and in his *Rule* (RB), we find precious clues that express the profound aspiration for an enlarged and overflowing heart and universal openness: in the chapter dedicated to the instruments of spiritual art that the monk must use, he reports, after the first and greatest commandment (Mt 22,38) of love for God and neighbor (RB 4,1-2), almost all the precepts of the Decalogue (RB 4,3-8), taking care to replace "honor your father and your mother" with "honor all men" (cf. 1Pt 2,17): it is a question of overcoming what in some way can be an expression of self-referentiality, of homology to oneself and to one's own world, to open oneself, instead, to a universal love that embraces everyone. And, immediately afterwards (RB 4,9), Saint Benedict adds the famous "golden rule" of the Old and New Testament tradition³, expressed in its negative formulation: "and what you do not want done to you, do not do to another", a "golden rule" which is reported by saint Benedict in another circumstance (RB 61,14), and which constitutes the ethical basis of every form of interreligious and ecumenical dialogue⁴.

Consequently, following the example of God, who, according to a constant of the Old and New Testaments, shows no partiality to persons⁵, St. Benedict recommends to the abbot: "The abbot should avoid all favoritism in the monastery. He is not to love one more than another unless he finds someone better in good actions and obedience. A man born free is not to be given higher rank than a slave who becomes a monk, except for some other good reason. [...] because *whether slave or free, we are all one in Christ* (Gal 3,28; Eph 6,8) and share

² Th. Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice*, Notre Dame (Indiana) 1968.

³ Tb 4,16; Sir 31,15; Mt 7,12; Lk 6,31.

⁴ W. Kasper, *Misericordia. Concetto fondamentale del vangelo – chiave della vita cristiana*, Brescia 2015, pp. 62-67.

⁵ Dt 10,17; 2Chr 19,7; Job 34,19; Wis 6,7; Acts 10,34; Rom 2,11; Gal 2,6; Eph 6,9; Col 3,25; 1Pt 1,17.

alike in bearing arms in the service of the one Lord, for *God shows no partiality among persons* (Rom 2,11)" (RB 2,16-18.20).

Regarding the welcoming of people, regardless of their religious beliefs, there are several examples in the life of Saint Benedict: Pope Gregory the Great informs us that the saint had very willingly welcomed the Goth who had asked to enter the monastery (Greg., *Dial.* III,6). Another eloquent episode concerns the Goth Zalla, "a follower of the Arian heresy, inflamed with fury and inhuman cruelty against all consecrated persons of the Catholic Church", who presented himself at the monastery of Saint Benedict to seize the property of a poor peasant, which the peasant, for his own safety, claimed to have entrusted to the saint. Abbot Benedict stared at Zalla, then looked at the peasant bound with straps, freeing him without touching him. At the sight of the miracle, Zalla leaped from his horse and recommended himself to the saint's prayers. The saint, without reproaching the Goth for his false faith, called the brothers and ordered them to let him in and offer him blessed food; then he warned him to desist from his mad cruelty. Zalla walked away tamed ("qui fractus recedens"): the Arian's heart was broken by Saint Benedict's act of mercy (Greg., *Dial.* II,31).

Even in his encounter with the Arian king Totila, Saint Benedict does not raise questions about profession of faith, but limits himself to the request to live primarily in a human manner, avoiding dissimulation and abandoning evil conduct (Greg., *Dial.* II, 14-15).

The quotation from Galatians 3,28, "We are all one in Christ," contained in RB 2,20, constitutes the Christological foundation of monastic life according to Saint Benedict's vision. On the one hand, the love of Christ, "to whom nothing should be preferred" (RB 4,21; 72,11), leads to recognizing him not only in those who take his place in the monastery (RB 2,2), in the sick ("they may truly be served as Christ": RB 36,1), but also in guests ("Christ is to be adored because he is indeed welcomed in them": RB 53,7), in the poor people and in pilgrims ("because in them more particularly Christ is received": RB 53,15). On the other hand, the monk's conformity to the attitude of radical obedience of the "Lord, of whom the Apostle says: he became obedient unto death (Phil 2,8)" (RB 7,34) makes the monk capable of a 360-degree relational openness, and a man of communion: obedience, in fact, promised on the day of admission into the community (RB 58,17) is not only hierarchical, but must be reciprocal: "not only must all exercise the virtue of obedience towards the abbot, but the

brothers must also obey one another, convinced that through this path of obedience they will go to God" (RB 71,1-2), and "they must compete in mutual obedience" (RB 72,6).

The *Rule* of Saint Benedict begins with an invitation to listen and practice obedience: "Listen carefully, my son, to the master's instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart. This is advice from a father who loves you; welcome it, and faithfully put it into practice. The labor of obedience will bring you back to him from whom you had drifted through the sloth of disobedience. This message of mine is for you, [...] armed with the strong and noble weapons of obedience" (RB, Prol. 1-3). The Latin term "oboedio", composed of "audio" (in Hebrew, both terms are translated as shama'), belongs to the same semantic field that in the *Rule* is also declined as "listen", "attend with the ear of the heart" and "welcome the advice". The theme of listening/obedience, indeed, constitutes the hermeneutic key of the entire *Rule*: listening, in fact, is that existential attitude that lies at the root of faith (cf. Rom 1,5; 10,17), which, on the one hand, denies all selfish and self-referential closure, and, on the other, opens us to relationships with the Other and with the other men. It is the essential foundation of every form of dialogue and relationship.

And even the vow of stability ("stabilitas in congregatione"; RB 4,78), connected to the vow of obedience, specific to the Benedictine order (RB 58,17), is to be understood as stability in communion, that is, within a system of relationships, to be nurtured and protected, including mutual tolerance and the pursuit "not of one's own advantage, but of that of others" (RB 72,5.7). It concretely expresses the service of communion to which monks are vowed.

Finally, the promise of "convers(at)io" that Saint Benedict asks of the monk (RB 58,17) also constitutes an ecumenical presupposition. The conversion revitalizes the relationship of faith, through the rediscovery of the deepest aspirations of human feeling, a continuous and renewed return to evangelical sources, and the consequent need for a continuous reform, which in this time marked by a ruthless egotatry, needs to be concretized in a life of communion to be implored from the Spirit and to be lived at every level.

