

Benedictine Fear of the Lord

Living in the Presence of God

“He who has ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the Churches” (Apoc. 2:7). And what does the Spirit say? “Come my sons, listen to me; I shall teach you the fear of the Lord” (Ps 33:12). In the Prologue, St Benedict sketches the broad outline of his programme for a school of the Lord’s service, which will be filled in by the rest of his Rule. Hence he draws attention here to this fundamental aspect, a key element in his teaching: fear of the Lord.

The patriarch of western monasticism was imbued with the Scriptures, where this holy fear – so different from cringing human fear – is frequently commanded and extolled, all the way from Genesis to Revelation. This awareness of God, of His infinite power and majesty, begets the desire to praise and glorify Him, and is a source of spiritual vitality. It is the distinguishing feature of those who love their Creator, who seek to please Him, who want nothing to cloud their relationship with Him, who wish to live in such a way as to enjoy Him eternally.

St Benedict would have it fill the souls of the officials of the community – those who have responsibilities for others, and perhaps greater temptations to worldliness and laxness by dint of their duties. The cellarer is to be ‘a God-fearing man who will be a father to the whole community’ (RB 31). Sick brethren are to be served by a brother ‘who is God-fearing, diligent and zealous’ (RB 36). A brother should be put in charge of the guests’ quarters ‘whose soul is filled with the fear of God’ (RB 53). When a new Abbot is to be elected, ‘he should be appointed whom the united community chooses in the fear of God’ (RB 64). The Abbot should appoint a Prior ‘after taking the advice of God-fearing brethren’ (RB 65). The doorkeeper is to attend speedily to enquirers ‘with all the gentleness that comes from the fear of God ... and with the warmth of charity’ (RB 66). The Abbot, who has the greatest authority and the greatest responsibility, receives the most frequent reminders: ‘The Abbot himself in all his actions must fear God and keep the Rule, keeping in mind that most surely he will have to render account for all his decisions before God, the most just Judge’ (RB 3).

For each and every brother, it is to be a motivation for prompt obedience (RB 5), and in Chapter 72 on Good Zeal, in which St Benedict recapitulates the most important points of his teaching, they are again exhorted to fear God. With justification, then, does Dom Paul Delatte, in his classic commentary, describe it as ‘the Benedictine spirit par excellence’ (p.489).

In Chapter 19, ‘Recollection in Chanting’, St Benedict would have his monks be aware of the presence of God and act accordingly. In Chapter 20, ‘Reverence at Prayer’, he speaks of the humility, reverence, repentance and purity of heart which should characterise the monk’s approach to ‘the Lord God of all things’. These two chapters can be seen as a description of the godly attitude with which St Benedict wants his monks to be filled habitually, and not only when participating in the Divine Office or praying privately.

It is expressed specifically in Chapter 7, ‘On Humility’: ‘The first step of humility is for a man to set the fear of God always before his eyes, and utterly to avoid forgetfulness.’ He recommends the constant remembrance of the divine commandments, the need to renounce all forms of sin in order to avoid hell and reach the eternal life ‘prepared for those who fear Him’. These thoughts are further developed, with particular emphasis on the presence of God, everywhere and always. ‘He must recognize that he is at every hour in the sight of God in heaven, and that his actions are everywhere visible to the divine eyes of God.’ He is encouraging the monk to live consciously in this presence, knowing that God sees him not

just from afar, but also from the depth of his being: not only his words and deeds, but also his thoughts, desires and intentions are known to God.

Abbot Delatte comments, 'Our spiritual education is the fruit of a twofold looking: God's looking on us, our looking to Him. When our gaze meets God's and this state is prolonged and becomes habitual, then our souls possess "the fear of God"... The look that we keep steadily fixed on God becomes the final form of our conscience as children of God' (*Commentary on the Rule*, p.105). It is the basis of practical fidelity in everyday life.

In *Athirst for God*, a scholarly work on St Bernard's sermons on the Song of Songs, Fr Michael Casey OCSO devotes a section to this theme. 'Fear of the Lord is closely connected, in Bernard's mind, with humility and vigilance, and issues in a self-knowledge which is close to wisdom. It has the effect of rendering a person alert, diligent and watchful of himself. It is gained especially through contact with the Word of God in the Scriptures, since before Christ can be experienced through sight he must be listened to in faith... Ultimately, fear of the Lord is based on the recognition of the holiness of God and of one's own unworthiness... Opposed to fear is a false sense of security, smugness, complacency... Fear of the Lord reminds us constantly of the outcome of our acts and omissions. By its operation we are enabled to discern what is eternally true and what is false. Fear consumes in us the attraction to what is base.' (pp. 308-310.)

We can note that at the beginning of the ladder of humility in Chapter 7, St Benedict does not disdain to use the stick as well as the carrot: he proposes the fear of hell as one of the motivations for being good, which is classically termed 'servile fear'. At the end of Chapter 7, however, when all twelve steps of humility have been climbed, 'the monk will soon reach that love of God which being perfect drives out all fear (1 Jn 4:18). Through this love, all the practices which before he kept somewhat fearfully, he now begins to keep effortlessly, naturally and habitually, influenced now not by any fear of hell but for love of Christ and by force of long practice and the very delight he experiences in virtue. These things the Lord, working through His Holy Spirit, will deign to show in His workman when he has been purified from vice and sin.'

Servile fear has given way to filial fear, the pure fear which endures for ever (Ps 18:10); that fear of God which is a gift of the Holy Spirit and which produces His fruit: charity, joy, peace... It is this holy fear of perfect love which is St Benedict's ideal, and which he wishes to be the hallmark of his disciples.

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