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ST. BENEDICT

Homily of the Right Reverend Dom Jean PATEAU
Abbot of Our Lady of Fontgombault
(Fontgombault, July 11th, 2024)

Ecce nos reliquimus omnia et secuti sumus te.
Behold we have left all things, and followed Thee.
(Mt 19:27)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,
My dearly beloved Sons,

POPE ST. GREGORY THE GREAT dedicated the second book of his *Dialogues* with Peter the Deacon to the life of St. Benedict. However, there is another episode attributed to the holy abbot not in this second book, but in the appendix to the third book. The pope evokes there the life of retreat of a man of Campania called Martin.

Martin, on his arrival on his mountain, had chained his foot to the rock with an iron chain, so that he was unable to go beyond the space limited by the length of his stretched out chain.

When he learnt that, Benedict sent him this message:

If thou truly art a servant of God, let not an iron chain, but Christ's chain hold thee, *non catena ferri, sed catena Christi.*^a

a. PL 77, 261 A-B.

And St. Gregory continues:

When he heard these words, Martin immediately removed his fetters; but afterwards, he never extended his foot now set free further than the space in which he was wont to extend it

when he was chained, and from then on, he constrained himself to remain without a chain in the same space as that in which he had previously remained when chained.^a

a. *Ibid.*

Forsaking all things to follow Christ doesn't mean choosing to remove a chain to become shackled by another one, it doesn't mean going into a jail. Forsaking all things to follow Christ means consenting to the self-denial necessary to establish in oneself a space of freedom. Within this space, the path leading to blessed eternity will be able to unfold, a path the secret of which is jealously preserved by God.

Forsaking all things to follow Christ can't be summed up in the consent of a fleeting moment, in the signature written at the bottom of a chart on a profession day. Forsaking all things to follow Christ means answering the call of every successive moment, an answer that should day after day become more radical. There are many pages in the Gospel which bear witness to the divine pedagogy used with the apostles to accompany them in the radical gift of their lives, a gift that for most of them was accomplished in martyrdom. If the Church has chosen this passage of the Gospel for the feast of St. Benedict, it is because he too, as the monks of all epochs, made a profession to forsake all things to follow Christ. Monastic life is thus assimilated to martyrdom, from which it took over, as it were, at the end of the period of persecutions.

The *Dialogues* tell us St. Benedict's first act of self-denial, when he renounced to study the liberal arts after he had realised that they were for many an occasion to fall into an abyss of vices.^b This choice was carefully thought out, and it bears witness to a great maturity, tersely expressed by St. Gregory in a few well-chosen words, describing St. Benedict as "skilfully ignorant and wisely unlearned."

b. *Dialogues*,
II, ch. I.

The vows of stability, conversion of manners, and obedience, give a concrete expression to this offering.

But this dimension of self-denial oriented towards the kingdom of heaven would be totally inadequate, if love didn't lead the monk on the path of divine commandments. The liturgy of a Doctor gives him the title of *divinae legis amator*, "full of love for the divine law." Love for the divine law, and above all

love for God, a love vowed in a radical way, such is the zeal that gave the first monks the strength to forsake their families, their wealth, so as to follow Christ in a ceaseless quest. It is this same love that gave Martin the hermit the strength to remain inside the vicinity of his grotto, free from the fetters of a chain, but captive from the bonds of his own heart.

Wouldn't this call to free oneself from chains that might prevent us to follow Christ, be also addressed to every man?

The life of St. Benedict is full of episodes in which the liberating power of St. Benedict's words is manifested. In Mount Cassino, the abbot found

an old temple where Apollo was worshipped by the foolish country people. [...] The man of God coming to that place broke down the idol, overthrew the altar, burnt the groves, and, of the temple of Apollo, made a chapel to St. Martin, and where the profane altar had stood, he built a chapel of St. John.^a

a. Dialogues,
II, ch. 8.

If breaking down idols wrought by the hands of men seems to be quite easy, it is more difficult to convert hearts. Benedict achieved that. Not far from the monastery was "a town in which no small number of people, by the exhortations of Benedict, had been converted from the worship of idols to the faith of God."^b

b. Ibid., ch. 19.

This call to break the chains of bondage is also addressed to each society, which can make itself a prisoner of its own laws, complicit in injustice as it refuses to follow the liberating precepts of a God whose name is love. The apostles summed up this liberating call: "We must obey God rather than men."^c The prophecy made by St. Benedict to the bishop of Canosa concerning the downfall of the city of Rome surrounded by Barbarians is very topical:

c. Acts 5:29.

Rome will not be destroyed by the pagans, but it will be so shaken by tempests, lightnings and earthquakes that it will decay of itself.^d

d. Dialogues,
II, ch. 15.

As Western societies are decaying, promoting a vision of man set free from God, and even free from his own nature, let us listen to the humble call of St. John Paul II:

Brothers and sisters, do not be afraid to welcome Christ and accept His power. Help the Pope and all those who wish to serve Christ, and with Christ's power to serve the human person and the whole of mankind. Do not be afraid! Open wide the doors for Christ. To His saving power open the boundaries of States, economic and political systems, the vast fields of culture, civilization and development. Do not be afraid! Christ knows "what is in man." He alone knows it.

So often today man does not know what is within him, in the depths of his mind and heart. So often he is uncertain about the meaning of his life on this earth. He is assailed by doubt, a doubt which turns into despair. We ask you therefore, — we beg you with humility and trust, — let Christ speak to man. He alone has words of life, yes, of eternal life. ^a

a. Homily for the inauguration of the pontificate, October 22nd, 1978, n. 5.

St. Benedict teaches the very same to his disciple: "Listen, O my son, to the precepts of thy master, and incline the ear of thy heart."^b The same goes for Our Lady, Queen of heaven and earth: "Whatsoever He shall say to you, do ye."^c

b. *Rule*, Prol.
c. *Jn* 2:5.

Amen.

