

+ SOLEMNITY OF SAINT BENEDICT

July 11, 2022

Homily of the Right Reverend Dom Philip Anderson, Abbot of Clear Creek Abbey
In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Ecce nos reliquimus omnia, et secuti sumus te...Behold, we have left all things and have followed Thee; what therefore shall we have? (Matthew 19:27)

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,
My very dear Sons,

It is striking how, in today's reading from the Gospel, the emphasis is all on the idea of leaving behind the world. Saint Peter seems quite happy about the fact that he and the other apostles had abandoned all their possessions--even their families--in order to follow the Lord. Christ Himself, far from disapproving of such an attitude, confirms it and blesses it saying in solemn fashion:

Amen I say to you, that you, who have followed me, in the regeneration, when the Son of man shall sit on the throne of His Glory, you also shall sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father or mother, or wife, or children, or lands for My name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold and shall possess life everlasting. (Mt. 19:27-29)

Likewise, Our Blessed Father Saint Benedict, as we read in his life by Pope Saint Gregory the Great, was constantly leaving behind persons, places and things. His entire existence seems woven of renunciation upon renunciation. "Even while still living in the world," says his biographer, "free to enjoy all it had to offer, he saw how empty it was and turned from it without regret" (Dialogues, II).

Already in Rome, shortly after beginning his studies, there is the abrupt decision to leave all behind. "When he found many of the students...abandoning themselves to vice, he decided to withdraw from the world he had been preparing to enter; for he was afraid that if he acquired any of its learning he would be drawn down with them to his eternal ruin...He turned his back on further studies, gave up home and inheritance and resolved to embrace the religious life" (ibid.).

Taking up residence in the little town of Affile, with a servant of his family to assist him, he soon left her too and set out for the wilderness, making his hermit's abode in a cave. Many other departures and renunciations would follow throughout his life, including his departure from Subiaco for Monte Cassino, after he had founded twelve monasteries in the region.

The Venerable Mother Mectilde de Bar, much admired by the Benedictine monks of Silverstream in Ireland, speaks of Saint Benedict's final renunciation, of the moment when he departed from this life, underlining the Eucharistic aspect. He died, as we know, standing in the Oratory of his monastery, after having received Holy Communion. She writes:

Our Most holy Patriarch, wishing to bear witness to his love for the Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar, could do so no better than by expiring in its holy Presence. Thus, did he render up the last gasps of his heart to that adorable Host, so that his sentiments, enclosed in the sacred ciborium, could in time generate sons of his Order who would, to the end of the world, offer adoration, homage, and continual acts of love and reparation.

In fact, this idea of the need to renounce earthly goods in order to allow the soul to adhere more freely to the things of grace and to heavenly realities is as old as Christianity. The prayers of the Church make constant mention of it. Many famous religious, such as Saint Antony of Egypt and Saint Francis of

Assisi, owed their vocations to hearing the Gospel read with its fundamental appeal: “If thou wilt be perfect, go sell what thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, follow me” (Mt. 19:21). The message is clear enough for those who desire the light.

On the other hand—in all fairness—the Church has always condemned those heretics who held that material possessions are to be rejected purely and simply; that marriage is a kind of necessary evil (but still evil); or that Christians could have no place whatsoever in public life. This might be explained by saying that if the word “world” often has a negative meaning in Holy Scripture, as in the First Epistle of Saint John—

Love not the world, nor the things which are in the world. If any man love the world, the charity of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, is the concupiscence of the flesh, and the concupiscence of the eyes, and the pride of life, which is not of the Father, but is of the world. (1 Jn. 2:15-16)

—it can also have a very positive meaning, as in the Gospel according to Saint John:

For God *so loved the world* as to give his only begotten Son: that whosoever believeth in him, may not perish, but may have life everlasting. For God sent not his Son into the world, to judge the world, but that the world may be saved by him. (Jn. 3:16-17)

In recent times the Church has certainly put the emphasis on the more positive approach to the world, to the human society around us. The teachings elaborated during the Second Vatican Council and in the years following the Council bear witness to an unmistakable shift from the theme of “flight from the world” to an attitude that has been described as “openness to the world.” Pope Francis certainly follows this way of understanding. This change of emphasis has been no small cause of confusion among many of Christ’s faithful, however. How are we to understand this seeming contradiction? How are we to understand the flight from the world of St. Anthony and of St. Benedict in view of this different approach? Finally, what is the meaning of monastic life in general, if separation from the world is no longer deemed useful for promoting the Kingdom of Heaven?

Well, in all truth, there simply are no revolutions in true Church teaching: what has always been taught as authentic tradition will continue to be so until the end of time. There are, however, shifts in where the accent is placed; there are reforms and renewals from time to time.

Let us put it this way: when St. Peter dropped his nets to follow Christ, he did not think them evil. In fact, after the Resurrection, he came back to his boat and his nets, at least for a time. When St. Antony went out into the desert of Egypt, he did not reject his fellow human beings or hate human life: he simply needed a special place to devote himself to prayer. When Saint Benedict left all to embrace the monastic life, he unwittingly—but really—did more for the world than any other man of his time, since his monasteries became the very foundation stones of the European Catholic civilization, of Christendom.

The monk too, is open to the “world” in its positive sense, that is to say that his heart embraces the people, the families and the honest institutions that thrive outside the monastery walls. It is good, in this sense, to be open to the world that God so loved as to give His only begotten Son.

Still we must be vigilant. If the Church is open to the world, it is after the manner of her Bridegroom, the Lord Jesus—on the Cross, through the gaping hole in His side and Sacred Heart. The heart of a monk is open the world, but in the manner of the Immaculate Heart of Our Lady, knowing sooner or later the sword of sorrow and the wound that only eternal life will heal. Thus prepared, yes, we are “open to the world” even after we have left it to follow Christ. Thus prepared we can look upon the beauties of the world as so many stepping-stones toward Paradise, where death and sin will be no more, where God will be all in all.

Sancte Pater Noster Benedicte, intercede pro nobis. Our Father, Saint Benedict, intercede for us. Amen. Alleluia.

