

ASH WEDNESDAY

Compunction: sorrow that brings us closer to God

ECCLESIA

14_02_2024



'Just as there is a bad zeal, full of bitterness, which separates from God and leads to hell, so there is a good one, which turns away from sin and leads to God and eternal life' (Rule of St Benedict, 72). With these words St Benedict introduces the penultimate chapter of the Rule. In our effort to understand what compunction is, we could simply replace the word 'zeal' with 'sadness': just as there is a bad sadness, full of bitterness,

that separates from God and leads to hell - and we call it melancholy - so there is a good sadness that separates from vices and leads to God and eternal life: compunction.

[...] St Gregory distinguishes two basic types of compunction: one of fear and one of love. The first is a purification from sin and a protection against it; the other is a force of spiritual desire that draws us towards Heaven. Two types and four motives: "When he remembers his own faults, considering where he was (ubi fuit); when he fears the sentence of God's judgement and questioning himself, he thinks where he will be (ubi erit); when he seriously examines the evils of the present life, with sadness he considers where he is (ubi est); when he contemplates the goods of the eternal homeland that he has not yet reached, weeping he realises where he is not (ubi non est)" (Moralia, XXIII, 41).

The first two arise from the fear of God, which is the first and fundamental gift of the Holy Spirit. But, it is above all through the gift of knowledge that the compunction of fear matures and grows in us, because it allows us to see ourselves as we are, with the sins that distance us from God, but also created in His image and likeness, redeemed by the blood of His Son and called in love to be holy like Him. Seeing our sinfulness and ingratitude towards God, we are filled with self-loathing and come to hate our sins; but seeing the price the Son of God has paid for our salvation, we are given hope to change our lives and become holy as He is holy.

Thus by the gift of fear of the Lord inspires us to "always be mindful of all that God has commanded" and leads our thoughts to "meditate constantly on the fire of hell that will burn for their sins those who despise God"; and thus protects us every moment "from sins and vices". This holy fear gives us the certainty that "God is always watching us from heaven and that our actions are everywhere visible to the divine eyes and are constantly being pointed out to God by the Angels"; it makes us feel "at all times the guilt of our sins in such a way that we consider ourselves already facing the dreadful Judgement and we constantly say in our hearts what the publican of the Gospel said with his eyes fixed on the earth: Lord, I am a sinner and not worthy to raise my eyes to heaven" (Rule of St Benedict, 7)

Souls pervaded by this dual compunction of fear feel deep contrition for their sins and fear that they will end up with the damned on the left hand of Christ. They make their own the requests of the Miserere, the unsurpassed prayer of repentance and contrition; and they ask for mercy as if they were already facing the Last Judgement, in sentiments that are perfectly expressed in the Dies Irae, that poetic masterpiece of the Requiem Mass. In these prayers, we see on the one hand a servile fear of punishment,

on the other a filial fear that shudders at the thought of offending God. The former diminishes as the latter increases, since filial fear is an expression of charity, of "that perfect love of God which drives out servile fear" (RB 7; 1 Jn 4:18).

As filial fear grows, we enter the third compunction: our love for God and our desire to be with Him gives rise to a readiness to suffer in this life to merit eternal bliss in the next. A great source of consolation for those in this state is the beautiful prayer of the Salve Regina, in which we turn to Our Lady to console us amidst the inevitable afflictions of this life. Our eyes, from her motherly face, return again to this world. And they see it for what it is: a place of exile and temptation, of toil and suffering, just penance for original sin and for our many personal sins. But, God in his mercy allows us to see these sufferings as blessed, because with them "we share in Christ's sufferings and deserve to have a share in his kingdom too" (RB, Prologue). And so we understand the 'law' of the saints: 'the more in this world the soul of the righteous is afflicted by adversity, the more acute becomes its thirst to contemplate the face of its Creator' (Moralia, XVI, 32).

Having become so dear to God through our labours, we can settle into the fourth compunction, in which there is no longer pain, but only penetrating joy, because we feel God close and available every time we pray. St Benedict tells us that this can also happen to us, because 'when you have done these things, the eyes of our heavenly Father will be upon you and His ears will be open to your prayers; and before you call upon Him, He will say to you: here I am' (RB, Prologue).

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