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May 15 - Memorial of St. Pachomius

Homily delivered on May 15, 2009, at

Mokoto Monastery of Keshero, Democratic Republic of Congo

Acts 15:22-31; John 15:12-17

Homily

Today we celebrate the memorial of Saint Pachomius, a saint who is particularly dear to me, and who is known as the father of Christian coenobitism, that is, of monastic life lived in community. If we had wanted to choose specific readings for this feast of Saint Pachomius, it would have been difficult to find any more fitting than those offered to us today by the weekday lectionary for Friday of the 5th Week of Easter.

The Gospel is indeed taken from chapter 15 of Saint John and recounts Jesus' words to his disciples during his last supper with them: "I give you a new commandment: love one another. God is love. The essence of our Christian and monastic life is therefore also love. And the essence of our communal life is fraternal love.

However, this is not a vague sentiment of affection. "Love one another as I have loved you," says Jesus. And he immediately explains the meaning of "as I have loved you" by saying, "There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for those one loves." And it is after explaining this requirement of love that he repeats: "The commandment I give you is to love one another." It is therefore a brotherly love that is expressed through each person's renunciation of their personal interests, in order to work for the good of each of their brothers.

Jesus emphasizes this by saying: "I do not call you my servants, but my friends." In this, he shows us the true meaning of friendship within a monastic community. We are not friends who chose the same vocation because we shared the same tastes. We are people who are different from one another, whom God has called to form a community so that we may embody within that community the mystery of his own love. It is his love for us that is the bond of our friendship.

Today's first reading from the Eucharist is also revealing. It recounts the conclusion of the Council of Jerusalem, which was convened to find a solution to a conflict that had arisen within the early Church, including among its leaders. The solution reached

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involves great respect for differing sensibilities, especially between Christians converted from paganism and those converted from Judaism, along with a willingness not to impose on either group anything that is not truly necessary. Harmony in community life within a community like ours requires such respect and flexibility. This is the only way to healthily navigate the tensions that inevitably arise within any normal community, just as they did in the early communities of Jerusalem and Antioch.

This is what St. Benedict, a spiritual disciple of St. Pachomius—paraphrasing St. Paul, incidentally—expresses so well at the end of his beautiful Chapter 72 of the Rule on proper zeal:

They will bear with great patience the weaknesses of others, both physical and character-related. They will obey one another wholeheartedly. No one will seek his own interests, but rather those of others. They will have a selfless love for one another, like brothers of the same family. They will respect God with love. They will have a humble and sincere love for their abbot. They will prefer absolutely nothing to Christ. May he lead us all together to life with him forever!