

## 7. Merciful fathers and mothers

We have seen that, for St. Benedict, only he who knows how to take care of his own wounds is qualified to care for the wounds of others. This humble sense of authority reflects the Gospel. When Jesus asks of us: “Be merciful as your Father is merciful” (Lk 6:36), he makes us understand that only sinners who let themselves be pardoned by the Father can be merciful with others. And we must not forget the beatitude of mercy: “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall find mercy” (Mt 5:7). The merciful are blessed because they will find the mercy they themselves need first. Only the one who humbly experiences the need for the mercy of God and of the brothers and sisters can be merciful with all. For this reason, I think, Jesus allowed St. Peter to deny him and thus experience his own misery and pettiness, to become aware of it to the point of suffering for it, to the point of weeping bitterly. Only thus could Peter be aware of the Lord’s infinite mercy toward him, because Peter had to become the greatest authority in the Church, and without mercy no one is authoritative, no one is mature, because the Church is in the world for the salvation of sinners, for handing on the salvation and healing which the dead and risen Christ represents for all the wounds of humanity.

When Jesus asks Peter three times, “Do you love me?”, it is as if he were offering him the possibility of returning to Him after each denial. The call to love Christ is the path that God’s mercy offers to each sinner for returning to the Father. And it is by learning this road back to the merciful Father that one is enabled to be a shepherd of the sheep: “Feed my sheep!”, Jesus says to Peter three times too (cf. Jn 21:15-19).

Ultimately, Peter is the first lost sheep that Christ the Good Shepherd went to look for and carry back to the fold. It is not the hundredth sheep that got lost first (cf. Lk 15:3-7), but the first, the first shepherd, the first of the apostles. And with his countenance and a dialogue of love, Jesus brought him back to the fold to feed the whole flock. Then the sheep of the flock began to get lost as well, now one, now another. But Peter learned from Jesus to look for the sheep as he himself first had been looked for, found, and brought back to the fold.

So when St. Benedict asks the culpable brothers to go to accuse themselves before the abbot and the community, it is not like he sent them up to a wall, or to an anonymous crowd that just needs to listen and that is all. He sends them to a father and to brothers, to a mother and to sisters, that is, he makes them “return home,” to a family, and the abbot and the community have a role to play in the culpable brother’s humble self-accusation, a role of mercy, at least in prayer for him, at least in the affection with which they receive him, with which they pardon, with which they continue their community path together with him. It is always a little like what happens in the parable of the prodigal son: the little brother’s return and his request for pardon involve the older brother too: he too must go deeper into the mystery of the father’s mercy, must be converted to become merciful like his father.

The members of the community must remember that each of them also entered the monastery like a lost son who had been rediscovered, that each of them came from a far country to reenter the house and experience the father’s embrace. Whoever does not have this self-awareness in relation to the brother who has made a mistake, it means that he has

not yet truly returned home, that the monastery and community are not yet the Father's house, in which he has felt that he has been reborn to new life.

This is the big problem of the Pharisees, at the time of Jesus and at all times, who feel they are the first in the house of God, who put themselves in the front row in the Temple, but who in reality have never entered as lost sons whom God's mercy has recovered and brought back to life. Whoever does not experience the Father's mercy does not experience coming back to life, so it is as if he were not aware of being alive, alive with the new and eternal life which Christ grants us to live in Him, as adoptive sons of the Father.

To be adopted sons means consciously to experience being born to life. When we are born from our mother we are not aware of being born and living. But when God adopts us as his sons and daughters in Christ, it is like a conscious birth. We become aware of being alive, of being able to live a new life with fullness. When we enter into the monastery, it is to have this experience. Life in community should be a conscious experience of the life for which we are born and for which we are reborn with baptism. But it is an experience that is had only by encountering God's mercy, and for this reason a Christian and monastic community is alive and fruitful only if it experiences and transmits mercy.

For this reason, it is important that he who has responsibility in the community be above all an expert in mercy. The abbot must be a man of mercy, because it is only thus that he builds a fraternal community.

As I was saying, St. Benedict doesn't ask him to be perfect, but to be aware of his miseries and his own need for mercy, of his wounds and of his own need to be cared for. The second chapter of the Rule, which speaks at length of what the abbot of the monastery should be like, ends with this very suggestive phrase: "While helping others to amend by his warnings, he achieves the amendment of his own faults" (RB 2:40).

This means, of course, that the abbot also has faults himself, has defects to correct. He too lives ever in a process of conversion, of correction. He too has constant need of forgiveness, of mercy. But it is precisely by serving God's mercy in relation to the community that he deepens it for himself, receives it ever more and more for himself too.

The coherence of life that St. Benedict asks of the abbot is at the service of a merciful correction of the brothers. He must teach with words, but above all with his example. And the example that he can always give is exactly that of recognizing first his own fragility and showing that he, first, needs mercy. In chapter 2 St. Benedict reminds him, then, of the famous teaching of Jesus on fraternal correction: "You who see the speck of dust in your brother's eye, have you not seen the beam in your own?" (RB 2:15; cf. Mt 7:3).

The abbot, then, must begin his pastoral ministry of guidance and correction to accompany the brothers in conversion with the humble readiness to accuse himself. Because in this way he does not limit himself to showing the brothers the path of life, does not limit himself to describing it as if he were explaining an itinerary on a geographical map, but he follows it first himself, and by following it he guides the whole flock to go further on it. The path of the good shepherd begins from the awareness of his own need for mercy.