

16. What is man that you care for him?

St. Benedict certainly has in mind the Good Shepherd, who carries the lost sheep on his sacred shoulders, when he speaks of patience and endurance. Four times in the Rule he has an expression in which patience is identified with “the bearing of”. The demanding sick are to be borne with patience: "*patienter portandi sunt*" (RB 36:5). In chapter 4, on the instruments of good works, he asks us "not to insult, but to patiently bear injuries received — *patienter sufferre*" (RB 4:30). In chapter 72, there is the phrase that we have already seen: “May they bear with great patience (*patientissime tolerant*) their physical and moral infirmities" (72:5). Finally, the same patience that bears — "*patienter portare*" — is asked of the postulant who is made deliberately to wait and treated rudely for a few days at the door of the monastery, in order to put his vocation to the test (RB 58:3).

This latter patience is curious, because it almost seems that in order to get into the flock of the community, St. Benedict asks the postulant to be the Good Shepherd for himself (or of the community that feigns unpleasantness in order to put him to the test).

In all of these cases, however, the Latin verbs associated with the adverb "patiently — *patienter*", or "most patiently — *patientissime*", the verbs *portare*, *sufferre*, *tolerare*, always have the etymological sense of carrying on themselves a weight, to bear something — or someone — heavy. Exactly like the sheep that the Good Shepherd carries on his sacred shoulders.

The patience that one bears is the condition of caring for others. As I was saying a few chapters ago, the notion of "care" is fundamental to understanding the mercy requested of the abbot and the community by St. Benedict. Taking care of others is basically the attitude that sums up the exercise of mercy, both with respect to the body and to the soul. Taking care is essentially — and initially — a maternal attitude, and then afterwards paternal. It embodies the love for the life of the other, for his growth, for his happiness.

The Bible presents us from the very first pages with a God who takes care of the human creature, even after original sin. The picture described in Genesis of a God who becomes a "tailor" to clothe Adam and Eve after the Fall is extraordinary: "The Lord God made for Adam and his wife garments of skins and clothed them" (Gen 3:21). He had just finished scolding and cursing them, but it was the venting of a betrayed lover. Immediately the paternal and maternal tenderness of His heart resurfaces, and with it the compassion for His creatures incapable of managing their own freedom, like children. This gesture of care that covers the nakedness of Adam and Eve expresses very well the fact that God sees man as a unity: what he does for our body he does also for the soul. In this case, He cares about the feeling of shame, of modesty. Shame in fact is not only a physical discomfort, but is also psycho-physical, exactly because in man, soul and body form a single person. And in shame, the fact that man is a relational being, who depends on the other's gaze and on gazing on the other, also comes into play. God does not clothe man and woman because they are cold, but because they are ashamed, because their ego needs the body to be clothed in order to feel better in the soul. Adam and Eve had tried to solve the discomfort, this sense of misery, entwining themselves belts of fig leaves (cf. Gen 3:7). But that wasn't enough, it's a ridiculous and inadequate solution! They needed God to take care of the entirety of their being, and of all the drama of their condition.

Psalm 8 is splendid, like so many others, in the amazement of man in front of the care that God has for him, for him personally, even though he is so small and insignificant compared to the immensity of the heavens:

"When I see your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have fixed in place;
what is man that you remember him,
the son of man that you care for him?" (Ps 8:4-5)

Jesus will remind everyone that the Father cares for us even to the smallest detail. "Can one not buy five sparrows for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten before God. Even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Be not afraid: you are worth more than many sparrows" (Lk 12:6-7). But He will also denounce the fact that we forget this, that we don't realise it, we forget to have faith in the Father, to trust in His providence that embraces all of our being. All nature is a sign of God's care for man, yet we do not know how to read reality, we do not know how to see beyond appearances to the intention of the Creator in the creating of even a single flower, a single drop of rain, a ray of sunshine...

St. Benedict wants then that the life of the community reminds us of God's care, that from this, we become witnesses for one another. What does it mean to love one another as brothers and sisters if we don't give witness ourselves to the watchful love with which the Father cares for us?

At heart, the Rule expresses the care which St. Benedict had personally and directly for each one of us. Sometimes it is as if he were worried that the abbots and abbesses might not have enough care for all their sons and daughters in the future. He's worried that they might forget to tell them to remove the knife from their belt during the night so as not to injure themselves in their sleep (cf. RB 22:5), that they might not allow the sick to eat meat or to take a bath (cf. 36:8-9); even that they might not leave, between Vigils and Lauds, enough time — excuse me — for "natural necessities!" (cf. RB 8:4).

We seem to see Jesus, when He looks at the crowd following Him and listening to Him in the desert, betray a maternal anxiety for the welfare of all those people, including, as we know from Matthew 15:38, women and children. But it is Mark who shows Jesus expressing with more detail His attention to the needs of the crowd, Mark who, perhaps autobiographically, notes the love with which Jesus looked at the rich young man (cf. Mk 10:21): "I feel compassion for the crowd; since three days now they are with me and they have nothing to eat. If I send them away fasting to their homes, they will faint along the journey; and some of them have come from afar." (Mk 8:2-3)

What attention! What care! He saw everything, knows everything. He knows that they have nothing to eat, knows where they come from, that "some" come from afar. Mercy, care, starts from this glance of compassion, caring, diligent down to the last detail, like the gaze of God who numbers the hairs on our heads. And St. Benedict, as we shall see, wants to educate us in this gaze.