

8. To obtain mercy

Also in chapter 64 of the Rule, dedicated, like 2, to the figure of the abbot, St. Benedict emphasizes his conviction that whoever needs or wants to accompany others on the path of conversion must begin with himself. He who knows he needs mercy helps others ask for it and receive it.

This is a constant in the Christian and Benedictine method of educating, of forming for life. For example: who is the best formator? Who truly forms others? In the end it is not so much the one who is well formed, who is well educated, but the one who is always being formed, who is always being educated. For the formation that counts for life is not so much that which fills us up with content, but that which teaches us always to be forming ourselves, to remain disciples always, always novices in learning every day, in seek the truth every day, in deepening reflection every day on the word of God, on the ecclesial and monastic tradition, in tapping ever anew into the sources of life, of truth, of beauty. Our true formators and educators are those whom we have seen and see always in formation, always disciples, even when they are old, even when they have already done so much study, even when they have lived such experiences. Our master or father or mother is the one whom we see is always a disciple, whom we see is always a son or daughter. What is their secret? Essentially desire and humility; the desire for life and truth that is satisfied in the humility of asking, of begging, of listening, of following, of not ever feeling that one has arrived.

Who, for example, has been and is for us a master of prayer? Certainly not the one who teaches us lessons, but the one whom we have seen or perceived in prayer; whom we have seen or perceived in an attitude of constant intercession with God, of praise, of adoration. And whoever has also given us lessons or teachings on prayer has helped us pray according to the measure in which his teaching was a witness, betraying a prayer that has been lived. When Jesus taught the Our Father, the disciples felt in those words the whole heart of Jesus, the whole desire for the Father, the love for the Father, the abandonment to the Father that He lived day and night.

So that is how St. Benedict asks whoever has authority in the community to promote mercy, to exercise it. He bears witness to mercy who is the first one to feel the need of it.

In chapter 64 of the Rule, St. Benedict insists on this aspect even more than in chapter 2. Perhaps in the meantime he came to know superiors of communities who were too harsh and authoritarian, too preoccupied with giving rules and commands, and feels the need to recall us to an authoritativeness that is deeper than that which seeks only community discipline. St. Benedict knows that it is not easy to exercise a responsibility in love rather than in fear, because he who loves must have great patience, must “submit to” many immaturities from the brothers and sisters, many adolescent reactions.

St. Benedict, then, calls the abbot to cultivate towards the brothers the mercy that he himself needs. He asks him to be “chaste, sober, merciful” (RB 64:9), reminding him right away that this is how one obtains mercy for oneself: “Let him always make mercy prevail over judgment, so that he too can obtain it” (64:10; cf. Jas 2:13). Ultimately he does nothing more than remind him of the beatitude of the merciful: “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall find mercy” (Mt 5:7).

“Let him always make mercy prevail over judgment – *semper superexaltet misericordia iudicio.*” This expression is taken from the letter of St. James (2:13), but if in St. James the subject is mercy that prevails over judgment, in St. Benedict the abbot is the subject who must make mercy prevail over judgment. Mercy is an instrument that God puts into the hands of our liberty, and we are the ones who must make it prevail, make it more important than justice alone. Then God too can make mercy prevail for us.

How do we “super-exalt” mercy? How do we lift it above other judgments, other attitudes, other ways of looking upon and treating our brothers?

The counsels that St. Benedict gives right afterwards to the abbot are essentially counsels of tenderness, of more maternal than paternal attention to the frailty of the brothers: “When he must punish them, he should use prudence and avoid extremes; otherwise, by rubbing too hard to remove the rust, he may break the vessel” (RB 64:12). And St. Benedict adds right away another reference to the abbot’s own need of this tenderness, because he too is fragile: “He is to distrust his own frailty and remember not to crush the bruised reed” (64:13; cf. Is 42:3; Mt 12:20).

A little later, St. Benedict takes from Sacred Scripture another beautiful image of attention to human frailty: in his decisions and prescriptions the abbot must use discretion and measure, “bearing in mind the discretion of holy Jacob, who said: If I drive my flocks too hard, they will all die in a single day” (64:18; Gen 33:13).

Certainly, in everything the abbot must be preoccupied with the path that the flock must take, that the flock progress, that it convert and be corrected, but St. Benedict does not want the superior’s project of progress, or that of any part of the community, to forget the sheep that must make this journey. Attention to persons must always prevail over any project that one can have for them. A mom who wants her son to become a Formula One champion must, at any rate, first teach him to walk...

St. Benedict, like God in Sacred Scripture, teaches us a good method for being sensitive to the frailty of the brothers and sisters and the adequate way of handling it: being sensitive to one’s own frailty and not forgetting it, and thus not hiding it, especially not from ourselves. “He is to distrust his own frailty and remember not to crush the bruised reed.” In Latin the Rule asks that the abbot be “*suspectus*” toward his own frailty, literally that he “look under (*sub-spicere*).” It is as if he said that the abbot, looking at reality and especially the brothers and sisters, must always see, under all that appears, his own frailty. It is as if all that the abbot sees were a film and he always had to watch it with the “subtitles” of his own frailty, of his misery, and therefore of his need for mercy.