

## 9. Do not crush the bruised reed

Yesterday I was saying that the abbot must look upon the reality of his community, especially the frailer members, with the “subtitles” of the awareness of his own frailty. But, careful!, he must not look upon the reality of the brothers only with these subtitles. Because if we think only about our own frailty, we risk also not understanding anything about the others since we think only about ourselves, or because we think that all frailties and wounds are equal to our own. In reality, human frailties are very diverse, and there is always a mystery at the bottom of each person’s wound or frailty, a mystery that only God can understand, and that only mercy truly respects. Which of us is truly aware of the nature of our own frailty? Often we inherit it from a long family history, or from our tenderest infancy. More than wanting to understand it, then, it is important to learn most of all to respect the mystery that it represents in us and in others. How to do this?

As we have seen, St. Benedict asks the abbot to keep sight always of his own frailty, but he does not ask him only this. He asks him at the same time to remember “not to crush the bruised reed,” that is, he asks him to remember the Gospel, in this case a text of Isaiah (42:3) that the Gospel of Matthew uses to describe Jesus as the meek and humble servant of the Lord (Mt 12:15-21).

Deep down, the best way to handle the frailty of the brothers is always that of thinking of how Jesus handled ours, of how Jesus handled and handles the frailty of all persons. The Gospel, like all of Sacred Scripture, is very rich with examples and words that help us face human frailties as God faced them.

In chapter 64, St. Benedict’s main preoccupation seems to be that of not “crushing” or “breaking” the frail brothers and sisters. He says not to scrape the rust too much, so that the vessel does not break: “*ne frangatur vas*” (RB 64:12). Then he remembers that one must not crush the bruised reed (64:13). Between these two examples of “rupture” of that which is weak, there is the reminder not to lose sight of one’s own frailty.

Now, the etymology of the term “frailty (fragility) – *fragilitas*” refers back to the Latin verb “*frangere*”: to break, to snap. Frailty is that which can be snapped in us, it is the weak point in which we always risk being broken, cracking. Our human life itself is fragile because the moment in which death will come to snap it is always pressing upon it. No one can flee from this essential fragility of human life. Psalm 89 describes this frailty: life is like grass that “springs up in the morning, blossoms, and in the evening is cut and dries out” (Ps 89:6). Isaiah has the very expressive image that life is like the thread that the weaver cuts when she has finished weaving the cloth: “Like a weaver you have rolled up my life, you cut me off from the loom. In a day and a night you bring me to the end” (Is 38:12b).

But let’s think especially of each time that Jesus refused to “break” the fragile people whom he met. The Pharisees always had, so to say, the scissors or knife in hand, to cut off from the people and from life those who were impure, sinners, non-observers.

Jesus always did the opposite: the more he saw frailty, the more he sustained, the more he protected. He did not break the Samaritan woman, Zacchaeus, and above all the adulterous woman (cf. Jn 8:1-11).

St. Peter, after his denial, was mentally and spiritually like a bent reed, a single word from Jesus, a single severe glance, would have been enough to break him completely. Instead, when Jesus sees him again on the shore of the sea, it is as if Jesus straightened him out three times, put him back on his feet, gave him support and strength not to be broken. How? By asking for his love: “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” (cf. Jn 21:15-19). And let us notice, that to ask for love, to beg for love, also betrays a certain frailty, the “frailty” of Christ, the frailty of God, who wanted to need the love of human beings, of us sinners. It is as if here Jesus felt he would “break” if he does not receive Peter’s love. And the broken reed that Peter receives strength and straightens out thanks to Jesus who looks upon him with awareness of his “divine frailty,” which is the need to be loved. Christ looks upon all human frailties with the awareness, with the “subtitle,” of his desire for our love, with his desire to be loved by sinners.

And for Peter, being put back on his feet instead of completely breaking means receiving the mission to feed the lambs and sheep of Jesus (cf. Jn 21:15, 16, 17). And here we return to the figure of the abbot according to St. Benedict, the merciful abbot who is always aware of his own frailty. But we also understand that the deepest “frailty” of the abbot, as of everyone else, is the need to be loved, like Jesus. And it is a frailty that St. Benedict asks him to cultivate, naturally without making it an affective manipulation of the members of his community.

Still in chapter 64 the Rule asks that the abbot “seek to be more loved than feared” (64:15). And at the end of the Rule, in the very beautiful chapter 72, it is asked of all the monks “that they love their abbot with sincere and humble love” (72:10).

Behind all these prescriptions concerning the figure of the abbot, of the superior of the community, we must always see St. Benedict’s preoccupation that the paternal or maternal figure in the community represent, for the brothers or sisters, the merciful paternity of God, just as Jesus incarnated it and revealed it to us. A paternity that, I repeat, is not afraid to be “frail” in asking more love than fear, as we see in the father of the parable of Luke 15, who is a father who does not fear to show both to his lost son and to the older son that he needs his sons, that he can never resign himself to the absence or discontent of his sons.

And if St. Benedict insists on the mercy that the father of the monastery must have, it is not in order to put the abbot at the center of everything, because at the center there is always and only Jesus Christ, but he does so rather because he is aware that we are all called to be merciful as God the Father (Lk 6:36), and the figure of the abbot and of the other authorities in the community, even the bursar who must be “*sicut pater* – like a father” (RB 31:2), must be a help and example for striving toward this essential perfection of Christian life which is God’s mercy lived out among human beings.