

10. Infirmary

I have emphasized the term “frailty – *fragilitas*,” because it helps us understand the mercy requested of the abbot and the whole community. But this term is used only once in the Rule, and it is worthwhile to study the other terms with which St. Benedict defines our human frailty, which needs mercy and therefore helps us be merciful with others.

The term that St. Benedict uses most often for speaking of frailty is the term *infirmitas*, infirmity or weakness, and the adjective *infirmus*. As a noun the term designates the sick, the infirm.

The etymology is clear: it means a lack of *firmitas*, of firmness, that is a lack of stability, of strength to stand on one’s feet, to walk, a constitutional weakness, an inability to “stand.” Rather than the idea of a tendency to break, as in the term “frailty,” this is a tendency to fall.

Chapter 36 of the Rule obviously uses the term many times to designate the sick. The sick, or in general those who are weaker in strength and health, are mentioned in other chapters too, so that account be taken of their weakness in the distribution of goods, food, or work (RB 31:9; 34:2; 39:1; 40:3; 48:24-25; 55:21). But especially in chapter 4, on the instruments of good works, St. Benedict mentions visiting the sick – “*Infirmum visitare*” (4:16) – in the list of some works of mercy.

Let us notice, in the chapter on the care for the sick, that St. Benedict asks for a particular recognition of Christ himself in them: “Before all things and above all things, care must be taken of the sick, so that they will be served as if they were Christ in person – *ut sicut revera Christo, ita eis serviatur*” (RB 36:1). Again, then, we find the theme of Christ’s frailty, of the frailty God has taken in his incarnate and crucified Son, which confers a sacred dimension to all human frailties and poverty. In the sick man, as in all our frailties, Christ asks us to recognize him and love him, as when he asked Peter for love: “Do you love me?” (Jn 21). We will have to come back to this theme, but mercy toward others is, then, a way of recognizing God, and therefore a form of adoration, that which Jesus Christ came to ask of us and continues to ask of us in every brother and sister who needs our care, our attention to their misery, our support for their infirmity. In these people we are asked to recognize and love the frailty that Christ made his own on the Cross.

In chapter 34, which deals with the distributes to each of what is necessary, St. Benedict begs that the decision be made not in accord with sympathies, but according to each one’s need. The criterion for giving more is the “consideration of infirmity – *infirmorum consideratio*” (34:2). And he adds a thought that is important for the life of each community: “Whoever needs less should thank God and not be distressed, but

whoever needs more should feel humble because of his weakness, not self-important because of the kindness shown him. In this way all the members will be at peace” (34:3-5).

To take account of frailties, then, is an act of mercy. This awareness should bring peace to all because whoever receives more knows that it is not because of his merit, but because he has more need of it. Mercy, then, must make us humble. Whoever receives less should not be jealous, but should rejoice, giving thanks to God for having already given him more than the others. In a few lines St. Benedict here takes up again the situation of the two sons of the merciful father of Luke 15. That which should create peace among the brothers is the awareness that the Father’s mercy always considers each one’s true needs, and whoever receives less, it is only because the Father has already given him everything: “All that is mine is yours” (Lk 15:31).

St. Benedict returns to the same idea in chapter 55, when he speaks of the distribution of clothing. He must give according to each one’s needs, and “must regard the weaknesses of the needy (*consideret infirmitates indigentium*), and not take into account the ill-will of the envious” (RB 55:21).

Ultimately, mercy shown toward our brothers and sisters must remind us that that, too, which we already have, the strength and the physical or moral health that we already have more than others, is a gift that God’s mercy has already given us, and for which we have forgotten to give thanks. What we do not need to receive from our superiors or from the community God has already given us, and we must be grateful for this.

But in the Rule, the term *infirmitas*, *infirmus*, is not limited to the frailty of illness or the physical constitution of the monks. The term is also used, and perhaps above all, for moral frailty. But before studying these passages of the Rule, it is good to conclude the theme of physical frailty with mention of a pair of other terms that St. Benedict utilizes for describing it.

I would like to emphasize that I do not go through this study with you to instruct you about Latin vocabulary, but to be more aware of the extreme sensitivity that St. Benedict has regarding human frailty, and thus to learn from him and from the Rule to live out this sensitivity, to have this way of looking upon man, which, as we shall see, is a gaze of mercy, that is, the gaze of God.

An interesting term for designating frailty is the term *debilis*, from which the Italian words “*debile*” and “*debole*” (for “weak”) come, and English words like “debilitated” and “debilitating.” The etymology is not simple like one might think and there are various interpretations, but we think the simplest is the one that refers to a lack of *habilitas*, that is, not possessing, or having lost, the ability to do something.

In chapter 27, the Rule uses the term, quoting the prophet Ezekiel: “What you saw to be fat you claimed for yourselves, and what was weak (*debile*) you cast aside” (RB 27:7; Ez 34:3-4). But here it speaks of moral weakness, that of the lost sheep whom the abbot must love and seek.

In chapters 36 and 39, however, this adjective is used to describe the weakness of the more seriously ill, who need still greater attention. Eating meat should be permitted “to the ill who are very debilitated – *infirmis omnino debilibus*” (36:9). In chapter 39 the same idea returns: the flesh of four-footed beasts, which is absolutely prohibited to all (*omnimodo ab omnibus*), is permitted to the ill who are very debilitated (*omnino debiles aegrotos*) (39:11).

The humanity of St. Benedict always surfaces, and it is a merciful humanity. He is an ascetic with very clear and demanding principles, but before weakness, need, frailty, he immediately and totally lets the principles fall in order to give care and support to the weak brother, so that he can rediscover strength and vitality. “*Pro reparatione* – so that they recuperate,” he says in order to justify the concession of meat to the ill (36:9).

The Rule wants to form us to be “good Samaritans” who stop to look upon and care for the frail brothers; not to be like the priest and Levite who, because of their religious principles, did not stop and did not have mercy on the wounded man in the middle of the street.