

11. Without support

Very close to the term *infirmitas*, as a lack of firmness, there is a term that the Rule uses four times: the term *imbecillitas*. Today, in some languages, to call someone “imbecile” is an insult. In the times of St. Benedict, however, it designated a great fragility of strength, especially physical. The etymology of “*imbecillis* – imbecile” is interesting: it is composed of *in* and *becillum*, which derives from *bacillum*, which is a diminutive of *baculum*, which means “staff.” It is a term that originally designated a person who does not have a staff to support himself, to stay on his feet even though he does not have the strength.

It is not a coincidence, then, if in the Rule *imbecillitas* comes up regarding the old monks and the children, in chapter 37, to which we will return because it is very important for understanding the meaning of mercy in St. Benedict. In this chapter it is said, then: “Let account always be taken of their weakness (*consideretur semper in eis imbecillitas*), and let them not in the least way be put under the rigors of the Rule with regard to food” (RB 37:2).

Old men and children are not ill, but they represent the ages that have particular need for external support, in this case of more substantial nourishment than what is permitted by the Rule to whoever is in the strength of age.

In chapter 35, the idea is expanded to all who for one reason or another are weaker. Here the topic is the service in the kitchen, which was entrusted by turn to all the monks for a week. Very heavy labor. On account of that St. Benedict, after having said that everyone must do it, hastens to think of the weaker ones, even before describing at length and in every detail how one must carry out this service. In St. Benedict there is always an overriding attention to the weaker ones, today we would say a “preferential option” for those who are more frail. Here too, it is as if he was hastening to offer a staff to the “*imbecilles*” who do not have one, in order to hold up their frailty: “To those who are weak (*imbecillibus*) let help (*solacia*) be given, so that they may serve without sadness” (35:3).

It is interesting to note that here St. Benedict is sensitive to the fact that the human being is not made of airtight compartments, but is a unity in which the body and soul influence each other in turn. In this case, the soul’s sadness can be caused by physical frailty, and for this reason assistance of the physical forces, through the brothers’ help or a little more food, also contributes to spiritual happiness. And he wants these brothers to be supported so they can fulfill their service as much as possible like the others, that is, so that they can live the community live fully, that they can feel that they are useful too.

In chapter 40, which deals with the measure of drink, that is, of wine, St. Benedict goes through reasoning that seems the opposite of what he says in the chapter on service in the kitchen. The issue is not helping the weaker ones be like the stronger, but the measure of wine established for all is the level necessary for the weaker. The beginning of the chapter shows us an insecure and scrupulous St. Benedict, who does not manage to make up his mind about giving his communities a reasonable regulation about the measure of eating and drinking that would not go against monastic observance:

“Everyone has his own gift from God, one this and another that. It is, therefore, with some uneasiness that we specify the amount of food and drink for others. However, with due regard for the infirmities of the sick (*infirmorum contuentes imbecillitatem*), we believe that a *hemina* of wine a day is sufficient for each” (RB 40:1-3).

We seem to see St. Benedict disturbed, with his pen in hand, thinking over and over about what to write about the quantity of wine. He is afraid of being too lax, of permitting too much, of putting in the Rule a weak point that will provoke decadence and shame in his monasteries. He thinks of the fathers of the monastic life who write that “wine is absolutely not something for monks” (40:6). He is really taken by scruples, as he writes. But in him the scruple is not only because of his fear of being insufficiently rigorous, severe. It is rather the opposite: he fears being too severe, prescribing a law that does not account for the infinite differences of spiritual gifts and physical constitutions in the monks of his time and of the future. But all of a sudden, it is as if his scruple and his anxiety are resolved the moment he listens to his mercifully paternal heart. He thinks of the weakness of the infirm, of the *imbecillitas infirmorum*, and it is as if he shouts: “*Eureka!* I found it!” The right measure is that which suits whoever has less strength, is weaker, needs a little wine to have the energy necessary to live, to work, to warm up when it gets cold, to refresh himself when it gets hot. All in all, the weakness of the one who is ill is a good measure, is a good measure for all, is not too much or too little.

But aside from the example, which is very specific, what I need to underline is that, in this chapter, St. Benedict confided in us the distress of his discernment for making a decision that respects all the factors of life and vocation of a monastic community. He could have written, as in a civil or penal code, that one receives a fine when the driver has on the alcohol level test more than the permitted level in his blood. In his case he could have written that one drinks a *hemina* of wine each day and that’s enough. But this is not what interests St. Benedict. Measures and laws are not interesting to him. To him only persons are interesting, their good, their happiness, and hence their vocation. For this reason, he takes advantage of this chapter to share with us his uncertainty, his scruple, but also his tranquility and peace when he finds what works especially for the weaker among those who are infirm. St. Benedict is at peace when he respects and helps others respect and live out mercy, and especially when he does not lose sight of the need for attention and love that the weaker ones have, and helps others do the same.

Today we no longer know how much a *hemina* contains, and it’s better that way, because the importance and current value of this chapter 40 of the Rule is not how much wine one can drink. Even the quantity of alcohol in wine has changed in 1500 years, and many other factors. But that discernment in every matter should account for the weakest, this always remains important, like the Gospel of Christ.