

## 20) Superfluous demands

St. Benedict helps us understand that there can be an abuse in the way we live our sickness, in the way we use it in relation with the brothers.

He defines this abuse with the term *superfluitas*, “superfluity”: “Let the sick... not bother (*contristent*) with their superfluity the brothers who assist them” (RB 36:4). The issue is superfluous demands, useless needs, artificial and non-existent necessities which nevertheless obligate the others to respond, make them spend their time and their strength in responding. Thus, responsibility before the need of the other which, as I was saying in these last Chapters, is in itself the activation of our freedom, and also its fulfillment, this responsibility is as it were tricked, it finds itself at work in a false, unreal field. That which is most nobile and dignified in man, the freedom which becomes responsibility, and therefore love, is fooled: one makes a game of the other’s responsibility, of his freedom and love.

It is in this sense that St. Benedict says that superfluous need can grieve the brothers who care for the sick. Brothers who feel used for false demands become sad. They move from compassion to sadness. They wanted to *com-patiri*, “to suffer with,” and they end up “*con-tristari*,” “saddened with.”

It is always good to think of this, and not only in the field of health. It is not necessary to get all the way to illness for us to give in to the temptation to make the community, or certain brothers in particular, bear our false needs, our superfluous demands.

Thus we are dealing with becoming clear about needs and difficulties, or duties, with which we cannot always burden the others, which we must accept to assume, to carry, ourselves, with the grace of God.

It is not always easy to recognize this. We all, in various spheres of life, would like others to carry our cross in our place. At times we realize, also thanks to the others, that if we end up in the middle of the communal road, stripped and half dead, it was not because we were victims of robbers, but of ourselves. Without realizing it, we needed to be dependent on the others’ dependence regarding us...

But in this case, too, St. Benedict does not send us to the psychiatrist: he stirs our conscience and our freedom to make a humble effort on the path of healing. And he asks us and offers us to take a path of healing that passes through the fear of God. He asks us to work on all our little mechanisms and relational productions by cultivating above all dependence on God.

Depending on God is never a lessening or frustration of our freedom, because God is the source of our freedom.

Everyone, infirmarians, sick, cellarer, brothers, and even the abbot, are sent back in chapter 36 of the Rule to the effort constantly to stabilize their responsibility toward their neighbor in their responsibility toward God. St. Benedict is convinced that one cannot truly be the neighbor of a brother in trouble without cultivating closeness to God, on whom our whole being depends and from whom comes to us every grace of love, strength, and patience.

In the end, it is not with respect to the other’s need that we can overcome ourselves, also and especially where it demands a great sacrifice of us, a great overcoming of the limits of our generosity. In every circumstance we are called to

overcome ourselves with trust in the all-mighty Lord who is full of love. What shifts the very human limits of the gift of our life, and therefore the limits of our capacity to respond to the others' need, is an ever greater and ever more humble abandonment to God who gives us the grace always to love more.

God wants to give us this grace, because He calls us to this. God invites us and calls us to overcome ourselves in love, precisely through our neighbor's need, through the poverty of the brother whom He makes us meet and for whom He wants us to be responsible.

Thus, St. Benedict opens this chapter right away with the identification of the sick brother with the suffering Christ: "Care of the sick must rank above and before all else, so that they may truly be served as Christ, for he said: 'I was sick and you visited me', and 'What you did for one of these least brothers you did for me'" (36:1-3; cf. Mt 25:36-40).

In Christian love for the neighbor, the source of strength to love coincides with the weakness of our brothers and sisters whom we need to love. In Jesus Christ, God makes the object of love coincide with the source of love. It is God who gives us the love to love him, to love Him in our neighbor. The sick must recognize the same mystery in themselves and in those who serve them: "Let the sick remember, however, in their turn, that they are served for the love of God." They too must recognize that Christ suffers in them, and that this is their profound dignity, which should give them patience to bear Christ suffering in themselves, without getting distracted from this with superfluous demands.

But when the sick do not know how to or cannot live their sickness with this awareness, and that is quite understandable, the Rule calls the infirmarians to double their patience "in order to acquire a greater merit" (36:5), which means that one must refer back even more to that which comes to us from God, that one must depend on God even more. All that which we expect from God makes us more free than whatever we can expect from ourselves and from others, including the sick.

Then Benedict goes on to insist that we must depend on God to truly be the neighbor of the others. The infirmarian must be "a brother who fears God" (36:7); and the abbot's ultimate responsibility regarding the care of the sick derives from his responsibility toward God, who has entrusted the flock to him: "The abbot's greatest concern should be that the sick not be neglected by the cellarer and the brothers who assist them, because all the negligences committed by his disciples fall back upon him" (36:10).

One thing is clear: St. Benedict wants us all to be responsible Samaritans, neighbors of our brothers in need, and, like Jesus, he writes this on the heart of our monastic vocation totally consecrated to the glory of God: "The sick are served out of honor for God" (36:4).

In order for the unification that defines the life of the monk, the man consecrated to the honor, to the glory of God, to be real and to come to fulfillment, must pass through closeness to the brothers in need. To serve the glory of God and to serve the brothers, sick or poor, is a single service, the service of love. To separate them means to divide our heart and our monastic vocation.