

6. Merciful sinners

St. Benedict asks that the failings be presented to the abbot and to the community. Not to undergo punishment, not to be judged, but to receive pardon, to return to the Father's house. The abbot and the community are thus called to be like the incarnation of God's mercy which always welcomes the repentant sinner. We have already seen that the Rule begins by alluding to the return home of the prodigal son (cf. RB Prol. 2). The whole monastery and the whole monastic life according to the Rule, then, is the house of God's mercy to which we turn and return ever again. The constant conversion asked of us is this continual return to this place belonging to people who incarnate God's mercy. Other chapters of the Rule will help us explore this theme more deeply, essential for the awareness we must have of our vocation and mission in the Church and in the world.

Today I would like to underline a detail in chapter 46 which it is important to clear up right away. The abbot and the community who accept anew a brother who has made a mistake, what are they like? Are they perhaps perfect monks who can judge others?

A detail at the end of the chapter, where the sins hidden in the soul are spoken of, discreetly gives us St. Benedict's answer. In fact he writes: "When the cause of the sin lies hidden in his conscience, he is to reveal it only to the abbot or to one of the spiritual elders, who know how to heal their own wounds as well as those of others, without exposing them and making them public" (RB 46:5-6).

The deepest, and most serious, wounds should be accused before the most spiritually mature member of the community, and therefore before the one who represents the mature fruit of the whole community, before the one who represents the whole community as a place of human and Christian growth, to which every member is called. The community before whom exterior failings should be accused is represented, in its most mature core, by the elders who can accept and treat the deeper wounds of a brother sinner.

Now, and here is the essential point, St. Benedict says that the abbot and the elders to whom the sinful brother can confess are those "who know how to heal their own wounds as well as those of others – *qui sciat curare et sua et aliena vulnera*" (46:6). We are dealing, then, with people who have themselves had, and continue to have, the experience of being wounded, of needing treatment, of needing God's mercy.

The spiritually mature man, then, is not the one who has always been perfect, and not even the one who has become so, but the one who is wounded, who knows he is wounded, and knows where and how to have himself treated. The spiritually healthy man is not the man who is not wounded, but the one who always lets himself be treated, who always seeks and welcomes healing again and the salvation that Christ offers us. They are those, then, who are the first to experience the mercy of God who heals sinners, and who therefore are able to be merciful with the others. They know how to be merciful like the Father, because the Father has forgiven them first. St. Benedict, like Jesus with his apostles, wants the more authoritative in the community to be witnesses of God's mercy, of the mercy which they themselves have experienced first.

The spiritual elders for St. Benedict are not those who look down from on high on the sinners, but men and women who have also sinned and who know, witness, and transmit the experience of the forgiveness that heals the soul. Thus, they need be nothing other than companions on the path of conversion and receiving pardon, in virtue of their experience as sinners who have been pardoned, of wounded people who have been treated and healed by the mercy of God.

It is not the abbot or the spiritual elder who heals the brother who is wounded in soul. He treats him, but he does not have the power to heal him. Only God is able and knows how to heal the human soul wounded by sin and by the consequences of sin.

Spiritual fathers and mothers who have the presumption to heal on their own the soul of the one who confides in them can produce very serious damage, because they distort the work of grace in the place where only God can act. For it is precisely there where man experiences his sinful wound that the Redemption of Christ wants to manifest itself.

The secrecy asked of the spiritual elders regarding confession or the confidences of the wounded brothers also implies the elder's effort not to "utilize" the wounds of the others for a project of his own, for example, that of making the brother or sister who confides depend on him. The act of exposing one's sins must always be free, and directed toward the brother's ever greater freedom, never something which creates a dependence, because Christ wants to heal us in order for us to be free to love with gratuity.

The awareness that what makes us "spiritual elders" capable of treating others is the fact that we too are wounded, makes us humble and free. The elders are merciful sinners because they have obtained mercy. They know they are "useless servants" (Lk 17:10), because they must do nothing other than render testimony to the mercy of Christ, who has healed them first, like St. Peter, like St. Paul, like Mary Magdalene.

This awareness, however, must also remind the brother or sister who entrusts his wounds to a spiritual elder that it is not from him or from her that he must look for the healing which only God can give. He should not even expect that the abbot or elder make a journey of conversion in his place. The spiritual father is not a nanny who carries us like newborns, but a travel companion who walks beside us.

Thus, according to St. Benedict, the principal and perhaps only value of the relationship with a spiritual father or mother is listening. To listen to the brother and to listen to the Holy Spirit together with the brother is the fundamental role of the elder. Together they must ask for and seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Listening is like the dawn of God's pardon. By listening, the father accepts the wound of his brother's soul and accompanies him toward the mercy of God that heals.

Accusing oneself of one's own wounds, of one's own sin, of one's own failings, frees the heart and life from the closing in on himself with which man reacts to his own sin since Adam and Eve. By speaking, by accusing himself, the brother opens, like a door opens. St. Benedict here uses the verb "*patefacere*" (46:5), to be wide open, like the door of a house is opened wide to let a guest enter, or a friend. In this case, one lets Christ enter, he who knocks at the door to enter and dine with us and heal us of every evil with his presence, with his friendship which reveals the Father (cf. Rev 3:20-21).