

12. Infirm souls

In the Rule, as I was saying, the term *infirmitas*, *infirmus*, does not limit itself to the fragility of sickness or the physical constitution of the monks. St. Benedict loves to use the term also for moral and spiritual fragility. In Chapter 72 he asks, summing up, that all the monks may: "bear with extreme patience their physical and moral weaknesses (*infirmitates*)" (RB 72:5).

In chapter 27 (one of the most beautiful and merciful chapters of the Rule), on the concern that an abbot must have for excommunicated brothers, St. Benedict reminds him that he "received the care of sick souls (*animarum infirmarum*), and not a despotic power over healthy souls" (RB 27:6).

What does this mean? Simply that if an abbot or abbess wants to find, so to speak, the right "wavelength" in the carrying out of his or her responsibilities, he or she must "tune in" to the infirmity of the souls of his brothers or sisters. If superiors had only ever communities of healthy souls (assuming that there are such communities, but I have never found one...), their authority would risk having to regulate itself only over the strong, and therefore to govern would risk becoming only a matter of being healthier than the healthy, stronger than the strong. And this leads to the "tyranny" of which St. Benedict speaks here. Instead, if his or her authority needs to regulate itself over the sick, over the fragility of the souls of our brothers and sisters, then one is no longer dealing with being the strongest of the strong, but of finding ways to care for our confreres, to do them good, to sustain them in their fragility, and this is no longer a question of strength, but of love, of charity, of mercy. The mission field of a superior, as of every member of the community, is the fragility of every soul, of every heart, which does not above all need to be governed, but to be loved; but it does need also to be governed, corrected, guided, to the degree in which these are necessary ways of expressing merciful love.

One word, then, is very important in defining the nature of the governance of a superior: the word is "*cura* - care". We find it here ("have received the care of sick souls"), but it runs throughout the whole Rule, and we will have to take it up again after having meditated on the theme of moral fragility, because it is a fundamental concept for understanding what St. Benedict means when he speaks of mercy.

The Rule, therefore, speaks of physical sicknesses, but also of the sickness of souls, that is, of moral weakness. It is for example the fragility of the lost sheep that the Good Shepherd, that is, Jesus, goes in search in the mountains, and "he has so much compassion for its weakness — *cuius infirmitati in tantum compassus est*" that he returns it to the flock "on his sacred shoulders" (RB 27:9).

In this chapter, 27, St. Benedict defines the monks suffering from moral feebleness, and who must be the focus of the maximum care and concern of the abbot, "*Delinquentes fratres* – delinquent brothers" (RB 27:1). This word, which for us today is almost synonymous with criminal offenders, literally means something like: "to leave the place where one should be." The term returns in various chapters of the Rule, like the term "sin." In chapter 2, St. Benedict joins the two words, almost in order to better define

them through juxtaposition, each one in reference to the other: the abbot must not "conceal the sins of offenders (*peccata delinquentium*), but at their first appearance, energetically uproot them from their very roots" (RB 2:26).

It seems that the etymology of "sin" is "missing the mark", for example when one shoots an arrow. The "sin of offenders" is at its heart any behaviour or attitude within us that misses the target of life — it does not match the objective of our lives, that end for which we are willed and created by God, that end to which we have been called by our vocation. To correct in this case means "to correct the aim", to redirect towards the "target" the shooting of our "arrow". If one corrects immediately, it is enough to correct only slightly in order to find the right trajectory of life. If one waits too long, the risk is always greater that the life of a person might not reach the goal, the destiny for which it is made. The Pope speaks sometimes of the distinction between "sinners" and "the corrupt". Perhaps one could define corruption as going in the opposite direction to life. Instead, the sinner turns away from the road, getting lost, but remains capable — or at least eager — to find again the right direction.

This idea seems important to me, because it helps us also to understand that the problem of our sins is not so much — or only — this or that fact, this or that incident to be repaired, or a stain to be removed from the dress: it is the direction that the journey of life takes. So one is not only dealing here with cancelling or repairing one's own sins, but of converting ourselves in order to find again the correct direction of the path, a path which is made up of thoughts, words, behaviours, feelings. A tendency to sin does not correct itself so much in washing itself from the filth, but in retaking the path in the right direction. And it is here that we understand the importance of the role of those who have to guide, accompany, as abbot or abbess, our community, or the spiritual elders of whom we have already spoken (cf. RB 46:5-6). For this, in order to correct ourselves from sin and from "delinquency", rather than "launderer" or "restorers," we need pastors, guides, people who will accompany us.

St. Benedict cites Psalm 31 in the fifth step of humility, the step in which one accepts to reveal one's thoughts to the abbot: "I made known to you my sin (*delictum*), I have not concealed my injustices. I said: I will accuse myself of my injustices before the Lord — and you have forgiven the wickedness of my heart." (RB 7:47-48; Ps 31:5). To confess our sin, admitting our guilt, our "*delictum* – crime", that is our lacking of the right track, must not be done as when one goes to the police to pay or to have cancelled a fine. We must do so with the desire to retake the right direction of the path of life, of the vocation, and therefore to let ourselves be helped with that, to let ourselves be shown the direction and the way to reach it. In fact, in this fifth step of humility, St. Benedict also says that Scripture exhorts us to do this by telling us, with Psalm 36: "Reveal your way to the Lord and have trust in him" (RB 7:45; Ps 36:5). Even if we are on a wrong path, even if we have abandoned our place or the right way, that is, even if we are "delinquents", the recognising of this and entrusting ourselves to a guide is like turning on again the car navigation system and allowing it to recalculate our route to get us back on the right road, the one that leads to the destination. So then, even the roundabout way that we will have to take in order to regain the master road, will be good. But we must entrust ourselves to the "navigator", that is, to the Lord and to who represents him for us.