

## 14. Wandering and wave-tossed

In 1999, the *Mars Climate Orbiter* space probe, designed and sent to study the climate of that planet, disintegrated due to having been pulled too close into Mars's atmosphere. This happened because during the programming phase, there had been an error in the data calculation — a fairly trivial error.

It's a good example that clarifies what I was saying yesterday about the meaning of the words "error" and "*errare* - to wander". These days, we conceive of error as something precise, something mathematical: exactly like when one makes a miscalculation. And it is true that in mathematics — at least in theory — error is reduced to this understanding, and it can be corrected simply by redoing the calculation. But in Latin, as I was saying, "*errare*" means to take a wrong turn, and this is not a mistake of precision, but of dimensions: where one gets lost, and where one wanders — one errs — in the "incorrect" time and space! The case of the NASA probe given above, however, is a good example of how even a mathematical mistake of precision can lead to the wrong trajectory, and therefore of losing the right road (with disastrous consequences if the direction and speed are not corrected in time).

But what I want to emphasise (and what I think is helpful for our journey) is the importance — even in our own lives — of distinguishing between errors of precision — falls — and losing the road. An error of precision is in itself not so serious, and can be repaired simply by recognising it and asking forgiveness. In my final high school exams, in the written examination in mathematics, I had made a miscalculation — but in the oral examination I was able to show I knew how to correct it. So in mathematics, I received the maximum grade! It's like when one falls: one might get hurt, but usually one can get up again quickly enough. An error or a fall doesn't necessarily define the path of our life. We can get up again and continue on our way — perhaps with more attention and humility!

But there are mistakes that make us lose the way, especially the repeated mistakes, unrecognised, or those that we do not take seriously enough. With falls regarding errors of technical precision, it is enough that we just get ourselves up again, or that we have someone to help us get back up, and everything is okay. When we come to find ourselves on a wrong path, the help we need is not just a hand that puts us on our feet again, but a guide, a shepherd who can accompany us, that teaches us the right road. It is of this mercy that we were speaking yesterday, citing the psalms: "I will teach the lost your ways, and sinners will return to you" (Ps 50:15).

It is above all this mercy for the "lost" that St. Benedict speaks to us of in the Rule, when describing the task of the abbot and the community, or when he asks of us the humility to follow the precepts and admonitions of the Father and Teacher who calls us to follow him in order to return to the house of God (cfr. Prol. 1-2).

How exactly does the Good Shepherd described in chapter 27 of the Rule (which the abbot is called to imitate) indicate the right way? What does he do with the sheep that was wandering and lost (*quae erraverat*)?

We note that in this chapter, the rebel and “delinquent” brother is also called “wave-tossed”: *frater fluctuans* (cfr. 27:3). He is not only wandering, but also unstable, slipping, like a drowning man in the midst of the sea on a wooden plank, rising and falling together with the waves, like a piece of cork. He who floats along in this way, is as if he had no stability in himself, nor in the community and in God, and therefore suffers passively all the movements of external circumstances.

Perhaps these days, man is more “wave-tossed” than “wandering”, because the internet culture holds his attention constantly on the surface of a thousand waves of information, of the news, and he has no more space and time in which he doesn’t “float”, does not “surf” on the surface (and virtual) waves of reality. We are no longer taught to have a harbour in which to dwell, to throw an anchor that fixes us and stabilises us in the deep. In religious communities I find many *fratres* and *sorores fluctuantes*, who are struggling to stand still, for example, to devote themselves to *lectio divina*, meditation, adoration, to stand still in front of God and in front of others, in order to listen, to learn, to await the coming of the Word.

We are now all caught up in this “wave-tossed culture”, in Europe, in America, but also in Asia and Africa, and we have to deal with it, and help ourselves to understand how to recuperate and live a monastic stability of the heart, regardless of the air we breathe.

But whether man is “wandering” or “wave-tossed,” St. Benedict tells us that his salvation, ultimately, is always and only in Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd who once came — and who comes continually — to seek the lost sheep, who has compassion on it, who carries it on His shoulders back to its flock. He who is on the shoulders of Christ is no longer lost, and not even “wave-tossed” but participates in His stability and takes a journey with Him.

The abbot must therefore, Benedict writes, “imitate the merciful example of the Good Shepherd, who having left the 99 sheep on the mountain, went to seek that single one that had been lost and whose weakness moved Him to compassion so much so that he deigned to put it on His sacred shoulders in order to bring it back to the flock.” (RB 27:8-9)

Here, St. Benedict contemplates Jesus; His charity, His compassionate Heart. He does so basing himself on the passages of the Gospel that speak of the Good Shepherd. Think of the tenth Chapter of John, of the parable in Luke 15:4-7 and Matthew 18:12-14. But one perceives that Benedict is not just remembering biblical passages. Benedict is *watching* Jesus, he looks on Him with attention. His *lectio divina*, his ruminating on these pages of the Gospel, has become a gaze on Christ, a contemplation of Christ. It is as if he were watching an icon of the Good Shepherd,

and because of this describes the scene with reverence, with adoration. Not only does he speak of "shepherd", but the "Good Shepherd"; he not only says that it is an example, but a "*pium exemplum*", an exemplar of piety, of mercy; not only does he speak, like Luke, of the shepherd's shoulders, but "of his sacred shoulders — *sacris humeris suis*". Then he prefers that the 99 sheep are left "in the mountains", as Matthew writes, rather than "in the wilderness" as Luke writes, perhaps to make the image more familiar, more real to the monks of his own mountainous region. Finally, He does indeed bring back the lost sheep "to the flock", a detail that is not mentioned in the Gospel!

All of this means that Benedict has meditated at length on the scene, that he has meditated on it with all his capacity for identifying himself totally with its subject. He has meditated on it with devotion also, with reverence, and in adoration, because in it he has watched the Lord Jesus Christ, His presence and His life, His charity. Saint Benedict has contemplated all of this, conscious of seeing God and His love for the saving work of redeeming man.