

19) Taking care of the neighbor

In order for the feeling of compassion not to degrade into sterile sentimentalism, it is necessary to continue the path of the Samaritan of the parable, which means following Christ who shows us, even to dying on the Cross, what it really means to become the merciful neighbor of the other.

The parable of the good Samaritan offers us several priceless clues for following this path. In it, compassion becomes proximity, and proximity becomes care, taking up the burden of the other. We can say that responsible freedom *is activated* by the reflex and movement of compassion, it *is defined* in the act of coming close, but it *is realized* truly in taking up a need, in care, in loving concern, in the work of mercy.

What is important here is not the way in which the Samaritan offers first aid to the wounded man, but how he brings the other's need into his own life.

The good Samaritan is very precise, and even meticulous in taking the emergency situation upon himself; he does all that the other cannot do: he cleans, disinfects, and soothes his wounds; he bandages them for him; he puts him on his horse; he carries him in his arms into the first inn he finds and spends the night, surely critical for the wounded man, to watch him, and care for him. In other words: he obeys the reality and the realism of that man's need.

But the day after, he leaves him. He must go, he must continue his journey. There must be something urgent, a task that he cannot turn down. He cannot let himself be completely absorbed by that man's need. There are family, professional, or other sorts of obligations, with respect to which he must be equally responsible. There are other people for whom he must be a neighbor, whom he must take care of. The wounded man whom he picked up certainly no longer has urgent need of his presence, like he did during the preceding night. And the Samaritan understands that he cannot on his own take care of this man's need. He understands that, in order to assume fully the various responsibilities of his life, he too needs help, he cannot manage everything on his own. He asks for help from the inn-keeper; he asks him to share in his decision to become a neighbor for the wounded man. He does not entrust the man to him in order to rid himself of him: he takes up his expenses, he will return to see him, and, very likely, it is he who will lead him to his house. But he does not do everything by himself.

The parable thus makes us realize that responsibility, the response to the other's need which makes us his neighbor by incarnating compassion, is not without discernment. In the description of the Samaritan's actions, Jesus gives us a sense of order, of reasonable, organized, well thought-out help. He expresses a just sense of need, but also of the response to need. It is a charity that is ordered, considered, measured, even in the use of money: the Samaritan gives two *denarii*, no more, no less; and if they were not enough, he would settle the whole account on his return, but he had calculated and deemed that it would be sufficient. To become the neighbor of the other does not mean splitting the other and his need off from the whole of reality, but confronting his misery and taking up the burden of it, bringing all-inclusive attention to bear on him, on oneself, and on all others;

with attention also to our possibilities and our limits.

And this is where we can find St. Benedict, the attitude which he asks us to have toward the needs of the brothers, especially the sick, of guests, of pilgrims, etc. Therefore, after having meditated on Jesus' meeting with a scholar of the Law and on the parable of the good Samaritan that Jesus tells him, I would like to return to the Rule of St. Benedict in light of what this page of the Gospel has allowed us to understand.

The questions that the scholar of the Law and Jesus ask in the gospel of the good Samaritan are abundantly present in the Rule. What must we do to inherit eternal life? Who is our neighbor? Am I the neighbor of the others? The whole Rule is marked by these questions, and Benedict, like Jesus, does not leave them unanswered. He hands on to us the answers of the Gospel, Christ's answers. But he hands them on to us in a Rule of life, on a path of life in which the questions must be faced in the concrete circumstances of personal and communal life.

Let us then take a concrete situation presented by the Rule: care for the sick, in chapter 36. This chapter describes a way to apply the parable of the good Samaritan concretely, and therefore to incarnate compassion toward the other and responsibility in facing his need.

St. Benedict, like the Samaritan, starts from the need, from the difficulty of the other: "Let care be taken of the sick first of all and above all" (36:1). The sick are there, sickness has assaulted them, they suffer it, and normally it is not their fault. In the same way, in the parable, it is not the wounded man's fault if the robbers attacked him, beat him, and left him half dead. It could also be that he had some responsibility: he could have been imprudent to pass along that road, perhaps at a dangerous hour, or showing off his wealth too much with the clothes he was wearing, with his mount, with the baggage he had... for the Samaritan that is not important, because now the man is there, on the ground, half dead, despoiled of everything. The issue is a reality before which the problem is no longer the sick man's responsibility, but that of the one who sees him and can help him.

Care for the sick must start, therefore, from their sickness, from their state of need. Care for the sick is a response to a need that is there.

But here St. Benedict makes a small comment in this chapter written basically for those who must take care of and serve the sick: he addresses the sick themselves, making an observation that deserves to be meditated upon: "But let the sick, in turn, consider that they are served for the love of God and not bother with excessive demands the brothers who assist them" (36:4).

There can be an abuse in the way of living out one's sickness, of using it over against the brothers. It is abuse in the relationship between one's own need and the responsibility that it asks of the others. The abuse is not in the need, in the fact of having need of the others, but in the use that can be made of that need. The abuse consists in the presumption, in the demands with which one weighs down the other through need. The extreme abuse consists in actually creating the need, in this case the sickness, to provoke and demand the others' help, to become dependent on the others, and above all to make them dependent on our dependence.