

## 17. Care begins with a gaze

St. Benedict is aware that caring for one other, the incarnation of the mercy of God, begins with the attention that we exercise towards the needs and the miseries of our brothers and sisters. And attention is a glance, a looking at that which the other needs, a sensitivity towards the needs of others, like that of the Father, like that of Jesus.

The care of the Good Shepherd is first of all exercised in watching over the flock, in keeping it in one's eye, ready to act if in need of defence or food, of water or rest.

There are many passages in which St. Benedict asks the abbot and other members of the community "to consider", that is, to see, to look carefully, for illness, weakness etc., at the needs of the others.

With respect to the elderly and children he says that "one must always consider the weakness in them — *consideretur semper in eis imbecillitas*" (RB 37:2). And this consideration must be more important than the observance of the Rule regarding food. Then he repeats straight away that as far as they are concerned, a "*pia consideratio*" is necessary, which could be translated as: "a merciful glance" (RB 37:3).

This is a beautiful example, and this short chapter — I do not know if it is by chance or deliberate — is at the centre of the Rule, in the same way as chapter 36 on the sick. In the middle of the Rule, St. Benedict asks us to...not observe the Rule! He asks this of us so that we might look with priority at those brothers and sisters most fragile and in need. We must not lead the monastic life of the community looking more at the Rule than people and life; it would be like driving one's car by reading the Highway Code, or the map, instead of watching the road! God help us if we end up like the Pharisee and the Levite, who in order not to neglect their religious observance, do not stop to take care of the injured man in the middle of the street! But this detachment from the Rule for considering the smallest and the most fragile, is asked of us by the Rule itself. We must obey the Rule even when it asks us not to be observed! This expresses the great humanity of Benedict, which is also exactly that of the Gospel.

Of course, this care must not be only acquiescent. The superior, if it is good that he might increase a little the amount of wine when it's hot and one works more, must also "watch (*considerans*) in any case that one does not arrive to satiety or drunkenness" (RB 40:5).

In chapter 48, which speaks of the need for everyone to be busy reading or in manual work, Benedict adds a note of special attention towards the fragile: "To the sick or fragile (*delicatis*) brothers one may entrust an assignment or a role so as not to leave them inactive; yet on the other hand, the work must not be such as to oppress them or lead them to escape from it. Their weakness must be taken into consideration (*consideranda est*) by the abbot." (RB 48:25-25)

It is a good example of integral attention to one's neighbour, in the sense that the abbot's gaze must consider all factors: the vocation of the brothers, the importance for their soul to not remain idle, but also their physical and mental fragility. From this gaze the right decision for their own good must come.

In short, the gaze over one's neighbour aims to have care for him — it is not a foolish gaze: it is one that thinks, that meditates, that discerns, in search of the best way of loving the true good, and the happiness of the other.

There are other examples, that each one of you can meditate on in the Rule, of the "*pia consideratio*", the "merciful consideration", which leads to taking good care of the brothers and sisters (cf. RB 34:2; 53:19-20; 55:3-21)

In the instructions on the qualities of an abbot, in chapter 64, Benedict asks that he be "*providus et consideratus* — providing and reasonable" (RB 64:17), that is capable of considering matters well in order to favour the good of the community, just like the Providence of God. And this carries him to a good discretion (*discretio*), like that of Jacob, who moderated the marching of the flock so that no sheep would perish (cf. RB 64:18). As in science: good judgment, a good theory, imply good observation — in our case good attention towards people.

Yet we note that this consideration must not be one-way only. For example, the sick must in turn have consideration for those who treat them: "Also the sick must realise (*considerent*) that they are served in honour of God, and must not sadden the brothers placed in their service with excessive demands" (RB 36:4). Even the nurse has a heart, a limit to his strength and his generosity, and can fall into sadness. And the patient does not do well always and only to be focused on himself, on his own sickness. Looking at the other, aware of those who surround him, at the heart of the one who is next to him, he must also make himself neighbour to he who makes himself neighbour to him: even the patient must take care of the one who cares for him.

In all these passages in which the term "to consider", "consideration" recur, we understand that in the spirit of St. Benedict there is, knowingly or unknowingly, the sentiment of etymological meaning of this Latin word, that is a beautiful meaning: it contains the word "star", in Latin *sidus*. So the meaning is of a careful observation, profound, as if one were to scrutinise the sky, the celestial bodies, the stars, where the ancients read the destiny of people, the fate of life.

But the extraordinary thing is that this term — so rich and so full of meaning — this term so noble expressing the tension of man towards his own destiny, the human capacity to contemplate the stars, that is, the infinite, it is this very term that St. Benedict uses above all to call us to attention towards he who is the weakest, frail, sick and miserable. Exactly: "*Consideretur semper in eis imbecillitas*" (RB 37:2).

It is as if St. Benedict were to ask us to convert our thirst for the absolute, our search for the ultimate meaning of life and of the universe, the "*consideratio*" that unites us to the stars, in order that it might become a "*pia consideratio*" (RB 37:3), in order that it become merciful, charitable, an act of love in our hearts and in our gaze, and therefore in our acting in service towards our neighbour.