

8th Chapter by the Abbot General OCist for the MFC – 01.09.2012

"Let a cell be set apart for the sick brethren, and a God-fearing, diligent, and a God-fearing attendant be appointed to serve them" (RB 36,7).

The chapter on sick brothers is essential to understand the sense of the fear of God in the Rule, because here the fear of God is necessary to adequately treat in truth and love, one of the most intense human experiences: illness. In sickness, mankind has the dramatic experience of his frailty, of his limits and his need of salvation. When we are well or believe that we are, we do not really realise how fragile our life is, how much death accompanies and threatens life. In sickness, it is as though all the deep drama of our humanity showed itself, came to the surface became sensitive, physically, psychologically and spiritually.

In chapter 36 of the Rule, it is interesting to note how saint Benedict, after having invoked the absolute priority of the care to be given to the sick, reminds the invalids themselves that their state might draw them, without them being aware of it, to become too demanding and thus to exasperate the brothers serving them. "But let the sick themselves also consider that they are served for the honour of God, and let them not grieve their brethren who serve them by unnecessary demands." (RB 31,4)

By these words, saint Benedict invites the sick to fear God: they must recognise the fear of God of those who serve them, because they do it "for the honour of God", because they do it recognising, in faith, Christ present and suffering in them, the sick (RB 36,1-3). The fear of God is effectively the recognition and adoration of the presence of the Lord who renders God present in our midst, so much so that he who lives in the fear of God, in a certain sense, also puts God before the others and the others before God. This makes us understand that if saint Benedict asks for the fear of God as a quality before assuming certain responsibilities and services, it is not only so that the people should have the necessary strength, but also so that the presence of God should be particularly recognised and adored in all these situations. The fear of God allows God to manifest himself, and his presence is, in the end, the essential answer to our needs. Even the sick, understand that they are served "for the honour of God", adoring God, serving and loving the Christ, are thus helped to recognise that the true and complete answer to the need of their heart is not only the treatment, medicine, health, but God himself.

Saint Benedict, while calling on the sick to not become too demanding, continues by inviting the infirmarians to patience: "These (the sick) must, however, be patiently borne with, because from such as these a more bountiful reward is gained" (RB 36, 5).

Saint Benedict is conscious that illness puts mankind in a state of need of which it is difficult to recognise the measure. Suffering, in fact, is an experience that one cannot define, nor delimit the measure. One can make a diagnostic, establish which illness is concerned, but for the person who is living it from the inside, these definitions have little sense, because his consciousness is, as it were, inside the pain, inside the suffering, the fear and anxiety. From the outside, the suffering of the patient can perhaps be objectively defined, and one can judge that his demands are not, objectively, in proportion to his real needs, to the true necessities.

But an invalid who is suffering cannot consider himself only objectively, and from the inside of his suffering and his anguish, it is very difficult to see just what his needs really are. It is why saint Benedict shows a delicate psychological sensitivity by suggesting to the sick to not to be too demanding, but above all by inviting the infirmarers to a greater patience.

To answer to the needs and the suffering of someone else with the fear of God, signifies, in fact, to respond to the need of the brothers with the consciousness that, whatever the form or nature of the need, in the end, it is God of whom we all have need. And in the need of God we are all at the same level, we are equally ill, equally needing healing. The thirst of God by sinful man is a universal illness, a universal suffering. The need of Christ, doctor of the soul, is a common need, for the healthy as well as the sick. The infirmarer who serves the sick with the fear of God knows that he also has need of salvation, and this consciousness binds him to his sick brother and allows him to understand and to accompany him, and also to receive his witness, almost sacramental, of the presence of the suffering Christ.

As I said yesterday, the fear of God coincides in the infirmarer with the ability to see and treat, with the eyes of faith, Jesus suffering in the sick brother. "May they be served in very truth as Christ is served; because He has said, 'I was sick and you visited Me' (Mt 25,36). And "As long as you did it to one of these My least brethren, you did it to Me' (Mt 25,40)." (RB 36, 2-3)

Saint Benedict invites the brothers who are in the service of the sick to cultivate the memory of this judgment in faith that transforms all people and all situations into the gift of the coming of Christ into our lives. The Christ truly comes to us in the brothers, the smallest and most needy, and by giving us his presence. He gives us also his thirst for love, his thirst for attention, for care. God in the sick gives himself to us as a beggar of love. The fear of God sees Him, recognises Him and serves Him.

In the Rule, it is as if saint Benedict leads us more and more to understand and live the fear of God as the recognition of the presence of God. And in the chapter on the sick brothers, we can perceive that, as we saw in the good thief, the Christian fear of God is not really a religious sentiment aroused by the majesty and the power of God, but by the weakness and the madness of the Cross. And saint Benedict helps us to understand the eschatological parable of Matthew 25,31-46 – "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you made me welcome, naked and you clothed me, sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to see me" – is the best exegesis to understand the signification of the fear of God for the good thief when he says to his companion: "Have you no fear of God at all, you got the same sentence as he did?" (Lk 23,40).

The fear of God is reborn in us from the moment of the consciousness that Jesus suffered for us all, our pain and misery, hunger, thirst, nudity, illness, the lack of freedom, and he has put all these dramatic human experiences in the light of his presence and his charity. And this consciousness helps us to live united to Christ, in or before all these sufferings, recognising in Him the salvation and the consolation of all humanity.

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