

# **Benedictine Spirituality: An Introduction**

## **Introductory Conferences**

The nine conferences presented here were prepared by Sr. Dolores Dowling, OSB, for Benedictine Oblates or Oblate candidates, but may also be of interest to others. Each section begins with some questions to be reflected upon while reading the text. The second part of each lesson is a deeper study of the Rule of Benedict developed by Sr. Gladys Noreen, OSB. These conferences are intended to be starting points for further discussion and more in depth studies.

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## Holiness

### Questions

- What does Benedict say about holiness? (RB 4:62)
- What personal attitudes lead to true holiness?
- What are the fruits of holiness in daily life?
- Is holiness something that is achieved “once and for all”?
- How are other people involved on this path to holiness?

Why should one choose to become a Benedictine Oblate? Life is busy enough. Why add more? The fact is that we are searching for meaning. It has been said that after the age of thirty all questions in life are questions of meaning. Our desire is to find more in life, to have our life really matter: in fact, to be holy. Though we wish to be holy, “holiness” is a word that tends to frighten us. “Me holy? Well, hardly!” But that is not the way that the Bible looks at it. Saint Paul clearly says that we are called to be saints. That is why God sent us the Son; why God set Jesus up as our source of mercy, our place of healing.

Remember the old Baltimore Catechism and one of its first questions: “Why did God make you?” “You were made to know, love, and serve God in this life, and to be happy with God forever in the next.” That answer is talking about holiness: knowing, loving, and serving God as best we can with all the strengths and weaknesses we have and being happy with God forever. What we need to remember, to lean on, is the fact that God wants us to be holy. God keeps on calling us to holiness and stands ready to help us. God wants to give to us and wants our response.

One of the great documents from the Second Vatican Council was the document on the Church. That document makes no bones about holiness. It says: “In the Church ... everyone is called to holiness,” and goes on to say,

The Lord Jesus, the divine teacher and model of all perfection, preached holiness of life to each and every one of his disciples, regardless of their situation... The followers of Christ are called by God, not according to their accomplishments, but according to God’s own purpose and grace. They are justified in the Lord Jesus, and, through baptism sought in faith, they truly become children of God and sharers in the divine nature. In this way they are truly made holy. Then, too, by God’s gifts they must hold on to and complete in their lives this holiness which they have received.

The statement continues,

Thus it is evident to everyone that all the faithful of Christ, of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity... In the various types and duties of life, one and the same holiness is cultivated by all who are moved by the Spirit of God... All of Christ's faithful, whatever be the conditions, duties, and situations of their lives, will grow in holiness if they accept them in faith from the hand of their heavenly Father, and if they cooperate with the divine will by showing all through their earthly activities the love with which God has loved the world [*Lumen Gentium* 41].

This document of the Church in our times makes clear that we are called to be holy. It does not matter what our life is, each of us is called to be holy in the way of life we have chosen. No way of life is better, in itself, than any other. Each way is the best for us if it is the one to which we have been called. What counts is how we live our lives, how we carry out the promise of our baptism, because it was in baptism that we began our lifelong journey to holiness. The spiritual journey is a constant process of renewal. We try, we fail, we get up and try again. Baptism is a sacrament of continual beginnings. It is not a once-over action, but a beginning, a direction.

As adults, our baptism, if it has any real meaning for us, has to be expressed in the way we live our daily lives. When we were baptized, we became members of Jesus' own family. From then on Jesus had to matter to us, and matter supremely. Jesus has to become the context out of which we live. Of course, this does not happen all at once. It is a process and a long one. The decision to become a Benedictine oblate is part of this process. It commits us to a more serious living out of the promise of our baptism. It also gives us additional help in doing this.

Being an oblate gives us a community to back up our desire to live out the promise of baptism and become holy. We cannot do it alone. God knows that we need help, usually from one another. Each of us is redeemed and each of us is a sinner; we have to live with this tension, with our lack of wholeness, our awareness of our weakness and selfishness. But we are not left alone. We have a community. In choosing to become an oblate, we choose others to help us in our striving. Our strength will help them, just as they will help us in our weakness.

Baptism demands that we share in Christ's love for his world and his people. However small and humble our part may be, we do have a part in the world's redemption. Holiness is not a rejection of the world, but a way of giving witness to God's saving action in this world. "All Christians," says the document on the Church, "are most intimately united with the life and mission of Christ" [LG 34]. That is why Jesus identified himself with us and his people during his life on earth. He participated in the ordinariness of life, allowing himself to be baptized to show this identification. His baptism was the first step in our growth in faith and personal holiness.

To understand what the Benedictine Oblates offer in this seeking for holiness, we will go on to consider the life and Rule of St. Benedict in our next reflection.

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You are about to begin a study of the Rule of Benedict and how this Rule is applicable to your life as a Benedictine oblate of the Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration.

The Rule is presented as one way of responding to the call to be disciples of Jesus. There is the invitation in the Prologue, (vs. 20-21) to set out on the way that leads to God and life. All of us, by our baptism, have the invitation and gift of the Spirit to live this life of discipleship. Benedict is most interested in the question, Do you truly seek God? This is a universal human quest and it is central to the whole Benedictine way of life. He writes frequently of the Work of God which refers to the Liturgy of the Hours, also called the Divine Office (Chapters 6-20). Many oblates begin to pray the office which is psalms, a short reading and a conclusion. Such regular praying of the Psalms and reading the Scriptures begins to form our conscious and unconscious so that we begin to see life through them. There has been much written about the Gospel values of the Rule. These values stand in contrast to those of our society. As you read the rule, see if you find these values.

<b>Rule of Benedict</b>	<b>Society</b>
Seeking God	Seeking material things
The common good	Individualism
Commitment	Non-involvement
Mutual sharing	Competition
Hospitality	Rejection
Care of the earth	Exploitation
Peace	Violence

The Rule contains many prophetic statements that challenge us to examine our faithfulness in living with the Gospel as our guide. Read the chapter of the Rule and reflect on these statements. What do they say to you about how you live your life?

1. Preferring nothing whatever to Christ (Chapter 72).
2. Regard all utensils and goods (it says of the monastery but apply it to your life) as the sacred vessels of the altar (Chapter 34).
3. The evil of murmuring must not appear for any reason (Chapter 40). There are a number of chapters that forbid this malady (Chapters 5, 35 and 53).
4. All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ (Chapter 53).

## St. Benedict

### Questions

- What is “religious conversion”?
- How might a religious conversion impact one’s life?
- Benedict’s main basis for the Rule is what?
- How did Benedict deal with the foibles of human nature?
- What was Benedict’s view of work?

Saint Benedict is universally recognized as one of the greatest figures in monastic history; yet we know very little about him. What we know is dependent on one book of the Dialogues of Saint Gregory the Great. Saint Gregory became Pope about the year 590 and is a vital link between the early Church and the Middle Ages. All Saint Gregory’s writings have a pastoral purpose. His specific purpose in writing about Saint Benedict is to show how God can work in the life of a person who responds to God’s gifts. It is this intention of Gregory that leads to some questions about the facts that he narrates. Are they actual or symbolic? Scholarly opinion now holds that these facts are for the most part genuine, though it is not easy to separate these from what is imaginative.

According to Gregory, Benedict was born in Nursia, northeast of Rome, around the year 480. Sent to school in Rome, Benedict experienced a religious conversion which led him to renounce the kind of life he had been living. He left Rome to live first as a hermit at Subiaco; later, after a bitter experience with some unworthy monks, he returned to Subiaco. There he was joined by a number of followers, for whom he founded twelve monasteries. Once these monasteries were firmly established, Benedict left that region, going to Monte Cassino, some eighty miles from Rome on the way to Naples. There he built a monastery on the heights overlooking Cassino. And there he lived the rest of his life, writing his Rule and acquiring a reputation as a man of God, who could work wonders. Saint Benedict died around the middle of the sixth century.

Gregory describes Benedict’s Rule as notable for its discretion and clarity of language. Benedict was, in fact, a great monastic teacher with a profound sense of tradition, who knew how to use the works of his predecessors. Acquainted with the writings of Pachomius, Basil, Cassian, Augustine, the Rule of the Master, and Caesarius of Arles, Benedict blended these into a Rule which includes both spiritual teaching and practical regulations for the ordering of daily life in a monastery. Like all the ancient monks, Benedict considers the true and ultimate rule of life to be the Word of God itself contained in the Scriptures.

Monasticism was simply the Christian life lived in a fashion that helped the monk to experience God. That is why Benedict called his work, “a little Rule for beginners.” He was not downplaying the importance of what he had written, merely implying that the Great Rule is the Word of God.

The Rule of Benedict is a masterly synthesis of previous rules, combining traditions from Gaul, Africa, Egypt, Cappadocia, and Italy itself. Its broadness and vision of humanity sets it apart from other Latin rules. Such clarity and liberality of mind could only have come from one who had long pondered the Word of God and could see all the varied strands of tradition in their essential harmony. Eventually, Benedict's Rule supplanted all other monastic rules in the West because of its ability to bring out the fundamental gospel principles of monasticism in an enduring way, free of details bound to particular times and places.

The Rule of Benedict is very short. The first chapters contain his spiritual doctrine and deal with the fundamental aspects of monastic life: unity among members, the role of the abbot, obedience, silence and humility. Next come the chapters dealing with monasticism in its ascetic discipline: how can a group live together in peace and charity; how can such unity be structured? This section has chapters of liturgical prayer, times for meals, sleep, etc. There is a section dealing with corrections: how to help the monks live up to the best that is in them. Next comes a section on the reception of new members, order in the community, work, hospitality, etc. A semi-final chapter deals in a short and gem-like way with community relations. Obviously Benedict understood human nature. He knew it is varied and complex, and that individual problems require individual solutions. Benedict leaves a great deal to the discretion, good sense and charity of the abbot. He shows a vast understanding of human weakness, along with compassion for the troubled and expectations for the strong. Benedict insists on the value of reading (*lectio* is the term used in the Rule).

Meditation on what has been read leads the monk to prayer and Christian life. He also insisted on the value of honest work, not only to support the monastery, but as a physical discipline and as a means of almsgiving to the poor.

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The Rule of Benedict is direct and clear. It has been adapted in every age by those who live according to it. Volumes have been written about it and after more than fifteen hundred years, it is one of the greatest handbooks of all time.

Since the Rule is written for people to live by, Benedict was sensitive to the human condition as it really is. He understood that real people are not all alike so you will find that all are not treated alike. Read chapter 34. From what Scripture did Benedict get this principle?

One of Benedict's characteristics is innate trust of people. This was not true of other Rules written during the early centuries. One notable area was to see how he delegated authority. See chapter 32. Note that the cellarer might be called the business manager today. Do you see this as trust? How do you trust others?

Life's little details mean much to Benedict. He is not interested in imposing some grand spiritual scheme on the community, but rather in leading ordinary people to heavenly heights. This is seen in the Liturgical Code, Chapters 8-20 (These will be read at a later date).

To begin to comprehend the Rule it is necessary to find the ideas that are presented in each chapter. Take a moment to read chapter 32. What is the principle presented here? How is it applicable to your life?

Do the same with Chapter 72. What is the principle and how does it apply to your life? Above all, the Rule is centered on Christ and the Christian life. All of us need order in our lives, priorities to govern life and discipline to remain centered in Christian life. The Rule of Benedict is one way to live such a life.

All of us are called to the Christian life by baptism. In the prologue, which is like an embryo of all that is found in the Rule, the reader is invited to LISTEN. That is something most have to work at doing. “This message is for anyone who wants to give up their own will and armed with the strong and noble weapons of obedience to do battle for the true King, Christ the Lord.”

Read the prologue through at one sitting. What do you find difficult to understand? The battle metaphor is often distasteful to folks. We speak of Christ as winning the victory or defeating death. There is an Easter hymn, “The battles o’er, the victory won” You may be able to think of other such examples.

Finally, Gregory the Great wrote a little book called, “The Dialogues”. In it he tells the stories of Italian saints. The second dialogue is about Benedict and includes a snippet about Scholastica, Benedict’s twin sister. It is the only account of their lives that we have. The only document that was written by Benedict is his Rule.

## Conversion

### Questions

- How does religious conversion compare to monastic conversion?
- How is faith involved in conversion?
- Where might be the most difficult struggles?
- How is a life of conversion a continual “turning around”?
- What external behaviors befit such a lifestyle?

At the heart of the monastic person’s life is the promise of conversion. It is one of the three vows Benedict asks of the monk in his Rule: stability, conversion, and obedience. Conversion is at the root of it all. It is a promise to keep trying, an explicit commitment to trust God enough to keep turning to God and away from anything that would make us ashamed of the Gospel. In many ways, then, conversion of heart is a rejection of living in the past. It is a willingness to let things go, to let the future happen, to keep responding to God’s abiding faithfulness to us.

This means, of course, that conversion is closely linked to faith. It helps us carry out the decision we spoke of before, to follow Christ in the spirit of the Gospel, living our baptism. We tend to think of faith as a matter of the mind; an intellectual assent to truths the church presents to us. But that is only one aspect of faith. In the Biblical sense, faith is really a surrender of ourselves to a person, the person of Christ, who shows us the Father. Faith is a relationship. By choosing to be an oblate, you are choosing a certain set of values which put a priority in your life on deepening this relationship with your God, developing a more personal relationship with Jesus Christ. This is what conversion means: a change of direction, a turning, a continuous turning and returning to God.

Think of the famous scriptural parable of the Prodigal Son. The Father was out daily, waiting, longing, looking for this beloved son to return to his home. Finally, the son came to his senses and set out on this homeward journey. It was not that he needed to ask forgiveness, he was already forgiven, always forgiven. He just needed to return to his father. It is the same with us. We are never not forgiven. We just need to realize this and open our selves to the welcome that awaits us.

Probably one of the reasons Benedict stresses humility so much is that he realized it would be needed for any genuine conversion of our hearts. Genuine conversion is going to conflict, time and time again, with our human desire to be self-sufficient. We said that conversion means entrusting ourselves to God, and this means opening ourselves to the unknown, realizing that we must be open to the possibility of change, realizing that God can ask anything. And this frightens us. We would feel better if it meant obeying rules, rules that we knew and could total up, like a supermarket tally. But conversion is, instead, a free, personal response to God who speaks to us in the challenges of human events and persons.

A good example of what conversion can mean is what happened in the Church after the Second Vatican Council. Many people had been comfortable with the Church they had always known. Then it began to change and some panicked. But the spirit of conversion means a willingness not to cling to customs, regulations and signs that have for a time been bearers of God's grace to us. When God asks us to move on, we have to be ready. Think of St. Paul's words: "Forgetting what is behind me and reaching out for that which lies ahead, I press toward the goal to win the prize which is God's call to the life above, in Christ Jesus" (Phil 3:13ff). We can move on like this, if we rely not on our own pitiful strength but on God's fidelity. God has never broken a promise.

In his Rule Saint Benedict listed his "twelve degrees of humility." Translating them into more familiar concepts can be of help toward understanding what conversion involves. Conversion means the effort at awareness: keeping in touch with the God-dimension of our lives, not letting this get swamped with other things. It means restraint: trying to overcome those little addictions that beset us; looking squarely at our compulsiveness to see where this interferes with our relationship to God and to others. Conversion involves the ongoing struggle with our self-centeredness. This is the Easter struggle: to die a little more to our vanity and our desire to be first, and to surrender more of ourselves to God. It also involves patience: being willing to wait, not to judge too quickly, accepting things we cannot change.

Conversion means openness; freeing up some of the energy we use to protect ourselves in order to reach out to others. It means working for self-knowledge: stripping away, layer by layer, those illusions that keep us from the real. Conversion involves trying to overcome competitiveness: not defining ourselves by comparison with others or making our worth depend on what we have. It involves, too, the effort at stillness, stopping the outer and inner chatter that reveals our fear of silence.

Benedict promises us that as we try to do this, we shall run the way of God's commandments. We shall be turned ever more to God and God to us.

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Within the monastic tradition, there is the phrase, '*conversatio morum.*' *Conversatio* is a Latin word, one that is difficult to translate into English. It is often read as conversion but in most cases, conversion indicates a one-time experience. Going from one church to another or converting from coal heat to gas. You may be able to come up with other 'once for all' meanings. If you recall, in the Prologue there is the phrase "ear of the heart." This is where the message of conversion is heard. It can mean once but reread the Prologue and notice that the Lord calls daily. Whenever the term conversion is used it would mean just that. In ones spiritual life, we daily commit our lives to the constant power of God. It means to become more attuned to the presence of God in our lives and to have a greater commitment to the Church.

Read Chapter 73. Where is Benedict directing us? How can you deepen your knowledge of Scripture?

Look up 2 Timothy 3:16. How does this relate to Chapter 73?

The spiritual life requires discipline; it is a way of life, an attitude of the mind and an orientation of the soul. If one seeks daily conversion of heart, these are necessities.

Look at the Prologue again paying attention to the last verses starting at vs. 48. Look at the first line for the motivation for conversion of heart.

Chapter 19 calls for discipline. But there is a reason for it. What do you think it is?

Lastly, read Chapter 4, called the Instruments of Good Works. In vs. 75, they are called the tools of the spiritual craft. Look carefully at the tools. Which do you find the most difficult? Conversion of heart is about life. How can these tools aid you in your life?

## Obedience

### Questions

- How does Benedict consider obedience to be “labor”?
- What is the purpose of obedience?
- To whom or to what are we to direct our obedience?
- What are the fruits of genuine obedience?
- What can be most difficult about obedience?

Obedience is part of our ongoing conversion, part of that constant turning to God, which is conversion. Benedict begins his Rule with the verb “Listen.” Basically, obedience is listening. It is hearing God’s word to us. We have forgotten how to be hearers, and this gets us off center. Listening obedience calls us to be centered again in our seeking God. “Obedience,” says St. Benedict, “is the mark of those who hold nothing dearer than Christ” (Chapter Five). Like us, he returns to the Father “by the labor of obedience.”

The Scriptures never oppose genuine freedom to obedient service. In the Hebrew Scriptures the prophet Ezekiel has God saying, “I will give them a different heart and put a new spirit into them ... then they will conform to my statutes and keep my laws” (11:19-20). Saint Paul says that we are to serve God “in a new way, the way of the spirit in contrast to the old way, the way of the written code” (Rom. 7:6).

The scene of Jesus’ baptism shows us Jesus confidently turning to God as the only reference point and justification of his adult life. Jesus knows that salvation is a free gift from God’s prodigal mercy. So Jesus never made the law absolute. Law is always relative, a means to an end. Good laws are instruments of our fidelity to God, supporting structures for freedom in love.

Looking at Christ in his humanity, we can see from the Christian Scriptures that obedience to the Father meant for Jesus a straightforward acceptance of concrete reality in his life. This was not something abstract, but the realities of everyday living. Like ourselves, Jesus had to look at his gifts, his background, the social situations of his time, what the circumstances called for, and then act with prudent judgment. Christ’s human obedience was always that of complete honesty with life. This is fundamental to all obedience, Christ’s and ours: we accept the life situation which here and now is the result of our decisions and choices. Genuine Christian obedience means a free and courageous decisiveness, not just conformity to a pattern of behavior. We have to choose our obedience!

In Chapter Seven of his Rule, Benedict explicitly associates obedience with the redemptive obedience of Jesus. This is not managerial obedience, the need to get a job done. It is an attitude of heart. To be obedient really means to cultivate a loving union with God, which becomes the basis for all our choices. We often speak of trying to find “God’s will.” First of all, when we say this we need to remember that God’s will is God’s love. There is no separation between them.

God's will and God's love are one. If we can see the face of a friend behind the mask of the law, it can help us to find God's will.

Another thing we need to know is that God's will for us is not some kind of blueprint which we must painfully decipher to discover what God wants us to do. Our job is not to try to find out what God already knows and is not telling us. That would make our freedom a fake. It would be like doing a crossword puzzle where the answers must fit an already designed outline. No, to seek God's will is to make the most loving choices of which we are capable, using divine help.

In choosing a particular way of life Christians put their doing of God's will in a particular setting; priests and religious are not more obliged to seek and do God's will than are married and single people. But they have chosen different settings, which will significantly affect how this will touch their lives. Those who are married will find God's will by taking into account in a special way their spouses and children. Religious will do so by taking particular account of the community in which they live. Lay persons who are single will take into account the circumstances of their lives. By the act of choosing a particular state of life, Christians give a very definite shape to their obedience. This shape is determined by the mediations of God's will that become paramount in this life: spouses and children, work and relationships, or community, rule, and superior.

At no time, however, do these mediations of God's will relieve us of the effort of discernment. Our family's wishes and needs, our community's customs and rules are privileged mediations, but we have to listen carefully to God in our hearts. That is why prayer and a mature life of prayer are so important to obedience.

Prayer prevents us from allowing any *mediation* of God's will to become primary rather than God. If it is true that God has called us to live in a certain context, then we are justified in believing that the realities of this context make up a responsible mediation of God's will for us. A wife has a right to trust that her husband and their life together are a genuine mediation of God's will for her. A Sister has the right to trust that her Rule, the leaders and members of her community are such a mediation for her. But there can be no mechanical certainty. Always we must listen for God's voice and pray to understand what God is saying to us.

With Jesus, we want to say to our Father, "I come to do your will." Then, like Jesus, we have to grow through suffering, through the confusions and uncertainties of daily life, through prayer and faith, to knowing and doing this will.

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In the Prologue, Benedict calls the monastery "the school of the Lord's service." As oblates, you are in an 'extension' course of that school. When one attends school, the person indicates a need to keep growing in wisdom and knowledge and mastery of the subject. For all of us, that process does not cease until death, at which time we will be filled with all knowledge of God.

Obedience demands a balance between interdependency and responsibility. Read Chapter 5 of the Rule. What do you think of that chapter? Does anything seem harsh or unreasonable? Why or why not?

The Latin word for obedience is related to the word listen. That is the first word of the prologue. And what is listening obedience? It is a listening to the Word, to the Church, to all civil authority, for a beginning. This is true for everyone, married, single or a vowed religious. For you who are oblates and for all Benedictines there is the added assistance of the Rule. All of us have chosen to shape our life within the framework of a particular state of life. In each state we have chosen to respond to a call from God. We have to work out our calling through imperfect and improbable events, situations and people. We live with the confidence that divine providence writes straight with crooked lines.

Another place in the Rule that adds to the concept of obedience is chapter 7 “On Humility.” There are twelve degrees but the ones we are interested in are #3, 4 and 9. To choose to be obedient indicates that one acknowledges that there is One who is over all creation.

At Baptism we became part of the people of God and received the basic orientation to the Father. We put on Christ and seek to make him our first love. In obedience, Jesus is our example. See Heb. 5:8-9.

We are to be obedient to all authority. See Titus 3:1-2. The Catholic catechism (#2238) reminds us that it is the duty of citizens to submit to legitimate authority and service of the common good.

In the early Church the civil authority wrote about Christians, “They obey the established laws and their way of life surpasses the laws.”

Read Chapter 68 of the Rule. Have you ever been asked to do something impossible? There is one time when one must decide to be disobedient and like the apostles we must obey God rather than humans (Acts 5:29) whenever civil authority demands are contrary to the demands of the moral order. Do you practice any civil disobedience? If yes, what is it about?

Read Chapter 71. Have you ever considered obedience a blessing? Underlying this chapter is a love and solicitude for every member of the community. You probably belong to a parish community. How do you demonstrate these qualities? And notice the elders are to give a constant example of fidelity to seek God so that the young see the virtue in Christian life.

Look up 1 John 2:3-5; Phil. 2:7b and 8; Eph 5:21

## Prayer

### Questions

- What is prayer?
- Is prayer connected to ordinary daily life?
- Is there some connection between prayer and the depths of the human heart?
- What kinds of prayer are there?
- What is the most important aspect of prayer?

At the heart of the ongoing conversion and obedience to God is prayer. Probably prayer has more definitions than most things in our Christian life. One of the oldest definitions is that prayer is a “lifting of the mind and heart to God.” This is quite true, provided that we realize that it is God who does the lifting. The initiative is always God’s. Fundamentally, we are a capacity for God; that might almost be our definition. Jesus came among us to tell us, to show us, that God is not a remote force, an unmoved cause in the heavens. No, God is personal and wants a personal union with us. We do not have to go looking outside ourselves for God. As Saint Augustine said, “Behold, you are within me, and I was out of myself when I went seeking you.” In the Hebrew Scriptures, Jeremiah had already compared our knowledge of God to the migratory instinct in birds, something almost instinctive in us, built into our nature.

Deep in us is a kind of wanting, an unidentified anxiety which reveals our creaturehood, telling us that we are not our own answer, driving us to seek the foundation, the grounding of our being. This personal conviction of unsatisfied need along with our experience of weakness, guilt, and loneliness are simply a part of our human condition. So is the lack of fulfillment that often haunts us, driving us to a restlessness that makes us seek God. This seeking is a kind of surrender, an offering, a movement that is a leaving of self. If our prayer is Christ, then it will be made in and through Christ Jesus. Belonging to Christ in baptism makes our prayer easier. We are continually called by God as Jesus called his first disciples: “Come and see!” It was in prayer that Jesus realized he was the Son of the Father. For us, also, prayer leads to recognizing ourselves as sons and daughters of God.

In his Rule, Saint Benedict makes plain that prayer is an habitual awareness of God present in our lives and a willingness to conform to what God wants. This is another way of saying that prayer is closely linked to faith. “We believe,” says Saint Benedict, “that God sees us everywhere,” (Chapter 19:2).

“Whatever good work we begin to do, we should first pray that God will bring it to completion,” (Prologue:4). Prayer should not consist of many words, but be short, pure, frequent (52:4). When the abbot is having difficulties with any monk, he must above all pray for this monk (28:4). From all this it is clear that Benedict perceives prayer as mindfulness, an alertness to God and to God’s action in our lives.

Benedict begins his Rule with the word “Listen!” Listening to God in the Word, in liturgy, and, fundamentally, in life, is what prayer means to Benedict. It is a way of saying yes to God, as Mary did at the annunciation. For us, as for Mary, this will require faith. Do we really believe that God is listening to us, that God cares? Or do we, perhaps unconsciously and secretly in our hearts, treat God as a powerful trickster, responsible for the unaccountable sufferings and confusions in our lives?

Prayer, in Benedict’s matter-of-fact treatment of it, is very daily, humble, and ordinary. It often comes out of our human brokenness. It means living in the actual moment and not being focused on the past. Anger and sadness are the two greatest obstacles to prayer, and these usually arise from the rejection of the here and now. Prayer means the faithful struggle to keep ourselves attentive to God, dealing with an imagination that often gets out of control, with distractions, weariness, and lethargy, with loss of concentration and a sense of unreality. This kind of prayer means we cannot depend on our feelings about it and that we simply pray as we can, believing that even a half hour of what seems to be nothing but vacant daydreaming, can still be an offering to God.

Saint Benedict had a contemplative way of seeing things. He implies this when he talks about using simple things as if they were vessels of the altar (31:10). He understands that prayer is not a desperate attempt to get God’s attention, but the quiet discipline of allowing God to claim our attention. As the great Rabbi Abraham Heschel used to say, “Prayer is turning self-consciousness to self-surrender.” This means asking God to be revealed to us in what we are thinking and doing. It can be in very ordinary things, like conversation with a friend. How did God take part in this? Listening to music: sharing its beauty with God, finding God in it. A drink of cold water on a hot day: thanking God for this refreshment. We can bring prayer into so many things.

Much of life is ambiguous, unfinished, contradictory. Yet there is so much goodness in it. To pray is to name this goodness that we all recognize. And since so much of life is ambivalent, prayer means allowing the goodness in it to come out of its hiding place: believing and hoping in our God who keeps promises. Finally prayer means helping to create goodness in life, expecting good things from God, because to pray is to know, with Jesus, that we are going home, that God is father and mother to us.

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Prayer lies at the heart of Benedictine life. This lesson and the next two are all of a part of what is important for you and us. The other two are about the Liturgy of the Hours and *Lectio Divina*.

Love is primary in the Rule. Remember from the beginning of the prologue that these instructions are from one who “loves you.” And at the conclusion our hearts are “overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love.” We know God’s love and respond to that love by seeking to listen to God in prayer. Prayer might be called a dialogue that allows us to listen to the voice of God in our lives.

Benedict has very few instructions on prayer. He sets up liturgical prayer, which are important to life, but every action is to be directed to God. Prayer is to permeate all of life. See I Cor. 10:31.

In Chapter 20 of the Rule Benedict suggests the external signs a Christian exhibits when approaching God: humility and reverence. The condition of the heart is important. Remember Jesus saying that the heart determines what is important in life and how we act. A heart full of self can never be filled by Jesus. So tears of compunction have something to do with Luke 18:9-14. It is sensitivity to the action of God in one's life, recognizing one's sinfulness in light of the cross, that is the cause of the tears. They are not tears of sorrow but tears from the heart of one who knows the Love of God with the knowledge of one's sinfulness. Perhaps it is the heart's response to God's grace.

Read Chapter 6 On Restraint of Speech. How does this relate to prayer? Think about enhancing inner silence by limiting, at times, exterior noise. How does silence relate to the notion that our life is a school of the Lord's service? (See Prologue)

Think about the discipline necessary for prayer. What do you think is essential? What do you know about yourself that will help you pray?

If you have a Catechism of the Catholic Church, read the final section on prayer. It is easy reading and very good.

One other chapter in the Rule that has a brief instruction on prayer is 52. Notice the respect for others who are praying. What is heartfelt devotion for you?

Finally, Benedict does insist on one prayer to be prayed twice daily. Read the 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph of Chapter 13. Do you allow thorns of contention to arise? Are you reconciled with everyone? Reflect on Benedict's reason for this instruction.

## Lectio

### Questions

- How is Lectio part of the spiritual craft in Benedict's Rule?
- How does Lectio involve the whole person?
- What are the different aspects of Lectio?
- Why is Lectio important in Benedictine life?
- How might conversion be involved with Lectio?

Lectio is one of the sources of prayer for a Benedictine. It is reading, but not just any kind of reading. The monastic term for the kind of reading that ends in prayer is *lectio*. Lectio means more than spiritual reading in the modern sense. Lectio is a meditative holy reading, a reading that involves more than the mind. Benedict was very insistent on this kind of reading. He regarded it as one of the "tools of the spiritual craft" (Chapter 4). The Benedictine Rule was written centuries before methods and techniques of prayer became popular. Yet at the heart of the Benedictine life there are spiritual methods that have stood the test of time. The monastic tradition envisions the person as a whole. It is to this whole person that the word of God is addressed. And it is our lectio that enables us to hear this word and listen attentively.

Some people are surprised that the Benedictine Rule has nothing to say about "mental prayer." The reason is that holy reading in the sense Benedict intended contains all that can be put under the title of mental prayer and a great deal more. Consider the opening word of the Rule: "listen." One of the essential acts of monastic life is listening; not passive listening, but a listening that is capable of an active response to what is heard. Saint Jerome wrote long ago, "If you pray, you are speaking to your Lord; if you read, God is speaking to you." Because holy reading is an active thing, it comes close to meditation. Now in the old monastic tradition, meditation meant to reflect on, to think over, with a view of doing something about it. The early monks read and meditated chiefly on the Bible. The texts of Scripture were seldom far from their minds and hearts. They knew the Christian Scriptures by heart, as well as the psalms. They were looking not for information or science in their reading but for savor. They wanted their lives to be flavored by the Word of God.

To read like this, chewing over the text, ruminating on it, is to experience the realities of faith; it is to "taste and see that the Lord is good." Such reading is an act of faith, and of recognition. It is intended to lead to commitment. This means that we need to read in a peaceful way. We are not doing *lectio* when we are tense about finishing a certain number of pages or so many chapters. We do not read on and on, so as to be completely informed about the subject. No, our reading is to be contemplative, without haste, fragmentation, or over-stimulation. If we let this reading become a way of prayer, it can help us do it in a fashion that leads us to God.

Suppose we just sit down with the Scriptures. We read for a while, then pause and reflect to see if something strikes us. If something does, we stop and let the passage do its work. Perhaps now we can begin to speak with God, simply and naturally, letting the passage console or strengthen us. This awareness may last only briefly; then there is some distraction, so we resume our reading with the same simplicity and peace. There are no practical goals to this kind of holy reading, only a deep, sacramental use of God's word in order to encounter God. At one time we may encounter God quickly after only a few lines; another time we may be tired and distracted, so we simply keep on reading, letting this be our offering to God. "Hear with an attentive ear what the divine voice daily cries out to us," urges Benedict in the Prologue to his Rule. This is what we are trying to do in our reading. We are letting the Scriptures be contemporary, asking what God is saying to us today.

In the monastic tradition there are four aspects to *lectio*: the reading itself, then reflection or meditation, next, prayer, and finally, contemplation. These are four aspects of one organic activity. It is well to choose carefully what we are going to read and then stay with it until we have made it our own. Take one of the gospels, for example. Read it through to get a grasp of the whole. Then read it again slowly and carefully. Next, read the parallel passages in the other gospels; then go to a commentary. After this comes meditation, the effort to understand, to connect and apply what we have read to our own experience.

Where does this fit into our lives? Such meditation helps us to personalize what we read. It is true that in reading Scripture we want to know first what the words meant to the original hearers, but it does not stop there. "These words were written for our instruction," says Saint Paul (1 Cor. 10:11). God is speaking to us. God's word is liberating, transforming, and living for us. The question is not what was Jesus asking of the people of his day, but what he is asking of us today.

From such meditative reading, the next movement is to prayer, to a quiet presence before the Lord to movement in our hearts of thanksgiving, sorrow, adoration, or petition. This involves our hearts more than our heads. The final step is contemplation. Contemplation is both a relaxation of our faculties and their total alertness. It is the gaze of the heart, total attention to the Lord. It is the Lord praying in us rather than our prayer. It is God unifying our entire being at the very center, "in the cave of the heart," as the Eastern writers liked to say. *Lectio* like this nourishes our faith and feeds our awareness of the presence of God in our life.

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Read Chapter 48 of the Rule. Although it is named, "The Daily Manual Labor" it is about work and *lectio divina* or divine reading.

The Rule of Benedict is known for its balance and harmony. There are provisions for work to support the community, for reading so as to grow in the spiritual life, for prayer in community and privately and for an adequate rest for maintaining health.

What is *lectio*? Have you ever heard the phrase or read about it?

It is the unhurried, meditative reading of Scripture or the writing of the Church fathers and mothers. The early monks read aloud. The reader used eyes, tongue and ears. The reading is done to create an awareness of the action of God in human life. Maybe we could call it feeding the soul. Notice Mary's response to the Word, Luke 2:19, 51.

The Psalmists ruminated on the Word until it became a part of them. Ps. 77:12-13. Ps. 119:97.

In Chapter 48 of the Rule, you will note that if one does not concentrate on the reading, it will bring harm to the negligent. Benedict deposes two seniors to make the rounds to see that everyone is reading. The only other place in the Rule for such deputation is in Chapter 27:1-4. It is always because of the care and concern for the welfare of each monk that such provisions are made.

Do you have care and concern for those in your parish community who no longer gather for Word and Sacrament? What is your responsibility toward such persons?

How often do you read the Bible? If you don't, what is your reason?

The Catechism of the Catholic Church urges all Catholics to read the Scripture. If lectio divina is to be fruitful for your inner life you need to select the optimal time for reading as Benedict did. Select the hours when one is mentally alert, usually not at night.

It is easy to find excuses for not reading Scripture. Do you use any excuses? How familiar are you with the Bible? It takes hard work and perseverance to become somewhat familiar with the Scriptures. If you don't read it often, start now with the gospel of Mark. Read short selections and reflect what that word is about in your life. There are, at least, two meanings to every story: One is about the situation in the past and the second is about your life in the present.

Look at RB Chapter 8:3 and 12:14. What have you memorized?

## The Liturgy of the Hours

### Questions

- Why is the Liturgy of the Hours important in Benedictine life?
- How does the Liturgy of the Hours make us aware of the sacredness of all time?
- How do the different Hours reflect the uniqueness of their particular time of day?
- How much of the Rule does Benedict devote to the Liturgy of the Hours (Divine Office)?
- What is the Scriptural foundation for the Liturgy of the Hours?

From his Rule, it is very evident that Saint Benedict considers praying together in community to be a sustaining force in the life of his monks. He put it plainly in Chapter 43: “Let nothing be preferred to the Work of God.” That was what he called the regular assembly of the monks to pray together at stated times; later this came to be called the “Divine Office,” and today it is known as the “Liturgy of the Hours.” In our own time, the Second Vatican Council affirmed the importance of Christians praying together. The document on the liturgy reaffirms that the Church ceaselessly praises her Lord and intercedes for the salvation of the world through the celebration of the Eucharist, and in other ways, “especially the Liturgy of the Hours.” The Council went on to say that this Liturgy is “arranged so that the whole course of the day is made holy by the praise of God.”

For Benedictines, the Liturgy of the Hours has always been a central element of their spirituality, a response to the basic human need to pray, to pray often and to pray together. Worship in every culture is a very human act, arising not only from faith, but also from the cultural experiences of those who gather to pray. Praying the Hours offers the occasion to sanctify daily life and make it an offering to God. But this life, so sanctified and offered, must be our authentic life, shaped by the influences of our time.

These strong moments of daily prayer together emphasize the continuity of our search for God. As a group of believers, we contemplate the mystery of salvation and pray for its completion. Praying these Hours together is one of the principal means by which we overcome the tendency to lose ourselves in the ordinary activities of daily life and so forget our source and destiny in Christ and our present call to live as Christians. Christ is truly present in Scripture as in the Eucharist, and there is always growth in the understanding of the realities and words which Scripture hands down to us. This happens through the contemplation and study of believers who treasure these words in their hearts, as Mary did in the gospels. Part of this treasuring is the constant praying of the Hours through the ages.

From the beginning of Christianity, believers used to pray in private at significant times of the day, particularly at morning and evening. Saint Clement of Alexandria, who died in the year 215, notes that some Christians also had the custom of praying at the third hour of the day (this came to be the prayer Hour of Terce), and at the sixth hour (Sext) and also at the ninth (None). These were private prayers but they could be prayed in common. Morning and evening prayers were always regarded as more obligatory. It was the desert monks in the early fourth century who instituted a common liturgical celebration of morning and evening prayer. This custom spread to the churches in the cities, where it became common to have a public celebration of Morning and Evening prayer for the people. These Hours consisted usually of a hymn, some psalms from the Hebrew Scriptures, readings from both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, and silent prayers between the psalms. Saint John Chrysostom writes of prayer for the whole Church and the world at these hours in which the faithful exercised their common priesthood. By the end of the fourth century, the Sunday vigil of the Resurrection appeared.

There is a different spirit between Morning and Evening Prayer. Since morning conveys the notion of rebirth and renewal, the Lauds (Morning) Hour has the air of dedication. It is a preparation, consecrating the day and all that happens in it to the Lord. That is why the psalms used at Lauds are for the most part joyful songs of praise. But songs of repentance are also part of Morning Prayer, to purify our awakening hearts and enkindle a desire for God. We invite all creation to praise God for the coming of light, especially the light of our Savior. Vespers (Evening Prayer) has two main themes: thanksgiving to God for the good that has come to us during the day, and repentance for the sins of the day. This Hour ends with the beautiful song of Mary, the Mother of God, called the *Magnificat*, a song of jubilant faith in the God who loves the humble.

In the early Church, the faithful considered participation in these two Hours as part of the Christian way of life and were present daily for them. Together with an occasional celebration of Vigils in preparation for the great seasons and feasts, this embedded their celebration of the Eucharist in a rich and varied rhythm of daily and weekly prayer. In this they were only following the example of Jesus their Lord, who was a man of prayer, born of a woman who was a true contemplative, and to a people who knew how to pray.

For these Christians the psalms of the Hebrew Scriptures made up a Christian prayer book, saturated with Christ on every page. They viewed the psalms as the prayers of Christ to his Father or as their own faith experience. The psalms were not predictions of what would happen in Christianity, but they can be used to reflect on God's definitive work for us in Jesus Christ. Spirit-filled prayers, the psalms were originally composed to be used by a variety of worshipers year after year. Their general character allows them to be used in many situations, as they bring our experience before God in praise, love, repentance, and submission. The psalms of Israel give us words to bless God, to repent, to bear trouble and sorrow with courage, to rejoice together. They help us translate our groping search for God into lyrical hymns of praise, into cries for mercy, into quiet hope, and into bursts of joy.

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This is mostly about Chapters 8 – 19 of the Rule. As you read these chapters look for insights that are separate from the Psalm numbers.

Benedict arranged the Divine Office, now called Liturgy of the Hours or Opus Dei, according to the seasons of the year and according to the liturgical calendar. The seasons changes were necessary because there was no electricity so everything had to be done in daylight or by memory. See Eph. 5:18b, 19.

Chapter 8: This section of the Rule, Chapters 8-20, has been called the Liturgical Code. It begins with the night office. The search for God is a constant and relentless search both day and night. The Easter vigil is the Christian celebration of darkness to light or resurrection. Notice the pauses.

Chapter 9: Vigils begins, “O Lord open my lips.” The desire to pray is a gift. God moves us to pray from the heart.

Chapter 10: The nights are shorter in the summer. To provide for adequate rest, the Office is somewhat abbreviated. What does this tell you about Benedict?

Chapter 11: Sunday is special and is arranged differently. How have we lost Sunday as the centerpiece of the week? Does the Sabbath mean anything to you? What do you do on that day? Do you know what the *Te Deum* is? If not, try to find out.

Chapters 12 and 13: are about the Office of Lauds. It is the prayer celebrated at Daybreak. Notice the refrain, recited by heart.

Chapter 14: Even in the Church of the 6<sup>th</sup> century there was a lively connection with the community of saints. Two chapels in Monte Cassino, Benedict’s monastery, were dedicated to John the Baptist and Martin of Tours. Do you know these saints and their feasts?

Chapter 15: Alleluia! Praise God. Why is it not used during Lent?

Chapter 16: The Hours of the Office were the same as the time the Roman guard was changing. For the world, the Ruler is in command. For the monk it was God.

Chapter 17: What does, “O God come to my assistance” suggest? Compline always has the same 3 Psalms; 4, 91 and 134. What does this say to you?

Chapter 18: After the long chapter on the Psalms to be prayed, notice Benedict’s freedom (vs. 22). Mood or preference of the individuals is not to interfere with the prayer in common. It is the Work of God and God is working in those who pray the Psalms.

Chapter 19: The presence of God is highlighted in this chapter. See John 14:20, 23. For any prayer, communal or private, discipline is necessary.

## Work

### Questions

- In what ways are work and creation related?
- What role does work play in the spiritual journey?
- How is work a significant part of Benedictine life in particular?
- From a Christian perspective, is work a curse or a blessing?
- How does a Benedictine perspective of work compare to other more prevalent perspectives of work in modern society?

Work is one of the elemental facts of our human condition, but it is a fact on which Scripture and revelation cast a new light. Our Creator-God is a worker, whose tireless act of creation never ends. Christ labored mightily at our redemption; day by day his Holy Spirit continues this work in us. As Christians we are co-workers with God. In work we know something of the joy of creation and something of the burden of our earthiness in a world where redemption is not yet complete.

We know our God by studying the work of our Creator's hands. And we are a part of this work! "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works" (Eph 2:10). The main activity, which takes up a good deal of our time, work, helps us to earn a living and can be an expression of ourselves. It can be made into a means of expressing our relation to God as we do our share in cooperating with the evolution of the created world. At the same time the painful, tedious, and laborious elements in work are a constant reminder that we live in a fallen world. The pain of work, its disappointments and failures, our own weakness and the sheer stubbornness of things are a part of our whole experience of the human condition as dislocated by sin.

Manual work was not highly valued in the ancient Greek and Roman world, partly because there were slaves to do it and also because of an exaggerated esteem for political and military life. But the Jews in both Old and New Testament times did value physical labor. They saw it as a part of the pattern of work and rest, recorded in the book of Genesis, a pattern God also followed, working for six days and resting on the seventh. The Jews believed that good hard work achieved discipline, security, and the avoidance of evil.

The Gospel atmosphere is one of people at work. Farmers, fishers, shepherds, vine dressers throng around Jesus who himself was known as the son of a carpenter. Jesus worked more years than he preached. He took work for granted as a human necessity, and, in fact, spoke of his supreme mission as Savior in terms of work. Once he said, quite simply, that the Son of Man came to serve, not to be served.

The apostles taught that work is a moral essential of Christian life. Saint Peter wrote that hard work in patient union with Christ guards us from evil. Saint Paul, too, had a good deal to say about work. He proclaimed that in Christian life there is no distinction between slave and free person. Christians work to earn their living and to keep away from evil. Those who refuse to work should not expect to eat. Work makes almsgiving possible and should be done for Christ's sake. Work is linked with charity to the poor and Christian discipline in Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians, and this has become an essential element in a Christian theology of work. The early Fathers of the Church add another note in their insistence that work is not a punishment for sin, because Adam and Eve worked in the Garden of Eden before any sin. They were put there to till and care for it. "God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase, till the earth and subdue it, rule over the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven and every living thing that moves upon the earth'" (Gen. 1:28-29).

In monasticism, work was valued as a spiritual exercise and a discipline. It could be penitential when it was burdensome, but that helped guard the monk against laziness and sloth. Saint Benedict says with no hesitation, "They are truly monks if they live by the labor of their hands" (Chapter 48). In his Rule, prayer, reading, and work divide the hours of the day. All three find their center in God, and a balance among them is of vital importance to the well being of the community. Work provides a relaxation from and a complement to the mental activity of reading and prayer. As Benedict summed it up, "Let the brethren serve one another... for this service brings increase of reward and charity" (Chapter 35).

From the sixth to the twelfth centuries the monastic philosophy of work inspired monks and nuns to develop model farm systems, to create centers of trade and home industry. Monastic innovations in agriculture during the medieval period helped the recovery of unused land to feed a growing population. It also improved the working conditions and economic opportunities of neighboring peasants. Shops built in monastic compounds gave a livelihood to carpenters, cobblers, furniture-makers and others; besides this, artistic gifts are provided for the benefit of society. They were influential in the development of civil and Church law, in handing on a knowledge of medicine, in the growth of art and architecture, and in the progress of education.

The rise of capitalism and the spirit of unrestricted acquisition gradually dominated the world of work, producing modern economic life. Nature was explored and exploited as never before; science began to control all expansion. Human beings suffered a worse exploitation. Many workers labored in inhuman conditions for long hours at starvation wages in jobs of mind-numbing sameness. By the end of the nineteenth century labor unions had begun to come to the rescue of workers. The Church, too, gave them support through the great social encyclicals of some modern popes. Today, economic justice must be the concern of all Christians.

In Benedictine communities the purpose of work has traditionally not been unlimited productivity and profit, but rather providing service for others, to achieve enough for a simple life style. For Benedictine Oblates in Christian communities anywhere, there must be a refusal to be dominated by things in order to be free for God and neighbor and to have something to give to the poor.

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Although chapter 48 was read for the topic of '*lectio*,' it is read again for some of the instructions on work. There is a suggestion that manual labor is preferred but in matters of clothing, see Chapter 55, Benedict takes into consideration local circumstances. This would seem true of other areas, including work. There would have been monks copying manuscripts, caring for the sick and the young children brought to the monastery. There were kitchen servers and others who performed duties for the upkeep of the monastery. In Chapter 57 you will find instructions for the artisans of the monastery. Everyone was not involved in the same kind of work and all was not manual labor. In Chapter 57, there is a reminder that all is a gift from God and haughty pride is out of place.

What kind of work do you do? How do you see the energy and talent as a gift from God? Benedict is intent on giving us a sacramental understanding of our lives. We are not involved in a secular world and then a sacred world, for in the ordinary we encounter God

This is very evident in Chapter 31 vs. 10 and 11. Regard all utensils as sacred vessels – the pitchfork, kitchen towels, books, everything. This is contrary to our society. Planned obsolescence and disposability are hallmarks of our era. Benedict legislates for care for the earth and all that is a part of the earth. He would teach that the spiritual life is not a call to ignore the things of the world but to be spiritual people who care for the things of the earth. How do you experience planned obsolescence and disposability?

It has a lot to do with the divine presence of the God who created all things and saw that they were good. See Chapter 19 vs. 1. What is your experience of God's presence in your life?

When you read Chapter 31, the cellarer, notice how Benedict warns the one who has power to treat the powerless (those who come with a request). Do you have power over someone's life? Are you careful with your power?

The world tends to judge individuals by wealth, success, acclaim and promotions. Our father Benedict reminds us that work is honorable and we are not what we do. Rather, it is that in whatever we do, God may be glorified.

What is a balanced lifestyle according to your understanding of the Rule?

What is the message for your life from these chapters?

How does this chapter relate to the one on *Lectio*?

Look at Dt. 15:10. Whom does God bless? What work is commended?

## Hospitality

### Questions

- What is the biblical foundation of hospitality?
- How is faith involved in the practice of hospitality?
- How is the practice of hospitality part of the spiritual journey?
- What does Benedict's Rule have to say about hospitality?
- How do you experience hospitality when you are the guest?

The most universal and the oldest way monasticism has made its presence felt in the world is hospitality. Of course, hospitality was a tradition long before the Christian era. In the ancient world it usually had spiritual overtones. The Greeks used to consider readiness to offer hospitality the criterion that distinguished the civilized person from the barbarian. In the Bible, hospitality is seen both as a work of mercy and a witness to faith. Think of Abraham who left the shade of his tent in the noonday heat to welcome three strangers who turned out to be messengers from God. Having been a stranger himself in desperate places, Abraham was willing to open his life deliberately to what was unknown and unprogrammed.

In one of the last climactic chapters of Matthew's Gospel, the evangelist has the Last Judgment scene. Here Jesus reveals the depth of the mystery of Christian hospitality: to welcome strangers is to welcome Christ. "I was a stranger and you took me in" (25:35). In Luke's Gospel we have the wonderful Emmaus story. Two distinguished disciples are walking along the road to Emmaus. They meet a stranger and tell him about their sorrow at the death of all their hopes. The stranger, who is Jesus, then begins to tell them why the Messiah had to suffer. When they come to an inn, the disciples persuade him to eat with them and only when eating together do they recognize him as their crucified Lord. Only in breaking the bread of hospitality did their confusion turn to hope. And the Book of Revelation says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and sit down to supper" (3:20).

To welcome the stranger is an act of faith. That is why Benedict stresses, as he does, hospitality to guests. The stranger is not just a person, but all the ambiguity, the unknown, the otherness in life. Faith can help us greet this otherness not as a threat, but as a possible gift. God is the ultimate stranger, unpredictable, potentially threatening our security. Faith is the attitude of one who searches the face of every stranger and guest looking for God.

The first monks, those men and women of the Syrian and Egyptian deserts, who lived in austerity, silence, and faith, knew the meaning of hospitality and were ready to dispense with their usual practices of asceticism to welcome a guest. There are some endearing little anecdotes on this theme. Consider the following. Once a monk came to a hermit, and as he was taking his leave he apologized, "Forgive me for hampering you in keeping your rule." But the hermit answered, "My rule is to welcome you with hospitality and to send you on your way in peace."

Another time, two monks came to an old hermit whose custom it was not to eat every day. When the hermit saw them, he greeted them gladly and said, “A fast has its reward. Those who eat from a motive of charity obey two commandments; they leave their self-will and refresh their guests.”

In Chapter 53 of his Rule, Saint Benedict provides for guests and is quite evidently glad that there will always be guests in a monastery. He is prepared for considerable inconvenience to take care of guests, because he is convinced that they represent Christ. Benedict goes on to make clear that the care of guests is to have a distinctively religious tone and that it be done in a way that does not disturb the peace of the community. The Rule shows Benedict’s belief that spiritual values can be transmitted through hospitality. It does not consider that guests are to be merely entertained. But that the monks are to witness to a life experienced as deeply meaningful, with Christ as its center.

Guests who come to our Benedictine monasteries today find many reasons for visiting. Basic to all these, is a desire to experience God through a lifestyle that speaks to them of peace and deeply held convictions. So many people today are wearied of a hectic, impersonal existence, wearied of the kind of competition and materialism that seems to lead only to despair. These people come to monastic houses looking for a vision of life with Christ at the heart of it, Christ with his power to reconcile and transcend differences of age, background, education, and opinion.

Benedictine Oblates who share the monastic experience and the monastic vision can witness this to their own guests and in their own kind of hospitality. For the greatest source of hospitality is not our houses but ourselves. It is we who can allow them to be what they really are and who through this gift of self can help restore some measure of balance and wholeness to their lives. Hospitality is the challenge of welcoming the other who may look at first like the gardener whom Mary Magdalene saw in the garden at Easter, or like the traveler on his way to Emmaus, but who turns out to be Christ.

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Begin by reading Chapter 4:75-78. The monastery is a workshop. Look at vs. 2, 8, 20, 21, 25, and 48-49. What does this have to do with Chapter 53, The Reception of Guests? An outline for you as you read through the chapter follows:

Notice the context: Christ’s presence - courtesy - meal - reverence.

Elements: announcement - greeting - kiss of peace - prayer - scripture, - washing of feet.

Read the Scriptural references that have to do with hospitality. Gen. 18:1ff; 2 Kings 4:8; Heb. 13:2; I Peter 4:9-10, and Jesus’ remark about strangers in Mt. 25.

The Rule underscores the understanding of service to others as to the Lord. Chapter 35:1; 36:1.

And in Chapter 53, the guest we entertain is no other than God.

When faith is more than a veneer, it sees the mystery of God as the richest source of goodness and blessing of one's life. This is to be the most influential formation in life and the primary consideration in all one's decisions. This is for all Christians.

To be hospitable in this sense means to make room for God in one's life. Entertaining the divine presence in careful and unhurried prayer, having patience in an imperfect community (or parish), showing concern for all people and gentle care for the material world which speaks of the reality and love of God in creation, this is true hospitality.

To be hospitable is making room for God's plan.

Who is to be received as guests? How did Benedict seek to safeguard the values of the community? Whom does the world honor?

Who is welcome in your parish? What body language implies acceptance? And rejection? Is the Rule out of step with society? How do you respond to the poor? The homeless? What fears keep us from entertaining strangers, or even speaking to them at Church if we are not 'greeters'?

The challenge for all is the human tendency to fashion life in accord with human wisdom. Society measures humankind by control and acquisition of power. To live in a secular world and to keep a transcendent revelation is the ultimate message of hope.

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## STABILITY

### *Part I - STABILITY OF HEART IN TIME: Past and Present*

Stability has been defined by Benedictine scholar, Jean Leclercq, as “**the past living in the present.**” There are three key words, all very important here: *past, living, and present*. Benedictines have a long past to remember—1500 years of it. However, we are not a museum preserving fossils from that past; that is traditionalism. It is well to question “isms,” as they often consist of theories or doctrines whose principles have become rigid and not supportive of growth and development. Traditionalists are usually very selective about *which* past practices they are trying to preserve, and blind to those that don’t fit into their particular belief system.

Living tradition is just that – **alive and moving**. Thomas Merton wrote: “Christian tradition, unlike all others, is a living and perpetual revolution.”<sup>1</sup> Since the monastic tradition is Christian to the core, the same can be said of the tradition by which Benedictines live. Merton goes on to liken living tradition to the breath of a physical body. It renews life by repelling stagnation. Christian monastic tradition is revolutionary because it denies many of the values and standards that pervade our media and our society.

Tradition is like a river whose current is deep and strong. It is capable of cutting entirely new channels, yet remains the same river. Fidelity to a tradition is an interpersonal reality. We are faithful, not to some **thing**, but to **someone**. That one is the Spirit who guided Benedict and the other monastic founding fathers and mothers, and who has guided reforms through the centuries. All true fidelity is creative: **hiding** comfortably behind the barricades of long-standing habits and customs, is to retreat from the demands of fidelity today, just as much as **neglecting** the weight of tradition is being unfaithful.

Tradition begins to die the moment it is too minutely defined. If you make it too concrete, that is exactly what it becomes—**concrete**: rigid, heavy, dead. There is an elusiveness about living tradition, yet at the same time a rootedness that enables it to grow, to adapt, and to express itself in new forms.

Tradition is concerned with lasting realities of the spirit, with values that remain while their expression keeps changing in order to keep up with our own personal growth, and with our changing environment and culture. For tradition to live, it is essential to distinguish between the essential value being transmitted, and the time-conditioned customs by which these values have been expressed. We keep this in mind as we study the Rule of Benedict. Many of the detailed regulations set forth there are customs of the period. We try to preserve Benedict’s values, while at the same time giving them an expression that speaks to our own time, and the circumstances of our own lives. Benedict’s Rule is not so much a legal document as it is part of the wisdom literature growing out of the lived experience of early monks. They attempted to respond creatively to the conditions of their times, just as we are called to respond creatively to the needs of our own times. Proverbial insights from the past remain empty unless they are filled with fresh experiences of life.

Esther deWaal says, “I must ask myself where I am rooted. Am I stable and unwavering in my commitment to my search for God? What militates against stability in my life are all my escape routes: my fantasies and my day dreams, my wandering memory and my wandering imagination, the romantic dreams of some better place.”<sup>2</sup> True stability is fruitful, drinking Christ’s living waters, and is the

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<sup>1</sup> New Seeds of Contemplation, by Thomas Merton, p. 142 ff

<sup>2</sup> A Life-Giving Way, by Esther de Waal, p. 151 ff

opposite of being static or stuck. As de Waal says, “Maturity comes from facing what has to be faced and not running away from all the dark and murky elements” that lie in wait to attack us from within.

If I am all taken up with some dream-place, I am not truly present to my present reality. Stability has to do with staying in the here-and-now situation when I would really much rather escape—anywhere but here and now. Stability means I am so deeply rooted in essential values, that I can “hang loose” and let go of whatever is not really essential, when the call to grow or serve requires that “letting go.” I can be *patient* in the full meaning of that word, including the elements of *waiting* and *suffering*. This is not possible through will power alone. It is possible only because I know I can rely on the faithfulness of God.

Benedict asks us to be present to the moment, whether that be pleasurable or painful. Oblate Elizabeth Canham writes: “We are part of a culture where escape from every kind of discomfort is to be found through access to a pill, a therapy, or some mindless entertainment. So we are encouraged never to stay with the uncomfortable experience long enough to ask what it means and where we might find God in it.”<sup>3</sup> You may be familiar with the advice given by one of the desert fathers when a young monk asked him for a word to help him on his spiritual journey. The elder monk replied: “Go to your cell and your cell will teach you everything.” “Be where you are” could be his word for us. Refuse the fantasy of “if only...”

Elizabeth Canham writes about living with loss as a practice of stability. The loss may be that of a loved one who has died, or the loss of a home, the loss of a familiar and loved community, a loss of a job that meant a great deal to me, the loss of health, or any of hundreds of other losses. Stability tells me not to escape into denial or avoidance, but to stay present and to nurture hope and trust, believing that as Julian of Norwich so famously said, “All will be well, and all will be well. In the end, all manner of things will be well.” St. Paul writing to the Romans said much the same: “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God” (8:28).

Being at *home with myself* is essential to stability. The familiar words of St. Augustine, ““Late have I loved Thee! And behold, Thou wert within and I was without, I was looking for Thee out there,” in a modern translation read, “Behold, You were within me and I was not at home.” If we are not at home with ourselves, who will open the door when Christ knocks? At the Last Supper he asked his disciples to “abide in me as I abide in you” in order to bear fruit. This is what *stability of heart* is all about.

## ***Part II: LOVERS OF THE PLACE – Physical Stability***

Looking at stability from the *outside*, what does stability *look* like? In Benedict’s time there were many varieties of monks, and most of us are familiar with the opening chapter of the Rule of Benedict, describing some of them. Benedict does not have much use for wandering monks. Not *all* wandering monks were unworthy, but apparently Benedict had experience with some of the less savory sorts. He gives us a stinging commentary on the *Sarabaites*, who “go about in twos and threes, or singly, resting in sheepfolds which are not those of the Lord, but which they make to suit themselves...” Even worse were the *gyrovagues*, who were “always on the move; they never settle to put down the roots of stability; it is their own wills that they serve as they seek the satisfaction of their own gross appetites.” About these Benedict says, “it is better to keep silence than to speak,” so we will do the same.

In Benedict’s mind, stability included much more than staying in one place. It meant being stable in living the cenobitic life (for anyone new to the term, cenobitic simply means *living in community*), as

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<sup>3</sup> Heart Whispers, by Elizabeth Canham, p. 110

it is followed in the community. It includes perseverance in *obedience* and overlaps the commitment to *conversatio morum*, which we will consider later.

Stability has to do with being at home in a place. The monastery is not a hotel or a boarding house. It is a home, albeit a different kind of home from the ones you live in. Most of you, however, know the difference between a home and an address, a place where you reside, but you may not consider *home* in the full sense of that word. It is good to reflect on just where home is for you, and what makes it home. Where are my roots here and now? In a mobile society such as ours, it is easy to lose touch with the value of stability.

Why is it important to be *at home*? It is impossible psychologically to experience the entire world as our home, if we do not relate to a particular locality and sink roots there. We have to be grafted into some local scene in order to grow. There is a creative interchange that goes on between ourselves and our environment. It is precisely in relating to our environment that we come to know ourselves, as we enter into relationship with it. Only when I dwell for a long time in a place where the surroundings are congenial and familiar, can I confront the basic questions of life: Who am I? Where have I come from? Where am I going?<sup>4</sup>

Living in a *familiar* environment means being familiar with our most distant horizons as well as with those things we live with most intimately. We may talk about our personal effects as *possessions*, but is it not better to think of them as our *belongings*? Possessions imply ownership. Belongings are all those things we *long* for, that we have a delight in, having lived with them for some time. We like to *be long* with them. This harmony between ourselves and our belongings is what makes our dwelling a *home*, the place where it is good to *be long*.

Being at home is not the same as making a comfortable nest for myself in some ivory tower where I allow no intruders. Gabriel Marcel holds that we must be permeable to external reality, we must be able to let it in: receive it, welcome it, and integrate it into ourselves. I consider this a good definition of hospitality. It is also in contrast to much of our social environment today. Fearful people erect barriers to exclude any influence they see as potentially threatening. They want to keep people out, rather than let them in. From another perspective, unless I am at home myself, I have no place to welcome anyone else.

In the early years of monasticism it was precisely their stability that enabled monasteries to grow and become citadels of civilization. Someone has said that the big difference between the Franciscans and Benedictines is that while the Franciscans sang and celebrated the glories of creation, the Benedictines worked at preserving creation. Franciscans have never held stability as a value—they cannot own property, and traditionally they roamed the highways and byways begging. Benedictines became highly successful farmers precisely because they stayed in one place and developed methods of agriculture and conservation of the land's resources.

Stability is not easily obtained. The Trappist Abbot, Francis Klein, writing in "Lovers of the Place," says: "Stability on our own land is never just easy squatting. For each piece of tranquility claimed, we must confront and control some wild energy within, or some bullying foe without... For the most part, we take a few steps forward, and then a few backward, against an enemy which never seems to be fully subdued." Stability requires that in unpleasant situations we do not take the easy route and run away. Stability asks us to confront adversity and stay in place, bending when we must, and, like a supple tree, growing stronger in the bending. Stability is not a matter of mindless, stubborn rigidity. We

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<sup>4</sup> On Being "At Home," by James McMurry, *Monastic Studies* 1966

know what happens to trees that are brittle and cannot bend when assaulted by violent winds: they break or are uprooted.

There are many paradoxes in stability. Abbot Francis sums it up in this way:

If you want to change,  
Stand still.  
If you want to grow  
Get rooted.  
Wandering around without growth,  
Reproducing the easy green shoots without blooms  
Creating compulsively, self-consciously  
Smothers everything  
Even the wonders of the world  
With sameness.<sup>5</sup>

As Sr. Verna writes in The Gift of Benedict: “Stability demands patience with oneself, with others, and with God. It is an active waiting like that of a pregnant woman who is ‘expectant,’ hopeful, ready to suffer birth pangs for the joy of bringing a new life into the world. The truly patient monk, says Benedict, will certainly share in the sufferings of Christ, but will also experience the joy of new birth...into his kingdom.”

For those who live in a monastery, one of the most important practices of stability is showing up regularly for the Liturgy of the Hours. Whether it is convenient or not, whether it is efficient or not, whether they *feel* like it or not, when the bell rings, monastics leave what they are doing and head for Chapel to praise God together, to sanctify that particular Hour of the day or night. This discipline is not always easy, but it gives stability to the day. Similarly, eating together is another expression of stability.

Those not living in a monastery have a more difficult task, in setting up structures to assure stability in their spiritual practice. Conditions vary so widely with each individual, that it is hard for me to make any recommendations beyond taking care that there is some regular *time* for prayer. Many people have found it useful to have a regular *place* for prayer also. A corner of a room can become a place that helps us focus and bring ourselves back to center. The place need not be a church, and it may not even be in any kind of building. What matters is that it helps us be faithful to prayer. When we are distracted and feel unable to pray, just being in a familiar place of prayer may be all we need.

“Stability,” says Joan Chittister, is an outward demonstration of what we say is our inward disposition: the love of God in all things, but especially in the humdrum and mundane, in the here and now, and the them and those.”<sup>6</sup> Precisely because our society is characterized by *speed*, rather than depth, we meet resistance to the practice of stability, even though our need for stability is far greater than our need for immediate satisfaction. To quote Joan again, “Stability is the one sure tool we have to be certain that the world, for us, can really become a garden to be tilled rather than a candy store to be robbed.”

For those of us who depend on modern technology for most of our waking hours, Gabriel Marcel offers this sobering insight: (and keep in mind that he wrote this nearly 40 years ago) “In our contemporary world it may be said that the more [we become] dependent on the gadgets whose smooth functioning assure [us] a tolerable life at the material level, the more estranged [we] become from an

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<sup>5</sup> Lovers of the Place, p. 98

<sup>6</sup> Wisdom Distilled from the Daily, p. 155

awareness of [our] inner reality... We ought not to break all the machines... but every kind of outward technical progress ought to be balanced... by an effort at inner conquest... self-mastery.”<sup>7</sup>

Guerric of Igny has two simple images for stability: “What good is a bird sitting on eggs who flies off and leaves her work unfinished? What plant can flower or bear fruit unless it is left in the place where it is planted?”

### ***Part III: STABILITY IN RELATIONSHIPS – security and exploration***

In their Statement on Benedictine Life made in 1967, the abbots of the world said: “**Essentially stability is a personal bond which links the monk with the community whose good and bad qualities, whose needs and aspirations, whose present reality and future development he accepts.**” Past, present and future are included here. The past for us as *community* includes 1500 years of Benedictine tradition. And to every human relationship, our *personal* past, our history, is what we bring. Furthermore, to have any kind of stability, every personal commitment reaches forward into the future. In the marriage ceremony, it’s that part about *for better or for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health*. Then of course there are all kinds of civil contracts that we enter into, presuming, or at least hoping for, good faith from all parties involved.

If we do not have some kind of *personal* stability or identity that includes these same dimensions of past, present and future, entering into a binding covenant of any kind may be problematic. A renewal document for one of the monastic communities of men speaks eloquently of this reality: *...the monk is encouraged to come to terms with self: he cannot flee self-confrontation. Stability, then is a self-discipline, since the monk promises to persevere in the task of spiritual growth despite discouragements and difficulties, realizing that he cannot really escape by running from place to place.*<sup>8</sup> Perhaps some of our commitments fail precisely because we do not consider all *three* of these dimensions of past experience, present reality, and future possibility.

Having considered stability from the point of view of *belongings*, rather than *possessions*, we can expand on that thought in relationship to people. Probably we all know of unhealthy relationships where people are treated precisely as *possessions*, ending in a serious loss of freedom. The opposite to that is *friendship*, which always respects the freedom of the other. When I was not looking for it, an article that I had copied years ago, fell into my hands, and while it was written by an English Jesuit, Brendan Callaghan, it had a very Benedictine feel. It was titled, “What does it mean to belong?” He shows how belonging is central in our lives and necessary to our freedom.

To some degree, we are all *exiles*, strangers in a strange land, since, as Paul reminds us, “Our citizenship is in heaven” (Philippians 3:20). Some of us feel like *political* aliens at this moment in history. This makes having a place or community where we *belong*, all the more important. Then there are those wonderful friends with whom we always feel “at home.” Furthermore, that sense of *belonging* does not require physical presence. We may spend long stretches of our life away from home, from community or friends, and still be nourished by what Benedictines could call stability.

We need to find where we truly belong. Erich Fromm says that only devotion to something genuinely greater than ourselves can supply an adequate framework of reference for human life. There is, of course, a down side to belonging if we do not have room to keep growing. Good parenting means giving children a secure base and the encouragement to explore from it. As Callaghan emphasizes, “We come back to what might appear a paradox: **healthy belonging sets me free to explore.**” He further

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<sup>7</sup> On Being “At Home,” p. 87

<sup>8</sup> Renew and Create, American Cassinese Congregation, 1969

suggests that such healthy belonging always involves the recognition of its *provisionality*: I am safe with mother, but to be me I have to move on. That can be true also of our relationship with Mother Church. Only in God do we find our true home.

This element of provisionality is perhaps the reason so many spiritual writers resort to the image of journey in relation to our life with God. We all need resting places along the way, but to get stuck too long at one of those resting places means we may never reach our goal. Furthermore, we rarely travel in one straight line. The journey may be more like the winding road up a steep mountain. We may wind around the mountain more than once, or travel by switchbacks, coming back repeatedly to the same view from a different angle. T.S. Eliot put it this way:

*We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.*<sup>9</sup>

Again, in Callaghan's words: "To the extent that I do not expect any one place or time or person *fully* to satisfy the need I have to belong, to that extent no place nor time nor person need be utterly foreign to me." When I recognize my essential belonging in *God*, I need not place unreal expectations on any immediate human relationship. The here-and-now relationships will then have room to breathe and grow. We will have moments of "coming home," and be able to celebrate them, without clinging to them possessively. These little homecomings then become foretastes of the Great Homecoming. And to the degree that we are "at home" with ourselves, we are in a position to enable other people to know that they belong, that they can be at home.

There is an aspect of monastic stability that may interest you. When I entered the monastery, at profession a bishop or abbot, as representative of the Church, received those vows. The superior and community merely witnessed the event. However, as monastic communities studied their charism and roots in the wake of Vatican II, the practice changed. Now the superior of the community receives the vows, representing the community, and the priest, bishop or abbot simply witnesses the ceremony. Also, the ritual now also more closely reflects the Rule of Benedict, who in Chapter 58, directed "Each novice then prostrates before every member of the community asking their prayers and from that day is counted as a full member of the community." Although we no longer have the new member prostrate before each member, immediately following the vows ceremony, there is a ritual exchange of the kiss of peace between the new sister and each member of the community.

Esther De Waal writes: "Without stability the other two vows lose much of their meaning. If we are to live our lives according to this commitment, we must be prepared to live it until the end, to death. If I know deeply and interiorly that this is where I stand, then that unleashes great energy and does away with the inner debate and uncertainty, that endless questioning, that so quickly becomes debilitating."<sup>10</sup>

In our congregation the aspect of commitment to the *community* is especially important, because we make that commitment to the entire *congregation*, and not to a particular monastery. This is unlike most Benedictine communities, where there is one independent monastery, and while members may live and work outside that monastery, their commitment is still to that monastery.

***Koinonia*** is the word used in the New Testament to convey the meaning of Christian love and friendship expressed in community, radiating to the larger Christian body. This is what Benedict

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<sup>9</sup> *Four Quartets*, "Little Gidding" lines 239-242

<sup>10</sup> *A Life-giving Way*, by Esther de Wall, p. 150-151

intended his Rule to create and sustain, and for him there is no greater loss possible for the monk than separation from the community, as is evident from the seriousness of the penalty of excommunication.

The love that unites Benedict's community goes beyond natural attraction and the enjoyment of one another's company. We are called upon to be the extension of the *agape* of God, and according to some scholars, *agape* is that love which unites precisely those who are *not* attracted to one another. *Agape* presumes the existence of tensions and divisions, so we need not be surprised to find them in our midst. *Agape* is a sign of forgiveness.

Aelred of Rievaulx has written some of the most beautiful tributes to monastic community that can be found anywhere. Aelred sees us as made for love, and our love has to be liberated, directed not to *objects*, but to *other loves*, which in their free and creative response call forth more love in ourselves. Aelred's theology of monastic life is a theology of friendship. So much so, that in a day when friendships were suspect, Merton mentions that in some Trappist monasteries, certain of Aelred's books were kept under lock and key!

For Aelred, monastic discipline is an education in friendship. Contemplation is not an individual exploit arrived at by turning away from everybody else. It is a sharing in the friendship of God, and is a place of encounter with God. If the friendship that unites two friends is true, Christ becomes more and more their common center of attraction and union. Today, when community at every level is breaking down, and families are fragmented, the way we view and live our stability has much to say to our neighbors.

Cassian, commenting on Psalm 133, says "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity." He says "This must not be understood of those who dwell merely in the same locality; but of those who dwell in the unity of the same spirit.... It is no impediment for those who are united by the same bond of virtue to be separated by the distance of their abode. It is unity in piety, and not of residence, which renders persons kindred in the sight of God."