

CLOTHING OF NOVICES, Oct. 11, 2012

Dear Postulants, you have just heard two very important readings at our service this evening. The one from St. Benedict's Rule says that anyone who wants to join a monastic community should actually be kept waiting for four or five days, enduring harsh treatment, in order to see if he is persistent in his request. Such a practice is actually found still today in some religious traditions. When I teach a world religions course, I regularly show the students a film in which a young man wishing to enter a Zen Buddhist monastery is made to wait, crouching at the monastery door for several days, both day and night, before he is allowed inside. Even though this may be somewhat stylized and the man probably knew that he would eventually be admitted if he just remained waiting at the door, it surely impressed on him in a very powerful way the seriousness of what he was asking.

As you know, we don't follow that part of the Rule literally, but there are nevertheless always going to be challenges for anyone newly coming to monastic life. There is no need for us to go out of our way to make things difficult, for the Gospel passage we just heard names some of the things that you are necessarily giving up as an integral part of this way of following Jesus: you are giving up various material possessions (what the Gospel calls "houses" and "lands"), you are giving up close familial ties for what Jesus in the Gospel calls "the sake of my name," and you are giving up the less-structured life that most people enjoy, one that allows them to decide more or less easily what they want to do for recreation on a weekend, what particular food they want to eat at a given meal, and so forth.

Now I don't want to exaggerate the difficulties. After all, St. Benedict says in the Prologue of his Rule that even though there is going to be a certain degree of strictness "in order to amend faults and to safeguard love," he adds that he nevertheless intends "to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome," and he goes on to assure the monk that if he perseveres "in this way of life and in faith," then he will find the road ever less narrow and will indeed find himself

running “on the path of God’s commandments, [his heart] overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love.”

What I most want to reflect on is why you or any of us should want to embark on this journey. Jesus says in that Gospel passage that anyone giving up so many things “will receive a hundred times more, and will inherit eternal life.” That sounds pretty good, and there is indeed nothing wrong with expecting some return from so generous and loving a Lord. We *are* to love ourselves, to want really good things for ourselves. After all, loving one’s neighbor as oneself presumes a certain degree of self-love. The crucial point, however, is that the best way to love oneself, the best way to experience already in this life something of the joy of heaven, is actually to be more concerned about the good of others than of oneself. This is what St. Benedict is getting at in the next-to-last chapter of his Rule when he writes that the monk is to pursue not “what he judges better for himself, but instead, what he judges better for another” and that they are all to “show to their fellow monks the pure love of brothers.”

It is worth noting how frequently this attitude or practice appears in the Rule. For example, if for some serious infraction a monk is for a time separated from the rest of the community—not allowed to participate with the others at the Divine Office, required to take his meals separately, and so forth—Benedict wants to make sure that such a monk does not become despondent and simply give up. For that reason, he says the abbot should send mature and wise monks to support the delinquent one, urging him to be humble enough to make satisfaction for his fault and consoling him “lest he be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow” (a phrase taken from St. Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians). This practice of excommunication from the rest of the community may be rarely invoked nowadays, but the spirit beyond Benedict’s admonition is of timeless value.

Such concern for others likewise appears in the beautiful chapter on care for the sick brothers, a chapter that begins with the words, “Care of the sick must rank above and before all else, so that they may truly be served as Christ, for he said, *I was sick and you visited me*, and, *What you did for one of these least brothers you did for me.*” The very same motivation appears at the beginning of the chapter on receiving guests, where we read, “All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, for he himself will say, *I was a stranger and you welcomed me.*”

In this connection, it’s worth noting that the same emphasis on caring for the sick and for guests appears in the earlier monastic tradition that St. Benedict was so intent on passing on, so let’s also hear a couple of the sayings of the Desert Fathers. The imagery of the first saying I’ve selected is a bit gross, but perhaps for that reason all the more impressive. It was said that a young monk came to an elder with this question: There are two monks, one of whom leads a solitary life for six days every week, doing much fasting and penance, and another spends his time serving the sick. “Whose work does God accept with the greater favor?” And the elder answered: “Even if the one who withdraws for six days a week were to hang himself up by his nostrils, he could not equal the one who serves the sick.” And on the reception of guests, one of the sayings goes like this: “A brother went to see a hermit, and as he was leaving he said to him, ‘Forgive me, Father, for having taken you away from your rule and your practice of solitude.’ But the other replied, ‘My rule is to refresh you and send you away in peace.’”

We ought never think that all of these are just fine, inspiring words. No, these words from the Benedict’s Rule and from the earlier tradition, all of them in one way or another based on the Gospel, can actually be the basic driving force for a life of genuine holiness. For example, those verses that Benedict quotes from the 25th chapter of Matthew’s Gospel, the

parable of the sheep and the goats, were what led St. Therese of Lisieux to be especially kind to members of her community who were not naturally congenial. She saw, perhaps more clearly than most others of the canonized saints, that love of one another in Christ (or, if you will, love of Christ in one another) is the best guideline of all for anyone who, in St. Benedict's words, wants to be "hastening on to the perfection of monastic life."

There are plenty of other topics that are relevant to the monastic way of life—prayer together here in our chapel, personal prayer at various times of the day, holy reading, work in our school or on the grounds, the sacraments, poverty, silence, and many others—but they are all to be practiced either as ways of actually loving and serving others or as ways of instilling or of deepening that kind of motivation in our hearts. That's why St. Augustine could say what might sound bold but is actually quite sound: "Love, and do what you will." Our whole way of life is meant to foster this, and to whatever extent this isn't evident in our conduct, the fault is surely our own. May you, throughout your novitiate, therefore grow above all in the two great commandments, which are exactly the ones with which St. Benedict begins his chapter on the tools of good works: "Love the Lord [your] God with your whole heart, your whole soul, and all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself."