

## SIMPLE PROFESSION OF BROTHERS ISAIAH AND SAMUEL

(29<sup>th</sup> Sunday of the Year – Cycle C)

Brothers Isaiah and Samuel, in asking to make profession according to the Rule of St. Benedict, you are well aware that you aren't so much making vows to a world-wide religious order as rather to a particular monastic community. Indeed, the very first aspect of profession that Benedict names in his Rule is stability, meaning commitment to a particular group of men, all of whom are intent on the goal that our founder names at the very end of the prologue to his Rule, namely, sharing in the sufferings of Christ so as to deserve to share also in his kingdom.

You are also well aware that such a commitment is to a considerable degree counter-cultural. This was already the case at the beginning of the Christian monastic movement back in the third and fourth century, and it has remained so ever since. Among other things, you are saying “No” to that whole attitude of “greed is good” that has infected the minds of so many of our fellow Americans in recent decades. But it is very important, indeed crucial, to realize that monastic profession is much more a matter of saying “Yes” than “No”—“Yes” first of all to someone, the Lord, but also to values that are very much needed in our country these days.

What I mean is this: In the past few weeks we have seen our entire government stuck in gridlock in a way that has done serious harm to the lives of many Americans and has made us a conundrum and even a laughing stock to people in other parts of the world. Even though the partial shutdown of government has finally ended, the solution is only temporary. To use an image that has become commonplace, Congress has merely kicked the can farther down the road.

Is Benedictine life at all relevant in this situation? I think it is. Consider what one political commentator recently suggested, namely, that the way our elected officials got to this point had less to do with politics than with habits of the mind and heart, and that one of the best things members of Congress could do would be to read and take to heart the Rule of St. Benedict. That commentator argues that monastic life is not some “hopeless throwback to the past” but rather “a window to a future that we desperately need in our society,” a way of life that stresses community over competition, consensus over conflict, service over self-aggrandizement, quiet over chatter, and concern for others over individual gain.<sup>1</sup> Each one of those five values is clearly part of the Benedictine way of life. Let’s look very briefly at each:

First, community over competition: In chapter three of the Rule, Benedict says that when there are serious matters to be decided, the abbot is to call the whole community together so that each monk may offer his honest opinion, but the saint insists that “the brothers, for their part, are to express their opinions with all humility, and not to presume to defend their views obstinately.”

Next, consensus over conflict: Actually, the Rule of St. Benedict does not insist on consensus in matters requiring a decision. That same third chapter of the Rule leaves the ultimate decision always to the abbot, even in cases where a majority of the community might judge differently, but over the centuries this proved to be so open to abuse that the constitutions of the various Benedictine congregations throughout the world now specify that on certain matters a majority of the community must be in favor if a particular course of action is to be pursued. Even when the abbot is required only to *consult* his council of seniors, our English Benedictine constitutions stipulate the following: “The abbot shall summon the council frequently, and always when there are matters of serious importance.... [He] shall pay serious

attention to the views of his councilors, and their advice should not be lightly over-ridden, especially if it is unanimous” (Const. 16-17).

Third, service over self-aggrandizement: More than a year ago, in a conference to our community, I pointed out how very frequently the language of “service” is found in the Holy Rule: some form of the verb *servire* (to serve) appears eleven times, while the related nouns “service” and “servant” appear a total of seven times in this rather short document. In the prologue to his Rule, Benedict calls the monastery “a school for the Lord’s service” (Prol. 45), and at the beginning of chapter five, on obedience, he calls the entire profession of monastic life a “holy service” (RB 5.3), by which he means not only service of God but also of one another. He writes that those assigned to kitchen duties are “to serve one another in love” (RB 35.6) and that the sick brothers are to be “served out of honor for God” (RB 36.4). All of this mirrors the teaching of the Gospel, especially Jesus’ saying that he came “not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45).

Fourth, quiet over chatter: Not only is there an entire chapter of the Rule devoted to the importance of silence, but, perhaps more significantly, the very first word of the entire Rule is “Listen,” more specifically “Listen ... with the ear of your heart.” So many people nowadays seem to love to hear themselves talk, utterly intent on making sure that their voice prevails. Benedict, however, advises us to be open to the wisdom of others, even saying at one point that the abbot should be sure to listen to the younger members of the community, for the Lord often reveals to them what is best. How different this is from the acrimony that infects much of our Congress today, with all sorts of vilification being thrown across the aisle, so much so that some very respected legislators have even left government service because the atmosphere seemed too

poisoned to enable persons of different political persuasions to work together for the common good.

And lastly, concern for others over individual gain: Here we cannot but think of Benedict's inspiring chapter 72 "On the good zeal of monks," where he insists that each member of the community is to pursue not what he judges better for himself but instead what he judges better for someone else. And all of this, he writes, is to be done in a spirit of love: love of God, love of one's abbot, love of one another.

Such love, in the final analysis, ought always to be the primary mark of a monk, as indeed of any Christian. It may not come easily, especially with regard to persons who may be very different in personality or temperament, but let us also never overlook or underestimate what supports we have to encourage and enhance our love of one another. Foremost among these is surely what we do a number of times each day in this very chapel, whether it be the Liturgy of the Hours or the Eucharist. In this respect, let me refer to the teaching of two women that my high-school students have been or will be studying this semester, both of whom had a deep appreciation of Benedictine life. Catherine de Hueck Doherty wrote in one of her books: "We have to begin to love one another in the fullest sense of Christ's teaching. But to do so we must pray. It is only through prayer that one can follow Christ to Golgotha and up onto the other side of his cross, and to become free through his ascension."<sup>2</sup> And with special reference to the greatest prayer of all, the Eucharist, Catherine's friend Dorothy Day, who was herself a Benedictine Oblate, once said: "Christ Jesus is present in many ways to his Church.... But He is present most especially in the Eucharistic species.... In Him I can do all things, though without

Him I am nothing. I would not dare write or speak or try to follow the vocation God has given me, to work for the poor and for peace, if I did not have the constant reassurance of the Mass.”<sup>3</sup>

It is surely a blessing for you, Brothers Isaiah and Samuel, to live in a place where your room is only a few minutes away from this chapel, and where you have the privilege of praying several times each day with your brother monks and the possibility of coming here literally any time of the day or night to pray privately. The first reading at today’s Mass spoke of Moses raising his hands in such a way as to help the Israelites in their war against the Amalekites. I admit that this sounds rather magical, but from early Christian times the account has been understood as symbolizing the power of prayer. Indeed, the early Christians often prayed with their hands uplifted more or less the way Moses’ hands were raised there on the mountaintop. In fact, Pope Pius XI once referred to this very account in a document approving the revised statutes of the Carthusian monks. In it, he went on to say: “Those who assiduously fulfill the duty of prayer and penance contribute much more to the increase of the Church and the welfare of humanity than those who labor in tilling the Master’s field, for unless the former drew down from heaven a shower of divine grace to water the field that is being tilled, the evangelical laborers would reap a mere scanty crop from their toil.”<sup>4</sup>

In accord with those words, I urge you, Brothers Isaiah and Samuel—as indeed, I urge all of us—to be faithful and assiduous in prayer, just as Jesus teaches in today’s parable of the “dishonest judge,” so that through such prayer we may grow in our love of God and one another. Whether or not you agree with that political commentator’s claim that the Rule of St. Benedict is the very best thing the members of Congress could read in order to extricate themselves from the current legislative mess, at the very least you yourselves have the Rule as a sure guide. You have

studied it in detail during your year of novitiate, and you now have what I can honestly call the *privilege* of making your first vowed commitment to it as we turn to the rite of profession.

<sup>1</sup> Judith Valente, an NPR commentator, referenced in an email from Amanda Skofstad, publicist at Ave Maria Press, received Oct. 15, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Catherine de Hueck Doherty, *The Gospel without Compromise*, in *Modern Spiritual Masters*, ed. Robert Ellsberg (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 88.

<sup>3</sup> Dorothy Day, quoted by Thomas Michael Loome, “The Real Presence(s) of Christ in the Life and Thought of Dorothy Day,” *Houston Catholic Worker*, Sept.-Oct. 2013, p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> Pope Pius XI, *Umbratilem*, quoted in Robert Bruce Lockhart, *Halfway to Heaven: The Hidden Life of the Sublime Casrthusians* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1985), 112.