

FIRST PERSEVERANCE OF BRS. ISAIAH, SAMUEL, AND BERNARD  
January 24, 2013

Our English Benedictine Congregation's Ritual says that the talk to be given on the occasion of a perseverance ceremony should actually be "an exhortation" to the novices, in other words, a talk that should encourage you, spur you on to ever greater faithfulness to the way of life you have chosen. As far as I can judge, you are already fervent and generous in the way you live among us, but we all need encouragement from time to time simply because of the tedium that can set in as we go on day after day, each day more or less like any other. There's even a book about monastic life titled *An Unexciting Life*. That, however, is only one side of the coin, for if our way of life is not marked by a lot of outward excitement and variety, the very journey to God—what St. Benedict calls running on the path of God's commandments—can be exhilarating indeed if only we keep our eyes on the goal. You'll recall that when we were reading and discussing some of John Cassian's Conferences a few months ago, we saw how his very first conference makes a distinction between our ultimate goal, the kingdom of heaven, and the proximate means of getting there, which he calls purity of heart. The main point I want to make this evening is that if you take seriously and reflect often on the main reason you chose monastic life—what St. Benedict calls "the seeking of God"—then other things will tend to fall into place.

And since the three of you are not the only ones listening to this talk, I would remind all of us of the responsibility that we, the professed, have in this matter. A fine monastic author recently wrote the following lines: "In a world of many distractions, people enter monasteries with a view to concentrating their lives on the one thing necessary. The greatest service that the community can do is to keep reminding them of the ultimate purpose of the choice they have made."<sup>1</sup> We do this, I think, not mainly by reminding you of this verbally but by showing in the way we live that this is the goal that keeps *us* excited in what might be, in other respects, "an

unexciting life.” But you might also want to remind yourselves verbally from time to time, just as St. Bernard is said to have done. One of his early biographers writes that in order to maintain the constancy of his resolve, the saint would regularly say to himself, “Bernard, Bernard, why have you come?”

One other way to keep this all-important goal before our eyes is to take seriously what we do every time we come to this chapel for one or another of our liturgical services, for if we are attentive at those times, then the very words of the Psalms that we pray and the readings from other parts of the Bible or other sacred writings to which we listen will inevitably shape our conduct and our outlook, often in ways that might surprise us. I forget if any of you were already here as visitors or postulants when we were having read during meals a book by Sr. Meg Funk in which she recounted a time in Bolivia when she and some companions were caught in a flash flood and she narrowly escaped death. She wrote that while she was being swept along in the rushing waters, phrases from the Psalms that she had been praying for many years kept coming to her mind, both comforting her and convincing her that no matter what happened, she was in God’s hands. In her words, “Again and again, one after the other, the psalms rose unbidden by my mind and flowed from me, the words echoing the pain and honesty of the psalmist all those centuries before. Like him . . . I called for sanctuary, and like him . . . I hoped against hope that the isolation, dread, and terror might be eased and I might be returned to the safety of dry land and shelter before the morning light.”<sup>2</sup>

People sometimes say that when faced with death, their whole life passes before their eyes. I’m not sure just what that means, but in any case I think it would be better if on such an occasion the whole Psalter would pass before one’s eyes just as the Psalms passed before Sr. Meg’s eyes, for we have in these prayers practically every conceivable sentiment that should

mark our relationship with God. As you know, Cassian singles out a particular verse from Psalm 70 as especially suitable for the practice of constant prayer—“God, come to my assistance; Lord, make haste to help me”—but I wouldn’t want to exalt that verse over so many others that could serve equally well. In fact, very similar to Cassian’s verse is one from the very next Psalm, the twelfth verse of Psalm 71: “God, do not stand far from me; my God, hasten to help me.” Or another, from the same Psalm: “You are my hope, Lord; my trust, God, from my youth.”

Any of us could go on and on choosing such verses as particularly helpful on one or another occasion, but the main thing is to be willing to linger over them, whether in what is our rather slow and reverent pace of recitation during the Liturgy of the Hours, or when doing *lectio divina* at other times. The important point is not to rush. In this connection, I just happened to come across an instructive paragraph from a very elderly Benedictine sister as I was disposing of a lot of the newsletters that accumulate in the calefactory. Sr. Lenora Black begins the paragraph with a reference to the early days of our country, something we heard a lot about during our recent refectory reading of the life of Alexander Hamilton, and—accurately or not—Sr. Lenora contrasts the situation then with what we have down on Capitol Hill today. Here’s what she wrote:

The founders of our country certainly had disagreements, even violent ones, but they shared certain principles and goals and held them deeply enough to work together unto death. It is hard to find that kind of commitment in our governing bodies today. What has changed? I am no sociologist, but just in my 86 years of life, it seems that almost everything has [changed]. The most obvious is the pace of life. The speed and quality of travel and communications have enormously widened our horizons. [But] we drown in

data until our mental circuits are flashing OVERLOAD!... Rarely do we spend time assimilating the challenge and wonder of it all.<sup>3</sup>

To be sure, there are some phrases in the Rule of St. Benedict that could incline one to rush, such as his urging us to *run* on the path of God's commandments, but Benedict's horarium with its leisurely balance among the practices of divine office, work, and several hours of *lectio* daily make it clear enough that he would have agreed with the classical adage *festina lente*: make haste slowly. May you and all of us do so in our common journey to our ultimate goal, the kingdom of heaven or, better and more personally, union with the Father through Christ Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit. I pray that you will indeed persevere in this journey.

1" Michael Casey, *The Art of Winning Souls: Pastoral Care of Novices* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 23.

2" Mary Margaret Funk, *Into the Depths: A Journey of Loss and Vocation* (New York: Lantern Books, 2011), 97-98.

3 Sr. Lenora Black, OSB, "Imagining a New Reality," *Spirit and Life*, Jan.-Feb. 2013, p. 5.