

**(following the Psalms of Midday Prayer on the occasion  
of dedicating the Monmonier Wing)**

A reading from the Rule of St. Benedict, Chapter 37: The Elderly and Children

<sup>1</sup>Although human nature itself is inclined to be compassionate toward the old and the young, the authority of the rule should also provide for them. <sup>2</sup>Since their lack of strength must always be taken into account, they should certainly not be required to follow the strictness of the rule with regard to food, <sup>3</sup>but should be treated with kindly consideration and allowed to eat before the regular hours.

I chose this chapter for our reading this afternoon because it is especially appropriate for a service dedicating a wing of our monastery that was renovated in order to provide better facilities for some of our elderly monks. What St. Benedict writes in this particular chapter is very much in accord with the whole tenor of his Rule. To illustrate this more exactly, let me first say a bit about a somewhat earlier document that did influence Benedict in some respects. We don't know the name of its author, but this earlier piece of monastic legislation is called the Rule of the Master. Among the deficiencies that prevented it from having stood the test of time and still be followed today is its insistence that every member of the community be treated in exactly the same way. In some ways that sounds pretty good: no possibility of playing favorites, absolute equality. What this overlooks, of course, is that different people have different needs and so require different kinds of treatment.

St. Benedict, recognizing this, makes all kinds of allowances in various parts of his Rule. For example, in the chapter entitled "Distribution of Goods according to Need" (RB 34), he begins by quoting a verse from the Acts of the Apostles: "Distribution was made to each one as he had need" and then adds this comment: "By this we do not imply that there should be favoritism—God forbid—but rather consideration for weaknesses. Whoever needs less should thank God and not be distressed, but whoever needs more should feel humble because of his weakness, not self-important because of the kindness shown him." In a later chapter, "On Constituting an Abbot" (RB 64), he writes that in giving orders, the abbot "should be discerning

and moderate, bearing in mind the discretion of holy Jacob, who said: ‘If I drive my flocks too hard, they will all die in a single day.’ Therefore, drawing on this and other examples of discretion, the mother of virtues, he must so arrange everything that the strong have something to yearn for and the weak nothing to run from.”

We see the very same principle at work in the chapter that was our reading this afternoon: knowing that the elderly or the very young do not have the same degree of strength as those in the prime of life, Benedict has the strictness of the Rule relaxed on their behalf. The specific mitigation he mentions is the matter of food. When I read that, you may have felt it rather insignificant that he allows the very old and very young to eat earlier than the rest of the community, but it’s important to know that in early monasticism it was normal for the monks to have but a single meal during much of the year. From mid-September till the beginning of Lent, this meal took place in mid-afternoon, and in Lent it was served not long before sunset. In those days, allowing the physically weaker monks to eat earlier was therefore something really significant.

It is surely in accord with this basic principle of Benedictine life that we have renovated what we once called “the old north wing” into an area with certain amenities appropriate for the more senior monks who will be living there, including a private bath, better temperature control for individual rooms, and no longer any need to climb stairs to get to their room. At the present time, Abbot Aidan and Fr. Hilary have already moved in, and others will eventually be moving there from their current second-floor rooms.

Before we turn to the blessing itself, you may like to hear something of the history of this wing. It was built in the early 1940s and originally intended to be a common novitiate for both our monastery and our sister house in Portsmouth, Rhode Island. After only a year or two, however, all the novices were moved to our 1930 building, which we now usually call the Tudor building, and this wing served as our high school from 1942 until 1955, when we opened a separate school building about fifty yards to the north. Subsequently, the wing had many uses: Various monks lived and slept in rooms there at one time or another, including Fr. Aelred Walsh and Fr. Daniel Kirk, both deceased, as well as some of our current monks. One room was a storage space for books, papers, and leaflets of liturgical music, two rooms were used for our

library, one was the vocation director's office for a few years, and so forth. When Fr. Simon was our superior a few years ago, he felt that we really needed what he called "a seniors wing." After various modifications and simplifications of the original plan, our community officially approved the idea at a chapter meeting, and we subsequently raised enough money to hire an architectural firm, begin working with a general contractor that had already done some fine work on our property, and see the work to completion more or less on schedule and actually under budget, a rather remarkable achievement. I was especially happy at one of the last biweekly construction meetings when the project manager and site supervisor commented on how much they enjoyed working with us and how remarkably free of acrimony those meetings had been, unlike the atmosphere at many of their other projects. I'd like to think that some of this was due to the fact that we monks try to take seriously what St. Benedict says at various points in his Rule, such as this line from chapter four: "Your way of acting should be different from the world's way," or, later in the Rule and quoting St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, "Each should try to be the first to show respect to the other."

Needless to say, we could never have made this renovation without the generous help of benefactors, some of whom are present here this afternoon. We are deeply grateful for your kindness to us, and you are inscribed in our hearts even more permanently than on the plaque now hanging in the corridor of the wing.

I will now conclude our Midday Prayer service with a prayer of blessing, after which I will walk through the renovated wing, which we have named in honor of our third headmaster, Fr. Hugh Monmonier, and will sprinkle the rooms with holy water. All of you are then invited to walk through the wing yourselves. Feel free to look into any of the rooms, and afterwards please come to the calefactory for some refreshments.

So, let us pray:

Lord Jesus Christ, you promised to prepare a home in heaven for those who follow the evangelical counsels. Bless this residence and surround it with the wall of your protection. Grant that all of our monks who will live there may preserve the bond of love as taught us in the Gospel and in the Holy Rule of our Father St. Benedict. We thank and praise you for their long

years, lived in faith and in doing good. Grant that they may have the loving support of their community and of their friends and relatives, so that in good health they may be cheerful and in poor health not lose hope. Sustained by the help of your blessing, let them spend their old age giving praise to your name, for you live and reign forever and ever. R. Amen.