

PERSEVERANCE:
The Second Perseverance of Brs. Isaiah, Samuel, and Bernard
April 25, 2013

Brs. Isaiah, Samuel, and Bernard, since you are still novices you are seldom or never in our school's academic building, and when Br. Samuel was a student there I don't think the current entrance to the academic building had yet been renovated, so it's possible that none of you have noticed a Latin saying near the ceiling just inside the entrance. It reads, "Rursus incipiemus nunc et semper." I'm also not sure how far along you are with your Latin studies with Abbot Aidan, but you will have come across at least a few of those five Latin words. Literally, the sentence means "Now and always, let us begin again." This strikes me as a useful admonition about perseverance, for if any one of you asks yourself just what it is you are requesting this evening, it is surely not simply to continue for three more months until the time of your third perseverance, but rather to persevere as a disciple of Christ Jesus for the rest of your life, ideally and hopefully as a member of our monastic community but in any case as someone who will remain faithful to the baptismal vows once made for you in infancy and ratified by you at the Easter Vigil each year.

The reason why that Latin saying speaks of constantly beginning again is in accord with one of the best-known sayings of the Desert Fathers. When one of them was asked what he did day after day, he replied, "I fall and I get up, I fall and I get up." There is a healthy realism to that desert saying, for none of us can expect to avoid all sins and offenses, much less all imperfections. The important thing is never to get discouraged but rather to persevere in such a way that there be fulfilled in you what Jesus says in the 24th chapter of Matthew's Gospel: "Many false prophets will arise and deceive many, and because of the increase of evildoing, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who perseveres to the end will be saved" (Matt 24:12-13).

What I'm talking about, therefore, is perseverance in the sense of never giving up, never doubting the ever-present grace of God, never doing what Jesus elsewhere warns against: putting your hand to the plow and looking back. At times this can take a lot of courage. Let me give you an example. It is taken from the world of sports but is, I think, pertinent to our topic this evening. I'm one of the few persons here who reads the sport section in the newspaper, which is fine with me because this means that it's usually available. In addition to accounts of

various games, there are occasionally some very thoughtful columns, one of which appeared about a month ago. I'm sure you are all aware to some degree of the man who is now again ranked number one in the world—Tiger Woods—and how a couple years ago his world fell apart: He was found guilty of adultery because of multiple liaisons with various women, went through a bitter divorce, can no longer be with his two children on a daily basis, was the butt of countless jokes on late-night television shows, and lost many very lucrative endorsements (which had actually brought him far more money than any of his tournament winnings). As a result of all this turmoil, he began playing such mediocre golf that his world ranking plummeted.

At that point, Woods could understandably have just given up. Instead, he spent many weeks in seclusion at a therapy center for sexual addiction, began taking seriously again the religious tradition in which he had been raised (in his case, Buddhism), and has gradually put his life back into some sort of order. Some writers have doubted the sincerity of his public avowals of contrition, and perhaps some of his expressions were crafted largely with a view to restoring his public image, but I nevertheless think there is a lot we can learn from all this. We need not hold him up as some paragon of virtue to admire the way he dealt with humiliating adversity. The sports column to which I referred, written by Thomas Boswell, included the following paragraph: “If some people don't identify with what Woods has been through for the last 40 months, then perhaps they're lucky. But they're also not like a lot of us. It's hard to find a life that never blew up. If that weren't true, all the helping professions would be out of work.”

I sincerely hope that none of your lives will ever blow up in anything like the way Woods' life did, but you will inevitably have times and occasions when you will be tempted to discouragement or confusion. Those are the times that will determine what you are made of, for it's easy enough to talk glibly about perseverance when everything is rosy. For the more challenging times, it is important to keep in mind those words of the Lord that I quoted earlier about persevering to the end, even as St. Benedict speaks the same way at the conclusion of the prologue to his Rule when he speaks of “faithfully observing [God's] teaching in the monastery until death” (Prol. 50). Another great saint, Catherine of Siena, whose feast we will celebrate this coming Monday, is also a trusted teacher and guide about perseverance. As you may know, we have from Catherine not only her classic work, *The Dialogue*, but also hundreds of letters. In one of them, addressed to her followers back in Siena when she was away from her native city, she had this to say:

To Sano Di Maco and All Her Other Sons in Siena: In the Name of Jesus Christ crucified and of sweet Mary:

Dearest sons in Christ sweet Jesus: I Catherine, servant and slave of the servants of Jesus Christ, write to you in His precious Blood: with desire to see you strong and persevering till the end of your life. For I consider that without perseverance no one can please God, or receive the crown of reward. He who perseveres is always strong, and fortitude makes him persevere.

All of us wish you, dear novices, that kind of perseverance as you continue to run along what St. Benedict calls “the path of God’s commandments” (Prol. 49).