

## OUR COMMON HUMANITY

May 2, 2013

Most of you probably recall from Church history courses or some other source that in many monasteries of medieval Europe, especially communities of women, only persons belonging to the nobility were admitted. From the perspective of abbesses or other Church leaders at that time this was no doubt acceptable, just as we've been hearing during table reading how so many persons in the American South considered slavery altogether acceptable in the mid-nineteenth century. It's worth noting, however, that the medieval practice was quite contrary to the mind of St. Benedict. Already in the second chapter of his Rule Benedict writes that a "man born free is not to be given higher rank than a slave who becomes a monk, except for some other good reason" (RB 2.18), and he justifies this by very appropriately quoting St. Paul's Letter to the Galatians, where the Apostle writes that "whether slave or free, we are all one in Christ" (Gal 3:28). Benedict's practice of not making distinctions based on birth or social standing is also clear from his later chapter on child oblates, which begins with some sentences about how "a member of the nobility" should go about offering "his son to God in the monastery" but which concludes with words about "poor people," even "those who own nothing at all," being able to do the same.

Surely no one would ever claim that these are the most important verses in the Rule, but they do have their special significance in our own day, when so much is being debated in Congress about whether (and how) persons who are variously called "illegal immigrants" or "undocumented aliens" could be incorporated into our society. If there were an easy answer to this question, we would not be having the tortured debate now going on. As I said in another connection on the recent feast of St. Catherine of Siena, we often hanker for simple, uncomplicated answers to questions, but these are seldom possible. What is, however, surely necessary in dealing with any of these social issues—whether it be slavery or immigration or

same-sex marriage or prisoners at Guantanamo Bay or a multitude of other topics that have aroused fierce passions both past and present—is a recognition of the common humanity of everyone involved. Consider the example of the most notorious prisoner at Guantanamo Bay, Khalid Sheik Mohammed, the admitted mastermind of the 9/11 attacks. At one of the hearings before a military court there he criticized what he considered our leaders' narrow usage of the term "national security," and he went on to say: "Your blood is not made of gold and our is made out of water. We are all human beings." A Jesuit priest who was present at that hearing asked himself how it was possible to reconcile Mohammed's confessed actions with his moral eloquence in the courtroom, so he later asked one of the Navy chaplains who works in the camp what he thought about the prisoner's statement to the court. The chaplain replied: "He is right. We are all human beings. Only by God's grace am I here and not in his seat.... All human beings are capable of terrible things. If any of us are free, it is by God's grace."<sup>1</sup> We may rightly want to see justice done in this case, but never out of a spirit of vindictiveness.

One fine Christian thinker who has dealt with this sort of problem from the inside is Miroslav Volf, who was born in the former Yugoslavia and had to suffer not only the prejudice that came from belonging to a small Pentecostal sect in towns that were either overwhelmingly Catholic or Orthodox but also the pain of seeing his father imprisoned in a communist labor camp. Miroslav Volf eventually studied theology in Germany and now lives here in the United States, and his best-known book, *Exclusion and Embrace*, has been ranked among the most important theological works of the twentieth century. In it, and in various talks and articles, Volf wisely avoids simple answers to complicated questions. On the one hand, he recognizes that the adage of good fences making good neighbors has a certain sociological validity, but on the other

hand he insists that these fences ought always have gateways that can be opened without a lot of fuss. In his words,

Instead of seeking to isolate ourselves from other groups by insisting on our pure identity, we should open ourselves to one another to be enriched by our differences. Of course, we will have to maintain group boundaries. If we did not, the bright colours of cultural multiformity would wash out into a drab grey of cultural sameness. We must cultivate our languages, sustain our traditions, nurture our culture. And all this requires boundary maintenance. At the same time, boundaries must be porous. Guests should be welcomed, and we should pay visits to our near and distant neighbours so that through cross-fertilization our respective cultures thrive, correcting and enriching each other.<sup>2</sup>

It is not far-fetched to see this attitude reflected in the Rule of St. Benedict, who on the one hand insists on a certain degree of separation from guests and yet wants the guests— whoever they may be, and he explicitly names the poor—to be welcomed as we would want to welcome Christ himself. I say all this not because I don't think we already do it rather well, but simply to keep before our minds the centrality of this aspect of Benedictine life. As I've said before, we will often know only later what a life-changing experience some of our guests may have after just a few days among us, and there may well be other instances of this about which we will never hear anything. All that really matters is that we act as St. Benedict prescribes.

1 Luke Hansen, SJ, "Our Humanity Is at Stake," *The Catholic Worker*, Jan.-Feb. 2013, p. 3.

2 Miroslav Volf, "Europe: Bosnia," in Wim Beuken and Karl-Josef Kuschel, eds., *Religion as a Source of Violence* (*Concilium*, 1997, no. 4; London: SCM Press; Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997), 36.