

THIRD PERSEVERANCE OF BRS. ISAIAH, SAMUEL, AND BERNARD  
July 3, 2013

Dear Brs. Isaiah, Samuel, and Bernard: You are now three-fourths of the way through your novitiate year and presumably have by now learned by experience—as well as by reading and through your regular classes—a great deal about how the Benedictine life is lived at this particular monastery. Among other things, you know that unlike later religious congregations and orders, we vow stability to a particular community, which will be quite similar to other Benedictine houses in some respects and rather different in others. Among the similarities, I think it is fair to say that all monks following the *Rule* of St. Benedict lead what that prominent Trappist author Michael Casey gave as the title of one of his books: *An Unexciting Life*. I'm sure Michael Casey would be the first to admit that the ongoing search for God can and should have a definite degree of excitement, a certain invigorating character, for it is this more than anything else that keeps us running along what St. Benedict calls in his Prologue “the path of God's commandments.” Nevertheless, the kernel of truth in Casey's phrase is that this ongoing search is normally conducted in a setting that will be pretty much the same day by day, regardless of the season of the year. Our very horarium, which varies only slightly between weekdays and weekends or between the school year and summertime, is but one obvious sign of this. The great Benedictine historian David Knowles was pointing to the same thing in his booklet *The Benedictines* when he wrote:

... the monk who in ordinary circumstances takes to any work with a zeal which burns out his fire of strength and health is departing from what is for him the way of salvation. It is not a virtue for the monk, as it might be for the missionary, to lack time in which to attend the common recitation of the Divine Office, read a certain amount, and mix with

his community. And hence there should be in the Benedictine monk a certain restfulness, a contentment, not in doing nothing but in doing the familiar, even the monotonous and the ritual; an ability to remain physically unmoved and unexcited, to produce, in fact, that stability which his Founder [St. Benedict] made a distinguishing and on occasion a unique religious vow, the vow of stability, the family vow.<sup>1</sup>

As you draw near the end of the novitiate year, what in the parlance of my home town would be called “the home stretch,” it is worth pondering such words and asking yourselves—just as all of us professed monks should regularly ask ourselves—to what extent we allow this outwardly rather unexciting life to be the vehicle for an ever deeper life of union with God and one another in love and prayer. I was recently reading from a book that we might someday have read during meals in the refectory, a collection of essays that were originally separate booklets published by St. Meinrad Archabbey. The chapter on prayer began with a reference to Fr. Theodore Heck, a monk of that community who died four years ago at the very advanced age of 108, having spent 85 of those years as a monk. The monk who wrote the chapter calculated that Fr. Theodore would have gone through the Psalter well over 2,000 times in the course of his life, and I think it entirely possible—even likely—that he never grew tired of it.

Here, as you know, we pray the same three Psalms at Compline every night just as St. Benedict prescribes, whether in choir or, on some days, privately. Some other monasteries vary the Psalms at Compline, presumably to introduce greater variety into the service, and certainly St. Benedict allow for some adjustments to his scheme, but I nevertheless dare say that Psalms 4, 91, and 134 are so timeless in their sentiments that we could never really get tired of reciting day after day such lines as these from Psalm 4:

I will lie down in peace and sleep comes at once,  
For you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety

Or the Lord's address to us at the end of Psalm 91:

When he calls I shall answer: "I am with you."  
I will save him in distress and give him glory.

Or again, from Psalm 134:

Lift up your hands to the holy place and bless the Lord through the night.  
May the Lord bless you from Zion, he who made both heaven and earth.

The basic attitude in those and so many other Psalms is one of joyful trust and confidence in God, and this is what we should convey to others not just by words but by our actions and very demeanor. A couple weeks ago those of us on the Abbey School's development committee had a conference call with a woman who has become a national leader in promoting the development of Catholic organizations, and prior to the call itself we were all given a short piece that she had written. Much of what she wrote captures what I consider to be a fine summary of the spirit that should pervade any religious community, especially such lines as the following:

Resist negativity and cynicism in all its insidious forms. In fact, learn to recognize it in others as a sign that you are onto something of consequence, that your positive and hopeful outlook is rattling the cages of those who would rather resist any form of change.

Learn to proclaim the good news of your [community] and how it is making a measurable difference in the world. Believe that people want to hear good news and to be part of something life-giving, successful, and, yes, holy.... It's all about joy. Be joyful.... Be expansive of spirit and magnanimous of heart.<sup>2</sup>

None of that denies that there will be difficult times in any of our lives, times when we will be asked to take on tasks for which we have little interest or don't feel ourselves well-suited, but if we have taken to heart what St. Benedict writes at the end of chapter 68 of his *Rule*—that even in such circumstances we can go forward, trusting in God's ever-present help—then even such occasions will not blot out the underlying joy and peace that should be a hallmark of Benedictine life. I trust that it is in this spirit that you will now embark on this final quarter of your year's novitiate.

1" David Knowles, *The Benedictines: A Digest for Moderns* (St. Leo, FL: The Abbey Press, 1962), 36.

2 Kerry Robinson, "Imagining Abundance: The transformative potential of Catholic fundraising," written July 21, 2008 and privately distributed.