

## ST. BENEDICT

Many of you have memorized the ten Benedictine hallmarks, and all of you know that they mainly go back to one person, St. Benedict, but we have to admit that we don't know as many details about his life as we'd like. The only early biography was written by a man who became pope, St. Gregory the Great, who lived a bit later than Benedict himself way back in the sixth century. In his account of Benedict's life, Gregory recounts a lot of the things Benedict did, many of them quite miraculous, but the key sentences from his account are these three: "With all the renown he gained from his numerous miracles, the holy man was not less outstanding for the wisdom of his teaching. He wrote a Rule for Monks that is remarkable for its discretion and its clarity of language. Anyone who wishes to know more about his life and character can discover in his Rule exactly what he was like as an abbot, for his life could not have differed from his teaching."

St. Gregory was certainly correct in saying that the monastic rule of St. Benedict is a model of discretion, that is, of good judgment, common sense, discerning the right way to act in any situation. That discretion is not something that was original with St. Benedict, however. Instead, he simply intended those who follow his Rule to find in it one good way to live according to the example and teaching of Jesus. Only a few days ago, the Gospel at one of our weekday Masses quoted Jesus's words that he had come not to be served but to serve, and this notion of service is found at numerous places in St. Benedict's Rule. Since our own school's service program is an integral part of what we stand for, it's important to see how this notion of service is rooted in the teaching of St. Benedict.

As some of you surely know, at the main meal in the monastery each day, one of the monks is appointed to be the table server, a job that rotates from one monk to another week by week. It's not really a difficult job. When soup is on the menu at the beginning of the meal, the server takes the pot of soup around the

refectory, i.e., the dining room, and lets each monk ladle as much as he wants into his soup bowl. One of the server's other duties is to pick up the used dishes and plates and flatware when the individual monks are done using them. The server puts these into a bussing pan and at the end of the meal carts the used utensils into the kitchen so they can go through the dish washer. As I said, this isn't all that difficult, but it's noteworthy that St. Benedict speaks of doing this as a genuine service. Here's the way he begins chapter 35 of the Rule, which is titled "Kitchen Server of the Week." He writes: "The brothers should serve one another. Consequently, no one will be excused from kitchen service unless he is sick or engaged in some important business of the monastery, for such service increases reward and fosters love. Let those who are not strong have help so that they may serve without distress, and let everyone receive help as the size of the community or local conditions warrant."

The very next chapter of the Rule, on care of the sick brothers, likewise brings in this idea of service. St. Benedict begins that chapter with these words: "Care of the sick must rank above and before all else, so that they may truly be served as Christ, for he said: 'I was sick and you visited me' and again, "What you did for one of these least brothers you did for me.'" And because sometimes a sick person may make excessive demands, St. Benedict realistically acknowledges this and therefore adds these words: "Let the sick on their part bear in mind that they are served out of honor for God, and let them not by their excessive demands distress their brothers who serve them. Still, sick brothers must be patiently borne with, because serving them leads to a greater reward."

It is worth noting that in just those few sentences I have quoted from these two chapters of the Rule, St. Benedict uses such words as service, serve, and serving a total of eight times. That really says a lot about the spirit of the Rule, and I've only referred to two chapters out of a total of 73. He even calls the monastery

itself “a school for the Lord’s service.” As we honor our great patron, we should all reflect on ways in which we ourselves can serve one another. Those of us who teach should do everything we can to prepare good classes. Doing this well can take a lot of time in preparation, but it really is a way we can serve our students, not only preparing you students for later life but also giving an example of service. In the same way, those of you who already do service projects should look up these not merely as one more thing you are expected to do but as an opportunity to be of help to someone in need. Our service program has regrettably had to be somewhat curtailed during the pandemic because some of the service sites we used to go to were closed to outsiders because of Covid-19, but as the pandemic recedes we hope that our program will return to full strength before much longer.

Beyond that, all of you students can rightly think of ways you can be of service to those in your families at home. You could think seriously of how much pleasure you could give to one or another of your parents or guardians by offering to pitch in with keeping the house or yard clean. I will remember when I was in grade school and high school, my brother and I did various chores around the house, especially on Saturday mornings. He and I didn’t look upon that as some sort of imposition but rather as a way to contribute to keeping the house clean and so being of service not only to our parents but to any persons who would visit the house for one reason or another.

None of the things I’ve mentioned thus far have been at all difficult. I’d like to conclude by referring to something that has been more challenging, but a challenge that was welcomed with open arms. I don’t think any of us will ever forget the scenes that have been coming out of Ukraine. Despite the horror of what has happened to so many people over there, including young children, even infants, there have also been inspiring stories of way persons are helping one another, serving one another. I’ll give just one example, appropriate enough on this

feastday because it involves Benedictine sisters. About two weeks ago we got a message about a small community of Benedictine sisters in the small city of Zhytomyr. They had had to retreat to the basement of their convent because of the shelling, but they made sure to take the Blessed Sacrament with them down into the darkness, where they continued their community prayers as best they could. A few days after that we got another message about them, saying that they had had to leave their city and move farther to the west in the hope of avoiding further bombardment. Subsequently we got a further message that they had arrived at their larger monastery in the city of Lviv, near the Polish border. They did feel somewhat safer there (although that may no longer be so), but their personal safety was not first and foremost in their minds. As you know from the news, there have been tens of thousands of migrants moving to the western part of the country, many of them hoping eventually to leave Ukraine altogether. There in Lviv these Benedictine sisters have been sheltering over 150 people, more than 50 of whom are children, including at least one newborn. Everybody pitches in to help with the cooking and cleaning. The superior of the sisters, Mother Klara, sent this message: “We sisters are very happy that we can help and serve the refugees .. and bring them joy .. After the horror of the war they went through here, it seems to them that they are in paradise .. We try to provide them with everything they need .. We are not doing anything extraordinary .. We are doing what each of us would do .. We are glad that we are all here together...”

That is a remarkable statement of what Benedictine service, Gospel-oriented service, is all about at its best, in very trying circumstances. Even as we pray for them, let something of what those sisters are doing be an inspiration for each of us to serve others in whatever ways we can.