



Meditators' Blog 27/10/2011



Marriage and Monastic Oblation: Twelve Steps of Humility *by Stefan Reynolds*

‘Are you still reading that book?’ My fiancé asked me after she had seen ‘The Rule of St. Benedict’ travel with me on various journeys. I had to try to explain to her that it was one of those books which one never finishes. I became an Oblate in 1996.

Last year I got married. Two forms of vows; different, but compatible. Surely the criteria of the call is similar: ‘Is there anyone here who yearns for life and desires to see good days?’ (Ps. 34.13). The married Oblate is also a coenobite; he/she lives in a community. I have a few reflections.

1) Before I was married, in my bachelor days, I was free to do what I liked with my holidays and when I came back from work. In that sense every bachelor is a sabbite: ‘Their Law is what they like to do, whatever strikes their fancy’ (Rule Ch.1). To be married is ‘to love not our own will, nor take pleasure in the satisfaction of our desires’ (2nd Step of Humility, Ch. 7). One has to take into consideration what the partner wants. My wife does not fancy a holiday in an Ashram in India.

2) In that sense to be married is to be under obedience. I have to listen to my partner. It is not just me anymore. ‘Constraint wins a crown’, as St. Benedict reminds. That crown is the ability to live beyond our ego and its desires; being able to live with others. My wife is Christ to me, in that sense she is also my Abbot.

3) If the root of obedience is to listen and respond, that is key to marriage. If I am asked to do something (‘Can you Hoover the house/ take the dog for a walk/answer the door, etc.?’) - unless I have some real reason why I can’t - then why not assume that this is what I am called to do. So I try to respond promptly. I don’t quite match those who ‘immediately put aside their own concerns, abandon their own will, and lay down whatever they have in hand, leaving it unfinished’ (Ch. 5). At least I should not annoy my wife by leaving undone, or postponing without reason, what has been asked.

4) ‘Let’s go to Venice for our summer holiday!’ In this I have to be like the monastic cellarer: ‘If anyone happens to make an unreasonable demand, the cellarer should not reject

that person with disdain and cause distress, but reasonably and humbly deny the improper request? (Ch. 31).

5) I don't have children yet but reading the qualities needed for an Abbess or Abbot I get some idea of the demands of parenting: "They must know what a difficult and demanding burden they have undertaken: directing souls and serving a variety of temperaments, coaxing, reproving, and encouraging them as appropriate" (Ch. 2). And change nappies!

6) What about the teaching on silence (Ch. 6)? Well, in my experience, it doesn't work in marriage. However "Speaking and teaching are the teacher's task; the disciple is to be silent and listen". In my experience marriage and teaching do not go together. My wife does not want to listen to my theological opinions at breakfast or at any time. I have to climb down off my retreat-giving pedestal before I am ready for an evening cuddle. There are no Zen Masters in the bedroom. For me silence is the silence of heavy opinions.

7) What about sex? In marriage is to "love chastity" (Ch. 4) really a tool for good? "Do not gratify the promptings of the flesh". Well, it plays more of a role in marriage than just getting children. Maybe the rule has taught me a little that sex is more about giving than getting. Sex may be part of that "good zeal" which Benedict sees as "fostering fervent love" (Ch. 72): "No monastics are to pursue what they judge better for themselves, but instead, what they judge better for someone else". It gives meaning to Benedict's injunction to remove one's knives before going to bed! (Ch. 22) In sex we are all vulnerable and joyful, it is not a place for power or moralising.

8) Getting married normally (and certainly in my case) goes hand in hand with becoming a householder. Setting up house has its demands. For an academic like me I am reminded that in manual work (cleaning, shopping, cooking, gardening, D.I.Y) we are living like real monastics (Ch. 48). Cooking for one another, according to the rule, is a way of "fostering love" (Ch. 35). "Consequently no members (husband or wife) should be excused from kitchen service". For me "toiling faithfully" in the house and its life and stability in the marriage is the "workshop" where love flowers (Ch. 4).

9) I certainly give more dinner parties than I used to. With house and home, especially in the country, hospitality plays a new role. "All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ" (Ch. 53). Though my wife does not meditate in a formal sense, we share the same faith. For me this is nowhere more clear than in trying to "show every kindness" to our guests. In welcoming them we welcome more than them and realise that our home is more than our home: "God, we have received your mercy in the midst of your temple" (ps. 48:10)

10) Before getting married I reflected on Benedict's "Procedure for Receiving Members" (Ch. 58) as parallel to the commitment of marriage. As Benedict says it is not to be taken too lightly. Dating is a sort of postulancy (though a bit more fun!). Engagement is a sort of novitiate even, in Benedict's view involving moving in to see whether things really work. Then we get our "marriage preparation" meetings where we were told "all the hardships and difficulties that will lead to God" on this path. Then the vows: "For better and for worse, for richer and for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do us part." Or as Benedict puts it: "They must be well aware that, as the law of the rule establishes, from this day they are no longer free to leave the monastery, or shake from their neck the yoke of the rule which, in the course of so long a period of reflection, they were free either to reject or accept."

11) Marriage is a sharing. In the house things are no longer labelled 'yours' or 'mine'. Even our bodies belong to each other. Benedict's description of profession fits the self-giving of marriage; 'without keeping back a single thing for themselves, well aware that from that day they will not have even their own body at their disposal' (Ch. 58).

12) Marriage is an enclosure; 'faithfully observing God's teaching' we are 'in the monastery until death' where 'we shall through patience share in the sufferings of Christ that we may also share in the eternal presence' (end of Prologue). Commitment. Patience. Monogamy. Monotony. But also depth. Deepening love. Unconditional love. Unending love. As Leonard Cohen puts it: 'The bed is kina narrow, but my arms are open wide, and here's a man still working for your smile' (from the song 'I tried to leave you?').

Twelve steps of humility. I am sure those who have been married longer than me will have more experience. I would do better 'to be silent and to listen' (Ch. 6). Still Benedict wrote his rule so that 'by observing it in monasteries, we can show that we have some degree of virtue and the beginnings of monastic life' (Ch. 73). In the monastery of marriage I am still a junior. I have many venerable elders under this profession for whom I rise and offer them a seat (Ch. 63). I ask for their blessing. But my wife is my Abbot and prioress. Her orders take precedence (Ch. 71).

I have recently taken up, with my morning and evening meditation, chanting the Office to myself. 'Go into the garden if you are going to make that racket?'. I obey, and have built myself a little garden Oratory. 'Nothing else is done or stored there?', I am not 'disturbed by the insensitivity of another (!)' and if I 'do not pray in a loud voice' then I figure 'I will not interfere with anyone else' (Ch. 52). The moral of the story is that we should all 'walk according to another's decisions and directions, choosing to live in monasteries and to have a prioress or abbot over them' (Ch. 5). Or as they said in the sixties: 'Make love not war?'.
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