



?Some Reflections on the Rule of St Benedict: Four Principles or Attitudes? by Laurence Freeman, OSB



St Benedict was a Roman. Like any good Roman he had a flair for organization, a concern for order, a respect for authority. Monastic life for him was to be structured; it was to follow a rule and a hierarchical chain of command. He was founding his monasteries at the time the Roman Empire was breaking apart, weakened by corruption at the center and barbarian invasion from the without. Benedict's monasteries were to be held together by a strong and responsible central leadership.

The Abbot or Abbess "holds the place of Christ" (Ch 2) however he/she was always accountable to the Rule and God. This center would not be corrupt and would recognize that it was part of a higher chain of command. As for barbarian invasions from the outside Benedict wanted his monasteries enclosed, all the necessities of life should be found within; "there should be no need for monks to roam outside," he writes, "because this is not at all good for their souls" (Ch 66).

Leaving the fortress of the monastery was spiritually unsafe. Journeys needed the Abbot's permission and the traveler "should not presume to relate to anyone what they saw or heard outside the monastery, because this causes the greatest harm" (Ch 67). Benedict was a man of his time.

How then do we relate to his rule? How much of it is culturally conditioned and a response to the situation of its time? Is it possible to distill from the rule an essence that is applicable to the different social and historical context of today? "Rule", like the word "Guru" in India, implies something that helps straighten the way to God, a guide that helps us avoid extremes and orientate ourselves in the right direction. What then are the basic principles or spiritual attitudes that Benedict's rule points us towards? Is it the need for authority, spiritual dependence on a father figure or an objective code of behavior? Is it the need for a highly

structured life where nature and spontaneity is regulated by discipline and self-control? Is it fear of the world, hiding away from the onslaughts of barbarian secularity in a separate spiritual reality? I propose that all these are responses that suit particular times and temperaments, of history and our own life. They are not the essential orientation of the Rule. Benedict is not primarily concerned with the external ordering of our lives but rather with a genuine seeking after God. He is offering the soul a direction and a flat playing field so that “as we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run in the way of God’s commandments” (Prologue). The shape and the form of the life can be changed according to circumstance (Ch 40). It is pragmatic rather than programmatic.

Can one then distill a spiritual essence out of the rule? Not in terms of a mystical treatise or a developed teaching on prayer, Benedict pointed beyond himself for that to the teachings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers (Ch 73). Benedict was concerned with the rudimentaries, the beginnings of monastic life. He wanted to give a practical framework on which the higher edifices of the spiritual life could be built.

Like in all the desert spirituality moreover there was for Benedict no split between the outer and inner, spirituality was lifestyle and the way you lived was the way you prayed (and visa-versa). So the best expression of an authentic relation to God was the way you related to your neighbour. Life in common was for Benedict the crucible of the spiritual life, both its testing ground and the place where their “zeal for God” expresses itself in patience, mutual obedience and respect (Ch 72). However I propose there are four principles or attitudes on which that common life is grounded and through which Benedict orientates his disciples to God: Obedience, Peace, Faith and Works together and Humility.

Obedience. Benedict calls those who would follow Christ to “the labor of obedience” (Prologue). This involves qualities of attentiveness, listening, readiness of response, cheerful generosity, laying down of one’s own will, mutual respect and concern: “No one is to pursue what they judge better for himself, but instead, what they judge better for someone else” (Ch 5, 71, 72).

Peace. “Let peace be your quest and your aim” (Prologue). This involves an esteem for silence (Ch 6) especially at night and in the Oratory (Ch 42, 52), refraining from gossip (Ch 6), purity of prayer (Ch 20, 52), and “supporting with the greatest patience one another’s weaknesses of body or behavior” (Ch 72).

Faith and Works always go together. “Idleness is the enemy of the soul” (Ch 69). Prayer is the “Work of God”; it comes before all else (Ch 47), and must be properly performed (Ch 45). “Work” includes manual labor, prayerful reading and the work of hospitality (Ch 48, 53). The tools of the workplace and kitchen are to be respected like the vessels of the altar (Ch 32, 46). Stability in the community and monastery is “the workshop” in which “the tools of the spiritual craft” are practiced (Ch 4).

Humility. “Not to us, Lord, not to us give the glory, but to your name alone” (Psalm 113:9 Prologue). The Twelve Steps of humility (Ch 7) undercut any false sense of complacency or self-satisfaction, they urge vigilance: We have to be continually on our guard against our own destructive tendencies. Humility is what keeps us connected, down to earth, real. It involves a true self-appraisal, not over estimating our strengths but recognizing that we are always in the presence of God. This ‘grounding experience’ often involves endurance, perseverance and long suffering.

These I believe are the qualities and orientations that Benedict hopes to foster in us. He is like a gardener removing the weeds so that the flowers can grow, the fruits of the Spirit. The Rule therefore acts like a garden hoe and watering can; clearing the space, tidying things up and then making sure the plants are well watered. At times like a scateur it prunes, at times like a lopper it removes what is incompatible with our spiritual growth.

That these principles are the true criteria for monastic life can be seen in Benedict's procedure for receiving new members (Ch 58): "The concern", he writes, "must be whether the novice truly seeks God and whether he/she shows eagerness for the Work of God, for obedience and for trails". Here are the four attitudes I see as key to the life Benedict envisions, attitudes which, in the rich meaning he gives them, are applicable to us today. They do not necessarily involve a hierarchical understanding of authority nor a seclusion from the world.

They don't necessarily involve changing the external form of our life except maybe giving adequate space for prayer. They do however challenge us to a conversion of manners, not what we do but the way we do things. Benedict's wisdom is timeless because it is the wisdom of the Gospel, yet has always to be newly envisioned so it can continue to be a guide to "the good life" (Prologue).

With much love,
Laurence

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