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Published on *The World Community for Christian Meditation* (<http://www.wccm.org>)

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"Labour Day Reflection 2005: Good Works in the Rule" by Ron McRae

In the Rule we discover a variety of ideas and activities that relate to what we might consider labour or work. Some of them are familiar to most of us – for example, activities such as laundry and food preparation. What is perhaps most striking for modern lay people, however, is the idea of the Work of God ("Opus Dei"). While in some sense all our activity may be described as the work of God when we see it through the eyes of Christ, St. Benedict is referring specifically to active and focused commitment to communal praying of the daily office.

His words remind us of the central importance of this activity in our lives: Indeed, nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God [RB 43:3]. Most of us understand what a struggle it is to make this prayer discipline the priority in our daily lives. We also understand, however, that the consistent commitment to daily meditation and praying of the office shapes our lives and bears fruit.

Throughout the Rule we find references to good works, often in the context of what in the past were referred to as the corporal works of mercy. St. Benedict invites Christians to begin their communal journey towards the kingdom with these words: Clothed then with faith and the performance of good works, let us set out on this way, with the Gospel for our guide, that we may deserve to see him " who has called us to his kingdom" [RB prologue 21].

The prayerful response to faith and God's grace produces fruit through service. If we wish to dwell in the tent of this kingdom, we will never arrive unless we run there by doing good deeds [RB prologue 22]. The use of the verb run lends a sense of exertion and urgency to the venture. St. Benedict sounds, however, a cautionary note. The self-conscious or calculating compilation of a catalogue of goods deeds in itself offers no guarantee for life in the kingdom. The spiritual quest is not about amassing gold stars to satisfy the performance expectations of a legalistic deity. The performance of good works may be robbed of its goodness when the motivating desire is for spiritual labels and titles. Do not aspire to be called holy before you really are, but first be holy that you may more truly be called so [RB 4:62].

The question of motivation is a critical one when we consider the role and importance of good works. Only in this are we distinguished in his (God's) sight: if we are found better than others in good works and in humility [RB 2:21]. St. Benedict's keen understanding of human nature alerts us to the potential disconnect between good works and humility. Good works arise not from love of self, but from love of the other.

The suffering of Christ is mirrored in those around us. Care of the sick must rank above and

before all else, so they may truly be served as Christ, for he said: “I was sick and you visited me ...” and “what you did for one of these least brothers you did for me...” [RB 36: 1-2] It is humility and prayer that anchor our intended good deeds in reality. Every time you begin a good work, you must pray to him most earnestly to bring it to perfection [RB prologue 4]. Our false sense of individuality and self-reliance needs constantly to be challenged by the truth that what is not possible to us by nature, let us ask the Lord to supply by the help of his grace [RB prologue 41].

Fr. John Main has reminded us that: To see himself a person must look at another because the way of selfhood is the way of otherness [Word into Silence 28] and When we are renouncing self we are in that condition of liberty and receptivity that allows us to be in relationship with the Other [Word into Silence 59]. In discovering and embracing what St. Benedict described as our “divine vocation” [RB 7:9] we come to the truth that becomes apparent only through the emptying of the self: ...we descend by exaltation and ascend by humility [RB 7:7].

May our daily meditation and spoken prayers open our minds and hearts to embrace humbly the source of all good works: Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone [Mark 10:18]. These people fear the Lord, and do not become elated over their good deeds; they judge it is the Lord’s power, not their own, that brings about the good in them [RB prologue 29].

Oblates

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