

## GIFTS – from St. Benedict

### Part I: Stability, Conversatio and Obedience

How do you define a gift? 1. A notable capacity or talent; 2. Something voluntarily transferred by one person to another without compensation; 3. The act, right or power of giving.

Freely you have received, freely give (Matt 10:8). The context of these words is important: Jesus is not speaking of material gifts, but of spiritual gifts which are meant to be passed on, not clutched. We cannot stockpile God's gifts, or store our gifts safely under some barrel. If we try to do so, they may become like the manna some of the Israelites wandering in the desert tried to hide away for the next day, disobeying God's command that they take only what they needed for that day. The surplus corrupted and became inedible.

Talents, like muscles, grow and mature only when they are used. So what I'm going to attempt in the next few minutes is some spiritual calisthenics. Benedict wrote his Rule to help his followers "look carefully at their lives through the prism of Scripture. The Rule is best read, therefore, in the way that Scripture is read, as sacred reading, or *lectio divina*. Benedict's Rule is like an old, full-bodied red wine; it is best enjoyed in sips."<sup>1</sup> Today we are also doing some spiritual wine-tasting.

First, a taste of **stability**. Contemporary life is characterized more by *mobility* than stability: we have mobile phones and portable computers; we change residences, jobs, even careers with a frequency that would astound generations that preceded us. Not surprisingly, our spirit too is restless. The antidote Benedict offers us is Stability of heart, "the commitment to a continuing search for God in a particular way of life, and a readiness to sink one's personal roots deep into a community, standing firm with its members in the concrete realities of everyday life."<sup>2</sup> Paradoxically, stability is a promise to accept change – "to listen every day to the new 'today' of God's voice."

Listening attentively every day requires living in the present moment, being *really present*. I believe this, but I have to admit that I sometimes spend an inordinate amount of time rehashing past events, or worrying about future possibilities. The result is that I miss what is going on here and now around me.

Perseverance is another word for Benedictine stability – "an ability to keep on going through the desert stretches of our lives."<sup>3</sup> That includes patiently hanging in there when the going is rough in our relationship with God and with those who are our companions on life's journey. Stability is especially relevant to Advent, the season of expectant waiting "like that of a pregnant woman who is 'expectant', hopeful, ready to suffer birth pangs for the joy of bringing a new life into the world."<sup>4</sup>

Stability centers us in something greater than ourselves. It helps us stay sufficiently still of heart to find God in the midst of our busy lives. It is especially needed in midlife when disillusionment may have set in and we start looking for distraction. It tethers a wandering heart and enables us to remain steadfast through the "winter of our discontent."

**Conversatio morum** is inseparable from Stability. While some Benedictines still translate this Latin phrase as *conversion*, most of us prefer to keep the Latin words, since there is no satisfactory simple English equivalent. Conversion – especially religious conversion – suggests a major change in direction, even a reversal. *Conversatio* promises "fidelity to a *way of life* and behavior in a community that is on the move,

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<sup>1</sup> *The Gift of Benedict*, by Verna Holyhead, SGS, Ave Maria Press, 2002, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 9.

constantly turning and being turned”<sup>5</sup> in response to God’s grace. Anyone who has persevered for many years in a good marriage or in religious life knows that there is a big difference between first love and love tested by fifty years of relationship.

Maintaining long-term relationships calls for learning to distinguish between what is essential and what is inessential. “Differences that do not threaten the relationship are not so much debated as lovingly tolerated and respected.”<sup>6</sup> Or in the words of a monk who was asked to sum up his community life: “We go on and fall down and get up; and go on and fall down and get up...”

We need *more* than a **sip** of the third monastic commitment: **Obedience**. What is the first word in the Prologue of the Rule of Benedict?... Listen! And the Latin word for obedience is *obaudire*, which means, to listen. Listen not only with ears, but with the heart. In the Roman family structure of Benedict’s time, the father of the family was definitely at the head, as is the abbot in Benedict’s community. Monks are of course expected to obey the abbot, but they are also to obey one another. The abbot is to listen to everyone, even to the youngest member of the community, while *all* listen to the Rule. No one is exempt from obedience. This mutual obedience, one to the other, is an acknowledgement that everyone has *some* wisdom, and no one has it all.

Benedict does not expect *blind* obedience. A monk who is commanded to do something that seems to be impossible is urged to accept the order given. “However, if the burden of this task appears to be completely beyond the strength of the monk or nun to whom it has been assigned...it would be quite right to choose a good opportunity and point our gently to the superior the reasons for thinking that the task is really impossible.”<sup>7</sup> If the superior still insists, “then the junior must accept that it is the right thing and with loving confidence in the help of God obey.”

What Benedict will not tolerate is what he calls murmuring – grumbling or griping. What has to be surrendered is what is sometimes thought to be an American birthright: rugged individualism. Joan Chittister in “Wisdom Distilled from the Daily” cites the teaching of a wise monk to a visitor seeking the Truth: “In order to find Truth, you must have an unremitting readiness to admit you may be wrong.” Think about that.

To those who suspect obedience can breed an unhealthy dependence, Joan Chittister has this to say: “...dependence is simply a way to avoid responsibility and look holy at the same time. When I need the approval of others to justify every step of my life; when I lay on others the burden of my own decisions; when I need someone else’s permission to do what I feel should be done; when I need someone else’s direction to do what I *know* must be done, that’s not obedience, that’s immaturity. Or it’s manipulation.”<sup>8</sup>

Obedience and *conversatio* are closely related, because *conversatio* calls us to let go, to be led beyond where we are, to where we can be; it is an invitation not to cling to past works, past relationships. It calls for self-discipline, and needs the guidance of authority.<sup>9</sup> This is as true in a family as it is in a monastery. It is true also in Church and civil life.

“Benedictine authority is authority full of respect and full of humility, open to questions and intent on vision, intent on growth rather than on control. The world and its families, the nations and their peoples have never needed a Benedictine spirituality of authority more.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 20

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 20

<sup>7</sup> RB Ch. 68.

<sup>8</sup> *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily*, by Joan Chittister, p. 137.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 145

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 146.

## Part II – Community, Hospitality and Compassion

This morning we considered the three monastic commitments, Stability, Conversatio and Obedience, as gifts from St. Benedict to us, in this 21<sup>st</sup> century. For these brief reflections I am drawing particularly on the small book, *The Gift of Benedict*, by Sr. Verna Holyhood. She compares the Rule to an old, full-bodied red wine; it is best enjoyed in sips.”<sup>11</sup> Today we are doing some spiritual wine-tasting, and this afternoon we taste three other gifts: Community, Hospitality and Compassion.

“In community authority is meant to become a gift rather than an instrument of oppression. Only in community do I really learn to listen to the voice of God in one another and to see the face of God in the other as well as in my own. In community I learn to be patient and to obey the command to serve one another.”<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps you have all heard Antoine de Saint-Exupery’s words description of friendship: “Love is not a matter of looking at each other, but of looking together in the same direction.” This describes the ideal of monastic **community**: the members, in all their diversity, looking in one direction – the love of Christ and the guidance of the Gospel. For this to be realized, the three monastic commitments that we looked at this morning are indispensable.

Benedict believed that one of the most insidious destroyers of community is murmuring – “Pervasive peevishness” is how *The Gift of Benedict* describes this vice. Another vice is that of **private ownership**. Material goods are required for work, study, personal ministry and health, but his ideal is the early Christian community, described in the Acts of the Apostles. They were of one heart and mind, and everything was held in common. Needs were met as they arose.

But all was not perfect in the community we read about in Acts. There was discrimination between the rich and the poor; not everyone shared their goods with equal honesty. There were squabbles over food. The early Christian communities were *human*, as Benedict well knew his communities were. Love costs. It costs in little daily things – serving meals, meeting needs, or refusing favors gently. Love makes demands: that we use our gifts for our own communities as well as for those outside. It demands that we share ourselves, our minds, our insights, and our time with one another. It demands that we allow the people in our lives to be who they are and grow as they can.<sup>13</sup>

Joan Chittister writes: “Community is the only antidote we have to an individualism that is fast approaching the heights of the pathological and the sinful in this world.” Communities exist to draw us always into the center of life where values count and meaning matters more than our careers or our personal convenience.”<sup>14</sup>

Simply living together does not by itself create community. People can live together in armies, prisons, college dorms and hospitals, without every becoming communities. “We have to share a common vision. We have to want good for one another. We have to be able to draw from the same well together... even liking one another is not enough... What we want to live for and how we intend to live out those values are the central questions of community.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *The Gift of Benedict*, by Verna Holyhead, SGS, Ave Maria Press, 2002, p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 140.

<sup>13</sup> *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily*, by Joan Chittister, p. 41.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p. 44

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p. 44.

Benedictine **Hospitality** is not a social event, but a holy event. “In each of us there is some inner homelessness, some alienation from ourselves and one another which longs for a welcome. Benedict asked his monks to become a shelter to one another, accepting each other with their differences of personality, gifts, and physical resources. Not to extend such a welcome is to remain ‘strangers.’”<sup>16</sup>

The long history of Benedictine hospitality given to the poor, to travelers and to pilgrims, is familiar, but perhaps we do not often think of the internal hospitality practiced in regard to those with whom we live or work. The wider community that calls for our hospitality today may, look very unlike Benedict’s pilgrims and strangers. Among those seeking our hospitality are the poor and homeless, war-scarred veterans, refugees and migrants. There are also guests who may not be materially poor but are spiritually starved. Many seek peace or perhaps only an environment of quiet, simple beauty.

There exists in our society a whole “hospitality industry,” but hotels cannot offer that hospitality which is always a gift. Often that gift involves disruption and setting aside personal agendas, but there is always the chance that we, like Abraham, are welcoming angels unawares.

In exercising hospitality, we may often fear that what we have to give is insufficient for the situation. What matters, though is simply whether we have *anything* to give. Abundance may be welcome, but it is the sharing that counts, even when there is little.

If we find hospitality to the stranger problematic in our day, Joan Chittister, a professional sociologist, reminds us that Benedict’s Rule was written at a time of great social migration and personal peril. Rich and poor alike were welcomed to the safety of the monastery. They still seek havens of peace and welcome.

Joan observes, “When I let strange people and strange ideas into my heart, I am beginning to shape a new world. Hospitality of the heart could change American domestic policies. Hospitality of the heart could change American foreign policy... make my world a world of potential friends rather than a world of probable enemies.”<sup>17</sup> She suggests that hospitality needs to be practiced at least once a day, or it won’t be there for the rare occasion. Welcome a new thought! Talk to a new person! See from a new perspective.

## Compassion

*The Gift of Benedict* describes compassion as “the deep, gut-wrenching response to and embracing of the situation of another. As a radical critique of blind legalism, cynical indifference, or established subservience, it is a work of justice, which announce that another’s dignity or hurt is to be taken seriously. And it is woven into the whole fabric and all seasons of a Benedictine community’s life.”<sup>18</sup>

The exercise of compassion is a part of hospitality, but in Benedict’s Rule it finds expression “before and above all else” in the care of the sick (RB 36). “As Christ is welcomed in the guest, so he is served in the sick with a *personal*, as well as functional relationship.” Benedict takes a holistic approach to the sick, respecting their quality of life, needs of the body, their diet, privacy and appropriate accommodation. The sick, however, also have challenges to meet and overcome. They are expected to avoid selfish and unreasonable demands.

In the brief chapter of the Rule immediately following that about the sick, Benedict considers care for the elderly and the young, directing that in regard to diet, “they should receive loving consideration and be allowed to anticipate the regular hours laid down for food and drink” (RB 37). A society that extols athletic

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<sup>16</sup> *The Gift of Benedict*, p. 92.

<sup>17</sup> *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily*, p. 128.

<sup>18</sup> *The Gift of Benedict*, p. 116.

and academic achievement can sometimes be less than caring for those who are physically or mentally challenged – much like the rich looking down at the poor.

The abbot is also responsible to care for the soul-sick, particularly for the excommunicated. In Chapter 27 he sends wise seniors “to show the sinner the way to humble reconciliation and also to bring consolation...to one in danger of being overwhelmed by excessive sorrow and in need of the reaffirmation of love which everyone in the community must achieve through their prayer.”

To close on a gentle note, St. Benedict reminds the one in charge of the monastery’s goods, the cellarer, that among the most important qualities to cultivate “is humility and the ability to give a pleasant answer even when a request must be refused. Remember how Scripture says that a kindly word is of greater value than a gift, however precious.