

Exploring Benedictine Rule for a Balanced Life

Session 5

Wednesday 11th July, 11.30

Introduction

Over these last couple of days, we have been able to explore together a number of themes that are central to the Christian life and to our various roles in the field of Mental Health provision. As our time together draws to a close, I would like to offer a few final thoughts.

May I begin by reflecting on our own personal lives and commitment to the Gospel way of life. As I said yesterday, St. Benedict's response to the Gospel is that of one man in the history of the Church. We should, I suggest, always have the question in our mind and hearts: What is my response, here and now, to the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Even for those of us who have made our big life choices – our vocational choices – that question should never be allowed to go away. We respond to the Gospel each and every day.

The Benedictine Vows

In that context, I would like to offer a few thoughts about the Benedictine Vows. When we think of Religious Life, we usually think of the three vows of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience. Benedictines do take three vows – but two of them are different.

Benedictines make vows of "*Conversatio Morum*", "Stability" and "Obedience".

May I say a word about each one, for I think they may have something to say to us, even if we do not take religious vows at all.

Conversatio morum

Conversatio morum is the foundation for a *way of life*. It therefore strikes at the very heart of the monk's existence as we make our pilgrim journey to our true home with Christ.

Benedict writes, in the 58th Chapter of the Rule:

When he is to be received, he comes before the whole community in the oratory and promises stability, fidelity to the monastic life and obedience.

In this translation, therefore, *conversatio morum suorum* is translated as *fidelity to the monastic life*.¹

The term, but it can be quite effectively described as a *way of life* – *what one does*, if you like. Returning to the text of the Rule and put very simply, it could be construed as *the way one loves one's life*.

We must remember that there was no formalised understanding of Religious Vows in the way we have them now. Such development only came about in the Middle Ages. No, Benedict's first disciples would simply have sought to live a full monastic life as *their way of life*.

¹ RB 58:17.

While I would not wish to cloud the issue too much, it seems only right to make reference to another term that came into common use in later times: *conversio morum*. Again, it would not be appropriate to go into too much detail. Suffice it to say that the word *conversatio* was altered to *conversio* in later times. This gave a new understanding – that of *conversion of life*. The Latin *conversio* means *turning around*. We are, perhaps, familiar with the Greek word *metanoia* (μετάνοιά).

This, later, term speaks to us of a process, an action. On one level, the disciple, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, recognises a need for a change in his way of life. He therefore seeks admission to the Monastery so that he may turn his back on his old ways and seek the way that leads to life.

On another level, of course, *conversio* is not a one-off process. Conversion is a journey in which we are engaged every day of our lives, even at every moment. Sin, the distractions of the world (however legitimate they may be) draw us away from Christ and we must be for ever *turning around* to face him. This speaks of action on our part, but action that is always under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Allow me to add further to the confusion. For *conversatio* has another meaning – *conversation*. This may seem very obvious to us when we look at the word with our modern eyes.

This may not have been what was originally intended, but it does speak to us of our relationship with God in a way that is authentic. That relationship is, very often, in the form of a conversation and it could be said that the monk enters the monastery in order to concentrate on that conversation. Indeed, the first words of the Rule speak of the most necessary element of that conversation – listening,² especially if one holds the view that the “master” is Christ.

Again, I would suggest that this meaning of the term *conversatio* has something to tell us. The monk is called into conversation with God. This goal is supreme for him, since Christ is calling him to be “his friend”.³

I would suggest that this Benedictine Vow has much to teach us. We are all called to the Christian *way of life*, to *conversion*, to a *conversation with God*. Our Baptismal calling challenges us to respond to an invitation to live our lives in the abiding love of the Holy Trinity. This is the *way we do things* and should impact on everything we do, every relationship, every person we are called to serve. Perhaps *conversatio morum* is not just for the Monk!

Stability

As with the other monastic vows, Benedict refers to Stability in Chapter 58 of the Rule, in conjunction with *conversatio morum* and Obedience.⁴

It is important to see Benedict’s words about Stability in the context of his warnings about wandering monks, the gyrovags, whom he recognised as the worst kind of monk, even worse than the sarabaites, who made up the rules to suit their own variable tastes, desires and whims.⁵ Indeed, Benedict saw a particular strength in the life of the cenobitic monk, whose community provides balance and a guard against the excesses that might be a risk for the hermit.

² RB. Prol.1.

³ Jn. 15:15.

⁴ RB 58.17.

⁵ RB 1.11.

Rather, Benedict's intention is to establish a "School of the Lord's Service".⁶ Membership of this school requires commitment and an intention to remain for the whole of the course, as it were. However, this stability of place is but one aspect of stability – albeit an important one. Physical stability is an assistance to perseverance. It is also a sign of that perseverance. Ultimately, Stability is about perseverance, patience and a sharing in the sufferings of Christ:

Do not be daunted immediately by fear and run away from the road that leads to salvation. It is bound to be narrow at the outset. But as we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God's commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love. Never swerving from his instructions, then, but faithfully observing his teaching in the monastery until death, we shall through patience share in the sufferings of Christ that we may deserve also to share in his kingdom.⁷

For the disciple who is new to the monastery, one of the first things that he is required to promise and display is "perseverance in his stability"⁸ and a key element during the time of formation is the issue of perseverance. If the disciple can persevere and be patient during times of trial, then this will be a sure sign of his calling and hope for his future as a member of the community. Benedict calls for the disciple to show that he can stand firm and be tested in patience.⁹

Chapter 4, on the Tools of Good Works, contains much material that relates to perseverance and patience. The monk is to suffer patiently when wronged,¹⁰ to endure persecutions,¹¹ to keep a continual watch over all that he does,¹² to devote himself often to prayer,¹³ to live by the commandments of God every day¹⁴ and never to lose hope in God's mercy.¹⁵ The place where all these things are carried out is within the enclosure of the monastery and in stability in the community – a place which Benedict describes as a "workshop".¹⁶

A very particular call to perseverance is found where Benedict writes about tasks that the monk finds impossible. He is to accept the task in a spirit of obedience and then, when he has tried, can bring his concerns to his superior, explaining patiently his problems. If the superior still considers it best for the monk, then the monk is called to obey.¹⁷ This is all to do with steadfastness and perseverance which, as the Scriptures tells us, will win life.¹⁸

The Witness of Stability

Just as the obedience of the monk witnesses to the obedience of Christ to the Father, so the practice of stability – perseverance, patience and presence – is a witness to the fidelity of Christ to his bride, the Church, and to the world as a whole. God's love for us is a faithful love.

⁶ RB Prol.45.

⁷ RB Prol. 48-50.

⁸ RB 58.9.

⁹ RB 58.11.

¹⁰ RB 4.30.

¹¹ RB 4.33.

¹² RB 4.48.

¹³ RB 4.56.

¹⁴ RB 4.63.

¹⁵ RB 4.74.

¹⁶ RB 4.78.

¹⁷ RB 68.

¹⁸ Lk. 21:19.

Obedience

The opening words of the Prologue to the Rule, as we know so well, invite the disciple to listen.¹⁹ It is interesting to note, therefore, that one of the meanings of *obedio* expresses the action of listening, or following the advice of another. It was Cicero who used the word in the sense of obedience and, in some instances, in the sense of one who is dependant on another.

Listening is a key disposition in the Rule and speaks of the relationship between disciple and master.

Obedience in the Rule

These principles of the relationship between master and disciple emerge very quickly in the Rule. The work of Obedience is set in the context of listening to sound advice:

This is the advice from a father who loves you: welcome it and faithfully put it into practice. The labour of obedience will bring you back to him from whom you had drifted through the sloth of disobedience."²⁰

Obedience, then, consists in freely opening the mind and heart to the advice of the father. It is in this way that the disciple turns away from the old ways of sin and grows closer to Christ. Obedience is a necessary aspect of conversion. It is also an explicit aspect of monastic profession.²¹

Just as Obedience finds its place at the very beginning of the Rule, so it is the foundation of humility. St. Benedict describes the Ladder of Humility²² in the seventh chapter of the Rule and tells us that the first rung of the ladder consists in keeping God before our eyes at every moment.²³ However, Chapter 5 of the Rule, *De Oboedientia*, states the following:

“The first step in humility is unhesitating Obedience, which comes naturally to those who cherish Christ above all.”²⁴

One might say, therefore, that Obedience is the firm ground on which the ladder is placed. Unless grounded in Obedience, the disciple’s development in humility will be put at risk. Obedience is an essential disposition for the one who wishes to grow in true humility. Without this firm footing, the ladder will wobble with pride and the disciple will fall.

The most important principle of Obedience lies in the fact that the disciple is obedient to Christ himself. For the monk or nun, the will of Christ is recognised in the legitimate direction of the Abbot or Abbess. For us, it is especially significant that obedience is often played out in obedience to the needs of those around us.

It is this obedience to the needs of others that forms the second rung of the Ladder:

¹⁹ “Obsculta, O fili, praecepta magistri...” RB Prol. 1.

²⁰ “...et admonitionem pii patris libenter excipe et efficaciter comple, ut ad eum per oboedientia laborem redeas, a quo per inoboedientiae desidiam recesseras.” RB Prol. 1-2.

²¹ RB 58.17.

²² The “Ladder of Humility” is based on the teaching contained in the works of Cassian.

²³ RB 7:10.

²⁴ “Primus humilitatis gradus est oboedientia sine mora. Haec convenit his qui nihil sibi a Christo carius aliquid existimant.” RB 5.1-2.

The second step of humility is that a man loves not his own will nor takes pleasure in the satisfaction of his desires; rather he shall imitate by his actions that saying of the Lord: *I have come not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me (Jn. 6:38).*²⁵

This principle is followed in a number of places in the Rule, but it will suffice here to make reference to Chapter 4, on the Tools of Good Works, where are described the the ways in which Obedience can be lived.²⁶

It is clear that this Obedience, based on the disciple's listening to the advice of the master, is not a blind obedience. It cannot be unthinking. The kind of obedience which allows abrogation of responsibility in an effort to avoid the consequences of an action is totally inappropriate in a monastic setting. This is made very clear in a number of places in the Rule: the Cellarer is to have a sense of responsibility in his office and, acting under the direction of the Abbot, is to treat the members of the community with charity.²⁷ The community members are to have due care for the tools and goods of the monastery.²⁸ Those who offend in any way in community life are to show responsibility for their actions and seek to do penance of their own accord.²⁹

There is much here for us all. We should strive for that sense of responsibility that pervades the Rule. Exercising one's responsibilities in a wholehearted way, making good use of one's time; using one's talents in the service of others; using one's possessions – and even more importantly, the possessions of others – in a responsible way; being ready to apologise for faults; all these are ways in which we live in a spirit of Obedience.

Reflecting the Love of Christ

Why is the monastic called to obedience? The answer is essentially simple. The monastic must be obedient because Christ himself is obedient to the Father:

“Make your own the mind of Christ Jesus:
Who, being in the form of God,
did not count equality with God
something to be grasped.
But he emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
becoming as human beings are;
and being in every way like a human being,
he was humbler yet,
even to accepting death, death on a cross.”³⁰

Jesus action of self-emptying, to death, in obedience to the Father's will is the foundation for our Obedience. Jesus tells us this Himself in a number of places through the Gospels:

²⁵ “Secundus humilitatis gradus est si propriam quis non amans voluntatem desideria sua non delectetur implere, sed vocem illam Domini factis imitetur dicentis: *Non veni facere voluntatem meam, sed eius qui me misit.*” RB 7.31-32.

²⁶ For instance: RB 4.14-21, 70-73.

²⁷ RB 31.

²⁸ RB 32.4.

²⁹ RB 46.2.

³⁰ Phil. 2:5-8.

“I have come from heaven,
not to do my own will,
but to do the will of him who sent me.”³¹

“The Father loves me,
because I lay down my life
in order to take it up again.
No one takes it from me:
I lay it down if my own free will.”³²

“Then he withdrew from them, about a stone’s throw away, and knelt down and prayed. ‘Father,’ he said, ‘if you are willing, take this cup away from me. Nevertheless, let your will be done, not mine.’³³

The Christian takes up the way of obedience, then, in order to mirror the obedience of Christ himself. Jesus tells us that those who love him are those who keep his commandments.³⁴ Through obedience, the individual is conformed to the person of Christ and also shows to the world the obedience of the One who died for us. Obedience is not only about personal growth in Christ. It is also about witness to Him.³⁵ Obedience is a consequence of Love, a loving response to the One who gave Himself out of love for us.

Obedience and Freedom

The society in which we live does not equate obedience with freedom. For many, obedience is seen as something which constrains, stifles expression and stamps on the rights of the individual. When obedience is the consequence of force and injustice, this may be so; but that is not true obedience.

True obedience has its ground and motive in love. It is the consequence of a free choice, borne of the response to a call.

The call is to listen to the Master and follow in his way. As St. Benedict reminds us, it is natural to those who cherish Christ.³⁶ Obedience, in its proper sense, is natural to the Christian. It finds its expression in a striving for humility and in a spirit of service. Obedience is, above all, an expression of love for Christ in humble service of others.

“For true obedience, which is the carrying out of God’s commands, the key to the whole spiritual life, and the guarantee of its authenticity, is never found without deep humility and outstanding patience, and is always accompanied by pure love for God and true charity.”³⁷

³¹ Jn. 6:38.

³² Jn. 10:17-18.

³³ Lk. 22:41-42. See also: Mt. 26:39; Mk. 14:36.

³⁴ Jn. 14:21.

³⁵ 1 Jn. 5:2-5.

³⁶ RB 5.2.

³⁷ Letter of St. Bruno, II, 9. cf. A CARTHUSIAN, The Freedom of Obedience, London, DLT, 1989, pp.95-96.