



"Nothing Dearer Than Christ"

Oblate letter of the Pluscarden Benedictines

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"Let nothing be preferred to the Work of God" (HR 43:3).

Dear oblates and friends,

I've enjoyed of late a delightful correspondence with Dom Marc Doucet, a monk of the Abbey of Belloc, of our Congregation, in the South West of France. I much regret that I have never actually met him, though I have long known of him as a scholar of St. Gregory the Great. Our contact began after a mutual friend sent him a copy of my pamphlet on St. Gregory. He wrote encouragingly, and has since been exceedingly helpful in response to my questions, and fraternally kind in every way. Dom Marc is also very interested, of course, in the Holy Rule. One idea he hit on to convey something of its essence to the people of our time was to conduct interviews with St. Benedict himself, and to publish the results in Belloc's quarterly magazine. With Dom Marc's kind permission, I'm offering for this oblate letter a translation of one interview, slightly adapted and abridged. It first appeared in *Voix de Belloc*, n. 144, March 1992.

MONASTIC VOICES

Question of Dom Marc Doucet: St. Benedict, you're already well known to the regular readers of this letter. At least, I should say your Rule and the monasteries that follow it are well known. But you yourself seem actually quite elusive. We find it hard to imagine you, apart from the figure frozen in a stained glass window. What I want to discover now is not just your work, but yourself. I want to know not just what you've written but the Roman man you are, because...

St. Benedict: Hang on a moment, if I might just interrupt you here. I'm not a Roman, I'm a Sabine. An important distinction! We're the men of the mountains, who've always been fiercely proud of our distinct identity. But having said that, I do accept of course that in culture, in education, in outlook and in attitude, I'm a Roman, through and through.

Q: Quite so. I like to think of you as a true son of those great men who formed the character and soul of your race: someone like Scipio, who was so successful as a leader of men because he understood them; because he was ready to learn not only from books but even more from his own personal experience...

St. B.: Yes; but don't forget other, more important traits: that I renounced my own will in order to take up the glorious weapons of obedience and to serve, as a soldier, the true King, Christ our Lord!

Q: Let me come now to my first question. I want to ask you, St. Benedict: what is a monk? Can you give me your own response to that question in two words?

St. B.: For me a monk is fundamentally a cenobite: someone who lives in community, subject to the authority of a Rule and an Abbot. That's a true soldier of Christ.

Q: Weapons of obedience, serving as a soldier, being subject to a commander.. There's so much in your Rule about order, submission, sanctions, hierarchy, punishments: anyone would think you were legislating not for a monastery but for a Roman Legion!! But there's an important difference between the two! Do you know that

nowadays, in many monasteries, these parts of your Rule are no longer read out in public, for fear of shocking the guests? All this apparently military discipline: is it quite appropriate for a Christian community?

St. B.: You exaggerate of course, but I can see the point you're driving at. You're actually focussing on one of the most culturally conditioned aspects of my Rule: one that's most marked by the passage of time. But don't forget that a few years ago, and even now in plenty of monasteries, all these passages were read out in public, and no one was shocked. And a few years before that, they were not only read out but put into practice, quite regularly, and no one was shocked... As for military images: they're commonplace in monastic literature. And the monks had good authority for using these images: they're in scripture (cf. e.g. Eph 6:14-17; 2 Tm 2:2-4). I use plenty of other images too, mind. But having said all that, I do accept that a Roman monastery may have something of the flavour of a Roman Legion about it. It's inevitable. Doesn't a French monastery have its own thoroughly French characteristics too? That's true whether it's shaped by people from your ancient peasant stock, or by the sons of your aristocracy... Just as a monastery of the English Benedictine Congregation irresistibly evokes "gentlemen at home", or an Italian monastery evokes a work of art...

Q: Accepting all that, I still want to ask about this impression you give of yourself in your Rule. When we read it, we might be forgiven for feeling we're reading the work of a General or a lawyer rather than of a monk. At least, according to the idea of a monk we usually like to have, or at any rate, on a first reading... You know our saying, "the style is the man". Is that true of you? Is the style of your Rule the man St. Benedict?

St. B.: No. I wrote the Rule as a father, and even with the tender love of a mother. I state this explicitly at the beginning, when I address the newcomer to the monastic life.

Q: That's true, I admit. We sense the same at the end of the Rule, and we always find these passages most consoling. But between the beginning and the end, sensibility and imagination are not exactly to the fore. We seem to be reading instructions by the boss, the commander, who arranges everything, who lays down the law. You present the Abbot, which presumably means yourself, as a father figure who exercises absolute, even divine authority, over everyone around him.

St. B.: No, you really haven't understood me at all. We Latins, we Romans certainly have a tradition of respect for the one who wields authority: "imperium" we say. But we also, and no less so, have a traditional loathing for any form of tyranny. You have to bear in mind all the time that it's ultimately not the Abbot who rules his monks, but Christ himself. The monastery is not the Kingdom of the Abbot; it's a little cell, a seed, of the Kingdom of God. The only King the monks recognise is Jesus Christ. The Abbot is his lieutenant, nothing more. I think I make that perfectly clear. In fact I insist upon it again and again, and upon the account the Abbot will have to give of his stewardship.

Q: But what about those who have to obey the Abbot? One gets the impression that all initiative is taken away from them. Aren't they treated as mere functionaries, who do what they're told; even treated somehow as minors?

St. B.: Not at all. Look at place given to the deans, who exercise authority in tandem with the Abbot; then there's the Prior; and most importantly there's the whole community who have to be consulted in all important decisions. And I stress that God might well reveal the wisest counsel through the youngest member present.

Q: Isn't there a danger, though, that all these people will always tend to say yes to anything the Abbot suggests, out of an ingrained habit of obedience to him? You say very harsh things indeed about the Prior, whom you choose yourself...

St. B.: Of course I do. And I say these things, believe me, because of bitter experience. I do try to explain in that Chapter on the Prior why in my opinion it's best if ultimate authority in the monastery is always retained by the Abbot.

Q: Yes. You say that after consulting his Prior, his deans, his community, the Abbot should do what he himself wants.

St. B.: Now you've really touched a very important point. I never say that the Abbot should do what he wants. I say that after he has taken advice, he has the grave duty, the heavy responsibility, to decide before God what's best - what seems to him to be best. This whole manner of procedure I outline is not based on one person's whim, or desire for power. It's firmly rooted in the long collective experience of our people. You must have read some Cicero? He succeeded in defining this experience on behalf of all of us. He spoke of the ideal government of a nation, and a lot of what he says applies to a monastery. According to Cicero, the state can't function if there's no stability of power; if the executive lacks the necessary authority to enact its decrees, or again if the people lack their due rights and liberties. So there has to be a balance between the best of the various forms of

government, whether by a King, by a Senate or by the People themselves. You'll find not a few of Cicero's ideas lying behind my description of how a monastery should be managed.

Q: Turning from abstract theory now to concrete practice: your Rule is full of quite small details about daily life. Can that be squared with the advice you give the Abbot, that he shouldn't be too concerned with the fleeting and temporal things of this world? For example, you say it's for the Abbot to ensure the habits of the brethren are properly fitted to their wearers; that the kitchen servers wash the hand towels; that the monks remove their knives before going to sleep... In the liturgy you lay down a time for taking care of the needs of nature. I could go on and on. The Abbot is concerned with details about the food, the silence, the bells... Is he not going to get lost trying to keep up with it all?

St. B.: You might think this paradoxical, but I'd say this emphasis on detail has precisely the contrary effect. You've noticed I begin my Rule with the great Pauline vision of Adam's disobedience at the beginning of creation, followed by the obedience of Christ, the second Adam, through which salvation is opened up to us. Everything that follows, the whole life of a monk, is set within this light. Without this vision, all the details in the Rule lose their significance, for sure. And you've noticed of course that I make constant reference to holy Scripture as the ultimate Rule, and to the monastic tradition, especially that of our father St. Basil, the desert fathers, John Cassian and the rest. But if we don't translate all that into the details of our daily life, it can remain simply at the level of fine sounding ideas.

Q: My next question brings us back to a subject we've already touched on, so I can probably guess what you'll say in reply. But it does still bother me. I mean the juridical tone of your Rule. There's so much in it of regulation and law...

St. B.: If you find my Rule too juridical, why have you added to it a set of Constitutions, which have at least as many pages, not to mention your Ordinances of the General Chapters, Provincial Ordinances and I don't know what else?

Q: Fair point. Nevertheless. Surely someone seeking guidance for a life with God traditionally goes looking for a spiritual father, not a legislator. I acknowledge that you do often offer us a warm invitation, asking for our generous response. You quote St. Paul who tells us that God loves a cheerful giver. But so often, by contrast, you seem to give orders, backed up by punitive sanctions. As a random example, you tell the young postulant: This is the law under which you wish to serve. Then you tell him in the most peremptory manner that if he can't keep it, he should push off!

St. B.: A great deal of what's troubling you here can be explained by reference to our Latin language and culture. We Latins have an extremely developed sense of law, and of the link between God and the law. A Roman almost naturally thinks of law not as something imposed from outside, something arbitrary, but as a reflection of the will of God which is written on every human heart. In this sense, for us, law and conscience overlap. We think of human law as making explicit, at least ideally, this law of God inscribed on our being. Now obviously it's necessary for grace to evangelise this aspect of our culture. But don't you see how wonderfully God has used it? And I hope you've noticed what I say about the kitchen servers: that they should serve one another "sub caritate". You might translate that "under the law of charity." In the last analysis, charity is the single law of the monastery.

Q: Thank you! Now here's a quite different question. It's one I've always wanted to ask you about the rite of solemn profession. You might think it a minor point, but it's always intrigued me. Why do you make the monk pronouncing his final vows sing verse 116 of Psalm 118: *Suscipe me Domine, secundum eloquium tuum et vivam; et non confundas me ab expectatione mea*? I don't of course deny the beauty of this verse: but what has it got to do with solemn vows?

St. B.: That's an easy one to answer! "Suscipe" - "take up": it's the word we use in our traditional gesture at the birth of a new baby. The new-born child is laid down at the feet of its father. He takes it up in his arms, and in doing that formally recognises it as his own. So the monk is saying to God: "Here I am on the ground at your feet! Take me up; recognise me as your own child; set me among your other children here: and I shall find my life and my inheritance..."

Q: That's very beautiful! Now here's another question I've always longed to ask you. It's about your reputation. Everyone is united in praising your Rule. We salute it as combining the best of all previous monastic legislation, and we call you the father of all the monks of the West. Do you agree with that? Do you accept the title?

St. B.: Let me return to the point I made a few moments ago: grace uses nature. Obviously I deny being some sort of solitary genius. The legacy of other great monastic legislators, my predecessors, people like St. Pachomius, St. Basil, or John Cassian, of course endures. But maybe God chose a Roman to do for monastic life

what the Romans did for law in general, leaving something that future generations could work on and adapt and enrich as the centuries unfold...

Q: And so they have done! As we've discussed, your Rule is so strongly rooted in a particular culture, yet its influence has now expanded over the entire globe. It has an enduring value that's universally acknowledged. How do explain that?

St. B.: Once again, nature and grace! You must know Virgil's lines about the vocation of the Roman: one of the best known texts in all our literature. The passage tells how other nations may produce greater artists, greater orators, greater mathematicians and the rest. "But you, O Roman", Aeneas is told, "remember your own greatness lies in the art of government over the whole world" (Aeneid VI, 847). Well, we all know that the Roman Empire declined and fell, as all earthly empires must. Yet Rome's vocation endured through the Gospel message she announced to the whole world. And so this little Rule I once wrote for beginners has also endured. God has used it as one humble part in his great design.

Q: And after St. Benedict, what next? Should anything be added to your Rule, anything modified, anything deleted?

St. B.: Experience is our mistress: *experientia magistra* we say. Let that decide!

Q: Now, really finally, I want to end by asking you for some brief words of advice. What message would you like to give a modern Abbot?

St. B.: That he should hate vices, but love the brethren!

Q: And modern monks?

St. B.: That they should prefer nothing whatever to the love of Christ, and that they should support with the utmost patience one another's physical or moral weaknesses.

Q: If I were to ask you what danger you think most threatens a healthy monastic community, what would you say?

St. B.: Murmuring.

Q: Have you any particular advice to offer to old monks?

St. B.: Yes: they should love their juniors!

Q: And young monks?

St. B.: They should show the utmost respect for their seniors!

Q: Nowadays there are quite a few monks who have left monastic life altogether, for one reason or another. Have you anything to say to them?

St. B.: Yes. I want to tell them never to despair of the mercy of God.

Q: Have you any message for young people who may now be considering a monastic vocation?

St. B.: Just this: that our journey to God lies through many hardships and difficulties. They should be aware of that, and resolute in determination to endure them all.

Q: What about novice masters?

St. B.: They should be careful to make sure that their postulants do truly seek God; that they show eagerness for prayer, for obedience, and for humiliations.

Q: What advice would you give in the case of a monk who marginalises himself from the community?

St. B.: It's terribly important that he not be just left. Someone has to be found who can go after him and speak to him in secret and console him.

Q: Sometimes a brother is given an order by the Abbot that seems to him impossible to carry out. What should he do?

St. B.: He should with all confidence go to his Abbot and explain the problem. But if the Abbot insists on his order, then the monk should put all his trust in the help of God, and simply obey.

Q: What about a case when a brother finds his obedience leads him into difficult and even unjust situations?

St. B.: He should keep his interior peace, and embrace patience, saying in his heart all the time, that amid all

these trials, we have the victory, because of Christ who has loved us. He should cling to the certainty of divine recompense.

Q: Have you a counsel for monks singing in Choir?

St. B.: The most important thing is that they keep themselves in the presence of God, and bring their minds into harmony with their voice. All the rest will follow. And is not that the bell? Good! Time to leave this now, and go to praise God together in Choir!