



"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).

"The brethren should serve one another. Consequently, no-one will be excused kitchen service unless he is sick or engaged in some important business of the monastery, for such service increases reward and fosters love. Let those who are not strong have help so that they may serve without distress, and let everyone receive help as the size of the community or local conditions warrant. If the community is rather large, the cellarer should be excused from kitchen service, and, as we have said, those should also be excused who are engaged in important business. Let all the rest serve one another in love.

On Saturday the brother who is completing his work will do the washing. He is to wash the towels which the brothers use to wipe their hands and feet. Both the one who is ending his service and the one who is about to begin are to wash the feet of everyone. He should return the utensils of his service to the cellarer clean and intact. The cellarer should, in turn, issue them to the one beginning his week., noting what he gives out and what he receives back.

One hour before mealtime, the weekly servers should each receive a drink and some bread over and above the regular portion, so that at mealtime, they may serve their brothers without grumbling or hardship. On solemn days, however, they should wait until the after the dismissal.

On Sunday, immediately after Lauds, those beginning as well as those completing their week of service should make a profound bow in the oratory before all and ask for their prayers. Let the server completing his week recite this verse: Blessed are you, Lord God, who have helped and consoled me (Daniel 3:52; Ps 85[86]:17). After this verse has been said three times, he receives a blessing. Then the one beginning his service follows and says: O God, come to my aid; O Lord, make haste to help me (Ps 69[70]:2). And all repeat this verse three times. When he has received a blessing, he begins his service." (Holy Rule Chapter 35)

Monastic Voices

"Life lived in common with others is useful in many ways. To begin with, none of us has self-sufficiency even regarding bodily needs, but we need one another's help in getting necessities. For God the Creator ordained that we need one another, as it is written (cf. Sirach 13:15-16; I Cor 12), in order that we may be linked with one another. But apart from this the love of Christ does not allow us each to be concerned solely with his own interests. For love, we read, does not seek its own (1 Cor 13:5)... How shall someone who lives alone show humility, if he has no one in comparison with whom to show himself humble? How can he exercise himself in patience, if no one contradicts his wishes? If someone says he finds the teaching of holy scripture sufficient to correct his character, he makes himself like a person who learns the theory of carpentry but never makes anything, or one who is taught metalworking but prefers not to put this teaching into practice. To such a person, the Apostle would say, 'It is not the hearers of the Law who will be righteous before God, but the doers of the Law who will be justified' (Rm 2:13). For behold, the Lord, because of His great love of mankind, was not content only with teaching the word, but, so that He might accurately and clearly give us an example of humility

in the perfection of love, he girded himself and washed the feet of the disciples in person (Jn 13:5). Whose feet then will you wash? Who will you care for? In comparison to whom will you be last, if you live by yourself?" (St. Basil the Great, 330 - 379: Longer Rule 7 - On the benefits of community life for monks).

"What more do you want than to be able to grow to be like that blessed woman Martha, who was worthy to receive Christ our Lord so often into her house, and to prepare meals for Him, and to serve Him, and perhaps to eat at table with Him? If she had been absorbed in devotion all the time, as Mary was, there would have been no-one to prepare a meal for this Divine Guest (cf. Lk 10). Now remember that this little community is Martha's house. There must be someone to cook the meals. Reflect that true humility consists to a great extent in being ready for what the Lord desires to do with you and happy that He should do it, and in always considering yourselves unworthy to be called His servants. If contemplation and mental and vocal prayer and tending the sick and serving in the house and working at even the most menial tasks are of service to the Guest who comes to stay with us, what should it matter to us if we do one of these things rather than another?" "God walks also among the pots and pans." (St. Teresa of Avila, 1515 - 1582: The Way of Perfection ch. 17 etc)

Dear oblates and friends,

In chapters 31 to 41 of his Rule, St. Benedict offers detailed guidance on the practical management of the monastery. The section begins with the qualifications of the monastery Cellarer, who under the Abbot is in charge of the whole domestic economy (ch 31). At its heart is chapter 35, on the weekly kitchen servers. The idea of service introduced here leads naturally to the reflections on the proper care of the sick, and of the elderly and children (36-37). The section ends with four chapters devoted to the brothers' meals (38-41).

I want to discuss in this letter the extremely important chapter 35. It's a wonderful example of the genius of the Rule. The whole Benedictine ethos can be found in it. It's also a chapter that has obvious implications for Oblates. But as so often, we need to see through its details to the spirit that animates it. Monks as well as oblates need to grasp the principles which St. Benedict held dear, and then to apply them to the particular circumstances of their own lives.

One of the first principles to grasp is drawn simply from St. Benedict's practicality. His feet are firmly on the ground. He is aware that he is writing for human beings, not angels. Sometimes people express surprise that there is so little teaching in the Rule on contemplative prayer, and so much focus, apparently, on pots and pans. But according to our faith, God in Christ took on Himself a full human nature. Therefore our way to Him will always be through, not apart from, our humanity. So St. Benedict's way of "preferring nothing whatever to Christ" (HR 4:21; 5:2; 72:11) is always practical, realistic, achievable. Nowadays, when faith in Christ is often lacking, people's natural desire for spirituality is often led astray, and they think of religion as something quite separate from daily life. So there is a demand for religious emotion without conversion; for mystical experience apart from morality or the commitment of faith; perhaps even for Christ, but divorced from His Church. This is not St. Benedict's attitude. He founds the whole spiritual life on the virtues of obedience and humility. He wants his followers to be wholly, consistently Christian: "at the Work of God, in the oratory, the monastery or the garden; on a journey or in the field or anywhere else" (HR 7:63). The Holy Rule exists to overcome any separation between prayer and life. It shows us how to be disciples of Christ all the time. And it suggests that, after the Church, the place we can best serve Him is the kitchen.

"The brethren should serve one another.... Let all the rest serve one another in love". Here is a principle very clearly stated and repeated. Mutual service in charity is necessary and good for all of us. Why? Because such service increases reward and fosters love. Or, at a deeper level: because a Christian has to imitate the example of Jesus. His whole ministry was one of service (cf. Lk 22:27; 12:37). St. John tells how this was summed up at the Last Supper. There He showed how He loved those who were His own "to the end", by washing their feet (Jn 13:1-15). St. Benedict implicitly refers to this episode when he requires his kitchen servers to wash the feet of all on the completion of their week. Another scripture passage he surely had in mind when writing this chapter comes from St. Paul's letter to the Galatians. "Serve one another in love, since the whole of the Law is summed up in the one commandment, You must love your neighbour as yourself" (Gal 5:13-14). According to St. Basil, therefore, monks generally need to live in community, in order to have the opportunity for service. He suspects that a life of prayer which lacks this element will probably not be authentic. His words apply, of course, to all Christians, not just monks. Parents certainly will have no difficulty finding ways to fulfill them. Perhaps their greatest need is to be shown the value, in the eyes of God, of their daily acts of service, however trivial or

routine they be. Others might need to be alert more consciously for little opportunities to serve: sometimes even to seek them out.

"No one will be excused from kitchen service". The implication of this principle is that monks can be expected to look for excuses that let them out of kitchen duties. And not only monks. Surely all of us are sometimes tempted to find excellent reasons for putting off, or avoiding, chores that are troublesome and boring. We easily think of them as evils to be tolerated: distractions from our real business: perhaps even from our prayer. St. Benedict would have us see them rather as a precious opportunity for growth in union with Christ: to be welcomed with gratitude and joy.

Here at Pluscarden all the brethren who are able take their turn at serving in the refectory, cooking, preparing vegetables, washing-up, doing the housework. Whether our work is normally in the garden, or an office, in the library or the workshops, these household duties always take precedence. In this way any distinctions between brethren are constantly undermined, and the common life is effectively safeguarded. Sometimes, for us as for everyone else, these duties can seem burdensome. We could perhaps employ outsiders to do them for us: but the quality of monastic life would surely suffer as a result. That we are able to do them all ourselves is not the least of the blessings our fortunate community enjoys.

"...unless he is sick or engaged in some important business." It is absolutely typical of St. Benedict to set an apparently inflexible rule, and then immediately to allow for exceptions. He knows the value of service, and insists on its importance. But on the other hand, he has no desire to turn the monastery into a labour camp. His aim is the building up of charity, and fostering of peace. If his regulation were to cause unnecessary distress, this aim would be subverted. So he builds flexibility into his Rule. He sets high ideals, and expects a demanding discipline, but always he remembers human weakness, and the differing capabilities of his monks. This principle of flexibility is essential also for lay Christians. We have to remember that our vocation to be perfect (Mt 5:48) includes the refusal to become task masters, whether over others or over ourselves. We have to accept that sometimes if the goals we set cannot be met, God may well not mind.

Some monks are therefore entirely exempt from kitchen service. Others -those who are not strong - are given help. Often they are the ones who most long to be able to serve. If St. Benedict's primary goal were efficiency, or rigid uniformity, he would simply exclude them, and leave them to their frustration. But his aim is that nothing be preferred to Christ. Benedictine monasteries are seldom therefore particularly efficient places. Sometimes meals drag on rather; sometimes jobs are not done quite as perfectly as they might be. This seems to St. Benedict a small price to pay, so long as the community is happy and united. Would that the modern work place could imitate his principle here! So often these days I hear how the relentless need to achieve drives people into stress and depression, as the human factor is ever more discounted in business calculations. This is a world gone mad. It is a tendency that has somehow to be resisted. If we need examples of healthy societies which function well, yet which value people for their own sake, then one very good place to look for inspiration is a monastery where St. Benedict's Rule is put into practice.

"The one beginning his service says, O God come to my aid; O Lord, make haste to help me. And all repeat this verse three times. When he has received a blessing, he begins his service". The same prayer that begins the Divine Office in Church, also begins the office of the kitchen. The same ritual - a three-fold repeated verse, a profound bow before all and a request for the help of their prayers - is used for the beginning of a monastic life, in the ceremony of Solemn Profession (HR 58:21-23). This shows the importance of the kitchen in the monastery, and is one way among others of linking it closely with the Church. And a monastic meal is very much like a Church service. It is formal and leisurely; hierarchically ordered; surrounded by ritual; begun and ended with psalms and prayers. It is the antithesis of snatched fast food, taken in front of the television by a collection of isolated individuals. It is an important community exercise. A monk can no more be excused from the table than he can be from Church.

The special blessing for the server must be regarded as a symbol for the blessing which must touch all that is ordinary in our life, whether inside or outside the monastery. What is touched by blessing and prayer is somehow transfigured: it remains as it was, but the mystery normally concealed within is allowed to shine out. What seemed entirely of earth, and without interest, is recognised as belonging in fact to heaven; of cosmic significance; giving joy to angels; opening for us a path to sanctity. This applies of course to any humble service whatever: but especially to any connected with meals.

Oblates living in the world, deprived of most of the helps offered by the Rule, should consider creating their own little rituals, so that the element of prayer and blessing may never be lacking. At least, they will want to be faithful to some grace before and after meals: each of which should be a reminder of the Holy Eucharist. And before undertaking any task, it is an excellent practice to ask for the help of God: and to bless Him in return when it is finished. Above all, disciples of St. Benedict will take care to be free from the spirit of grumbling. "If a disciple obeys grudgingly and grumbles, not only aloud but also in his heart, then, even though he carries out the order, his action will not be accepted with favour by God, who sees that he is grumbling in his heart. He will receive no reward for service of this kind; on the contrary, he will incur punishment for grumbling, unless he changes for the better and makes amends" (HR 5:17-19).

The middle two paragraphs of chapter 35 remain to be briefly discussed. In the Eastern tradition of monastic asceticism, filth is regarded as a sign of penitence and humility. Not so in the West. St. Benedict's pet hates are laziness ("the enemy of the soul" HR 48:1) slovenliness and indifference. He seems to have had quite a horror of dirt: also of the institutional mentality that shirks responsibility for the general upkeep of the establishment. "Through the labour of obedience you will return to him, from whom you drifted through the sloth of disobedience" (Prol 2). So in chapter 35 he wants the utensils returned "clean and intact". Again, it is not hard for us to see here a principle we can well apply. One ideal proposed to us in the novitiate was never to come out of the kitchen without leaving it in some way cleaner than when you went in.

Finally, we see St. Benedict taking care for the carers, by providing them with a little extra snack. Some commentators translate: "Before the hour of the single meal...". This makes sense, because on feast days, when there were two meals, it would be easier for them to keep the fast: waiting until the Abbot's dismissal.