



"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 fourth step of humility is that, if in this obedience one meets hardships and difficulties or even injustice, one should with a quiet heart embrace suffering ("patientiam") and stand firm, neither growing weary nor giving up. As scripture says, "Whoever perseveres to the end will be saved" (Mt 10:22), and, "Let your heart take courage and wait for the Lord" (Ps 26:14). And showing how the faithful ought to endure any and every difficulty, however contrary, for the Lord's sake, it also says in the person of those who suffer, "For your sake, we are put to death all the day long; we are reckoned as sheep for slaughter" (Rm 8:36/Ps 43:22). So confident are they in their hope of God's reward, they go on with joy to declare, "But in all these things we are conquerors, because of him who loved us" (Rm 8:37). In another place scripture says, "You have tested us, O God; you have tried us as silver is tried in the fire. You have led us into a snare; you have bowed our backs with suffering" (Ps 65:10-11). Moreover, to show that we ought to be under a superior, it adds, "You have placed people over our heads" (Ps 65:12). In adverse and unjust circumstances, they patiently ("per patientiam") fulfil the Lord's commandment: when struck on one cheek, they offer the other; when robbed of their tunic, they give up their cloak also; when forced to go one mile, they go two (Mt 5:39-41); with the Apostle Paul, they bear with false brethren (cf. 2 Cor 11:26), endure persecution and bless those who curse them (1 Cor 4:12).

(Holy Rule Chapter 7:35-43; translated by Dame Catherine Wybourne OSB)

Monastic Voices

"In this fourth degree, humility blossoms out into heroic patience. What a contrast with pride! On the day we made profession of our Rule, we promised to tend towards this humility.

If so admirable a patience appears very difficult for us to possess, let us turn our gaze upon our Divine Model during His Passion. He is God, the All-Powerful, and his Soul is rich in perfection. And behold, they spit in His face, and He does not turn away (Is 50:6). He is silent before Herod who treats Him as a fool (Lk 23:9). He submits Himself to Pilate who condemns Him to an infamous death. Why does Christ Jesus submit without complaint to all these outrages? From reverence and love of His Father, Who has fixed the circumstances of His Passion (Jn 14:31). It is proportionately the same for the humble monk. Why does he accept all humiliation? Always for the sake of the reverence he has for God. But love and confidence likewise animate the monk's soul in all these circumstances, painful as they are to nature. You see how our Holy Father never separates the confidence of the child, hoping in the goodness of his Heavenly Father, from the reverence that he has because he is a creature."

(Dom Columba Marmion 1858-1923: Christ the Ideal of the Monk.)

"Patience is the root and guardian of all the virtues. Possession of this virtue is a greater proof of holiness than signs and wonders. None of the Saints attained to heavenly glory except through patience.

There is no virtue of patience in prosperity. Perfection means refusal to deviate from the straight course of one's hope, however crushed by adversity. The perfect man is never impatient with the imperfection of his neighbour. True patience consists not only in bearing calmly the evils done us by another, but also in not being consumed by resentment against the person who inflicts them. Often we appear patient because we are unable to repay evils. This is the display, but not the virtue of patience. Patience in the sight of God means not only bearing with one's opponents, but also loving them.

Now we should be aware that often, at the time someone suffers opposition and hears insults, he feels no distress and practises patience. But the cunning enemy will return during a period of tranquillity, and remind him of all his losses and injuries. Exaggerating everything that was inflicted, he stirs the peaceful mind up into a rage. Ashamed at having borne those things calmly, and regretting that he has not returned the insults, the previously victorious person is thus finally defeated, as he resolves to do worse to the other person, given the chance. But the truly patient man bears with the evils done by another, without resenting them at the time, and rejoices when he thinks back over them, glad that he endured them." (St. Gregory the Great, +604, from his Gospel Homily 35, on Lk 21:19)

Dear oblates and friends,

Sooner or later, whether inside or outside the monastery, we are going to encounter Trouble. It is one of the consequences of the Fall. Our first parents were driven out of Paradise, and an Angel with a flaming sword has been appointed to bar, for the time being, our way back there (cf. Gn 3:24). And so we dwell as exiles in this valley of tears, far from our true home. In principle, of course, we can often regard the trials and tribulations of this life as richly deserved punishments for our sins. But not always. More bafflingly, in God's mysterious Providence, our ancient enemy has been given permission to prowl about the earth, venting his malice even, perhaps especially, on the innocent (cf. Job 1:7; 2:2).

If we fail to deal with our difficulties positively, serious spiritual harm can follow. Some people react against their troubles by anger and aggression, lashing out at anything or anyone who happens to come in their way. Others more passively sink into bitterness and resentment. This can easily establish itself as a habitual peevishness, ever ready to find fault, and lay blame. Some people feel themselves crushed under the burden of their troubles. A debilitating depression can result, fostering a terrible sense of isolation, and hopelessness. If unchecked this can even lead to despair.

But Christians know that all things act together for good for those who love God (Rm 8:28). Troubles can be seen as the very means of our purification: the blows of hammer and chisel turning the rough marble block into the finished statue. We know that suffering can identify us more closely with Christ; draw us into closer union with God. And we know that we do not face our troubles alone. As Dom Helder Camara once said, God is far less likely to abandon us in hardship than in times of ease. Experience shows that He is often most present when things are at their worst.

The sons and daughters of St. Benedict are especially fortunate to have his offer of guidance in time of trouble. It is set out in his fourth step of humility, which is one of the most important passages in the Rule. We can think of it as St. Benedict's bequest to us: our birth-right. Novices are normally expected to learn it by heart. There will be occasions, in the lives of all of us, when this text can be a life line for us to hang on to. Amid our distress we can be greatly helped by thinking it through slowly, word by word, applying it to our own situation, our eyes fixed all the time on Christ crucified.

The fourth step of humility is all about Christian patience. The importance of this virtue had already touched on at the end of the Prologue. "Passionibus Christi per patientiam participemur": "through patience we share in the sufferings of Christ" (verse 50). This understanding of patience is one of the most important insights of the monastic wisdom that St. Benedict inherited. The first monks wanted to imitate the perfect fidelity to Christ of the martyrs, even when persecution of the Church had ceased. But it was precisely the virtue of patience that most characterised the martyrs. So the monks concluded that by practising patience they also could be worthy followers of Christ, and witnesses to Him. They recognised too that this "martyrdom of the heart" need not be regarded as an easier option. Sustained, daily fidelity amid continuous difficulties can be harder to achieve than one heroic act of generosity. True Christ-like patience is as necessary for this as for the martyrdom of blood. It is the fruit not of Stoic endurance, but of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:23). It is attained only through the gift of God.

Patience, as an attitude, pervades the Holy Rule. It characterises those good monks whom the Abbot need not rebuke, but still must encourage to grow in virtue (2:25). Patient bearing of and refusal to inflict injuries appears among the tools of good works (4:30). The sick are to be served with patience (36:5). Any newcomer to the monastery is first of all tested in patience (58:3,11). The novice is clearly told of the "dura et aspera", the difficulties and hardships through which we make our way to God (58:8). Faced with an impossible obedience, the monk explains his difficulties with patience, at the right moment (68:2). Finally, the Chapter on good zeal shows how patient monks treat one another (72:5).

If patience is to be real, and to grow, it needs exercise. St. Benedict assumes that monastic obedience will be the context for this (7:35). For an oblate, this could be translated as the inescapable demands of duties imposed by his or her situation in life. Things like sickness, or bereavement, can play a part in this. But more often than not, the occasions will come from the people with whom we live.

Far from shielding us from the implications of our desire to follow Christ, come what may, St. Benedict assails us with a frightful list of the sort of horrors we can expect. To wit: Harshness, things that go against the grain ("contrariis rebus"), undeserved injuries, suffering, "being put to death all day long", "being reckoned as sheep for the slaughter", "being tested like silver in the furnace", "being led into a trap", "having afflictions laid upon our back", "having men walk over our head", adversities, "being struck on the cheek", having our clothes stolen, being press-ganged into a forced march (Mk 15:21), having to endure false brethren, persecution. We end the list with curses ringing in our ears.

The monk does not choose these things. Each of them, though, offers him the chance to be Christ-like. It is all too easy for us to think we can achieve this by our own activities. These are important of course, just as Christ's active ministry was an important element in His mission. But the real test of our discipleship will come when, like Him, we have to endure what is done to us, even without our consent.

Not that Christian patience can be reduced to a passive resignation. The fourth step of humility shows how just how active our patience has to be. This can be seen as unfolding in four stages.

Endurance, first of all. As I was told in the noviciate, the first rule to follow is Stay Put! "Do not be daunted by fear and run away from the road that leads to salvation. It is bound to be narrow at the outset" (HR Prologue, 48). Five times in this step of humility, St. Benedict uses the word "sustinet" ("he endures, stands firm, bears"). The same word is used to describe the server waiting for his lunch (35:14, 38:10). In other words, this endurance is in expectation of a reward. And so the whole picture is transformed. St. Paul starkly remarks that if our hope in Christ is for this life only, then we are of all men most to be pitied (1 Cor 15:19). But as St. Benedict notes elsewhere (49:7), the lenten quality of our life is endurable precisely because it prepares us for the Easter, our own Easter, that will follow.

As well as enduring, however, we must also, through it all, preserve a "quiet mind". St. Benedict added this phrase to the text of the Rule of the Master which scholars presume he had before him as he composed his own Rule. This is a further stage in the heroism demanded of us. But as St. Gregory insists, without it all our endurance can be quite worthless. We have to make a conscious decision: I will not let this upset destroy my peace, or my prayer, or my ability to fulfil the law of love. The decisive battle we have to fight is this inner one: not the exterior one against our annoying brethren. We can win it if we keep our gaze away from our troubles, or our enemy, and fixed only on the beauty of God.

The third element is the Benedictine recipe for patience is joy. The Apostles rejoiced at being found worthy to suffer for Christ's sake (Acts 5:21). Like them, the patient monk can be glad, certain of his share in God's love, and in Christ's victory. We are being invited here to live entirely in the spirit of the Beatitudes. We consider ourselves blessed, fortunate, whenever we have the opportunity to merit some share in the Kingdom of Heaven (Mt 5:11-12). This is not just words, or fanciful theory. The martyrs lived it. With God's help, we can too: and we will be immeasurably the gainers, in every way.

Finally: not only are we to endure with equanimity and joy, but we are to ask for more of the same. This may sound silly, but it is simply the teaching of Christ, given in the sermon on the Mount. It all makes perfect sense when we bear in mind the words of St. Paul: "The sufferings of this present life are as nothing compared with the glory that is to be revealed in us" (Rm 8:18).

All of this forms part of our advance in humility. So we should end by looking outside ourselves, and towards those we carry in our hearts. If patience enables us to share in the passion of Christ, then it also gives us very great intercessory power. We must never forget that those who truly suffer with Christ uphold the world. By our patience, we can contribute towards its final redemption (cf. Col 1:24).

Let me give the last word to St. Teresa of Avila, who knew a great deal about suffering from personal experience. Once, at the end of her tether, she cried out: "Lord, why must You treat me like this?" He replied, "But it's how I treated My Son. I always treat My friends that way." "No wonder", she said, "You have so few of them."