



"Nothing Dearer Than Christ"

Oblate letter of the Pluscarden Benedictines

Elgin, Moray, Scotland IV30 8UA

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

Monastic Voices

"Dear Sisters in Christ:

Giving thanks to God, "because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world" (Rm 1:8), I welcome you; I greet you as heirs to the great tradition of Christian holiness which has its roots in St. Benedict's prayer in the silence of Subiaco, a tradition that lives on through your communities, which are "schools in the service of God" (Holy Rule Prol: 45).

St. Benedict lived in the dark times that came with the collapse of the Roman Empire. For many, disorder brought despair and the escapism that despair always breeds. But Benedict's response was different. Obeying impulses long known in the Christian East, he turned from all that was familiar and entered his cave, "searching for God" (HR 58:7). There he learned that even in darkness and in emptiness we can find the fullness of light and life. The mountain that Benedict climbed was Calvary, where he found the true light that enlightens all men (Jn 1:9). There he learned that from the Cross alone comes the light, the order and the fullness of God for which all people long. There alone does the human heart find rest.

The first word of his Rule reveals the core of Benedict's experience in the cave: Ausculta, listen! This is the secret: Benedict listens, trusting that God is there and that God will speak. Then he hears a word in the silence; and thus he becomes the father of a civilization, a civilization born from contemplation, a civilization of love born from listening to the word which springs from the depths of the Trinity. It is astonishing to consider how much came from so little: "this is the Lord's doing, and a marvel in our eyes" (Ps 117/118:23).

The Rule which St. Benedict wrote is unforgettable not only for its burning passion for God and its wise concern for the discipline without which there is no discipleship, but also for its radiant humanitas. The Rule breathes a spirit of hospitality grounded upon the belief that the other is no enemy but is Christ himself who comes as a guest; and this is a spirit given only to those who have known the magnanimity of God. In the Rule of St. Benedict, we find an order which is strict but never stern, a light which is clear but never cold, and a fullness which is absolute but never overwhelming.

Dear Sisters, our society too knows much darkness at the end of this century and on the threshold of the new millennium. In such a time, the luminous figure of St. Benedict stands in our midst, pointing as always to Christ. You have been called in a special way into that mystery of light - which is why the Church continues to look to you and your communities so expectantly. We look to you because you are those who are not afraid to enter the cave which is dark and empty; those who listen in a truly contemplative silence; those who hear the word of God and become that word; those who help shape a truly civilized world where anxiety and despair lose their power, and the peace of Easter is experienced in the tranquillitas ordinis.

The Church looks to you with special eagerness as we undertake the new evangelization to which the Holy Spirit is now summoning us at the dawn of the new millennium. There will be no evangelization without the contemplation which is the heart of Benedictine life. The whole Church must learn more of the meaning of "ora et labora", and who will teach us that, if not the sons and daughters of St. Benedict? The world is longing for the truth which Benedict knew and taught so well; and now, no less than in the past, people are looking to the witness of prayer and work which your communities so joyfully offer.

In all your prayer and work, it is the Virgin Mary who sheds light upon your path. She it is who teaches you to listen, who leads you into the depths of contemplation that you may bear witness in the power of the Holy Spirit to what you have heard. May Mary guard you and your communities with a mother's love; may Benedict, Scholastica and the great host of Benedictine saints be your inspiration and your strength; and may the grace and peace of Christ, "the faithful witness and first-born from the dead" (Rev 1:5), be with you always. As a pledge of this, I gladly impart my Apostolic blessing."

(From an address given by Pope John Paul II to a group of Benedictine women meeting in Rome, 11 September 1998)

Dear Oblates and friends,

I want to respond, in this letter, to the holy Father's request that we reflect particularly this year on the Person of God the Father. Doing so will prepare us to experience the forthcoming great Jubilee, according to the mind of the Pope, as a great act of praise to the Father. The Pope encourages us to think of the whole of our Christian life as a pilgrimage to the house of the Father: a journey to the Father like that undertaken by the prodigal son.

We can find many resonances of this theme in the Holy Rule. The first paragraph of the Prologue immediately springs to mind. One of the first requirements of my noviciate was to learn this off by heart (in Latin!). It is a personal address, given by a loving father, who is also a "teacher" or "master", to his son. An invitation is extended: to return, by the labour of obedience, to him "from whom you had drifted by the sloth of disobedience". This is St. Benedict's whole programme. The rest of the Rule is really offered simply as one practical and sure way by which the determined son can make this pilgrimage back to his Father. It offers him what we all need for a long and arduous journey (HR Prol 48; 58:8): an experienced guide; continual support; nourishment and companions for the way; a well charted course. Others who have successfully gone before are ready to encourage us to come to our Creator "along the straight road" (73:4). So: "Whoever you are, who are hastening to your heavenly fatherland, keep with Christ's help this little rule that we have written for beginners... Then, under God's protection ... you will arrive" (73:8-9).

We journey towards union with the Father, but the journey is itself to be an act of praise of the Father. Here again, the Pope's theme is one already very dear to the sons and daughters of St. Benedict. The name "Benedict" means "blessed". I often have occasion to reflect on this, since it is my good fortune also to bear this venerable name. Blessing is a divine and life-giving action, the source of which is the Father. The one who is blessed has no greater desire than to return the blessing. St. Paul beautifully expresses this at the beginning of his letter to the Ephesians: "Blessed be God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places..." The Benedictine monk or oblate is therefore, almost by definition, one who realises what blessing he has received in Christ, and who wants to make his whole life an act of blessing God, in adoration, thanksgiving and self-surrender.

The idea of blessing permeates the Holy Rule. St. Benedict is always giving blessings, whether over things like food (25:6); or over all the brethren (9:5, 11:7); or for individuals, like the weekly servers (38:2-5), or the excommunicated (44:10). Twice he reminds us always to pay back a curse with a blessing (4:32, 7:43). He also advises his monks to seek blessings from one another (63:15), or from guests and visitors (53:24, 66:3-4). But above all, at least 7 times a day (chapter 16), Benedict and his monks bless God. They do so, above all, in the public prayer of the Church: in the liturgy.

The prayers of the liturgy, today as in the sixth century, are normally addressed to God the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. Nearly all the Collects of the year, certainly all the Prefaces and Eucharistic prayers of the Mass have this structure. The Lord's Prayer itself of course is addressed explicitly to the Father. St. Benedict gives it a privileged place in his liturgy: said in silence by all at the little hours; solemnly sung by the Abbot at

Lauds and Vespers (HR 13:12-14). I hope to make this the subject of a future letter. The liturgy also does not fail to express the equality of the Persons of the Trinity. It does this, nearly always, in the doxologies of hymns, which are sung, according to the Rule, at every office (chapters 9-18). Above all it does it in the "Gloria Patri" which comes at the end of every psalm. In St. Benedict's monastery, and still here at Pluscarden, the "Gloria" is sung some 50 times a day.

St. Benedict frequently insists that the Abbot represents Christ in the monastery. But Christ came on earth, as it were, to represent the Father; to be a living Icon of the Father. "The only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, he has made him known" (Jn 1:18). "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn 14:9). So it is also the Abbot's job to be a living image of God the Father for his monks. His name, in fact, is derived from Christ's own name for the Father, "Abba" (HR 2:3). The Abbot must therefore "show his monks a father's loving affection" (2:24); he must be a "spiritual father" (49:9), always striving "to be loved rather than feared" (64:15). And the monks are to reflect this fatherhood to one another. The Cellarer also is to be "like a father to the whole community" (31:2), and the junior monks address their seniors with the name of "venerable father" (63:12) (see also Eph 3:14-15).

We Christians know what this word "Father" means because of what Christ has revealed to us, and what he has done for us. According to St. Paul, the fundamental prayer of those guided by the Spirit is simply this one word, "Father!" (Rm 8:15; Gal 4:6). Because of Christ, our relationship with God the Father is utterly transformed. By baptism we enter into his own sonship, and become adopted children of our Father in heaven. "To those who did accept him he gave power to become children of God" (Jn 1:12). "And if we are children, then we are heirs, heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ" (Rm 8:17).

Christ has revealed to us that God is love (1 Jn 4:8). And as the Pope emphasises, God's love is above all "merciful love". And the privileged illustration of this is the parable of the prodigal son (Lk 15:14-32).

The prodigal son stands for all of us, who in Adam have squandered our original inheritance of God's friendship. In fact the first step on the path to holiness is the realization that I am a sinner; a bankrupt utterly undeserving of God's mercy. But the Father, who has come running towards me in Christ, wants me to set out on this path, knowing that His love is more powerful than sin.

Rembrandt's painting, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, very powerfully conveys this image of the Father's merciful love. An earlier picture on the same theme had been full of violent movement, but this one, painted near the end of Rembrandt's life, is still: full of dignity. The eye is drawn first of all to the father's face. It is alight with tender compassion; yet we can also see there the father's suffering. His face appears calm, but only because his emotion is too deep to be expressed outwardly.

It is hard to look at his hands without emotion: one of them strong, the other gentle. The prodigal himself, clothed in rags, is a picture of humility and contrition; but he cannot get his speech out, because his head is already buried in his father's embrace. The two are on a sort of stage, on which the light falls: the others are the audience. Perhaps the figure leaning on the pillar is the son's mother?

The tall figure on the right must be the elder brother. Rembrandt has slightly adapted the original story in order to put him there. He wears the same clothes as his father. But he stands straight, detached, uncommitted. His hands are folded and in shadow. His expression is neutral. He is merely observing. It is as if he is as yet undecided how to react. Will he join his father and embrace his brother, in the light; or will he reject both of them, and move away, into the darkness?

Each of us can identify with all three main figures in the painting. Certainly, each of us needs God's mercy. We imitate the prodigal's gesture, and experience anew the Father's embrace, especially whenever we celebrate the sacrament of penance. We can easily become like the elder brother, also, whenever faced with the manifest sin of another. And all of us are called to be like the father, reflecting in our lives God's unconditional love for everyone, but especially for the most abandoned.

A Modern Version

A 16 year old labourer in London's dockland told a story recently. One of his friends was a dreadful rebel and the despair of his poor parents. He was so bad that all the neighbours talked about him, and that only made him worse. So one day, he gathered all his things together, completely severed relations with his parents, and went to live in Chelsea, so he could live it up and not be the object of everyone's disapproval. At first he was happy, and enjoyed his new freedom. Gradually, however, he began to see his folly, and what a foolish, empty life he was leading, and how good his parents had been to try for so long to make him see sense. So, he swallowed his pride, and wrote to his father like this:

"Dear Dad,

I see now that I have been a silly fool, and I'm sorry to have worried you and Mum so much. I want to come back home, but I'll quite understand if you don't want me back. I was a rotten son and you probably won't think it's safe to have me in the house with all the others. I'll catch the bus to Poplar next Friday, and if you are good enough to forgive me in spite of all the trouble I've caused, could you tie a hanky to the tree by the bus stop? - Mike."

When Friday came he gathered the few possessions he had left, and spent his last few pence on the bus fare home. He was so full of nerves that all he could do was gaze blankly at his bus ticket. As the bus rocked down Commercial Road he turned shyly to the big coloured man sitting next to him and said haltingly, "I know it sounds daft, but when we get near the stop just before Burdett Road, could you look to see if there is a handkerchief tied on the tree? It's so important, I am scared to look." The West Indian laughed. "Man, it's been puzzling me," he said. "There's a handkerchief tied to every tree we pass."

Fort Augustus

Having written my last letter on joy, I was tempted to devote the whole of this one to a lament over Fort Augustus. Although we knew that the community there had plenty of problems, the news of the decision to close down completely still came as a terrible shock. Fort Augustus' tradition was different from our own, but there were naturally ties of fraternal friendship between the two neighbouring Benedictine monasteries. Our Frs. Giles, Hugh, Anselm, Bede and Mark did their theological studies there. Fr. Ambrose and I would occasionally go there during our own studies for a week or so to catch up on essay deadlines. We did our retreat for priestly ordination there together. I will always be grateful for the spiritual help and edification received then from members of the community. Fort Augustus also had come to the help of our own community during its difficult early years on Caldey Island. One Fort Augustus monk, Dom Benedict Steuart, transferred his stability to us, and served the Prinknash community as Superior from 1929-1938.

Those suffering most of all from the decision, of course, are the surviving brethren, now variously dispersed. Fr. Gregory, now 86, has been at the Fort since the age of 12. The many others who knew and loved the place will recall with sadness the treasured link with the old Scottish Abbeys in exile; the enormous Church, never properly finished, and now perhaps destined for demolition; the row of portraits of past Abbots in the refectory; the magnificent library; the great cloister; the splendid organ; the school buildings and playing fields; the cemetery, with its neat rows of monastic crosses; the long years when the prayer of the Church was offered to Almighty God in this place, day in day out... No more.

Actually, the closure was only the last sad episode in a long period of decline. The 1945 Benedictine Year book lists, under Fort Augustus, no fewer than 107 monks (including members of dependent houses, and an unusually large number of lay brothers). Fort Augustus in its time gave 3 Bishops to the Church: Dom Joseph McDonald, who became Archbishop of St. Andrews and Edinburgh; Dom Maurus Caruana, who became Archbishop of Malta, and Dom Ansgar Neilson, who became a Bishop in Sweden.

On the eve of the Reformation there were over 60 living monasteries in Scotland, at a time when the population of the country, I'm told, was smaller than its Catholic population is now, and the Church supposedly lukewarm and worldly. Is this recent closure not a melancholy sign of the times in which we live? For all its latter day weaknesses, the Fort remained something of a light in our land: and that has now gone out. What had been a great monastery is now dead. All of us, somehow, must be the poorer for it.