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APPROACH TO PRAYER, RB 20 PURITY CORDIS PURITY OF HEART USAFI WA MOYO

The entire Rule of St Benedict is oriented toward *growth in prayerfulness*; it aims at providing sound foundations for an evangelical life which has **prayer for its keystone**. To aspire to live permanently in the presence of God, to purify one's heart of whatever could blind us to that presence, and to grow towards continual prayer, are necessary components of the Benedictine ideal.

The hours of the office, the Opus Dei, support the effort of one who would respond to the Lord's invitation to continual prayer.

Monastic spirituality is a spirituality of the *heart*; it is a spirituality which recognises that grace is an inner source of all that we do, that response to God begins at a person's centre. The characteristic features of Benedict's approach to prayer are found in such phrases as *humility of heart*, *purity of heart* and *intentio cordis*. "Find your heart, said Abba Pambo, and you will be saved."

According to John *Cassian* the immediate pursuit of the monk in moving toward the Kingdom of God is purity of heart. The term "purity of heart", *usafi wa moyo*, is used in several senses in the monastic tradition.

Initially purity of heart means that active renunciation by which a monk rejects whatever in his life hinders progress towards the Kingdom of Heaven, the Union with God. This involves not only the will to be free of sin, but also the leaving behind of anything in one's life that is an obstacle to growth in grace. Thus, in becoming a monk, *one separates from many things not sinful in itself*.

Secondly, the habit of renunciation leads to a progressive experience of freedom from vices and desires that will destroy one's commitment. Instead of being divided within itself, life becomes progressively simplified, integrated, unified, so that one's energy flows in a single stream.

Thirdly, when such freedom is firmly established one is progressively liberated from contrary imaginations, one's thoughts, the mind becomes disciplined and in control. This freedom from distractions means that prayer comes readily and often. In confirmation of this the Beatitude is often quoted: "Blessed are the pure in heart: they shall see God." Achieving purity of heart is a matter of opening ourselves to the purifying fire of the Holy Spirit and exercising ourselves in the practices of the "active life" as occasion demands. The practices of fasting, watching, withdrawal to the hermitage, meditation on the Scriptures are all subordinate means to our chief aim which is purity of heart or charity. We ought never allow these practices to take precedence over charity.

In the scheme of *Evagrius* the soul upon its journey attains at last a "state", *apatheia*, and the gate to charity, which is the gate to contemplation. In the scheme of *Cassian*, the soul likewise may attain at last a state called by various names: purity of heart, purity of mind, tranquillity, stability of mind, freedom from disturbance, or "perfection". Free from the passions and nourished with scriptural texts, the mind may concentrate its thought upon God. In this state, the soul has achieved or been given so stable a condition that it cannot again desire the flesh-pots of Egypt.

The idea of purity occurs three times in RB 20: *On the Reverence of Prayer*. Purity must characterise one's devotion in making petitions; a certain type of self-effacement is necessary in the one who prays. Humility and reverence must characterise the monk's attitude at this time. Secondly, "purity of heart" is joined with "compunction of tears" and dissociated from "many words". Prayer is pure when it grows away from wordiness and many thoughts and tends toward few words. Prayer is pure in the sense that it is intense and, under normal circumstances, when it is not "prolonged by the feeling of love coming from the in-breathing of divine grace", lasts only a short time.

This prayer of purity, however wordless is shaped more by the direction of the will than by the articulate intelligence and is nourished by Scripture. The Psalms lie under it. As the mind concentrates towards simplicity, it is represented as stripping itself of the "wealth" of thoughts to the "poverty" of a single thought. The single thought which it repeats is one verse of the psalms, "O God make speed to save me, O Lord make haste to help me." This short prayer, ceaselessly repeated, represents Cassian's last step of the highest stage, where the mind is engaged in continuous prayer (which is contemplation or the "vision of God") and has rejected all images and distractions and thoughts, except that one thought of God.

Prayer for St Benedict is not a matter of external involvement of mouth or thought, It is something which flows naturally from a life of generous dedication to God. It is characterised by a move away from noisiness, narcissism and novelty and an unshakeable commitment to a simple life. Prayer may be understood as the interplay of discipline, quietness, concentration and tenderness in the presence of God.

Benedict, read in the context of antecedent and subsequent tradition, has a great deal to tell us about the attitudes and dispositions for prayer. He has in mind the sort of life in which prayer is a priority and all his injunctions are aimed at advancing this end. Externally, prayer is characterised by simplicity, quiet, straight-forwardness and reverence. Internally, it is nourished by meditation on the Scriptures, the willingness to be touched by grace and by desire for God. It is in prayer, above all, that the search for God is realised.

Text with gratitude to Michael Casey: Introducing Benedict's Rule

Questions

- What are my problems with / in prayer?
- Do I continue to learn to pray? How do I do that?
- Did I get new insights in learning how to pray today; what are these insights?
- How can I explain the term *Purity of Heart, Usafi wa Moyo* to a new aspirant?

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- Is this my ideal? If yes, how do I pursue it?