

Statio Conference September 2008

THE GOOD ZEAL or What will last for the next hundred years RB 72

My dear Sisters,

The Jubilee of our *Hundred Years Priory Ndanda* reaches its climax this month. How do we step into the room of the next hundred years which none of us will leave alive? What luggage is worthwhile taking along into this room?

Well, for me it is chapter 72 of the Rule. And if there is something I want to put into your heart for living and practising together, then it is RB 72. Sr Aquinata Boeckmann OSB writes:

A life that is marked by “the most ardent zeal” (72.3), by radical living of the Gospel, by love of God and neighbour – such a life can give answer to the profound longings of human life, that is missionary life with impact for the Kingdom of God.

I suggest for this important month, milestone in our history, let us as individual Sister and as community take RB 72 to our heart and mind. I follow with thanksgiving “*Expanding our Hearts in Christ*”, Perspectives on the Rule of St. Benedict, by Sr Aquinata, page 50 - 73, and recommend to you the whole chapter of this book for *lectio*.

At the end of the Rule, Benedict does not give any further external regulations of conduct but appeals to the heart of these goals of observance. These cannot simply be “fulfilled”, but they challenge the entire person and we are never finished doing them. However, Benedict does not want them to remain a matter of attitude. They are to be practiced in daily life (v.3). This is one of the most intense chapters of the entire Rule (most ardent love, with utmost patience, no one, nothing whatsoever). RB 63-72 might be called “The way from good order to love”. By the law, by order and discipline, the monk is to be trained in love. Once the law has been internalized in the heart, detailed regulations are no longer needed. GOD IS THE GOAL OF ALL OUR WAYS.

We all have experienced bitter and destructive zeal and recall some of the experiences. However, we want to stand on the side of good zeal with wholehearted engagement. There is no “holy indifference” here!

The word ZEAL as a keyword occurs four times in this chapter alone; a word of intensive striving, referring to the power of motivation in a person. Zeal is a radical passion in people. It is exclusive, permeates everything, and knows no half-measures. It is a dynamic reality, the direct opposite of weak, tired, timid, or hesitant movement. The zeal of hatred and jealousy leads to hell, Benedict realises that this dreadful end is possible! Good zeal is zeal for God’s affairs, not for my own. Zeal is most ardent love. Love can enter a monastic who acknowledges being a sinner, for then the Holy Spirit can work in her. In RB 72 Benedict begins where RB 7 ended as the sum of humility. Let us practice good zeal, and it will drive out what is evil. Here Benedict teaches us there is just one way to eternal life: all embracing love, spelt out before in obedience (RB 5 and 71), in good works (Prol 17), and humility (RB 7). That is a vital love that takes hold of a person’s entire being and implies passionate love and living. The monastic does everything out of love of Christ. This is no longer the initial zeal, but a proven, mature and therefore more ardent zeal, the total engagement of our power of loving. It urges us to hasten, not to walk (RB 73), with the whole community (72.12) and it marks all our actions. Zeal is the ardour, the fire of the Holy Spirit, and the dynamic power of community life and of the apostolate. “For the love of Christ impels us” (2 Cor 5:14). We should not be discouraged, because we are too tired to live this, but just practice, exercise this good zeal on a daily basis, starting afresh every morning.

After having heard the word of the most ardent love, we might expect heroic deeds, but the word “practice” has prepared us. Benedict lists attitudes that can be actualized every day. Zeal does not consist in correctness and order, but in *attitudes* that can be shown by various ways. Almost every sentence says *how* things should be done. Thus this chapter can be practiced everywhere and by every sister, no matter how varied the expressions might be in different countries. Benedict begins with *mutual respect*. This is the basis for fraternal love.

It is respect for the other as a sister, as a person, not because of age, rank, or position. It is rooted in our faith in the presence of Christ in people, especially in the least of them (cf RB 36.2; 53,15). We realise we can learn much from others. The practice of living RB 7 is presupposed: if we realize we are the least and believe it in our hearts (7.51), we will truly give honour to others. For Benedict it was like with us: community as mixture of different cultures, different age groups, different educational background, different preferences in tastes, leisure. Respect is emphasized, even if the other person is wrong. And we work with people of a different mentality, cultural and social background. The Second Vatican Council emphasizes respect as a basic requirement for true dialogue (cf GS 92;23). For each one of us: rich field for daily practice.

Bear each other’s weaknesses with utmost patience

What are the weaknesses of body and character? Physical illnesses, someone easily gets excited or confused, depressed by the amount of work, cannot even perform kitchen service without assistance. Benedict includes all human weaknesses in two words: physical and moral. Each one of us in some respects is a weak person, in other respects a strong person. We all depend on one another for patience and mutual understanding. We can reflect on bearing our own weakness, try to accept, what we cannot change in us and in others. Patience does not mean simply accepting, resigning oneself to a situation, but firmness, strength, and courage to bear what cannot be changed. Patience is the day-to-day expression of love.

They are to vie each other in rendering obedience

Obedience is due to everyone. Benedict knows how easily we excuse ourselves from obeying by pointing out the vices and weaknesses of others. All of us can be mediators of God’s will for one another. And God often uses rather fragile instruments to speak to us. The monastic’s entire life should be one of ceaseless listening and obeying God, to whom all obedience is ultimately rendered. In this sense, Benedict can speak of the good of obedience. Concretely, a competing in mutual obedience might look like this: “walking in the shoes of another”, adjusting to his pace, being open to correction from the other, to a critical word, to a different opinion; considering a correction in God’s light and asking what message from God every member of the community has for each one personally. The will of God also comes to us from outside by the needs of the time, the people we encounter.

No one is to follow he judges useful to himself, but what seems more useful to the other.

The question has to start from the other person: who needs my help? What is truly useful to the other in view of one seeking God? Placing the other person in the centre as Christ did, no longer myself! - is the concrete fulfilment of the key sentence of preferring nothing to Christ. It is a way of following him. When we aim at the true benefit of the others, we attain happiness also for ourselves. Benedict says NO ONE, without exception, is to follow the law of Christ, to put the other at the centre of my life, not myself. How much do I try to live this, very different from what “the world” teaches us each day in the media!

They are to show pure brotherly love to one another

All monastics are brothers, sisters to each other, no matter how different they may be. Selfless, sincere, love without seeking one’s own advantage is the absolute requirement for life in the community. This love is also the guideline for all external activity. This love is to be given and

shown by me first of all, not to complain about the community, where I live, that there is no such love.

They are to fear God in love

In Sacred Scripture, fear of God is the initial response to the holiness of God. It comprises reverence and adoration, and in its fullest sense it also includes love. Without fear God is demoted to a benign grandfather or comrade; without love, God becomes a terrifying tyrant. “Holy God, grant that we may always fear and love your holy name, for you withdraw your fatherly hand from no one who is firmly rooted in your love.” (12th Sunday ordinary time)

They are to love their abbot with a sincere and humble love

Whatever was said earlier about the relationship with the brothers also applies to the relationship with the abbot/superior: we are to outdo each other in showing him or her respect, also bear his or her weaknesses with the utmost patience, vie in obeying him or her, consider what is useful to him/her and show him/her brotherly love. But added to this horizontal dimension is the vertical one. Love for the abbot is grounded in the foundation of the love and fear of God and is a concretization of preferring nothing to the love of Christ. Like the love for the brothers and sisters, the love for the superior must even more be rooted in faith if it is to last.

They are to prefer nothing whatsoever to Christ, and may he lead us all to everlasting life.

This is the foundation. Here, as in Prol 49, the fire of Benedict’s own love for Christ seems to break through. Preferring nothing whatsoever to Christ is simply our response to Christ’s love for us. Preferring nothing whatsoever to Christ is the response of a person who has met the Lord. Initial enthusiasm must grow deeper, become stronger through difficulties and discouragement (Prol 48), become more radical and permeate the entire person. The monastic is ever in danger of preferring something else to Christ: persons, his own honour, comfort, self-interest. But there is also the grace of a second or third conversion, chances for a fresh decision, our vow of *Conversatio*. It is through Christ that all these persons in the monastery are united, he is their common centre. Whereas the monastic had been the person acting, now it is Christ who takes over. It becomes clear that Christ in his person is the good zeal.

The word together in a deeper sense refers to solidarity with all humanity. Every person whom Christ calls to follow him is helping to bring the world home to the Father.

If we live this chapter, each one of us trying day by day, we truly follow Christ in community according to the Gospel, providing service needed in our time and for our time. It is enough luggage for the next century and a strong foundation for the next room.

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