

SOLEMNITY OF ST. BENEDICT

Almost every book ever written about St. Benedict refers to the moderation of his Rule, often with quotations about the way he wants “to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome” (Prol. 46) and about the abbot’s need to be “discerning and moderate, bearing in mind the discretion of holy Jacob, who said: ‘If I drive my flocks too hard, they will all die in a single day’” (RB 64.17-18). A specific example of this moderation came up in our table reading from the Rule just a few nights ago, where St. Benedict insisted that there always be two cooked dishes available at the main meal of the day so that a brother who might not be able to eat one kind could always partake of the other (RB 39.3).

Of course, it would be one-sided to conclude from such passages that Benedict thought living as a monk was especially easy. That same part of the Rule’s prologue that talks about avoiding things harsh and burdensome nevertheless warns that a certain strictness is required for the amending of faults (Prol. 47), and the same general section of the Rule that allows for a variety of dishes also specifies that for the greater part of the year, beginning in mid-September all the way up to Easter, the monks are to eat only one meal a day, and that never before mid-afternoon and in Lent only toward evening (RB 41.6-7). I doubt that any of us would care to observe so extensive a fast for about seven months every single year. In addition, the saint has a rather extensive series of chapters on punishments for those who do not make satisfaction for various kinds of faults: some are to be excluded from the common meal and made to eat alone after the others have finished, while an even worse offender is also prohibited from attending the common prayer, with the rest of the community being forbidden even to converse with him (RB 24 & 25).

What are we to make of this? Is the difference in tone among these parts of the Rule so great that the very unity of the document is jeopardized? I don't think so. St. Benedict was simply realistic in his understanding of human nature: There are limits beyond which most of us cannot go—hence the need for his vaunted moderation—but there are also tendencies in each of us that detract from community life and these faults have to be corrected in some way. It is this point that leads to one of the most impressive examples of what we might call St. Benedict's "middle way."

In reflecting on this, let me first note that there are some very important parts of the Rule that emphasize Benedict's desire that any monk who undertakes this way of life should persevere to the end—normally in the monastery of his profession, though the saint does leave open the possibility of someone's moving on to the life of a hermit. Here are some examples of what I mean by his concern that each monk persevere: The very last sentence of the Prologue reads: "Never swerving from [God's] instructions, then, but faithfully observing his teaching in the monastery until death, we shall through patience share in the sufferings of Christ that we may deserve also to share in his kingdom" (Prol. 50). Then, in chapter two, the saint writes that the abbot should so accommodate himself to each monk's character that he will not only keep the flock entrusted to his care from dwindling but will rejoice in the increase of a good flock (RB 2.32), while the chapter on receiving new brothers clearly states that anyone who professes monastic vows is expected to observe them for the rest of his life (RB 58.15-16).

It is, then, only with the greatest reluctance that St. Benedict recognizes the possibility that one or another monk might at some point be so recalcitrant, so averse to amending serious faults, that he would have to be expelled from the community, and this would only come after a lengthy series of attempts to bring the wayward monk to a change of heart. This is what I

consider one of the most striking examples of what I am calling Benedict's "middle way." He knows on the one hand that dismissal from the community may at times be necessary, so he dare not be overly lenient in turning a blind eye to faults—that would be one extreme. But Benedict also avoids excessive ruthlessness in dealing with wayfarers but instead provides for a whole series of measures to bring them fully back into the fold. This even includes the humble recognition that he or any other abbot might not be the best person to bring about the needed reformation. For this reason, in chapter 27 he mentions the assistance of monks called by the unusual term *senpectae*. That chapter begins with these words: "The abbot must exercise the utmost care and concern for wayward brothers, because it is 'not the healthy who need a physician, but the sick.' Therefore he ought to use every skill of a wise physician and send in *senpectae*, that is, mature and wise brothers who, under the cloak of secrecy, may support the wavering brother, urge him to be humble as a way of making satisfaction, and 'console him lest he be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.'" (RB 27.1-3).

This is surely one of the most humane parts of the Rule: on the one hand, it recognizes that some genuinely bad behavior has occurred that cannot be overlooked and must be corrected if the monk in question is to remain in the community, but on the other hand the chapter shows the lengths to which Benedict thought that he or any superior ought to go to bring about the needed change of heart, even if this means humbly recognizing that others in the community might be better able to break through the impasse. Any of us should actually feel privileged to live under the guidance of so wise and discerning a legislator. As we continue with our celebration of the Eucharist on his feastday, let us then pray that more and more of St. Benedict's wisdom and discretion may characterize our own lives as well.