

# **“Road to Eternal Life, Reflections on the Prologue of Benedict’s Rule”**

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## **CHAPTER 44**

**[T]here is a need to run and do now what will profit us in perpetuity.**

Saint Benedict seems to like the image of running to indicate a level of enthusiasm for the task undertaken. He then quotes Saint Augustine who wrote, “Singing is typical of one who loves”; he then suggests that we can say that, “Running is typical of one who loves. And this is the way he wants us to make our way on the road to eternal life.

As novices and oblates we study Saint Benedict’s rule in which he lays down his laws; in reality, he is simply giving us the directions to get us where we say we want to be.

If you accept his way, do it with an attitude of enthusiasm and generosity of heart. Monastic life makes no sense except in the context of eternity. This applies to Christian life as well. Without belief in a future life and confidence in the road that leads to it, there is no point in walking the way of Christian discipleship.

The Church also makes no sense unless it is the vehicle that transports us to heaven.

Monastic life is a journey to heaven; to run with zeal to eternal life requires a strong faith in the reality of eternal life and to believe our life here is the first phase of our existence. We believe this life will end and after death will come judgment, then resurrection from the dead, and then life everlasting. It is this buoyant hope that energizes the monk in his lifelong commitment to the monastic way.

1. On page 158, Casey makes the statement that if we see the monastic or spiritual life as a series of external imperatives—

laws, regulations, obligations—we will probably come to resent them. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? If so, why?

## Chapter 45

“Therefore a school of the Lord’s service is to be set up by us”

The logic of the chapter: A school is needed for 3 things

### **1- To be disciples of Christ we need structure**

“It is as though Saint Benedict is saying that because of the scope of the spiritual journey and the challenges to be confronted in making that journey, some sort of formal institution needs to be established in which the wayfarer can be provided with the optimal conditions for reaching the desired destination” (p. 161, first paragraph).

### **2- To be disciples of Christ we need to be a learner**

“One who follows the way of Saint-Benedict is one who is prepared to be a disciple, a learner in the school of Christ” (p. 161, second paragraph).

### **3- To be disciples of Christ we need a teacher**

“Christ is the monk’s teacher” (p. 162, second paragraph)

“The abbot, as the one whose duty is to perform the functions of Christ in the monastery, is also a teacher” (p. 162, third paragraph).

Possible application for Oblates

- Should experience Oblates teach newer Oblates?
  - “The abbot is not the only teacher in the monastery. All those who are selected for the key offices in the community are to be chosen on the basis of their sound practices and their skill in teaching” (p. 163, last paragraph).
  - “And it happens that sometimes we learn by teaching” (p. 163, last paragraph). Saint Benedict seems to be saying that teaching others help us learn. Should the Oblates program encourage a mentoring program to help both teacher learn and learner learn? Who are you teaching to follow the way of Saint Benedict? In the NT, Paul encouraged his student Timothy to teach others. In his second letter to Timothy Paul says to him: “You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust to faithful men and women who will be able to teach others also” (2 Timothy 2:2). Do you have a Timothy?

## **CHAPTER 45**

## **Therefore a school of the Lord's service is to be set up by us.**

Saint Benedict tells us that to progress on our spiritual journey to eternal life requires an acceptance of certain necessary structures to keep us from aimless meandering.

The only means of progress in the monastic or spiritual path is through the acceptance of discipline.

The acceptance of being under discipline is a sign of willingness to enter a process of learning. This means consenting to be instructed, guided, taught.

One who follows the way of Saint Benedict is one who is prepared to be a disciple, a learner in the school of Christ. Although the training methods may seem constrictive, the goal is the fullest realization of those who attend.

Under the guidance of the Gospel, Christ is the monk's teacher whereby the monk is never to move away from this masterful teaching, but to remain a lifelong disciple in the school of Christ; always willing to hear, always attentive, always ready to obey, always open to change.

The abbot, as the one whose duty it is to perform the function of Christ in the monastery, is also a teacher of the divine law as contained in the Scriptures. He should not teach or establish as policy or command anything outside the Lord's precept.

The abbot is a channel by which Gospel teaching, as transmitted by the monastic forebears, is translated and applied to the lives of those under his care.

No individual is indispensable. We are all learners; Christ is the permanent teacher and master of all. When one abbot goes, another takes his place, but monastic doctrine remains constant.

The monastery is the school where we are trained in the service of Christ: to take our part in the Work of God, to serve one another in

humility, to embrace wholeheartedly the element of the monastic lifestyle, and to learn to live in love. It is a school from which we never graduate. We are always learning something new. And it is through such lifelong learning that we grow in grace in the sight of God and of those around us.

These comments are exactly as Casey wrote them. Which ones are new to you? Did any surprise or challenge you?

## Chapter 46

“In its organization we hope to put in place nothing that is harsh or heavy”

‘In drawing up its regulations, we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome’  
(RB 1980)

This verse takes for granted the necessity of regulations/structure for the spiritual life (see Casey’s comments in chapter 45).” Indeed, Casey succinctly points out at the beginning of this chapter that “External regulations are necessary in order to lay solid foundations and get people started on the right track” (p. 164).

Now, regarding the necessary regulations, Benedict says they are not meant to be harsh or heavy. But why should they not be harsh or heavy? Casey suggests at least four reasons:

1- Regulations should not be harsh or heavy because **life is hard for everyone no matter what**: “every person’s life will have its own particular challenges and that it is in dealing with these that character is built” (p. 165, 1<sup>st</sup> par.). R

- What would you say are your particular challenge(s) you are facing right now and which calls for character building? (no obligation to share)

2- Regulations should not be harsh or heavy **because there should be room in the exterior life for a certain blandness**: “An unexciting exterior life, when a person is relaxed and not distracted by multiple concerns and activities, is the optimal condition for the appearance of tendencies that have no opportunity to show themselves when too much else is going on” (p. 165, 3<sup>rd</sup> par.).

3- Disciples may be in a season where after a period of initial enthusiasm, their spiritual life begins to disintegrate. **Support**, rather than harshness **is called for** in this phase: “to help people pass through this phase creatively, firm but moderate structures are needed, plus unconditional but sober support and affirmation” (p. 165, 3<sup>rd</sup> par.).

4- A virtuous life needs **moderation**: “The simple fact is that any virtue that is carried to extreme becomes a vice” (p. 166, 3<sup>rd</sup> par.)

- How do we develop virtues? Casey says: “we do not develop virtues by systematically following some flow chart. What happens is that different situations call forth different responses and so different virtues are cultivated” (p. 167, 1<sup>st</sup> par.).

Possible applications for Oblates

- We need structure but as Saint Benedict recommends, they should not be burdensome. In your oblate life do you feel you need more structure or less structure?

## **CHAPTER 46**

### **In its organization we hope to put in place nothing that is harsh or heavy.**

This verse begins a very precious part of the Prologue, one that is original to Saint Benedict. It is a progression from external discipline to inner conviction and from there to a very profound sense of delight in God and in spiritual reality.

When the beliefs and values have been internalized and a certain facility with the practices of the spiritual life develops, it becomes possible to be more relaxed about regularity and routines and to begin to enjoy the fruits of your efforts.

Artificial or external trials do not have the same character-building effect; they are little more than elaborate games.

When one begins deliberately to live a more fervent spiritual life, there is a period of initial enthusiasm that helps that person to adjust to the changes involved. This is normal and to be expected, but it is also temporary.

The fundamental challenges of monastic or spiritual life in general derives from the emergence into the open of hidden negativities. For this to happen, a certain exterior blandness is necessary.

An unexciting exterior life and a certain lack of distractions and activities is the optimal condition when such hidden negativities show themselves.

When that happens, our spiritual lives begin to disintegrate before our eyes. What is happening is that the real action is just beginning.

Experience shows that now is a good time to seek the support and guidance of a spiritual director who can provide firm but moderate structures. **Meanwhile, nothing should be done to terminate the phase before its work is complete.**

What Saint Benedict offers in his rule is a life style based on the Gospel and solid monastic experience stamped with his signature quality of moderation.

Saint Gregory the Great noted that the Rule's chief character is its discretion: it asks its adherents neither too much nor too little.

The moderation that is typical of Saint Benedict and all genuine spiritual masters is the result of recognizing the complexity of moral life.

The simple fact is that any virtue carried to extreme becomes a vice.

Saint Benedict knows that the best recipe for perseverance in the spiritual journey is to have a moderate measure of **all** the virtues rather than lots of one virtue and none of another.

Saint Benedict, the patron saint of moderation, wishes to prescribe nothing harsh or heavy because he knows that it is by small increments of fidelity in the everyday virtues that we make the most progress along the road that leads to eternal life.

Once again, these are exactly as written by Casey. Which of these statements most resonates in you or, at the very least, caught your attention? Why?