

Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary  
(Silver Jubilee Monastic Profession – Bro. Benoît M. Charlet, OSB)  
(Ephesians 1:3-6,11-12 / Luke 1:26-38)  
08.12.2016

Recently I went to Rome on Congregational business. My time there coincided with the closure of the Great Year of Mercy. Sitting on the plane in Dublin, just before take-off, I decided I would live my administrative trip to Rome as a pilgrimage, not just for myself, but for our little community – each one of us: Bro. Eric, Bro. Thierry, Bro. Benoît and Bro. Joshua. I asked the Lord to accord each one of us what we need at this time in our personal lives and in our community life. Arriving in Rome – taking a moment of prayer in my cell at Santa Francesca Romana (our monastery there) – my thoughts turned especially to our Bro. Benoît. I recalled how this year is for him a jubilee year. (The purist in me would say a half-jubilee year, really – for, on this Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Bro. Benoît celebrates twenty-five years of monastic Profession, not fifty!) It seemed only right that Bro. Benoît should be carried into the pilgrimage experience in a special way.

Today, we give thanks for the grace of monastic Profession in his life – and in the life of our community as, indeed, in the life of our wider monastic family, and, over and beyond us monks, in the life of the Church.

Using the words of the apostle Paul: *We give thanks to God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ.* The Lord has blessed our Bro. Benoît in himself and He has blessed us through him.

True to his name Benoît/Benedict, our brother is blessed and is a blessing. (Blessing is the meaning of the name Benedict.)

The translation of the Bible I had with me in my room at Santa Francesca Romana during my time in Rome and to which I turned to pray Paul's words, thinking of Bro. Benoit and all the brethren here, renders the opening verse of today's first reading in this way: *All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ.*

For a little moment, let us concentrate our attention upon that notion of our being united with Christ.

Bro. Benoît, by your Christian baptism and by your monastic Profession, you are united with Christ – as indeed, all of us are, who are gathered here with you today. Moreover, *in Christ*, we are blessed *to form together the one family of God our Father.*

Family is important to you – very important to you, Bro. Benoît.

We, your brothers, know how much your biological family means to you and we also know how much we, your monastic family, mean to you.

I wonder if you know just how important your presence here is for each one of us?

We want you to know that today.

We want you to be graced to know today how much you are cherished and loved, cared for and appreciated, not only by your Heavenly Father, but also by us your monastic family. You are well and truly our brother ... *Frere Benoît.*

I smile as I say that – as do all of us in community – for we are used to hearing you introduce your conversations on the telephone, even to your biological family, with the words: *C'est fr. Benoît qui parle.*

This reveals how much you see yourself – and we see you – as our brother, and, in the family

of God, everyone's Brother.

If you are our brother, this is because we are all God's children.

You are a child of God, *His beloved son*. We are all the children of God: *His beloved children*. What does it mean to be a son – a child – of God?

Jesus, the obedient Son of the Father shows us what it means to be a child of God. The epistle to the Hebrews tells us: *Because He was a son, He learned to obey*. Obedience and son-ship go hand in hand.

St Benedict makes this point at the very outset of his Rule for Monks: son-ship is expressed in obedience.

In the Prologue of the Rule he makes it clear that his goal is none other than to lead us to conform our lives to Christ, through obedience. We are to *return to our loving Father through obedience*.

Benedict calls upon us to be obedient as Christ was obedient – even unto death.

More than once in the Rule our Holy Father Benedict reminds us that we are *to prefer nothing whatsoever to Christ* and he constantly reiterates the role obedience has to play in this preferential love for Christ.

Our obedience is nothing other than the manifestation of our desire to live our lives conformed to, configured to, Christ.

Obedience is also to be the bond of love between us. We are to practice mutual obedience.

That means listening to one another, being attentive to each other – as Benedict puts it: *vying to show one another the honour and respect each one is due*.

Brother Benoît, twenty-five years ago, wanting to express preferential love for Christ, you made a unique promise: the promise to obey.

The abbot asked you what you promised: *Que promettez-vous ? What do your promise?*

You replied; *L'obéissance, selon la Règle de Saint Benoît. I promise obedience according to the Rule of Saint Benedict*.

In response to your promise, you heard these words pronounced by Abbot Philibert in return – a covenant word spoken in God's name: *Et moi, je vous promets la vie éternelle... I promise you eternal life*.

I can still hear Abbot Philibert speak those words with evident emotion in his voice.

An obedient, listening heart is the hallmark of a Benedictine monk – at least it should be.

This was the hallmark of the One we celebrate today on this feast of her Immaculate Conception. Yes, it is the distinctive hallmark of Mary's whole life.

I know you are inclined to think much in terms of the lyrics of certain hymns from our repertoire with which you are very familiar given all you do here in preparing the liturgy. Already at Bec this attachment to the liturgy was evident in you. How often I am given to see still today (this comes across in your remarks during liturgy preparation sessions here at Rostrevor) how you retained practically everything I ever tried to teach in liturgy classes in the classroom – *la Salle Saint Augustin* – at Bec. You still retain things I, the teacher of yore, have long forgotten!

Thinking of your Silver Jubilee celebration on this day, the words of a Marian hymn from the Bec repertoire came to my mind. I prayed them – indeed, interiorly, I sang them – with and for you yesterday, looking to Mary, whose discreet presence in your life I also want to acknowledge today, on this her feast-day.

I refer to that hymn in which Mary is hailed simply as *l'Humble Servante du Seigneur*. The hymn I think of sings: *Amour éveillé par la grâce. Dieu te choisit, Heureuse tu accueillis le*

*message du Maître de la vie ... and further on we find these simple words: Dieu te bénit. Humble servant. Love awakened by grace. God chooses you. Happy, you welcome the message of the Master of Life... God blesses you.*

If Mary is *the humble servant of the Lord*, so too is a true Benedictine monk. Humility is the other great hallmark of a Benedictine *worthy of the habit and the tonsure of a monk* – to speak like St Anselm. St Benedict proposes nothing other than a way of humility to those who would live by his Rule of life.

We might ask just what it means to be humble. When they gathered at Bec in 1981 (I was only a novice myself at that time) the French Novice-Masters and Novice-Mistresses of the Benedictine/Cistercian tradition, who came together for their annual study week, asked Dom Paul Grammont to describe a humble monk to them. They asked what would be distinctive traits in such a person. In his answer Abbot Paul spoke of a humble monk being one who is *quite simply at his place in the community – whatever that place might be, either the first or the last, or anywhere in between, whether exercising a seemingly important or a seemingly less important charge – and just happy to be there at his place, doing what is asked of him.*

As you go about your daily life in the monastery, Bro. Benoît, we see how you are happy just to be *about the Father's business, doing whatever is asked of you*: whether that be in *the noble service of the divine majesty* in the Sacred liturgy or as was the case for many years in the laundry, washing and ironing, and now looking after the candle-making workshops – along with all the other many little, but vitally important things you do, like ringing the bells for meals with the precision of a Swiss time-keeper. We see you not only *doing for* the community, but actively striving *to be with* the community – actively striving to be there for each one of us a loving, caring brother. For this we give thanks. Yes, we give thanks for *God's love poured into your heart* that makes you want to live the life you live in the way you live it – in the loving, discreet, way in which you live it.

St John of the Cross reminds us that *at the end of the day we will all be judged on only one thing: love.* He invents nothing really. Long before him St Benedict already placed his whole emphasis upon love. The end of chapter 7 of our Rule makes it clear that love is the end to which our monastic life tends: *at last the monk will arrive at that perfect love which casts out fear.* In what is probably the most beautiful and profound chapter of the whole Rule (Chapter 72 *On the Good Zeal Monks Should Have*) Benedict speaks of the love we are called to share in a most elegant and truly gracious way. Let me quote St Benedict: *There is a good spirit which brings closer to God. It is this spirit that all who follow the monastic way of life should strive to cultivate, spurred on by fervent love – trying to be first to show respect to one another ... living in mutual obedience ... never aiming at personal advantage, but rather concerned for the good of others ... Thus the pure love of one another, as of one family, should be their ideal... For God they should have a profound and loving reverence. They should love their abbot with sincere and unassuming affection.* Benedict concludes: *They should value nothing whatever above Christ Himself and may He bring us all together to eternal life.*

Brother Benoît, we pray with and for you today.

Praying with you and for you, we also pray for our brotherhood. We pray that we may all grow in *humble love*, coming to that *perfection of love which casts out all fear*.

We ask that we may grow in humble love, in depth and in number.

May the Lord lead us all together in the way of life!

And, of course, we spare a thought for all your loved ones whom you surely carry in your heart today – including those who have gone before you to live with the Lord for evermore. Among them I think in a special way of your dear grandmother who showed you so much love and surely taught you how to love in the way you do today.

Amen!