

St Benedict 2017
(Proverbs 2:1-9 / John 17:20-26)
11.07.2017

The gospel passage proposed for the Solemnity of St Benedict this year is an extract from what is often referred to as Jesus' *High Priestly Prayer* – the long intercession with the Father which Christ prayed on the eve of His passion and death, at the heart of which we hear His plea that His disciples *may all be one*.

As monks of Holy Cross Monastery we have made Jesus' supplication, which is inscribed upon the icon of the cross which hangs above my head, our community's fervent prayer. The longing *that all may be one* is at the very heart of our community life. The unity of the Church is a major concern for us – for the simple reason that it was clearly Jesus' dying wish and remains the deep desire of His heart for His people. Christ never ceases to implore the Father *may all be one*.

As a community we feel involved by those words; we believe we are called to live them for ourselves and to bear witness to them before others.

We feel compelled to bear in the flesh of our community life, just as Jesus bore in His flesh upon the cross, an ardent desire and real hope for the unity of the Church. Acutely aware of the pain and scandal of the Church's divisions, we remain firm in hope, coupled with a holy longing, that Christ's prayer will not go unheard: all His disciples shall become one.

As monks of Holy Cross Monastery, we have committed ourselves to respond to Christ's invitation to be one by our whole way of being. We seek to give answer to Christ's desire first and foremost in the life we share. For, how could we credibly speak of unity with others if we weren't striving to live this grace already among ourselves?

To labour for restored communion is a cause we feel called to engage in wholeheartedly because this is what Jesus gave His life for when He made His total self-offering upon the cross. We are told that Christ lived His sacrifice upon the cross *so that all the scattered children of God might be gathered together as one*.

The wound of disunity still existing between believers in Christ and the urgent need to pray and work for the restoration of Christian unity really grips our hearts and works upon them. This is in line with our Benedictine monastic vocation.

In his *Rule for Monks* Benedict has a very clear vision for those gathered together to live in community that they should strive by their whole way of being to be *one in Christ*. We find that little Pauline phrase *one in Christ* at the very heart of the Rule.

In our own day and age there is a real need to be engaged in a more intense witness in this respect, for it is to be feared that our Churches, following the way of the world – borne witness to by growing nationalism – are retreating into the unhealthy comfort found in living apart from one another, indifferent to each other.

This is not the Christian way!

In the Christian way no Church can consider itself indifferent to the other Churches. The New Testament could not be any more explicit. If we claim to be an apostolic Church then we must be attentive to apostolic teaching. The apostles could not be any clearer in their teaching. The apostles challenged those Churches which were unconcerned for their brothers and sisters in other Church communities. We only have to open our Bibles to read this.

Speaking of the specific contribution that monks and nuns of our Order might make to

Christian unity, St John-Paul II spoke of the importance of *the spiritual ecumenism of prayer, conversion of heart and charity*. When the saintly pope speaks of *charity* I am inclined to think, first and foremost, in terms of the loving welcome we are called to offer to all who come our way through the giving of generous hospitality for which Benedictinism is renowned.

St John-Paul stressed the need for monastic communities to be engaged in a more intense witness in respect of the *spiritual ecumenism* of which he spoke. He came back on this theme in several texts. We find this thought developed in *Vita Consecrata, Orientale Lumen, Ecclesia in Eurpoa* and *Ut Unum Sint* – as well as in other discourses, especially those addressed to our Order.

In the Encyclical Letter On the Unity of the Church – *Ut Unum Sint* – John-Paul II spoke of *prayer and conversion being the soul of ecumenism*.

This leads me to halt for a moment this morning on these 'soul matters' and their place in our Rule of life.

Prayer

Prayer in the Rule really is about an attitude in one's whole way of being – an attitude of attentiveness to God.

In a special way Benedictine prayer is about attentiveness to God as He speaks to us in and through the inspired words of Scriptures. This explains the importance of *lectio divina* – which is Scripture-based prayer – in the Benedictine Rule. Clearly, for St Benedict it is all important to persevere in prayer through an assiduous practice of *lectio divina*. Just think of the place he gives to the reading of the Bible and meditation upon its message in the daily horarium of the monastery. Benedict sees his monks engaging for several hours each day with texts from the Bible.

Alongside *lectio* – born of it and leading back to it – Benedict also gives an enormous place to the celebration of the Divine Office, the liturgical prayer of the Church. This is Scripture-based prayer.

We could say that the Benedictine who prays is one whose heart overflows with the words of the Sacred Scriptures to which he or she seeks to respond with words and actions and silence.

Prayer in Action

For Benedict words and actions really do go together.

We see this set out clearly in the Prologue of the Rule – *whatever good work we undertake we are to approach with a most instant prayer, asking the Lord to bring it to perfection*.

Everything we do is to be undertaken in a prayerful spirit. Likewise, everything we say is to be rooted in prayer and seen as a response to the call of the Sacred Scriptures.

Again it is in the Prologue of the Rule that this is made clear to us. There we read that whatever is asked of us, whatever we do, is to be considered as a response to *the Sacred Scriptures* since they *cry out to us showing us the way to follow*, the course of action to pursue, *the path of life* to take.

Evidently, our undertakings are to be seen as nothing other than an expression of our prayer. Benedictine life becomes a matter not only of living *ora et labora*- *prayer and work* – but of seeing one as the other in both directions.

Hence, we can say, *laborare est orare* – *to work is to pray* – and *orare est laborare* – *to pray is to work*.

The Work of God

Benedict speaks of community prayer, the Divine Office, precisely as *the work of God*. I find it helpful to understand this to mean that the Office is the place where we become attuned to God's work (*Opus Dei – God's work*) within us, propelling us to accomplish whatever good we do in and through Him, in His name and through His power at work within us.

For Benedict prayer is not just one activity among others. For Benedict prayer is a way of being. It takes up the whole of our life. We are called to live as prayerful persons: our lives are meant to be prayer.

Joan Chittister captures the relevance of prayer in Benedictine life when she writes: *The function of prayer is not to establish a routine: it is to establish a relationship with God who is in relationship with us always...* And a little further on in the same commentary on the Rule she states: *The function of prayer is to bring us into touch with ourselves...*

Since prayer brings us into relationship with God, it brings us into true relationship with our self – and bringing us into a true relationship with our self, it brings us into an ever deeper relationship with the Lord, since He is with us always with us, at the deepest level of our being.

When we come back to prayer we are led to come back to ourselves, to become more and more our true self.

How important this is for us! For, let's face it, are we not so often all over the place, so easily far removed from our own hearts, so readily inclined to live at a distance from our true self?

This leads me to say that prayer is also about what Benedict calls *truthful living*.

Truthful living

That expression is a very important one. We could say that *truthful living* is how Benedictine life is actually defined.

Being in-touch with God, with our true selves and with the community – all three held together – is this is not what conversion amounts to?

Given that the reflection I share with you this morning is inspired by Christ's own *High Priestly Prayer*, I have spoken at some length about prayer. I will now go on to speak about conversion and hospitality, but more briefly. I think a few words on both these points is also relevant for today.

Conversion

Maybe another way of speaking of conversion would be to speak in terms of **a decisive commitment to Christ**.

Benedict is clear in the Rule that *nothing is to be preferred to Christ*. Incidentally, Benedict says the same thing about the *Opus Dei*, the Work of God or the Divine Office, Community Prayer – *nothing is to be preferred to the Opus Dei* – so Benedict actually parallels commitment to Christ and commitment to prayer; commitment to prayer and commitment to Christ.

Conversion/Commitment to Christ

Here we have the well-spring of our life – and its end!

Commitment to Christ is the whole purpose of our way of life. If monastic practices have not got for goal to help us grow into Christ, to encourage us put on Christ, to make us place Christ at the centre of our lives, then they are of no real value – other than, perhaps, to flatter our egos by making us feel good about ourselves because we manage to live up to their demands upon us.

Perfectly observant and rigorous monks are not necessarily really good monks. Perfectly observant and rigorous monks can be people engaged upon an *ego trip*.

Give me (give St Benedict!) a monk who struggles and battles his way through life, in humility of heart, before one who lives his life like *a walk in the park*, feeling good about how well he is performing – observing all the rule and regulations with such ease.

In the Benedictine vision of things it is the publican of the gospel story who is the model for the monk – not the Pharisee in the same story. The Publican is a type for the monk who struggles, in humility.

The monk who is situated before the Lord as the publican was – not daring to lift his eyes to heaven, acutely aware of his unworthiness – actually excels by far those seemingly well-performing brethren who feel they can boast to the Lord about their great deeds and good living!

For Benedict what matters above all is Christ. For him *there is only Christ*. There we hear echoes of St Paul. The little phrase *There is only Christ* comes from Paul's Letter to the Colossians.

Paul's Letter to the Philippians also comes to mind with its insight that what matters is not so much performing well and being observant as leaving all one's *feel good* sentiments behind, for the sake of the love and knowledge of Christ. Let me quote from Philippians 3:

Everything else is worthless when compared with the priceless gain of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. I have put aside all else, counting it worth less than nothing, in order that I can have Christ, and become one with Him, no longer counting upon being saved by being good enough ... but by trusting Christ to save me... Now I have given up everything else – I have found this to be the only way to really know Christ... to live in the fresh newness of life to which He calls me.

We could say that a converted life – by which I mean a life turned towards God – is a life guided by the Spirit and configured to Christ.

We must ask ourselves if that is how we live our lives.

Such a life will also be open to and welcoming of others – ready to offer hospitality to all those whom the Lord sends our way.

Let me conclude with just a word on such openness as an expression of charity – a manifestation of God's love at work in our hearts.

Hospitality

While many of our close relationships are likely to be with people who share much in common with us, it is important that we also build relationships in those who differ to us. If we don't, we deprive ourselves of the enrichment those who are different can bring to us, and,

likewise, we deprive them of the possibility of receiving from us what we have to share with them.

In the Church and between the Churches we are called to an exchange of gifts. We are called to share whatever riches and strengths we have with others who could benefit from them, just as we are called to allow ourselves to be enriched by others' riches and strengths which could be beneficial to us.

I dare to say that it seems to me that we also have to learn to be more willing to share something of our weaknesses with each other. Benedict sees this readiness as fundamental to life in community. The chapter of the Rule *On The Good Zeal Monks Should Have* testifies to this. Chapter 72 of the Rule speaks of the help we can obtain for ourselves and proffer to others by carrying – quite literally supporting – each other's weaknesses and flaws.

It is important for us to be aware that if we surround ourselves only with people who are like us, then we are restricting ourselves to a very small world indeed. We will end up living very narrow lives.

Moreover, we are eliminating from our lives the eventuality of being challenged by other people's differences – and in this, we are depriving ourselves of the possibility of being helped to grow in the way of conversion to which we are called.

From our reading of the Rule we see that Benedict understood this.

We could allude to many passages which show how Benedict understood the importance of encountering people who are different to ourselves. Why does he insist on the importance of difference? Well, maybe because the encounter with difference helps stretch us. For example, think of what the Rule says about how young and old, slaves and free men – insisting that they are to mingle together in the monastery and help each other grow.

It is an unhealthy monastery which closes in on itself and creates for itself some kind of parallel world – a world wherein all the members of the community appear to be quasi-clones of each other.

We must be careful not to idealise to the point of idolising the idea of a coherent homogeneous world.

The community is not an *en bloc* reality, but a reality made up of the different (I accentuate the *different*) persons who constitute it.

Benedict would certainly challenge a homogeneous, pea-size, tight and narrow little world. He would see a healthy monastic life having for goal to open us up to the wider world and not to close us in upon ourselves, locking us into some sort of comfortable little sect.

That final vision with which Benedict was graced – the vision of which Gregory the Great speaks in his Second Book of the Dialogues – is a vision of *the whole world seen to be held in a globe of light*. This speaks to us of Benedict's breadth of vision. This is something in which we are called to share today as his spiritual children. We are called to be large in our outlook.

May our vision be widened, our hearts expanded – *dilated by the sweetness of love* (RB - Prologue) – by the thought of God's all-compassing, all-embracing love. Amen!