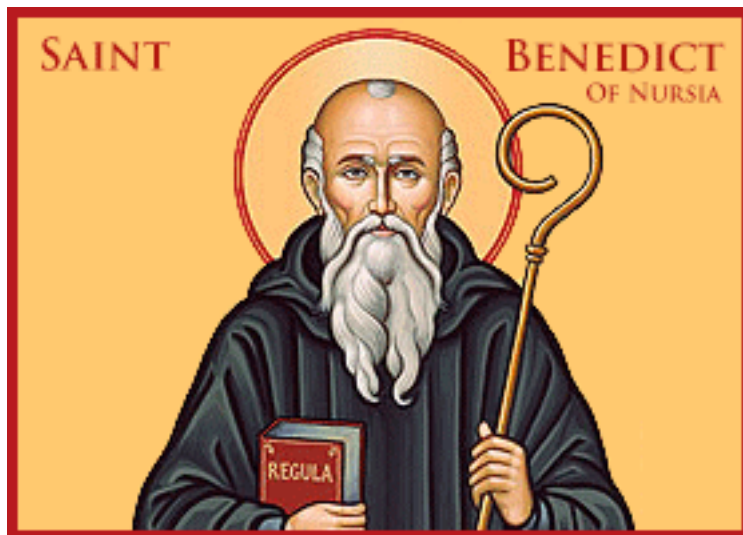


Prefer Nothing Whatever to Christ

Living the Rule of St. Benedict
in the Secular Realm



Daily Meditations on the Rule
with the complete text of
The Rule of St. Benedict

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The Introduction

Are you hastening toward your heavenly home? Then with the help of Christ, keep this little rule written for beginners. (Rule of Saint Benedict 73:8)

Only transformed lives will bring about a revitalized Church and transformed communities. There is a pagan culture out there hungry for real hope, real truth, and Christians who manifest Jesus in their lives. But how can we live a transformed life, truly committed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ while dwelling in the midst of this opposing culture? It was a question Saint Benedict asked. The answer he received was codified in *The Rule of Saint Benedict*.

The culture of the 21st century is not much different from that which Saint Benedict experienced in A.D. 500. As a young man he had traveled to Rome for his education. The barbarians had overrun Rome just a quarter century before. Young Benedict could not withstand the moral depravity of the culture and he fled. At first he tried becoming a hermit, but many young men heard of him and pursued him for mentoring. Eventually, Benedict accepted that living in community was a preferable approach for sustaining a Christian lifestyle. He began to gather some of these young men around him, and over time he produced his rule for Christian community: *The Rule of Saint Benedict*.

For 1500 years this “little rule for beginners” has been a guide to assist those who hasten toward Christ. It is not a substitute for the Gospel, it is practical guidance for living the Gospel in Christian community. Whenever the Church has practiced the discipline of monastic spirituality, the Church has flourished. When monasticism has waned, so has the spiritual discipline of the Church, and both Church and society have suffered. At its core the Rule of Saint Benedict is a guide in the art of Christian living for those who follow it. People throughout history have pursued the Rule in hard times for the same reason that the young men of the 6th century sought out Benedict himself. These people have seen that the way of life presented in the Rule provides guidance for embracing the truth of the Gospel, and in that they find hope in dark times.

But what does the Rule of Saint Benedict actually say? How can the precepts of this ancient Rule be applied to life in the 21st century? You may say, I don’t live in a monastery or nunnery, how is a rule for monks relevant to someone living in secular society? These are questions that the meditations which follow will seek to answer.

In obedience to Benedict’s exhortation that “this Rule be read quite often in the community, that none of the brethren may excuse himself of ignorance” (RB 66:8), many Benedictines observe a rotation of daily readings from the Rule, reading through the Rule three times a year. In this volume I have provided a reading from the Rule for each day of the year followed by a brief meditation, seeking to apply the precepts of that section of the Rule to a life lived in our modern culture. This is not an academic examination of the Rule; it is a reflection on Benedict’s instruction to anyone “hastening toward our heavenly home.”

The Rule of Saint Benedict is divine instruction that has 1500 years of experience behind it. Though we may not live in a monastery, we can still practice this monastic spirituality, albeit in a new way, bringing from the storehouse what is old and what is new (Matthew 13:52). Saint Benedict declares in the Prologue that he is establishing a “school for the Lord’s service” (v. 45). So, let us go to school together.

January 1, May 1, September 1
Prologue 1-3

*Listen, my son, to the precepts of the master, and incline to them with the ear of your heart. Cheerfully receive and put into practice the admonitions of your loving Father, ²that by the labor of obedience you may return to Him from whom by the sloth of disobedience you have gone astray. ³To you, therefore, my message is now directed, who, giving up your own will once and for all, take up the strong and most excellent weapons of obedience to do battle for Christ the Lord, the true King.**

The Prologue sets the stage for Benedict's teachings in the chapters which follow with three keynotes which will resound throughout the entirety of the Rule. These keynotes are: listen, obey, and submit to Christ's will. To obey we must first listen—listen to the master's instruction. We must tune the ear of our hearts to his heart and not just his words. And thus armed with obedience we can submit to Christ. We can do battle for Christ, our King and our Lord. Listen and obey, that we may “prefer nothing whatever to Christ.” (RB 72:11).

“Listen, my son, to the precepts of the master...” Benedict does not define master in this context. Is he Jesus? The abbot? The novice master, or maybe the monk's spiritual director? Benedict does not say, but the exhortation would be true for each. We all need a master to whom we may look for spiritual direction—an accomplished elder who has the insights of someone who has walked the Way for many years. However, we are not all privileged to have someone like that to whom we may listen and submit. Michael Casey, OCSO suggests that if we do not have the good fortune to have such an individual in our lives, “the next best option is to attach ourselves to a tradition, making the journey in company with others who share the same ideals and learning from their example and wisdom” (*The Road to Eternal Life*, p. 14). And so, we listen to the Master through the fellowship of the Body of Christ.

Listening, we learn to obey. Benedict calls this type of obedience a “labor”. This is not labor in the sense of a burdensome toiling in a rock-strewn field. This labor is a joyful effort to draw closer to Christ. It is more like the courting of a beloved, seeking the deeper, more permanent relationship of marriage. We work hard to establish the bonds of love and solidify the covenant. Sloth has no entry into that type of energetic effort. Benedict indicates that the major obstacle to spiritual growth, and the ultimate sign of disobedience, is sloth. This “labor of obedience” is the means by which the goal of union with God is reached. It is a goal worth working for.

The third keynote, submission to Christ, follows closely on the heels of listening and obedience. It is the reason we take time and make the effort to listen, and the purpose of our obedience. We have chosen this path of spiritual discipline in order to yield our will to the will of Christ. Benedict makes bookends of this pattern of submission by opening the Prologue with this exhortation, and sums up his Rule, as noted above in chapter 72, with the command that we “prefer nothing whatever to Christ.”

The heart of our daily battle is the fight between self will and submission to the will of Christ. Whether living in the confines of a monastery, or in the temptation-rich fields of the world, the Rule confronts us with the challenge to submit our will to that of Christ's; to live in obedience to Him and to His Body. We cannot live in submission to Christ apart from the Church militant. For without the army of Christ, the weapons of obedience are not available to us.

And so, those of us outside the confines of the monastic enclosure need the fellowship of the Body. We cannot come to the full richness of relationship with Christ apart from the Body of Christ. With the help of our brothers and sisters in the Church we can do battle with self will, and continually renew our commitment to submit to Christ, our King and our Lord.

*The version of *The Rule of St. Benedict* in these meditations is my own paraphrase. As I do not know Latin and could not translate the original, I compared four translations of the Rule and conflated them, giving what I hope is the clearest sense of Benedict's intent in the Rule.

January 2, May 2, September 2
Prologue 4-7

In the first place, each time you seek to begin a good work, earnestly pray that He will perfect whatever good you begin, ⁵in order that He who is pleased to count us as His children, need never be grieved at our evil deeds. ⁶For we ought at all times to obey Him, serving Him with the good things which He has given us, that He may not, like an angry father, disinherit his children, ⁷nor, like a dread lord, enraged by our evil deeds, hand us over to everlasting punishment as most wicked servants, who would not follow Him to glory.

We all get excited about beginning a new work. And rightly so. But, are we directed by God in that work? Have we commended that work to God for His guidance in its execution? Do we begin, then to lose interest and let it fall dormant? Do the cares of the world, our self will, the tempter, all seek to snatch these good deeds away from us? These verses ring with the truth of the parable of the sower. Sadly, all too often our good work is not brought to completion; and far less often to perfection.

The keys to bringing the works we do to perfect completion are earnest prayer and stability. The promises of chapter 58 will be foreshadowed here. With stability, the pilgrim Christian will have God's grace to persevere. But only if he or she has made the effort to bathe that good beginning in earnest, insistent prayer. For, "every good and perfect gift is from above" (James 1:17). And with stability we also promise fidelity. We need each other. We need fellowship. We need commitment to live disciplined spiritual lives in fidelity to the Gospel and to the Rule. It is very unlikely that we will bear permanent and perfected fruit if we labor on our own. The third promise, obedience, was touched on in yesterday's meditation and is a solidly recurring theme throughout the Rule. I might think that I know what needs to be done, but without God's guidance and submission to His will I will follow my own conscience and reason, and that often leads down dark paths of greed and pride. God knows what the goal of these works needs to be, and His desire is that we accomplish them for the good of the Kingdom. Are we going to obediently follow His will and see it through to perfection in Christ?

There are also some seemingly harsh words in these few verses. For example, Benedict warns that we need to be obedient lest God "like an angry father, disinherit his children," or "like a dread lord, enraged by our evil deeds, hand us over to everlasting punishment." Some of St. Benedict's phraseology, disciplines, and practices strike our ear and our consciences as outdated and somewhat loathsome. The idea of corporal punishment, excommunication, and as we see in the verses today, disinheritance and "everlasting punishment as most wicked servants," all resonate as somewhat antiquated ideas to our modern Christian ear. Nevertheless, we cannot, like Thomas Jefferson did with the Holy Scriptures, cut out the uncomfortable passages and focus only on what seems pleasant to our fragile minds. We must listen to the word of the Rule, as we have been exhorted, as sons and daughters, with the ear of our heart. And like children of the King, we cannot at first blush always understand all that is being conveyed in these verses. We must walk with the Master and learn through obedient fulfillment of the discipline of the Rule. St. Benedict was writing the Rule in a different time and addressing a culture of an earlier age, and we need to understand that, not only Benedict, but also the culture of his day have something to teach us. Their experience can inform our own if we allow it to do so.

We must not take any chapter or verse from the Rule out of the context of the whole. Our father Benedict sets the tone in the first verse of the Prologue when he addresses the reader as “My son.” We are not servants or slaves of a rule and a lifestyle. Our work is a labor of love. St. Benedict is not striving in these early verses of the Prologue to instill fear, he is exhorting us, using the language of his day, to practice a sacred piety within the context of the ordinariness of daily life. It is an exhortation for us to experience the martyrdom of self will, that we may daily die to Christ. In so doing, we will find our works perfected and our lives renewed in Him.

January 3, May 3, September 3
Prologue 8-13

Let us then rise at long last, since the Scriptures rouse us, saying: “It is now the hour for us to rise from sleep” (Rom 13:11); ⁹and having opened our eyes to the light that comes from God, let us hear with our ears what the divine voice admonishes us, crying out daily: ¹⁰“Today, if you would hear his voice, harden not your hearts” (Ps 94[95]:8). ¹¹And again: “He who has ears to hear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Rev 2:7). ¹²And what does He say?—“Come, children, hearken unto me, I will teach you the fear of the Lord” (Ps 33[34]:12). ¹³“Run while you have the light of life, that the darkness of death may not overtake you” (Jn 12:35).

Benedict returns to the theme of listening. “It is now the hour for us to rise from sleep...” (Rom 13:11). The sense given in these verses is that we have been asleep at the wheel, so to speak, and the life God intends for us is passing us by. It is time to wake up, because God has more for us. And so, Benedict alerts us and calls us to “open our eyes to the light” and “let us hear with our ears.” For he says that God calls out from heaven to us every day (v. 9). Benedict has laid down a challenge for us to grow in constant awareness of our Lord’s Presence and His grace.

This is a difficult challenge for us because in this modern world the distractions are numerous. The stimuli with which we are constantly bombarded are manifold, and the result is that we do not know how to be quiet. It’s not a matter of our having been asleep, it’s a matter of our focus. We are distracted and our priorities have been shifted to the things of this world. Just look at what churches are doing to bring people in their doors. They create stimulus rich services that are all but indistinguishable from worldly assemblies, sporting events, TV shows, and concerts. People complain that mainline services are boring. To get a group of Christians to observe a quiet day is all but impossible. But as Benedict says, quoting Revelation 2:7, “He who has ears to hear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” How can we listen if we do not silence the competing voices vying for our undivided attention. We are so convinced we can multitask that we have demoted God to a role comparable to our Facebook friends. We are so awake temporally that we miss the heavenly voice. We reject interiority in favor of a stimulus rich secular life. The truth though is that God is patient. He is standing by on call, waiting. He is ready to talk, but He will NOT interrupt our priority conversations. When we are ready, He will talk to us. “Now is the hour for us to rise...”

We are also called to open our eyes to the light—the divine light. Apparently, the adjective “divine” used here is an action word. The divine is not simply descriptive; it is transformative. It is the “divinizing” light. When we open our eyes to His light, He transforms us. He transitions us from darkness—absence from Him—into His marvelous light.

All of this is not simply a personal or individual encounter—“listen to what the Spirit says to the churches.” Every Word, even individual exhortations, are corporate in nature, for we are all part of One Body. Also, from the other perspective, every corporate Word is also personal. We all need to listen carefully to the prophetic words given to the Body.

And finally, Benedict quotes from John 12:35, “Run while you have the light of life...” (Jn 12:35). The word “run” appears no less than four times in the Prologue.* We must not delay responding to God’s

call. But I am also reminded, having two young grandchildren, that children run to express their joy and excitement. That type of exuberance has been quelled in too many adults, and that is sad. Run with exuberance while you have the light of life. Do not delay to respond to God's loving call.

* cf. vv. 22, 44, 48

January 4, May 4, September 4
Prologue 14-21

Seeking His workman in the multitude of the people, the Lord proclaims these words, saying again:

¹⁵“Who is the man that desires life and covets many days” (Ps 33[34]:13)? ¹⁶If hearing this you answer, “I am he,” then God says to you: ¹⁷“If you will have true and everlasting life, keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit; turn away from evil and do good; seek after peace and pursue it” (Ps 33[34]:14-15). ¹⁸And when you have done these things, My “eyes shall be upon you, and My ears unto your prayers. And before you shall call upon me I will say: ‘Behold, I am here’” (Is 58:9). ¹⁹What, dear brothers, can be sweeter to us than this voice of the Lord inviting us? ²⁰See, in His loving kindness, the Lord shows us the way of life. ²¹Therefore, clothed with faith and the performance of good works, let us walk in His Way under the guidance of the Gospel, that we may be found worthy of seeing Him who has called us into His kingdom (cf 1 Thess 2:12).

The Lord seeks His workers. We are called to the Kingdom, and that call is to take our part in the work of the Kingdom. Too often I meet people who come seeking the Kingdom *only* for what it will provide for them. “What do I get out of accepting Christ?” “What benefit is there for me if I join the Church?” And sadly, many preachers cater to them and proclaim Jesus as Savior at the expense of the new converts accepting Him as Lord. Benedict is pointing out in these verses that the Lord calls out to us, not only for what we receive in acceptance of the call, but for what we have to contribute to the Body.

As our holy father, Benedict, says in verse 14, our Lord “proclaims these words...again...” And He is desirous and hopeful that we will respond with an “I do.” “If hearing this you answer, ‘I am he’...,” then God will speak to you. When we say “yes”, God will answer! When we say “yes” to our Lord we declare that we want Him to direct and rule our lives. We want to practice the virtues of a life yielded to Christ’s will. Benedict asks, “What can be sweeter to us than this voice of the Lord inviting us?” It is a beckoning to a love relationship. Benedict goes on to say, “See, in His loving kindness, the Lord shows us the way of life.” It is not enough for us to have desire for this life, we must “choose life.” And having made the choice, and fully committed ourselves to this path, we are then, “clothed with faith and the performance of good works...”. This is not a one-time event, but a process of daily transformation.

And in the conclusion of this section we are given these encouraging words: “that we may be found worthy of seeing Him who has called us into His kingdom.” This rings with the sound of works righteousness. Again the language of his day may be a stumbling block for us, but the context of the whole Rule beckons us to recognize that everything we have is received as gift from Christ and the Father, by means of the Holy Spirit. “It is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the Kingdom.” (Luke 12:32 *emphasis added*).

January 5, May 5, September 5
Prologue 22-34

If we desire to dwell in the tabernacle of His kingdom, we cannot reach it in any way, unless we run there by doing good deeds. ²³*But let us ask the Lord with the Prophet, saying to Him: “Lord, who shall dwell in Thy tabernacle, or who shall rest on Thy holy hill” (Ps 14[15]:1)?* ²⁴*After this question, brothers, let us listen to the Lord’s answer as He shows us the way to this tabernacle.* ²⁵*“He who walks blamelessly, and does what is right; ²⁶who speaks truth from his heart; who does not slander with his tongue, ²⁷nor does evil to his friend, nor takes up a reproach against his neighbor” (Ps 14[15]:2-3).* ²⁸*He has brought to nothing the foul demon tempting him, casting him out of his heart, and has taken his evil thoughts while they were yet new and dashed them against Christ (cf Ps 14[15]:4; Ps 136[137]:9).* ²⁹*These people, fearing the Lord, are not puffed up by their goodness of life, rather holding that any actual good which is in them cannot be done by themselves, but by the Lord.* ³⁰*They praise the Lord working in them (cf Ps 14[15]:4), and say with the Prophet: “Not to us, O Lord, not to us; but to Thy name give glory” (Ps 113[115]:1):9).* ³¹*Thus, in the same way, the Apostle Paul has not taken credit for his preaching, saying: “By the grace of God, I am what I am” (1 Cor 15:10).* ³²*And again he says: “He who boasts, let him boast in the Lord” (2 Cor 10:17).* ³³*Hence, the Lord also says in the Gospel: “He who hears these words of Mine and does them, is like a wise man who built his house upon a rock; ³⁴the floods came, the winds blew, and they beat upon that house, but it did not fall, for it was founded upon the rock” (Mt 7:24-25).*

The prologue to John’s Gospel tells us that Jesus came and “made His tabernacle with us” (John 1:14). The tent of His Kingdom has been pitched in our world, because God so loved us that He sent His Son to dwell with us in order that we might dwell eternally with Him. To “dwell in the tabernacle of His Kingdom” is to dwell in Christ Himself. And according to the first verse of this section of the Rule, “we cannot reach it in any way, unless we run there by doing good deeds.” Jesus says that the Holy Spirit “dwells with you and will be in you” (John 14:17). And Paul reiterates this in Romans 8:9 saying, “the Spirit of God dwells in you.” And in 1 Cor. 3:16, “Do you not know that you are God’s tabernacle and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” So, if the Father sent the Son to make His dwelling with us, and His Holy Spirit dwells in us, and it was the Father’s good pleasure to give us the Kingdom (Luke 12:32), then why does Benedict exhort us to “run there by doing good deeds”?

Throughout the history of the Church the question of the place of good works has fluctuated in importance and focus. Pelagianism is the most prominent heresy associated with works righteousness, and many Protestant theologians err on the side of “faith only, without works”. Sadly, the question of works can be a dividing wall between denominations. The fact of the matter is that the same Spirit Who dwells in us is the One Who is doing the good works through us. The Psalmist reminds us that we have no good apart from God (Psalm 16:2). Therefore, any good works we do originate in the heart of God, not in us. For us to run to the Kingdom is to actively seek relationship with God’s Holy Spirit, manifesting that relationship in our attitude and works for His Kingdom.

Benedict goes on in the next five verses of this section to detail the good works expected of us, utilizing the words of the Psalmist in Psalm 15. Then verses 28-34 put the entirety in the context of the Lord’s power and authority. It is only by Christ’s authority that the evil one is overcome and temptations thwarted. The fear of the Lord is the weapon to combat pride. Praise exalts the Lord, that His Name alone, and not our own, may be glorified. It is by grace—and grace alone—that we recognize God’s gift

and are thereby empowered to minister through good works in His Name. Our boasting can therefore be only in the Lord, not any works of our own.

January 6, May 6, September 6
Prologue 35-38

Having fulfilled these words, the Lord waits for us daily to respond to His holy admonitions by our works. ³⁶*Therefore, the number of our days is lengthened by a truce for the amendment of our misdeeds.* ³⁷*As the Apostle says: “Do you not know that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?” (Rom 2:4)?* ³⁸*For the Lord says: “I do not desire the death of the sinner, but rather that he turn back to Me and live” (Ezek 33:11).*

This brief section emphasizes that Benedict sees the place of repentance as the essential element in dwelling with Christ. “The Lord waits for us daily...” And that indeed is good news. He waits for us to “turn back...and live”. Daily...*cotidie*: the Latin word used here is translated “every day” or “daily”. This is not a one-time event, and if you miss it, tough luck. Scripture emphasizes the need for daily nurturing of our relationship with Christ. He taught us to pray with these words: “give us this day our daily bread”. Psalm 68:19 declares: “Blessed be the Lord, who daily bears us up.” Prov. 8:34 tells us that “Happy is the man who listens to me, watching daily at my gates.” And Jesus says that “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23).

But once again the ancient language of Benedict’s time causes us to pause. In verse 36 he says, “the number of our days is lengthened by a truce...” The word *truce* is defined as “an agreement between enemies”, or “an intermission of hostilities”. To think that we are in a hostile relationship with God is not a pleasant thought. Does Benedict think that we are in a hostile relationship with the Almighty? How can we interpret what is meant here? The word *truce* has fallen out of favor in common English language usage. Etymologically it derives from the Old English *treow*, which means “faith, trust, fidelity”. And from the Old German roots we derive, “true”. That certainly seems like a more pleasant understanding of the word. But as we see in both the Epistle to the Hebrews (12:3) and the Epistle to the Ephesians (2:14-16), Scripture indicates that we have previously had hostility toward God. For Benedict, it appears that God would be well within His rights to view that hostility as an attack. The call to repentance, then, is God’s loving *truce*. He allows us time to “amend our misdeeds”. Quoting Romans, he reminds us that “God’s kindness (His patience) is meant to lead us to repentance.” And Benedict assures us that the Lord does “not desire the death of the sinner”.

Certainly, for Benedict, the word *truce* used in this context makes perfect sense. Repentance is the essential element in calling us back to Himself and keeping us in right relationship with His Son, Jesus Christ. He is patient: “The Lord waits for us daily to respond...” Let us not disappoint Him.

January 7, May 7, September 7
Prologue 39-44

Brothers, now that we have asked the Lord who it is that shall dwell in His tabernacle, we have heard the conditions for dwelling there; and if we fulfill the duties of tenants, ⁴⁰we shall be heirs of the kingdom of heaven. Our hearts and our bodies must, therefore, be ready to do battle in holy obedience to His instruction. ⁴¹And let us ask the Lord to supply by the help of His grace what is impossible to us by nature. ⁴²If we desire to reach life everlasting, avoiding the pains of hell, ⁴³then, while there is yet time, and we are still in the flesh, and are able during the present life to fulfill all these things by the Light of Life, ⁴⁴we must run to do now what will profit us forever.

Yesterday's reading challenged us to enter a *truce* with God through repentance. The idea that our relationship with Him might be construed as a potentially hostile one is fraught with concern, doubt, and a certain level of fear. Benedict follows that quickly with today's reading which is packed with hope and promise, tempered with righteous challenge and caution. The balance between good works and grace is made explicit in verse 41: "And let us ask the Lord to supply by the help of His grace what is impossible to us by nature." We are told to prepare "Our hearts and our bodies...to do battle in holy obedience to His instruction." We cannot prepare for this battle without God's loving grace. And Benedict declares that "we must run to do now what will profit us forever." These latter two themes of obedience and running must be understood in light of the promise of help given in God's grace.

To fulfill the duty of tenants in the tabernacle of the Kingdom, we must maintain our right relationship with Christ, for Jesus Himself commands His disciples to abide in Him. "I am the vine, you are the branches...apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). We dwell in the Kingdom by living our lives in Christ, in the fellowship of His Body. Apart from the Body we wilt and wither. Within the fellowship of the Church we receive the nourishment of the sacraments, the encouragement and instruction of the Word, and the empowerment of the Spirit. We need the fellowship of His Body.

The Epistle to the Hebrews has sage advice for how we might best "run to do now what will profit us forever." In chapter 10:23-25, the author of the epistle says, "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near." For those of us who live in the secular world and not a cloistered life together, it is essential that we need to "consider how to stir up one another to love and good works," and not neglect our opportunities for fellowship "as is the habit of some". Word, sacrament, fellowship, each is essential to the life of the believer that we may be "encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."

January 8, May 8, September 8
Prologue 45-50

We, therefore, intend to found a school for the Lord's service. ⁴⁶In drawing up the regulations, we hope to introduce nothing harsh or burdensome. ⁴⁷But even if, to correct vices or to preserve love for one another, we are prompted to a little strictness, ⁴⁸do not be quickly discouraged and fly from the way of salvation. The beginning of the Way must be narrow. ⁴⁹But as we advance in the way of life and faith, we shall run the path of God's commandments with expanded hearts and the inexpressible delight of love. ⁵⁰Never departing from His guidance and persevering in His teaching in the monastery until death, we may by patience share in the sufferings of Christ, and may be found worthy also to share with Him in His kingdom.

We come to the end of the Prologue and Benedict's summary statement of purpose: "We therefore, intend to found a school for the Lord's service." This is a word of hope for all of us who struggle with our own sense of inadequacy in spiritual matters. We see the spiritual depth of the saints, and even our friends in the Church, and we recognize just how far from God we really are. However, as a fellow priest once said, "We measure our insides against their outsides. And that is not valid." It serves no purpose for us to compare, and Benedict gives us the reason: we are all in school—"the school for the Lord's service"—and we are each at our own level of education and expertise. We want to make it more difficult than it needs to be. In the recesses of our spirit we know we are unworthy and we convince ourselves that we must earn the Lord's favor. But the words of this concluding paragraph of the Prologue are meant to encourage us to persevere. "Do not be quickly discouraged and fly from the way of salvation."

St. Benedict is, of course, writing his Rule for the cenobite—the man committed to the monastic life. But the stated purpose of his Rule ought to apply to all Christians seeking unity with Christ: "Never departing from His guidance... we may by patience share in the sufferings of Christ, and may be found worthy also to share with Him in His kingdom." Whether in the monastery or secular world, discipline is the key to keeping to the path of righteousness. And the Rule of Saint Benedict offers us a plan—a curriculum—for pursuing a right relationship with God. No single spiritual rule will fit the needs of every Christian, and Benedict acknowledges this. That is why he refers to it as a school. Not every student will excel in every subject. We each have gifts, one differing from the other. And each is adept at using the tools for which he or she is most highly suited and trained. Thus, Benedict says, "In drawing up the regulations, we hope to introduce nothing harsh or burdensome."

The learning is in the doing. The only way to embrace and understand the application of the Rule to our individual lives is to, as it were, enroll in the school and regularly attend classes. "Do not be quickly discouraged and fly from the way of salvation. The beginning of the Way must be narrow." And with this exhortation to persevere, our father Benedict gives us this encouraging word: "But as we advance in the way of life and faith, we shall run the path of God's commandments with expanded hearts and the inexpressible delight of love." We are to "run" like the child who delights in every new thing, like the calf released from the stall (Mal. 4:2), like the athlete pursuing the prize (1 Cor. 9:25; 2 Tim. 2:5). There is great delight in pursuing God's love; for in this way of life, in following the Rule, there is new life and fulness of joy.

January 9, May 9, September 9
Chapter 1

Here begins the text of the Rule: It is called a rule because it regulates the lives of those who obey it.

It is well known that there are four kinds of monks. ²The first kind is that of Cenobites, that is, the monastics, who live under a rule and an Abbot. ³The second kind is that of Anchorites, or Hermits. They have come through the test of living in a monastery and passed beyond the first fervor of their conversion, ⁴but taught by long monastic practice and the help of many brethren, have already learned to fight against the devil. ⁵And going forth from the rank of their brethren, well trained for single combat in the desert, they are able, with the help of God, to cope single-handedly without the help of others, against the vices of the flesh and evil thoughts. ⁶But a third and most vile class of monks is that of Sarabaites, who are untried by any rule under the hand of a master, as gold is tried in the fire (cf Prov 27:21); but, soft as lead, ⁷they are still loyal to the world by their works, and clearly lie to God by their tonsure. ⁸Living in two's or three's, or even singly, without a shepherd, enclosed, not in the Lord's sheepfold, but in their own, the gratification of their selfish desires is their law; ⁹because what they choose to do they call holy, but what they dislike they hold to be unlawful. ¹⁰But the fourth class of monks is that called Gyrovagues, who wander their whole life long from one place to another, staying three or four days at a time in different monasteries as guests. ¹¹Always roving and never settled, they indulge their passions and the cravings of their appetite, and are in every way worse than the Sarabaites. ¹²It is better to keep talk of all these silent rather than to speak of their most wretched life. ¹³Therefore, passing these over, let us go on with the help of the Lord to lay down a rule for that most valiant kind of monks, the Cenobites.

It is interesting that St. Benedict begins his Rule with this description of the types of monks. Why? If he is following the “Rule of the Master” (an early rule that was the basis for the RSB), then that is the answer, for the “Master” begins his rule here. However, Benedict strays from his long-winded predecessor at will, omitting almost two-thirds of the Master’s content. And if this is important information to be included in the Rule, why chapter 1? Benedict is setting the mark for his target audience—those who have chosen the better way. Benedict says that the purpose of the Rule is “to lay down a rule for that most valiant kind of monks, the Cenobites.” This then begs the question for those of us who are not cenobites: What relevance does this Rule have for us? Are we to be labeled then as one of the other three types? Not at all.

Those who are committed to the genuine pursuit of Christ need guidance, direction, and a rule of life that promotes the righteous life in Christ. To choose to live in the world is a battle of its own, and sets us in the forefront of spiritual warfare. How do we maintain fidelity to Christ and His Church, stability of discipline, and obedience to the Word and the authority of the Church while not succumbing to or living life for the world? It is a challenge. *The Rule of Saint Benedict* offers the guidance that we need to succeed and be victorious. In the more than 1500 years of its use in the Church, the RSB has been utilized as the model for every monastic rule in the Western Church. It is a divine gift to the Church, a guidepost for those on the pilgrimage to Christ’s Kingdom. And in this generation there is a genuine need for greater discipline for those who love Christ. We need one another. We need constant encouragement as we combat the forces waging war against the Church and her saints. The RSB offers that model for us as well as for the cenobites.

There have been moves in other corners of the Church to revive Benedictine spirituality. For example, Rod Dreher wrote the book *The Benedict Option* which presents an alternate vision for the Church based on the RSB. But Dreher's and others' perspectives tend toward isolation from the world—a siege fortress mentality. But we are called to live in the world, not of the world, in order to transform the world, to bring the transforming light of Christ to the world. Living lives in accordance with the RSB while maintaining our place in the secular community is a huge challenge.

The challenge of this first chapter, then, is to recognize that our father Benedict is calling all of us to discover who we are in Christ Jesus. It is the task of all faithful followers to be found in Him and allow Him to lead us through the trials and temptations of life in the world. As followers of Christ and *The Rule of St. Benedict* we accept that challenge, and like other followers over the past 1500 years we will find sure guidance in Benedict's "little rule" (RB 73:8). As he states in the note before chapter one, "It is called a rule because it regulates the lives of those who obey it."

January 10, May 10, September 10
Chapter 2:1-10

The Abbot who is worthy to be over a monastery, ought always to be mindful of what he is called, and make his works conform to his name of Superior. ²For he is believed to hold the place of Christ in the monastery, since he is called by a title of Christ, ³according to the saying of the Apostle: “You have received the spirit of adoption of sons, whereby we cry Abba (Father)” (Rom 8:15). ⁴Therefore, the Abbot should never teach, prescribe, or command anything contrary to the instruction of the Lord. ⁵His commands and teaching should be instilled like a leaven of divine justice into the minds of his disciples. ⁶Let the Abbot always bear in mind that he must give an account in the dread judgment of God of both his own teaching and of the obedience of his disciples. ⁷And let the Abbot know that whatever lack of profit the master of the house shall find in the sheep, will be laid to the blame of the shepherd. ⁸On the other hand he will be blameless, if he gave all a shepherd’s care to his restless and unruly flock, and took all pains to correct their corrupt manners ⁹so that their shepherd, acquitted at the Lord’s judgment seat, may say to the Lord with the Prophet: “I have not hid Thy justice within my heart. I have declared Thy truth and Thy salvation” (Ps 39[40]:11). “But they have despised and rebelled against me” (Is 1:2; Ezek 20:27). ¹⁰Then, at length, eternal death will be the crushing doom of the rebellious sheep under his charge.

We now begin an extended look at the qualities of an abbot. We do not live in a monastery. We are not subject to the rule of an abbot. How is this relevant to those of us living outside the cloister? St. Paul tells us through his first letter to Corinth, “you have countless guides in Christ, [but] you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (4:15). We all have people to whom we are called to submit in the Church, men who have become our fathers in Christ through the Gospel. These men have become our abba, and Benedict gives us guidance in how to relate to them.

For those of us who are in positions of authority, it would behoove us to listen carefully to the cautions of our father Benedict regarding the execution of the office of abbot. For the abbot is “always to be mindful of what he is called...” and “Let the Abbot always bear in mind that he must give an account in the dread judgment of God of both his own teaching and of the obedience of his disciples.” The ones placed in responsible and authoritative positions within the Church answer for themselves and for those over whom they exercise that authority. In light of this it is important that we accord respect and obedience to those in authority over us in the Church, for they carry the title of Father not by their own worth but by the calling and worthiness of Christ. As Paul tells Timothy, “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching...” (1Tim. 5:17).

This then, is a two-way street. The abbot is responsible for the flock, and the disciples are responsible to carry out obedience to the father. And though the father is responsible for his flock, “he will be blameless, if he gave all a shepherd’s care to his restless and unruly flock, and took all pains to correct their corrupt manners.” Ultimately, we will all answer for our work. Were we rebellious or obedient to the authority placed over us? Those in authority in the Church not only need our obedience, they need our prayers and support. Their task is one that requires faithfulness and care. They need our love and the love of God.

January 11, May 11, September 11
Chapter 2:11-15

When, therefore, anyone receives the name of Abbot he should govern his disciples by a twofold teaching; ¹²namely, he should show them all that is good and holy by his example more than by his words; explaining the commandments of God to receptive disciples by words, but showing the divine precepts to the dull and stubborn by his works. ¹³And whatever he teaches his disciples as being contrary to the law of God must not be done, let him avoid doing those things, that “lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified” (1 Cor 9:27), ¹⁴and he himself committing sin, God one day say to him: “What right have you to recite my statutes, or take my covenant on your lips? For you hate discipline, and you cast my words behind you” (Ps 49[50]:16-17). ¹⁵And also this: “Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?” (Mt 7:3).

As we look further into the qualities of the abbot it is important to recognize that the traits that Benedict describes have applicability to all Christians. In the section today he is warning the abbot to demonstrate leadership by a two-fold teaching: “explaining the commandments of God to receptive disciples by words, but showing the divine precepts to the dull and stubborn by his works.” The challenge to be a living example is not only for the abbot but for all who represent Christ to the world (i.e. all of us). Whether in a position of leadership or not we are all responsible for re-presenting Christ to others in the Body and to those with whom we interact in the world.

St. Paul tells us that “we are ambassadors for Christ...” (2 Cor. 5:20). The world is watching, and the Church has fallen very short of the mark of Christ. How many of our Church leaders have dramatically fallen in public scandals? How the media rejoices when they have news fodder because some new accusation has been revealed against a Roman Catholic priest. And on a more pedestrian level, how often do we see someone with Christian symbols on their car, or wearing a Christian symbol on a necklace, behave in a manner unbecoming for a Christian? Is it any wonder that those of the world do not want to be part of the Body? They see no distinction between the Church and the world because those who proclaim Christ act no differently. St. Benedict exhorts us to be good and holy by example.

And in the Church itself, St. Paul exhorts the older men and women to model Christian behavior for the younger members. He tells Titus, “Bid the older men be temperate, serious, sensible, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness. Bid older women likewise to be reverent in behavior, not to be slanderers or slaves to drink; they are to teach what is good, and so to train young women to love their husbands and children, to be sensible, chaste, domestic, kind, and submissive to their husbands, that the word of God may not be discredited” (Tit. 2:2-5). And he concludes with this command for all of us: “Show yourselves in all respects a model of good deeds” (2:7).

St. Benedict applies this divine teaching in this section of the Rule. It is a challenge for all of us to avoid hypocrisy, and to, as St. Paul demands, “live sober, upright, and godly lives in the world...” (Tit. 2:11). If we strive for this mark of holiness, then our “opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say of us” (Tit. 2:8). We are not all called to abbatial authority, but we are all called to re-present Christ to the Church and the world.

January 12, May 12, September 12
Chapter 2:16-22

Let the abbot make no distinction of persons in the monastery. ¹⁷Let him not love one more than another, unless it be one whom he finds more exemplary in good works and obedience. ¹⁸Let not a free-born man be given higher place to one born a slave, unless there be some other reasonable cause. ¹⁹But if for a just reason the Abbot deems it proper to make such a distinction, he may do so in regard to the rank of anyone whomsoever; otherwise let everyone keep his own place; ²⁰for “whether bond or free, we are all one in Christ” (cf Gal 3:28; Eph 6:8), and we all bear an equal burden of servitude under one Lord, “for God shows no partiality among persons” (Rom 2:11). ²¹We are distinguished with the abbot in this respect alone, if we are found to excel others in good works and in humility. ²²Therefore, let the abbot show equal charity for all, and impose a uniform discipline for all according to merit.

In verse 20 of this chapter, the *RB1980* translation reads that we all “share alike in bearing arms.” That was perplexing to me the first time I read it, because to “bear arms” in America has a much different meaning than what I believe Benedict intended here. The Verheyen translation (<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/benedict/rule.html>) is a bit clearer, and that helped make sense of this verse and the entire short passage quoted above. That translation reads, “and we all bear an equal burden of servitude.” Benedict is talking about treating all people with equal respect.

“God shows no partiality” (Rom. 2:11), and neither should the abbot. And by extension, if we are to be like Christ, and re-present Him to the Church and world, then we must also refrain from showing partiality. We need to treat all people equally. The abbot is commanded to “make no distinction of persons...” There are, however, exceptions. If one person shows greater diligence “in good works and humility” he may be “distinguished with the abbot...” And the abbot may find one “more exemplary in good works and obedience.” But this is a practical consideration for the good of the community. Benedict was not promoting the sin of favoritism.

Under no circumstances is the abbot, nor are we in the modern parish, to show partiality to one person over another because of “rank” in the secular world. Rich and poor, white and black, male or female, all are to be welcomed equally. St. Benedict quotes the last half of Galatians 3:28, but the first half of that verse is instructional to this theme: “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female...” We are to receive anyone who comes through the door of the Church as Christ Himself, showing no partiality. This, however, can be problematic if it becomes obvious that the individual is walking in sin. We accept the person, but not the sinful behavior. So, just as the abbot is to “show equal charity for all, and impose a uniform discipline for all...” we are not to tolerate sinful behavior, and neither can we complain when we are shown discipline for our faults.

We are not cloistered saints. Nevertheless, the teaching of this portion of the Rule has much to say to us about living in community. We are all part of the Body of Christ, and that requires us to learn to love the unlovable, and as our baptismal vows demand, “to respect the dignity of every human being.”

January 13, May 13, September 13
Chapter 2:23-29

In his teaching the Abbot should always observe that principle of the Apostle in which he says: “convince, rebuke, and exhort” (2 Tm 4:2), ²⁴that is, mingling gentleness with severity, as the occasion may call for; let him show the severity of the master and the loving affection of a father. ²⁵He must sternly rebuke the undisciplined and restless; but he must exhort the obedient, meek, and patient to advance in virtue. But we charge him to rebuke and punish the negligent and haughty. ²⁶Let him not shut his eyes to the sins of evil-doers; but on their first appearance let him do his utmost to cut them out by the root at once, mindful of the fate of Eli, the priest of Shiloh (cf 1 Samuel 2:11-4:18). ²⁷The well-disposed and those of good understanding, let him correct at the first and second admonition with words alone; ²⁸but let him chastise the wicked and the hard of heart, and the proud and disobedient at the very first offense with stripes or other bodily punishments, knowing that it is written: “The fool is not corrected with words” (Prov 29:19). ²⁹And again: “Strike your son with the rod, and you will deliver his soul from death” (Prov 23:14).

The abbot must exercise discipline with his monks, but Benedict notes that he must mingle “gentleness with severity, as the occasion may call for...” One size does not fit all. Each of us approaches life, both spiritual and temporal, in our own unique way, and God recognizes our uniqueness, dealing with us lovingly and tenderly, but firmly. The abbot must reflect the Father’s love for his children, showing “the severity of the master and the loving affection of a father.”

Benedict once again calls for some measures of discipline that seem harsh and outdated to our modern ear. He says that the abbot should “chastise the wicked and the hard of heart, and the proud and disobedient at the very first offense with stripes or other bodily punishments...” He is to do this for the good of the individual as well as the community. He should “not shut his eyes to the sins of evil-doers...but cut them out by the root at once...” Though the practice of corporal punishment is no longer acceptable, we do need to root out evil from the Body of Christ. Alas, that is much more difficult in today’s Church. If one does not want to change, he or she need only find a more tolerant church, one which will turn a blind eye to the practice of ill behavior. And sadly, there are dozens of such congregations in any metropolitan area.

But for those pursuing Christ, discipline from the elders of the Church should be welcome. For “God is treating you as sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline?” (Heb. 12:7). And why should we submit to such discipline? “For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant; later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (Heb. 12:1). As ones who seek to follow the way of Christ in accordance with the precepts of the Rule of St. Benedict, but are doing so in the secular society, discipline is key. To be able to submit to the authority of Christ manifest in the ecclesiastical authority of the Church is important. Without those checks and balances on our behavior we can be tempted to fall into the worldly patterns of the society around us. The discipline may seem painful rather than pleasant at the time, but as the author of the epistle to the Hebrews points out, it will yield “the peaceful fruit of righteousness.”

January 14, May 14, September 14
Chapter 2:30-36

The Abbot ought always to remember what he is and what he is called, and to know that to whom much has been entrusted, from him much will be required. ³¹Let him understand what a difficult and arduous task he undertakes in directing souls and accommodating himself to a variety of characters—speaking gently to one, to another by reproof, and to still another by entreaties, to each as is appropriate to their understanding. ³²Let him so adjust and adapt himself to each one that he not only suffer no loss in his flock, but may rejoice in the increase of a worthy fold. ³³Above all, the Abbot must not neglect or undervalue the welfare of the souls entrusted to him, having too great a concern about fleeting, earthly, perishable things. ³⁴Rather, let him always keep in mind that he has undertaken the care of souls for whom he must give an account. ³⁵And that he may not complain of the want of earthly means, let him remember what is written: “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well” (Mt 6:33). And again: “Those who seek the Lord lack no good thing” (Ps 33[34]:10).

The responsibility entrusted to the abbot for the cure of souls requires accountability. Benedict says, “The Abbot ought always to remember what he is and what he is called...” He is called “abbot”. He is the father of the family, and is thus entrusted with the “care of souls...” And as a result, “he must give an account.”

There are so many out there who want to be the leader. They want to preach. They want the accolades that they assume go with being the pastor of a church. There is also the common disease among the clergy in liturgical churches of wanting the next step up: deacons wanting the black shirt of the priest; the assistant believing he is better suited to being rector; of the priest with “purple eyes”, wanting to be bishop. But the qualification for any clerical role is “calling”. The abbot is called. The priest is called. And every baptized member of the Body is called! We do great harm to ourselves and to the Body when we try to take on a role that does not belong to us. We are all called to serve, both laity and clergy, for Jesus said, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide” (John 15:16). Jesus chose you, called you, and equipped you, that you may labor in His vineyard. And each of us has his or her giftings and calling. As St. Paul says, “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Cor. 12:7), and he “apportions [the gifts] to each one individually as he wills” (1 Cor. 12:11).

We also do great harm to the Body when we have accepted a call to serve and refuse to be held accountable for the manner in which we carry out the calling. “He must give an account.” This is not simply the reckoning that all must give at the final judgment. If a man in a position of authority has no one to whom he may be held accountable for his behavior, then he is walking in paths fraught with danger, relying on his own resources, reason, and subjective judgment. But whether we walk in a clerical leadership role or as a lay servant of Christ, we all must be accountable for our life witness for Christ. We need objective perspective on our life, ministry, and witness. We need a brother or sister in Christ with whom we can share our walk and who will speak honestly to us about our life, our service to the Lord and His Church, and our witness to the world. We are not our own. We all represent Christ to the Church and the world. Like the abbot, we must always remember who we are, what we are called (i.e. “Christian”), and Whom we represent.

January 15, May 15, September 15
Chapter 2:37-40

The abbot must know that anyone who undertakes the care of souls must prepare himself to give an account for them. ³⁸Whatever the number of brothers he has in his care, let him be sure that on judgment day he will, without doubt, have to give an account to the Lord for all these souls, in addition to that of his own. ³⁹And thus, while he is fearful of the Shepherd's future examination about the sheep entrusted to him, and is watchful of his account for others, he is concerned also on his own account; ⁴⁰and while by his warnings he has administered correction to others, he amends his own failings.

As we come to the end of this chapter about abbatial qualities we need to remember that those in authority over us, regardless of their personal qualities and personality, need our prayers. Benedict states that "The abbot must know that anyone who undertakes the care of souls must prepare himself to give an account for them." If an abbot, a bishop, a priest, or a secular leader, such as the mayor, governor, or president has responsibility for our well-being, then we NEED to pray for them. Yes, they will be held accountable for how they have carried out their duties, but regardless of whether we like them or not, we are also called to support them, especially by lifting them up before the Lord. Besides, if their concern is the care of our souls (or the welfare of our temporal being for secular leaders), we need to pray for them for our own benefit. And if they are amiss in anything, we need to ask God to reveal that and bring them into right relationship with Himself. Leave it in God's hands. He alone can change the hearts and minds of man.

Benedict makes an interesting point in the final verse: "While by his warnings he has administered correction to others, he amends his own failings." Often, we find that in helping others we have helped ourselves. If we are open to the Holy Spirit, He can open our eyes to see that a fault we found in others is one we also possess in ourselves. It is important to recognize that when we think we are the one giving, pouring out ourselves, and ministering in the love of Christ, that we are receiving manifold ministry in return. How often have I visited someone in prison, the hospital, or their home and have come away far more blessed than I could have imagined.

The one in authority carries a burden not only for his own soul, but for all under his care. And as St. Benedict notes, "on judgment day he will, without doubt, have to give an account to the Lord for all these souls." But this burden of responsibility is too great only if it is not carried in the Lord. Those in authority need God's grace that they may be accountable, not only at the final judgment, but throughout their lives and ministry. Pray, therefore, for the shepherds committed to caring for the sheep. And pray that each of us, lay and clergy, may faithfully carry out the ministry to which our Lord has called us.

January 16, May 16, September 16
Chapter 3

Whenever weighty matters are to be transacted in the monastery, let the Abbot call together the whole community, and make known the matter which is to be considered. ²Having heard the brother's views, let him consider the matter himself and do what he thinks best. ³It is for this reason, however, we said that all should be called for counsel, because the Lord often reveals to the youngest member what is best. ⁴The brothers, however, should give their advice with humble submission, and let them not presume stubbornly to defend their own views, ⁵for the decision is rather the Abbot's to make, so that in what he considers best all obey him. ⁶But just as it is proper for the disciples to obey their master, so also it is becoming for the master to settle all things with prudence and justice. ⁷Therefore, let all follow the Rule as their guide in everything, and let no one rashly depart from it. ⁸Let no one in the monastery follow the desires of his own heart, ⁹and let no one dare to dispute insolently with his Abbot, either inside or outside the monastery. ¹⁰If any one dare to do so, let him be placed under the correction of the Rule. ¹¹Moreover, the Abbot himself must do everything in the fear of the Lord and out of reverence for the Rule, knowing that, beyond a doubt, he will have to give an account to God, the most just Judge, for all his rulings. ¹²If, however, matters of less importance, having to do with the welfare of the monastery, are under consideration, let the Abbot use the counsel of the seniors only, ¹³as it is written: "Do all things with counsel, and you shall not need to repent when you are done" (Sir 32:24).

Over the course of my 36+ years of priesthood, I have heard the ministry variously described as herding cats, or corraling butterflies. And there is a certain level of truth to that. It is why the priesthood is called a "holy order"—it is the clergy's role to bring order to the life of the community. There is a need for order in the life of the community of the Church, and it is the job of the clergy to govern the people of God under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This chapter in the Rule of St. Benedict reflects this need for order and governance in the community of believers, and the crucial role that the Holy Spirit plays in that governance.

The Church as a whole has lost her bearings because we have allowed worldly models of government to take precedence in Church affairs. The Church is not a democracy (government by the people), nor is it an autocracy (government by one person with absolute power), nor any other manmade model. None of these forms of government work because they are not the government instituted by God. Benedict calls for the Body to return to the New Testament model presented in Acts 15. This a Holy Spirit driven decision-making model. "Whenever weighty matters are to be transacted in the monastery, let the Abbot call together the whole community..." The goal of such a gathering is to seek the mind of Christ. This is not a democratic process, seeking the will of the majority; this is a theocratic process, a communal seeking of the mind of Christ. Benedict says that the reason for calling all together for counsel is, "because the Lord often reveals to the youngest member what is best." This type of government requires careful listening and humility among the leadership. There is a need to listen to what each person is hearing from the Lord. And it just might be the youngest member who is hearing most clearly at any one time.

This type of government requires an honest give and take within the community, a level of trust that must be built up over time. These governmental gatherings are not an occasion for airing opinion, but for humbly seeking the mind of Christ, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, that the community may

understand and do the will of God. “The brothers...should give their advice with humble submission, and let them not presume stubbornly to defend their own views...” And ultimately, when a decision must be made, the one appointed by God as Father of the family and entrusted with the care of the flock, must speak for the community declaring the resolution of the matter: “the decision is...the Abbot’s to make”. And he must “settle all things with prudence and justice.” Benedict goes on to say that these decisions are of and for the Body. No one is to “follow the desires of his own heart...[nor] dare to dispute insolently with his Abbot.” The fellowship of the community is the fellowship of the Body of Christ. And even as our Lord repeatedly said throughout the Gospel of John (5:30; 6:38; 8:28; etc.), “I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me.” And with His last prayers to the Father in the Garden, Jesus prayed, “Not my will, but Thine be done” (Luke 22:42). This is the model and the attitude we need bring to decisions in the Church and in our personal lives.

Every decision we make affects not only ourselves but the Body of Christ. Seeking the counsel of the elders, and our brothers and sisters in Christ, is wise. “Where there is no guidance, a people falls; but in an abundance of counselors there is safety” (Prov. 11:14). Whether it is a large decision (e.g. moving to a new home) or a smaller one (e.g. a special gift for the parish, getting a dog for the family, etc.), praying through that decision with members of the family of God will be of advantage to you. Benedict notes that there are less important decisions that need to be made from time to time. Rather than gather the whole community together for those decisions, a select group of elders should be consulted. Regardless of the size of the concern, the Body is to be consulted, that the Mind of Christ may be made manifest. And Benedict leaves us with this encouraging word: “Do all things with counsel, and you shall not need to repent when you are done” (Sir 32:24).

January 17, May 17, September 17
Chapter 4:1-19

First you must love the Lord God with your whole heart, your whole soul, your whole strength...²and your neighbor as yourself (cf Mt 22:37-39; Mk 12:30-31; Lk 10:27). ³Then, you are not to kill... ⁴not to commit adultery... ⁵not to steal... ⁶not to covet (cf Rom 13:9). ⁷You are not to bear false witness (cf Mt 19:18; Mk 10:19; Lk 18:20). ⁸You are to honor all men (cf 1 Pt 2:17). ⁹And what you would not have done to yourself, do not do to another (cf Tob 4:16; Mt 7:12; Lk 6:31). ¹⁰Deny yourself in order to follow Christ (cf Mt 16:24; Lk 9:23). ¹¹Discipline your body (cf 1 Cor 9:27). ¹²Do not to seek after pleasures, ¹³but love fasting. ¹⁴You are to relieve the poor. ¹⁵Clothe the naked... ¹⁶visit the sick (cf Mt 25:36). ¹⁷and bury the dead. ¹⁸Help those in trouble, ¹⁹and console the sorrowing.

Chapter 4 is the extensive list of more than 70 tools for good works. As previously stated, the Rule of St. Benedict is a practical guide for how to live the Gospel, and this chapter is, as it were, the tool chest for practical application. He begins his list with our Lord's Summary of the Law—the Great Commandments. Then in verses 3-7 he lists the 6th to the 10th commandments from the Ten Commandments. These latter are the commandments focused on relating to others, and Benedict sees them as foundational for living in community. Though we do not live in an enclosed community, these are tools that every Christian must employ in order to represent Christ. Jesus said that we are to “love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35). If we are going to be effective in living the Gospel in the world, we must utilize these tools to do the work of Christ.

Verses 10-19 are transitional between the commandments of the opening and Benedict's challenge to be different from the world (tomorrow's meditation). To make that kind of transition and to open ourselves to the transforming work of Christ, we must first utilize the tools of self-denial and self-discipline. “You are to honor all men...Deny yourself in order to follow Christ...Discipline your body...Relieve the poor, clothe the naked, visit the sick, help those in trouble, and console the sorrowing.” This work that we are called to do is the work of the Kingdom, and each of us is given, by grace, specific tools to use for the building up of His Kingdom.

January 18, May 18, September 18
Chapter 4:20-33

Your way of acting should be different from worldly ways. ²¹The love of Christ must be preferred to all else. ²²Do not give way to anger. ²³Do not foster a desire for revenge. ²⁴Do not entertain deceit in your heart. ²⁵Do not make a false greeting of peace. ²⁶Do not turn away someone in need of love. ²⁷Do not swear to any oath, lest it prove false. ²⁸Speak the truth with heart and tongue. ²⁹Do not return evil for evil (cf 1 Thes 5:15; 1 Pt 3:9). ³⁰Do no injury to another, but bear patiently the injury done to you. ³¹Love your enemies (cf Mt 5:44; Lk 6:27). ³²Do not curse them that curse you, but rather bless them. ³³Bear persecution for justice sake (cf Mt 5:10).

When we have denied ourselves, taken up our cross and begun to follow Christ, we must put our love for Him before all else. The precepts in this section are not randomly chosen instructions. Each one of these tools will aid us first in our relationship with God, and next in relationship with others—if we properly employ them. But the key is found in verse 21: “The love of Christ must be preferred to all else.” When we actively seek Him in prayer and work, in worship and in relationships with others, then we will fulfill the call to make our “way of acting...different from worldly ways.”

When we have begun to accept and receive the transforming love of Christ, then we will no longer “give way to anger...[and] entertain deceit,” or be hypocritical making “a false greeting of peace.” And our decision to prefer Christ, combined with the empowering grace of the Holy Spirit, will allow us to “speak the truth with heart and tongue.” When we employ these tools, the Love of God will work to change our hearts and turn us toward the other. The Holy Spirit will teach us love for our enemies, and thus not to “return evil for evil.” Our “way of acting should be different from worldly ways.” That will happen when we prefer Christ and His Way over the way of the world, and accept the grace of His Holy Spirit to do His work.

January 19, May 19, September 19
Chapter 4:34-43

Do not be proud...³⁵Do not be given to wine (cf Ti 1:7; 1 Tm 3:3).³⁶Do not eat to excess,³⁷ or be given to much sleep.³⁸Do not be slothful (cf Rom 12:11).³⁹Do not grumble.⁴⁰Do not speak ill of another.⁴¹Put your trust in God alone.⁴²If you see what is good in yourself, give the credit to God.⁴³But be sure that any evil in yourself is your own and charge it to yourself.

“Do not be proud...” A difficult command for most. And yet, most of us would argue that we are not prone to pride. The outward signs of pride are not necessarily visible, and the evil one wants us to deny that this deadly sin is an issue for us. Too quickly we believe the lie, and so we become proud that pride is not a problem for us. Hmmm.

The first verses of this section, verses 35-38, are an exhortation against gluttony in all of its varied forms, and we need to take notice of these. Let us carefully examine them and let the light of these test and challenge us. Then Benedict comes back to the issues of interpersonal relationships: “Do not grumble...[or] speak ill of another.” Again, how easy it is to fall into the trap of gossip and speaking ill of another. How do we avoid doing these wrongs, and how can we begin to apply these precepts to our lives? In our fallen nature we all look at the apple and find it pleasing to the eye (Gen. 3:1-6). We are gluttonous, and covetous, and prideful by nature—fallen nature. But God... “With God all things are possible” (Mark 10:27). But God... He alone can save us from ourselves. But God... He alone can give us the grace of discipline. And so Benedict gives us this tool: “Put your trust in God alone.” Anything good found within us is from God, so “give the credit to God.” Trust Him, and allow Him to begin to transform us into His Image.

January 20, May 20, September 20
Chapter 4:44-54

Fear the day of judgment. ⁴⁵Be in dread of hell. ⁴⁶Desire eternal life with all spiritual longing. ⁴⁷Have an expectation of death before your eyes daily. ⁴⁸Keep a constant watch over the actions of our life ⁴⁹certain that God sees us everywhere. ⁵⁰Dash at once against Christ the evil thoughts which rise in your heart, and disclose them to your spiritual father. ⁵¹Guard your tongue against bad and wicked speech. ⁵²Practice moderation in speaking. ⁵³Do not speak useless words and such as provoke laughter. ⁵⁴Do not love much or boisterous laughter.

This section is troubling for many people, myself included. It appears to draw our focus onto things to avoid rather than affirm, and it seems to attempt to quash joy in the saints. I don't think either of those are the intent behind this portion of the Rule. Let's look.

The section begins with the admonition to “Fear the day of judgment.” Scripture tells us to fear the Lord (e.g. Deut. 10:12-22; Acts 9:31; 2 Cor. 5:11). However, St. John tells us that fear has to do with punishment, and that only perfect love (i.e. God's love) casts out fear (1 Jn. 4:18). And Luke tells us in Acts 9:31, that as the early Church was “walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit it (the Church) was multiplied.” So, if we have the Holy Spirit dwelling in us, and we continually seek to nourish our relationship with Christ, then we need not fear either the judgment day nor dread the horror of hell. So, what is Benedict saying? He places all of this in the context of the exhortation which follows: “Desire (literally, ‘yearn for’ or ‘work toward’) eternal life with all spiritual longing.” Those who are not in right relationship with Christ are alienated from God, for Jesus is the Way, and no one comes to the Father except through Him (John 14:6). Benedict's concern was that we foster a yearning and a holy desire to dwell in the courts of our God. He expands this thought with practical advice in verses 47-54.

But what about the prohibitions against laughter (cf. 6:8; 7:59,60)? Scripture tells us that “the joy of the Lord is our strength” (Nehemiah 8:10). But as fallen creatures we can attempt to hide our fallenness behind a facade of bawdy laughter, with off-color jokes, or humor at the expense of another. This can be harmful to another, and that must be avoided. Laughter is not always the outward sign of a joyful heart. Nevertheless, there are times when a turn of phrase or an expression of delight may bring laughter apropos to a situation. Benedict is not opposed to an expression of joy of this sort; he is simply warning the brothers to avoid bawdy and inappropriate conversation which does not build up the Body of Christ.

We are to take all “evil thoughts which rise in our hearts” and “dash them at once against Christ.” As St. Paul tells us, “We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle to the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ...” (2 Cor. 10:3-5). However, if we are honest, we can admit that we are not always so vigilant. Benedict is aware that we all fall short of the glory of God, thus, he tells us to disclose those shortcomings to “our spiritual father.” We are to quickly and readily confess our sins to God in the sacrament of Holy Reconciliation. This is not a burden, it is a blessing to be able to know that cleansing love—it is an unburdening of our spirit.

Benedict said in the Prologue that these regulations were not intended to be harsh or burdensome (v. 46), and so we need to read the directives of the Rule in that light. Benedict wants the followers of the Rule to be followers of Christ, not their own selfish and sinful desires. Let us keep that always in the forefront of our minds as we read and study the Rule, looking at the teachings and regulations not as restrictive, rather as instructive. And may we always “prefer nothing whatever to Christ.” (72:11).

January 21, May 21, September 21
Chapter 4:55-61

Listen willingly to holy reading. ⁵⁶Apply yourself often to prayer. ⁵⁷Confess your past sins to God daily in prayer with sighs and tears, ⁵⁸and to amend them for the future. ⁵⁹Do not fulfill the desires of the flesh (cf Gal 5:16). ⁶⁰Hate the urgings of your will. ⁶¹Obey the commands of the Abbot in all things, even though he himself (which Heaven forbid) act otherwise, mindful of that precept of the Lord: “observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do” (Mt 23:3).

“Listen readily to holy reading.” Reading is a huge component of Benedictine discipline and something all of us should be readily about. There are set times for reading, according to the Rule, so that the monks may study the Word and the Fathers in their private cells. There is an exhortation to do *lectio divina*, divine or meditative reading. If a monk arrived at the cloister and was found to be illiterate, one of the brothers was tasked with teaching him to read. And in subsequent generations Benedictines have been instrumental in bringing literacy to the masses. Reading is essential to encouraging and fostering a healthy spiritual discipline. It is one of the means used to foster spiritual growth in the disciple. The “holy reading” that Benedict is prescribing here is not just the Bible; the monk is commanded to read the teachings of the Fathers, and whatever books the Abbot assigns, especially during the Season of Lent (cf. 48:10-16). We would all do well to follow this example. Ask what those in leadership in the Church are reading. Follow their example.

“And devote yourself often to prayer.” This prayer is above and beyond the liturgical cycle of prayer. Benedict is encouraging all of us to fulfill St. Paul’s challenge to pray constantly (1 Thess. 5:17). At those quiet moments throughout our day (when we are so blessed to have them) we can pause in thankfulness to God. While driving, or shopping, say a blessing on those around you. When waiting in line, or stuck in a traffic jam due to construction or an accident, pray for those causing or dealing with the delay, and pray for the injured and inconvenienced. And Benedict declares that we ought every day to confess our sins in prayer that we might change our ways in the future (vv. 57-58).

Even as we pursue a life of prayer, it is a labor of obedience—a battle against self-will. Benedict recognizes this work as he commands that we “hate the urgings of self-will”. It is not enough to desire to submit to Christ’s will, we must subject our will to His, which is a much bigger step. We must recognize that there is a war of wills being waged, and self-will must be defeated. It is essential that we turn against its urgings and acknowledge that those urgings are working against our best interests. They have become our enemy.

And finally, don’t do as I do; do as I say. When I was in high school I had an employer who actually said those words to me. I had a job where I spent many hours unsupervised. I had seen my boss cut corners in one of the jobs that I shared with him. One day he caught me doing that very same thing and took me to task. I confronted him saying that I had seen him do it, and he replied “Don’t do as I do; do as I say.” Benedict says, “Obey the commands of the Abbot in all things, even though he himself (which Heaven forbid) act otherwise...” Those in leadership are human, and they are in the battle, too. We will all slip up, and as St. Paul says, we all fall short of the glory of God. But, it is not for us to judge them. We are to maintain a place of submission to their authority and obey—to do as they say.

January 22, May 22, September 22
Chapter 4:62-74

Do not desire to be called holy before you are; but be holy first, that you may be truly so called. ⁶³Fulfill daily the commandments of God. ⁶⁴Treasure chastity. ⁶⁵Hate no one, ⁶⁶and do not be jealous. ⁶⁷Do nothing to entertain envy. ⁶⁸Do not love quarreling. ⁶⁹Do not be prideful. ⁷⁰Honor the aged. ⁷¹Love the young. ⁷²Pray for your enemies in the love of Christ. ⁷³Make peace with an adversary before the setting of the sun. ⁷⁴And never despair of God's mercy.

“Do not aspire to be called holy before you really are...” for God alone is Holy. When we seek to be recognized as holy, we are seeking the place of God. It is the first temptation: “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God...” (Gen. 3:5). To aspire to be called holy is very different than to aspire to become holy in God’s grace. The prior is prideful, the latter is humble. And so to avoid such a stumbling block we must “be holy first...[and] fulfill daily the commandments of God.” From there Benedict gives us a list of Biblical commands in verses 64-73.

The fact is that we do all fall short of the glory of God, and it is easy to become frustrated and discouraged. But our father Benedict does not leave us comfortless. He ends this section with the hopeful exhortation to “never despair of God’s mercy.” As we aspire to holiness, God’s mercy is always available for “His mercy endures forever” (cf. Psalms 107, 118, 136, etc.). God knows our weaknesses, and the trials and tribulations we face day after day. He will, if we seek Him, strengthen us and provide for us every spiritual gift. And when (not if) we come up short in our aspiration for holiness, and when we outright fail to measure up, He will have mercy. Never despair. God loves you. God has forgiven you. God is not mad at you. And God will NEVER leave you nor forsake you. “His mercy endures forever.”

January 23, May 23, September 23
Chapter 4:75-78

Behold, these are the instruments of the spiritual art, ⁷⁶which, if they have been applied without ceasing day and night and approved on judgment day, will merit for us from the Lord that reward which He has promised: ⁷⁷“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor 2:9). ⁷⁸But the workshop in which we perform all these works with diligence is the enclosure of the monastery, and stability in the community.

Benedict summarizes his listing of the tools available in God’s tool chest by saying, “Behold, these are the instruments of the spiritual art...” We are to use them “without ceasing day and night...” He uses the Latin word *instrumenta*. This word is also used for musical instruments, and as such begs a metaphor. Just as there are a large number of tools available to be used for the work of living in community, so there are a large number of musical instruments available to be used in the composition and performance of a symphony. Each musical instrument has a specific role in the composition of a symphony, and must be played at the appointed time, in the right tempo, and at the appropriate volume. There is a logic and flow to a symphony, with each instrument playing its crucial part. Out of context the notes played by any one instrument might seem odd, even dissonant. But in the context of the whole composition, each instrument adds its unique part to the complete work of art. There is a beauty to the crafted whole, and when each piece has played its part well the work holds together and paints an auditory picture for the audience. So it is with the tools of the spiritual art. When we employ each tool, and use it properly, our lives and that of the community become a complete work, a masterpiece—beautifully framed and forged, proclaiming a glorious message.

This may all sound wonderful, but in the last verse Benedict declares that “the workshop in which we perform all these works with diligence is the enclosure of the monastery...” That would be a problem for us. Is there some means or provision for an alternate reading, or an adaptation of verse 78? The beginning of the verse reads, “the workshop in which we perform all these works with diligence is the enclosure of the monastery...”, but then Benedict adds, “and stability in the community.” Even if we are not cenobitic, we do live in community. Whether as professed Benedictines, or faithful Christians living in the world, we promise “stability” in our profession of promises according to chapter 58 of the Rule. These monastic promises are reflected in every Christian’s baptismal vows: “Will you continue in the apostles’ teaching...? Will you persevere in resisting evil...? Will you proclaim...the Good News...? Will you seek and serve Christ...? Will you strive for justice and peace...?” All of these speak to stability in relationship with Christ and community. And in order to properly employ “the instruments of the spiritual art” we must be walking in the way of the Spirit, in fidelity to the calling, and in obedience to the Word. Therefore, we must practice “stability in the community” wherever we live and work, be it the monastery or the world.

Maintaining a stable relationship with Christ and with His Church is invaluable. It is hard enough to live in the world as a Christian; to do so without Christ and His Church would be impossible. So, Benedict has given us this chapter on the “instruments of the spiritual art”. He has shown us how to employ the tools. Now we need to maintain stability in our relationships with God and one another in order to utilize these gifts for the building up of the Body of Christ and the spread of His Kingdom.

January 24, May 24, September 24
Chapter 5

The first degree of humility is obedience without delay. ²This comes to those who hold nothing dearer than Christ. ³Because of the holy service which they have promised, or of the fear of hell, or the glory of life everlasting, ⁴as soon as the Superior has commanded anything they permit no delay in the execution of that work, as if the matter had been commanded by God Himself. ⁵The Lord says of these men: “At the hearing of the ear he has obeyed Me” (Ps 17[18]:45). ⁶And again He says to the teachers: “He who hears you hears Me” (Lk 10:16). ⁷Such people, therefore, instantly quit their own work and abandon their own will, ⁸and lay down whatever they have in hand, and leaving unfinished what they were doing, follow with the ready step of obedience the voice of authority. ⁹And in the same moment, both the master’s command and the disciple’s finished work are, in the fear of God, speedily finished together. ¹⁰The desire of advancing to eternal life urges them on. ¹¹They, therefore, are eager for the narrow way of which the Lord says: “Narrow is the way which leads to life” (Mt 7:14), ¹²so that, they no longer live according to their own desires and pleasures but walk according to the judgment and will of another. They choose to live in monasteries, and desire an Abbot to be over them. ¹³These men truly live up to the maxim of the Lord in which He says: “I came not to do My own will, but the will of Him Who sent Me” (Jn 6:38). ¹⁴This obedience, however, will be acceptable to God and agreeable to men only if what is commanded is done without hesitation, delay, lukewarmness, grumbling or complaint. ¹⁵For the obedience which is rendered to Superiors is rendered to God. For He Himself said: “He who hears you hears Me” (Lk 10:16). ¹⁶Further, obedience must be rendered gladly by the disciples, “for the Lord loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor 9:7). ¹⁷If the disciple obeys with an ill will and grumbling, not only with lips but also in his heart, ¹⁸even though he fulfills the command, yet it will not be acceptable to God, who regards the heart of the grumbler. ¹⁹And he will have no reward for such an action; rather he will incur the penalty for grumblers, unless he makes satisfactory amendment.

St. Benedict declares in this chapter that obedience is always immediate (5:4,7), complete (5:9), and joyful (5:16). Anything less than this is at best compliance, at worst rebellion. But the question that resonates for us today is, what does this chapter say to the non-cenobitic follower of the Rule? We do not, as it says in verse 13, “choose to live in monasteries, and desire an Abbot to be over [us].” Who, then, is the authority over us, and to whom do we owe obedience?

There are various forms of authority in the world, and we need to be obedient to them all. Let us, then, look at some of the types of authority with whom we interact in our daily lives. The first, is direct authority: the Word of God. We must obey the Biblical Word of God. This is non-negotiable. The Word of God is authoritative and unchangeable. We must also be aware that God continues to speak to His Church prophetically. We need to test the prophetic word, and if it is in line with Holy Scripture, and is affirmed by the elders, we need to be obedient to that word. When God speaks through Scripture and prophetically, we must respond immediately, completely, and joyfully.

Secondly, there is delegated authority. Jesus said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been committed to Me” (Matt. 28:18). But He also delegated authority to His disciples. He said to His disciples, “Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 18:18). And as Benedict points out (twice) in the chapter above, Jesus said, “He who listens to you listens to Me” (Luke 10:16 NIV). The apostles, then, in each successive

generation, over the centuries, have delegated that authority to the elders in the Church, and that authority has been passed down through the Church to today. We are called, therefore, to be obedient, immediately, completely, and joyfully, to the current apostolic authority in the Church.

There is also delegated authority in the secular realm. Jesus told us to “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12:17). And St. Paul says, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God” (Rom. 13:1). The same commands to be immediate, complete, and joyful in our obedience to the authority in the Church apply here. For when the commands of secular authorities are not in violation of the Word of God, then we are duty-bound to be obedient to them.

And finally, there is familial authority. The fifth commandment says that we are to honor our father and mother. And St. Paul reiterates this command in Ephesians 6:1. When we are living in our parents’ home, we are to be obedient to them. And in Ephesians 5:21f, Paul lays out some general “haustafel” or household-codes. He begins these codes with “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.” We need to recognize that God continues to speak to His Church, and He does so through the members of the Body. We need to listen to one another and be willing to accept that what we are hearing from a brother or sister may actually be the Word of God. If what we have heard from others in the Church is in line with God’s Word and is affirmed by the elders of the Church, we need to respond immediately, completely, and joyfully, “out of reverence for Christ.”

Obedience is freeing. When we recognize that the ones in authority over us have been placed there by God, and that they answer to Him, we can accept that they are duty-bound to fulfill God’s will. And if we obey and they have misspoken, then the responsibility for the mistake lies solely with them. Obedience that is immediate, complete, and joyful honors God and builds up the Body.

January 25, May 25, September 25
Chapter 6

Let us do what the Prophet says: “I said, I will take heed of my ways, that I sin not with my tongue: I have set a guard over my mouth, I was dumb, and was humbled, and kept silence even from good things” (Ps 38[39]:2-3). ²Here the prophet indicates that there are times we ought to refrain even from useful speech for the sake of silence. How much more ought we to abstain from evil words on account of the punishment due to sin. ³Therefore, because of the importance of silence, let permission to speak be seldom given even to the mature disciples, no matter how good and holy and edifying their discourse, ⁴for it is written: “In much talk you shall not escape sin” (Prov 10:19). ⁵And elsewhere: “Death and life are in the power of the tongue” (Prov 18:21). ⁶For speaking and teaching are the master’s responsibility; the disciple is to be silent and listen. ⁷If, therefore, anything must be asked of the Superior, let it be asked with all humility and respectful submission. ⁸But coarse jests, and idle words, or speech provoking laughter we condemn everywhere; and we do not permit the disciple to engage in speech of that kind.

In this chapter, Benedict implies that it is a human tendency to regularly engage in unnecessary conversation. Our insistence upon filling the vacuum of silence with speech is, or certainly can be, distracting from the greater communication taking place in the silence of the heart in both the speaker and the hearer. “We ought to refrain even from useful speech for the sake of silence,” Benedict declares. There are better words to be heard from God in the silence of the heart. Let me offer two examples. When I was a postulant for holy orders, my bishop was trying to help me understand the art of spiritual contemplation. He told the story of his meeting the Metropolitan of Constantinople at Kennedy airport as the latter arrived for a conference at the Trinity Institute in New York. My bishop was the conference organizer and he had a number of questions for the Metropolitan who was the featured speaker. But when his guest got in the car, the two men sat together in silence until they arrived at the venue. At that point the Metropolitan turned to Bishop Terwilliger and said, “Thank you for that intimate communication. I feel I know you better, now that we have shared this spiritual union.” The conference went forward smoothly from there. The second example is personal. I am losing my hearing. I have been prayed over many times for healing, but the prophetic word I have received in those healings is that God is allowing me to lose my physical hearing so that I can spiritually hear more clearly. My hearing loss has given me a greater appreciation for silence.

Shutting out unnecessary noise and confusing voices allows me to concentrate more fully on the voice of God, and I believe that is true for all of us whether in the monastery or outside. We would all do well to talk less and listen more. But Benedict goes further. He also commands a prohibition against vulgarity and gossip. This should be an obvious restraint for the Christian, however, the reason for the prohibition against “speech provoking laughter” seems less obvious. We spoke of this in the meditation on chapter 4:44-54. What Benedict is seeking to guard against in placing this restriction is distracting behavior. A pun, a play on words, or even a humorous aside can distract the hearer from the import of the current conversation. Any significant points that are being made in the conversation can be lost in the distracting asides or humorous twists of language. This can lead to wandering minds and unnecessary digressions, and the conversation can become hijacked to less edifying thoughts.

Our lives are filled with noise and confusion. Any discipline which helps bring order out of the chaos common in secular living is worthy to be employed. Silence has become a lost art in modern society,

and sadly, it is often denigrated as “wasted time” by those who neither understand it nor respect it. As Christians seeking the heart of God, we need to make time in our confusing days to listen carefully for the still small voice of God and actively carve moments out of our busy days for silent contemplation. Make time for silence, and consciously seek to develop and perfect that precious gift of holding one’s tongue and listening.

January 26, May 26, September 26
Chapter 7:1-9

Brothers, the Holy Scripture calls to us saying: “For every one who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Lk 14:11; 18:14).²In saying this, therefore, it shows us that every exaltation is a kind of pride.³The Prophet declares that he guards himself against this, saying: “O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me” (Ps 130[131]:1).⁴What then? “I have calmed and quieted my soul; as a child that is weaned is towards his mother, so shall You reward my soul” (Ps 130[131]:2).⁵Hence, brothers, if we wish to reach the greatest height of humility, and speedily to arrive at that heavenly exaltation to which ascent is made in the present life by humility,⁶then, by our actions, we must erect the ladder which appeared to Jacob in his dream, by means of which angels were shown to him ascending and descending (cf Gen 28:12).⁷Without a doubt, we understand this ascending and descending to be nothing else but that we descend by pride and ascend by humility.⁸The erected ladder, however, is our life in the present world, which, if the heart is humble, is by the Lord lifted up to heaven.⁹For we say that our body and our soul are the two sides of this ladder; and into these sides the divine calling has inserted various steps of humility and discipline which we must mount.

These verses are the table setting for the teaching on humility. At first glance, this chapter seems extremely intimidating. There are 70 verses in this chapter, and they cover what Benedict calls 12 steps. But it is not as if Benedict is creating something new regarding how a Christian is to live. Humility is a Biblical hallmark for living life in the likeness of Christ. In these first few verses of the chapter Benedict lays the framework of the structure for the steps of what he calls the “ladder” of humility. He says, “by our [ascending] actions, we must erect the ladder”. The ladder is “our life in the present world...[and] our body and our soul are the two sides of this ladder...” into which the steps which follow in this chapter are inserted. These steps are inserted by what St. Benedict labels “the divine calling”. And it is in understanding that divine calling that we can learn to apply these teachings.

But what is this divine calling? If the divine calling is to be a monk or a nun, then we who are dwelling in the secular world are going to be either left out or hard pressed to experience it. And so, for those of us on the outside of the monastic enclosure our calling is going to be different, and if truth be told, somewhat more difficult. For the cares of the world and the culture in which we find ourselves, which encourages selfishness and pride, are always going to weigh on and confront the Christian seeking to abide by the Gospel. As the prophet Micah states: God “has shown you...what is good...”. Then he asks, “and what does the Lord require of you?...” We are to “walk humbly with our God” (Micah 6:8). And that is the battle. Humility is accursed in this world. The humble get run over. But the model of Christ is that of one who lays down his life for others. Jesus said, “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). By always putting the needs of others first we enter into the promise of growing in humility. As St. Paul said, “I bid every one among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think,” ... “but in humility count others better than yourselves.” (Rom. 12:3; Phil. 2:3).

Our vocation, our divine calling, then is to live in harmony with Christ and in obedience to His Word and His will, re-presenting Him to the world by our “ascending actions” of humility. St. Benedict tells us in this opening to chapter 7, that we will ascend to the fulfillment of that calling through the practice of humility, and we can best do that by the steps which follow.

January 27, May 27, September 27
Chapter 7:10-18

The first step of humility, then, is that a man always have the fear of God before his eyes (cf Ps 35[36]:1-2), shunning all forgetfulness ¹¹and that he be ever mindful of all that God has commanded, that he always consider in his mind how those who despise God will burn in hell for their sins, and that life everlasting is prepared for those who fear God. ¹²And while he guards himself evermore against sin and vices of thought, word, deed, and self-will, let him also be quick to cut off the desires of the flesh. ¹³Let a man consider that God always sees him from Heaven, that the eye of God observes his works everywhere, and that the angels report them to Him every hour. ¹⁴The Prophet tells us this when he shows that God is ever present in our thoughts, saying: “The searcher of hearts and minds is God” (Ps 7:10). ¹⁵And again: “The Lord knows the thoughts of men” (Ps 93[94]:11). ¹⁶And he says: “You have understood my thoughts afar off” (Ps 138[139]:3). ¹⁷And: “The thoughts of man shall give praise to You” (Ps 75[76]:11). ¹⁸Therefore, in order that he may always be on his guard against evil thoughts, let the humble brother always say in his heart: “Then I shall be spotless before Him, if I shall keep myself from iniquity” (Ps 17[18]:24).

The first step in the ladder of humility is to have the fear of God before our eyes. Nearly a third of the seventy verses of this chapter are dedicated to this first step. Why is that? Benedict is laying a foundation as well as erecting a ladder. The first step is the most important, for without it, the other steps have nothing upon which to build. St. Paul says that “no other foundation can any one lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 3:11). And that is what St. Benedict is doing. He is contrasting self-will with the will of God. We are to “be ever mindful of all that God has commanded...” We are to guard ourselves against the “vices of thought, word, deed, and self-will.” Even our thoughts, to which God is privy, must be toward God and the desire for His will.

But what does Benedict mean when he exhorts us “to have the fear of God before our eyes”? By looking at the Scripture citation accompanying the command we can see that the one who doesn’t have the fear of God “flatters himself in his own eyes”. He is proud. And his pride leads him to believe that “his iniquity cannot be found out and hated.” Benedict is declaring a warning to us all. He is reiterating the exhortation given by Moses to the people of Israel before they entered the Promised Land, saying, “what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the Lord...” (Deut. 10:12-13). And the implications of walking in humble submission go far beyond our own relationship with God. St. Luke tells us that the early Church was built up in faith, “and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit it was multiplied” (Acts 9:32). The fear of God is a yielding of our will to His, by the grace of God’s Holy Spirit. To enter the Promised Land we must “walk in all His ways, to love Him, and to serve the Lord.”

Right relationship with God begins in humble submission to His will. It is the first step and foundation for our intimate walk in communion with God.

January 28, May 28, September 28
Chapter 7:19-22

We are thus forbidden to do our own will, since the Scripture tells us: “Turn away from your evil will” (Sir 18:30). ²⁰And, too, we ask God in prayer that His will may be done in us (cf Mt 6:10). ²¹We are rightly taught not to do our own will when we guard against what the Scripture says: “There are ways that seem right to men, that in the end plunge them into the depths of hell” (Prov 16:25). ²²And also we are filled with fear at what is said of the negligent: “They are corrupted and become abominable in their desires” (Ps 13[14]:1).

This brief section is summarized in verse 21: “We are rightly taught not to do our own will...” This laying aside of our will in deference to the Father’s will is, paradoxically, not something we can accomplish by means of our own will. To want what God wants requires God’s grace—His gift of desire. Left to our own desires we will rely on our fallible reason, and selfish will, so that, we think and do things that may seem right to our reason, or appropriate according to our selfish thoughts. And when we do those things, as Benedict reminds us, they “in the end plunge [us] into the depths of hell.” No matter how hard we try, we cannot lay our will aside by our own efforts. We are, by our fallen nature, selfish creatures. It is not until we have died to self and been raised in Christ that we can begin to change into His likeness. It is the grace of God that makes it possible.

As Christians living in the secular realm we are constantly bombarded with demands on our time, our attention, and our property. It is a self-protective reflex to elevate our will in response to those attacks. But the Kingdom is not about our desires or our will, it is about seeking the will of God for ourselves, our family, and the world around us. His Kingdom will come when His will is being done by those who are residents of the Kingdom—the subjects of the King. As St. Benedict reminds us, “we ask God in prayer that His will may be done in us.” As Christians living in the world, this petition should be a constant: “thy will be done.” It is one of the many reasons we say the Lord’s prayer at the conclusion of every hour of the Divine Office.

The ultimate goal of this first step is that we may be so yielded to Jesus that we not only desire to do the will of the Father, but like Jesus Himself, *delight* to do His will. Hebrews 10, quoting Psalm 40, says, “Consequently, when Christ came into the world he said... ‘Lo, I have come to do your will, O God.’” And the wording of Psalm 40:8 is even more explicit: “I delight to do your will, O my God.” May we always desire and delight in fulfilling the will of our Lord.

January 29, May 29, September 29
Chapter 7:23-30

But as regards desires of the flesh, let us believe that God is ever present to us, since the Prophet says to the Lord: “All my desires are known to you” (Ps 37[38]:10).²⁴ We must, therefore, guard against evil desires, because death is stationed near the entrance of pleasure.²⁵ For this reason the Scripture commands us: “Do not pursue your lusts” (Sir 18:30).²⁶ If, therefore, the eyes of the Lord observe the good and the bad (cf Prov 15:3)²⁷ and “the Lord always looks down from heaven on the children of men, to see whether there be anyone that understands and seeks God” (cf Ps 13[14]:2);²⁸ and if our actions are reported to the Lord day and night by the angels who are appointed to watch over us daily,²⁹ then we must ever be on our guard, brothers, as the Prophet says in the psalm, that God may at no time see us “gone aside to evil and become unprofitable” (Ps 13[14]:3),³⁰ and having spared us in the present time, because He is kind and waits for us to change for the better, says to us in the future: “These things you have done and I was silent” (Ps 49[50]:21).

We finally come to the end of step 1. Here Benedict addresses the issue of bodily desires. The Psalmist says that if we “delight ourselves in the Lord, He will give us the desires of our heart” (Ps. 37:4). But there appears to be a clear distinction between heart desire and bodily desire. When our heart is wedded to God (i.e. delighting in Him), then God looks lovingly on those desires. But as we see in Paul’s letter to Rome (12:1), we are called upon to give up our bodies sacrificially. I am not suggesting that Benedict is setting up a Gnostic dualism, rather he is indicating that heart, mind, AND body need to be yielded to the will of God.

As non-cenobitic followers of the Rule, we do not of necessity practice celibacy. However, we do promise stability, fidelity, and obedience. Part of that fidelity is to take marital vows seriously, practice bodily as well as spiritual discipline (exercise, fasting, and shunning gluttony), and practice moderation in all things. Whether we are married or single, the manner in which we conduct our lives has the potential to be either a positive or a negative witness to the Lord. It is one of the many ways we bear testimony to Christ. Revelation 19:10 says that “the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.” Living lives of stability, fidelity, and obedience to Christ is a prophetic witness.

The last line of this segment, in verse 30, has some interesting facets. It brings us back to the fact of God’s love for us. He spares us when we deserve punishment. He recognizes that we are weak and inevitably fall short of His glory from time to time. And though we do fall into sin, He occasionally says nothing, believing that we will return to Him and repent. Of course, though God does not berate us in our missteps, He provides opportunity for us to recognize our faults. Usually this entails some serious discomfort on our part, by coming out from under the cover of God’s protection. But that is the grace of God. He wants us to walk in His ways, humbly seeking Him and the comfort of His love and peace.

January 30-31, May 30-31, September 30
Chapter 7:31-34

The second step of humility is, when a man loves not his own will, nor is pleased to fulfill his own desires³² but by his deeds imitates that word of the Lord which says: “I came not to do My own will but the will of Him Who sent Me” (Jn 6:38).³³ It is likewise said: “Self-will has its punishment, but constraint wins the crown.”³⁴ The third step of humility is, that for the love of God a man submits to his Superior in all obedience, imitating the Lord, of whom the Apostle says: “He became obedient unto death” (Phil 2:8).

Steps two and three both speak of imitation. The humble man, “by his deeds imitates” our Lord’s word that He came to do the will of the Father. And the humble man “imitates the Lord” in submitting to his superior in all obedience. The New Testament rings with calls to imitate those who are walking in the way of the Lord. St. Paul says, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1), and “you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us...” (2 Thess. 3:7). Also, the author of the epistle to the Hebrews writes: “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God; consider the outcome of their life, and imitate their faith” (13:7). Children learn by imitating their elders. The saints who have preceded us in the faith are our elders, and Benedict exhorts us, as children, to imitate their lives, to follow their example.

The second step, building on the first, moves us forward from submission of our own will to Christ’s, to modeling our lives on that of Christ’s. We do this, Benedict says, by constraint, for “constraint wins the crown.” The essence of this directive is that the submission of our will is not a one-time event. We need to keep our will in check, we need to constrain it in order to be conquerors over our selfish desires. We do this by grace, in keeping our eyes on the Lord and modeling (imitating) Him and His most faithful followers.

And the third step then builds on this practice of restraint. Benedict says, “for the love of God a man submits to his Superior in all obedience, imitating the Lord...” As Jesus “became obedient unto death” (Phil 2:8), so we, in like manner, are to be obedient to those whom the Lord places over us. We have spoken of obedience many times already in these early chapters of the Rule. It is a keynote to the exercise of discipline in the Rule. But, how are we, who live in the secular realm, to practice that discipline? Sadly, as I was writing this, my thoughts went immediately to some people in the Church who have openly rebelled against the authority of the Church. There are two significant problems with this type of rebellion. First, on the rebel’s side of this conflict, there is the unwillingness to accept that someone else might know better what we need, what is best for us. It is that adolescent mentality that looks at our elders as out of touch with modern society, neglecting our feelings and “needs”—which we know are actually “wants”—and the rebels go their own way. Secondly, from the other side of the coin are those who are called to exercise authority but who suffer from the original sin—wanting to be like God. These individuals want to be their own pope, infallible in their decisions, and shun oversight from anyone else. This inevitably leads to the types of scandals which have plagued the Church in the modern era: church splits, internal power struggles, personality cults, and politicized churches electing and removing leaders at the whim of those in power.

These issues face both the cenobitic community as well as the Church community in the world. The unstated question Benedict lays before us is whether we will accept the authority of those whom God

has placed in leadership over us in both the Church and the world, or will we rebel. In order for us to imitate Christ, the apostles, and the saints of the Church through the centuries, we need only say “yes”. Yes, we will be obedient to Christ in those whom He has placed in authority over us, and yes, we will follow their example.

February 1, June 1, October 1-2
Chapter 7:35-43

The fourth step in humility is that in this same obedience, though things may be hard and contrary and even injuries have been inflicted, [the monk] accepts them with patience³⁶ and with a quiet conscience endures it without growing weary nor giving in, for as the Scripture says: “Anyone who perseveres to the end shall be saved” (Mt 10:22).³⁷ And again: “Let your heart take courage, and wait for the Lord” (Ps 26[27]:14).³⁸ And showing that a faithful man ought even to bear every disagreeable thing for the Lord, it says in the person of the suffering: “For Your sake we suffer death all the day long; we are counted as sheep for the slaughter” (Rom 8:36; Ps 43[44]:22).³⁹ And secure in the hope of the divine reward, they go on joyfully, saying: “But in all these things we overcome because of Him Who loved us” (Rom 8:37).⁴⁰ And likewise in another place the Scripture says: “You, O God, have proved us; You have tried us by fire as silver is tried; You have brought us into a net, You have laid afflictions on our back” (Ps 65[66]:10-11).⁴¹ And to show us that we ought to be under a Superior, it continues, saying: “You have set men over our heads” (Ps 65[66]:12).⁴² And fulfilling the command of the Lord by patience also in adversities and injuries, “when struck on the one cheek, they turn also the other; when deprived of their coat they give their cloak also; and when forced to go one mile they go two” (cf Mt 5:39-41);⁴³ with the Apostle Paul they bear with false brothers and “bless those who curse them” (2 Cor 11:26; 1 Cor 4:12).

In step four, Benedict directs that we embrace suffering, persevere, and be patient in hardship and unjust treatment. He spices his directives with multiple Scripture references. Ultimately, what is commanded of us is an alteration of our attitude. We are called to not complain, rather to speak blessing when things do not go as we had hoped or planned.

The words we use speak into existence things that can either bless or curse. If we complain, it focuses our minds on ourselves. If we endure patiently with the wrongs done against us, then we can offer blessing to those who persecute us, ultimately robbing them of the power to hold us captive to the harm they intended against us. Complaints emphasize the negative and accentuate what the evil one is striving to accomplish. Patient endurance brings hope. St. Paul encourages the persecuted Church in Rome with these words: “we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us” (5:3-5).

Again, as we saw in the last two steps, it is helpful for us to imitate those who have persevered before us, and to recognize the hope made manifest in their lives. It is hard sometimes in the midst of our earthly struggles to see the light or experience the love, but by focusing on the light, we can make our way through the darkness and recognize that those who seek to hold us captive are themselves prisoners to the darkness. So let us speak blessing upon them, and as Benedict directs, “with the Apostle Paul... bear with false brothers and ‘bless those who curse [us]’” (2 Cor 11:26; 1 Cor 4:12).

February 2, June 2, October 3
Chapter 7:44-48

The fifth step of humility is that a man does not hide from his Abbot any evil thoughts which rise in his heart or any evils committed by him in secret, but humbly confesses them. ⁴⁵Concerning this, the Scripture exhorts us, saying: “Reveal your way to the Lord and trust in Him” (Ps 36[37]:5). ⁴⁶And it says further: “Confess to the Lord, for He is good; His mercy endures forever” (Ps 105[106]:1; Ps 117[118]:1). ⁴⁷And the Prophet also says: “I have acknowledged my sin to You and my faults I have not concealed. ⁴⁸I said: I will confess my faults to the Lord; then You have forgiven the wickedness of my heart” (Ps 31[32]:5).

Step five builds on to this ladder of humility by emphasizing our need to cleanse our heart and keep it right before God. It is very important for us to keep short accounts with God. Allowing hurts, evil thoughts, and impure motives to fester, gives them opportunity to become rooted in our spirit. Yes, we can confess our sins directly to God, and we should do that as part of our daily devotions. But by following Benedict’s prescription to “not hide from his Abbot any evil thoughts which rise in his heart or any evils committed by him in secret...”, then we allow our confessor or spiritual director to objectively examine our life and observe what may be patterns of behavior which negatively affect our spiritual health. He may see issues that we cannot discern in our subjective examination, things like generational curses, ingrained habits and behaviors, or false teachings which have taken root in our minds and spirits. We need to make confession regularly, keep short accounts with God, so that these problems may be dealt with quickly and not become the genesis of repeated sins.

Let me give you a Biblical example of someone who kept short accounts. King David is described by Paul in Acts 13:22 as a man after God’s own heart. How can this be? David was an adulterer. He commanded the murder of the husband of his illicit lover. He rebelled against God in commanding the census. Yet, when confronted, David in each instance would quickly repent. Nathan confronted him about his dalliance with Bathsheba, and when David commanded Joab to have her husband Uriah killed, he says to the prophet, “‘I have sinned against the Lord.’” And Nathan said to David, “The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die” (2 Sam. 12:13). And when he took the census of the people, rather than trusting the Lord’s provision, “David’s heart smote him after he had numbered the people” (2 Sam. 24:10). A saint after God’s own heart is not one who is sinless, rather one who keeps short accounts seeking intimacy and penitence in his or her relationship with God. “His mercy endures forever.”

February 3, June 3, October 4
Chapter 7:49-50

The sixth step of humility is, when a monk is content with the lowest and worst of everything, and in whatever tasks assigned to him he holds himself as a poor and worthless workman, ⁵⁰saying with the Prophet: “I am brought to nothing and ignorant; I have become as a beast before You; yet I am always with You” (Ps 72[73]:22-23).

At first blush this sounds like a most demeaning way to walk through life, however, in step six, Benedict exhorts us to be content. As St. Paul proclaimed to the Church at Philippi, while he was incarcerated and facing death, “Not that I complain of want; for I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content. I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want. I can do all things in Him who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:11-13). It is our fallen nature to want to be recognized for our accomplishments and to be rewarded for our work. However, Scripture points out that anything we have comes to us from God. St. James says, “Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (James 1:17). We are merely servants of our Lord. When we humbly recognize this fact, the humble servant can “in whatever tasks assigned to him hold himself as a poor and worthless workman,” We are to be content with whatever position the Lord has assigned to us, knowing that we “can do all things in Him who strengthens [us].”

This is a challenge for us in both the Church and the world. In our secular lives, are we willing to obediently do a less-than appealing job for our employer? Are we willing to let someone cut in line in traffic, or clean up someone else’s mess? Do we want, like the Pharisees, for people to see the sacrifices we are making in time, talent, or treasure to help the Church? Can we learn to be content and do what has been assigned to us, letting God receive the Glory?

February 4, June 4, October 5
Chapter 7:51-54

The seventh step of humility is, when not only with his tongue does a man declare, but also in his inmost soul believes, that he is the lowest and most worthless of men, ⁵²*humbling himself and saying with the Prophet: “But I am a worm and no man, the reproach of men and the outcast of the people” (Ps 21[22]:7).* ⁵³*“I have been exalted, then humbled and confounded” (Ps 87[88]:16).* ⁵⁴*And also: “It is good for me that You have humbled me, that I may learn Your commandments” (Ps 118[119]:71,73).*

“The seventh step of humility is, when not only with his tongue does a man declare, but also in his inmost soul believes, that he is the lowest and most worthless of men...” This sounds harsh and demeaning, but in reality it is very freeing. Years ago, I was struggling to discern God’s will for myself and the parish. In frustration I cried out to God, “I am trying desperately to figure out what You want.” God clearly replied, “You will never figure it out, Bill, you are a bear of very little brains.” And more recently, I was preparing a sermon and the Lord showed me that I am the Forest Gump of clergymen. I’m not a smart man, but I have, by grace, been in the right place at the right time throughout my ministry, and God has been able to use me. It was incredibly freeing to realize that I am responsible for none of the Lord’s work. I don’t have to understand. I don’t have to figure anything out. I simply need to be obedient and to allow Him to rightly position me that He may do His work through me. I am, as Benedict says, “the lowest and most worthless of men,” yet God can use me for His greater glory.

It’s not that Benedict is declaring that God wants to demean or belittle us. Rather, when we recognize that we are dependent upon God and those in authority over us, then we are free. We are not responsible for the greater decisions, neither are we accountable for the outcome. In that is blessing. We only need to learn to trust the Lord and be obedient to Him and His delegated authority.

February 5, June 5, October 6-7
Chapter 7:55-58

The eighth step of humility is, when a monk does only what is sanctioned by the common rule of the monastery and the example of his elders. ⁵⁶The ninth step of humility is, when a monk restrains his tongue from speaking, and keeping silence, does not speak until he is asked a question; ⁵⁷for the Scripture says that “in a multitude of words you shall not avoid sin” (Prov 10:19); ⁵⁸and that “a man full of talk is not established in the earth” (Ps 139[140]:12).

Step eight constitutes only one verse: “That a monk does only what is endorsed by the common rule.” For those of us who live outside the enclosure of a monastery, but within the Christian community, this may be a far more relevant guiding principle. If each of us goes our own way, interpreting the Word, and as the Israelites did in the days of Judges, doing what was right in his own eyes (Judges 21:25), there will be at best disunity, and at worst chaos in the Body. We are to pursue unity in the Spirit and the mind of Christ. This can only be accomplished when we live according to the Word and in communion with the community of faith.

The ninth step is a bit more difficult to apply. Even the silent orders, like the Trappists, have had to adapt since Pope John XXIII opened the monasteries to the public. How do we maintain silence in the midst of the world? And what purpose would it serve? The latter question is the more important one. Holding one’s tongue, and avoiding unnecessary chatter are good disciplines for those pursuing the ability to hear God’s voice. Holding the tongue, particularly in stressful situations guards against an untoward word.

But we do live in the world, even if we are striving to be separated from the ways of the world. So, how best to apply this principle? Focus on the other. Spend more time listening than speaking. Hold your opinions until asked. The Trappists and other monastics practice the Grand Silence from compline through the morning offices. It would be appropriate for us in the world to similarly practice a disciplined time of quiet each day, to have a time of silence in which we can focus on the still small voice of God. It need not be in the evening, it could be any time in the day. If it impacts others, members of your family, roommate, or co-workers, make sure that they know what your desire is, as it will affect them. And, it may be a witness to them. You can invite them to join you in silent meditation.

As Christians living on the outside of the monastic enclosure it is a good thing to keep to a discipline, a common rule of life, that keeps us in communion with the Body. And spending quiet time with the Lord throughout the day should be a key part of that discipline.

February 6, June 6, October 8
Chapter 7:59

The tenth step of humility is, when a monk is not quickly given to laughter, for it is written: “Only the fool raises his voice in laughter” (Sir 21:23).

The tenth step is Benedict’s prohibition against laughter: “a monk is not quickly given to laughter...” This is bothersome to many modern Christians, and it is easy to get the sense that St. Benedict was a killjoy. However, there are other parts of the Rule which point to a subtle humor in Benedict’s presentation of the disciplines. Throughout the Rule there is great concern for restraint from speech. We have already seen the multiple tools in chapter 4 exhorting “moderation in speech” (vs.52), “avoidance of chatter” (vs. 53), and to not love “boisterous laughter” (vs. 54). The entirety of chapter six counsels restraint of speech and the importance of silence. But now we come to the issue of humility. Steps nine through eleven of the ladder concern the need to be moderate in our use of words, and cautious in expressions of mirth.

Clearly one quarter of the steps to true humility involve the use of the tongue. St. James gave the clarion call of warning at the beginning of the Christian era. He said, “the tongue is a fire. The tongue is an unrighteous world among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the cycle of nature, and set on fire by hell...no human being can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison.” (James 3:6-8). In this middle step of the three regarding speech, the monk is commanded to “not [be] quickly given to laughter.” Does Benedict presume to forbid the expression of joy through laughter? Not at all. For example, in his instructions for Lent in chapter 49:5-7 he says that we are to deny ourselves “some food, drink, sleep, needless talking and idle jesting...” If we are to deny “some” chatter and laughter in Lent, the presupposition is that it occurs at other times. He is not promoting dour demeanors from those who pursue the Way of Christ, rather moderation in all things. But laughter should not be a constant.

Whereas joking can relieve tension and be therapeutic for the individual or group, often it is used to draw attention to self. The goal of self-denial is thwarted when we seek others’ responses to our humorous banter. Would it not be better to engage the one speaking and elicit their further insights rather than draw attention to self with humor? And never should our jesting be at the expense of another or be cruel and vulgar. Good humor has its place, but all things should be done decently and in order, and in moderation.

February 7, June 7, October 9
Chapter 7:60-61

The eleventh step of humility is, that, when a monk speaks, he speak gently and without laughter, humbly and seriously, with few and sensible words, without raising his voice, ⁶¹as it is written: “The wise man is known by his few words.”

As noted yesterday, Benedict has a three step process for restraint of speech. Today’s verses represent the third in that three step process. He gives a quick rundown of the type of speech acceptable for a monk. He says, a monk will “speak gently and without laughter, humbly and seriously, with few and sensible words, without raising his voice...” This is sound advice for any Christian. As it says in Proverbs 15, “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (15:1). Seldom will a harsh word or a voice raised in anger accomplish good in a relationship. Gentleness in speech opens opportunity for discussion and dialog where hearts as well as ears can hear.

It is also wise advice, given in verse 61, to refrain from abundance of words. Too many of us suffer from verbal diarrhea—we love to hear ourselves talk. There is also a common tendency to verbally dance around a topic rather than zero in and come to the heart of the matter at hand. This is particularly true in the south. We like to schmooze, to tell stories, illustrate our message. But as Benedict declares, “The wise man is known by his few words.” The words attributed to Jesus in Acts that “It is more blessed to give than to receive” could be applied to the gift of listening. It is more blessed to give an open ear—to listen—than to talk endlessly.

May we learn to speak “with few and sensible words, without raising our voices.”

February 8, June 8, October 10
Chapter 7:62-66

The twelfth step of humility is, when a monk is not only humble of heart, but always lets it appear also in his bearing so that it becomes evident. ⁶³At the Work of God, in the garden, on a journey, in the field, or wherever he may be, sitting, walking, or standing, let him always have his head bowed, his eyes fixed on the ground, ⁶⁴ever holding himself guilty of his sins, thinking that he is already standing before the fearful judgment seat of God, ⁶⁵and always saying to himself in his heart what the publican in the Gospel said, with his eyes fixed on the ground: “Lord, I am a sinner and not worthy to lift up my eyes to heaven” (Lk 18:13); ⁶⁶and again with the Prophet: “I am bowed down and humbled in every way” (Ps 37[38]:7-9; Ps 118[119]:107).

The final step. Benedict says that “a monk is not only humble of heart, but always lets it appear also in his bearing so that it becomes evident.” Humility ought to be observable, but never a false facade. False humility is deadly; it undermines our witness for Christ. So, how might we best exhibit our humility? St. Benedict presents a picture of monastic life within the enclosure of a monastery. He says that the outward appearance of the monk, whether “at the Work of God, in the garden, on a journey, in the field, or wherever he may be, sitting, walking, or standing, let him always have his head bowed, his eyes fixed on the ground...” That sounds harsh and an unreal expectation for those living outside the cloister. If any were to behave in that manner in the world, someone would assume such a person is suffering depression and call for help. Nevertheless, there are some basics which Benedict highlights in these verses which would serve us all well. When he says that we must always judge ourselves guilty of our sins, it is a truth. For who else would be culpable? And also, as was noted in the meditation on the opening verses of this chapter, St. Paul commends us to “in humility count others better than yourselves” (Phil. 2:3).

Developing an attitude of gratitude before God will strengthen our recognition that any grounds we may have for boasting are to be directed toward God, from Whom every good and perfect gift derives (James 1:17). A ready will to compliment others also brings harmony and peace to the community, and builds up the Body. It is, therefore, not so much a matter of self-demeaning as it is honoring God and our brothers and sisters in Christ. Draw the attention toward God, and encourage the members of the Body. That is the heart of humble service in the Lord.

February 9, June 9, October 11
Chapter 7:67-70

Having, therefore, ascended all these steps of humility, the monk will presently arrive at that love of God, which being perfect, casts out fear (1 Jn 4:18). ⁶⁸Through this love, all things which he once performed not without fear, he will now begin to keep without any effort, as it were, naturally by force of habit, ⁶⁹no longer from the fear of hell, but for the love of Christ, from the very habit of good and the pleasure in virtue. ⁷⁰May the Lord be pleased to manifest all this by His Holy Spirit in His laborer now cleansed from vice and sin.

Benedict is prescribing that we form habits which will both enhance and establish positive patterns of behavior. If we are truly participating in a school for the Lord's service, then we are learning the material by repetition. We study what is included in the curriculum and then practice it. We become proficient in it through repetition until it becomes second nature. Thus, as Benedict states in verse 68, "Through this love, all things which he once performed not without fear, he will now begin to keep without any effort, as it were, naturally by force of habit..."

We will falter in our steps toward true humility. But the Lord is a lord of redemption and invites us to make repeated new starts. And so we try again, repeating the steps until we "begin to keep [them] without any effort."

February 10, June 10, October 12-13
Chapter 8

The brothers will rise during the winter season, that is, from the first day of November until Easter, making due allowance for circumstances, at the eighth hour of the night; ²so that, having slept until a little after midnight, they may rise refreshed. ³The time, however, which remains after Vigils will be used for study by those of the brothers who still have some parts of the psalms and the lessons to learn. ⁴But from Easter to the first of November mentioned above, let the hour for celebrating Vigils be arranged so that a very short interval be provided the brothers that they may take care of the necessities of nature. Then Lauds, which is to be said at daybreak, may follow immediately.

Having dealt with the spiritual life of the community in the first seven chapters of the Rule, Benedict now begins his teaching on the practical aspects of living life in community by addressing the discipline of communal prayer. Chapters eight through twenty deal with the practice of the Divine Office. The clear message in this transition from the spiritual to the practice of prayer is that everything done in community must flow from the common prayer of the Divine Office. We begin and end each day in prayer and praise, and pause throughout the hours of our workday to offer to God our selves in prayerful unity with our brothers and sisters in Christ. This discipline of prayer is essential to sustaining our communal life whether we live in an enclosed community or in the secular world. We need to nurture the discipline of prayer. In the same way as making habits of the steps of humility, so we make habits of the hours of prayer until the habit becomes part of the natural rhythm of life and we find that we are praying constantly.

It is daunting at first to consider the possibility of rising in the middle of the night on a daily basis to pray. After we were first married, Miranda wanted me to change my pattern of sleep to a more “normal” routine. But “normal” is what is prescribed as the norm for the community in which you live. The norms of the world are far different than the norms of the disciplined spiritual life. Over the four decades that we have been together, Miranda has come to accept, and I believe respect, my somewhat strange sleep schedule in making time for prayer.

It is not mandatory for us, as Benedict instructs, to “rise during the winter season...at the eighth hour of the night”, which is 2:00 AM. Even Benedict recognizes the need for “making due allowance for circumstances.” But rising in the quiet, dark hours of the night, or the early morning before our day is upon us, offers opportunity to bore into the silence of the night and close out the distractions of the world. The removal of the world’s demands gives us the freedom to enter the day in closer communion with God, and to tune into His still, small voice speaking to us through the quiet of our stilled hearts and minds. This may not work for everyone, but “due allowance for circumstances” is acceptable. Nevertheless, if your circumstances do allow for pre-dawn prayers, you might want to give it a try.

February 11, June 11, October 14
Chapter 9

During the winter season, Vigils begins with the verse: O Lord open my lips; and my mouth shall declare Your praise (Ps 50[51]:17). This is to be said three times. ²After this Psalm 3 and the Gloria are to be added, ³and Psalm 94 [95] with its antiphon is to be said or chanted. ⁴Then let an Ambrosian hymn follow, and after that six psalms with antiphons. ⁵When these and the versicle have been said, let the Abbot give the blessing. All being seated on the benches, let three lessons be read by the brothers from the book on the lectern, and between each let a responsory be said or sung. ⁶Let two of the responsories be said without the Gloria, but after the third lesson let him who is chanting say the Gloria. ⁷When the cantor begins to sing, let all rise at once from their seats in honor and reverence of the Blessed Trinity. ⁸Besides the inspired books of the Old and the New Testaments to be read at Vigils, also the expositions of the Scriptures which have been made by reputable orthodox and Catholic Fathers should be included. ⁹After these three lessons with their responsories, let six other psalms follow, together with a sung Alleluia. ¹⁰After these let the lessons from the Apostle follow, to be said by heart, then the versicle and the litaney, that is, Kyrie eleison (Lord, have mercy). ¹¹And the service of Vigils is thus completed.

This is the second of four installments in the Rule of Saint Benedict about the service of Vigils, or as it is sometimes called, Matins. This office garners so much attention because in many ways it is the foundational service of worship for the day. This chapter details the number of Psalms and lessons to be recited and read at this service, the focus being praise, with a total of 12 Psalms being recited, besides the introductory Psalms (3 and 95).

To begin one's day in adoration and praise is a wonderful alternative to most modern practices. How many modern Americans open their eyes and grab their phone? They check their social media accounts, or tap into one of the news feeds. But Benedict offers an alternative. Roll out of bed and sing praises to the Lord, beginning with the opening acclamation, "O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall declare Your praise." And the opening verses of Psalm 95 set the tone for the service and the day: "O come, let us sing unto the Lord; let us heartily rejoice in the strength of our salvation. Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving, and show ourselves glad in Him with psalms." What a wonderful way to set our hearts aright for the day.

The number of psalms or lessons said during the service is less important than the inclination of the heart to worship. As the Psalmist said in Psalm 95, "let us heartily rejoice..." Having visited various Benedictine communities over the years I have yet to find one that pharisaically observes the routine described in this section of the Rule for the office of Vigils. For example, at Mepkin Abbey, a Trappist Monastery, they recite six psalms (or sections thereof) and read two lessons (the second being from "reputable orthodox and Catholic Fathers"). They maintain the heart and intent of the Rule, while making the service itself a little less formidable. Nevertheless, the service is one of praise to the God Who has created the new day. Ask the Lord to open your lips, that you may "come before His presence with thanksgiving, and show [yourself] glad in Him with psalms."

February 12, June 12, October 15
Chapter 10

*From Easter until the first of November let the whole number of psalms, as explained above, be said.
²However, because of the shortness of the nights, no lessons are read from the book, but instead of these three lessons let one from the Old Testament be said from memory. Let a short responsory follow this.
³And let all the rest be performed as was said, namely, that never fewer than twelve psalms be said at Vigils, in addition to Psalms 3 and 94.*

Benedict did not have the blessing (or is it a curse) of modern time-keeping devices. So, the good father recognized the need to adjust schedules to fit the seasons. But regardless of the season, the focus of Vigils was to remain unchanged—a service of praise. Lessons from the Scriptures and the Fathers are good, but in order to adjust for the work of the community in the Summer sun, the service must be shortened to take advantage of cool mornings. Nevertheless, the heart of the community must continue to be turned toward God in worship and praise at the beginning of the day.

The *Opus Dei*, the Work of God or the Divine Office, begins with praise, whether that is inclusive of readings or not. Benedict recognized that for the work of the community to thrive, we must give back to God, first our praise and thanks, and only then to ask for His blessing and aid. We are called to give a sacrifice of praise. As the Psalmist says, “He who brings thanksgiving as his sacrifice honors me...” (Psalm 50:23). It is far better to begin our day in thanksgiving and praise rather than seeking gifts from His hand or consuming more knowledge from the readings. St. Paul reminds us of what Jesus said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35).

If your work requires an early start, you too can adjust your morning devotions. But recognize that omitting those morning devotions is not an adjustment, it is an abdication. If your discipline has not previously included morning devotions, there is no better time than the present to begin. Start slowly and work up. To dive into the recitation of twelve psalms and four lessons, with versicles and responsories could be daunting for even the most saintly of worshipers. Let God guide you in your worship of Him. It is His party, let Him show you the way.

February 13, June 13-14, October 16
Chapter 11

*For Vigils on Sunday the monks should rise earlier. ²At this office let the following order be observed: after six psalms and the versicle have been sung, and all have been properly seated on the benches in their order, let four lessons with their responsories be read from the book. ³In the fourth responsory only, let the Gloria be said by the chanter, and as soon as he begins to sing let all rise with reverence. ⁴After these lessons let six other psalms with antiphons and the versicle follow in order as before, ⁵and four more lessons with their responsories as above. ⁶After these let there be said three canticles from the Prophets, selected by the Abbot, and chanted with Alleluia. ⁷After the versicle and the Abbot's blessing, let four other lessons from the New Testament be read in the order as above. ⁸But after the fourth responsory let the Abbot begin the hymn *Te Deum laudamus* (O God, we praise you). ⁹When this has been sung, let the Abbot read the lesson from the Gospel, all standing with reverence and awe. ¹⁰When the Gospel concludes let all answer Amen, and immediately the Abbot will follow up with the hymn *Te decet laus* (To You be praise). After a final blessing, Lauds will begin. ¹¹Let this order of Vigils be observed on Sunday the same way in summer as well as in winter, ¹²unless (God forbid) the monks should rise too late. If that were to happen, part of the lessons or the responsories would have to be shortened. ¹³Let every precaution be taken that this does not occur. If it should happen, let him through whose neglect it came about make due satisfaction for it to God in the oratory.*

Sunday is always a feast of the Resurrection of our Lord. It is a day of praise. There is to be no studying, no labor, and the morning hours are to be spent in psalms of praise and attention to the Word. Special attention is given to the Good News. As Benedict instructs, “the Abbot [will] read the lesson from the Gospel, all standing with reverence and awe.”

Some, in our modern society, might complain that no one should tell them what to read, or how many prayers to pray, or how long we need worship. And yet, the wisdom and direction of those who are practiced in the faith, who have developed a closer walk and more intimate relationship with the Lord, have much to teach us. Left to our own devices, most of us would default to old habits and familiar patterns of reading Scripture. We would inevitably avoid those Psalms which are uncomfortable for us, and the Scriptures that are peculiarly foreign to our modern ear. We would inevitably skip the longer Psalms (e.g. 105, 106, 119), and the more tedious portions of the Old Testament (e.g. Leviticus).

Benedict is laying a foundation for his disciples which will encourage a pattern of behavior that, once it becomes second nature, will help the follower become more complete in his or her worship and reception of the Word. The emphasis of this chapter not only focuses on the primacy of Vigils as a service of praise, but of Sunday as being a celebratory day.

Benedict begins the conclusion of this section by saying that “this order of Vigils be observed on Sunday the same way in summer as well as in winter.” This directive has implications for us about how to live a life of faith. If we are to keep an order of worship which focuses on praise in both summer and winter, and if we are to “at all times and in all places give thanks” as commended in the Great Thanksgiving of the Eucharist, then we need to develop an attitude not only of gratitude, but of adoration as well. To live a life of faith is to live at all times in praise and thanksgiving.

February 14, June 15, October 17
Chapter 12

At Lauds on Sunday, let Psalm 66 be said first, without an antiphon. ²After that Psalm 50 is said with Alleluia. ³After this let Psalms 117 and 62 be said; ⁴then the blessing and the praises (Psalms 148-150), one lesson from the Apocalypse, said by heart, a responsory, an Ambrosian hymn, the versicle and the canticle from the Gospel, the litany, and it is finished.

Benedict continues his direction for observance of the Divine Office on Sundays with instruction regarding Lauds. Again, the focus is on praise. Even the name of the office is Praise! The Psalms appointed for the day are all praise Psalms, except Psalm 51. (Remember that Benedict follows the Vulgate and Septuagint numbering of the Psalms, so they differ from what is in our Psalter and the Masoretic text.) After the opening Psalm of adoration (Psalm 67 “Let the peoples praise thee, O God” [v.5]), the monks offer their confession of sin in Psalm 51. The acronym ACTS helps us understand the flow of worship in this our morning devotion: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication. But even Psalm 51 is recited as a psalm of praise as it “is said with Alleluia.”

The remaining Psalms are all thanksgivings and praise Psalms. They are coupled with readings from Revelation, responsories, an Ambrosian hymn, versicle, the Benedictus (Luke 1:68-79), litany, and conclusion. The heart of the service is to bring “laud” to the Lord. Our Sunday observance sets the tone not only for the day but for the week.

February 15, June 16, October 18
Chapter 13:1-11

On weekdays let Lauds be celebrated in the following manner: ²Let Psalm 66 be said without an antiphon, drawing it out a little as on Sunday, so that all may be present for Psalm 50, which is to be said with an antiphon. ³After this let two other psalms be said according to custom: ⁴on Monday, Psalms 5 and 35; ⁵Tuesday Psalms 42 and 56; ⁶Wednesday Psalms 63 and 64; ⁷Thursday Psalms 87 and 89; ⁸Friday Psalms 75 and 91; and on Saturday Psalm 142 and the canticle from Deuteronomy, which should be divided into two sections with Gloria after each. ¹⁰On the other days, however, let a canticle from the Prophets, each for its proper day, be said as the Roman Church designates. ¹¹After these let the psalms of praise follow (Psalms 148-150); then one lesson from the Apostle, to be said from memory, the responsory, the Ambrosian hymn, the versicle, the canticle from the Gospel, the litany, and it is finished.

Benedict did not create his rule from scratch. He has openly and liberally drawn from many sources. For example, he instructs that portions of the Daily Offices are to follow the practice of “the Roman Church” (vs. 10), and that the hymns used are from the Ambrosian Hymnal. He based the entirety of the his rule on the *Rule of the Master*, and as we shall see later, he commends and acknowledges the influence of “the *Conferences of the Fathers*, and their *Institutes and Lives*, and the rule of our holy Father, Basil (St. Basil the Great)” (RB 73:5).

For those of us who have enrolled in the School for the Lord’s Service, the Rule is not so much prescriptive as instructive. We can draw from multiple reliable sources for the development of our spiritual disciplines. Benedict has done so, and has laid a foundation for us in order to establish healthy spiritual habits, not to bind us to an unwavering curriculum with hard and fast rules. As Benedict says in the statement before the first chapter, “It is called a rule because it regulates the lives of those who obey it.” It is NOT called a rule because it keeps the followers captive. The rule is a standard by which we can live and measure our lives. It is not a legal document which cannot be broken.

So, do we legalistically follow every verse of the Rule of St. Benedict, not missing a Psalm, singing every Ambrosian Hymn, and faithfully reciting the canticles from Old and New Testaments. What if we miss an hour? We press on, brothers and sisters. We follow the tenets of the Rule, and honor the intent. We do not chain ourselves to a Pharisaical following of every jot and tittle of the Rule. It is good to let the Rule challenge us to grow into a deeper relationship with Christ and His Church. But it is a Rule to which we can look for guidance, and grow in the observance of that Rule. It is a rule, “because it regulates the lives” of those who follow it, in order to help us live those lives in closer harmony with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

February 16, June 17, October 19
Chapter 13:12-14

The offices of Lauds and Vespers must never be recited without the Lord's prayer being said at the end by the Superior for all to hear, because thorns of conflicts that are likely to arise. ¹³Thus the petition all offer in the prayer in which is said, "Forgive us as we forgive" may cleanse themselves of this kind of evil. ¹⁴At the other offices, let only the last part of that prayer be said aloud, that all may answer, "But deliver us from evil" (Mt. 6:13).

The superior, whether Abbot or Prior, or anyone whom the Abbot appoints, is to recite the Lord's Prayer at the end of both Lauds and Vespers, the two major offices of the day. The purpose for this prescription, according to Benedict, is to help quell the "thorns of conflicts that are likely to arise." When people are living in close proximity to one another, contention will inevitably arise. But that is also true for those of us living in the outside world. We all have our idea of how things ought to be run, including the Church. And conflicts are "likely to arise." The recitation of the Lord's Prayer at every office of the day reminds us to keep our focus on the Lord, and to remain humble, forgiving others as we have been forgiven ourselves. In the practice of that discipline we position ourselves to experience God's deliverance from evil.

This all seems so simple, but it is important for us recognize our tendency to recite the common prayers without our hearts and minds engaged. The Lord warns us in the introduction to this prayer that we must not "heap up empty phrases...[nor] think that [we] will be heard for [our] many words" (Matt. 6:7). And how much more of a temptation is it to silently ignore the words when someone else is praying those words for us. We need to keep the "discipline" of prayer. As liturgical Christians, the practice of our common prayer ("common" as in prayer in community, not "ordinary") is that someone—usually the clergy—leads us in our prayers. We need discipline to help us remain focused.

Let us, also, look at the place the Lord's Prayer has for us in our personal daily round of devotion. The fact that Benedict calls for the Lord's Prayer to be said in full both morning and evening, and silently at every other office, offers us a perspective on our own devotion in obedience to Christ. Jesus said, "When you pray, say, 'Our Father...'" We begin and end each day in obedient submission to His Word, and practice that discipline through the hours of the day. And in the larger picture, as the faithful throughout the world offer this prayer morning and night, we realize that it is being said in every time zone around the world, so that at any moment in time, somewhere on this planet, the Lord's Prayer is being said, and obedient worship of Our Father is taking place. What an honor for us to be a part of that holy undertaking, transcending both time and geography.

February 17, June 18, October 20
Chapter 14

On the feasts of the saints and on all solemn festivals, Vigils is to be performed as it would be done on Sunday, ²except that the psalms, the antiphons, and the lessons proper for that day be said. The number of psalms above mentioned must be maintained.

As has been noted before, every Sunday is a feast day of the Resurrection of our Lord. Every saint's day is a celebration of Christ, for the saints are a manifestation of Christ's Presence at work in His Body. And so, "On the feasts of the saints and on all solemn festivals, Vigils is to be performed as it would be done on Sunday..." Every saint's day and solemn festival is a day to be celebrated in resurrection joy.

But which saints? There are saints who are included in the Roman calendar that are not on an Anglican calendar. And there are Eastern saints who are not recognized in the West, and Western saints not venerated in the East. And there are the big "S" saints, and the little "s" saints (i.e. Biblical saints vs. latter ones); there are major feasts and lesser feasts. Is it essential that we recognize all of the days designated as saints' days? St. Paul said, "One man esteems one day as better than another, while another man esteems all days alike. Let every one be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord" (Romans 14:5-6). For us, the primary focus must always be the celebration of the Lord. We are to "prefer nothing whatever to Christ" (RB 4:21; 72:11).

At the request of Bishop Jones, I compiled a simplified form for observing the Liturgy of the Hours. In order to keep it simple, I did not include special services or liturgical readings for the saints' days. In my spiritual devotions, I maintain the observance of the Hours each day using this simplified form, but in the evening, in prayer time with my wife, we recognize and celebrate the major saints days and solemn festivals in our devotions. I also recognize the lesser saints' days in our Eucharistic celebrations in the parish's weekday services. As St. Paul said, "Let every one be fully convinced in his own mind." If the observance of the celebration of the lives of the saints is edifying for you, and you do it "in honor of the Lord", then by all means rejoice and celebrate those days. If in your spiritual discipline it is distracting or troubling to follow the calendar of saints' days, there is no harm in "esteeming all days alike". Regardless of which ones you choose, "prefer nothing whatever to Christ."

February 18, June 19, October 21
Chapter 15

From the holy feast of Easter until Pentecost “Alleluia” is to always be said both with the psalms and responsories. ²From Pentecost until the beginning of Lent it is only said during Vigils with the last six psalms. ³However, on all Sundays outside of Lent, all of the canticles and services of Lauds, Prime, Tierce, Sext, and None are said with Alleluia. At Vespers, however, the antiphon is used. ⁴Alleluia is never said with the responsories except from Easter to Pentecost.

When is it appropriate to say “Alleluia”? It seems an odd question. How is it ever NOT appropriate to say, “Praise the Lord”? According to Benedict, and the common practice of the liturgical Church in general, Alleluia is not to be said during Lent. My wife would argue that if Sunday is ALWAYS a feast day of our Lord’s resurrection, then why can we not say Alleluia on Sundays in Lent. And, if the argument is that this exhortation to praise is not used in penitential circumstances, then why in chapter 12 of the Rule does Benedict prescribe Alleluia to be said in the context of reciting Psalm 51?

Alleluia is an appropriate response to God’s grace regardless of the time of year. However, the liturgy should reflect the focus and purpose of the seasonal observance. Is it wrong to be penitential during the Easter Season? No, but that should not be the main focus of the seasonal observance. So, neither is it wrong to sing Alleluia to God during Lent, however, it would not profit the faithful to make praise the focus during this season of cleansing and purifying by means of penitence. It is important to have these liturgical reminders of our need for repentance.

At all other times, “on all Sundays outside of Lent” the offices are to be said with Alleluia, as is appropriate for those of us who have received His gift of redemption.

February 19, June 20, October 22
Chapter 16

As the Prophet says: “Seven times a day I have given praise to You” (Ps 118[119]:164). ²This sacred sevenfold number will be fulfilled by us if we perform the duties of our service at the time of Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Compline; ³for it was of these hours during the day that he said: “Seven times a day I have given praise to You” (Ps 118[119]:164). ⁴For the same Prophet says concerning Vigils: “At midnight I arose to give praise to You” (Ps 118[119]:62). ⁵Therefore, let us offer praise to our Creator “for His righteous ordinances” at these times: Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Compline; and “let us rise at night to praise Him” (cf Ps 118[119]:164, 62).

This is Benedict’s exhortation and presentation of the methodology for praying constantly (1 Thess. 5:17). The Liturgy of the Hours, as Benedict presents it in this chapter, is one way the Church has sought to answer affirmatively this imperative of St. Paul. The Psalmist’s assertion that “seven times a day will I praise thee,” (Psalm 119:164) and his claim that “at midnight I will rise to praise thee” (Psalm 119:62) helped determine the hours of prayer and praise for the early Church fathers. And the traditional Jewish hours of prayer observed by the Apostles influenced “the little hours.” It is here, in these chapters (chapters 8-20), that Benedict codified the number and times of the hours, and established the rotation of psalms.

For most Christians prayer, at best, is caught between hours of work, family, and recreation. Prayer becomes the afterthought of the day, not its heart. On the other hand, the Liturgy of the Hours places prayer as the constant, and brings our work, our meals, our family time, and recreation into the context of worship, prayer and praise. Our work comes under the cover of the Work of God—the *Opus Dei*. The Hours create a rhythm which prompts us at key moments throughout the day to return our attention to God. With practice and repetition this recitation of the offices becomes second nature. Hours missed suddenly become empty moments which call us to prayer, and remind us of our dependence upon God for our being. This rhythm of prayer invites us into intimacy with God and that intimacy grows into a heart for “constant prayer.”

This is not something that we need to dive into immediately, but it is a goal for which we can work in order to receive the benefits that the Church has experienced for 1500 years. Work with your spiritual director to gain experience in how to enter into the fulness of the Work of God. Find a partner who will work alongside you as you seek the rhythm of the hours. Encourage one another and pray for each other, that we may all learn to “pray constantly” (1 Thess. 5:17).

February 20, June 21-22, October 23
Chapter 17

We have already arranged the order of the psalmody for Vigils and Lauds. Now, let us arrange the other Hours. ²At Prime three psalms are to be said, each followed by the Gloria Patri (Glory be to the Father...). ³The hymn for this Hour is sung after the opening verse “O God, come to my assistance...” (Ps 69[70]:2), before the psalms are begun. ⁴Then, after the completion of three psalms, one lesson is read, a verse, the Kyrie eleison, the collects and dismissal. ⁵At the third, the sixth, and the ninth Hours, the prayer will be said in the same order; that is, the opening verse, the hymn proper to each Hour, three psalms, a lesson with versicle, the Kyrie eleison, the collects and dismissal. ⁶If the community is large, let these Hours be sung with antiphons; but if small, let them be said without a refrain. ⁷The office of Vespers should be limited to four psalms with antiphons. ⁸After these psalms a lesson is to be recited, a responsory, an Ambrosian hymn, a versicle, the canticle from the Gospel (Magnificat), the litany, the Lord’s Prayer, the collects and dismissal. ⁹Compline is limited to three psalms, which are to be said without an antiphon. ¹⁰After these the hymn is sung for this Hour, one lesson, the versicle, Kyrie eleison, collects, the blessing, and dismissal.

In order to read all 150 Psalms in one week, there needs to be a schedule to follow. This chapter sets the number of Psalms to be read at both the daytime hours and the evening hours, the psalmody for Vigils and Lauds having already been explained. The little hours of Prime, Terce, Sext, and None are very simple and dealt with in verses two through six. Then Vespers and Compline are explained in the remaining verses. All of this is not an effort to create a legalistic form to follow; it is Benedict’s effort to help the community to maintain relationship with the Lord while laboring during the day.

It is important to phone home, to stay in touch with one another, to keep the relationship spark burning. Miranda and I stay connected even when we are apart from one another—when Miranda is at work, or when I’m out of town, etc. We phone home. In the Work of God, the little hours are our call home during the worldly hours of our day. It is our way to keep the spark kindled in the midst of our daily, secular routine. It is not crucial that we follow a prescribed order of service, or read the established number of psalms. What is important is that we maintain our lively relationship with the Lord while walking through the maze of this world. It is too easy to lose our way without a guide, and the Liturgy of the Hours provides that guide.

Vespers and Compline are the offices for the time of day to be settling down. The number of the psalms is limited and the services are simple. It is important to put the day’s events in the hands of the Lord, and to commend the night hours to His care. We, in our modern era—the 24 hour news cycle—tend to clutter our minds before retiring for the night with both unimportant and disturbing thoughts and images, leaving our unguarded imagination to run wild in our dreams. To fill our minds with images of the Lord’s grace is a much more satisfying and healthy approach. We can end the day watching the evening news, or renewing our relationship with the Lord in the service of Compline. To close the day with the words, “Into Your hands I commend my spirit” is very hard to beat.

February 21, June 23, October 24
Chapter 18:1-6

Each of the hours begins with the verse: “O God, come to my assistance; O Lord, make haste to help me” and the Gloria Patri (Glory be to the Father..) and the appropriate hymn for each hour. ²Then, at Prime on Sunday four sections Psalm 118 [119] are said. ³And at the other hours, that is at Terce, Sext and None, three sections of this psalm are said. ⁴At Prime on Monday three other psalms are said: Psalms 1,2 and 6. ⁵And at Prime each day thereafter until Sunday, three psalms are said in consecutive order up to Psalm 19 [20]. Psalms 9 [9 & 10] and 17 [18] are each divided into two sections. ⁶In this way, Sunday Vigils can always begin with Psalm 20 [21].

Benedict is continuing to lay the framework for the weekly recitation of all 150 Psalms. It is not easy to follow his instructions as they are not laid out in a concise and orderly fashion. The pattern for the recitation of the psalms to be read at the various hours on the various days of the week must be pieced together over multiple chapters in this portion of the Rule. As we will see in the third reading of this chapter, day after tomorrow, Benedict does allow for alternate patterns of Psalm recitation, saying, “We advise that if anyone finds this distribution of the psalms displeasing, he may arrange them however he judges better, provided that the full complement of all 150 psalms is said every week...”

Though Benedict stipulates that “all 150 Psalms” are to be said every week, that is extremely difficult for most of us who live in the secular world. We all have responsibilities which are time consuming. Even the monastic communities tend toward either a two week or one month rotation of the Psalms. It is not the quantity of Scripture read, and specifically the number of psalms recited, that is important, it is the encounter with the Lord, and our relationship with Him that is the heart and goal of the Divine Office. And so, it is appropriate that we begin the latter offices with the petition, “O God, come to my assistance; O Lord, make haste to help me”, for without His assistance we are unable to do the “Work of God.” The Lord promises us, through the prophet Moses, that if “you will seek the Lord your God, you will find him, if you search after him with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deut. 4:29).

February 22, June 24, October 25
Chapter 18:7-19

On Monday at Terce, Sext and None, the nine remaining sections of Psalm 118 [119] are recited, three parts at each of those hours. ⁸Psalm 118 [119] is thus completed in two days, Sunday and Monday. ⁹On Tuesday three psalms are said at each of the hours of Terce, Sext and None. These are the nine psalms, 119 - 127 [120 - 128]. ¹⁰These psalms are to be repeated daily at these hours until Sunday. Also the arrangement of hymns, lessons and versicles are observed the same way on all of these days. ¹¹In this way, Psalm 118 [119] will always begin anew on Sunday. ¹²Four psalms will be sung at Vespers ¹³beginning with Psalm 109 [110] and ending with Psalm 147, ¹⁴omitting those psalms appointed to other hours, namely, Psalms 117 [118] through 127 [128], Psalm 133 [134] and Psalm 142 [143]. ¹⁵All the rest are to be said at Vespers. ¹⁶And because this leaves three psalms short, the longer ones are to be divided: Psalms 138, 143, 144 [139, 144, 145]. ¹⁷But because Psalm 116 [117] is short, it may be joined with Psalm 115 [116]. ¹⁸This is the order of the Vesper psalms; the rest of the service, the lessons, responsories, hymns, versicles and canticles, are to be recited as was explained above. ¹⁹At Compline, the same psalms are to be repeated daily: Psalms 4, 90 [91], 133 [134].

Benedict continues to set forth his pattern for the recitation of all 150 Psalms, together with the organization of the little hours, and the evening hours. As we can see from this section, there is repetition of a number of the psalms both at the little hours and at Compline. I have found that spreading these psalms out across the week aids my use of these hours by shortening the office. Rather than trying to say three psalms at each hour, I say one, thus leaving more time for intercessory and petitionary prayers, and a short meditation on the Scripture itself.

Do not be afraid to adapt the services to best suit your schedule. As was noted yesterday, and as will be repeated tomorrow, even Benedict allowed for flexibility in the recitation of the psalms. The goal is an intimate relationship with the Lord and the practice of constant prayer throughout our day. Allow God to “come to your assistance.”

February 23, June 25, October 26
Chapter 18:20-25

The remaining psalms, those not accounted for in this arrangement for the day hours, shall be distributed equally over the seven nights of the week at Vigils. ²¹The longer psalms are to be divided so that twelve psalms (or portions thereof) are said each night. ²²We advise that if anyone finds this distribution of the psalms displeasing, he may arrange them however he judges better, ²³provided that the full complement of all 150 psalms is said every week, and that the series begins afresh each Sunday at Vigils. ²⁴For monks show great sloth in their devotional service if they recite less than the full Psalter in the course of a week with the customary canticles, ²⁵for we read, that our holy Fathers promptly fulfilled in one day what we lukewarm monks can achieve in a whole week.

In all my visitations to monasteries over the years, I have yet to experience a service of Vigils which follows this directive that “twelve psalms (or portions thereof) are said each night”. The Trappists, who are the Cistercians of the “strict observance” of Benedict’s Rule only read six at their services of Vigils. So, please let me reiterate that it is not the quantity of psalmody, rather the quality of prayer and encounter that is important.

At a recent visit to a traditional Benedictine monastery (OSB versus OCSO), I found that the community there read the psalms rather than chanting them, and they read them *very slowly*, pausing between the half verses and thus cherishing every word of the psalm. The practice of silence after the readings and the slow recitation of the psalms allows for absorption of the Word. Making time for a quiet encounter with the Lord through His Word yields substantive benefits for our relationship with Him. Slow down. If a word, a phrase, a verse of one of the psalms or lessons piques your interest, stop and meditate on that. Even if you never get back to the remainder of the passage you were reading, that is okay. The Lord may have placed that word before you to engage you in dialog. Let Him speak to you through His Word. Listen with your whole heart and mind.

The monks of Benedict’s day, and in the enclosure of Benedict’s monasteries, were living in a different time and culture. The exhortation to avoid sloth, and the rebuke of “lukewarm monks” should not discourage us from our efforts to follow Benedict’s Rule. Allow God to “come to our assistance” and “make haste to help us”. It is okay to adapt Benedict’s Rule to work for us. Do not forget his admonition to us at the beginning of his Rule: “Listen, my son, to the precepts of the master, and incline to them with the ear of your heart. Cheerfully receive and put into practice the admonitions of your loving Father...” (Prolog. 1). Incline the “ear of your heart” to the Lord. He is our Loving Father.

February 24, June 26, October 27
Chapter 19

We believe that God is present everywhere and that “the eyes of the Lord behold the good and the bad in every place” (cf Prov 15:3). ²And it is important for us to firmly believe this, especially when we take part in the Work of God, the Divine Office. ³Therefore, always remember what the Prophet says, “Serve the Lord with fear” (Ps 2:11); ⁴and again, “Sing praise wisely” (Ps 46[47]:8); ⁵and, “I will sing praise to You in the sight of the angels” (Ps 137[138]:1). ⁶Therefore, let us consider how we ought to behave in the sight of God and His angels, ⁷and so, let us stand to sing the psalms so that our minds may be in harmony with our voices.

The key to this chapter is found in the final verse: “let us stand that our minds may be in harmony with our voices.” A common objection to liturgical worship is the fear that our prayers will become rote and meaningless through familiarity and repetition. Benedict would, undoubtedly, be aware of such accusation and share the concern. He, therefore, combats these objections by commanding diligence in prayer and directs that our physical posture assist us in maintaining attention to prayer and the Word.

Growing up in the Episcopal Church, I was taught that “we sit to listen to the Word, stand to praise the Lord, and kneel to say our prayers.” Holy Scripture does not dictate specific postures for our various forms of worship. We read that prayers were said standing, kneeling, or even fully prostrate. Whatever position works best for you at any given moment is right. Kneeling can be hard for me, as my knees are weak and it pains me to kneel for any length of time. It would be very hard for me to focus on the Lord if I were distracted by discomfort in my joints. Thus, I usually sit to say my private prayers. I do not think that this dishonors God and it certainly helps to keep my mind “in harmony with my voice.” Let the Lord direct you in the most reverent posture for prayer. But set aside a place that you can reliably offer your prayers without distraction. If it requires you to sit, do not be dismayed. Sit. Pray. Encounter the Lord.

February 25, June 27, October 28
Chapter 20

If when we wish to seek any favor from men of influence we presume not to do so except with humility and reverence, ²how much more must supplication be made with all humility and purity of devotion to the Lord God of all? ³And let us bear in mind that it is not in our many words that we are heard by God, but in purity of heart and tears of penitence. ⁴And so our prayer should be pure and short, unless perhaps it be prolonged as a result of inspiration of divine grace. ⁵In any case, however, prayer in community should always be brief, and at the signal from the superior all should rise as one.

With this chapter we come to the end of the instructions for the Daily Office. Chapter 20 speaks to the attitude we are to have toward prayer. Our prayers should be directed toward God “with humility and reverence”. And Benedict says that our prayers “should be pure and short”.

If we are faithfully doing the Divine Office and praying the eight hours of the day with an eye to “constant prayer”, there is certainly no need for lengthy, wordy prayers at any of the hours. The goal is to practice the presence of God. Our conversations with Him should be pure and intimate, and our petitions, in corporate services of worship, short and simple. We do not need to be long-winded and wordy in order for God to know our concerns and desires. For God knows what is in our hearts and our minds. As the Psalmist said, “For he knows the secrets of the heart” (Ps. 44:21). And St. Paul reminds us that “He who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit” (Rom. 8:27). And yet, He delights to hear us raise our voices in prayer and praise to Him. He is “enthroned on the praises of Israel” (Psalm 22:3). But in corporate times of worship, Benedict is right to counsel “pure and short” prayers. Long rambling prayers made publicly are often more distracting than edifying. An individual making such lengthy petitions tends to draw attention to himself or herself, thereby taking the focus away from the Body’s worship of God. When we are gathered for corporate worship, we need to make our prayers “with humility and reverence”, keeping them “pure and short”.

But there are times, when we are blessed by God and we can spend some extended quality time with Him in lengthy prayer. These are usually private times with God, though on occasion we can have corporate experiences of extended quiet meditation and prayer. In these events, everyone must be in agreement with the dynamics of the prayer session for it to be wholesome and edifying for the Body. Those quiet times with the Almighty, whether alone or with the congregation, are all too rare, but exquisitely precious. They are blessed opportunities for extended prayer. But we must always remember that prayer is two-way conversation. We are not to use this time to broadcast to God our wants and desires, our needs and intercessions, a laundry list of petitions, and not fine tune our hearing to focus on the still small voice of God. The most productive use of those extended quiet times is to settle ourselves, by His grace, into a receptive mode, a spirit of alertness to His Presence and His loving voice. As God the Father said on the Mount of Transfiguration, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” (Luke 9:35).

February 26, June 28, October 29
Chapter 21

If the community is large, let some brothers of good repute and holy life be chosen from among them and be appointed Deans; ²and let them take care of their deaneries in everything according to the commandments of God and the directions of their Abbot. ³The Deans should be chosen by the Abbot that he may safely trust them to share his burden. ⁴Let them not be chosen for their rank, but for the merit of their life and their wisdom and knowledge. ⁵If any of them become puffed up with pride, and be found deserving of censure, and after having been corrected once, twice, and even a third time, refuse to amend, let him be removed from office, ⁶and be replaced by one who is worthy. ⁷We make the same regulation with reference to the Prior.

Delegated authority. Jesus said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” He then delegated that authority to His disciples, saying, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...” (Matt. 28:18). In the same way, the disciples, who now having been sent are apostles (“one sent”), delegated that authority to the generations which followed. Jesus will always retain full authority, and anything done in His Name must be done in accordance with His Word. “So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us” (2 Cor. 5:20). No ambassador speaks on his own behalf, but rather is called to represent the one who sent him. “God is making His appeal through us.” (2 Cor. 5:21).

In the same way, both in the monastery and in the parish church, the one in charge, be it the abbot or the rector, delegates authority in order to facilitate the work of the Body. In the monastery those who accept delegated authority from the abbot are called deans. As Benedict says in the section above, “The Deans should be chosen by the Abbot that he may safely trust them to share his burden.” The deans represent the abbot in sharing his burden of leadership. This type of delegation of responsibility for leadership in the Body dates back to the time of Moses. “And the Lord said to Moses, ‘Gather for me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; and bring them to the tent of meeting, and let them take their stand there with you. And I will come down and talk with you there; and I will take some of the spirit which is upon you and put it upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, that you may not bear it yourself alone’” (Num. 11:16-17). Jesus also entrusted His work to 70 and sent them out two by two (Luke 10).

But this type of sharing of responsibility and work is not limited to the monastery or the parish church. This is a concept that we all are exhorted to practice. St. Paul tells the Church at Galatia to “bear one another’s burdens” (6:2). He goes on to say that when we do that we “fulfill the law of Christ.” And then the Apostle explains how we can do this: “Let him who is taught the word share all good things with him who teaches” and “let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith” (6:6,10).

So, whether in the enclosure of the monastery, but even more for those of us working in the temptation-rich secular field, we need to help one another to stay on the path. We are to practice humility toward one another and “bear one another’s burdens.” For it is not about you, and it is not about me; it is about the Kingdom.

February 27, June 29, October 30
Chapter 22

The brothers are to sleep each in a separate bed. ²They should receive the bedding appropriate to monastic life, according to the direction of their Abbot. ³If it can be done, let all sleep in one large room; but if there are too many, let them sleep in tens or twenties under the care of the seniors who have oversight of them. ⁴Let a light be kept burning constantly in the cell until morning. ⁵They should sleep clothed and girded with cinctures or cords, that they may be always ready to rise without delay, but they should remove their knives, to avoid being wounded while asleep. ⁶And when the sign is given, they must be ready to rise without delay, and let them hasten to arrive at the Work of God before the others, yet with all dignity and decorum. ⁷The younger brothers should not have their beds beside each other, but intermingled with the older ones. ⁸And rising for the Work of God, let them gently encourage each other to avoid the excuses of the drowsy.

This is certainly a chapter that seems to have little relevance to the life of those living outside of the monastic enclosure. Benedict is addressing practical considerations for the temporal living conditions in which the monks find themselves. And yet, all of us could prosper from taking a critical look at our own temporal living conditions. Do these conditions promote life giving patterns of behavior, or does our living situation rob us of opportunity for spiritual nurture? Let's examine what Benedict is recommending.

First, he recommends that "a light be kept burning constantly in the cell until morning." The reason for this is to promote "watchfulness." Korneel Vermeiren, OCSO, says that "The monk has to sleep with the attitude of the wise virgins who had their lamps ready when the arrival of the bridegroom was announced. It is the lamp of prayer and of worship that should never go out. It is also the symbol of God's protecting presence." (*Praying with Benedict*, p. 34). Just as the lamp in the Temple burned continuously with pure oil, so our hearts should burn with the pure oil of the Spirit, even in our sleep.

So, how do we promote this watchfulness? We are to go to sleep "clothed and girded," ready to respond to the Lord's call night and day. But, "they should remove their knives, to avoid being wounded while asleep." This is not so much about what we are to wear to bed; rather it is about what we are taking to bed with us. What thoughts are you allowing to remain in your mind before sleep? When we conclude the day with Compline, we can lay down the burdens, the failures and successes of the day, and place all in the hands of the Almighty. We remove the dagger of worldly concerns, shortcomings and sins of the day, and lay that dagger at the feet of the Lord. The ultimate goal, is that in our watchfulness even our sleep becomes prayer.

"And rising for the Work of God, let them gently encourage each other to avoid the excuses of the drowsy." We are to encourage one another. I have very erratic sleep patterns and from time to time will get into a non-sleep pattern. But I always lift that up to my accountability partner and seek his prayer, encouragement, and accountability. He helps me sort through what "daggers" I am carrying to bed, what patterns of behavior are contributing to my sleeplessness, and he gives Spirit-led counsel to me. As we noted in yesterday's meditation, we are to "bear one another's burdens." Do not be afraid to ask for help and advice. We will all sleep better if we show care for one another and lay our daggers down.

February 28, June 30, October 31
Chapter 23

If a brother is found stubborn or disobedient or proud or murmuring, or opposed to anything in the Holy Rule, and defies the orders of his Superiors, ²let him be admonished by his Superiors twice privately, according to the command of our Lord (cf Mt 18:15-16). ³If he does not amend, he must be rebuked publicly before all. ⁴But if he does not reform even then, and he understands what the penalty is, let him be excommunicated. ⁵However, if he lacks understanding, let him undergo corporal punishment.

One of the most common errors we make as Christians is that we equate being nice with being Christian. St. Paul (Gal. 3:1-5; 5:2-12), and even Jesus Himself (John 2:13-21), had some harsh words for those who erred and strayed from God's Way. When we err on the side of being nice we can begin to tolerate sin, and such tolerance is sin itself. Benedict advises patience, not tolerance. Following Jesus' command in Mathew 18:15f, he admonishes that the one found in error be confronted twice privately, but if he does not amend his ways he must be "rebuked publicly before all." If one does not change, excommunication is the only remaining option.

Restoration is always the goal of discipline. But to restore one to the fulness of the Body without repentance and amendment of life is to set that soul and the whole Body in danger. There are degrees of fault, and we shall look at those in the next chapter. But suffice it to say that, we must "prefer Christ before all" (RB 72:11). When we allow our temporal friendships to blind us to the sins we witness in others, and even the sins we ourselves commit, then we have placed our worldly relationships before the Love of Christ.

March 1, July 1, November 1
Chapter 24

The degree of excommunication or punishment ought to be in due proportion to the gravity of the offense, ²and it is up to the judgment of the Abbot to determine that. ³If, however, a brother is found guilty of a lesser fault, he must not be allowed to eat at the common table. ⁴The following shall be the practice respecting one who is excluded from the common table: in the oratory he will not intone a psalm or an antiphon nor read a lesson until he has made satisfaction; ⁵and he will take his meals alone, after the brothers have eaten. ⁶For instance, if the brothers eat their meal at the sixth hour, that brother will take his at the ninth, and if the brothers take theirs at the ninth, he will take his in the evening, ⁷until having made due satisfaction he obtains pardon.

Chapters 23 through 30 are the disciplinary instructions of the Rule of St. Benedict, and as was noted yesterday, the goal of all discipline is restoration of relationship. The most extreme measure of discipline, then, is removal from relationship, that is excommunication from the community. Obviously, communion with one another at table and at prayer is the heart of communal living. These two events in the daily lives of the monks are the places where soul nourishment takes place. To be excluded from the table in the refectory and the Work of God in the oratory is to be cut off from the lifeblood of the home and family.

This insight offers a challenge to those of us in the world to maintain close ties with the Body of Christ. It emphasizes the importance of regular worship attendance, substantive communication with each other (i.e. actually talking to each other, not tweeting or texting), recreating together, and praying for one another. We are to encourage each other, and as St. Paul exhorts, “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; never be conceited. Repay no one evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all” (Rom. 12:15-18).

Too often, as a priest, I have seen members of the Body get offended or discouraged and excommunicate themselves. They quit coming to worship, they cut themselves off from communication with the other members of the parish, and they don't tell anyone what is going on. It is self-sabotaging behavior, and the devil loves it! We need each other for support and accountability. Reach out when you see someone struggling. And when you yourself are hurting, it is not helpful or loving to try to deal with it alone. Talk to your brothers or sisters in Christ. Reach out to your priest. Receive the love and healing Christ offers to you in the ministry of the Body. When one part of the Body hurts, the whole Body suffers. When one part of the Body is restored, the whole Body is built up.

March 2, July 2, November 2
Chapter 25

A brother who is found guilty of a most serious fault shall be excluded from both the table and the oratory. ²No other brother may associate or speak with him. ³Let him work alone at the tasks assigned to him, persevering in penitential sorrow, mindful of the terrible sentence of the Apostle who said, that ⁴“such a man is delivered over for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord” (1 Cor 5:5). ⁵Let him take his food alone in such quantity and at such a time as the Abbot shall deem fit; ⁶and let him not be blessed by anyone passing by, nor should the food that is given him be blessed.

As has been noted in the previous two meditations, the goal of discipline is restoration. St. Benedict emphasizes here, though, that we cannot simply overlook “serious fault” and restore someone to the Body without true repentance and amendment of life. In order to maintain the unity of the Body “penitential sorrow” must be experienced and displayed by the one at fault for restoration to take place after such a breach in relationship.

In meditating on this chapter I am reminded that there are five steps in true penitence. They are:

1. Acknowledgment of sin—recognizing that what we have done is sinful and an offense against God.
2. Contrition—true sorrow that we have sinned and broken covenant with God.
3. Confession—confessing with our lips, openly before God, either privately or in the Sacrament of Reconciliation before a priest.
4. Repentance—turning around, turning back toward God and the community of faith.
5. Amendment of life—change our patterns of behavior so that we are not tempted to commit that same sin again.

Benedict is following this pattern in these chapters on discipline. In chapter 23, he comments that “if a brother is found stubborn” (23:1) he is to be admonished privately, so that he recognizes that his behavior is sinful. If he recognizes that sin, then he can show contrition, that is true sorrow for his sins. This is described in chapter 27. When a brother is truly sorrowful, then we can “encourage him to make humble satisfaction” (27:3), that is true confession of sin. Repentance is turning around and returning to God and the community. And so, when the one who has sinned against the Body repents, we must “confirm [our] charity towards him’ (2 Cor 2:8); and let prayer be said for him by all” (27:4). Then, in order not to fall into the trap of sin again, the brother must make a new start by amending his ways and following the path of righteousness in obedience to the Gospel and the Rule. As Benedict says in chapter 29, if a brother wants to be restored, let him “first promise full amendment” (29:1). Then he may return to the fold and be received prayerfully by the community.

This is a most healthy approach to living in relationship with others who are in Christ Jesus. Whether we reside in the monastery or the world, we do need to live together in harmony, and practice maintaining gracious hearts toward one another. When one has strayed, and repented, let us welcome him home with joy, just as the father (not the older brother) welcomed the prodigal (Luke 15:11-32). And when we have strayed, and have been confronted with that sin, let us seek to make “humble satisfaction” for our sin. The goal of all discipline is restoration to the Body, that the Body of Christ may be whole, that we may be one even as Jesus and the Father are one (John 17:11).

March 3, July 3, November 3
Chapter 26

If a brother presumes to associate with an excommunicated brother in any way, or to speak with him, or to send him a message, without the command of the Abbot, ²let him incur the same penalty of excommunication.

There are those who do not understand that the discipline the Church exercises in separating a member from the Body for grievous fault is for the good of the Body. Again, we all too often mistake being nice with being Christian. Sometimes an unrepentant member of the Body must be removed before even greater harm comes to the Body by their seditious behavior. And though it may seem kind to reach out to the one removed, it has the potential to cause even greater harm.

Let me provide an illustrative scenario. One of the primary ways that the devil will attack a parish is to divide the leadership, and especially the clergy and worship teams (musicians, acolytes, dancers, etc.). For if the enemy can disrupt the worship of God, then the people of God will quickly fall out of relationship with Him. For example, if a person intent upon doing harm to the parish were to try to come between the members of the clergy, and that effort would prove unsuccessful, then this individual might seek to divide the members of the worship team from each other. Should that fail and the worship team remains united and they remain submitted to the clergy, this rebel could then begin to sow seeds of disunity between the congregation and the worship leadership. Ultimately, this person must be made to step down from all positions of responsibility and influence in the parish. If he or she continues to show no repentance or amendment of life, excommunication from the parish must be exercised. Some members of the parish, being unaware of the reasons for the individual's departure, may want to reach out to this person encouraging him or her to come back. Though it may seem compassionate, it would be most ill advised. To welcome this individual back without repentance would be divisive to the Body. Thus, Benedict notes that to continue association with a rebellious individual is to open ourselves to their unhealthy influence. It is a poison. We need to not "presume to associate with an excommunicated brother in any way..." for the good of the whole Body of Christ.

All of this sounds so very harsh, but it is the only way to maintain the health of the Body. For when one part of the Body is ill or broken the whole Body is affected. Every effort should be made to facilitate healing, but if the individual is rebellious and unwilling to accept correction and pursue penitence, then the only option left to the leadership of the Body is excommunication. As St. Benedict states in chapter 28 of the Rule: "If the faithless one departs, let him depart' (1 Cor 7:15); lest one diseased sheep infect the whole flock." We will look at this further when we examine that chapter.

March 4, July 4, November 4
Chapter 27

The Abbot must show all care and concern towards offending brothers because “it is not the healthy that need a physician, but the sick” (Mt 9:12).²Therefore, like a wise physician he ought to use every opportunity to send senpectae, that is, discreet elderly brothers,³who may support the wavering brother in secret, and encourage him to make humble satisfaction and console him “lest he be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow” (2 Cor 2:7).⁴Rather, as the Apostle also says, “confirm your charity towards him” (2 Cor 2:8); and let prayer be said for him by all.⁵The Abbot must make the utmost effort, and strive with all wisdom and zeal, in order that none of the flock entrusted to him perish.⁶For the Abbot must know that he has taken upon himself the care of infirm souls, not a tyranny over the healthy.⁷And let him fear the threat of the Prophet in which the Lord said: “What you saw to be fat, you took to yourselves, and what was diseased you threw away” (Ezek 34:3-4).⁸He is to follow the loving example of the Good Shepherd, who, leaving the ninety-nine sheep on the mountains, went to seek the one that had gone astray,⁹on whose weakness He had such pity, that He was pleased to lay it on His sacred shoulders and carry it back to the fold (cf Lk 15:5).

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews talks about the loving Father’s discipline (ch. 12), and that is the model for all Church discipline. “The Abbot must show all care and concern towards offending brothers...” All discipline is to be administered in love, with the goal of restoration of the lost and their salvation. But how do we do this?

Benedict uses the image of a healing balm, a *senpectae**, being applied to the wounded one. That balm is, according to Benedict, “discreet elderly brothers, who may support the wavering brother.” The monk under discipline is, as it were, a captive of the evil one, and thus separated from the Body. He needs both restoration and healing. The abbot bears the responsibility, as the father of the family, to see that this restoration can happen. And so he must use wisdom, delegating responsibility to “discreet elderly brothers”, when appropriate, for the healing process. These are men, who will not be harsh, and are to “encourage him to make humble satisfaction and console him...”.

And because any brokenness in the Body affects the whole Body, Benedict exhorts that “prayer be said for him by all”. We can hear in the words of this chapter the compassionate heart of Benedict for his flock, calling upon the abbot to “follow the loving example of the Good Shepherd” and “to seek the one that had gone astray”. The Lord’s second Great Commandment is to “love your neighbor as yourself”. We may not live in the enclosed community, but any brokenness in the Body of the parish, the diocese, or the larger Church is a loss to the whole and to each one of us. Pray for those who must exercise discipline in the Body, that they, like Benedict instructs, may “show all care and concern towards offending brothers”. And may we all follow the example of the Good Shepherd in loving our neighbors as ourselves.

*The RB1980 footnote on this word (p. 222) says “This word, which appears nowhere else in Christian literature, is variously interpreted. Some suggest “mustard paste” (poultice)... Whatever may be the etymology, what is important is what St. Benedict understands the term to signify and that he has explained.”

March 5, July 5, November 5
Chapter 28

If a brother has often been corrected and has even been excommunicated for a fault and does not amend, let him receive a more severe correction, that is, let him receive corporal punishment. ²But if even then he does not reform, or should become puffed up with pride, or even defends his actions, which God forbid, the Abbot must act like a wise physician. ³After he has applied soothing lotions, ointments of admonitions, the medicine of the Holy Scriptures, and finally the harsh rod of excommunication and the blows of the lash, ⁴and if he sees that even then his pains are of no avail, let him apply an even better remedy: his own prayer and that of the brothers, ⁵so that the Lord who is all-powerful may work a cure in that brother. ⁶But if he is not healed even in this way, then finally the Abbot must dismiss him from the community, as the Apostle says: “Put away the evil one from among you” (1 Cor 5:13); ⁷and again: “If the faithless one departs, let him depart” (1 Cor 7:15); ⁸lest one diseased sheep infect the whole flock.

Verse 1 once again brings into the exercise of discipline the act of corporal punishment. But the heart of this chapter is found in the second verse. If the brother at fault “does not reform, or should become puffed up with pride, or even defends his actions, which God forbid, the Abbot must act like a wise physician.” The following verses describe, in medical terminology, the attempts that need to be made for restoration of the lost soul. Ultimately, “if he is not healed even in this way, then finally the Abbot must dismiss him from the community.” This is not the simple excommunication of which we have spoken before, this is a lifetime ban from the community for an egregious breaking of relationship. The *RBI980* uses much stronger wording than other translations of the Rule. Verse 6 in that familiar translation says, “finally, the abbot must use the knife and amputate”. Amputation is clearly a final act. You don’t put the amputated limb back on the Body.

Again, all of this may sound harsh to our modern ear, but as was noted two chapters ago, such an amputation is a necessary step to preserve the Body. In physical terms, when a human limb becomes severely infected or gangrenous, it needs to be removed to protect the rest of the body from poisoning. If the infection were to get into the blood stream then as the blood flows to the various organs of the body it carries that poison with it. The Eucharist is the blood stream of the Body of Christ. The nutrients, that is the grace, that we receive when partaking of the Body of Christ, are transmitted to the whole Body. All who receive the Holy Eucharist are partakers of the one Body (1 Cor. 10:17). When one member of that Body is poisoned, and presumes to come to the Eucharist, the whole Body can quickly become infected. The poisoned limb must be removed.

Every effort must be made to preserve all of the parts of the Body. However, as Benedict says, if “he does not reform...the Abbot must act like a wise physician,” and amputate. It is an extreme measure, but one that must be taken to preserve the health and well-being of the Body of Christ.

March 6, July 6, November 6
Chapter 29

If a brother, who through his own evil will, leaves the monastery, but later desires to return, let him first promise full amendment for the fault of leaving; ²and let him be received back, but in the last place as a test of his humility. ³If he should leave again, or even a third time, he should be allowed to return under the same conditions. But after this, he must understand that every prospect of return will be denied him.

A number of years ago, I had a parishioner who left the parish because she did not want to seek reconciliation with someone who had offended her. Later, she wanted to come back, but still refused to meet with the offender. I tried to gently explain that, as Benedict says in verse 1 above, that she needed to “first promise full amendment for the fault of leaving.” Sadly, she said that she had done nothing wrong, that the offender was the one who needed amendment. The offender did need amendment, but it was not her place to correct him, and it was impossible to facilitate such amendment without her cooperation. It all seems so complicated when we don’t follow the ways of Christ. Would that we prefer His will to our own.

As has been noted before, there are those, like the one in the example above, who excommunicate themselves. But readmission to the Body is not a process that the departed one can control—the one at fault does not set the agenda for reconciliation. There needs to be a recognition that the departure was not in accordance with the will of Christ, and readmission requires a humble admission of our sinful self-will, and submission to godly authority in the Body. Benedict encourages restoration. He says, “let him be received back, but in the last place as a test of his humility”. And this can be done “even a third time..., under the same conditions”. But this type of unhealthy behavior must be halted. And so, after three attempts at restoration and reconciliation “he must understand that every prospect of return will be denied him”. The revolving door of separation must be stopped.

Unity of the Body of Christ is essential for the health of the Body. And Christ Himself is the one who facilitates that unity. We must be One in Him. His ways are perfect—not necessarily easy, but perfect. They are not always easy because our will gets in the way. When I am offended, in my self-will I want the offender to know it and suffer for the offense. But as St. Paul says in his first letter to Corinth, “Why not rather suffer wrong?” (6:7). The practice of humility opens the door to healing. And that Christ-centered healing facilitates unity in the Body.

March 7, July 7, November 7
Chapter 30

Every age and understanding should have its proper discipline. ²Whenever, therefore, boys or immature youths or those who cannot understand how grave a penalty excommunication is, ³are guilty of a serious fault, they should be subjected to severe fasting or be disciplined with corporal punishment, that they may be corrected.

As we come to the end of the disciplinary section of the Rule of St. Benedict, we see that Benedict recognizes differing degrees of discipline based on the ability of the offenders to understand and accept those disciplinary actions. As hard as we may try to help them, there are some who for reasons of mental illness, or lack of mental acuity, or stubbornness and recalcitrance and who are wedded to their self will, simply cannot comprehend discipline. They are like the two-year-old who throws a fit when he doesn't get his way. He doesn't understand that the world does not revolve around him. We want to help these individuals, but it does require their cooperation. And sadly, sometimes we have to recognize that they don't want to change and they will not cooperate under any circumstances. These we must let go.

But this chapter is instructional for us in that we are reminded by Benedict that one size does not fit all. We are each uniquely created in the image of God, and the Body is made up of all these parts. We need each other, and we must learn to respect the uniqueness of the other. Some are more mature than the others, and some less. And we must learn patience with those who differ from us. We cannot tolerate rebellion, nor ignore those who defy ecclesiastical authority and the Rule, but we can, in the love of Christ, work with them and stand by them as they learn with us the discipline of the Body.

As has been stated previously, the Epistle to the Hebrews (12:6) reminds us that the Lord disciplines those whom He loves. And the author of the epistle adds, "for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons" (12:7-8). From the opening verse of the Prologue, Benedict addresses the entire Rule to us as "sons". When we accept the discipline of the Lord and the discipline of the Rule, we are legitimate children, for we know that the Lord disciplines those whom He loves.

March 8, July 8, November 8
Chapter 31

There should be chosen from the brotherhood a Cellarer of the monastery. He is to be a wise man, of settled habits, temperate and frugal, not conceited, irritable, resentful, sluggish, or wasteful. ²He must fear God, and be as a father to the whole brotherhood. ³He is to have the charge of everything, ⁴but do nothing without the command of the Abbot. ⁵He is to do what he has been ordered to do, ⁶and not annoy the brothers. ⁷If a brother should make an unreasonable request for anything, let him not reject the brother with a cold refusal, but politely and humbly refuse the one making the improper request. ⁸Let him be watchful of his own soul, always mindful of the saying of the Apostle: “For those who have ministered well, shall gain a good standing for themselves” (1 Tm 3:13). ⁹Let him provide for the sick, the children, the guests, and the poor, with all care, knowing that, without doubt, he will have to give an account of all these things on judgment day. ¹⁰He must regard all the vessels and goods of the monastery as if they were sacred vessels of the altar; ¹¹and let him neglect nothing. ¹²He is not to give way to avarice, nor be wasteful and a squanderer of the goods of the monastery; but let him do all things in due measure and according to the bidding of his Abbot. ¹³Above all things, let him be humble. If he does not have the things requested, let him answer with a kind word, ¹⁴for it is written: “A good word is better than the best gift” (Sir 18:17). ¹⁵He should take care of everything that the Abbot has entrusted to him, and not presume to do what the Abbot has forbidden. ¹⁶Let him give the brothers their apportioned allowance of food without pride or delay, so that they may not be scandalized, for he must remember what the Scripture says the person deserves who scandalizes one of these little ones: “It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea” (Mt 18:6). ¹⁷If the community is large, let assistants be given him, that, with their help, he may calmly fulfill the office entrusted to him. ¹⁸Let the things that are to be given be distributed, and the things requested be asked for at the proper times, ¹⁹so that nobody may be disturbed or grieved in the house of God.

The cellarer is the person who is responsible for the provisioning of food and drink and other necessities in the community. The role of the cellarer is basically to run the physical side of the monastery so that the abbot can be free to attend to the spiritual wellbeing of the community. There is not a comparable person in the lives of those of us living outside the confines of the monastic enclosure, however, the qualities that the abbot would look for in the cellarer are qualities for which all Christians should strive. For example, one of the challenges for any cellarer is to maintain gentleness and charity at all times with each of the brothers, whether he be pleasant or ornery. And not only must he care for the brothers this way, St. Benedict also tells him to have this same care for the sick, for children, for guests, and for the poor. This chapter speaks to us of a whole theology of how to relate to one another in community.

Humility seems to be particularly important for this office, for Benedict says that “Above all things, let him be humble...” The cellarer should give things to the brothers without any arrogance or delay, and it would surely be a test of humility and charity for a cellarer if some brothers ask for things they realistically do not need, or they ask at an inappropriate time, thus creating an inconvenience for the cellarer. Benedict is striving to cast the role of the cellarer as “one who serves” in the model of Christ Himself, Who said, “I am among you as the one who serves” (cf. Mark 10:45). But Benedict recognizes that this type of service requires grace, saying, “He must fear God”. As St. Peter declares, “Those who serve, let them serve with the strength given by God” (1 Peter 4:11).

The spiritual qualities required of the cellarer might best be reflected in St. Paul's epistle to Rome. He said, "I bid every one among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think...[and to] live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; never be conceited" (12:3,16). And to the Philippians Paul wrote, "Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves" (2:3). This is the type of behavior that should be practiced by all who confess Christ.

Let us seek to serve one another as Christ has given us the example, "for the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

March 9, July 9, November 9
Chapter 32

The Abbot should appoint brothers in whose lives and character he has confidence to oversee the property of the monastery's tools, clothing, and general goods. ²Let him assign to them, as he sees proper, all the articles which must be collected and cared for. ³The Abbot will keep a list of these articles, so that, when the brothers in turn succeed each other in these assigned tasks, he may know what is given and what is returned. ⁴If anyone, however, fails to handle the goods of the monastery carefully let him be reprimanded, ⁵and if he does not amend let him come under the discipline of the Rule.

In yesterday's reading, Benedict instructs the cellarer to "regard all the vessels and goods of the monastery as if they were sacred vessels of the altar..." That sounds a little over the top. Should I consider a mop bucket a sacred vessel? How about a plumber's helper? If I need either and am blessed to have them, they are a gift. What Benedict is saying there, and what he is instructing in today's reading are that we should respect all of our possessions as gifts from God and treat them with respect. "All the articles...must be collected and cared for...[and] if anyone...fails to handle the goods of the monastery carefully let him be reprimanded..." If we can truly begin to see that everything we own is actually a gift, and in essence does not really belong to us but is on loan from God, then we can begin to foster an attitude of gratitude toward these goods.

Americans tend toward idolatry of possessions, and as a result they are held captive by those possessions. But Benedict is offering an alternative to that perspective. If we can envision the goods we possess as belonging to God rather than ourselves, then we can loan them without concern, knowing that God gives freely to all. Nor should we grieve their loss when broken or stolen, because God who is faithful and generous beyond measure will provide for our every need. And when we share the good things God has "loaned" to us, then we facilitate their use for the good of the whole community.

As St. Benedict stated in chapter 4, "Your way of acting should be different from worldly ways" (v. 20). Rather than stingily hoarding goods for ourselves, as the world would expect us to do, we can learn to treat our possessions as "sacred vessels of the altar". When we begin to put this lesson to practice, then we can learn to care for the good things God has entrusted to us and be free to share them with all around us who have need. That would be different!

March 10, July 10, November 10
Chapter 33

The vice of personal ownership must by all means be removed by the very root from the monastery. ²No one must presume to give or receive anything without permission of the Abbot; ³nor to retain anything whatever as his own, neither a book, nor a writing tablet, nor a pen, nor anything else whatsoever; ⁴since monks are not allowed to own even their own bodies or their wills. ⁵For everything that they need, they must look to the Father of the monastery, and are not to be allowed to have anything which the Abbot did not give or permit him to have. ⁶All things are to be held in common, as it is written, so that no one call or take to himself anything as his own (cf Acts 4:32). ⁷But if anyone should be found to indulge in this most evil vice, he should be warned a first and second time. ⁸If he does not amend, let him be subjected to punishment.

Benedict quotes from the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 4, where Luke tells us that “the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common” (v. 32). As we discussed yesterday, our acquisitive culture here in America is detrimental to our spiritual health. There is an almost infantile mindset that if I have something in hand it is mine, and as a result our possessions effectively possess us.

Jesus said that if I see my neighbor in need and do nothing to help, I have failed to fulfill the Gospel. “And the multitudes asked him, ‘What then shall we do?’ And he answered them, ‘He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise’” (Luke 2:10-11). And the apostle James reiterates this challenge in his epistle: “If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit?” (James 2:15-16). That is why Benedict begins this chapter with the exclamation “The vice of personal ownership must by all means be removed by the very root...” and then adds the words “from the monastery.” But whether we live inside or outside the monastery, personal ownership without a spirit of charity and gratitude for these gifts, is a vice that must be rooted out of our spirit.

Benedict goes on to say, “For everything that they need, they must look to the Father...” Here he is referring to Father as the abbot, but we know that “every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights...” (James 1:17). God loves you and will provide for you. Jesus said, “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” (Matt. 7:11). Benedict knows that the worldly attachments, both physical and emotional, are unhealthy for our spirit. In our baptism we died to self and were raised in Christ, so that as Benedict indicates, “monks are not allowed to own even their own bodies or their wills.” Even our own bodies now belong to God, and our loving God will take care of them if we entrust them to Him. “For everything that [we] need, [we] must look to the Father.”

March 11, July 11, November 11
Chapter 34

It is written, "Distribution was made to each as any had need" (Acts 4:35). ²We do not say by this that there should be favoritism (God forbid), but there should be regard for weaknesses. ³Whoever needs less should thank God and not be distressed, ⁴but whoever has need of more should humble himself because of his weakness, not becoming elated for the indulgence shown him. ⁵Thus all the members will be at peace. ⁶Above all, let there be no evil murmuring in word or behavior for any reason whatever. ⁷If anyone be found grumbling, let him be placed under very severe discipline.

In his book *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis suggested that as Christians, in terms of charitable giving, we ought to strive "to give more than we can spare". And he says, "if our expenditure on comforts, luxuries, amusements, etc., is up to the standard common of those with the same income as our own, we are probably giving away too little". Living by this standard is a good witness to those who are of the world and cherish their possessions. Benedict says, "Whoever needs less should thank God and not be distressed." By possessing only what we need rather than indulging our wants, we become freed from those possessions. Living according to that principle also gives us greater leeway to be more generous in our charitable giving, thus being freed to help others who may be less fortunate. In this way "all the members will be at peace."

St. James reminds us of the power material goods can have over us. He says, "What causes wars, and what causes fightings among you? Is it not your passions that are at war in your members? You desire and do not have; so you kill. And you covet and cannot obtain; so you fight and wage war" (James 4:1). Sometimes that war is simply within our own minds and hearts. Envy and covetousness can create battles within us if we do not call them into check. And if left unchecked then grumbings begin, and Benedict repeatedly warns us against this evil. He says, "Above all, let there be no evil murmuring in word or behavior for any reason whatever." If we allow our covetousness to take root, and grumble when we cannot have those things we desire, then we create division within the Body, separating ourselves from others in community. We then quickly find that we are no longer living together in the love of Christ.

St. Benedict is essentially saying, "It's not about you (what you want, what you think you need), and it's not about me (what I think I deserve); it's about the Kingdom (what's best for the Whole Body!)." We want what will make us happy. God wants what will make us holy. In Psalm 16:11, the Psalmist says, "You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures for evermore." If we truly seek the holiness that God wants for us, we will experience the "fullness of joy". And if we ask Him to rule our hearts, to govern our lives (which is what is meant by God's "right hand", His scepter hand), then we will know "pleasures for evermore". It's not about what we possess, it is about Who possesses us. When we all begin to accept His rule, "all the members will be at peace".

March 12, July 12, November 12
Chapter 35:1-6

The brothers should serve each other so that no one will be excused from the work in the kitchen, unless he is sick or involved in more important work, ²because such service increases the reward and promotes love. ³Let help be given to the weak, so that they may serve without distress, ⁴but let all receive help according to the size of the community and the circumstances of the place. ⁵If the community is large, let the Cellarer be excused from kitchen service, and, as we have said, anyone engaged in more urgent work. ⁶Let the rest serve each other in love.

Every Christian is an *imago Christi*—the image of Christ—and so, how we behave as Christians reflects upon Christ. What others see in us is what they “imagine” Christ to be because we are the “image” of Christ. And how we treat others is indicative of the love that we are showing for Christ Himself, for we are to seek Christ in the other person, to see him or her also as the *imago Christi*. Serving Christ in the other, whether our task be at the kitchen table, cleaning the bathroom, treating and caring for the sick, the young, or the elderly, or giving space to the other with our silence, it is all for Christ.

The specific topic of chapter 35 is the kitchen servers. But this topic has much more to say to us than serving tables. Those of us seeking to follow Benedict’s Rule on the outside of the monastic enclosure don’t have kitchen servers, readers at meals, or limitations on when we can take those meals. So how does this teaching apply to our community? The key for us is found in the first verse of chapter 35: “The brothers should serve one another.” And at the end of the paragraph, Benedict reiterates: “Let the rest serve one another in love” (vs. 6).

Whether it is our brothers and sisters in Christ in the parish, or the perfect stranger on the street, if we maintain an attitude of reverence for Christ in the other, and serve them as we would serve Christ Jesus Himself, we will fulfill the heart of this Rule. To love our neighbor as ourselves is not the second great suggestion—it is the second great commandment. And Jesus put the exclamation point on that command when He said, “Love one another as I have loved you” (John 13:34). Jesus showed His love not only by washing our feet; He showed His love for us by dying on the Cross for our sake. That is the *imago Christi*, the Christian who is willing to lay down his life for his neighbor. As Benedict says, “such service increases the reward and promotes love.”

March 13, July 13, November 13
Chapter 35:7-14

Whoever is completing their weekly service will do the cleaning on Saturday. ⁸Let him wash the towels which the brothers used to wipe their hands and feet. ⁹Both the one completing his service and the one about to begin are to wash the feet of all. ¹⁰Let the one completing his service return the utensils of the kitchen to the Cellarer clean and whole, ¹¹and the Cellarer shall give those to the one beginning his week. In this way he may know what he distributes and what he receives back. ¹²An hour before mealtime let each of the weekly servers receive a cup of drink and a piece of bread above the prescribed portion, ¹³so that they may serve their brethren at the mealtime without murmuring or undue strain. ¹⁴On solemn feast days, however, let them abstain until after Mass.

“Both the one completing his service and the one about to begin are to wash the feet of all.” Every major denomination practices foot washing, usually on Maundy Thursday, or some other time during Holy Week. And there are certain denominations (e.g. Adventists, Anabaptists, Free Will Baptists, and various Pentecostal groups) which do foot washing more often, and who refer to foot washing as “the third ordinance” after Baptism and Holy Communion. Sadly, and ironically, though, running battles are often fought between denominations about these services of servanthood. Jesus prayed “that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in me, and I in You, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that You have sent me” (John 17:21). But we, to our shame, focus on what divides us, rather than the Christ Who unites us. And all the while the world stands by watching, waiting “with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God” (Romans 8:19). These doctrinal battles are not how we are to “serve” one another in the manner of Christ.

Benedict had seen the corruption and divisions in the Church, and wanted no part of them. But he even more desperately wanted to see the healing work of Christ manifested in the Body. That healing, he knew, could only come about through humility and service in the manner of Christ. To wash another’s feet is a vivid representation of Christ’s love and humble service to a brother or sister. And it takes a certain level of humility to let someone wash your feet. Foot washing then, for Benedict, is an outward sign of humility and piety on the part of the one washing and the one being washed. It is an example, given to us by our Lord Jesus, of humble service. Jesus told His disciples, on the night before He was betrayed, “If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you” (John 13:14-15).

For those of us on the outside, and in a denomination which commonly practices foot washing at most once a year, what relevance does this have to our daily walk with Christ in obedience to the Rule of St. Benedict? As was noted yesterday, we don’t have kitchen servers, readers at meals, etc., so how does this apply? This chapter is about service—serving one another as if we were serving in the manner of Christ, and as if serving Christ Himself in the other. And so, like Jesus, we should be in the midst of the community as one who serves, making every effort to put the other’s needs first. Every type of service, whether it be as simple as giving another preference in line, visiting the sick and shut-in, or donating a kidney to one who needs a transplant, is a following of the Lord who washed the feet of His disciples.

March 14, July 14, November 14
Chapter 35:15-18

As soon as Lauds on Sunday is ended, let the weekly servers who are to begin their service and those completing theirs, kneel in the oratory before all, asking their prayers. ¹⁶Let the server completing his weekly service say the following verse: “Blessed are You, Lord God, for you have helped me and comforted me” (Dan 3:52; Ps 85[86]:17). ¹⁷After having said this three times the one departing receives the blessing. Then the one beginning his service follows and says: “O God, come to my assistance; O Lord, make haste to help me” (Ps 69[70]:2). ¹⁸And let this also be repeated three times by all. And when he has received the blessing, let him begin his weekly service.

Take note: where does the transition for the kitchen servers take place? Benedict instructs, “the weekly servers who are to begin their service and those completing theirs, kneel in the oratory before all, asking their prayers.” The passing of the baton in the temporal service of the community takes place in the oratory, thus emphasizing the Benedictine principle of *ora et labora* — prayer and work. All Christian service flows from the Altar! The work we do in the world, unless it is bathed in the Work of God, is going to flow from our own hearts and not the heart of God. Benedict is setting the pattern for all of us to recognize that our work is most effective when we approach it from the Altar, having first bathed all we do in communal prayer. He is calling us to set the focus of our life and work on God!

Week by week (and preferably, when possible, during the week) we come to the Altar of God. Only what we bring before God and lay down before Him will be blessed and sanctified. Are you bringing the concerns of your family, your job, your home, your health? All of these make demands on our attention, but are we placing them in the hands and heart of God, or are we trying to deal with them and care for them ourselves. All Christian service flows from the Altar. Lay your burdens down, and let the Blood of the Lamb flow over those burdens. Then, pick up only what God directs you to claim. Some of these burdens will require that we address them later, but many will be washed away in the cleansing Blood of Jesus. There are those who will say, how can I bring these secular concerns into the sanctuary? Shouldn't I leave them outside in the world and not bring them into the sacred space? The transition from secular to sacred can only take place by the work of the Holy Spirit. What better place to witness God's transforming power than at the Altar of God.

We do not have to live in an enclosed community to practice the precepts of this chapter. When we begin any new task, we can join Benedict and say, “O God, come to my assistance; O Lord, make haste to help me.” And when we have completed a task, we can give the glory to God, saying, “Blessed are You, Lord God, for you have helped me and comforted me.” And we can, like the kitchen servers in this chapter, begin our service anew as we approach and depart from the Altar of God.

March 15, July 15, November 15
Chapter 36

Before and above all things, care must be taken of the sick, that they may be truly served as Christ, ²because He said, “I was sick and you visited Me” (Mt 25:36), ³and “As you did it to one of the least of these My brothers, you did it to Me” (Mt 25:40). ⁴But let the sick themselves also consider that they are served for the honor of God, and let them not grieve their brothers who serve them by unreasonable demands. ⁵Nevertheless, sick brothers must be patiently borne with, because serving them leads to a more bountiful reward. ⁶The Abbot’s greatest concern, therefore, must be that they suffer no neglect. ⁷A separate room should be made for the sick brothers, and a God-fearing, diligent, and careful attendant should be appointed to serve them. ⁸The use of the bath must be offered to the sick as often as it is needed, but the healthy, and especially the young, should not be given permission often. ⁹Also, meat may be given to the sick who are very weak to speed their recovery, however, when they have recovered, they should all abstain from meat in the usual manner. ¹⁰The Abbot must exercise the utmost care that the Cellarer and the attendants who serve the sick do not neglect them, for whatever shortcomings his disciples may have are his responsibility.

Before there were hospitals, there was the Church. As Benedict points out in verses 2 and 3 above, Jesus said, “I was sick and you visited Me” (Mt 25:36), and “As you did it to one of the least of these My brothers, you did it to Me” (Mt 25:40). The early Church took this seriously. A nursing tradition quickly developed during the early years of Christianity when the benevolent outreach of the church included caring for the sick. And much of that ministry was carried out in the monasteries. Monasteries added wards for their own members and outsiders who came to them for healing. These infirmaries, to care for the sick, meant not only physical comfort but spiritual sustenance and healing as well. St. Basil the Great, who himself had established a monastery and written a monastic rule about 200 years before Benedict, is credited with establishing the first hospital in modern times. He did it to fulfill Jesus’ exhortation to his disciples to “heal the sick” (Matt. 10:8).

What is new and different today is the distinct separation of religion from medicine. This is a relatively recent phenomenon in the United States. And in some countries this change has still not occurred because modern scientific medicine is simply not available. People in these places must rely on the Church—rely on the Lord—to experience physical healing. Throughout most of recorded history, religion and medicine have been strongly linked together in one way or another, and physical disease understood largely in religious or spiritual terms.

So what does this tell us? We live in this land of separation not only of Church and state, but of Christ and healing. It need not be that way, and Benedict is summoning us to return to the Lord not only for our spiritual sustenance and wellbeing, but also our physical wellbeing. It is interesting and instructive to note that in the *Book of Common Prayer* (1979), the first rubric in the service of ministrations to the sick says: “In case of illness, the Minister of the Congregation is to be notified” (p. 453). When we are sick, is that the first place we turn? Do we run to the medicine cabinet before we turn to prayer? Who has the ultimate healing remedy? It is a promise of the Lord that if we call on Him, He will answer. The Apostle James says, “Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up” (James 5:14-15). That is a promise that we need to reclaim for the Church.

March 16, July 16, November 16
Chapter 37

Although human nature is of itself drawn to feel compassion toward both old and young, still, the decree of the Rule ought to make provision also for them. ²Since their natural weakness must always be taken into account, the strictness of the Rule should not be imposed upon them regarding food, ³but let them be treated gently regarding when they need to eat before regular hours.

As we saw in yesterday's meditation, monasteries were centers for caring ministries within the communities where they were established. The monks provided medical care for the elderly, and often took in and cared for orphans left on their doorstep. Benedict recognized this basic societal need and sought to address this in his Rule. Unfortunately, this practice has not been continued in the modern Church. In today's society, the old who need special care are far too often placed in "homes" by their loved ones, and children who are unexpected and unwanted are killed in the womb by their mothers. And so, Benedict's statement in verse 1 is even more relevant today: "Although human nature is of itself drawn to feel compassion toward both old and young, still, the decree of the Rule ought to make provision also for them." Not only is there a need to make provision by decree in the Rule, we need to pray for, and do our part to facilitate a change in the mindset of this nation toward the weak, the elderly, the unborn, and those whom we think of as "unproductive" members of society. Benedict says that "... their natural weakness must always be taken into account...". Sadly, their natural weakness is discounted as a personal and societal burden and both the young and the elderly are treated as unwanted.

Besides the fact that many of our elderly members in the Church feel unwanted and forgotten when we shuffle them away to a nursing home or assisted living facility, we are also robbing our young of interaction with these veterans of life and spiritual warfare. We have so much to learn from the senior members of the Body. We can learn from their triumphs, tragedies, accomplishments, and mistakes. They have a compendium of experience that needs to be tapped. A number of years ago I took the teenagers in the parish to visit our elderly shut-in members. I had each of the young people prepare a set of questions of their own choosing that they would want to ask someone who had these vast life experiences. Once they had come up with their list of questions, we sat down with each of the elders of the parish and the kids interviewed them. The young people loved it! And the seniors? The light in their eyes gleamed as they shared their stories. Young and old were both edified.

The Rule of St. Benedict conveys a great wealth of truth and advice in this very short chapter. The message is clear: we must take into account the needs of both young and old, and treat them gently. Are you staying connected to the elderly of your parish? Are you reaching out to the young and encouraging them in their walk with Christ? How can you help both to live a life full of Christ's love, and to remain active in the Body of Christ? That is the challenge presented in this chapter.

March 17, July 17, November 17
Chapter 38

Reading must always accompany the meals of the brothers. The reader should not be anyone who may by chance take up the book, but one who will read for the whole week, beginning that office on Sunday. ²After Mass and Communion let him ask all to pray for him that God may shield him from the spirit of pride. ³And let the following verse be said three times by all in the oratory, with him beginning it: “O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall proclaim Your praise” (Ps 50[51]:15). ⁴And when he has received the blessing, let him begin his reading for the week. ⁵Let there be profound silence during the reading that no whispering or speaking be heard, except that of the reader alone. ⁶But let the brothers serve each other, so that what is needed for eating and drinking may be provided without asking. ⁷If, however, anything should be needed, it should be requested by means of a sign rather than a sound. ⁸And no one should presume to ask any questions either about the book or anything else, in order that “no opportunity be given [to the devil]” (Eph 4:27; 1 Tm 5:14). ⁹The Superior, however, may wish to say a few words for edification. ¹⁰The brother who is reader for the week may take a little bread and wine before he begins to read, on account of Holy Communion and because the fast may be too long for him. ¹¹Afterward, however, let him take his meal in the kitchen with the weekly servers and the waiters. ¹²The brothers will not read or sing in order of their rank, but only those who edify their hearers.

Though most of us seldom have opportunity to take meditative time at meals, listening to someone read to us from sacred texts, we can make those meals eucharistic (communal meals of thanksgiving) by acknowledging the others with whom we are dining by turning off electronic devices and focusing our attention on the family and friends present with us. We can then begin to see the others as Christ and our time together as a sacred opportunity, a divine encounter. And if there are periods of silence, resist the urge to fill those gaps in conversation; rather embrace the silence, communing with the other in that sacred, silent space. If you are single, or have occasion to dine alone, rather than fill the room with sound from the TV, internet, or other electronic device, relish the silence, acknowledge your unseen guest, and enjoy communion with Him.

Meals are always communal affairs, even when we are dining alone—for we are never alone if we are in Christ. Much of the ministry I do is done over meals or a cup of coffee. Animals eat, humans dine. There is a reason that God created us with a reverence for mealtimes. It is a sad commentary on our culture that the family meal is losing ground quickly to the harried pace of our multi-tasking world. How often do we see a couple dining together in a restaurant, only to witness them more engrossed in their phone than in one another? You do realize, do you not, that it is not necessary to post a picture of your meal on your social media account to make it real? Just relish the great gift that God has given you to sit down with Him and with whomever you have chosen to dine. And serve one another with engaging conversation, or even with profound silence, enjoying the gift of one another’s company.

March 18, July 18, November 18
Chapter 39:1-5

Making allowance for the weakness of individual persons, we believe that for the daily meal, both at the sixth and the ninth hour, two kinds of cooked food are sufficient at all meals, ²so that one who cannot eat of one, may make his meal of the other. ³Two kinds of cooked food, therefore, should be sufficient for all the brothers. And if fruit or fresh vegetables are available, a third dish also may be added. ⁴A pound of bread should be sufficient for the day, whether for only one meal or for both dinner and supper. ⁵If two meals, let a third part of the pound be set aside by the Cellarer and be given at supper.

St. Paul told the Corinthians to “eat whatever is set before you” (1 Cor. 10:27). But there are some, like my wife and granddaughter, who have severe food allergies and must be careful to not consume what could be harmful, or even deadly. Nevertheless, there are some people who are restrained by conscience, or simply want to be picky. Even in Benedict’s day there was a measure of that as we see in verse 1. He makes “allowance for the weakness of individual persons...” and directs that “two kinds of cooked food” be prepared, “so that one who cannot eat of one, may make his meal of the other.” It is for the good of the community that Benedict makes this provision, and it is for the good of the community that we eat what is set before us, and not grumble.

We also see that Saint Benedict gives to the abbot the authority to change the diet, when that is necessary. As we shall see tomorrow, the real concern in the directives of this chapter is that overindulgence be avoided. Frugality is the rule, and one we should practice—a difficult task when we live in a land of such abundance. Benedict is not suggesting that all the monks (and those of us practicing the Rule in the secular realm) should seek to be skeletal in our appearance, rather that each of us may find how much he or she *needs* to eat and try to stay with that measure of eating. It can be truly a difficult task. That is not to say that we cannot on occasion enjoy a sumptuous meal in celebration of a significant event, or simply enjoy a good meal with a loved one. But we all know the temptation that an abundance of food provides for us, and the discomfort we usually experience when we do overindulge. The key is knowing ourselves and taking only what we need, not what our eyes tell us we want, and learning to say “no” to what is excess.

March 19, July 19, November 19
Chapter 39:6-11

If, however, the work has been especially hard, the Abbot has the power to decide to add something to the meal, if he thinks it is appropriate, ⁷barring above all things every excess, so that no monk suffer indigestion. ⁸For nothing is so contrary to the life of a Christian as overindulgence, ⁹as our Lord says: “Be on guard, so that your hearts will not be weighted down with overindulgence...” (Lk 21:34). ¹⁰Do not serve the same quantity of food to young children but less than to older ones, since we should be frugal in all things. ¹¹Let everyone except the very weak and the sick abstain altogether from eating the flesh of four-footed animals.

As was noted in yesterday’s meditation, in the latter half of this chapter Benedict addresses the issue of overindulgence, and he adds in today’s reading, the prohibition against eating the meat of four-footed animals. It appears that there were times in the history of the Benedictine tradition that fish and fowl were both acceptable fare. And at times, even the fowl was seen as forbidden. And in some traditions of the stricter observance of the Rule, not even fish was allowed. Vegetarian fare was from the beginning the preferred norm throughout the history of the order. It seems clear, however, that for St. Benedict the “meat of four-footed animals” is never acceptable. It is possible that this prohibition comes from an understanding in his day that such meat made the passions stronger, as some commentators have suggested. But it is equally possible that our Father Benedict was concerned for the life of the animals and wanted to show compassion for “all creatures great and small”, as the veterinarian, James Herriot, said in his famous hymn.

So, how do we apply this? For our personal spirituality, it is important for us to look at our lives and consider whether we are wise and frugal, whether we really have and use only what we need, whether we are caring for God’s precious creation, or are we being wasteful. It is a wonderful spiritual discipline to strive to have and use only what we need. It is not a sin to eat meat. But is that what is best for our physical well-being, our spiritual health, and the greatest care for God’s creation? The general thrust of the Rule is to always take the higher road, that “Your way of acting should be different from worldly ways” (RB 4:20). As St. Paul says, “‘All things are lawful for me,’ but not all things are helpful. ‘All things are lawful for me,’ but I will not be enslaved by anything” (1 Cor. 6:12). Benedict wants us to strive for what is helpful and holy. His restriction is not intended to be an onerous burden or a penitential sacrifice. Benedict wants us to want what is best for all.

March 20, July 20, November 20
Chapter 40

“Each has his own special gift from God, one of one kind and one of another” (1 Cor 7:7). ²It is with some hesitation, then, that we determine the measure of food and drink for others. ³However, making allowance for the weakness those who are sick, we think a half bottle of wine a day is sufficient for each one. ⁴But to those whom God grants the strength of abstinence, they shall know that they will earn their reward. ⁵If the circumstances of the local conditions, or the work, or the summer’s heat should require more, let the judgment of the Superior determine who needs a greater amount. He must, above all things, see to it that excess or drunkenness do not creep in. ⁶Although we read that wine is not at all proper for monks, yet, because monks in our times cannot be persuaded of this, let us agree to this, at least, that we do not drink to excess, but moderately, ⁷for “wine makes even wise men go astray” (Sir 19:2). ⁸But where the poverty of the local circumstances will not permit the measure indicated above, but much less, or none at all, let those who live there bless God and grumble not at all. ⁹Above all things, we charge that they live without grumbling.

Over the last two days we have examined eating and drinking in moderation, and practicing frugality. But, if we are honest, we often do not give much consideration to what we eat and drink because it is such an ingrained habit of our daily life. Of course, we do notice if someone is enormously overweight or terribly thin. The extremes draw our attention. And so, St. Benedict is quite clear in his teaching: “each has his own special gift from God. It is with some hesitation, then, that we determine the measure of food and drink for others.” Nevertheless, he does provide some guidelines which are as applicable to those of us on the outside as to the monks enclosed. With food, there should not be indigestion. With drink, there should not be drunkenness. In many countries, it would be most surprising to have the monks drink wine every day. However, in many European countries, where it is the common drink at meals, it is taken for granted that monks drink wine. The early monastic traditions dictated that monks should not drink wine at all, rather all should practice abstinence from alcohol. But again, Benedict recognized that abstinence is not a gift shared by all. He sought to take a more gentle approach toward his monks, and insist only on moderation: “that we do not drink to excess, but moderately.” For Benedict, if something is not necessarily harmful to the monk, then there is no reason to abstain from partaking of that food, rather accept that gift with moderation. Good advice for us all. He acknowledges that to drink wine is not sinful, and therefore he allows it to be consumed by his monks. But it is his contention that “wine is not at all proper for monks”—it would be better if they didn’t consume alcohol, for “wine makes even wise men go astray”. He does not enforce abstinence, but recommends it for those who have that special gift from God.

And finally, NO grumbling. Benedict repeatedly forbids this heinous practice (e.g. RB 4:39; 5:14-19; 34:7; etc.). Grumbling is the sin of preferring ourselves, our selfish will, to God, and so he says, “Above all things, we charge that they live without grumbling.” Wouldn’t life be wonderful if we could all practice this discipline. Grumbling is a negative use of our energies, and essentially selfish—“if I can’t have my way, I’ll grumble”. Benedict is saying, Let us ask that we might lay down our will and accept the Lord’s will; and that we may never grumble, no matter what the situation. To give thanks for what He has given us, no matter how great or small, is to honor God, for the Psalmist says, “He who brings thanksgiving as his sacrifice, honors Me” (Psalm 50:23).

March 21, July 21, November 21
Chapter 41

From holy Easter until Pentecost, the brothers dine at the sixth hour and take supper in the evening. ²From Pentecost through the whole summer, if the monks have no work in the fields and the excess of the heat does not interfere, they shall fast on Wednesday and Friday until the ninth hour. ³On the other days they dine at the sixth hour. ⁴If they have work in the fields or the heat of the summer is great, the Abbot may decide they should maintain the sixth hour for dinner, ⁵and so let him manage and adapt everything that souls may be saved, and that what the brothers do, they may do without having a reasonable cause for grumbling. ⁶From the ides of September until the beginning of Lent, they always dine at the ninth hour. ⁷During Lent, however, until Easter, let them dine in the evening. ⁸But let Vespers be said at a time that they will not need lamp-light during their meal, and that everything can be finished while it is still day. ⁹But let the mealtimes always be arranged so that, whether dinner or supper, everything is done by daylight.

It is hard for us to imagine, in our culture of plentiful abundance, that there was a time when one meal per day was the norm. Nevertheless, that was the practice in the monastic movement of the early centuries, and it apparently reflected the culture around them. A substantive mid-day meal sufficed for the day. Benedict, however, in celebration of “holy Easter” called for two meals during Eastertide. At all other times of the year there was but one, and the time of day that the meal (or in Easter, meals) were served depended on the observance of the Work of God. Benedict designated the times for the Divine Office and now he prescribes the times for the meals. The hours of light in the day, and the climate changes affected these decisions. So, for example in the Summer months from Pentecost until Holy Cross Day (September 14), the one meal was served at Noon, except on Wednesdays and Fridays, when it was held until after the service of None, “to observe the fast”. In the Fall and Winter, the meal was served after None. And in the penitential season of Lent, the meal was held over until after Vespers. With the Divine Office and the meals thus determined, the monks’ work and study schedules must fit in around these communal events, for “nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God” (RB 43:3). But in all these things the Abbot is exhorted to “manage and adapt everything that souls may be saved, and that what the brothers do, they may do without having a reasonable cause for grumbling.”

All of this seems quite impossible for our own day. It is hard to imagine most modern Americans taking only one meal a day. For many in the secular working world, schedules are adapted to taking meal breaks during the work day. And family schedules are often set based on when the members of the family can reasonably sit down together. It is important that we think about the discipline of eating and what role it plays in our daily lives. We would do well to reflect on the relationship between eating and praying, between eating and the discipline of the moral life, between eating and caring for one another in community. St. Paul gave a clarion warning in his letter to Philippi, saying, “Brethren, join in imitating me, and mark those who so live as you have an example in us. For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is the belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power which enables him even to subject all things to himself” (3:17-21). How easy it is to make food an idol, our belly a god, and to allow our minds to be set on earthly things.

For modern cultures, in spite of all the focus on wholistic thinking and natural living, most people do not associate any relationship between eating and praying. But our bodies are a temple of the Holy Spirit, and as St. Paul encourages us, we are to “present [our] bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is [our] spiritual worship” (Rom. 12:1). We can honor God by caring rightly for the body that He has given us. It is only a loan, for “our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body...”

March 22, July 22, November 22
Chapter 42

Monks should always diligently pursue silence, especially during the hours of the night. ²Therefore, every day, whether a fast day or for ordinary days, ³as soon as they have risen from their evening meal, let all sit together in one place, and let one read the Conferences or the Lives of the Fathers, or something else that will edify the hearers, ⁴but not, however, the Heptateuch or the Books of the Kings, because it would not be wholesome for weak minds to hear this part of the Scripture at that hour; they should, however, be read at other times. ⁵On a fast day, between Vespers and the reading of the Conferences, there should be a short interval. ⁶Then four or five pages shall be read, or as much as the hour will permit. ⁷This will allow all to assemble in one place during the time of the reading, including those who were engaged in work assigned to them. ⁸All, therefore, having assembled in one place, shall say Compline; and after going out from Compline, there is then to be no more permission for anyone to say anything. ⁹If, however, anyone is found to break this rule, let him undergo heavy punishment, unless the needs of guests should arise, or the Abbot should perhaps give a command to anyone. ¹⁰But even this is to be done with the utmost seriousness and moderation.

Silence. A rare blessing. Learning to be silent is more than just keeping an external quiet. It is about quieting the heart and mind, and being comfortable with ourselves first, and then becoming aware of the Presence of God and being drawn into His peace. But it is indeed a challenge for most of us to be still and silent in today's world. Our lives are filled with clamor, and when there is that rare quiet space in our day, we tend to fill it with music, TV, the internet, or some other modern "convenience" available at hand. We don't know what to do with ourselves when we have the gift of quiet moments, or much less how to actively pursue that type of spiritual quietude.

Why should we pursue silence? It is not simply because it is a recommended discipline of the Rule. Discipline is not the end or goal of the Rule. Rather we must think of silence as creating an atmosphere in which we can hear the still small voice of God. Silence offers us the opportunity to declutter our mind and our spirit, removing the turmoil of the day around us. This is what Saint Benedict is looking for, and the reason for what is known as the Grand Silence. The Grand Silence is the rule of silence between the conclusion of Compline until after the morning offices. The purpose of the silence is to encourage the members of the community to cultivate and deepen their relationship with the Lord by listening to the voice and the heart of God.

How can we recreate such a practice in the secular realm? Let us look at the time of the Grand Silence and ask ourselves what is our normal routine in these hours. What are we doing with our evenings? Are we setting the scene for restful, peaceful, restorative sleep? Or are we cluttering our minds and hearts with troubling thoughts and images? The prohibition Benedict gives in verse 4, that the brothers not read "the Heptateuch [the first seven Biblical books: Genesis to Judges] or the Books of the Kings, because it would not be wholesome for weak minds to hear this part of the Scripture at that hour," gives us a glimpse of the mind of Benedict regarding the night hours. Even if we cannot engage in "pure" silence because of family obligations, or work related issues, or simply the need to get ready for the next day's work load, we can screen what comes into our hearts and minds. We do not need to watch the news, or listen to the radio, or check the internet. We can choose to sit quietly with God. We can read one of His love letters to us in the Epistles. Or we can simply sit, ask Him to join us, and enjoy the calm peace that washes over us with His Presence.

March 23-24, July 23-24, November 23
Chapter 43:1-12

As soon as the signal for the time of the divine office is heard, let everyone, leaving whatever he has in his hands, go with all speed, ²yet with gravity and without creating cause for levity. ³Therefore, let nothing be preferred to the Work of God. ⁴If at Vigils anyone comes after the Gloria of the 94th psalm, which we wish to be said slowly and deliberately, let him not stand in his place in the choir. ⁵He must stand in the last place, or in a place set apart by the Abbot for such careless ones, that he may be seen by the Abbot and by all, ⁶until he makes satisfaction by public penance, when the Work of God is ended. ⁷The reason why we think they should stand in the last place, or apart from the rest, is that they may be seen by all and this will shame them into amending. ⁸For if they stayed outside the oratory, there might be one who would go back to sleep, or worse yet, would sit outside and indulge in vain gossip, thereby giving a “occasion to the devil” (Eph 4:27; 1 Tm 5:14). ⁹Rather, they should go inside so that they may not lose everything, and may amend for the future. ¹⁰At the day hours the same rule applies to those who arrive for the Work of God after the opening verse and the Gloria of the first psalm. He is to stand in the last place. ¹¹Let him not attempt to join the choir of those praying the psalms until he has made satisfaction, unless the Abbot pardons him and grants exception. ¹²Even if granted exception he is still bound to atone for the fault afterwards.

Every time I read the first two verses of this chapter, I chuckle. I have the image of the monks, their habits flying behind them, as they jostle one another in order to be the first into the oratory. Why else would Benedict see the need for the proviso of verse 2? But that is not the heart of this message. Verse 3 reveals the mind of our Father Benedict: “let nothing be preferred to the Work of God.” We must do whatever we can to make certain that time is given for the worship in the Divine Office. Our relationship with God must be the primary focus of our day. Yes, our work (be it employment, school, housework, etc.) is important, but “let nothing be preferred to the Work of God.” Giving priority time to God makes all of the time that follows more productive; thus, Benedict’s emphasis on making satisfaction if the monks fail to arrive for worship on time. He even lays out provision for how to behave if the unavoidable happens and an individual arrives late to a service, for he doesn’t want anyone to give “occasion to the devil”.

Sometimes, though, events conspire and we find ourselves delayed. It happens. But there are those who are perpetually late. A habit of tardiness really is a sin. It is the sin of selfishness. John Michael Talbot, in his book *Blessings of St. Benedict*, says, “Tardiness, procrastination, or unnecessary absence are ultimately expressions of selfishness. It means that we place ourselves over the community functions that others must attend. . . . Some are conditioned for tardiness by their upbringing and past cultural experiences. The Rule is a way to heal that defect.” The discipline laid out in chapters 43-46 of the Rule is a discipline that may sound harsh to our modern ear, but its purpose is to facilitate the healing of our faults. Therefore, the goal of such discipline is the maintenance of unity in the community, together with the conversion and redemption of the individual. These disciplines are not punitive by nature, but rather restorative.

March 25, July 25, November 24
Chapter 43:13-19

If anyone does not come to the table before the verse, so that all may say the verse and pray together, and sit down at table together, ¹⁴if he failed to be timely through his own fault and negligence, let him be corrected twice. ¹⁵If he still does not amend, let him not be permitted to eat at the common table, ¹⁶but let him eat alone, separated from the company of all. His portion of wine should be taken from him, until he has made satisfaction and shown amendment. ¹⁷Anyone who is not present for the verse which is said after the meal should receive the same treatment. ¹⁸And no one is to presume to eat or drink before or after the appointed time. ¹⁹But if anything should be offered to a brother by the Superior and he refuses to accept it, then afterwards desires what he first refused or anything else, he should receive nothing at all until he makes due satisfaction.

We dealt with the sin of tardiness in yesterday's meditation. The theme continues today. Whereas yesterday Benedict was addressing the importance of promptness for the Divine Office, today we read about the importance of timely gathering for mealtime. It is hard to imagine that Benedict would equate the importance of worship and communal dining. However, the communal table is a sacred space, and taking a meal together is an anointed time for the entire Body. Both the Work of God and the common meal are communal events, and both are important components in maintaining unity of Spirit in the Body of Christ.

For those of us on the outside of the monastery, communal meals are more often than not with members of the family, but less often with the entire Body of Christ with whom we worship. Nevertheless, those communal meals have value, whether with our biological family or our spiritual family. Sadly, we too often see members of our family choose to forgo the opportunity to dine with the other members of the family, putting their work or pleasure ahead of the sacred time spent in the company of our loved ones. It is a manifestation of that sin of selfishness that John Michael Talbot spoke of in the quote in yesterday's meditation. And there is another manifestation of that same sin that is unique to this generation that could not have been anticipated by our Father Benedict. That is the curse of the electronic devices brought to the dinner table—be it our telephone, iPad, TV, etc. We get absorbed in the device and are not present to those with whom we are dining. It is a very sad situation indeed.

The end of this chapter presents one other injunction that is significantly relevant to our modern society. That precept is a warning against eating outside of the normal meal times. This is particularly difficult in our present age when most of us are accustomed to eating when we feel like it. We are a snacking culture, and it is evidenced by the obesity of our nation. Much of our modern culture has absolutely no discipline about food at all. We eat when we are lonely, distracted, reading, watching TV, and worst of all, before going to bed. (Sadly, I am eating while writing this.) We eat to combat depression, which makes us more depressed. Benedict recognized this tendency in man and combatted it saying, "no one is to presume to eat or drink before or after the appointed time." It is sound advice.

March 26, July 26, November 25
Chapter 44

Whoever is excommunicated for serious faults from the oratory and the table, at the time when the Work of God is celebrated in the oratory, ²he must prostrate himself in silence before the door at the feet of all who leave the oratory. ³And let him do this until the Abbot judges that it is enough. ⁴At the Abbot's bidding, he is to prostrate himself at the Abbot's feet, then at the feet of all, that they may pray for him. ⁵If then the Abbot orders it, he may be received back into the choir in the place which the Abbot assigns. ⁶Even so, he should not presume to intone a psalm or a lesson or anything else in the oratory, unless the Abbot again bids him to do so. ⁷Then, at all the Hours, when the Work of God is ended, he must prostrate himself in the place he occupies. ⁸He will continue to make satisfaction until the Abbot again bids him finally to cease from this penance. ⁹Those who are excommunicated for lesser faults from the table only are to make satisfaction in the oratory for as long as the Abbot commands, ¹⁰and let them perform this until he gives his blessing and says, "It is enough."

Chapters 43-46 address the process of dealing with mistakes, and the disciplines associated with righting wrongs. What Benedict is saying here is that when one has repeatedly failed, erred, or made a mistake in oratory or broken something belonging to the community, and has refused to acknowledge his wrong, he is to be barred from the Table of the Lord and from the offices in the oratory—he is to be excommunicated. If the one who has done the wrong wishes to be restored, he is instructed to prostrate himself before the Abbot and community (vv. 2-5). This humbling act is designed to refocus the individual on God and to accentuate the penitent's submission to God, to those in authority, and to the community as a whole. And the restorative aspect of this discipline is the act of the entire community granting forgiveness and pledging their support to the process of restoration and conversion.

When we have done a wrong to one member of the Body, we have offended not only that individual, but done harm to the whole Body. This is sometimes hard for us to comprehend. We don't want to be embarrassed by making confession before the whole community, and there are times when such a penitential act would be inappropriate. But the need for the whole Body to receive back one who has been severed from the Body by excommunication is exactly what Benedict is proposing in this chapter. It is the parable of the prodigal made real. When the prodigal son returned home, the father was ecstatic, but the older brother was unwilling to receive him. The father rebuked the older brother for his hard-heartedness. When we do not welcome back someone who desires to return it thwarts healing in the Body. We may want justice, retribution, or retaliation, but God wants restoration. That is why Benedict directs that the penitent one "is to prostrate himself at the Abbot's feet, then at the feet of all, that they may pray for him." It is very hard to hold animosity toward one for whom we are praying. The prayer is as much for ourselves as it is for the one seeking to be restored. That is a prayer designed to change hearts—our hearts.

March 27, July 27, November 26
Chapter 45

If anyone makes a mistake while reciting a psalm, a responsory, an antiphon, or while reading a lesson, and does not humble himself at that time before all by making satisfaction, let him receive a greater punishment, ²because he would not correct by humility what he did amiss through negligence. ³But let children be beaten for such a fault.

Benedict begins this section of his Rule on dealing with wrongs with the words, “Indeed, nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God” (43:3). And here in chapter 45 he addresses mistakes made in the Divine Office, when we are doing the Work of God. Again, the matter comes back to the inner life of the individual. If a mistake is made, Benedict prescribes that “he must make satisfaction there before all”. This directive is designed to keep the members of the community humble before one another, to keep their heart right before God and each other. What he is prescribing is not a prolonged apology to the community. The admission of error should be a simple acknowledgement, a simple “please forgive me”, nothing that will draw undue attention to the reader. The sense of Benedict’s word is that when a mistake is made in reading, the reader should pause, apologize, and move on. Not acknowledging the mistake reveals a prideful heart. A simple apology is a humble gesture.

The point of all of these disciplines is straightforward: the Work of God is to be preferred above all. Discipline is designed to be restorative, not punitive, nor to bring attention to the mistakes or those who make them. The idea behind this discipline is an effort to facilitate good liturgy, and that the liturgy may be well led. This type of discipline encourages preparation. If I know that I need to read a lesson, chant a psalm, or participate in any way in the liturgy, I should practice. If I know I will be held accountable for my part in the liturgy, I will be more likely to take my role seriously. The ultimate goal of this discipline is that all in community may have a right heart and a right spirit about the Work of God, and to draw closer to God through the healthiness of the community and their worship together.

March 28, July 28, November 27
Chapter 46

If someone commits a fault while at any work, in the kitchen, in the cellar, in serving, in the bakery, in the garden, at any art or work in any place whatever; ²by breaking or losing something, or failing in any way whatever; ³he must come at once before the Abbot and the community, and of his own accord confess his offense and make satisfaction. ⁴If it becomes known through another, let him be subjected to a greater correction. ⁵If, however, the cause of the offense is secret, let him disclose it to the Abbot alone, or to one of his spiritual Superiors, ⁶who know how to heal their own wounds, and not expose or make public those of others.

We all make mistakes, and it is common to our human nature to want to hide those mistakes. But Benedict demands that the one having made the mistake “must come at once before the Abbot and the community, and of his own accord confess his offense and make satisfaction”. Then Benedict goes on to say that if the monk tries to hide his wrongdoing, he is to be “subjected to a greater correction”. The hiding of the fault is the greater sin. When “the cause of the offense is secret,” Benedict explains, “let him disclose it to the Abbot alone, or to one of his spiritual Superiors, who know how to heal their own wounds, and not expose or make public those of others.”

We all tend, to some measure, toward narcissism. We really don't want to acknowledge our mistakes, our faults. But our attempts to hide wrongdoing allows the poison of these mistakes to be retained by the Body. Confessing our sins, our faults, our mistakes, lances the wound and allows the poison to be expelled. This chapter of the Rule is, if you will, the instruction for healing the wound. We would all do well to put this principle to practice in our own lives. When we have fallen short of the mark, inadvertently broken something, or as Benedict says, “failed in any way whatever”, to acknowledge the wrong allows God to begin the healing work in His Body. And from that we can all benefit.

March 29, July 29, November 28
Chapter 47

Let it be the Abbot's care to announce the time for the Work of God both by day and by night. He may either announce it himself or entrust this charge to a careful brother, so that everything may be done at the proper time. ²Only those who have been authorized may intone the psalms or the antiphons in their turn after the Abbot. ³No one should presume to sing or read unless he is able to edify the hearers; ⁴and let it be done with humility, seriously, and with reverence as the Abbot has ordered.

This section of the Rule, chapters 47-52, covers instructions regarding the Work of God and the need to maintain the discipline of the hours. There is a delicate balance that must be kept between prayer and work, and Benedict is addressing those issues in these chapters.

Benedict and his monks did not have the benefit of wrist watches, cell phones, or even electric clocks. This created a need for someone to be responsible to keep an eye on the time and to announce the hour for the Work of God. It was crucial that some form of notification of the hours be given that all of the brothers could be summoned to attendance in the oratory for the Work of God. Benedict says that it was "the Abbot's care to announce the time for the Work of God both by day and by night." However, he could delegate that responsibility "to a careful brother".

As non-cenobitic followers of the Rule, we do not have a common worship space for the daily hours, nor do we have a brother designated as the watchman and herald of the hours. But we do have clocks; we are surrounded by them. The monks of Benedict's day needed the herald because when they were out in the field, ensconced in the work of the kitchen, or tending the garden, it would be easy for them to lose track of the time. They needed a reminder to lay down the manual work and pick up the Work of God. We can do the same thing. We can create our own herald. I have programmed into my phone a reminder at 9:00 AM, Noon, 3:00 PM, and 5:00 PM. So, in the midst of my busy day, if I have become lost in my work and the little hours are in danger of being left unsaid, I am reminded. And often, if I am busy cooking dinner I lose the hour for Vespers. But with my phone reminder, I have a herald to call me to the Work of God. The early morning services of Vigils, Lauds, and Prime are easy for me to keep, so I do not need a reminder for them. And as for Compline, I have a printed copy of the service on the bookcase headboard of my bed, together with a copy of the Psalms. Before I lay down, I am reminded by their presence to lay the day's work and events in the hands of the Lord, and to commend the night hours to Him.

It is good to maintain the discipline of the hours. If you need to, you can combine the hours, and we will discuss that in more detail in tomorrow's meditation. Even if you are keeping a modified discipline, with only Morning, Noonday, and Evening Prayer, with Compline, a little reminder via a phone alarm can help you stick to that discipline. It is good to have a herald to call us to the Work of God, "so that everything may be done at the proper time".

March 30, July 30, November 29
Chapter 48

Idleness is the enemy of the soul. Therefore the brothers ought to have certain times for manual labor as well as time for devout reading. ²Hence, we believe that the time for each will be properly ordered by the following arrangement: ³From Easter until the first of October, they spend their morning from the first until about the fourth hour doing the necessary work, ⁴but from the fourth until the sixth hour they devote to reading. ⁵After Sext and the noonday meal, let them rest in their beds in complete silence; or if anyone desires to read privately, let him do so but without disturbing others. ⁶Let None be said somewhat earlier, about the middle of the eighth hour, and then until Vespers they are to return to the work that is necessary. ⁷If, however, the local conditions or their own poverty should require that they do the work of gathering the harvest themselves, let them not be downcast, ⁸for then they are true monks if they live by the work of their own hands, as did our forefathers and the Apostles. ⁹However, on account of the faint-hearted let all things be done with moderation. ¹⁰From the first of October until the beginning of Lent, let them devote themselves to reading until the end of the second hour. ¹¹At that time Terce is said, and then let all work at their assigned tasks until the ninth hour. ¹²When the first signal for the hour of None is given, each one is to leave their work and be ready when the second signal is given. ¹³Then after the meal let them devote themselves to reading or to the psalms. ¹⁴During the Lenten season let them be free in the morning to read until the third hour, and until the tenth hour let them do the work which is assigned to them. ¹⁵During these days of Lent each one is to receive a book from the library, and is to read it straight through. ¹⁶These books are to be given out at the beginning of the Lenten season. ¹⁷Above all, one or two of the seniors should be appointed to go about the monastery during the time that the brothers devote to reading ¹⁸and to see that no slothful brother be found who gives himself up to idleness or vain talk, and does not attend to his reading, and so is himself unprofitable, but disturbs others. ¹⁹If such a one is found (which God forbid), he is to be punished once or twice if necessary, ²⁰and if he does not amend, he must come under the correction of the Rule in such a way that others may fear. ²¹And further, brothers ought not associate at inappropriate times. ²²On Sunday all are to devote themselves to reading, except those who are appointed to various functions. ²³But if anyone is so careless and slothful that he will not or cannot meditate or read, let some work be given him to do, that he may not be idle. ²⁴Weak and sickly brothers should be given such work or craft that they will not remain idle, but without straining them or driving them away. ²⁵Their weakness must be taken into account by the Abbot.

Benedict expresses the need for balance between labor and *lectio*. This is clearly stated in the first verse of chapter 48: “Idleness is the enemy of the soul. Therefore, the brothers should have specified periods for manual labor as well as for prayerful reading.” The Work of God is to be not only the structure on which our daily routine is built, but the underpinning of everything we do. Benedict arranges the hours of manual work based on the hours of the Divine Office, and that arrangement varies with the seasons.

For those of us who live outside the monastery, we do not have a central oratory, nor can we always organize our work around the hours of the Divine Office. So how is any of this relevant to our life as followers of the Rule? There are two keys to applying these instructions from the Rule to our lives. The first is to allow the Work of God to form the structure for our day, making adjustments to the times of the hours, or combining various hours “as best we can” so as to “not neglect our measure of service”. For example, if you are in a workplace where taking time for Terce and None would be difficult or

impossible, combine those little hours with Sext and do the Psalms appointed for all three hours as part of Noonday Prayer on your lunch break. Maybe your morning routine does not allow time for Vigils, Lauds, and Prime. You can do Vigils upon arising, then combine Lauds and Prime either at home before work, or combine Vigils and Lauds then say Prime at work when you arrive. At the very least, we should be conscientious to do Morning and Evening Prayer every day.

The second key is to recognize our need to make sacred time and sacred space within the context of each work day. Silence is a gift that we too often neglect. Making sacred time, and setting aside sacred space for quiet contemplation and *lectio* is very important. Even just setting aside five minutes in a quiet corner of home or office, or finding a park bench near your office, or pausing in the car (while parked) before entering the office, or whatever space you can designate, is an opportunity for a Divine encounter. If the space allows for the opportunity to kneel as Benedict suggests (RB 50:3), and your body will cooperate with the practice, that is so much the better. But make the time and space regardless. These are moments of grace that we should not let pass. And having a permanently specified space in your home designated as “sacred space” is important, too. That can be your “go to” space for prayer and encounter with God—your personal oratory.

In the Rule, prayer is referred to as “the Work of God.” Prayer, then, is work and work is prayer in Benedict’s understanding. His vision, as revealed in this chapter and the overall Rule is that we begin to see that all we do is a work of prayer. His desire was that we consecrate to God the whole cycle of our day, from rising and drinking our morning coffee, to our drive to work or school, meetings and classes, and household responsibilities, until we crawl into bed for sleep. When we have given it all to God, we can then rest in His unchanging love.

March 31, July 31, November 30
Chapter 49

The life of a monk ought always to be a Lenten observance. ²However, since such virtue is that of few, we advise that during these days of Lent he guard his life with all purity ³and to wash away during these holy days all the shortcomings of other times. ⁴This will be done fittingly, if we restrain ourselves from all vices, and devote ourselves to prayers with tears, to reading, heartfelt penitence, and to abstinence. ⁵During these days, therefore, we will add something to the usual amount of our service, private prayers, abstinence from food and drink, ⁶so that each one offer to God “with the joy of the Holy Spirit” (1 Thes 1:6), of his own desire, something above his prescribed measure. ⁷In other words, let each one deny himself some food, drink, sleep, needless speech, and jesting, and with the gladness of spiritual desire anticipate holy Easter. ⁸Each one, however, should make known to his Abbot what he intends to do, and let it be done with his approval and blessing. ⁹Whatever is done without permission of the spiritual father will be reckoned as presumption and vainglory, and not to merit. ¹⁰Therefore, let all be done with the approval of the Abbot.

“The life of a monk ought always to be a Lenten observance.” According to the *Book of Common Prayer*, Lent is the liturgical season “of penitence and fasting” (BCP p. 264f). You may ask why anyone would want to live in a perpetual state of penitence and abstinence? Obviously, Benedict recognizes that we cannot realistically live a continuous Lent. He acknowledges that to be able to maintain the discipline of penitence is a “virtue...of few”. But Lent is also the season of preparation for Easter and the celebration of the Resurrection (Lenten preface #2, BCP p. 379); so in that sense our lives truly are a Lenten observance. We are constantly in a state of preparation for our resurrection in Jesus, looking toward that final consummation when we will be united with Him in His kingdom. I believe it is safe to say that it is the desire of all faithful Christians to live in that resurrection joy, and it is a promise of God that we shall dwell there (1 Cor. 15:51-52). But there are no shortcuts into the Kingdom; there is only The Way. Too many want to live in Easter without experiencing Good Friday. We want the resurrection without the crucifixion. That is not The Way. The Way is in Jesus Christ Who was crucified, Who died, Who descended into hell, THEN was raised by the Father, and Who sits at God’s right hand. You cannot have Easter without Lent, without walking The Way.

But what Benedict is teaching in this chapter is that our Lenten discipline is a foundational practice for the rest of the year. We can learn the disciplines in Lent that will help us live our lives in accordance with the Gospel throughout the other seasons of the Church year. The disciplines that we practice in Lent will help us to walk more closely in The Way. Note how, before Benedict lists the disciplines of self-denial and abstinence, he says, “During these days, therefore, we will add something to the usual amount of our service...so that each one offer to God ‘with the joy of the Holy Spirit’, of his own desire, something above his prescribed measure.” A Lenten discipline—a Lenten life—is not primarily about giving up things, it is about learning to add what will help us on The Way, shedding the things that hinder our ability to follow Christ. Lent is the time to learn the disciplines of the faith “with the joy of the Holy Spirit”.

But we must also recognize that everything we do in Christ affects the entire Body. It is important that we not rely on our own reason and instincts, but trust those who have been placed in authority over us in Christ. That is why Benedict instructs that as we prepare for our Lenten discipline let “...all be done

with the approval of the Abbot”. We don’t have an Abbot, but we do have people to whom we may look for advice and Godly counsel. It is always wise to get an objective perspective on our spiritual walk, someone whom we trust to speak the truth into our lives. Look to your parish priest, your accountability or prayer partner, or your confessor for advice when preparing to make a change in your spiritual discipline. When we try to do these things on our own, we may find that what we have chosen to do “will be reckoned as presumption and vainglory, and not to merit”. Seeking the approval and blessing of the clergy or others in authority before making a life change is a healthy practice.

April 1, August 1, December 1
Chapter 50

The brothers who work too far away, and cannot come to the oratory at the appointed time—²and the Abbot has assured himself that such is the case—³should perform the Work of God where they are working, kneeling out of reverence for God. ⁴In the same way let those who are sent on a journey not omit the appointed hours, but say the office by themselves as best they can, and not neglect to fulfill their obligation of divine service.

In this chapter, and the one to follow, Benedict presses forward with specific guidelines for maintaining faithfulness to the Work of God, even when we are away from home. These chapters address how to pray in various situations, at work, or on the road, and how to set aside sacred time and sacred space wherever you are.

Benedict instructs that when you find yourself in unusual surroundings you must not neglect the Work of God, but make sacred time and space for the Divine Office regardless of the circumstances. This can be difficult. Often when I am traveling for Church related business, I have no control over my schedule. I must fit the hours in around conferences, council meetings, etc. But, if, as we saw in chapter 43, that nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God, then even when schedules are disrupted by travel, sickness, or other unforeseen impingement on our time and routine, we are to “perform the Work of God where [we] are, kneeling out of reverence for God.” Benedict directs the act of kneeling as it temporarily recreates whatever space we have available for prayer into sacred space. But, as we observed in the meditation on chapter 19, Holy Scripture does not dictate specific postures for our various forms of worship. The primary concern of St. Benedict was not the physical posture, but the “reverence for God”. For example, sitting on the couch in a hotel room, if our undivided attention is directed toward God, can be a reverent posture and create sacred space.

Benedict recognized that there are going to be those times when outside forces can negatively impact our efforts to keep the holy hours. He says “let those who are sent on a journey not omit the appointed hours, but say the office by themselves *as best they can*, and not neglect to fulfill their obligation of divine service” (*emphasis added*). The Lord knows our heart (Psalm 44:21). If the desire of our heart is to honor the Lord and to worship Him, He will be glorified. The Lord says, “those who honor me I will honor” (1 Sam. 2:30), and “he who brings thanksgiving as his sacrifice honors me” (Psalm 50:23). So whether we are kneeling, standing, or sitting, and no matter where we are, “at all times, and in all places, give thanks” to the Lord (BCP p. 333).

One final thought on this topic. I encourage my parishioners to bring me a signed bulletin from churches they visit while traveling. I joke that I want it signed to confirm that they actually went to worship there and didn’t just bop into the narthex and grab a bulletin. And when they do bring a bulletin to me, I acknowledge that at the announcements on Sunday morning. But the idea in asking them to bring a bulletin is two-fold. I like to know what other churches are doing, and I want to encourage my parishioners to attend worship when they are away from their parish home. We are never on vacation from God. We worship Him “at all times, and in all places!” We need to encourage one another in that discipline.

April 2, August 2, December 2
Chapter 51

A brother who is sent out on any business and is expected to return to the monastery the same day, may not presume to eat outside, even if he is urgently invited to do so, ²unless, indeed, it is commanded him by his Abbot. ³If he act otherwise, he will be excommunicated.

Again Saint Benedict emphasizes the importance of belonging to the community. The reason the monk must return to the monastery is so that he may eat with the other members of the community. To eat outside the monastery would rob the monk of the fellowship of the community. Today, we live in an age of incredible individualism. We jealously guard our private time, and that is understandable because it is extremely rare to have that time. And the time we do have in our days is consumed with work, family, and other obligations. As a result, it is not uncommon for us to grab a quick bite at a fast food restaurant and eat alone at our desk or in the car. And it seems that in our culture we are quickly losing any sense that eating with others means sharing our lives and spiritual communion with each other. To linger over a meal is too often perceived as “wasted time”. Miranda and I try to eat dinner together every day, but as an introvert I am quite happy most of the time to eat my lunch alone. When I am honest, I can admit that I cherish that privacy and solitude. But the practice of solo dining, if left unchecked, can cut us off from our family and the other members of the faith community.

What Benedict is suggesting here is that our communal meals are opportunities to deepen the sacramental character of our community. Whenever possible, I try to arrange counseling times, and visits with my parishioners over a meal, or at the least a cup of coffee. The food itself is not important, it is the quality time spent in spiritual union during the meal. To slow down and sip a cup of coffee, or relax over a common meal, opens avenues for genuine fellowship and spiritual union. Jesus often met with the ones to whom He was ministering over a meal (e.g. Matt. 9:10; 26:7; Luke 5:29; 11:37; 19:5). The act of breaking bread together draws us into a deeper fellowship. It is in that sense an outward sign of an inward grace, i.e. a sacramental act. The Pharisees couldn't understand this. They asked Jesus' disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” (Matt. 9:11; Mark 2:16; Luke 5:30). Jesus ate with them so that the Holy Spirit could work in that situation, often bringing conviction on the participants in the meal, but equally often opening the door to spiritual enlightenment.

Is it wrong to “presume to eat outside”? Or to have a quiet, private, uninterrupted meal? No. But, to make a habit of avoiding opportunities for fellowship, and breaking bread with a brother or sister, is spiritually unhealthy. As the song says, “Let us break bread together” and enjoy the company of the saints in a common meal.

April 3, August 3, December 3
Chapter 52

The oratory needs to be what it is called, and let nothing else be done or stored there. ²When the Work of God is finished, all should depart in complete silence, and with reverence for God, ³so that a brother who may desire to pray alone is not prevented by another's misconduct. ⁴But if perhaps another desires to pray alone, he may simply enter and pray, not with a loud voice, but with tears and fervor of heart. ⁵Therefore, the one who does not wish to say his prayers in this way, is not be permitted to stay in the oratory after the Work of God is finished, as we said, that another may not be disturbed.

During the Summer of the year prior to the beginning of my seminary career, I spent 12 weeks visiting various kinds of churches in order to get a sense of the breadth of worship styles in the modern Church. It was eye-opening! One of the churches I visited was a rather large, non-denominational congregation. They had recently built a new, multi-purpose "worship space". I was seated on a riser across from the pulpit. The band was on the floor behind the pulpit; and on the risers behind the band a choir was seated. On the hardwood flooring of the "worship space" was the outline of a basketball court, and directly over my head was a basketball backboard and hoop raised on a folding frame. It didn't feel, to me, like "worship space" at all. I felt like the worship team and congregation had invaded the space dedicated to a sports arena.

St. Benedict would have been appalled by the "worship space" I described above. He declares that "The oratory needs to be what it is called, and let nothing else be done or stored there." The oratory is to be sacred space, designated for silent contemplation, corporate and private prayer, and communal worship. The Latin word *oratio* means prayer. In the monastery of Benedict's day, private space for quiet personal prayer was hard to come by. The monks did not have private rooms, taking their sleep in dormitory settings. Their days were regimented, so wandering off to sit by a quiet stream, or hiking a mountain to pray was not usually an option either. The oratory was the place of prayer. The norm in that period was to situate the oratory at the center of the monastic enclosure. It then became the focal point of the community. This pattern was carried over into the medieval construction of European cities. The cathedrals were placed on the highest point and near the center of most European cities. And even here in the United States, the Washington National Cathedral site was chosen because it is the highest point of land in the nation's capital. Would that we centered our government around the oratory and that it became the focal point of the national community!

One of the on-going battles I face as a parish priest is maintaining quiet in the sanctuary before and after a service of worship. My congregation is very loving and they like to talk to each other. Sometimes before the beginning of our Sunday worship the din of conversation in the nave can be quite overwhelming. Benedict says that "the one who does not wish to say his prayers [quietly], is not be permitted to stay in the oratory." There are members of the church who do want to pray quietly, and I feel confident that they find the noise level of conversation distracting. I do try to encourage those who want to fellowship to move to the "fellowship hall", but it is often a losing battle. But, think about this, and see if the Lord does not put it on your heart, not to correct others, but to set an example by taking your conversation out of the oratory, "that another may not be disturbed."

April 4, August 4, December 4
Chapter 53:1-15

Let all guests who arrive be received as Christ, because He will say, "I was a stranger and you welcomed Me" (Mt 25:35).² And let appropriate honor be shown to all, "especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Gal 6:10) and to wayfarers.³ When a guest is announced, let him be met by the Superior and the brethren with every mark of love.⁴ First they are to pray together, and let them be united in peace.⁵ This kiss of peace, though, should not be given before a prayer has been said, because satan seeks to deceive.⁶ In the greeting let all humility be shown to the guests, whether coming or going.⁷ Let Christ be adored in them, with head bowed or the whole body prostrate on the ground, because He is also received in them.⁸ When the guests have been received, they should be invited to prayer, and after that the Superior, or whom he shall bid, will sit with them.⁹ The divine law is to be read to the guest so that he may be edified, and after that every kindness should be shown to him.¹⁰ The fast may be broken by the Superior in deference to the guest, unless it is a day of solemn fast, which cannot be broken.¹¹ The brothers, however, keep the customary fast.¹² The Abbot should pour water on the guest's hands,¹³ and both the Abbot and the whole community wash the feet of all the guests.¹⁴ When they have been washed, the guests say this verse: "We have received Your mercy, O God, in the midst of Your temple" (Ps 47[48]: 10).¹⁵ Great care must be taken, especially in the reception of the poor and travelers, because Christ is received more particularly in them; whereas our regard for the wealthy assures them of respect.

The Rule of St. Benedict is an inspired document. The Holy Spirit obviously had His hand in its composition. At the same time the Rule's organization and many of its chapters are characterized by a response to issues facing a growing cenobitic Christian community. Thus it is that chapters 53-63, which cover some household rules for the monastic community, may appear disparate but are bound together by the inspired theme which permeates the entire Rule: the *Imago Christi*—the "Image of Christ". Seeing Christ in the monastic guest, practicing humility before Abbot and brothers, and denying all for the sake of Christ, all point to the desire to be recreated in the image of Christ. This theme resonates throughout the Rule (cf. RB 72:11; RB 4:21; and meditations on chs. 2-3; chs. 35-42), and it underlies each of the eleven chapters we begin reading today.

Benedict begins this chapter with this exhortation: "Let all guests who arrive be received as Christ..." In the early years of our parish, when we moved to our second location, Smoky Joe, a homeless man who lived under a lean-to behind the convenience store a half block from our church, would come to our services and sit on the steps to the parish hall at the back of the nave. He was seldom washed and often reeked of alcohol. One Sunday a parishioner was trying to comfort and quiet her infant daughter by pacing back and forth behind the last pews. Smoky Joe commented how beautiful the baby was. The mother asked if he would like to hold her. Joe was flabbergasted and protested, but she held the baby out to him and he took her in his arms. Tears began to run down his cheeks. The next Sunday Smoky Joe showed up for church washed and in clean clothes. I asked him about the change, and he said to me, "I wasn't sure you were serious that you welcomed me. Now I know." Benedict says, "let appropriate honor be shown to all"—not just the clean and polished, but to all. "Let Christ be adored in them... because He is also received in them." When we look at the guests who come in through the door of the church do we see the *Imago Christi*? How do we greet them? You can set the example.

April 5, August 5, December 5
Chapter 53:16-24

The kitchen of the Abbot and guests should be separate from the brothers', so that the brothers might not be disturbed by the guests who arrive at uncertain times—and monasteries are never without guests.

¹⁷Assign two brothers who are competent to work in the kitchen for a year. ¹⁸Additional help may be given them as they need it, that they may serve without grumbling. And when they have not enough to do in the kitchen, let them go out again for work where it has been assigned to them. ¹⁹This course should be followed, not only in this office, but in all the offices of the monastery, ²⁰that whenever any brother needs help, it be given to him, and that when he has nothing to do, he again does his assigned work.

²¹Moreover, let the guest quarters be assigned to a God-fearing brother, ²²where there should be a sufficient number of beds prepared. ²³And the house of God should be managed by sensible men who will care for it wisely. ²⁴On no account is anyone to associate or speak with guests, who is not ordered to do so; however if a brother meets or sees a guest, he is to greet them humbly, as we have said, and he is to ask for a blessing and to continue on explaining that he is not allowed to speak with a guest.

Moving from welcoming guests to taking care of their needs, Benedict gives instruction on how that work load may be divided between various members of the community. The most telling remark in this section is found in verse 23, where he says, “the house of God should be managed by sensible men who will care for it wisely.” We need wisdom in caring for our home, and wisdom in dealing with our guests.

We examined welcoming guests into the church in yesterday’s meditation. But what about into your home, and with whom do you associate in general? Benedict warns against the brothers having interaction with the guests, unless ordered to do so. Why is that? And what relevance does that have for us? It is wise to be cautious about whom you welcome into your home, and to whom you have extended interaction in your daily life. St. Peter cautions us to “be watchful, [for] your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour” (1 Pet. 5:8). And St. Benedict warns in verse 5 of this chapter that the “kiss of peace should not be given before a prayer has been said, because satan seeks to deceive.”

When I was doing Kairos prison ministry at Central Prison in Raleigh, I was carpooling for the training sessions with two men from Cashiers, a town about an hour west of Asheville. These men would stay at my house on the night before the training sessions so that we could leave together early on Saturday morning. Both of these men were convicted felons. Neither Miranda nor I felt unsafe in their presence because we had all prayed together and spirit witnessed to spirit. Years later, I had a deacon who, before he had joined our parish, had also opened his home to a convicted felon, but he and his wife had neglected to prayerfully vet their guest. They left for work the second morning of his stay, and when they returned that evening their home had been thoroughly cleaned out. Everything of value was gone.

Yes, we should treat the stranger as if he or she were Christ Himself, to see him or her as the *Imago Christi*. But we must also be wise in whom we welcome into a deeper relationship. Benedict commands that “on no account is anyone to associate or speak with guests, who is not ordered to do so...” Seek confirmation of the Holy Spirit and the elders of the Church before taking a guest further into your confidence and home. St. Paul reiterates this warning, saying, “Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is not strange if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness” (1

Cor. 11:14-15). It is a delicate balance. As Christians we need to have an open and welcoming spirit. But take note of Jesus' exhortation to His disciples as He sent them forth: "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (Matt. 10:16).

April 6, August 6, December 6
Chapter 54

A monk is not allowed at any time to give or to receive letters, tokens, or gifts of any kind, either from parents or any other person, nor from each other, without the permission of the Abbot. ²Even if anything is sent to him by his parents, let him not presume to accept it without making known to the Abbot that he has received it. ³And if the Abbot allows it to be accepted, let it be in the Abbot's discretion to give it to whom he pleases. ⁴And let not the brother to whom it was sent, become sad, that "no opportunity be given to the devil" (Eph 4:27; 1 Tm 5:14). ⁵Whoever shall presume to act otherwise must fall under the discipline of the Rule.

This chapter sounds very harsh at first glance. The monk "is not allowed at any time to give or to receive letters, tokens, or gifts of any kind..."; and even if the Abbot allows the monk to receive a gift, it is "in the Abbot's discretion to give it to whom he pleases." The import of this chapter, though, is less about the giving and receiving of gifts than it is about maintaining detachment from the things of this world. What are the things that we consider truly valuable? What is it that we possess? And have we become so possession conscious that our possessions, in effect, possess us?

When we begin to see the whole Body of Christ as the Family of God then our sense of possessing things becomes less problematic. We can begin to live the principle of Acts 2:44: "all who believed were together and had all things in common." Letting go of our possessions means giving up these gifts to the *Imago Christi*, the members of the Body of Christ. It is a discipline, an act of the will. St. Luke states again in Acts 4:32, "Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common." This is a goal for all of us to work toward.

One day, upon returning home from the church, my next door neighbor was standing next to her car, crying. As I got out of my car asked if I could help. She told me that her car had died and her brother, who is a mechanic, had come to look at it and declared it beyond repair. I offered to help her find a new car, but she began to sob, saying, "I don't want a new car. This is my car! It is the only car I have ever owned, and I want it to last forever. I don't want a new car." Her car possessed her.

What are the things that would devastate you if they were stolen from you, became irreparably broken, or were destroyed? We all have things which are precious to us, but they are just things. Fires happen. Tornados and hurricanes demolish everything in their path. Wars devastate communities and lives. And things simply grow old and wear out. The things of this world are passing away. The things of God are eternal. The things that are truly valuable are the unseen things of God: His love, His mercy, His salvation, His Kingdom. "We look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal" (2 Cor. 4:18). But St. Paul tells us in his letter to the Church at Rome that the things of this world are useful in helping us see these unseen things of God. He says: "His invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made" (1:20). When we let go of our possessions God can use them to redirect our focus, and by receiving them as gifts we can then freely give them up to the *Imago Christi*, the members of the Body of Christ. By giving the things of this world into the care of Christ, we allow Him to direct their usage. Then we are free to receive the eternal things of God.

April 7, August 7, December 7
Chapter 55:1-14

Let clothing be given to the brothers according to the circumstances of the place and the nature of the climate in which they live, ²because in cold regions more is needed, while in warm regions less. ³This is left to the Abbot's discretion. ⁴We believe, however, that for a temperate climate a cowl and a tunic for each monk are sufficient; ⁵a woolen cowl is necessary for winter, and a thin or worn one for summer; ⁶also a scapular for work, and sandals and shoes as covering for the feet. ⁷Monks must not worry about the color or the texture of all these things, but use such as can be bought more cheaply. ⁸The Abbot, however, should look to the size to insure that these garments are not too small, but fitted for those who are to wear them. ⁹Those who receive new clothes should always return the old ones, to be put away in the wardrobe for the poor. ¹⁰For it is sufficient for a monk to have two tunics and two cowls, for wearing at night and for washing, ¹¹but any more than that is superfluous and must be taken away. ¹²So, too, when they receive anything new, let them return sandals and whatever is old. ¹³Brothers who are sent on a journey should receive underclothing from the wardrobe, which, on their return, they will replace there, washed. ¹⁴Their cowls and tunics should also be a little better than the ones they usually wear, which they received from the wardrobe when they set out on a journey, and give back when they return.

William Shakespeare, in his play *Hamlet*, said, “the apparel oft proclaims the man.” How often do we make assumptions about a person by their outward appearance? If we all wore the same garments then the man himself might have to speak and act for himself. This is the concept behind the uniform clothing of the monastic tradition. And interestingly enough, it is the same concept behind the use of vestments in the worship of the Church. Vestments cover the man. Whereas a televangelist may wear a \$3,000 suit and a Rolex watch, if a priest were to do so (I'd, first, ask where the money came from), it would not be obvious, for the vestments cover the man. The cowl, tunic, sandals, and scapular of the monks was a common garment of the day. We look at monks vesture now as unusual, but in Benedict's day, it was simply street clothing. Thus Benedict directs that the old, worn clothing “should be returned at once and stored in a wardrobe for the poor.” They would not look odd wearing it. Our clothing should not become a matter of pride, rather simple, functional, and common enough to not draw attention.

Another aspect of the clergy vesture is that it is symbolic for the entire congregation of being clothed with Christ Jesus. We have died with Christ, in baptism, and now we are incorporated into His Body. For us to truly be the *Imago Christi* we must look like Him—be clothed in Him. St. Paul said, “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Gal. 3:27). But it is not simply a one-time experience. We are called daily to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 13:14). Before we walk out the door to greet the day, we need to spend time with Jesus and allow him to vest us in His Being, that we may be His image in the world. We all belong to one Body. Our presence in the world should not “proclaim the man”, as Shakespeare said, but proclaim the *Imago Christi*.

April 8, August 8, December 8
Chapter 55:15-22

For their bedding, a straw mattress, a blanket, a coverlet, and a pillow should be sufficient. ¹⁶These beds must, be frequently examined by the Abbot, to prevent personal goods from being found. ¹⁷And if anything should be found with anyone that he did not receive from the Abbot, let him fall under the severest discipline. ¹⁸And that this vice of private ownership may be cut off by the root, let everything necessary be given by the Abbot: ¹⁹that is, cowl, tunic, sandals, shoes, belt, knife, pen, needle, towel, and writing tablet; so that every excuse of want may be removed. ²⁰The Abbot should bear in mind the following sentence from the Acts of the Apostles: “And distribution was made to every man according to his need” (Acts 4:35). ²¹In this way, then, the Abbot will have regard for the infirmities of the needy, not for the evil will of the envious. ²²Yet in all his decisions, let the Abbot bear in mind God’s retribution.

There are two verses in this section of chapter 55 which help us clearly understand St. Benedict’s mind regarding what he considers necessary for the monks to possess (vv. 15, 19): these are the things listed for the monks’ use, but none of them are to be kept for private ownership. The brothers are given what they need, not what they want. Benedict says, “let everything necessary be given by the Abbot... so that every excuse of want may be removed.”

We don’t have an abbot to hand us what we need. And to be honest, most of us in the United States can have much more than what we need, and as a result we can indulge in what we want. It is a great source of temptation for all of us. The more we possess, the less we have to charitably give to those less fortunate. Mahatma Gandhi said, “Live simply so that others may simply live.” It is a useful proverb. How do we know when we have stepped over the line from what we need into the realm of excess? Here is a simple quiz that one can take: Do you own more than one pair of shoes? Do you own your own car, truck, or motorcycle? Do you have a choice of food each day? Do you have more than one change of undergarments? Only one in ten people around the world can answer yes to even three of those questions. As Rich Mullens sang, “Birds have nests foxes have dens, But the hope of the whole world rests, On the shoulders of a homeless man, You had the shoulders of a homeless man, No You did not have a home” (*You Did Not Have a Home*). Our homeless Savior commanded us to “Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him who would borrow from you” (Matt. 5:42), and promised us that “whoever gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he shall not lose his reward” (Matt. 10:42).

To truly be the *Imago Christi* we would, in essence, be the image of a homeless man. I am not suggesting that we all don rags, live in a cardboard refrigerator box, and beg. But Benedict’s exhortation that we live with what is sufficient for our needs is a challenge that all of us should take seriously. This is the Gospel ideal. This is the mark and measure that St. Benedict proclaims to us in this chapter.

April 9, August 9, December 9
Chapter 56

The Abbot's table must always be with the guests and travelers. ²Whenever there are no guests, it is in his discretion to invite any of the brothers he should choose. ³Let him, however, insure that one or two of the seniors always remain with the brothers for the sake of discipline.

In an initial reading of this short chapter it sounds as if the Abbot is being accorded special privilege, however, the import of this discipline is the protection of the monks. "The abbot's table must always be with the guests and travelers." By having the guests sit with him, the abbot protects the monks from uncomfortable conversation, intrusive questions, and possibly even demonic assignments from the outside. In protecting the monks under him the abbot is manifesting the *Imago Christi*, even as Jesus Himself sought to protect His disciples in the Garden when He told those who came to arrest Him, "I told you that I am he; so, if you seek me, let these men go" (John 18:8).

Are there loved ones whom you are called to shield? When our loved ones are threatened, it is a temptation to utilize worldly means to protect them. In the heat of the moment we can find ourselves responding with type for type: returning anger for anger, insult for insult, blow for blow. When we respond in such a manner, the devil rejoices. But Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also..." (Matt. 5:38-39). Our battle is not with the person confronting us, for as St. Paul says, "we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers..." And putting on the whole armor of God, we can take up "the shield of faith, with which [we] can quench all the flaming darts of the evil one" (Eph. 6:11-18). And St. James makes this pattern of defense clear to us, saying, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you..." (James 4:6-8). God is able, and desirous, to defend your loved ones. Humbly trust Him, and not your own power and ability.

How best can we protect our loved ones while maintaining the *Imago Christi*? "Put on the whole armor of God", draw near, and submit to Him.

April 10, August 10, December 10
Chapter 57

If there are skilled workmen in the monastery, let them work at their art in all humility, but only if the Abbot gives his permission. ²If one of them should grow proud by reason of his art, such that he feels he is conferring a benefit on the monastery, ³let him be removed from that work and not return to it, unless after he has humbled himself the Abbot again orders him to do so. ⁴If any of the work of the artists is to be sold, let them, through whose hands the transaction must pass, see to it, that they do not presume to practice any fraud on the monastery. ⁵Let them always be mindful of Ananias and Sapphira, who suffered death in the body (cf Acts 5:1-11), ⁶lest they and all who practice any fraud in things belonging to the monastery suffer in the soul. ⁷As regards the prices of these things, let not the vice of avarice creep in, ⁸but let it always be sold a little cheaper than it can be sold by secular dealers, ⁹so that God May Be Glorified in All Things (1 Pt 4:11).

This chapter is not about doing art, it's about the mindset and the heart of the artisan. We all have gifts, but are we using them for self-aggrandizement and personal profit, or for the building up of the Body and the glory of the Lord?

“Every good and perfect gift is from above...” (James 1:17). Monks are not to claim possession of their talents. Artisans “are to practice their craft with all humility...If one of them becomes puffed up by his skillfulness in his craft...he is to be removed...”. If an artisan is to project the *Imago Christi*, he must see that the gift that he has been given by God is “for the common good” (1 Cor. 12:7).

The gifts that God has given to you are yours to use as you see fit. You have control over your body, your mind, your spirit. God has entrusted all that we have to our care. We can use our body, mind, and spirit for God and His kingdom; or we can abuse them or allow them to become dormant. The same is true for the gifts that God has graciously entrusted to our care. We can use the gifts selfishly, for our own benefit. We can let the gifts become dormant from fear or neglect. Or we can even use the gifts maliciously as did the fallen angels. The gifts are yours. You can “possess” them, or you can yield them to God for Him to use as He sees fit. It is like the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14-30). All three servants were given gifts. The two who used the gifts wisely for the Master were given more gifts. The one who selfishly buried his in the ground lost everything. When we return the gifts God has graciously given to us, He will use them for His glory and will entrust us with more.

You may be concerned if you have not used a God-given gift recently, or you are afraid that you didn't use it correctly and God will be angry. “What if God has taken it away from me?” St. Paul can put your mind at ease. He said that “the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29). Pick up the gifts again. Ask God to forgive you and to give you the grace to use these gracious gifts for His glory. Yield your spirit and your gifts to His will. Then watch what God will do.

What good gifts has God given to you? Are you allowing them to lie dormant? Are you using them selfishly? Or are you using them selflessly for the common good and for God's glory?

April 11, August 11, December 11
Chapter 58:1-16

Do not grant easy admission to one who has newly come to monastic life, ²but, as the Apostle says, “Test the spirits to see whether they are of God” (1 Jn 4:1). ³If, therefore, the newcomer keeps on knocking, and after four or five days it is seen that he patiently bears the harsh treatment offered him and the difficulty of admission, and that he perseveres in his request, ⁴then shall admission be granted to him, and let him live for a few days in the guest quarters. ⁵But after that let him live in the novitiate, and there let him meditate, eat, and sleep. ⁶A senior should be appointed for him, who is qualified to win souls, who will observe him with great care ⁷and see whether he really seeks God and whether he is eager for the Work of God, and for obedience and trials. ⁸The novice should be shown all the hard and rugged things which lead us to God. ⁹If he promises to remain steadfast in stability, then after two months have passed, let this Rule be read to him straight through ¹⁰and let it be said to him: This is the law under which you desire to serve. If you can keep it, enter in; if, however, you cannot, depart freely. ¹¹If he still stands firm, then let him be taken back to the novitiate, and let him be tried again in all patience. ¹²And after six months have passed, let the Rule be read to him again, so that he may know what he is entering. ¹³And if he still stands firm, let the same Rule be read to him again after four months. ¹⁴After having weighed the matter with himself, if he promises to keep everything, and to do everything that is commanded him, then let him be received into the community, ¹⁵knowing that he is now placed under the law of the Rule, and from that day forward it is no longer permitted to him to leave the monastery, ¹⁶nor to shake his neck from under the yoke of the Rule, which after so long a deliberation he was at liberty to either refuse or to accept.

This chapter is the heart of this section of the Rule. Though the section begins with chapter 53, the reception of guests, the message of chapter 58 may give us a clearer look into the mind of St. Benedict regarding the elements of discipline in these chapters. The English title given to this chapter in the *RB 1980* is “The Procedure for Receiving Brothers”, but the Latin title uses the word *disciplina*, or “The Discipline for Receiving Brothers”. It is in this chapter that Benedict gives us the promises that the newly professed makes: stability, fidelity, and obedience. When someone is truly desirous to be the *Imago Christi*, they will pursue the disciplines of the Lord, and to do that, they will keep the promises. That procedure, the discipline of the Rule, is what Benedict has laid out for us in this chapter.

You may say, “But this chapter is about becoming a monk! I’m not interested in entering the monastery. What does this chapter have to do with me?” Yes, Benedict wrote the Rule for monks, but the truth is that a monk is someone, as Benedict describes above, who “seeks God and...is eager for the Work of God”. This is a significant challenge for every Christian. The Latin word translated “eager” is *sollicitus*, which is often translated into English as “zeal”.

For what are you zealous? As Christians living in the world, but by grace not of the world, we are often tempted to get caught up in worldly pursuits. The pursuit of financial security, status, physical attractiveness, etc., all make their claim on our consciousness. But as St. Benedict exhorts us in chapter 4, verse 20: “Your way of acting should be different from worldly ways.” In pursuit of that goal, Benedict lays down three things for which we must be zealous: “the Work of God, and for obedience and trials”. But let us honestly ask, are we zealously pursuing organizing our daily routine around the discipline of prayer? Are we seeking to live our lives in obedience to the Word of God, and to those in

authority? And are we willing to persevere through the “trials” of life, humbly accepting our role in His Kingdom? The evidence of our zealousness of these pursuits may be answered in our response to the question: Are you zealously desirous of becoming the *Imago Christi*?

The truth is that most of us want the Christian life to be easy. But there are trials. And as Benedict states above, “The novice should be shown all the hard and rugged things which lead us to God.” The zealous pursuit of God often leads through rough terrain. To that end, the novice professes three promises before he is admitted to full membership in the community. These promises are not unique to the cenobitic community, and we shall see in the next meditation how they apply to our lives as Christians living in the secular world.

April 12, August 12, December 12
Chapter 58:17-23

Let him who is received promise in the oratory, in the presence of all, before God and His saints, stability, fidelity to moral life, and obedience, ¹⁸in order that, if he should ever do otherwise, he may know that he will be condemned by God Whom he mocks. ¹⁹He is to make a written statement of his promise in the name of the saints whose relics are there, and of the Abbot there present. ²⁰The novice is to write this document with his own hand, or if he does not know how to write, let another write it at his request, and let the novice make his mark, and with his own hand place it on the altar. ²¹When he has placed it there, let the novice next begin the verse: “Uphold me according to thy promise, that I may live, and let me not be put to shame in my hope!” (Ps 118[119]:116). ²²Then all the brothers repeat this verse three times, adding the Gloria Patri. ²³Then the novice prostrates himself at the feet of each monk, asking that they pray for him; and from that day he is to be counted in the brotherhood.

As was noted yesterday, to be a follower of Christ is to be zealous to become the *Imago Christi*. To that end we must pursue the “hard and rugged things which lead us to God”. Benedict tells us that in order to do these things we must practice “stability, fidelity to moral life, and obedience”. Let us look at how these promises are applicable to our pursuit of holiness as zealous followers of Christ.

The basic meaning that one can derive from Benedict’s use of the term “stability” is perseverance. It is important for us as members of this community of faith to persevere not only in relationship with God, but also in relationship with one another. Our perseverance in communal work, prayer, and relational support for one another is essential to fulfilling the Great Commandment. We are called to love God with all of our being, but also to love our neighbor as ourselves. Stability is about relationship with God and earnestly maintaining our relationship with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Sadly, in our American culture, we have come to the point of zealously protecting our firmly held personal beliefs. For example, we demand the right to not be offended. If you disagree with me, you must be wrong! People quickly jump ship over the slightest offense, moving from church to church until they find a church that tells them what they want to hear. And when they fail in their pursuit, there is always the option to leave the institutional church altogether. Stability offers the alternative of persevering in the steadfast faith that God works through difficult people (ourselves included). We will never agree with everyone, nor will everyone agree with us about everything. But there is great benefit in remaining in one place, pursuing the *Imago Christi* in each one of those whom God has placed around us. As Benedict reminded us in chapter 4, “the workshop in which we perform all these works with diligence is...stability in the community” (vs. 78).

The second of the three promises is “fidelity to moral life.” This promise is difficult both grammatically and in practice. The Latin phrase that Benedict uses in 58:17 is *conversatio morum suorum*. I am not a Latin scholar, however, those who are and who have commented on this verse in the Rule are in agreement that this wording is problematic. The best translation of the promise appears to be lost in the idiomatic expressions of Benedict’s days. On a more practical level, the essence of the promise, if we can rightly interpret Benedict’s intent, is that we are promising a conversion of our behavior—the abandonment of secular habits that are contrary to our Lord’s will for our lives. The promise, *conversatio*, then is a promise to adopt a “way of life” that is in fidelity to the Gospel and to the Rule of

St. Benedict. Fidelity is faithfulness. To faithfully follow Christ we need to let go of the things which distract our attention from Him. Secular goods and values are a distraction from committing ourselves to the *Imago Christi*. The call for us in this promise is to live in faithful adherence to the Rule in the station of life where we find ourselves. For us, that is not a call to renunciation of all worldly goods; rather it is a renunciation of the claim that those worldly goods have over us. We cannot serve both God and mammon. To “prefer nothing whatever to Christ” (RB 72:11) is our goal, and fidelity is the call to embrace that goal.

The final promise is obedience. This virtue is the one most prominently touted in the Rule, and one that every person should strive to possess. Life without obedience is fruitless. Without obedience to God, we are alienated from the source of life. Without obedience to those in authority we are in rebellion, which Samuel told King Saul is like the spirit of divination (1 Sam. 15:23). According to Benedict, “it is love that urges us” to be obedient (5:10), but it is also a battle to maintain this lifestyle (Prol. 40-41). And though we will inevitably struggle to maintain a life of obedience, obedience is a blessing that leads to a deeper and more profound relationship with God (71:1-2). “Obedience is a blessing to be shown by all, not only to the Abbot, but also to one another, knowing that we shall go to God by this path of obedience” (71:1-2). The life and health of the community is tied to this virtue. If we are to live together in love and unity we must show respect for one another, support each other with patience, and “vie with one another in obedience” (72:4-6).

April 13, August 13, December 13
Chapter 58:24-29

If [the one received] has any possessions, he should first either give them to the poor, or formally donate them to the monastery, reserving nothing for himself ²⁵as indeed he should know that from that day onward he will no longer have power even over his own body. ²⁶Then, in the oratory, he is to be divested at once of the garments with which he is clothed, and be vested in the garb of the monastery. ²⁷But let the clothes of which he was divested be laid by in the wardrobe to be preserved, ²⁸so that, if he were to ever agree with the devil's suggestion and leave the monastery (which God forbid) he can be then stripped of his monastic habit and cast out. ²⁹But let him not receive the document of his profession which the Abbot took from the altar, but let it be preserved in the monastery.

The early Church practice in the sacrament of baptism would be difficult for us in modern society to reclaim. The candidates for baptism would gather at the riverside and disrobe. They would then walk into the river, be baptized, and wade ashore on the far side of the river where they would be clothed in new, white robes. Removing our old clothing and being vested in the new garments was a sign of our shedding our worldly lives and being clothed anew with the garments of salvation. This practice is what Benedict claimed for new converts to the monastic community as well. He says that the novice “is to be divested at once of the garments with which he is clothed, and be vested in the garb of the monastery.”

St. Paul says that “Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven” (1 Cor 15:49). And again, in his second epistle to Corinth, “For while we are still in this tent, we sigh with anxiety; not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life” (5:4). And St. John describes the sanctified Church in heaven with these words: “it was granted her to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure—for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints” (Rev. 19:8). We are to “bear the image of the man of heaven”, the *Imago Christi*. St. Paul urges the Church at Rome to “cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us conduct ourselves becomingly as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires” (13:12-14).

By pursuing the promises of stability, fidelity, and obedience we can begin to divest ourselves of the soiled garments of this world, and begin to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ”.

April 14, August 14, December 14
Chapter 59

If a nobleman offers his son to God in the monastery, and the boy is of a young age, his parents should write a written promise which we have mentioned above; ²then at the service of oblation they will wrap that document and the boy's hand in the altar cloth. That is the means to offer him. ³As to their property, they are to bind themselves under oath in the same document that they will never give him anything themselves, nor through any other person, nor in any way whatever, nor give the boy anything or give him opportunity to own anything; ⁴or else, if they refuse to do this and want to make an offering to the monastery as an alms for their own benefit, ⁵let them make a formal donation to the monastery of whatever goods they wish to give, keeping to themselves the income of it, if they so desire. ⁶And there ought to be no opportunity for the boy to expect anything and thus deceive him and ruin him. May God forbid this. But in the past we have learned by experience that this can happen. ⁷Let those who are poor act in like manner. ⁸But as to those who have nothing at all, let them simply write the declaration, and with this oblation offer their son in the presence of witnesses.

There are many and various reasons why noblemen and the poor would make an oblation, an offering of their sons to the monastery. In the days of Benedict, military service was mandatory, but for those in monasteries, or certain service industries, military deferment was an option. To offer one's son to the monastery was a means to preserve his life, and possibly the family name. Often people would give their sons to the monks for education or to learn a trade. And occasionally, there were those who truly witnessed a call from God on the life of their child and wanted to facilitate that call's fulfillment. For the poor, feeding a large family could be problematic. By giving one or two of their children to the monastery the parents could save the lives of those offered and ease the burden on the remainder of the family members. And, of course, there were those who offered their children to the monastery mistakenly thinking that doing so would win them favor with God—a sacrificial offering, if you will.

What can we learn from Benedict, and from this practice? Every child is a gift from God and belongs to God. By recognizing that fact, and daily offering our children back to Him, we glorify God in our offspring. Benedict makes it clear that when parents bring their child to the monastery, they offer their son to God. This oblation is sacramentally signified in the ritual of wrapping the boy's hand in the altar cloth. We don't need to give our children away in order to make an oblationary offering. But we do need to recognize that our children do not belong to us—we do not possess them, or even know what is best for them. God knows what our children need better than we do, because He knows the depths of their spirit, the state of their heart, and the very thoughts in their mind. God Himself set the example of giving up a child, “for God so loved the world that He gave His only Son...”

This oblationary practice has long since ceased in the monastic community. So what relevance does this chapter have to either the Benedictine Community or to us who serve God in the secular realm? The relevance is found, not in the directives regarding children, but in what it teaches us about our attitude toward the people we love. Do we love them enough to “wrap [their] hand in the altar cloth” and give them to God? Can we follow the example of God the Father, Who loved us so much that He gave His Son to die for us? Do I love someone enough to let them go? That is a hard question, but one we all will face in one way or another.

If we can, by God's grace, see in those we love the *Imago Christi*, then we can, like the Father, let them go, because we can trust God as the noblemen and poor of Benedict's day did, and wrap their hands in the altar cloth, and offer our loved ones to God. It is not easy, but it is freeing for us, and for them. It is hard to give up someone we love. But let us remember what St. Paul said about giving freely: "Each one must do as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance" (1 Cor. 9:7-8). In letting go of those we love, we get them back. Because in giving them to God, we can find them in the Heart of Christ. When we receive the Eucharist, we receive the Body of Christ and everyone who is found in Him.

April 15, August 15, December 15
Chapter 60

If a priest asks to be received into the monastery, let consent not be granted too quickly. ²However, if he urgently persists in his request, let him know that he must keep the whole discipline of the Rule, ³and that nothing will be relaxed in his favor, that it may be as it is written: "Friend, why are you here?" (Mt 26:50). ⁴It may be granted him, however, to stand next to the Abbot, and to give the blessing, or to celebrate Mass, but only if the Abbot orders him to do so. ⁵But if the Abbot does not, let the priest not presume to do anything himself, knowing that he is under the discipline of the Rule, but rather give an example of humility to all. ⁶But if there is a question of an appointment in the monastery, or any other matter, ⁷let him be ranked by the time of his entry into the monastery, and not by the place granted him in consideration of the priesthood. ⁸But if a cleric, moved by the same desire, wishes to join the monastery, let him too have a middle place, provided he promises to keep the Rule and observe stability.

I am a priest, but I will not be asking to be received into a monastery any time soon. What does this chapter say to me? You may not be a priest, and so you may rightly ask what this chapter has to say to you. Regardless of our place in the Church, Jesus gave us a directive in Luke chapter 14 which is instructional for comprehending this chapter from the Rule of St. Benedict. Let me quote the passage in full here:

Now he told a parable to those who were invited, when he marked how they chose the places of honor, saying to them, "When you are invited by any one to a marriage feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest a more eminent man than you be invited by him; and he who invited you both will come and say to you, 'Give place to this man,' and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, 'Friend, go up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you. For every one who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 14:7-11).

The best course of action for any Christian, when taking on any new opportunity or responsibility (e.g. a new job, ministry, or even as a guest) is to take the lowest place. Let God raise you up, and your host, or employer, or parish priest invite you to "go up higher".

In each of the final four chapters of this section (chs. 60-63), as we shall see over the next few days, the common theme that resonates in each is humility. Sadly, it is all too common for those in Holy Orders to demand respect rather than to earn it by humble service. But Jesus set the model saying, "For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). For the priest to be an *Imago Christi* he must be as the Pope's honorary title suggests, the "servant of the servants of God". When the clergy take the lowest seat, they give honor to God by honoring the other members of the Body of Christ. As our Lord commended, "Whoever would be first among you must be servant of all" (Mark 10:44). Whether clergy or laity, as Christians we must practice such humility and thus permit "the love of Christ to come before all else" (RB 4:21) in our lives and ministry.

Seeing Christ in the other, practicing humility before our brothers and sisters in Christ, and denying all for the sake of Christ all point to the desire to be recreated in the image of Christ. This chapter, and the

three which follow, were probably born out of issues that St. Benedict faced as the community grew and new houses were added. By inspiration of the Holy Spirit these chapters help the members of the community to break through what could be stressful conflicts in the relationships between brothers. And for us, they point toward the discipline of seeking Christ in our neighbor, in the stranger, and in the members of the Body. We are reminded, too, in practicing the discipline of the Rule that we are daily being recreated in His image. In that we are called to be and to live as the *Imago Christi*.

April 16, August 16, December 16
Chapter 61:1-7

If a monk from far away arrives and desires to stay in the monastery as a guest, ²and is satisfied with the customs he finds there, and does not trouble the monastery with unreasonable demands, ³but is satisfied with what he finds, let him be received for as long as he desires. ⁴Still, if he should reasonably, with humility and charity, criticize or point out anything, the Abbot should prudently consider whether the Lord may have sent him for that very purpose. ⁵If later, the visitor makes known his desire to declare his stability, he should not be denied, and especially since his life could be examined during his stay as a guest. ⁶But if during the time that he was a guest he was found to be troublesome and disorderly, he must not be admitted to the monastic body ⁷but instead, he should even be politely requested to leave, that others may not be infected by his evil life.

It is interesting that in verse four of this chapter, Benedict says that if the visiting monk “should reasonably, with humility and charity, criticize or point out anything, the Abbot should prudently consider whether the Lord may have sent him for that very purpose.” This reflects the statement that the author of the epistle to the Hebrews makes: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares” (13:2). God often puts people in our path who have been sent to speak into our lives. We need to be open to that possibility. We need to practice hospitality.

The New Testament declares that hospitality is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Paul lists “helpers” in his secondary list of the charismatic gifts in 1 Corinthians 12:28. And in Romans 12:7, he says, “If your gift is serving others, serve them well.” Help and service begin with hospitality. But beyond the gifting, hospitality is a practice commanded of us all. Paul says, “Contribute to the needs of the saints, practice hospitality” (Rom. 12:13). And Peter commands, “Above all hold unfailing your love for one another, since love covers a multitude of sins. Practice hospitality ungrudgingly to one another. As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace...” (1 Peter 4:8-10).

But we must be careful. Scripture warns us to be “wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matt. 10:16). And in 2 John 1:10, it says, “If any one comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into the house or give him any greeting.” Thus it is that Benedict declares that if a guest is “found to be troublesome and disorderly, he must not be admitted to the monastic body but instead, he should even be politely requested to leave, that others may not be infected by his evil life.” Benedict commands us to receive all guests as Christ Himself (RB 53:1). But we are also commanded to “test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:2). There are many wolves out there in sheep’s clothing. We need to practice discernment with our hospitality for the sake of protecting the Body of Christ.

What can we do? Sadly, hospitality is quickly becoming a lost art in our modern culture. We welcome and entertain those who agree with us, but shun or outright reject and despise those who differ from us, or who have differing opinions. We no longer know how to have meaningful discussions. If you disagree with me, you are my enemy. We have forgotten how to listen. We substitute social media for face-to-face chats. We text instead of talk. Personal, meaningful contact is quickly disappearing from our culture. But Benedict says that “Your way of acting should be different from worldly ways” (4:20). We need to break these habits and engage one another in meaningful and loving interaction. We need to practice hospitality. We need to re-present Christ to one another and be the *Imago Christi*. For we never know when we may be entertaining angels unawares.

April 17, August 17, December 17
Chapter 61:8-14

But if [a visiting monk] has not been shown to be deserving of dismissal, he should not only be admitted, if he requests, ⁹but he should even be urged to remain, that others may be taught by his example, ¹⁰because we all serve the one Lord and do battle for the one King everywhere. ¹¹In addition, if the Abbot recognizes him as deserving, he may place him in a somewhat higher rank. ¹²It is at the Abbot's discretion to place not only a priest or cleric, but also a monk, in a higher place than that of their entry, if he sees that he deserves it. ¹³But the Abbot must take care never to receive a monk in the community who is a member of another monastery without the consent of his Abbot or commendatory letters, ¹⁴because it is written: "what you hate, do not do to any one" (Tb 4:15).

Benedict once again advocates the virtue of stability for members of the community. It is nice to have visitors, but one who wants to stay must be tested over time; for as was noted in chapter 1 there are those "who wander their whole life long from one place to another... (v. 10)". Throughout the Rule, Benedict advocates staying where you are planted, and deal with the issues of the community where you live and worship. And it is important that whoever desires to join a community not bring unwanted baggage with him or her. Thus, Benedict commands that "the Abbot must take care never to receive a monk in the community who is a member of another monastery without the consent of his Abbot..."

In the liturgical churches, when a clergyman transfers from one church to another, his transfer must be accompanied by "letters dimissory". The canons of the Church prescribe that: "A transfer of a priest or deacon from one diocese to another shall be done with a letter dimissory, initiated by the bishop of the transferring diocese and sent to the bishop of the receiving diocese. Upon acceptance of the transfer, the clergyman will be under the authority of his new bishop." The concept here is the same as that prescribed by Benedict, that the abbot must receive "commendatory letters" from the visiting monk's previous abbot.

But what does this have to say to those who are not in either monastic or clerical orders? One of the plagues afflicting the Church today is church hopping. A church member is offended by something in his or her current congregation, or the pastor rubbed that member the wrong way, or for any of dozens of other reasons has found reason to become discontented. So, they "hop" over to another congregation. The pastor there welcomes this visitor and quickly makes them a new member of his flock. However, as he receives this new person, if there has been no closure with the previous congregation, and no letter of transfer of membership, the transferring member will be bringing all of the unresolved issues from the last church with him or her.

To combat this unhealthy practice, the liturgical churches use a similar form of transfer for lay members as they do for their clergy. A person who wants to transfer from one congregation to another within the denomination, or between related denominations, may ask for a "letter of transfer" from his or her local pastor. If the person is a "communicant in good standing" the pastor can then send a letter of transfer to the member's new pastor. If, however, there are issues that remain unresolved, the clergyman should seek to help the member resolve those before transferring them to the pastoral care of the new church. Otherwise, there may be a change in location and community, but the problems that faced that member in the old congregation will still be there with the new one.

As we have seen in previous chapters (e.g. 7:44-48), Benedict advocates that we keep short accounts. If there is a problem within a local congregation, it is imperative for the health of the whole community to deal with those issues quickly, before they can fester and grow foul. Changing parishes while leaving those issues unresolved only spreads the foul stench of unresolved hurts and sins. It is incumbent upon us to encourage one another to deal with the problems we face in community, and hold one another accountable.

The pattern of “commendatory letters”, set by Benedict in this chapter, is not limited to liturgical churches. It can be followed by non-liturgical churches as well. What Benedict advocates here is a matter of stability. It is far better to stay where we are and deal with the issues we face than to be like the gyrovagues described in chapter one who are “always roving and never settled” (RB 1:11). And yet, not all issues can be resolved, and not all hurts can be healed. If genuine efforts are made to resolve these differences, and if after attempts to reconcile there is no resolution to the conflict, then it is right and acceptable to submit to the authority of the pastor and kindly request a transfer. This pattern, set by Benedict in his Rule, will go a long way in helping heal the unhealthy pattern of “hopping” in the modern church.

April 18, August 18, December 18
Chapter 62

If the Abbot desires to have a priest or a deacon ordained, he should select from among his monks one who is worthy to discharge the priestly office. ²But the one who has been ordained should be on his guard against arrogance and pride, ³and he should not attempt to do anything but what is commanded him by the Abbot, knowing that he is now all the more subject to the discipline of the Rule. ⁴Just because he is now a priest he should not forget the obedience and discipline of the Rule, but must advance more and more in godliness. ⁵Let him, however, always keep the place which he had when he entered the monastery, ⁶except when he is engaged in sacred functions, unless the community chooses and the Abbot wishes to promote him in acknowledgment of the merit of his life. ⁷He must know, however, that he must observe the Rule prescribed for the Deans and the Superiors; ⁸and if he should do otherwise, let him be judged, not as a priest, but as a rebel. ⁹If after frequent warnings he does not amend, let the bishop be notified. ¹⁰But if even then he does not amend, and his guilt is clearly shown, he is to be removed from the monastery, ¹¹provided his obstinacy is such that he will neither submit nor obey the Rule.

We have already dealt with the nature of the priestly role as the “servant of the servants of God” in the meditation on chapter 60. But as was noted in that meditation, “Whether clergy or laity, as Christians we must practice...humility and thus permit ‘the love of Christ to come before all else’ (RB 4:21) in our lives and ministry.” In this chapter, Benedict states that the one chosen by the abbot to be a priest should be “one who is worthy to discharge the priestly office”. Thus that person “should be on his guard against arrogance and pride...[and] should not forget the obedience and discipline of the Rule, but must advance more and more in godliness.” St. Benedict is inviting us, both clergy and laity, to consider what is the nature of personal holiness, and what it means to “advance more and more in godliness”. This notion of an increase in holiness is basic to the whole concept of the spiritual life outlined in the Rule of St. Benedict.

In the footnotes on this chapter in the RB 1980, it says, “The notion of spiritual progress is basic to the monastic life and is evident in many places in RB. It is implicit in the idea of a school for the Lord’s service (Prol. 45), in the *processu...conversationis et fidei* [progress in this way of life and in faith] of Prol. 49 and above all in the climbing image of RB 7, where spiritual progress is equated with progress in humility.” The promise that Benedict gives us in Prologue 49 is that if we persevere and “progress in this way” then “we shall run on the path of God’s commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love.” What a wonderful image! We have been enrolled in school, and we will continue to learn as long as we attend school and engage the curriculum provided.

The Christian life is not static. This concept of advancement in our relationship can be seen in Paul’s second letter to Corinth. He says, “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit (3:18).” We are being changed! The process of being changed—of sanctification—is a life-long endeavor. And it requires stability. We need the stability of the worshiping community where God has placed us. We need fidelity to our brothers and sisters in Christ who encourage and support us as we grow. And we need obedience to the Word and to those whom God has placed in authority over us. We cannot do it alone. It truly is about relationship—with God AND with one another in Christ.

And so, Benedict recognized the need for men of holiness to be raised up in the community to encourage and support the members of the community in their advancement in Christ. These must be “worthy” men who will set the example for others in the school for the Lord’s service. But these chosen clergymen must be ones who are also personally striving to “advance more and more in godliness”. We don’t graduate from this school, we continue to advance.

April 19, August 19, December 19
Chapter 63

Everyone shall keep their rank in order in the monastery according to the time of their entry and as the virtue of their life distinguishes it, or as the Abbot directs. ²The Abbot is not to disorder the flock committed to him, nor by an arbitrary use of his power dispose of anything unjustly. ³He must always bear in mind that he will have to give an account to God for all his judgments and works. ⁴Therefore, let the brothers approach for the kiss of peace, for Communion, intone the psalms, and stand in choir in the order that the Abbot has established, or as already established among them. ⁵And in no place whatever let age determine the order or be a disadvantage. ⁶Remember Samuel and Daniel were mere boys when they judged their elders (cf 1 Sam. 3; Dan 13:44-62). ⁷Except for the one whom, as we have said before, the Abbot has from higher motives advanced, or for certain reasons has lowered, all the rest shall take their place as they are received. ⁸For example, let him who came into the monastery at the second hour of the day, know that he is younger than he who came at the first hour; whatever his age or dignity may be. ⁹Children are to be kept under discipline at all times and by everyone. ¹⁰Therefore, let the younger ones honor their elders, and the older love the younger. ¹¹In speaking to each other let no one be allowed to address another simply by his name; ¹²rather let the older address the younger as brother, and let the younger call his elder, father, by which is implied the reverence due to a father. ¹³But because the Abbot is believed to hold the place of Christ, let him be called Lord and Abbot, not for any claim on his part, but out of love and reverence for Christ. ¹⁴Let him think of this and so show himself worthy of such an honor. ¹⁵Wherever the brothers meet, let the younger ask the blessing from the older, ¹⁶and when the older passes by, let the younger rise and give him place to sit, and not presume to sit down with him unless his elder bids him to do so, ¹⁷that it may be done as it is written: “outdo one another in showing honor” (Rom 12:10). ¹⁸Let children and boys take their places in the oratory and at table with all due discipline. ¹⁹Outdoors and wherever they may be, they should be supervised and controlled until they reach the age of understanding.

“Everyone shall keep their rank in order... according to the time of their entry...” Benedict is once again directing that we are to keep order in the community by maintaining the stability of rank. The order within the community is not to be according to the worldly standards that we usually associate with social rank, for as Benedict says earlier in the Rule, the way of the community “should be different from worldly ways” (RB 4:20). The criteria for ranking the members of the community is not physical age, as one might expect; rather, order is determined by when one has joined the community. The mindset of spiritual standards has already been well established in the Rule. And when we follow these precepts given in the Rule of Saint Benedict, the community works in a healthy fashion. Utilizing this model, every person is heard and every point of view is respected (cf. RB 3). At the heart of this relationship of rank is mutual respect and care for one another. There is a clear focus on respect in Benedict’s model. The younger must respect their elders, even when the elders are not perfect. But the respect must be mutual. Benedict says “let the older love the younger”. This is what one should expect from family life, and from those who are our brothers and sisters in the community of Christ. In this way, following the example of the first Christian community described in the Acts of the Apostles, the goal is to be of “one in heart and mind” in Christ Jesus, and to live in the unity of the family of God, “having everything in common” (Acts 4:32).

Order in the community can only be maintained when the Body works as one. The governing principle is Benedict's exhortation that "we all bear an equal burden of servitude under one Lord" that all may be one in Christ (cf. RB 2:20). And of course, Jesus Himself commanded that "whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave" (Matt. 20:26-28). This chapter, then, is not touting a new teaching, rather it is taking the teachings from the early chapters and practically applying them.

April 20, August 20, December 20
Chapter 64:1-6

In the election of an Abbot let this always be observed as a rule, that the one placed in this position be the one whom the whole community with one consent, in the fear of God, or by a small part of the community with sounder judgment, shall elect. ²But let him who is to be elected be chosen for the merit of his life and the wisdom of his teaching, even if he is the last in community rank. ³But even if the whole community should by mutual consent elect a man who agrees to connive at their evil ways (which God forbid) ⁴and these irregularities come to the knowledge of the Bishop of the diocese to which the place belongs, or to neighboring Abbots, or Christian people in the region, ⁵they must not permit the conspiracy of the wicked to succeed, but appoint a worthy steward over the house of God, ⁶knowing that they shall receive a bountiful reward for this action, if they do it with a pure intention and godly zeal. If on the other hand, they neglect to do so, they may be sure it will be counted as sin.

The Rule of St. Benedict was most likely compiled over an extensive period of time in answer to various questions and situations which arose in the growing community. As the movement spread and new houses formed, there were situations which arose that required attention (cf. RB 59:6, 65:1-3). For example, chapter 2 deals with the role of the abbot, and the personal qualities of the abbot mentioned here (e.g. “the merit of his life and the wisdom of his teaching”, etc.) were previously stated in that earlier chapter. But what happens if the abbot becomes disabled, or dies, or for unknown reason leaves the community? What would be the process for replacing him? And with the abbot away on community business, who is in charge? When the community was small and tight-knit these questions had not arisen. But as the movement grew and spread, issues that faced other houses were brought back to the mother house and additions to the Rule became necessary. Chapters 64-66 address some of these considerations.

So, how does the community select a new leader? There are essentially two modes for the election of a new abbot. First, “the whole community with one consent”, or if the situation calls for it, “a small part of the community with sounder judgment, shall elect.” But Benedict is not unaware of man’s fallen nature and the wickedness that can take root in a community. He warns that if the community were to “by mutual consent elect a man who agrees to connive at their evil ways”, action must be taken by “the Bishop...or neighboring Abbots, or Christian people in the region...” And Benedict says that “...they must not permit the conspiracy of the wicked to succeed, but appoint a worthy steward over the house of God...” Benedict is apparently reacting to problems that have already arisen in the monasteries, and now he is seeking to provide solutions. Regardless of which mode is employed, the goal of the community is to seek the mind of Christ in the election, that a man of merit and wisdom may be placed in this role of leadership for the community.

So, what does this have to say to us as a community outside the confines of the monastery? We, too, have leaders, and we also are capable of “conniving” to place the person we desire in leadership positions. As was pointed out in the meditation on chapter 3, we have allowed worldly models of government to take precedence in Church affairs. The Church is not a democracy, and we are not to follow manmade rules of government. Benedict calls for the Body to return to the Holy Spirit driven decision-making model of Acts chapter 15. The goal of such a gathering is to seek the mind of Christ, not the will or conniving of man.

This chapter reminds us that without vigilance, and fidelity to prayer, we can all fall into the trap of seeking our own will ahead of the will of God. Once we open that door, it is easy for us to begin to try to influence others and connive to secure our will. But with stability, fidelity, and obedience we can call one another to account, and together seek the mind of Christ in order to do His will.

April 21, August 21-22, December 21-22
Chapter 64:7-22

Once the Abbot has been elected, let him bear in mind how great a burden he himself has received, and to whom he must give an account of his stewardship (cf Lk 16:2);⁸ and let him be convinced that it is better to serve than to rule.⁹ He must, therefore, be versed in the divine law, so that he may have knowledge of when “to bring forth new things and old” (Mt 13:52). He must be chaste, sober, and merciful,¹⁰ and always exalt “mercy above judgment” (Jas 2:13), so that he also may obtain mercy.¹¹ Let him hate vice, but love the brothers.¹² And even in his corrections, let him act with prudence and not go to extremes, lest, while he rubs to remove the rust he rubs too harshly and the vessel be broken.¹³ Let him always keep his own frailty in mind, and remember that “the bruised reed must not be broken” (Is 42:3).¹⁴ In this we are not saying that he should allow evils to take root, but that he cut them off with prudence and charity, as he shall see it is best for each one.¹⁵ And let him aim to be loved rather than feared.¹⁶ Let him not be excitable, over-anxious, exacting, or headstrong; let him not be jealous or suspicious, because if he is, he will never have rest.¹⁷ In all of his commands, whether they refer to things spiritual or temporal, let him be cautious and considerate.¹⁸ He ought to be discerning and temperate in the tasks which he assigns, recalling the discretion of holy Jacob who said: “If I should cause my flocks to be overdriven, they would all die in one day” (Gen 33:13).¹⁹ Keeping in view these and other dictates of discretion, the mother of virtues, he must so arrange everything that the strong may still have something to desire and the weak may not draw back.²⁰ Above all, let him keep this Rule in every detail,²¹ that when he has served well he may hear from the Lord what the good servant heard who gave his fellow-servants bread in due season: “Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions” (Mt 24:47).

In speaking of the type of person the abbot should be, Benedict gives us a portrait of a mature Christian. He provides a limited list of some of the virtues to which we should all aspire: “He must be chaste, sober, and merciful...let him hate vice, but love the brothers... let him act with prudence...” And as in chapter 21, in reference to the deans, Benedict says that the abbot should not be “chosen for their rank, but for the merit of their life and their wisdom and knowledge” (RB 21:4). Would that we all pursue merit of life, wisdom, and knowledge. In every respect, Benedict is drawing a portrait of the “faithful and wise servant” in Matt. 24:45, the one whom the Master has set over the household, to give them their food at the proper time.

Let us take notice of two things about this portrait of a Christian servant. First, he is the one whom the Master has appointed. As St. Paul indicates in his presentation of the spiritual gifts, “All these are inspired by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as He wills” (1 Cor. 12:11). Our place in the Body of Christ, and the ministry we are called to fulfill, is not of our choosing, but has been appointed by God. He places us, and gives us the requisite gifts, “as He wills”. It is important for us to accept and embrace our calling, and serve Him in the capacity He has chosen for us. Second, notice that the abbot is to be a man “at rest” (cf. v. 16). It certainly seems that the servants of Christ in His Church are overworked. We tend to be few in number and all-too-often not especially strong in the Spirit. As Jesus Himself said, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few” (Matt. 9:37). But this chapter adds to that picture the awareness that the soul is also endangered when never at rest. In St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, he says, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” We find our rest, in Jesus. He said, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart,

and you will find rest for your souls” (Matt. 11:28-29). The abbot is to model for the community that being “at rest” can only come from singleness of heart and fidelity to God. The soul at rest is focused on the One Thing necessary—our relationship with Jesus. That is a goal that not only the abbot, but all of us in the Body should pursue.

April 22, August 23, December 23
Chapter 65

Too often it happens indeed, that grave scandals arise in monasteries out of the appointment of the Prior. ²There are some who are puffed up with the wicked spirit of pride and think of themselves as second Abbots. They set up a despotic rule, foster scandals, and excite quarrels in the community, ³and especially in those places where the same Bishop or the same Abbots appoints both the Abbot and Prior. ⁴It can easily be seen how foolish this is, because from the very beginning of his appointment, a basis for pride is furnished to him, ⁵when his thoughts suggest to him that now he is exempt from the authority of the Abbot, ⁶because “You have been appointed by those who appointed the Abbot.” ⁷This can foster envy, discord, slander, quarrels, jealousy, and all forms of disorder. ⁸If the Abbot and the Prior are at variance with each other, it must follow that their souls are endangered by this discord ⁹and that those who are under them, as long as they take sides in the disputes, go to their ruin. ¹⁰The responsibility for this evil rests on the heads of those who were the authors of such disorders. ¹¹Therefore, for the preservation of peace and charity, it is best that the government of the monastery should rest with the Abbot; ¹²and if it can be done, let the affairs of the monastery (as we have explained before) be attended to by deans, as the Abbot directs, ¹³so that, no one may become proud, if the responsibility of the office is shared by many. ¹⁴But if the local situation requires it, or the community reasonably and with humility make the request, and the Abbot shall deem it advisable, ¹⁵then let the Abbot himself appoint as Prior whomever he should choose, with the advice of God-fearing brothers. ¹⁶But let the Prior reverently do what his Abbot assigns him, doing nothing against the will or the direction of the Abbot; ¹⁷for the higher he is placed above others, the more careful he should be to obey the precepts of the Rule. ¹⁸If the Prior is found disorderly, or blinded by conceit, or shows contempt for the Holy Rule, he must be admonished up to four times. ¹⁹If he does not amend, he is to be punished under the regular discipline of the Rule. ²⁰But if he does not amend even then, let him be deposed from the office of prior and another who is worthy be appointed in his place. ²¹But if even after that he is not a quiet and submissive brother, let him be expelled from the monastery. ²²Yet, let the Abbot reflect that he must give an account to God for all his judgments, lest the flames of envy or jealousy should sear his soul.

It would be nice to believe that monasteries and the Church in general are immune to “grave scandals”, “despotic rule”, “envy, discord, . . . jealousy, and all forms of disorder”, as well as “quarrels in the community”. SIGH. Sadly, that is not the case, as Benedict notes in the opening verses of this chapter. Once again, issues have apparently arisen in the monastic communities under Benedict’s leadership that require a response. Something negative apparently happened in the past that Benedict needed to deal with in his latter years and he gives instruction here on how to address similar situations in the future. It appears that St. Benedict had some negative experiences with troublesome priors. By the wording in this chapter, it is obvious that his preference would be to abolish the office altogether. Yet he does not quite do that. Rather, he offers the abbots of sister monasteries and his own successors the freedom to make an independent judgment within their communities. Undoubtedly it is this type of flexibility that has enabled the Rule to be such an effective Christian guide for so many centuries. He does not try to fashion a one-size-fits-all model which will be forced on all of his communities.

But what does this say to those of us living in the secular realm? This chapter is a prescription for maintaining order, obedience, and how to seek the Mind of Christ as a community of believers. Benedict says that “If the Abbot and the Prior are at variance with each other, it must follow that their

souls are endangered by this discord and that those who are under them, as long as they take sides in the disputes, go to their ruin. The responsibility for this evil rests on the heads of those who were the authors of such disorders. Therefore, for the preservation of peace and charity, it is best that the government of the monastery should rest with the Abbot.” Order begins at the top. If there is discord in the leadership of the community, it must be dealt with quickly, for the souls of the leaders “are endangered by this discord”. Repentance and reconciliation are needed for the good of the community. If the discord is allowed to take root, it is inevitable that members of the community will “take sides in the disputes” with the end result that they will “go to their ruin”. And so, “for the preservation of peace and charity”, there needs to be obedience to the Godly leadership of the man chosen and appointed by God to be the father of the community.

If the community sees the need for a prior, Benedict directs that “the Abbot himself appoint as Prior whomever he should choose, with the advice of God-fearing brothers.” This is ultimately the abbot’s decision to make, but again Benedict advises that he do so “with the advice of God-fearing brothers.” It is once again a clarion call that all things done in the community be done so with seeking the Mind of Christ. For those of us in the secular realm, we would do well to follow Benedict’s advice to seek Godly counsel when making decisions. As the author of Proverbs observes, “Where there is no guidance, a people falls; but in an abundance of counselors there is safety” (Prov. 11:14); and “by wise guidance you can wage your war, and in abundance of counselors there is victory” (Prov. 24:6).

April 23, August 24, December 24
Chapter 66

Place a wise old man at the door of the monastery, one who knows how to take a message and give an answer, and whose mature age prohibits him from straying about. ²The porter should have a cell near the door, so that anyone who comes may always find one present from whom they may obtain an answer. ³As soon as anyone knocks or a poor person calls out, he answers, “Thanks be to God,” or invokes a blessing, ⁴then with gentleness from the fear of God he returns an answer speedily in the fervor of charity. ⁵If the porter has need of assistance, let him have a younger brother. ⁶If it can be done, the monastery should be so constructed that all the necessities, such as water, the mill, the garden, are enclosed, and the various arts may be plied inside of the monastery, ⁷so that there may be no need for the monks to go about outside, because it is not good for their souls. ⁸But we desire that this Rule be read quite often in the community, that none of the brethren may excuse himself of ignorance.

Stability. It is a promise made by those seeking the disciplined life of prayer and community in the Benedictine model of discipline (RB 58:17), and it is a virtue to be pursued by every Christian. But sadly, stability is all too often scorned by modern man. In counseling a young couple who were living together without the benefit of marriage, I was asked by the young man, “Why would we want to get married?” His rationale: “I think I would get bored with just one partner in life.” But there is great value in maintaining stability in our personal lives and in the community of faith to which we are committed.

The various themes interwoven in this short chapter center around the virtue of stability. First, Benedict suggests that the porter be an older man who will stay put. Secondly, the monks would be best advised to not roam. And, thirdly, the Rule is to be read again and again. What, then, do we imagine is the value of stability? Like the young man I mentioned above, do we believe it breeds boredom? What positive benefits might stability carry? Why on earth should we give ourselves to one person in marriage? Or why should we commit to one parish, one small group of people, for the rest of our lives? Is this not inhibiting—a stifling of our giftedness, and a limiting of our influence? On the contrary; it allows for the perfecting of our gifts in a stable and encouraging environment; then we can go out into the world strengthened and empowered, and can influence and train the next generation with whom we abide.

In order for any living thing to grow, there needs to be stability—plants need roots firmly planted, and children need stable homes in which to be nourished. The Church is a living organism, and the parish is a living part of that larger Body. When members of the Body have no rootedness and flit about from parish to parish, both the individuals and the congregations are diminished. Children raised in broken homes are far more likely to repeat that pattern of divorce and remarriage, and often become pawns in the struggles between divorced parents. That lack of stability is a sure sign of unhealthiness and brokenness in the Body, and in the family. Unfortunately, the Church is no less prone to such issues of instability in her leadership. Pastors become bored, or have eyes on the prize of the bigger, and thus in their minds more influential parish. They abandon their flock, seeking the bigger paycheck, or the next rung on the ecclesiastical corporate ladder, and the whole Body suffers.

But a faithful marriage and a stable parish have much in common. Benedict is promoting not simply a “wise old man at the door” but admonishes that we all become “mature...[and refrain] from straying about”. And the themes of stability presented in this chapter have one more important lesson: stability in

learning. St. Paul warned young Timothy that “the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths” (2 Tim. 4:3-4). We need stability in the words we receive and the lessons taught by the Church. It is important, therefore, to be conscientious in our study of the Word with stable, reliable teachers. Too often people will wander, scrolling the internet to find “teachers to suit their own likings”. From there, it is not a long trek to turning away from the Truth and wandering into myths. And for those following Benedict’s discipline, it is important “that this Rule be read quite often in the community, that none of the brethren may excuse himself of ignorance.” In this modern era, it is easy to wander from the Truth; the temptations are numerous and easily embraced. Stability in our homes, our faith community, and our learning is a blessing to be desired and bears much good and healthy fruit.

April 24, August 25, December 25
Chapter 67

Brothers who are sent on a journey should ask the prayers of all, the community and the Abbot. ²And after the last prayer at the Work of God, the community should always pray for the absent brothers. ³On the day that the brothers return from the journey, let them lie prostrate on the floor of the oratory at all the Canonical Hours, when the Work of God is finished, ⁴and ask the prayers of all on account of their failings, in case they may have seen some evil or heard frivolous speech. ⁵And let no one presume to relate to another what he has seen or heard outside of the monastery, because it is most hurtful. ⁶But if anyone should presume to do so, let him undergo the penalty of the Rule. ⁷In the same way anyone who presumes to go beyond the enclosure of the monastery, or anywhere else, or to do anything, however little, without the order of the Abbot must be punished.

From time to time, it is necessary for monks to travel. And the same is true for those of us in the secular arena. Our business and family obligations can often compel us to leave home in order to fulfill our responsibilities. Of course, there are also those times we travel simply for pleasure. Though on the surface this chapter is about monastic travel, like the previous one, at its heart it is about stability. It is a warning against wandering: for the monk, a warning not to wander physically away from the enclosure, and for those of us on the outside, not to wander away from the Lord with our eyes and our ears, our memory or our imagination.

Our lives are constantly bombarded with noise, images, news, gossip, and a whole host of unwanted, and unfiltered sensations. The internet, for example, can present a tremendous source of temptation for the Christian. Curiosity about images and reports we see on news sites and social media can draw us away from centering in God. And as we stray into that wilderness it is easy to lose sight of the path and wander afar. There is a necessary interaction between the whole created world and the committed Christian, and for those of us who are living in the world, we need to address that relationship. But there is an important distinction we need to make between what is necessary and what is voluntary—between the quality of what is available and our response to a vast array of opportunities presented in the secular world. We must hold fast to our commitment that the Christian's primary goal is to seek God and to live in relationship with Him. "Let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ..." (RB 72:11).

But as was noted in the first paragraph, we are sometimes called away from home for business or family, and there are times that we choose to travel for leisure. As was noted in the meditation on chapter 50, it is a policy in my parish, that when a parishioner is traveling, they are to bring a bulletin back with them from the church where they worshipped while away. The reason for that policy is that I want to encourage them, that though away from home, they are NOT away from God and their relationship with Christ. It is far too easy, when out of one's routine, to forget our obligation to worship. And when someone is going to be away from the parish for an extended period of time for work, or school, or military service, etc., we have them come before the Altar, and all lay hands on them and pray for them, in much the same way as Benedict describes in verse 1 above. Benedict reminds us that while in the world we are constantly exposed to various "evils and frivolous speech", and we need the Lord's protection while living in and traveling about in this temptation-rich environment. The community's prayers are a trustworthy shield about us. Never leave home without them.

April 25, August 26, December 26
Chapter 68

If any difficult or impossible tasks are assigned to a brother, let him receive the order given to him with all meekness and obedience. ²If, however, he sees that the task is altogether beyond his strength, then he should patiently and reasonably explain the reasons for his inability to his Superior; ³without pride, protest, or refusal to obey. ⁴If, however, after his explanation the Superior still insists on his assignment, then the younger must accept that it is good for him, ⁵and let him obey in love, relying on the help of God.

The practice of obedience was dealt with in chapter 5 of the Rule. In that chapter Benedict made clear that true obedience is always immediate, complete, and joyful; anything less is at best compliance, and at worst rebellion. But once again, it appears that there were issues which arose as the monasteries grew and multiplied, and these issues needed to be addressed. Questions were apparently raised as to the legitimacy of questioning an order given. And is it ever acceptable to request to be excused from a task that appears to be beyond one's ability? To whom must one be obedient? So, here in chapter 68, and in chapter 71, Benedict once again addresses the practice of obedience.

In the current chapter, Benedict deals with the problem of a monk being ordered to do something which the individual feels is beyond his capabilities. Can he request exemption from this task? Is it ever acceptable to question an order given? Why would one in authority ask someone to do "any difficult or impossible task"? The Old Testament teaching on hearing and obeying holds a key for us. The Hebrew word "Hear!" (*shema*) literally means "already to be in response" or "to obey" The sense of the command is that the hearer is always to be primed, ready to be responsively obedient. The most famous verse from the Old Covenant is known as "The Shema": "Hear (*shema*), O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!" (Deut. 6:4). But the verse that makes clear the connection between hearing and obeying is found in the Psalms: "As soon as they heard (*shema*) me they obeyed (*shema*) me..." (Ps. 18:45). We are called to listen to the commands of God and his appointed and anointed leaders, and be ready to immediately, completely, and joyfully accept the task handed to us.

So, is it ever acceptable to question a command given to you? Benedict says that it is okay to "patiently and reasonably explain the reasons for his inability to his Superior, without pride, protest, or refusal to obey." But it is never acceptable to simply refuse to do the task or to question the authority of the one giving the command. The one in authority may be looking at the task from a far different perspective than the one assigned to do it. Benedict explains that if "the Superior still insists on his assignment, then the younger must accept that it is good for him." There must be a reason for the one in authority to assign that task to the one who finds it difficult or seemingly impossible. Benedict is saying that to accept the "impossible task" is to already be doing what you question your ability to do. It is in the doing that we learn how to do what we are commanded to do. It is in the doing that we learn what are our weaknesses and our strengths, and that is a very important and valuable lesson. We are called to be humble, to be "fools for Christ's sake" (1 Cor. 4:10). We may not do the task well, because it is beyond our current ability, but we will undoubtedly learn a valuable lesson from the experience.

April 26, August 27, December 27
Chapter 69

Care must be taken that on no occasion one monk try to defend another in the monastery, or to take his side in a dispute, ²even if they are closely related by ties of blood. ³In no way should the monks presume to do this, because such conduct may give rise to very grave conflict. ⁴If anyone breaks this rule, let him be severely punished.

Do not take the side of, nor the side against, one of your brothers or sisters in Christ in any conflict. Neither defend nor strike. Why? Because you cannot see the big picture. You do not have the perspective of the abbot, nor of the parish priest, nor of Christ Himself. It is quite possible that when defending a brother or sister in Christ, or taking one side over another in a dispute, we may find ourselves opposing Christ. We cannot know what is best for our friends, our brothers or sisters in Christ. Benedict says that “In no way should the monks presume to do this.” Why? “because such conduct may give rise to very grave conflict.” Conflict within the community, yes. But also, conflict within the spirits of those involved in the dispute.

We each must individually stand before our Lord and allow Him to direct and rule our hearts. No one can do that for us. Jesus addressed this concept in the parable of the ten virgins. The oil for the lamps represents the Spirit. The five wise virgins were full of the Holy Spirit, whereas the five foolish ones were not. But the wise virgins could not give to the foolish ones something that the foolish had not sought out on their own. We can bear one another’s burdens, but we cannot bear one another’s relationship with Christ. No one else can take the essential steps of the spiritual life for us. No one can carry the lamp oil for us (Matt. 25:1-13).

When we step in where we do not belong in the life of another we risk inhibiting their redeeming interaction with the Lord. Are we trying to do for others what they need to do for themselves? Are we robbing them of the opportunity to grow and become stronger in their faith and life in Christ? Conflicts and difficulties are always opportunities to choose Christ. If we interfere in someone else’s struggles we interfere with their ability to choose Christ. John Michael Talbot notes that when we champion the cause of another, “We think we are doing well, but we may be doing harm instead.” (Blessings of St. Benedict, ch. 69) It is also possible that if we were to take a long and careful look at the reason behind our interfering in another’s life we may find that we are doing so to avoid dealing with our own issues.

April 27, August 28, December 28
Chapter 70

Let every occasion for presumption be avoided in the monastery. ²We decree that no one may be permitted to excommunicate or to strike any of his brothers, unless the Abbot has given him the authority. ³“But let those who transgress be taken to task in the presence of all, that the others may fear” (cf 1 Tm 5:20). ⁴Children, up to the age of fifteen, however, should be carefully cared for by all, ⁵provided that it be done within due limits and with discretion. ⁶For if anyone should presume to chastise those of more advanced years, without the command of the Abbot, or should unreasonably treat the children, let him be subject to the discipline of the Rule; ⁷because it is written: “what you would not have done to yourself, do not do to another” (Tobit 4:16).

We should not take on responsibility that is not given to us, or defend one who we may think is being unfairly burdened or treated. That is the sin of presumption. And the sin of presumption encompasses issues of corrective discipline as well. Benedict says that “no one has the authority to excommunicate or strike any of his brothers unless he has been given this power by the abbot” (70:2). Ultimately, the watchword of these chapters is that we show deference and respect for one another.

In a community, whether inside the monastic walls or outside, we need order. In the Church community there are those who have been chosen and anointed by God to oversee and bring order to the life of that community. These are those who have been called to “Holy Orders”. When members of the community try to usurp the role of the clergy and exercise discipline of their own making, they bring disorder to the life of the communal family. Discipline can be delegated, as Benedict explains in verse 2 above, but no one should “presume” to claim that authority for himself or herself. That is the sin of presumption, and as Benedict charges, “Let every occasion for presumption be avoided...”

April 28, August 29, December 29
Chapter 71

Obedience is a blessing to be shown by all, not only to the Abbot, but also to one another, ²knowing that we shall go to God by this path of obedience. ³Granted that the command of the Abbot and of the Superiors who are appointed by him take precedence over private commands, ⁴in other circumstances let the younger brethren obey their elders with all charity and zeal. ⁵But if anyone is found to be obstinate, let him be punished. ⁶And if a brother is punished in any way by the Abbot or by any of his Superiors for even a slight reason ⁷or if he perceives that of any of his Superiors is angry or disturbed with him, ⁸let him without delay cast himself down on the ground at the other's feet making satisfaction, until the agitation is quieted by a blessing. ⁹If anyone refuses to do this, either let him undergo corporal punishment, or, if he is obstinate, let him be expelled from the monastery.

As was noted in the meditation on chapter 68, the practice of obedience was dealt with in chapter 5 of the Rule. But once again, it appears that there were issues having to do with obedience which arose as the monasteries grew and multiplied, and these issues needed to be addressed. Specifically, Benedict is addressing the question of to whom are we called to be obedient. Benedict succinctly answers the question in verse one: "Obedience is a blessing to be shown by all, not only to the Abbot, but also to one another..." What does that look like? And what relevance does it have for those of us in the world?

According to both Holy Scripture and the Rule of St. Benedict (RB 2:20), we are all one in Christ Jesus. Benedict says, "for 'whether bond or free, we are all one in Christ' (cf Gal 3:28; Eph 6:8), and we all bear an equal burden of servitude under one Lord, 'for God shows no partiality among persons'" (Rom 2:11). But do we practice that directive? When we listen to each other do we truly believe that we are listening to God? Benedict touched on this in chapter 5, verse 6, when he said, "And again He says to the teachers: 'He who hears you hears Me.'" (Lk 10:16). Not only is Christ found in the Abbot, but He is found in each one of us.

If Christ is present in our brothers and sisters in Christ, then we need to practice a deep, attentive listening and expectancy when dealing with each other. We need to practice obedience to one another. This is not a blind obedience, an abstaining from wisdom and a discerning spirit. For St. John exhorts us to practice discernment, giving this warning: "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1). The type of obedience being advocated by Benedict is an avenue to God. He says, "we shall go to God by this path of obedience." And as we listen attentively to one another, God is revealed more and more to us in our interaction.

Again, all of this requires a healthy dose of humility. It means accepting that we might not have the answer or the insight that a situation requires. But if in humility we can listen with an open heart, open mind, and open spirit to what another is saying to us, then it becomes possible to hear the voice of God through our brother or sister, and be obedient to His voice.

April 29, August 30, December 30
Chapter 72

Just as there is a harsh and evil zeal which separates us from God and leads to hell, ²so there is a virtuous zeal which separates from vice and leads to God and life everlasting. ³This is, therefore, the zeal which monks must pursue with most ardent love: ⁴“that they should be the first to show honor to one another” (cf Rom 12:10), ⁵that they bear, with the utmost patience, with one another’s infirmities, whether of body or mind, and let them vie with one another in obedience. ⁶Let no one follow what he thinks useful to himself, but rather to another. ⁷Let them practice brotherly charity with a chaste love; ⁹and to God, loving fear; ¹⁰and to love their Abbot with sincere and humble affection. ¹¹Let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ, ¹²and may He lead us all together to life everlasting.

We come to the penultimate chapter of the Rule of St. Benedict, but substantively, the final chapter of instruction and direction. So here are Benedict’s final words to us on the consecrated life, his summary of what we are about. If we were to set forth a statement of “good zeal”, that is, the eager and earnest desire of our hearts which will lead us to God, what might we say? Very likely we would frame some statement about loving God with our whole being. Unquestionably that is what Benedict intends, but he understands it to be lived by showing respect for one another. It is about relationship: our relationship with God, and our relationship with one another in community. Once again Benedict directs our thought to something that seems very simple but which is profoundly transforming if we begin to live it. For Benedict, God brings “us all together to life everlasting”; salvation is not an individual project, but one which we undertake with and among our brothers and sisters in Christ. We work out our salvation not only individually in fear and trembling, but also in community. It is in our care for, and interaction with, one another that we become the Body of Christ, now and forever. That is why Romans 12:10, referenced above, and the other ethical portions of Paul’s letters and Matthew’s Gospel and the Old Testament “wisdom literature” are so central to Benedict’s thought and the Rule.

Preferring Christ is something we are able to do in hundreds of ways, each and every day, because we have zeal for life lived together under the rule and reign of Christ. And the discipline of the Rule of St. Benedict helps us focus on these Godly precepts. We are given daily choices to accept the love present implicitly in every portion of the created world, by abandoning our self-will in favor of that purity of heart which knows itself to be the recipient of God. The movement toward Christ in heart, mind, and spirit within the daily round is the whole goal and the whole longing of the Rule.

As seeking Christians living in the secular world, but not of the secular world, we can apply these teachings to our lives in communion with one another and in the larger community of the Church and world by showing mutual respect. The keys that Benedict points to are deference and charity. If we listen deeply when another is talking, disagree with charity and gentleness, letting go of ego, self-will, and entrenched opinion, we will be able to hear the other—his or her heart as well as his or her voice. We need to learn to respect another’s new ideas, new insights, and practice an objective perception. All of this will eventually help us toward the goal of chapter 72, the exercise of “virtuous zeal”. Benedict assures us that there is a “virtuous zeal which separates from vice and leads to God and life everlasting”. But how is this zeal made manifest? “The zeal which monks must pursue with most ardent love [is] ‘that they should be the first to show honor to one another’ (cf Rom 12:10). . . .” That is a zeal for which we should all strive—the monastic and those of us outside the cloister.

April 30, August 31, December 31
Chapter 73

Now, we have written this Rule that, observing it in monasteries, we may show that we have acquired at least some moral righteousness, the beginning of the monastic life. ²For the one who is hastening on to the perfection of the religious life, there are the teachings of the holy Fathers, the observance of which leads a man to the height of perfection. ³What page or what utterance of the divinely inspired books of the Old and the New Testament is not a true guide for human life? ⁴Or, what book of the holy Catholic Fathers does not loudly proclaim how we may go straight to our Creator? ⁵So, too, the collations of the Fathers, and their institutes and lives, and the rule of our holy Father, Basil—⁶what are they but the monuments of the virtues of exemplary and obedient monks? ⁷But for us, who are slothful, unobservant, and negligent monks, they make us blush for shame and confusion. ⁸You, therefore, who are hastening to the heavenly home, with the help of Christ keep this little rule written for beginners; ⁹and then you shall, with God's help, attain at last to the greater heights of knowledge and virtue which we have mentioned above.

G.K. Chesterton said, “Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried.” The Christian life is demanding. And it is sometimes hard for us to discern and to know *how* to live according to the Gospel. That is why we have tools like the Rule of St. Benedict to help us. Living according to the Rule helps us make space for God to do His transforming work in us. Living by the Rule helps us to know how to fight the fight and live more closely in line with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Benedict concludes his Rule with these encouraging words: “You...who are hastening to the heavenly home, with the help of Christ keep this little rule written for beginners; and then you shall, with God’s help, attain at last to the greater heights of knowledge and virtue which we have mentioned above.”

Benedict says that this Rule was written for beginners. This is a theme which is reiterated throughout this chapter and throughout the Rule. In the first and eighth verses of this chapter he says that by keeping this Rule we have “the beginning of the monastic life”, and that “this little rule [was] written for beginners”. And from the opening verses of the Rule, Benedict says: “In the first place, each time you seek to begin a good work, earnestly pray that He will perfect whatever good you begin...” (Prol. 4). We are all beginners. We all are taking classes in the School for the Lord’s Service.

As in any school there are many facets to a complete curriculum. The Rule of St. Benedict is but one source of learning for the beginners. Benedict provides a nice list of other helpful literature available to us. He says, “For the one who is hastening on to the perfection of the religious life, there are the teachings of the holy Fathers...the divinely inspired books of the Old and the New Testament...the holy Catholic Fathers...the collations of the Fathers, and their institutes and lives, and the rule of our holy Father, Basil...” That is quite a collection of instruction. We would do well to pay attention to this suggestion.

The Rule is an intense and earnest manual for the practical living out of a life consecrated to God. Benedict’s goal was always to be pointing elsewhere and onward, to fix the monastic’s eyes on Christ. That we might “Prefer nothing whatever to Christ” (RB 72:11). Our formation into the likeness of Christ (*Imago Christi*) is a lifelong process, enabled by a lived familiarity with formal disciplines, and

involving ever more whole-hearted inner receptiveness and response to God's Spirit. The Rule began with an exhortation to earnestly engage in such a life, and that exhortation is renewed here at the end. Even the words of this chapter are echoes of and invitations to deepen the words of the Prologue. So the work of the consecrated life is like that of a spiral. No matter where we are, we are always just beginning in the journey with Christ. It may seem like we are wandering in circles, but as we assess our progress we can recognize that yes, we have gone around, but we are now on a slightly higher plane. Thanks be to God. And, thank you Father Benedict for showing us a better way.