

The Benedictine Promises

Fidelity

The second of the three promises that we make as Benedictines is “fidelity to monastic 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, those of us in the Fellowship of Saint Benedict are not promising to live in a monastic setting, and so to faithfully adhere to “monastic life” would be problematic for us.

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 Rule of St. Benedict. For the cenobitic monastic, abandonment of all personal possessions is essential to their profession, but for those of us who continue to live in the world, and those of us with families for whom we are committed to care, that would be all but impossible. Therefore, it would behoove us to take an alternate view of this promise.

St. Paul says, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.” (2 Cor. 5:17) For the Benedictine continuing to live in (but not of) the secular world, we are striving to become that new creation in Christ Jesus. That is to be remade in the image of Christ. Sister Therese Marie of St. Scholastica Monastery in Michigan says that we must let go of the attachment to secular goods and values. “Put on the outward appearance of a Benedictine,” she says. “Dress simply, walk quietly, live communally. Do not ask for exceptions, come to the Office and Mass, even when it is a struggle. Put on the mind of Christ. Embrace silence, the root of all being. Drink deeply from Scripture. Meditate. Watch your thoughts and stop them before they become desires. Let go of the need to own things.”

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 Love of Christ. The call for us in this promise from the Rule of St. Benedict 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. “Putting nothing before the Love of God” is our goal, and fidelity is the call to embrace that love.

The promise, *conversatio morum suorum*, is a promise for us to put God first in every aspect of our lives, to put nothing before the love of God.