

The Benedictine Promises

Obedience

The final promise that we make at our profession to the Fellowship of Saint Benedict is the promise of obedience. This virtue is 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 Saul is like the spirit of divination. He said, “Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice...For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry.” (1Sam. 15:22-23) And St. Paul argued that anyone “who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment...” (Rom. 13:2) Obedience to those in authority is no small matter. St. Benedict says that true obedience is always immediate (5:1-9), complete (5:9), and joyful (5:14-16). Anything less than this is at best compliance (5:14). Obedience, however, is not an onerous duty, rather an act of love. According to Benedict, “it is love that impels 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).

Though the heart of St. Benedict’s instruction regarding obedience is found in chapter 5 of the Rule, the message of this virtue’s importance for the life of the individual and community permeates every chapter. The clarion call to obedience is made in the opening verses of the Prologue (vv. 2-3): “The labor of obedience will bring you back to him from whom you had drifted through the sloth of disobedience. This message of mine is for you, then, if you are ready to give up your own will, once and for all, and armed with the strong and noble weapons of obedience to do battle for the true King, Christ the Lord.” Obedience is a labor, a battle, and a blessing. Even when we are asked by those in authority over us to do a seemingly impossible task, we must still submit and “with complete gentleness and obedience, accept the order given.” (68:1) Benedict adds, “Trusting in God’s help, he must in love obey.” (68:5) The truth is, none of us can be truly obedient, nor accomplish the tasks given to us, without reliance on God’s help, His grace.

Obedience, however, is not simply obeying orders by our superiors. “Obedience is a blessing to be shown by all, not only to the abbot but also to one another as brothers, since we know that it is by this way of obedience that we go to God.” (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 to one another, support each other with patience, “and earnestly compete in obedience to one another.” (72:4-6)

In the Fellowship of Saint Benedict we do not have an abbot. But we have ecclesiastical authority, and we have each other. By showing respect for those who are our superiors in the Church, and by supporting one another in patience and love, we will continue to build up the Body of Christ and live our lives in accordance with the Rule of St. Benedict and the promises we make in our profession.