

The Benedictine Promises

Stability

In the Rule of Saint Benedict, chapter 58, there are three promises listed which the “professed” makes at his reception into the community. “When he is received, he comes before the whole community in the oratory and promises stability, fidelity to monastic life, and obedience.” (vs. 17) These are considered “promises” as opposed to vows, because they are made to the Abbot himself, with God as his witness (58:18), rather than promises to God, which would constitute a vow.

In contrast, the *Rule of the Master* offers a detailed description of the act of profession which includes this reply from the Abbot to the request for admission: “See, brother, you are not promising anything to me, but to God and to this oratory and holy altar.” (RM 89:11) For the “Master”, the profession was to God, and thus a sacred vow. Benedict recognized that this was more onerous than most men could endure, and the consequences of failure had dire implications for the professed. Though St. Benedict draws heavily on his predecessors’ works (e.g. the Rule of the Master, Rule of St. Basil the Great, Rule of St. Pachomius, etc.), he leans toward a more succinct and simple process in the profession stressing greater emphasis on commitment to the community.

The Rule dictates nothing regarding the liturgical setting for the profession, except that it takes place in the oratory (RB 58:17-20). In the following chapter, in the description of the oblation of a child, the Rule indicates that the document and the child’s hands are both to be wrapped in the altar cloth (i.e. fair linen). This prescription suggests that the profession takes place at the offertory of the Holy Eucharist, and as such would hint that the same would be true for the profession of a monk. The implication of the profession being made to the Abbot, and in the context of Holy Eucharist, is that the promises are made in communion, that is to the community as a whole. The new monk is making a commitment of stability, fidelity, and obedience to the body of brothers as they embody the whole Body of Christ.

The promise then of stability is one of commitment to maintain relationship with this particular community of faith and these fellow believers. The basic meaning that one can derive from Benedict’s use of the term in the Rule is perseverance. Besides this list of promises in 58:17, Benedict uses the term “stability” four other times in the Rule. In referring to the monastic tools, Benedict says, “The workshop where we are to toil faithfully at all these tasks is the enclosure of the monastery and stability in the community.” (4:78) Our good works are not for our benefit alone, but for the “stability in the community.” In reference to the brother who is to be received as a professed member of the community, the Rule declares, “If he promises perseverance in his stability, then after two months have elapsed let this rule be read straight through to him.” (58:9) Again, the message of stability is one of perseverance in community. Priests who visit the monastery with an eye to joining are exhorted to “promise to keep the rule and observe stability.” (60:9) The sense is that once the commitment is made to join the community, a cleric must persevere in maintaining that on-going relationship. And finally, a visiting monk who decides to remain in this community must, “bind himself to stability.” (61:5)

How does this relate to the Fellowship of Saint Benedict? It is important for us as members of this community of faith to persevere in relationship with one another. Our promise of “stability” is one of perseverance in communal work, prayer, and relational support for one another. Our promise of stability is to the Fellowship, with God as our witness. Stability is about relationship with our brothers and sisters in Christ.