

## **RB 72 – In the Workshop of the Monastery - How Does a Monk Advance in Good Zeal?: The Ascetical Dimension of Community Life**

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There are examples throughout the world, past and present, of the transforming power of monastic asceticism in the lives of individual monastic men and women, but to illustrate the goal to which this way of life aspires I am going to step out of the monastic context in presenting the example of a married person. I do this because seeing the result of Christian community asceticism in a different context may throw new light on our own project; and it may also serve to emphasize that the goal of monastic asceticism is simply the goal of Christian life, which is achieved not by a particular set of external practices, but through the motivation, conviction, and grace inspiring those practices as a way of life.

About twenty years ago, not far from our monastery, a couple married more than forty years discovered that the husband had cancer in an advanced stage; he was given only a few months to live. Within six months he was on his deathbed, weak and emaciated, eaten up by the cancer. On April 28 the doctors told the family that he would die within twenty-four hours. His body would accept no nourishment, and he was suffering intense pain beyond the reach of drugs. When his daughter went to say goodbye, he asked her what day it was. “Tuesday,” she said. “No; what date?” “April 28.” With that he closed his eyes and was silent.

But he didn’t die that day or night. And he didn’t die during the next day and night. And he would not sleep. The doctors could not understand it. No nourishment; and pain enough to send him into a coma and death. He asked the date again on April 30. He was perspiring with pain. The family tried to release him, to give him permission to die. But he held on. And he would not sleep. Two hours before midnight he asked again, “What is today?” By now his wife and daughter knew he meant the date: “April 30.” But this time he also asked the hour: “10:15 P.M.” (22:15)

Against his will he fell asleep for a couple of hours, but awoke with a start. “What is the date?” he asked. His daughter looked at her watch. It was just past midnight. “It’s May 1, Daddy.” “Good,” he said. “Mother will get her check.” Within a half hour he was dead. He had been holding on until the new month so that his wife would receive one more social security payment in his name.

Though this man was not a monastic, his dying action struck me as a dramatic example of what St. Benedict describes as the “good zeal” in Chapter 72: expressed especially in mutual obedience (v. 6) and the pursuit of what is better for the other (v. 7), animated by “pure love” (v. 8: RB 1980; Barry) or “selfless love” (Kardong). This husband and father was not able to act this way on the spur of the moment at the time of his death. He went the extra mile with nothing to gain for himself in this extravagant gift of suffering; the gain was all for the other. Somehow he had lived in a way to become what he was at the last moment; he had, if you will, practiced an effective asceticism during his life of married love. He had trained himself (or accepted training) to become what he was at the end.

I hope that using an example completely outside the boundaries of Benedictine community life will help us avoid debates over externals. The end result of our search for God in the monastery does not depend on the way we organize our lives nor the local traditions we follow. That does not mean that these issues are unimportant. It just says that

the actions in our lives draw their power from an honesty underpinning our observances and a commitment and dedication to the task as a call of God.

We do not know what this couple's life practices were, in other words what was the path that led the husband (and presumably the wife) successfully to the true love expressed in his moment of death. Married life does not have a proven and accepted tradition available to couples in most cultures anymore. Around the world today, more or less, each newlywed couple has to create its own path by trial and error; which is a large reason, certainly, why marriage is in such chaos and why divorce rates are so high.

Monastic life, however, does have the gift of a centuries-old ascetical tradition; and those of us called to this life must live it according to the proved tradition we have received. The goal, however it is identified in our sources – “good zeal” or “purity of heart” – is not exclusive to monasticism. It is simply the Christian goal, approached “with the gospel as our guide” (Prol. 21). But our vocation requires us to journey toward the goal with the practices appropriate to this life, not those for another life.

### Asceticism

Perhaps at this point a word on “asceticism” would be timely, in view of the scope of this presentation within our overall outline. Asceticism, coming from the Greek *askesis*, “discipline” or “training” or even “fighting,” implies an active program toward achieving a spiritual goal, exercising to gain a skill. The word itself is not contained in the Bible nor the Rule of Benedict, but the concept is essential to both. The Gospels record Jesus' instructions about the practices of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving (Mt 6) and the requirement to take up one's cross (Lk 9:23). St. Benedict communicates this sense of active pursuit by the words *militare* (“do battle”) and *currere* (“run”): “We must, then, prepare our hearts and bodies for the battle of holy obedience (*oboedientiae militanda*) to his instructions” (RB Prol. 40; also Prol. 3; 1.2; 58.10; 61.10); “Run while you have the light of life” (Prol. 13; also Prol. 22, 44, 49; 27.5; 43.1). The Rule (and the whole tradition) is certainly influenced by St. Paul's description of the spiritual struggle in terms of racing and fighting and his insistence on a program of strict training for the sake of the goal: “Every athlete exercises discipline in every way” (1 Cor 9:2).

And what is the goal? In the Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality, Rosemary Rader, O.S.B., says that “Although there has never been a uniform definition or practice of asceticism through Christian history, the underlying motivation has always been that of overcoming the obstacles to the fulfillment of the gospel imperative to love God and love one's neighbor.” (p. 28). We notice immediately that this is the opposite of a popular concept of asceticism as harshness toward the body arising from self-hatred or a negative view of the human. Authentic Christian asceticism depends on a healthy view of humanity: we believe it is possible for human beings to take steps to bring order into their lives and to work toward self-transformation, always dependent, of course, on the help of divine grace. St. Paul said beautifully to the Corinthians, who were immersed in a culture which devalued the human: “Glorify God in your body” (1 Cor 6:20).

This is a breath of fresh air in a world which increasingly wants us to believe we are at the mercy of our upbringing or our inherent inclinations. Psychologists describe three main determinism theories: genetic determinism: my ancestors are the cause of my erratic behavior; psychic determinism: my parents “emotionally scripted” me to my compulsions; and environmental determinism: I'm the way I am because of the world around me (the economy, the culture, the people in my life, my circumstances). The ascetical tradition says that though

we carry various kinds of baggage we are not shackled prisoners: we can make a start in becoming new persons, and our freedom increases as we progress. A saying from St. Augustine embodies this conviction: “We are our choices.”

Social scientists have noted the phenomenon in American society of people in recent years approaching religion or church as a lifestyle choice. The motivation is not faith or conscience conviction, but the desire to find a philosophy or lifestyle which fits my tastes. This has occasionally affected religious life, when candidates have appeared who are searching for a community that suits their present way of living already or can be tailored to fit. The message of monastic asceticism is that if you are satisfied with yourself or your life the way it is, don't bother to apply. We come to the monastery to be changed. Monastic asceticism is about conversion, and this process will be a way of the cross: “We shall through patience share in the suffering of Christ that we may deserve also to share in his kingdom” (Prol. 50). The story is told of a novice in a missionary religious community founded in Europe during the nineteenth century, who wrote frequently to the foundress, recounting the blessings of her novitiate days and exuding over the beauties of community life. After a time this began to worry the superior, who finally wrote: “Sister, if by the time you receive this letter you have not received a cross, make a novena.”

Evagrius described the goal of monastic asceticism as apatheia. This came into Western monasticism as puritas cordis through Cassian, who avoided the Greek term apparently because of the controversy raised about it by Jerome and Augustine. We are ironically fortunate in this development, because “purity of heart” is much easier to deal with as a spiritual goal than “apathy,” an inaccurate translation which would have been hard to avoid in most modern languages.

St. Benedict does not speak of purity of heart as such but the concept is certainly present in the goal of the ladder of humility which he takes over from Cassian through the Rule of the Master: “Now, therefore, after ascending all these steps of humility, the monk will quickly arrive at that perfect love of God which casts out fear” (1 Jn 4:18; RB 7:67). Cassian also uses a step imagery in speaking of the ascetical practices leading to purity of heart: “This is why we take on loneliness, fasting, vigils, work, nakedness. For this we must practice the reading of the Scripture, together with all the other virtuous activities, and we do so to trap and to hold our hearts free of the harm of every dangerous passion and in order to rise step by step to the high point of love” (Conf. I, 7).

The point is made over and over in these and other monastic sources that the purpose of asceticism is not discipline or self-control, but a heart of love. Evagrius sees gentleness and compassion as at the heart of apatheia. But the struggle involves the total person. It is not just a matter of intention and desire. Cassian makes the point in relationship to prayer: a solid foundation in virtue is needed to support a life of prayer (Conf. IX, 2).

### Freedom

We perform these ascetical practices, says Cassian, “...to hold our hearts free.” Freedom is the first issue of asceticism, rather than love, because the gift of self that is love requires the freedom to give.

In our monastic formation programs we are rightly concerned to cover many issues and topics: Scripture and the Rule, monastic history and traditions, Catholic teaching and Church law, psychological readiness for the demands of vowed life, the search for God in prayer and lectio divina, etc. But the purpose of all monastic formation, as of all Christian and even

human formation, is to lead us to personal freedom. Vatican II called authentic freedom “an exceptional sign of the divine image within the human person” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 17)

Freedom of course is a loaded word, a “buzzword,” which has to be treated carefully. It has many meanings, some of them fraudulent; some of them ironically and treacherously leading to enslavement. Freedom at its most basic level is the ability to be myself. That, however, is not as simple as it seems. Freedom is a prize of human maturity; it is meant for all and available to all, but not all achieve it.

The struggle for human freedom begins in the crib, but it becomes a consuming fire in adolescence with the search for individuality and unique personhood. The struggle goes on, but if we have made a beginning of peace with ourselves in adolescence the growth to freedom will be organic; otherwise it will be chaotic as the issues stay alive and smoldering, waiting to flare up again and again.

The most common mistake about freedom is to equate it with the removal of restrictions external to myself. The way to be free, this implies, is to remove obstacles: parental control, social mores, legal restrictions, and even the people who stand in my way, by leaving them, locking them in or out, or even killing them (e.g., abortion). This, of course, is an illusion, because removal of identifiable obstacles deals with only a small part of the battleground of freedom, which mostly takes place interiorly and invisibly.

We will not be free until we deal with the unseen and unidentified masters driving us to our actions and decisions, that whole inner world of passions, moods, and fears, the realm of sexuality, pride, self-doubt; compounded by a historical baggage of past hurts, resentment, and prejudices. Then there is that outer world of peer and media pressure, of cultural indoctrination, of societal values, that affects us constantly by osmosis.

Slavery means being controlled by a master or masters I haven’t chosen. It is no less slavery if my masters are unidentified or if I am unaware they are controlling me. The slavery is all the more sinister because its agents are hidden from me.

Freedom means to be guided by a master or a norm I have chosen, not one that has been imposed with or without my knowledge. This explains the curious biblical expression “the law of freedom” (*Jas 2:12*). In our human condition there is no true independence. We are involved in a network of dependences, which actually increases rather than diminishes with the advances of science and technology: think of the worldwide impact of the disruption caused by the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center a year ago. This is only a reflection of dependence on a much higher level: dependence on God. Though we may choose to reject this dependence, it is impossible to be truly independent, our own master. As St. Paul tells us, we will be either slaves of sin or slaves of God: “When you were slaves of sin, you had freedom from justice.... But now that you are freed from sin and have become slaves of God, your benefit is sanctification as you tend toward eternal life” (*Rom 6:20,22*). True freedom requires acceptance of dependence on God. Augustine says: “Whoever is not bound by this chain is a slave.”

To emphasize this, Jesus used the image of the child. “Unless you change and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of God” (*Mt 18:3*). The focus here is not innocence – a child may be good or bad – but recognition of and acceptance of dependence on another. We are all sinners, but there is hope for sinners who recognize their dependence on God’s mercy.

A free person has by personal decision internalized the norms of the chosen master. Everything is subjected to this inner law, even external laws. St. Paul called this “the law of the spirit” (*Rom 8:2*). We see this law at work in Jesus and the saints, and all who have

made a conscious decision to live by an inner norm. People who do not share the same master cannot understand the lives of those who are so guided and driven. Both Jesus and Paul were accused of being mad.

Christian asceticism -- and monastic asceticism as a particular expression -- is dedicated to forming us in true freedom: choosing God to be our master, loosening the shackles of other masters to be able to embrace God and his commandments, and then to live freely by the inner norm we have chosen. Benedict refers to this as a process of “giving up one’s own will”: a readiness to do this is laid down as a prerequisite at the beginning of the Rule (Prol. 3), and is key for the first two steps of humility (7:19;31-33). At face value this goes down hard with modern psychology: a weak self-concept is a sure sign of sickness. Benedict would have no quarrel with that. What he is urging, in concert with the whole monastic tradition, is a commitment to a process of removing the illusions which cover up one’s true will. Voluntas propria and desideria sua in the Rule of Benedict do not refer to the true will of the healthy self. That true will is found in the inner depths, where we are truly ourselves, where all of us desire to be united to the Creator and to fulfill the destiny for which we were created. Sin has covered over this true will and caused us to confuse it with our selfish transitory desires. As long as we suffer this confusion, we cannot do our true will because we do not know it, and we cannot be free. So Benedict gives us as a tool for good works to hate our own false will (4:60).

Choosing God as master is not a once for all choice. The other masters do not give up their hold easily; and we do not easily let them go. The most tragic people in monasteries are those who do not remember or never understood that they freely chose God to master them through the vowed life, and that their only hope for true freedom now is through what they view as the “encroachments” of obedience and monastic observance.

### School for the Lord’s Service

St. Benedict provides us a school and a discipline for growing in this true freedom. He calls it “running the path of God’s commandments” (Prol. 49). We are not to run just anywhere. Just because activity is inspired with good intentions does not assure it is leading toward a goal. We can flail aimlessly with great energy. St. Benedict drops an anchor for us with his strong maxim in Chapter 43: “Let nothing be preferred to (or “put before”: praeponatur) the Opus Dei.” The weight of this instruction can be gauged by its echo in Chapter 72: “Let them prefer (praeponant) nothing whatever to Christ” (v. 11). Why is the Work of God so important in the life programmed by the Rule? We know that Benedict has compressed the meaning of this term. In the tradition before him the Work of God described the whole monastic project or prayer in general; in his Rule it denotes the Hours of the liturgy. It is here that the divine presence, highlighted everywhere -- in the abbot, in the sick, in the guest, in the poor, in the senior and the junior -- is especially to be recognized and revered.

For Benedict participation in the community liturgy becomes the touchstone of the observance of the community and of each member. First of all, it removes illusions about what is important and who makes it important. It takes faith (in the core meaning of the New Testament term pistis, “trust”) and dependence on God to drop everything several times a day to come together to proclaim God’s praises. It is an unremitting expression of the fear of God, emphasized in the first two degrees of humility in Chapter 7 and as evidence of the good zeal in Chapter 72, which means that we put God first, above every other project or influence, at every moment. If someone or something draws me away needlessly from the

Opus Dei, at that moment I fear that person or thing more than God. Unlike an examination of conscience, open to self-deception because of its interiority, participation at the Work of God is an exterior norm, which is physical and observable. An axiom has it: My mind and my tongue deceive me, but my feet tell me the truth.

The Opus Dei is like the Sabbath for the Hebrew believer, a reminder of God's lordship. One who believes in God's caring presence is able to let the world go for a day every week, to rely on God to maintain the world and take care of its people. A monastic is able to leave work, even work of critical importance to the monastery, several times a day to appear with the community gathered in God's presence. Until this priority is established, an individual's growth toward inner freedom and the good zeal will be compromised. Everything is on hold if God is not first. "Let nothing be put before the Work of God."

For fidelity to the Work of God to carry me forward in pursuit of the good zeal, however, mere physical presence is not enough. Quality of presence is determined by fidelity to the next great area of monastic asceticism, lectio divina, which is St. Benedict's code for the individual monastic's personal and private search for God. This is the observance which directly deepens our love of God and purifies our intention for all the other pursuits of our day, including the Work of God. By imbibing the spirit of a biblical reading or by "slow brooding over the tradition" (Eamon Duffy), we gradually grow into God's perspective on reality, seeing the world and its people through God's eyes, reading life divinely. St. Benedict says very little about the method of lectio divina or about the personal prayer with which it forms a seamless robe. His interest is more in establishing a framework and rationale for the personal spiritual journey, knowing that if time is spent in God's presence God will lead the way. To provide further information, in Chapter 73 he points us to his own sources, some of which, particularly the Desert Fathers and Cassian, are being rediscovered as guides today.

Without the backing of this personal search for God, all the other monastic observances, including the Work of God, become dry straw: they will bring neither nourishment nor enjoyment. While the public nature of the Opus Dei gives it special power to remind and prod us to daily fidelity, the effectiveness of lectio divina and personal prayer comes from their very interiority. Because there is no way for anyone else to know whether I am faithful in this interior journey, and because there is no observable or measurable proof that anything is happening to drive me along day to day, my fidelity has to be based on my personal conviction and desire for God. Beyond anything I can know, this practice radically nurtures my trust in God and therefore my interior freedom. But it requires daily consistency without fail.

#### Obedience: Vertical and Horizontal

St. Benedict warns us at the beginning of the Prologue that the monastic project will be futile unless we take up the bright and noble weapons of obedience in a decision to give up our own will to put on that of Christ. We know this is not a call to lose our personality and integrity, but to follow through on willingly giving our personhood over to the mastery of Christ. The key here is to recognize God's presence everywhere and to yield to the manifestations of God's will however they are made: through the abbot or superior who "takes the place of Christ in the monastery" or in mutual obedience to the needs of one another in the daily experience of community life.

Chapter 68 on Impossible Tasks is very important, because it shows that the worth of our work comes not from the quality of the product or the skill we bring to the task, which are

very good things, but from the faith which permits us to go forward against our personal evidence, “trusting in the help of God” (v. 5). In the life of the Rule there is no such thing as resigning a position given in obedience, though there is room to petition a change, but desiring it only if it will be consistent with God’s will for us. The vocation prayer of Pope Clement XI is an exact expression of this attitude:

“O God, I want to do what you wish  
for as long as you wish  
in the way you wish  
because you wish.”

Benedict singles out two great enemies to this trust in God, to the pursuit of obedience, and ultimately to the whole monastic course: murmuring and private ownership. Though these practices are harmful to the hopeful spirit of the community and to mutual trust, their destructive potential goes much deeper than this. They are matters of spiritual life and death. Both murmuring and private ownership strike at the heart of the community, its faith in God’s loving and providing presence. Both these practices imply that God either does not know my sad situation in this community, or does not care, or is unable to provide for me; therefore I must take care of myself, whether by words or by things.

Murmuring against God is a theme of the wilderness journey in Exodus and Numbers. It was invoked by Jesus in the bread of life discourse in John 6. The insidious potential of this fault is expressed especially in two texts: at the place called Massah and Meribah before Moses struck the rock, when the people cried out “Is the Lord in our midst or not?” (Ex 17:7); and in the night wailing, when their doubt and fear led the people to propose: “Let us appoint a leader and go back to Egypt” (Num 14:4). Murmuring leads us to give up on God and go back into slavery. Its most deadly form today is probably passive aggression, by which I in effect appoint myself God and become judge of the community moment by moment.

The wilderness journey is also the source of the warning against putting possessions between oneself and God. The Letter to the Hebrews applies the lesson of Deuteronomy: “Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be satisfied with what you have. For God has said, ‘I will never leave you; I will never abandon you’” (13:5; Dt 31:6). Hoarding or hiding possessions means that one has no faith that God will provide: to survive in this misguided community, I must take care of myself.

Completely different from this self-serving attitude is the spirit St. Benedict recommends with the concept of mutual obedience in Chapters 71 and 72. “They know that they will go to God by this path of obedience” (71:2). In Chapter 71, though it is entitled “That they be obedient to one another,” the treatment of the communitarian aspect of obedience gives way to a strong reiteration of vertical obedience. But in Chapter 72, St. Benedict addresses mutual obedience more thoroughly as a key ingredient of the good zeal.

Verse six, which has the strong language of “competing” in mutual obedience, is sandwiched between verses which expose its prime elements: respect for one another (4) and patience with each other’s weaknesses (5) on one side, concern for the good of the other (7) and mutual love (8) on the other side.

Mutual obedience may be viewed as central to the observance of monastic stability: this particular group of people, with whom God has called me into covenant, mediates God’s will to me day by day. The “good zeal” of Benedictines is not achieved by obeying orders, no matter how faithfully, but demands also sensitivity and availability to the spoken and unspoken needs of my sisters or brothers. Cardinal Newman saw in the daily give and take of family and community living a seedbed for sanctity: “I cannot fancy any state of life more

favourable for the exercise of high Christian principle than that of persons who differ in tastes and general character, being obliged to live together, and mutually to accommodate to each other their respective wishes and pursuits.” This captures the spirit of Benedictine mutual obedience. St. Bernard said, “Vita communis poenitentia maxima” (The common life is the greatest asceticism). When in verse 11, Benedict admonishes us to “prefer nothing whatever to Christ,” this includes all those who represent Christ in my life: the abbot/superior, the old, the young, the sick, everyone.

Mutual obedience brings God very close, but it means I must break through Christ’s disguises. He will be present in all the “weaknesses of body and character” in the community – in the borrower who never returns, in the person who is never on time, in the one who tracks dirt on a clean floor, and the member who never volunteers to help.

But he will also be present in the one who is faithful but hurting, or prayerful but lonely, or secretly mourning the loss of a loved one. Obedience to one another here calls for deep listening, the daily practice of “attending with the ear of the heart to the master’s instructions” to which we are called at the beginning of the Rule (RB Prol 1), especially when the call of God comes to us in the flesh and blood of our sisters or brothers in community. A desert anchorite went to see another monk and as he was leaving said to him, “Forgive me, abba, for having taken you away from your rule.” But the other answered him, “My rule is to refresh you and send you away in peace.”

### Hospitality

There is great strength in the stability and regularity of monastic life, but there is also a danger: we can get stuck on the path, settling down in oases we mistake for the promised land. The Rule with its images of running and striving and fighting should make us alert and ready for the new, but the regularity of the life may settle us down and close us in. The monastic tradition of hospitality is a great help here.

St. Benedict admonishes us to welcome the guest as Christ (RB 53:1), and from his instruction there has developed a tradition of Benedictine hospitality known for its quality around the world. But I think we may do more to reap spiritual benefit within the community from this teaching. Within the community we are constantly guests and even at particular times strangers to one another. If we are truly hospitable we will constantly welcome one another anew.

Verse 4 of Chapter 72 on the Good Zeal is a quotation from St. Paul to the Romans, translated in RB 1980 as “They should each try to be the first to show respect to the other” (12:10). The Latin word honore is translated here as “respect,” which evokes a helpful nuance in application. To respect means literally to look back at, to regard more closely, to see again. True respect does not categorize persons or, even worse, dismiss them by caricature; it makes the effort to see Christ anew each time.

Some years ago I was invited to give a retreat for the Dominican Sisters of Bethany, a small monastic community in the northeastern United States. Two or three members are assigned to their one external apostolate, ministry to women in a large federal prison.

Over the years, this ministry has awakened in some of the women inmates a monastic vocation, which they have pursued in that Dominican monastery. The Sisters have worked hard to forestall discrimination against these candidates. They have instituted a unique community statute: no member is permitted to talk about her past life except to a superior or spiritual director or confessor; and no one is permitted to question another’s past. Ideally no one knows whether another member is a former teacher, banker, or convict.



The point is applicable to every community. We all have different backgrounds and histories, but we have been brought together by a common call. Our life in the monastery begins on the day of entrance. What went before is not the issue, but how we live together now in response to God's call today. The past is only prologue. We have to let our own past go, even yesterday, and start on our journey anew today; and we have to let our sisters or brothers do the same. What counts is how we serve the Lord today, however God has brought us together to share this day.

Christian hospitality lived authentically is quite dangerous, for it means reserving judgment until after the guest or stranger has been welcomed in. For the world, the first movement is judgment, the second acceptance, just the opposite of the Gospel and the Rule. It is part of our charism and tradition as hospitable monastics to open the door of our monasteries to complete strangers, giving them space to be themselves before judgment imposes itself. The Letter to the Hebrews reminds us that through hospitality "some have unknowingly entertained angels" (13:2). But to be fully hospitable we must accord one another in community the good zeal of a richer gift: again and again opening the door of our hearts to our sister or brother, ready for a fresh revelation of the person we think we already know.

### A Biblical Model

I began with an example of Christian good zeal from married life, and as I near the conclusion I will call attention to an example of the good zeal from the Bible: Barnabas, the companion of Paul, who exemplifies well virtues prized in the common life.

Barnabas was a unique leader in the apostolic community, being at the same time a Levite and therefore thoroughly Jewish and a Hebrew speaker, and a native of Cyprus familiar with Greek ways and a Greek speaker. This made him providentially situated to be a bridge between Hebrew and Greek Christians and a leader in the mission to the Gentiles. All of this combined with his considerable natural gifts poised Barnabas for the critical service he brought to the founding of the Christian Church, but it does not explain his contribution. Gifts are squandered daily. The secret of God's success through him was his good zeal.

Barnabas is introduced in the Acts of the Apostles by a single sentence that reveals his integrity (contrasted with the deceit of Ananias and Sapphira) and the esteem in which he was still held years after his death: "Thus Joseph, also named by the apostles Barnabas (which is translated 'son of encouragement'), a Levite, a Cypriot by birth, sold a piece of property that he owned, then brought the money and put it at the feet of the apostles" (4:36-37). So impressed were the leaders by his gift of affirming people and building up the community that they named him "The Encourager," a name so descriptive of his apostolic role that it replaced his given name in community memory (like "Peter" for "Simon").

We see him in action as Acts unfolds, mentoring Saul when the other leaders were afraid of him (9:26-27), and affirming the Church at Antioch when its outreach to the Gentiles was challenged. But the real test came when Barnabas was confronted with the choice of recalling Saul into service after Saul had been judged a liability by the Jerusalem leaders and sent home.

Barnabas surely saw the dangers in Saul's manner and approach, but he also recognized the potential of Saul's gifts for the mission of the Church. He surely realized, too, that championing Saul would compromise his own standing in the Jerusalem community should Saul fail. But he was more concerned about the proclamation of the gospel, not pursuing what he might judge better for himself, but instead, what would be better for the Church.

Soon, inevitably because of Saul's abilities as a public speaker and motivator, Barnabas began to take second place and recede into the background. When the mission to the Gentiles was launched at Antioch, Barnabas was mentioned first in the community and Saul last. The Holy Spirit told the praying community to set apart "Barnabas and Saul" for this work, but already by the end of the Cyprus mission the narrative is talking about "Paul and his companions" (Acts 13:1,2,13), and later the duo is usually "Paul and Barnabas."

It is right here that Barnabas' good zeal makes its critical contribution, in his obedience, which in terms of the Rule of Benedict we would term both vertical and mutual, and in his humility. There is no indication anywhere that Barnabas complained or sulked about his demotion from prominence in favor of Paul. He recognized Paul's gifts and the good that would come to the Church if Paul were encouraged and given free rein. Barnabas recognized that he himself could not do what Paul could do. For as long as Paul would let him, Barnabas was his promoter, his supporter, and his buffer to the Jerusalem community.

But if Barnabas didn't have Paul's gifts, neither did Paul have the gifts of Barnabas. God didn't need two Pauls or two Barnabases, but one of each giving what they had been given. Would the early community have held together as it did without Barnabas, an encourager, a consoler, one who was "first to show respect to the other," a humble behind-the-scenes community builder?

At the top of Benedict's ladder of humility is the "perfect love of God which casts out fear" (RB 7:67; 1 Jn 4:18). Barnabas was able to serve God and the Church, always promoting the good and encouraging others, because he was at peace within himself. He had the inner security that can only come when one is deeply and thoroughly convinced of being personally chosen and loved by God. His actions showed that his heart, again in Benedict's terms, "was overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love" (RB Prol. 49).

Barnabas risked disruptions and disagreements by taking Saul/Paul under his wing; he risked alienation from the Jerusalem leaders, and he risked the loss of prestige in the community and an established reputation for good judgment and wisdom. But Barnabas had no fear about losing those external approvals. He did not need them to be himself. He had God's love, and this made him free.

It would have been easier and safer for Barnabas to turn the other way when Saul appeared on his horizon like a burning bush, and thus preserve what he had. No one would have blamed him; no one would even have known. But the Church would have lost Paul, and Barnabas would have lost himself.

When we witness the life of someone like Barnabas, so secure with the love of God in his heart, we recognize good zeal and we understand how much of the evil zeal, by contrast, comes from inner insecurity and is expressed in self-protection and pettiness.

### A Choice of Zeals

One version of hell on earth is to have everything you want but no one to share it with. The "wicked zeal of bitterness" is a selfish pursuit which "leads to hell" already in the present life, while the good zeal gives already a foretaste of heaven, where there will be no selfishness: all will be love.

Everything in the good zeal points away from self and toward the neighbor and God. This is the fulfillment of the Great Commandment, the first of the tools in Benedict's workshop (RB 4:1) and the goal of monastic asceticism. We may see as a pattern the tools grouped together in Chapter 4, verses 10-19. The first four might seem negative and self-oriented -- "Renounce yourself in order to follow Christ; discipline your body; do not pamper yourself,

but love fasting” -- but they are focused toward the good zeal by the tools immediately following: “You must relieve the lot of the poor, clothe the naked, visit the sick, and bury the dead. Go to help the troubled and console the sorrowing.” If you go into yourself it is to go out of yourself.

In the Rule of the Master, the monks are urged to vie with one another in obedience to the abbot. Perhaps this was the direction of Benedict’s own early teaching as reflected in the earlier part of his Rule, so heavily influenced by the RM. Obedience to the abbot, who represents Christ, can and should be a path to humility and holiness, but as presented by the RM it is potentially a selfish path, a search for personal glory, status and power.

In his mature teaching, without minimizing obedience to God through the superior who represents Christ, Benedict urges monks to compete in obedience to one another. This gives a clearer focus to the whole work of obedience in the monastery, and removes the danger of a selfish motivation. It gives everyone in the community a role in my search for God, and me a role in theirs, and makes all of us ever more eager for Christ to bring us all together to everlasting life.

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#### Ideas for Reflection Questions

1. Who comes to mind, inside or outside the monastery, as a model of the good zeal described by St. Benedict? Why?
2. Name a major deception of contemporary life which hampers development of inner freedom.
3. What are appropriate and inappropriate forms of monastic discipline today?
4. What are the monastic practices which are at the same time attractive and helpful to today’s entrants?
5. What is the most difficult monastic concept for today’s entrants?
6. How does a previous professional career help or hinder life in community?
7. How do hierarchical and mutual obedience mesh with or conflict with one another?
8. What are the limits of monastic hospitality?