

Home Retreat: Spiritual “Parenting”

*Pour out in your Church, O Lord,
the spirit which guided our Holy Father St Benedict.
Fill us with that spirit,
and grant that we may love what he loved,
and put into practice what he taught,
through Christ our Lord.*

I had a strange experience in my first few weeks as Housemaster. One of my Sixth Formers suddenly appeared in my office, looking incredibly embarrassed. It was a simple problem – he’d blocked one of the loos, and didn’t know what to do, having tried in vain to “fix” it himself. Immediately I said I would come along and sort things, but he then looked horrified. “Father”, he said, “You’re a *priest* – you can’t unblock toilets!” Quietly, I asked him who would sort out this problem if he was at home, and he instantly replied “My Dad”. “Well then”, I said, “Why should it be different here? When you’re in the House, I’m effectively Mum and Dad to all of you – I’ll be straight along”. And 5 minutes later, with the aid of an unravelled coat-hanger, all was sorted and running freely again. It was a small thing, but it changed our relationship.

Many of you will know that we have just elected a new Abbot, Abbot Robert, up until now the Prior of our community in Zimbabwe. This is a moment of joy for us – but it has also been a time of deep reflection for us on what it *means* to have a “spiritual father”. You might think that little story is an “unworthy” way to start a short reflection on “spiritual parenting” – but I suspect St Benedict would disagree. If you read the Rule, the Abbot appears in almost every chapter, whether dealing with the “spiritual” life of the community or with the more mundane and practical aspects of its life. Certainly, the Abbot is our “spiritual father”, but Benedict wants him also to have special concern for the poor, the sick, the children, and equally to ensure that the brethren have what they need – habits that fit, appropriate bedding, enough food, even handkerchiefs. Admittedly, he doesn’t mention unblocking the toilets, but I’m sure you see what I mean.

And I think there is something terribly important there. In these days of Christmas and Epiphany, we celebrate the mystery of the Incarnation – Jesus, the divine pre-existent Word of God, becomes man for our salvation. The one through whom all things were created now has hands and feet like us, feels hungry and cold like us, needs care and love like us. In his life, there appears to be little of that “artificial” distinction between “spiritual” and “physical” which so plagues our modern culture – there is just life, and the *promise* of life in all its fullness. And I think St Benedict realised that in the portrait of the Abbot which he draws in the Rule – and because of that, perhaps there are some lessons which all Christians might learn from – whether parents of families, leaders in business or management, or

simply monks or nuns trying to live out our Baptism with the Rule and the Gospel for our guide.

So what does Benedict say? For Benedict, the Abbot is *the* key figure – he is “*believed to hold the place of Christ in the monastery*” (RSB 2:2). Commenting on who should be chosen as Abbot, he says:

Goodness of life and wisdom in teaching must be the criteria for choosing the.. abbot, even if he is the last in community rank... (RSB 64:2)

Benedict is clear. It is goodness of life and wisdom in teaching which are the hallmarks of a good “father”, and it is interesting that he puts them in that order, with goodness even before wisdom. Benedict states that age or rank are no bar to election – it is the *qualities* of the candidate, not his status, which is important. He also warns against a community electing someone who would ‘make their life easy’. For Benedict, the Abbot must be someone who will challenge the monks – someone who will face them with the hard reality of the search for God, encourage them in the difficult task of community living.

As if to emphasise this, he makes three further points:

Let him recognise that his goal must be profit for the monks, not pre-eminence for himself... He must hate faults, but love the brothers... Let him strive to be loved rather than feared... (RSB 64: 8, 11, 15)

The principal goal of a superior is to be the profit of those in his care. To use a biblical analogy – it is the *sheep* who need to grow fit and healthy, not the shepherd who grows fat at their expense. The Abbot’s role is about *service*, following the example of Christ *who came not to be served but to serve* (Mk.10:45). The Abbot must always see each monk as a child of God, despite their faults; as those who sometimes need to be corrected, but only so that they can grow to be the people *God* calls them to be. That is tough love – both for the superior and for the community – and perhaps the parents among you will recognise such “tough love”.

Clearly speaking from experience, Benedict goes on:

Excitable, anxious, extreme, obstinate, jealous or over-suspicious he must not be. Such a man is never at rest. Instead, he must show forethought and consideration in his orders... (be) discerning and moderate... (RSB 64:16-18)

It’s interesting to note Benedict’s *reason* for condemning those “negative qualities”. “*Such a one is never at rest*”, he says. Clearly, for Benedict that quality of “restfulness”, a certain tranquillity and balance in a spiritual father is important. If a community or a family or a business is to remain united, working together for a common goal, then the Superior must be able to foster *unity* – and all those negative qualities are about *divisiveness*.

Also in this chapter, Benedict writes one of the most famous sentences of the Rule:

He must so arrange everything that the strong have something to yearn for, and the weak nothing to run from. (RSB 64:19)

That sentence speaks for itself – it is about challenge and love. Benedict knows that people are fragile – after all, he calls the Rule “a little Rule for beginners”. Driving a community too hard or too fast can result in casualties, and it is the Abbot’s task “never to leave a man behind”. The *purpose* of the Rule is that “[Christ] should bring us all together to everlasting life” (cf. RSB 72:12) – “all together”, and not just the bravest and best. It is the ‘father’s’ task to lead, since the journey must go on, but it must be at a pace that *everyone* can manage. And of course, Benedict is only too well aware that everyone has strengths and weaknesses – all need challenge, all need support – and that is a difficult task for any ‘father’.

A little further on he adds:

He must know what a difficult and demanding burden he has undertaken: serving a variety of temperaments, coaxing, reproofing and encouraging them as appropriate. He must.. adapt himself to each one’s character and intelligence.. (RSB 2:31-32)

It is the superior’s duty to recognise and respond to *diversity* in the community. Many people’s idea of monks is rather regimented – we’re a sort of “clone army”. But that’s not the case. Rather, it is the Abbot’s duty to get to know each person “inside out” and also to communicate fruitfully in a way that will promote their growth, both as individuals and as a group. That is an immense challenge. For a superior, “one size fits all” is not an option. Rather, he must find a way to bring *unity out of diversity*.

Elsewhere, Benedict says that whenever there is important business, be it spiritual or temporal, the Abbot should call the whole community together to hear their advice and only then decide the wisest course of action (cf. RSB 3: 1-3). No superior should ever act without first *listening*. For Benedict, that ability to listen, and to listen deeply and openly to the advice of others is vital. As he says: *Do everything with counsel, and you will not be sorry afterwards* (Ecclus. 32:24).

I would like to mention one last quality, and that is “vision”. In Proverbs we read: “*Where there is no vision, the people perish*” (Proverbs 29:18). I suspect that, often, we see our superiors as the CEO’s of international corporations; and in that “corporate world” that phrase might mean we need a “vision statement”, clear goals and strategic “targets”. But it means something different for us.

For us, that “vision” is “*the remembrance of God’s work for our salvation*” – it is *not* the personal “masterplan” of the superior. The Abbot *must* be a man of vision, but the vision he has to hold before the community is the “vision of God”, our ultimate goal. Benedict gives a very simple definition of what a monk *is*: *one who truly seeks God* (cf. RSB 58:7). It is the

superior's task to see that in all circumstances we never forget that, that we are always reminded of its centrality. For without that *fundamental* vision, even a monastery would be just another human institution, and, like all human institutions, it would fail. It is only that vision, the realisation that the work we do is for God and not for ourselves, that gives us any chance at all – not only of surviving – but of flourishing.

We might summarise all this in four points: 3 “Takes” and 1 “Give”:

- *Take time* – any “parenting” relationship needs time – time spent with the family or community, time taken to listen, time to get to know each other at depth. Only with time will relationships grow, whether with God or with each other.
- *Take care* – Benedict tells us that our brethren are all “servants of the true king”, that all our goods are “to be treated like the sacred vessels of the altar” and that we will be accountable for everything we do – that in all things God may be glorified. That means we should take great care in *everything* we do.
- *Take advice* – no one person has *all* the answers. There is always something to be learned from listening to others before we make a decision or put something into action. Taking advice needs humility – but it is so much better to listen and get things right!
- *Give thanks* – any experience of parenting, whether spiritual or natural, is a privilege, itself a source of growth and depth, even when things are tough. Often we do not realise what a gift it is until it is lost or taken from us – so always give thanks to God, the source and origin of all parenting, and may He bring us all together to everlasting life. Amen.