

Home Retreat on ‘The Kinds of Monks’

10 July 2021

This talk provides a reflection on how St Benedict’s teaching on the different ‘Kinds of Monks’ can help and encourage Christians to grow in their faith.

In his *Rule*, St Benedict presents a vision for a particular way of living the Christian life – a vision intended originally, of course, for monks and nuns, but one which over the centuries, on account of its wisdom and adaptability, has proved its longevity with not only many different monastic communities living by its teachings, but also many lay men and women coming to share in its spirituality, finding in St Benedict’s vision an inspiration for their faith and way to God.

Fundamental to the teaching of the *Rule* is its opening word, ‘Listen’. It would seem that what St Benedict had in mind is that we should always be attentive to the voice of the Lord calling to us, as he says in the Prologue, ‘*Is there anyone here who yearns for life and desires to see good days? (Ps. 33:13) If you hear this and your answer is “I do”, God then directs these words to you.*’ And in his *Rule* he sets out a number of ways in which this voice can be heard, such as through the teaching of the Abbot, who holds the place of Christ in the monastery; through the members of the community in formal community consultations and in the course of their daily interactions; from pilgrims and guests, including visiting monks, in whom Christ is also encountered; and especially in prayer – formal community prayer with the recitation of psalms, canticles and readings, private silent prayer (which he says should be short and pure) and in the word of Scripture, *lectio divina*, as we now tend to call it. This listening to God, this encounter with the Word of God, draws the Christian closer to Him, resulting in a deepening of faith, hope and love; and part and parcel of this growth in the knowledge and love of God is a growth in self-knowledge, which should lead to increased humility – that virtue so prized by

Benedict, as it is in humility that our relationship with God is at its deepest and our love most tenderly nurtured.

That this was Benedict's intention is clear from a number of passages in the *Rule*, but one place particular place where this can be seen is in his first chapter on 'The Kinds of Monks.' In this chapter he describes four kinds of monks, the cenobites and the anchorites or hermits, whom he regards positively, but also the sarabaites and the gyrovagues of whom he is strongly critical. In what he says about each one of these types of monks, we can learn something about how Benedict expected the monk to grow in self-knowledge as part of his quest for God and deepening relationship with Him.

At first, Benedict seems to say very little about the cenobites, simply that they 'belong to a monastery, where they serve under a rule and an abbot'; but the value of these three elements – belonging to a monastic community, serving under a rule and having an abbot to teach and guide them – becomes rather clearer in his description of the other three kinds of monks.

Of the anchorites or hermits, Benedict says that they 'have come through the test of living in a monastery for a long time'. The consequence of this is that: 'Thanks to the help and guidance of many, they are now trained to fight against the devil.' This is because they 'have built up their strength and go from the battle line in the ranks of their brothers to the single combat of the desert. Self-reliant now, without the support of another, they are ready with God's help to grapple single-handed with the vices of body and mind.'

From this it is clear, then, that Benedict saw cenobitic life as a necessary preparation for eremitical life – at least, for those who are called to this latter form of monastic living – and that this preparation was to enable them with God's help 'to grapple single-handed with the vices of body and mind'. Put a little differently, we can say that in the monastery the hermit had grown sufficiently in self-knowledge as to be able to keep watch over his thoughts, his desires, his impulses,

so as to understand which would lead him to God and which would lead him astray. This vigilance over thoughts – *logismoi*, as they are called in the desert tradition of monasticism – combined with the appropriate response which would mitigate or even negate those thoughts that would become sinful and manifest themselves in sinful words and behaviour, constitutes that grappling with the ‘vices of body and mind’ to which Benedict refers, and presupposes and facilitates a growth in self-knowledge – in other words, understanding what we are really like and this in relation to God. Furthermore, if the preparation for the eremitical life is life in a monastery, then it follows that belonging to a monastic community and serving under a rule and abbot aid this process of growth just described, which is integral to monastic life and to proper Christian discipleship.

Hence, Benedict’s criticism of the sarabaites – ‘the most detestable kind of monks’, he says – ‘who with no experience to guide them, no rule to try them *as gold is tried in a furnace* (Prov. 27:21), have a character as soft as lead’. The problem seems to be that they have no measure against which to assess their life: they have no experience of genuine monastic living and lack the wisdom that comes from sharing the search for God with others in a monastic community; they have no rule to provide a framework for their life; and thus they lack the resilience that comes from a growth in self-knowledge in relation to God, a resilience that comes from learning to grapple with ‘the vices of body and mind’. For this reason, Benedict says, they remain ‘loyal to the world by their actions’ and ‘clearly lie to God by their tonsure.’ They have no abbot to teach and guide them: rather, ‘Two or three together, or even alone, without a shepherd, they pen themselves up in their own sheepfolds, not the Lord’s’; and their life is one of self-indulgence: ‘Their law is what they like to do, whatever strikes their fancy. Anything they believe in and choose, they call holy; anything they dislike, they consider forbidden.’

Benedict is similarly critical of the gyrovagues, ‘who spend their entire lives drifting from region to region, staying as guests for three or four days in different monasteries. Always on the move, they never settle down, and are slaves to their

own wills and gross appetites. In every way [Benedict says] they are worse than the sarabaites.’ Once again, these so-called monks are simply self-indulgent, lacking the stability and discipline that comes from living in a monastic community, where they would have a rule to provide a framework for their life and an abbot to teach and guide them. Instead, they drift from place to place without any vigilance over their *logismoi* – without making any examination of their thoughts and how these might either lead them to God or away from Him into sin – selfishly pursuing their own interests and desires. Thus, for them, there can be no real self-knowledge, because they never have to confront the difference between their impulses, desires, thoughts, and behaviours on the one hand and the Truth of God on the other; they never learn what they are really like and thus what they really need, if they are to mature in discipleship and come to God.

The purpose of keeping vigilance over one’s thoughts is to come to understand what it is that leads us to God and what it is that leads us away from Him. St Benedict’s teaching on the cenobitical and eremitical life is important, because it indicates that there is a way, as found in the desert tradition, of discerning the value and significance of these thoughts, so that both in the monastery and in the desert the monk learns about, and is able to grapple with, the ‘vices of mind and body’. And as he does this, he recognises that it is only with God’s grace - and not through human effort alone – that he is able to mitigate those impulses, desires and thoughts that left unchecked would lead him into sin; and as he recognises this, he learns to depend upon God and not himself, his increased self-knowledge issuing in a proper humility by which he understands himself just as he is in relation to God, coming to know his absolute dependence upon him.

In this regard, what is true of the monk or the nun is true also of the Christian, the monastic life simply being a particular way of living the Christian life. Ultimately, we all need to know and accept our fundamental and absolute for God; and we come to know this through increased self-knowledge, which is the result of keeping watch over our thoughts and examining our lives, which in turn helps us

to grow in humility. In this way, we come also to recognise just how much we have been forgiven by God, which helps us to understand just how much we are loved by Him; and this in turn should help to grow in love of God and through Him of each other – each of us having learned that everyone of us stands in the same need before God, forgiven sinners, loved by God and called to share this love with one another. Jesus’ teaching in St John’s Gospel can help us with this:

If you make my word your home, you will indeed be my disciples, you will learn the truth and the truth will make you free. (John 8:31-32)

Reflection

The quotation above makes clear that our Christian discipleship is one that promises freedom in our relationship with God – a freedom that comes from knowing the truth about ourselves in the context of having been created and redeemed by God, who of His very nature is loving and merciful, loving mercy being His defining attribute. Whilst we should be certain to know and accept our sinfulness and our need of God, we must also learn to accept that we have been redeemed in Christ and are truly loved by him with an infinite love.

A passage from St Paul’s Letter to the Galatians can help us to reflect on our thoughts and how the Holy Spirit can guide us:

When Christ freed us, he meant us to remain free.... My brothers and sisters, you were called, as you know, to liberty; but be careful, or this liberty will provide an opening for self-indulgence. Serve one another, rather, in works of love, since the whole of the law is summarised in a single command: *Love your neighbour as yourself*. If you go snapping at each other and tearing each other to pieces, you had better watch or you will destroy the whole community.

Let me put it like this: if you are guided by the Spirit you will be in no danger of yielding to self-indulgence, since self-indulgence is the opposite of the Spirit, the Spirit is totally against such a thing, and it precisely because the two are so opposed that you do not always carry out your good intentions. If you are led by the Spirit, no law can touch you. When self-indulgence is at work the results are obvious: fornication, gross indecency and sexual irresponsibility; idolatry and sorcery; feuds and wrangling, jealousy, bad temper and quarrels; disagreements, factions, envy; drunkenness, orgies and similar things. I warn you now, as I warned you before: those who behave like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. What the Spirit brings is very different: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control. There can be no law against things like that, of course. You cannot belong to Christ Jesus unless you crucify all self-indulgent passions and desires.

Since the Spirit is our life, let us be directed by the Spirit. We must stop being conceited, provocative and envious. (Galatians 5:1 & 13-26)

The point of all this is not that we should condemn ourselves, but rather that having recognised our need for God we should seek forgiveness for our sin, so that we can be transformed through God's grace and loving mercy. The Sacrament of Reconciliation is a very powerful means for this. As Pope Francis writes:

Now more than ever the People of God must be helped to rediscover... the Sacrament of Mercy. Let us ask Christ to help us to rediscover the full beauty of this sacrament... and with this grace to set out again on the journey to holiness.

And in a similar vein, Pope John Paul II also wrote:

It would be an illusion to desire to reach holiness without the practice of frequent sacramental conversion. No one finds confession easy; it is often an humiliation to reveal to another person... an aspect of ourselves, our character and behaviour that we do not even want to admit to ourselves. Pride holds us back and can subtly influence who we choose to go to as a confessor and how we articulate our sins.

Our call is to holiness, and as Pope Francis wrote in his Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exultate*, we should take encouragement from the Lord, who will renew us by His Spirit, transforming us into the image of Christ His Son:

The Lord will bring it to fulfilment despite your mistakes and missteps, provided that you do not abandon the path of love but remain ever open to his supernatural grace, which purifies and enlightens.

With this in mind, let us make St Augustine's 'Prayer to the Holy Spirit' our own:

Breathe in me O Holy Spirit, that my thoughts may all be holy.

Act in me O Holy Spirit, that my work, too, may be holy.

Draw my heart O Holy Spirit, that I love but what is holy.

Strengthen me O Holy Spirit, to defend all that is holy.

Guard me, then, O Holy Spirit, that I always may be holy. Amen.