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Engaging Aging

Aging in Benedictine Spirituality

By Reverend Jerome Kodell, OSB

In This Issue

Calendar

7

"You have not only a glorious history to remember and to recount, but also a great history still to be accomplished! Look to the future, where the Spirit is sending you in order to do even greater things."

*St. Pope John Paul II
Vita Consecrata*

The Benedictine Order is known for the motto "*Ora et Labora*," Pray and Work, which, though a later formulation, is a succinct description of the life the Rule of St. Benedict describes. The emphasis is on a rhythm that weaves the physical and spiritual elements of daily life into a single effort instead of separating them into categories. The Rule calls the brothers to break away from other activities eight times for community prayer, the Divine Office or, in Benedict's preferred term, the Work of God, and also sets times totaling two to three hours daily for private or personal prayer in "*Lectio Divina*."

This arrangement may seem very impractical and inefficient by contemporary standards, requiring a constant breaking up of work times in order to come apart for prayer. Benedict permits the abbot to make adjustments because of changing work demands, such as at harvest, but this scheduling establishes the principle of the priority of prayer in the monastic search for God. All kinds of work are described in the Rule, including ministry to pilgrims and wanderers at a time when the Roman Empire was in collapse and the roads were dangerous. But though the arrangements for prayer are clear, and would stay basically the same from house to house, no particular work or ministry is prescribed; rather, work arises in response to the needs and calls of the local situation.

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Aging in Benedictine Spirituality, continued



Brother Andrew Suarez, OSB (above, left) and Brother Anthony Pierce, OSB (above, right), a certified nursing assistant (All photos: Jim Judkis)

This arrangement of daily life in a Benedictine monastery has an obvious effect on the monks' experience of aging. Most of the time the transition into retirement is not clearly marked. The daily rhythm of prayer and work goes on, and the individual is told more by his body than by his superior what he should continue to do. Though situations vary from community to community, ordinarily a monk does not move to a retirement facility but remains in his accustomed room in the monastery until he requires more nursing care and moves into the monastery infirmary, but still as part of the daily life of the community.

This general perspective has held firm through the centuries, but the arrangements change according to the varying locations and cultures. In modern times, monks assigned to work in dioceses, universities, hospitals, and other ministries become very conscious of retirement schedules and the life change that happens at a particular time. But in general, because one's work or ministry is not the defining issue in

monastic life, there is not the same danger of a crisis of identity that can happen when a particular office or ministry or skill is no longer exercised. The main work of the monk goes on and is modulated now more in the direction of prayer and solitude.

Cardinal Newman's description of the Benedictine life is still apt, though his image is from a medieval agrarian economy and has a decided touch of the romantic: "To the monk, heaven was next door; he formed no plans, he had no cares; the ravens of his father Benedict were ever at his side. He went forth in his youth to his work and to his labor until the evening of life; if he lived a day longer, he did a day's work more; whether he lived many days or few, he



Brother Joseph Koehler, OSB, in vineyards of Subiaco Abbey

Aging in Benedictine Spirituality, continued

labored on to the end of them. He had no wish to see further in advance of his journey than where he was to make his next stage. He plowed and sowed, he prayed, he meditated, he studied, he wrote, he taught, and then he died and went to heaven.”

Pillars of Benedictine Life

There are several pillars of conviction which support and animate the Benedictine life. These are principles common to all Christians but which receive a heightened emphasis in the monastic expression. In many ways, the Rule of Benedict insists on a daily awareness of the divine presence which is very Christ-centered. The abbot or prioress “is believed to hold the place of Christ” in the monastery. But also, in various ways, Benedict calls attention to the presence of Christ in the sick, in the guest, in the young, in the old; in fact, everywhere and in everyone.

In connection with this, a culture of Benedictine hospitality has been established from a key quotation in Jesus’ parable on the sheep and the goats: “All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, for he himself will say, ‘I was a stranger and you welcomed me’” (Matthew 25:35).

This attitude was always countercultural, and is even more so in the self-protective consciousness of our time. The conventional wisdom is to check credentials at the door, but the gospel principle is to welcome first and check later, admittedly risky but a more optimistic attitude:

“Do not neglect hospitality, for through it some have unknowingly entertained angels” (Hebrews 13:2).

The hope is that this attitude will become more and more natural and fundamental as Benedictines grow in faith and years, for hospitality is one ministry that can be exercised until the end, both among community members to one another and in interaction with guests of the monastery. Benedict’s welcome of “all guests” does not envision any kind of discrimination or pre-judgment. Guests do not have to identify themselves or their reason for visiting the monastery. They may be retreatants or tourists or students or simply curious about the place. This has made monasteries natural settings for ecumenical encounters.

Benedict wrote his Rule in the sixth century, within sixty or seventy years of the collapse of the Roman Empire. The roads were dangerous and people of all kinds of backgrounds and persuasions arrived at the monastery’s door. Benedict instructs the porter to make strangers welcome by greeting them with “Thanks be to God!”, but even more remarkably with “Your



Brother Francis Kirchner, OSB,
Guestmaster at Subiaco Abbey

Aging in Benedictine Spirituality, continued

blessing, please.” The monk is to look for a spiritual gift from the stranger, without knowing by what faith, if any, the stranger is animated. This resonates with humility, the focus of the longest chapter in the Rule.

This attitude toward the guest or stranger also keeps the monks from the sort of navel-gazing isolation from the real world by which they are often caricatured. Ideally, the monks are always looking outward rather than inward, interested and concerned about the larger Church and the world. One of the earliest monks, Pachomius, on questioned about his motivation, said “I have become a monk to save the world.”

The example of two of our recently deceased monks will flesh this out. Father Meinrad Marbaugh died at 94 after almost 70 years in religious life. In his younger days he had been an assistant pastor in Fort Worth, legendary in his concern for the poor. In retirement at the Abbey he was limited more and more by diminishing health and incapable of any consistent ministry, but in the last decade of his

life he became a one-man collection agency for aluminum cans, and established a quickly revolving bank account with which he funded small donations to helping agencies around the world. Once a scam artist in Nigeria lifted Fr. Meinrad’s signature from a check and tried to clean out his bank account, which amused him because of the ingenuity and even more because the account was momentarily empty.

Brother Jerome Heard entered the monastery in the 1950s. He was afflicted with epilepsy, which according to the canon law of that era, prevented him from making religious vows. Undeterred, he became a claustral oblate for the next fifty years, living the vowed life but without chapter rights. After his death, it was discovered that he had developed a unique ministry which could only have been possible because of his limitation.

Because Brother Jerome could not make vows, he was not required to renounce ownership. His family gave him his inheritance early, which he could use with the abbot’s permission. Brother

Jerome’s disease prevented him from driving and even from much physical work or mobility. But with the abbot’s permission, he began to study finances and investing at his desk in the business office with the purpose of helping needy causes. This he did close to home and around the world, but always anonymously, so that besides his



Aging in Benedictine Spirituality, continued

superiors, no one was aware of it. When his obituary appeared in the state newspaper, the Abbey received a call from the Food Bank in Little Rock asking if the recently deceased Mr. Heard was the person who had been helping them generously over the years. They tried to contact him, but he would never return calls or messages, but then they would receive another check.

Monastic Prayer

Even monastic prayer in its most contemplative expression is reaching outward. This insight of the ancient tradition has never been better described than in a sermon by Archbishop Desmond Tutu in Washington, D.C., in 1984, at the height of apartheid discrimination in South Africa. He thanked people around the world for the help that had come to South Africa because of their prayer. But he was not making the usual connection about prayers for a particular intention, in this case for the suffering people in South Africa. He was thanking people on behalf of South Africa for their prayer, but not for their prayer for South Africa. They might not have been thinking of South Africa. He was making a deeper connection: "Sometimes you may not feel like praying because your prayers are insipid. There is a dryness, and God seems miles and miles away. But because you are faithful, you say to God, 'I want to pray, and I offer you these thirty minutes, God, even if it means fighting these awkward distractions,' and because you are so faithful, someone in South Africa suddenly receives an excess of grace; inexplicably, it appears."

Tutu spoke specifically of the case of a black man being tortured in a solitary confinement cell, who at first hated and wanted to kill his torturer, but over time began to see him as a suffering child of God, and began asking God to help him. "Where," he said, "did that grace come from, unless from the many people in

various places in the world turning to God in prayer?"

This is an insight from the ancient monastic tradition of prayer which probes the deeper connections beyond request and response.

Though not all prayer is petitionary, because of the mystery of the Incarnation all prayer is intercessory. The divine pattern is for human beings to cooperate with God in being channels of grace to one another. God could take care of all needs without our help, but he encourages our cooperation. Monasticism concretizes this aspect of the universal call to prayer. We are to become channels of blessing for people and their needs all over the world by making ourselves more and more available for God's action in and through us. Through the humility of deep prayer we are able to

penetrate beyond the false self to our true center, where God is always waiting. We prostrate ourselves interiorly, offering ourselves to God for the world, and God does the rest. "We do not know how to pray as we ought," says Paul, "but the Spirit itself intercedes with inexpressible groanings" (Romans 8:26). And



Aging in Benedictine Spirituality, continued

God distributes gifts in our name, without our ever knowing where or how. As Thomas Merton has written: “In the economy of God’s grace you may be sharing his gifts with someone you will never know until you get to heaven.”

As things quiet down in the active ministry of monks, this ministry of prayer becomes more and more the focus. Of course, it is not only true of monks. But rather than a withdrawal from ministry, for monks this represents a call to ministry in a deeper sense, in which helplessness is joined to the helplessness of Jesus on the cross for the sake of the world. The medieval Cloud of Unknowing expressed this conviction powerfully: “One loving, blind

desire for God alone is more valuable in itself, more pleasing to God and to the saints, more beneficial to your own growth, and more helpful to your friends, both living and dead, than anything else you could do” (Chapter 9).

In their aging years, Benedictine religious enter into a deeper understanding of a unique feature of their vocation: the profession of stability. The profession formula in the Rule of Benedict is not presented in the familiar form of the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty, and obedience, which began to be used with the rise of the mendicant orders in the thirteenth century. St. Benedict has the novice profess “stability, fidelity to monastic life, and obedience.” The mendicants dropped the profession of stability, which was inappropriate for their mobile ministry, and highlighted two of the key

Bother Basil Taylor, OSB (below, left) and Brother Ephrem O'Bryan, OSB (below, right) Subprior of Subiaco Abbey



Aging in Benedictine Spirituality, continued

ingredients implied in the profession of “fidelity to monastic/religious life,” poverty and chastity, to go along with the fundamental virtue of obedience.

But stability was retained as essential to the monastic profession and has come to be understood as what primarily distinguishes the monastic from other forms of religious life. Though the application is not rigid, in making a profession of stability the monastic is expecting generally to live in the same place with the same people over a lifetime. This is only the external framework for the real work, which is that of opening oneself under the grace of God to inner stability.

Staying in one place or in one job does not insure inner tranquility and stability. Today, especially, people may be kept continually unsettled and off balance by the constant bombardment of shocking news from around the world. Electronic media bring this into the monastery as anywhere else, and it is in the air even if you turn off the news. The key for all of us is to change the pivot of our life from the outside to the inside, where God is enshrined in our heart. “I do not ask that you keep them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world any more than I belong to the world.” (Jn 17:15-16)

Benedict planted monasteries in the real world of his time, and instructed his monks to travel and do business as necessary, and to serve whoever came to the door. His purpose was not to isolate the monks and hide them away, but to help them establish a rhythm of prayer and work that would form them for their mission of service to the world. The goal of stability is not mainly to stay in one place physically, but to be grounded and anchored interiorly in Christ. Only then can we share the peace of Christ

with others.

A few years ago, when there were several aged and ailing monks in our infirmary, they would appeal for prayer intentions and place them in a bowl on a table while they prayed the rosary together. They could not be active in the same way as in their younger days, but they could still reach out from within the stability they had professed to serve the Church and world.

**Please join the staff of the
National Religious Retirement
Office as we continue to give thanks
this Christmas for the
generosity of our many
friends and benefactors.
We pray that the birth of the
Christ Child will bring peace and joy
to your life and to our world
throughout the coming year.**

Calendar 2020

February 24—27

- **A Gifted Journey Workshop: Accompanying a Person Through the Dying Process; Bon Secours Retreat Center, Marriottsville, MD**

July 6—9

- **A Gifted Journey Workshop: Accompanying a Person Through the Dying Process; Carmelite Spiritual Center, Darien IL**

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The National Religious Retirement Office coordinates the national collection for the Retirement Fund for Religious and distributes these funds to eligible religious institutes for their retirement needs. Our mission is to support, educate, and assist religious institutes in the U.S. to embrace their current retirement reality and to plan for the future.

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