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St Benedict 2024

(Letter n° 68)

“Give your servant an understanding mind to govern your people,
able to discern between good and evil.”
(1 Kings 3:9)

As part of a reflection on synodal spirituality, Dom Gregory Polan, Abbot Primate of the Order of Saint Benedict, has written a text we are happy to propose for your meditation.

Benedictine Spirituality

In the Rule of Saint Benedict, the abbot is depicted as a teacher and spiritual father who presides over the life of a community; Benedict describes the monastery as a “school of the Lord’s service” where one is guided in living the paschal mystery (RB, Prol. 45, 50). One of the elements of guidance for the community stands early in this 1,500 year old Rule, in Chapter 3, “Summoning the Community for Counsel.” It was clear for Benedict that important and major decisions were to be made by the community, as a whole. We would like to consider how the text of this one chapter in the Rule of Saint Benedict points out significant perspectives of synodal procedure in the monastic tradition, and rooted in the texts of Sacred Scripture. This Chapter centers a synodal process of decision-making; it should be noted that other parts of the Rule also echo the teaching of Chapter 3.

In the opening sentence of Chapter 3, Benedict makes it clear that when anything of importance is to be considered for the life and well-being of the community, the whole community shall we called together. Together as a group, they would best understand what is at stake, and so proceed with wisdom and prudence.

There is something that can almost be taken for granted in reading through this text: both listening and speaking. Today we live in a culture of many words; it can be that there are so many words that we hear the person speaking, yet fail to listen to what is said. For Saint Benedict, listening is a key element to growth in the spiritual realm and to the well-being of communal life. For Saint Benedict, he counsels us to “listen with the ear of the heart” (RB, Pro. 1). That is a beautiful image for us to ponder in the context of synodal discernment. To listen with the ear of the heart is something akin to the practice of lectio divina, where we believe we are taking in a word that comes to us from God. If we do that as a practice in our manner of reading the Scriptures, it will become the way that we listen in other contexts of our life. When someone comes to us to discern something important in their life, we listen with a rare receptivity because we believe we can be of genuine help. It is a considerable

challenge for us to take on that posture of listening with the ear of the heart. And yet, it accomplishes two things: first, it enables us to hear with a depth that poses questions within us; and second, it values both the person and the message that is being offered us. Benedict will enlarge this notion in Chapter 6 on "Restraint of Speech" as an element of spiritual doctrine. Again this is fostered in Chapter 4 on "The Tools of Good Works." There he writes, "Guard your lips from harmful or deceptive speech. Prefer moderation in speech" (RB 4:51-52). To listen with the ear of the heart stands as a noble virtue for synodal encounter.

In this third Chapter of the Rule, Benedict takes special care to note that the reference to all who should be heard, writing, "the Lord often reveals what is better to the younger." In a society that favored the voices of elders, this is a special contribution of the manner of community discernment. The young can often have a vision that takes the elder generation beyond where it presently stands, seeing with new perspective and insight into contemporary situations. In a Synod, that role of the young might also be extended to those who live on the periphery, the poor and excluded who see things differently from the majority.

On the expectation of obedience in this situation, Benedict makes it clear that this teaching is not only offered to the members of the community, but also to the abbot. Notice how the text reads: "Yet as it is proper for disciples to obey their master, so it is also fitting for the master to arrange everything with foresight and fairness" (v.6). Several times in the Rule, Benedict uses this expression, "with foresight" (RB 41:4-5; 64:17). Someone reading the Rule of Benedict would naturally think that, in our day and age, the abbot holds a power that is more than should be given to a human being. However, here we see that he holds the abbot accountable for all of these decisions that come before the community. In his best efforts at listening, the leader of the community stands as the one who is responsible, not only to the community, but also to and before God. In the synodal process, this can take a number of different expressions. Not only the Pope, but also those who stand as the person responsible for a committee, a report, a discussion, and importantly, a decision. This presents a significant challenge in the ways of discernment, for those who carry the responsibility; they have to weigh what they believe is best, with what others have considered the most advantageous, with what is possible, and with what likelihood of success the decision can proceed for the good of all. At the same time, there is the challenge of discerning the will of God, which is rarely an easy decision, unless the Gospel itself speaks clearly and directly on the topic. Weighing all the information and deciding what is best is truly a sacred endeavor, as it often involves the well-being of individuals and their future.

The full text can be read on the Synod on Synodality website:

https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/resources/spirituality/benedict/EN_Spiri_Polan.pdf



News concerning our secular oblates:

✞ On 5 January, before 1st Vespers of Epiphany, Angela Donnelly from Newcastle (Northern Ireland) began her novitiate as secular oblate.

✞ On 12 April, Marie Dainow (89 years old) passed away in the United States, surrounded by her two daughters, Ann and Helena. On 22 June, her two daughters brought their mother's ashes to the Abbey for the funeral Service. They were buried afterwards in Kilbroney cemetery.

✠ On 4 May, Peter Stobart (78 years old) passed away in Belfast. On 17 May, Abbot Mark-Ephrem and Bro. Thierry participated in the funeral Mass at St. Colmcille's Church in Belfast (Peter's parish) and, later that day, led the Service at Roselawn Crematorium.

✠ On 4 May, Rev. Peter McDowell (Presbyterian) made his profession as secular oblate.

✠ On 26 May, before 1st Vespers of Trinity, Joan Fitzpatrick from Burren began her novitiate.

✠ On 23 June, Rev. Jerry Lepine (Anglican, former Dean of Bradford Cathedral in England) made his profession as secular oblate.

✠

In recent months, Abbot Mark-Ephrem has continued his ministry as Commissarius for the two French communities of Bec-Hellouin and Maylis:

✠ He was at Bec:

- from 22 to 24 January for the funeral liturgy of Bro. Robert Reneteau (84 years old) who passed away on 17 January. Bro. Robert made his monastic profession in 1965;

- from 15 to 22 February;

- on 21 and 22 March for the funeral liturgy of Bro. Maurice Laurent (87 years old) who passed away on 16 March. He made his profession in 1963;

- from 9 to 11 April and from 25 to 29 June.

✠ He was at Maylis:

- from 26 April to 1 May for the priestly ordination of Bro. Patrick Leblanc;

- from 17 to 20 June, with Abbot General Diego Rosa and the Bursar General, Dom Andrea Santus, for a time of listening to the community. Bro. Thierry assisted the visitators for that visitation.

✠

✠ From 7 to 10 January, we had the joy of welcoming Dom Gregory Polan, Abbot Primate of the Order of Saint Benedict.

✠ On 9 January, Bro. Éric participated in a chapter meeting of the Anglican Cathedral of Downpatrick, of which he is a canon.

✠ For the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, our two preachers were: on 21 January, Rev. Dr. Donald Watts, Presbyterian, and on 25 January, Rev. Elizabeth Hanna, Anglican.

✠ From 26 January to 1 February, Abbot Mark-Ephrem visited our sisters of the Grandchamp community (Switzerland).

✠ On 23 February, Abbot Mark-Ephrem was in Dundalk (Ireland) for an ecumenical meeting organized by the Irish Inter-Church Meeting.

✠ On 3 and 4 March, Abbot Mark-Ephrem and Bro. Thierry were at Turvey Monastery (England).

✠ From 10 to 15 March, Abbot Mark-Ephrem was at Monte Oliveto Maggiore Abbey (Italy) for the meeting of the Definitory of our monastic family.

✠ From 17 to 21 March, Abbot Mark-Ephrem was on the west coast of Ireland for a time of retreat and rest.

✠ On Holy Thursday, 28 March, at Newry Cathedral, Abbot Mark-Ephrem concelebrated at the Chrism Mass, presided over by Archbishop Eamon Martin of Armagh and Administrator of our Diocese of Dromore.

✠ On 1 April, Bishop John McAreevey, former bishop of our diocese, concelebrated at the Eucharist and shared our midday meal.

✠ On 4 April, Abbot Mark-Ephrem was in the Presbyterian Church of Ballygrainey where he attended a Service in memory of Fiona Watts, who passed away on 28 March.

✠ From 8 April to 7 May, Bro. Joshua was in Mexico where he spent time with his family.

✠ On 13 and 14 April, we had a visit from Bishop Fintan Gavin of Cork and Ross (Ireland).

✠ From 30 April to 4 May, Bishop Paul Dempsey, auxiliary bishop of Dublin, was on retreat in our midst.

✠ On 2 May, the editorial committee of the journal *One in Christ* met at the Abbey. Present were: the new editor, Sr Ingeborg-Marie Kvam (contemplative Dominican from the monastery in Oslo, Norway), Sr Geraldine Smyth (Dominican in Belfast), Fr Bill Russell (White Father in Jerusalem), Fr Jan Nowotnik (Director of Mission and Ecumenism for the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales), and Bro. John Mayhead (Benedictine from Turvey).

✠ From 7 to 10 May, Bro. Benoît was in France to celebrate his mother's 95th birthday.

✠ On 14, 15, and 16 May, we organized three public evenings on the Synod on Synodality. Catherine Clifford, a Canadian theologian and Synod member with voting rights in both sessions (October 2023 and 2024), helped us reflect on the issues of the Synod. On 14, Catherine shared her experience of the 1st session of the Synod, its functioning, and its purpose; on 15, she discussed the ecumenical challenges of the synodal process; on 16, she showed us how the Synod requires us to rethink certain modes of operation in the Catholic Church, particularly in terms of discernment and decision-making.

✠ On 24 May, Abbot Mark-Ephrem and Bro. Éric were in Dublin to celebrate the 80th birthday of Bishop Raymond Field, former auxiliary bishop of Dublin.

✠ On 27 May, Sr Marie Dolores O'Brien, former Superior General of the Sisters of Adoration, passed away in Belfast (89 years old). She preached our community retreat (in French) in 2000. On 28, Abbot Mark-Ephrem and Bro. Éric went to Belfast to pray beside her body.

✠ There are two major ecumenical church organizations in Ireland: The Irish Council of Churches and the Irish Inter-Church Meeting. On 29 May, Abbot Mark-Ephrem was in Dublin for a meeting of the two organizations with the Orthodox Churches present in Ireland. The two groups were hosted by the Romanian Orthodox parish of Dublin.

✠ On 2 July, Abbot Mark-Ephrem and Bro. John, the last monk present at Turvey Monastery, visited the Bishop of Northampton, the diocese in which Turvey Monastery is located.



St. Benedict offers his monks profound and sobering advice when he writes, "Day by day remind yourself that you are going to die" (RB 4.47). This statement is not about yearning for death or fearing it, but rather about discerning what truly matters. In the face of mortality, what remains significant?

What holds genuine value? Benedict's message is not meant to instil fear of death but to help us realize that the awareness of our mortality can put into perspective the pursuits we often prioritize. Keeping the reality of death in mind liberates us. We all know that death can come at any time, and eventually, we must confront it.

When we do, we understand that we are often driven by false ambitions and goals. Occasionally, we need to step back from our lives. This doesn't mean physically going somewhere but rather finding an inner distance from the things that drive us, allowing us to see more clearly the deeper connections that sustain us.

Abbot Notker Wolf OSB
(Abbot Primate of the Order of Saint Benedict from 2000 to 2016,
born in 1940 in Germany, passed away on 2nd April 2024)