

Home Retreat, 20th June, 2020: Brothers and Sisters – St Benedict’s concept of Family

I think the concept of this series of home retreats is to bring to the home the advice and guidance of the Rule of Benedict. I have called this one ‘Brothers and Sisters – St Benedict’s concept of Family’ because the concept of a family is at the root of Benedictine life.

Monastic life began with solitary hermits in the Egyptian desert: *μοναχος* means ‘a solitary’. Then St Cassian, who had been a soldier, organised the solitary monks into some sort of groups. But I think the first Rule in which family life is really important is Benedict’s *Regula Monachorum*, his *Rule for Monks*. The principal idea is that the brothers should help one another, both in daily life and on their way to God.

The Abbot is the father and must be treated with the respect due to a father. Always in this family, it must be remembered that it is a sacred family, just as the Church is a sacred family, in which all are striving together to seek God. So when the Abbot is called *Abba* the word being used is the word which Jesus used addressing his Father in his most intimate and agonized of his prayers in Gethsemane. Much more than this, the Abbot must care for his sons with the care of a father, indeed with the care of our heavenly Father.

Again and again brotherhood and family become obvious in the Rule. At the door should be an old monk, ready to receive guests, and too immobile to wander off. So he should have a helper who complements his immobility by running errands for him. The Bursar, ‘if the community is rather large’ should have a helper to lighten his tasks. The brothers should respect the seniors and love the juniors. They need to behave always with respect for others. So, in a world where even private prayer was normally vocal, murmured, perhaps under one’s breath (just as at that time people normally read aloud, not silently to themselves), during private prayer in the oratory, each must be careful not to disturb others by praying too loudly. In other ways Benedict is careful to show that all the monks are to be regarded as equal members of the family. Even the most junior has an equal say in the chapter. Perhaps the strongest provision is that of serving one another in the refectory: Benedict stresses strongly that all must undertake this service except the Abbot and the Bursar, who obviously serve the community plentifully in other ways.

Benedict is perfectly aware of human failings, so when the monks have a long period of reading (as on a Sunday) a senior monk should wander around as they sit in the cloister, to ensure that they really are reading, not idly chatting. The beds of the juniors should not be together, but the juniors should be scattered around lest they get up to high jinks at night. When the monks get up at an uncomfortable hour of the morning, they should gently encourage one another to get down to the church on time. To my mind, the most solicitous of all cares laid upon the superior is about delinquents: if a member of the community has to be punished by isolation, the superior must quietly send in to him mature and steady members of the community in case he is confused and upset, and to show that he really is still loved; this shows to me the real delicacy of a family and of a solicitous father.

That is all very well in a perfect world, but inter-personal relations are always complicated. Even in a normal family there can be quarrels and dissension. How much more so in an artificial family like a monastery, in which highly diverse people are brought together and into close contact over a long period. Before I became a monk, when I was only 17 years old, I came across a poem which has haunted me throughout my monastic life. It is the *Soliloquy*

in a Spanish Cloister by Robert Browning, and I would like to quote a few lines. It shows how things can go wrong in a monastic family:

Gr-r-r--there go, my heart's abhorrence!
Water your damned flower-pots, do!
If hate killed men, Brother Lawrence,
God's blood, would not mine kill you!
What? your myrtle-bush wants trimming?
Oh, that rose has prior claims--
Needs its leaden vase filled brimming?
Hell dry you up with its flames!

At the meal we sit together;
Salve tibi! I must hear
Wise talk of the kind of weather,
Sort of season, time of year:
Not a plenteous cork crop: scarcely
Dare we hope oak-galls, I doubt;
What's the Latin name for "parsley"?
What's the Greek name for "swine's snout"?

Whew! We'll have our platter burnished,
Laid with care on our own shelf!

And so on. It brings home the reality of envenomed hatred. It is so easy and so destructive to hate in any human group, family, business or a more casual situation. But the closer-knit the group is, the more destructive is the hatred. Look at another family, the family which we meet in church. There too hostile criticism is easy enough. 'Typical, she always shows off by the hats she wears'. Or 'He reads as though he were addressing a board-meeting, or a children's party' – take your choice. It is particularly dangerous if the monk is a school-teacher, who is trained to spot faults and correct them. Perhaps that is why the Letter of James say 'You should not all be teachers'. That is why the corruption of family life expressed in that *Soliloquy in a Spanish Cloister* has been an uncomfortable spectre for me throughout my monastic life,

Correction is a particularly dangerous factor. Benedict ends his Rule with a chapter on good and evil zeal. It is only recently that I have come to realize what is meant by an evil zeal. Is not zeal always a good thing? Benedict uses it in a special, technical, biblical sense. In the Bible 'zeal' is an eagerness for the Law, championship of the Law. It often comes to mean intervention to ensure that the Law is being observed. One occasion is when a zealous Israelite pierces through with one spear a couple, an Israelite man and a non-Israelite woman, who are having sexual relations against the Law (Numbers 25.1-9); he ensures that the Israelite observes the Law. So I conceive good and evil zeal like this: good zeal is a genuine assistance to others to observe the Law, sparked by genuine love and concern for the person. Benedict says it must be 'spurred on by fervent love'. On the other hand evil zeal is the criticism, sparked by mere spite, envy, jealousy, dislike, which points out failures in another and in fact rejoices in them. It is so easy, especially in an enclosed community like a

monastery or a family, to observe faults of behaviour, store them up and allow them to fester. That is what we see in the friar in the Spanish cloister.

What is St Benedict's remedy? The Lord's prayer and its petition for forgiveness, on the condition of our forgiving others. The Abbot solemnly and publicly speaks the prayer on our behalf: we seek forgiveness only on condition that we forgive others. Can we join in this and still allow the faults to fester? When we live in any sort of family or community there are bound to be moments or ways in which we upset one another, provoke one another's jealousy or rivalry. Matthew knows this well, for in his discourse on relationships within the community he devotes almost half this Chapter 18 to a process of reconciliation after a disagreement or a quarrel, and this leads on to the daunting parable of the Unforgiving Debtor.

That is also the importance of the daily shared Eucharist. Can we stand together and approach the altar to receive the Lord, while still allowing the envy, jealousy, hatred, criticism to fester within us? The Eucharist is the prequel of the Passion of Christ, when Jesus offers himself to his disciples in the moment of wiping away the disobedience of the world and of the human race. His death is the moment of perfect love for his Father by his perfect, loving obedience. He is there as love made perfect. Can we come to receive the Body and Blood of the Lord while still harbouring within us such spite and resentments? Does the Lord want to be received, day after day, by someone turmoiled by hostility and jealousy? For me this is the importance of the daily monastic Eucharist. St Paul tells us so clearly that we cannot partake of the eucharist and remain a divided and fractious community. Real family life denotes a loving care for the welfare of others. Inter-personal relations are the basis of family life, and this is why Benedict brings his Rule to a final climax by the contrast of the good and evil zeal.

1. Show your love to other members of the family, remembering especially that tomorrow is Father's Day. A few telephone calls?
2. Is there anyone you have not forgiven? Show it now, in such a way that the bond is strengthened to something more than it was before the offence.
3. Is there anyone who needs to forgive you? Give that person a chance – in a delicate way.
4. Is there any way in which I could play a more helpful part in my family, my district, my office-life, my relationships with colleagues?
5. Read Chapter 72 of the Rule.
6. Read Browning's *Soliloquy in a Spanish Cloister* – on-line. Does it sound a chord?
7. Pay a visit, perhaps a virtual visit, to a lonely person who lacks family.