

The Cellarer of the Monastery

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This Home Retreat explores St Benedict's understanding of an important monastic official in his Rule, suggesting ways in which St Benedict's teaching about him can help all of us to seek holiness.

As cellarer of the monastery, there should be chosen from the community someone who is wise, mature in conduct, temperate, not an excessive eater, not proud, excitable, offensive, dilatory or wasteful, but God-fearing and like a father to the whole community. He will take care of everything, but will do nothing without an order from the abbot. Let him keep to his orders.

So begins chapter 31 of the *Rule of St Benedict* in which Benedict elaborates the 'Qualifications of the Monastery Cellarer'. As this title of the chapter suggests, it is not so much a job description, as a character sketch of the sort of person that Benedict felt could be entrusted with this responsibility in the monastery.

Particularly noteworthy, the abbot being the father of the community, is his comment that the cellarer is to be 'like a father to the whole community', this implying that he should have made a degree of progress in his monastic discipleship of the Lord, this coming to fruition in one who is wise, mature, temperate, humble, obedient and God-fearing. For Thomas Merton, in the conferences that he gave to novices at Gethsemani Abbey, Benedict's description of the cellarer is his depiction of the ideal monk.

In addition to saying that 'He will take of everything', Benedict indicated some of the things that the cellarer would do, such as having 'every care and concern for the sick, children, guests and the poor'; caring for the 'utensils and goods of the

monastery as sacred vessels of the altar'; responding to requests from the brothers for the things they need; and ensuring that they have their food at the right time and in the proper amount. But whilst this task of stewardship of the material goods of the monastery is clearly important in any monastery – now just as much as it was then – it is not so much the service that is provided, but the manner in which it is provided, so much so in fact that Benedict says, 'Let him keep watch over his own soul, ever mindful of that saying of the Apostle: *He who serves well secures a good standing for himself* (1 Tim 3:13).' For the cellarer, what he is asked to do in service of the community is part of his spiritual journey, part of his way to God, Benedict's injunction that the 'utensils and goods of the monastery [be treated] as sacred vessels of the altar' indicating his understanding of the sacramentality of our life in this world.

And this is perhaps a point of contact for all of us – whether we are cellarers or not – in that Benedict is making it clear that our faith is not simply concerned with other-worldly things, but with everyday realities: the need to eat; the need to care for people, especially the vulnerable; the need for various goods and to use tools; and the need to manage resources, including money, prudently in the service of the Gospel and the building up of the Kingdom. And how we treat others is fundamental to this. As Benedict says of the cellarer:

He should not annoy the brothers. If any brother happens to make an unreasonable demand of him, he should not reject him with disdain and cause him distress, but reasonably and humbly deny the improper request.

Above all, let him be humble. If goods are not available to meet a request, he will offer a kind word in reply, for it is written: A kind *word is better than the best gift* (Sir 18:17).

And:

Necessary items are to be requested and given at the proper times, so that no one may be disquieted or distressed in the house of God.

There is an important Christian principle in play here, namely that through our baptism we are called individually to make our way to the Lord, but as part of a people called together by Him for salvation. Thus, my salvation, and that of any other believer, is bound up with that of others – others whom we are called to serve and from whom, and indeed from our own reactions to whom, we can learn something about the state of our own discipleship. As St John wrote in his First Letter:

My dear people, since God has loved us so much, we too should love one another. No one has ever seen God, but as long as we love one another God will live in us and his love will be complete in us. (1 John 4:11-12)

My children, our love is not to be just words or mere talk, but something real and active. (1 John 3:18)

And very tellingly:

Anyone who says, 'I love God', and hates his brother, is a liar, since a man who does not love the brother he can see cannot love God, whom he has never seen. So this is the commandment that he has given us, that anyone who loves God must also love his brother. (1 John 4:20)

We might almost say, then, that St Benedict's chapter on the cellarer is a description of holiness in the course of normal daily life. But if this is so, then what is that would enable a cellarer, or any Christian, to become the type of person that Benedict envisages for this role and to carry it out in the way in which he describes?

Fundamentally, it is grace. Created in the image and likeness of God and redeemed in Christ, we participate now by means of our baptism in the life of God, called into union with Jesus, so that through him we may come to the Father, and so share in that infinite and overflowing love of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is as much the life and identity of a Christian, as it is the life and identity of a

monk, the monastic calling and the profession vows giving a distinctive form to this particular way of being a Christian.

The key for all of us is to try – with God’s help – to live with such an openness to the Holy Spirit that what we believe, our Christian faith, should become integrated into our daily life. For this to come about, we need to know our need of God: that we are sinners in need of his mercy and love, this being the basis for allowing God to draw us nearer to Himself, as we learn to give ourselves up to Him. It enables our growth in humility – that most fundamental of virtues for Benedict and which he insists upon for the cellarer – which in turn helps to deepen our prayer in its various forms, all of these open to all Christians, even if they are also characteristic of the monastic life: the Divine Office (the *Opus Dei*, as St Benedict calls it); the prayerful reading of the Scriptures, often known as *lectio divina*; and meditation or contemplation, being that aspiration towards a silent, loving desire for God and to be in His presence. All of this, of course, is presumed by Benedict to be integral to the life of his cellarer, along with the necessary conditions, such as silence and life in community. And in chapter 4 of his *Rule* on the ‘Tools for Good Works’, commenting that ‘the workshop where we are to toil faithfully at all these tasks is the enclosure of the monastery and stability in community life’, he provides us with advice on how to live as Christians. So, for instance:

First of all, love the Lord your God with your whole heart, your whole soul and all your strength, and your neighbour as yourself.

Renounce yourself in order to follow Christ. You must relieve the lot of the poor, clothe the naked, visit the sick and bury the dead. Go to help the troubled and console the sorrowing.

Your way of acting should be different from the world’s way; the love of Christ must come before all else. You are not to act in anger or nurse a grudge. Rid your heart of all deceit. Never give a hollow greeting of peace or turn away when someone needs your love.

You must not be proud.... Do not grumble or speak ill of others.

Place your hope in God alone. If you notice something good in yourself, give credit to God, not to yourself, but be certain that the evil you commit is always your own and yours to acknowledge.

Listen readily to holy reading, and devote yourself often to prayer. Every day with tears and sighs confess your past sins to God in prayer and change from these evils ways in the future.

Do not love quarrelling; shun arrogance. Respect the elders and love the young. Pray for your enemies out of love for Christ. If you have a dispute with someone, make peace with him before the sun goes down.

And finally, never lose hope in God's mercy.

These are the 'tools', then, that the cellarer must employ if he is provide the humble service of his brethren and stewardship of the of the monastery's resources that his role demands, thus growing in holiness. And if we could all aspire to be like the cellarer, then we would begin to live in that humility and love that St Paul taught the Romans should characterise Christian life:

Do not let your love be a pretence, but sincerely prefer good to evil. Love each other as much as brothers [and sisters] should, and have a proper respect for each other. Work for the Lord with untiring effort and with great earnestness of spirit.

If you have hope, this will make you cheerful. Do not give up if trials come; and keep on praying. (Romans 12:9-12)

And, as St Benedict adds at the end of chapter 72 of his *Rule*:

Let them prefer noting whatever to Christ, and may he bring us all together to everlasting life.

Suggested Reflection

The passage below is taken from Vatican II's *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, chapter 5 on 'The Call to Holiness'.

Read the passage carefully and consider to what extent I recognise myself as a baptised Christian called to holiness.

The Lord Jesus, divine teacher and model of all perfection, preached holiness of life (of which he is the author and maker) to each and every one of his disciples without distinction: 'You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Mt. 5:48). For he sent the Holy Spirit to all to move them interiorly to love God with their whole heart, with their whole soul, with their whole understanding, and with their whole strength (cf. Mk. 20:30), and to love one another as Christ loved them (cf. Jn. 13:34; 15:12). The followers of Christ, called by God not in virtue of their works but by his design and grace, and justified in the Lord Jesus, have been made sons and daughters of God in the baptism of faith and partakers in the divine nature, and so truly are sanctified. They must therefore hold on to and perfect in their lives that sanctification which they have received from God. They are told by the apostle to live 'as is fitting for saints' (Eph. 5:3), and to put on 'as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness and patience (Col. 3:12), to have the fruits of the Spirit for their sanctification (cf. Gal. 5:22; Rom 6:22). But since we all offend in many ways (cf. Jas. 3:2), we constantly need God's mercy and must pray every day: 'And forgive us our debts' (Mt. 6:12).

The following questions might help reflection:

- What is my real identity (or nature) as a Christian?
- How does God help me to become holy?
- Are there any biblical texts that could help me to become holy?
- Is there anything in St Benedict's teaching quoted above in the Home Retreat talk that could inspire me to become holy?
- What are the signs of holiness that I should expect to see in everyday life?

Take a moment or two to pray with any of the ideas or texts that have come to mind as a result of this reflection.

And when you feel ready, pray this prayer of St Augustine of Hippo:

Here is my heart, O God; here it is with all its secrets. Look into my thoughts, O my hope, and take away all my wrong feelings. Let my eyes be ever on you and release my feet from the snare. I ask you to live with me, to reign in me, to make this heart of mine a holy temple, a fit dwelling for your divine majesty.