

## The Porter of the Monastery: An Illustration of the Vitality of Stability

*This Home Retreat explores how the monastery porter's stability in Christ in the context of community life, as required by St Benedict, is a prerequisite of Christian life and mission.*

In the sixty-sixth chapter of his *Rule*, St Benedict writes the following:

At the door of the monastery, place a sensible old man who knows how to take a message and deliver a reply, and whose age keeps him from roaming about. The porter will need a room near the entrance so that visitors will always find him there to answer them. As soon as anyone knocks, or a poor man calls out, he replies, 'Thanks be to God' or 'Your blessing, please'; then, with all the gentleness that comes from the fear of God, he provides a prompt answer with the warmth of love. (RSB 66:1-5)

On one level, St Benedict is describing an aspect of the practical arrangements for receiving guests whom, he reminds his monks, 'are to be welcomed as Christ.' (RSB 53:1) But his description of the porter and how he is to reply to those arriving at the door of the monastery also tells us something about the spiritual qualities that the porter should possess, and hence something about growth in the spiritual life.

For Benedict, the porter needs to be capable of stability – not just the physical stability that keeps him from wandering around and so at his post and ready to welcome guests, but he needs to be spiritually stable, rooted in Christ with the warmth of whose love he is able promptly to receive visitors. Like the cellarer, the porter to be mature and wise, capable of humble and effective service rooted in the love and example of Christ (cf. RSB 31). It is not just any old man, then, who can be placed at the door of the monastery, but one who is so grounded in Christ that he is capable of standing at the edge of the enclosure, at the periphery, without

losing his bearings and surrendering what he has gained from his application, and living out, of 'The Tools for Good Works' in 'the enclosure of the monastery and stability in the community.' (RSB 4:78)

This teaching of Benedict's is, of course, based on that of Jesus, who in St John's Gospel taught as follows:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that bears no fruit he cuts away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes to make it bear even more. You are pruned already by means of the word I have spoken to you. Make your home in me, as I make mine in you. As a branch cannot bear fruit all by itself, but must remain part of the vine, neither can you unless you remain in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me with me in him, bears fruit in plenty; for cut off from me you can do nothing. (St John 15:1-5)

By his stability, then, the porter remains a branch of the vine, full of sap and life-giving, transmitting to, and sharing with, those who come to the monastery the very life of Christ in whom the porter himself inheres. By means of their baptism, Christians share in the life of Christ, dying with him to the old life of sin and rising with him to new and eternal life with God. And this sharing is something dynamic: it means really living in Christ, sharing his life, receiving and giving his love. As St Paul wrote to the Philippians, 'For to me, to live is Christ' (Philippians 1:21) and to the Galatians, 'through the Law, I am dead to the Law, so that now I can live for God. I have been crucified with Christ, and I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me. The life I live now in this body I live in faith: faith in the Son of God who loved me and who sacrificed himself for my sake.' (Galatians 2:19-20)

This life in Christ, as the image of the vine makes clear, is not an individualistic life. By baptism we become members of Christ's Body, the Church, a People called together by God for salvation. Thus we see in the Acts of the Apostles how the

first Christians sought to live out their spiritual communion, rooted in the tradition that had been handed on to them by ‘remain[ing] faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers’, in the reality of a genuinely common life. Thus:

The faithful all lived together and owned everything in common; they sold their goods and possessions and shared out the proceeds among themselves according to what each one needed.

They went to the Temple every day but met in their houses for the breaking of bread; they shared their food gladly and generously; they praised God and were looked up to by everyone. Day by day the Lord added to their community those destined to be saved. (Acts 2:42, 44-47)

Here we find the interior stability of the porter reflected in that of a community centred on Christ and among whose members Christ is present, always offering to, and wanting to share with them, the mercy, the love and the life of God. To live like this in response to Christ’s invitation is the Christian calling, St Benedict in writing his *Rule* for monks was doing no more than describing the Christian life, albeit lived out in a distinct manner. As Mauro Lepori, the Abbot General of the Cistercians, has written:

Above all there is an essential aspect of the Christian experience that is worth emphasising. The communion of the disciples of Christ, their living together, is the very substance of the transmission of the Christ event, of salvation in Christ, of the fulness of the revelation of the Triune God to the world. There is no transmission of Christ and of salvation in him without the Church, without the Christian community, without the People of God which is the Body of Christ.

The Church *is* transmission of the Son of God sent by the Father to save the world. The Holy Spirit realises this mission of the Church from Pentecost on, to incarnate the mission of Christ.

Hence St Benedict's teaching, 'Let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ, and may he bring us all together to everlasting life.' (RSB 72:11-12) God has called us together as brothers and sisters in Christ, and it is the communion of the baptised – a communion in which like the porter in his monastic community we must be deeply rooted – that transmits Christ and his gift of salvation. In giving his account of the Last Supper (the earliest that we have), St Paul tells the Corinthians that he is handing on to them 'what I received from the Lord' (I Corinthians 11:23), namely he is transmitting, is handing on, the gift of the Eucharist, of Christ's saving presence, as it was given to him in the communion of the Church. St John's account of the Last Supper, the foot-washing, is marked by a strong sense of this transmission:

It was before the festival of the Passover, and Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to pass from this world to the Father. He had always loved those who were his own in the world, but now he showed how perfect his love was.... Jesus knew that the Father had put everything into his hands, and that he had come from God and was returning to God.

(St John 13:1-3)

In the washing of their feet that followed, Jesus taught the disciples that it was by living out in humble love and service their stability in communion that his presence and the salvation of God would be kept alive among them and transmitted to others: 'I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you' (St John 13:15) and again, 'I give you a new commandment: love one another; just as I have loved you, you must also love one another. By this love you have for one another, everyone will know that you are my disciples.' (St John 13:34-35)

Mauro Lepori again:

What Jesus wants his disciples to transmit with the humble fidelity of a servant and messenger who does not presume to transmit more of, or something better than, he receives from the master who sends him is the

fraternal communion whose regenerative force is humility, humble mutual service.... Before all else, Jesus makes us understand that living together, living united, being one as the Father and the Son are one in the Spirit, is already a transmission, is like the incarnation of the transmission of salvation to the world, of the transmission to the world of the mission of the Son and Saviour.

It is because the porter is rooted in Christ in the stability of Christian communion that in his greeting to visitors, he is able to transmit with the warmth of love the message of salvation. Similarly, for all Christians, to be rooted in Christ is to be rooted in the communion that is his Body through we are joined to him, inheritors and recipients of the gift of salvation which, by our grace-assisted fidelity in communion, we make known and offer to others. Stability in Christ in the communion of his love is, then, a defining characteristic of Christian identity, being the source of both Christian life and mission.

### Reflection

Read the following passages from St John's Gospel prayerfully. The stimulus questions might help you consider what constitutes your stability in Christ.

I am the Bread of Life. He who comes to me will never be hungry; he who believes in me will never thirst....

I tell you solemnly, if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood you will not have life in you. Anyone who does eat my flesh and drink my blood has eternal life, and I shall raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I in him. As I, who am sent by the living Father, myself draw life from the Father, so whoever eats me will draw life

from me. This is the bread come down from heaven; not like the bread our ancestors ate: they are dead, but anyone who eats this bread will live forever. (St John 6:35, 53-58)

- What does the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist mean to me?
- Does attending Mass and receiving communion help me to draw nearer to the Lord and to others?
- In what way is the Mass lifegiving for me?

After saying this, Jesus raised his eyes to heaven and said:

Father, the hour has come: glorify your Son so that your Son may glorify you; and, through the power over all mankind that you have given him, let him give eternal life to all those you have entrusted to him. And eternal life is this: to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent....

I pray not only for these, but for those also who through their words will believe in me. May they all be one. Father, may they be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you, so that the world may believe it was you who sent me. I have given them the glory you gave to me, that they may be one as we are one. With me in them and you in me, may they be so completely one that the world will realise that it was you who sent me and that I have loved them as much as you loved me. (St John 17:1-3, 18-23)

- How do I respond to Jesus' prayer that I might be one with him as he is one with the Father?
- Do I allow this to influence how I treat and live with other people?