

The Feast of St. Benedict

“Listen, carefully, my daughters and sons, to the master’s instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart. This is advice from a father who loves you; welcome it, and faithfully put it into practice...” these words which open the “little rule” of St. Benedict, have been heard and read by women and men, called to seek God in their lives for over 1500 years.

As I picked up the Rule for some guidance for this reflection on the feast of our Holy Father St. Benedict, I noticed, perhaps for the first time that the Rule is written in the present tense, for all of us today, as though Benedict was in our midst, sharing with us in the here and now, much like the Scriptures which are truly God’s Word to us TODAY. As we also heard from Proverbs, “receive my words.”

Benedict’s influence is truly profound. Those of us who are professed Benedictines know much of the Rule by heart and can proclaim a phrase or a sentence here and there when appropriate. After reading some of Benedictine scholar Sister Aquinata Bockman’s commentary on the Rule, and particularly the prologue, I began to try to get into the mind of St. Benedict to discern what is the mind of Benedict and what does he say to us today through the first phrase of the Rule. “Listen, carefully...” Perhaps he knew that true listening is an art, and so added the word “carefully.”

The gospel that we heard for the second Sunday of Lent is another reminder of the call to listen. St. Benedict probably heard, read, and pondered that gospel more than once. The apostles who were with Jesus at the Transfiguration heard in a cloudy atmosphere, the voice of divinity, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him.” Benedict listened and followed the call to listen deeply, to go away, to invite followers, and then to direct them simply to “listen.” We his followers, must also risk the act of listening.

The Rule of Benedict provides many examples and invitations to listen: the abbot (prioress) listening to the community, listening as disciples, listening to the divine voice, listening to the master, listening to holy reading, listening to the Rule, and while not stated directly, listening to one another. That, to me is a grand amount of listening. I remember in the 60’s and 70’s, during the time of renewal and all of the meetings, the committees, the discussions, and the image I

had then, simply, was one very large ear...to absorb and take in all the words, both written and spoken. We did do more than our share of using our ears. I'm sure this is also true of the Vincentian Sisters of Charity, the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth as well as the ordained clergy.

Sister Aquinata goes on to expand the concept of listening as she understands it and as she reads it back into the Rule and into the mind of Benedict.

An appropriate response to careful listening is a person listening with undivided attention. Listening goes deeper and is more demanding. It presupposes that I am not filled to the brim with my own needs and desires and activities but rather have some empty space in me allowing myself to be surprised and startled. And I ask myself...and each of you...when was the last time we were surprised and startled by a word...or words...by the spoken words of another...by the words of Scripture...by the written word. Or is my own word the only one to which I truly listen. Obviously each of our own words carries weight...sometimes heavier weight than at other times...however, our own word is not what Benedict invites us to when he opens the "little rule for beginners" with "Listen carefully, my child, son, daughter, to the precepts of your master or your parent. Certainly an active listening is what is called for by Benedict. The opening verse of the Rule asks us to turn our hearts entirely toward God and all human beings...the presence of God and full presence of each human being we encounter.

The Ephesians are reminded to take the word of God and at every opportunity pray in the spirit. Listening to God's word and listening to one another constantly and attentively. A tremendous challenge and perhaps that's why Benedict chose the word Listen as the very first word of our rule. Called by the gospel of Matthew to follow Christ, who gives us a "solemn" word, we are promised the inheritance of eternal life...and as Benedict notes at the end of his Rule, may he bring us all together to everlasting life.

Let us continue to walk together, listening attentively with the ear of our hearts to our God...and to one another.

A blessed and happy feast to all!

Karen Brink, OSB

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