

REFLECTION FOR THE FEAST OF SAINT BENEDICT

Recently I spent a day in prison...!

And as I sat through the day, listening to the speakers, watching the performers, and being aware of other participants, many thoughts concerning today's (July 11, 2015) reflection surfaced in my mind. One of those thoughts was a sentence I had written down on a small post it note one day last summer, and that sentence, which I copied from somewhere and am sorry I cannot cite the reference, was that "Prayer is the adhesive of a vibrant Benedictine community." That thought came to me the day I spent in prison because I was so aware of everything around me. There was a certain energy in that space, surrounded as I was by professional corrections personnel as well as residents (prisoners) at the penitentiary. The experience for me was one of what I would call "intentionality."

At various times throughout this summer I hope to reflect with you on "intentionality," the fact of being deliberate or purposive, and in our case deliberate about the three pillars of Benedictine life: prayer, ministry, and community.

"Prayer is the adhesive of a vibrant Benedictine community."

As we celebrate the feast of Saint Benedict, this reflection will focus on and be intentional about prayer. And that seems to be an appropriate place to start. In the Rule of Saint Benedict, the author spends 16 of the 73 chapters on prayer. There is no doubt about the importance of prayer in the Rule. In the short chapter on "The Discipline of Psalmody," the final words are "let us stand to sing the psalms in such a way that our minds are in harmony with our voices." That phrase speaks to me of intentionality. Usually rules are written to call attention to a situation, or to remind an individual or a group of something, or to establish a practice...today we hear a lot about "best practices" for various venues. Our opportunity to do the Opus Dei, the work of God, is a profound one for us as a community. And, of course, the call to prayer is one of intentionality.

Recently at our community retreat, Father Eugene (Hensell, OSB, St. Meinrad) talked about the ordinariness of our lives. And while I believe our prayer is anything but ordinary...how can being in touch with divinity be ordinary?!.. there is a certain steadiness to our prayer together and just as each day follows the one before, the sun comes up and goes down and we can expect these patterns, so it is with our prayer together.

In his book, The Psalms for Contemplation , Jesuit Carlos Vallas comments on daily prayer. *“Teach me, God, the rhythms of your creation, the friendliness with nature, the intimacy with the earth that holds my step and the air that fills my lungs. Teach me the wisdom of the seasons, the movements of the stars, the ultimate lesson that you always teach me and that I always miss: that in nature as in grace there is rise and fall, there is day and night, there is high tide and low tide, there is joy and there is despondency, there is enthusiasm and there is doubt, there is darkness and there is light.”*

We can expect the ordinary and find blessing and contemplation in our prayer together, our community prayer.

Demetrius Dumm, OSB, in Praying the Scriptures, has a delightful tale which I will paraphrase for our purposes: It seems there was a young monastic, newly arrived in Egypt, who wanted to find holiness in the shortest possible time. But she had difficulty with her prayers. So she consulted an aged “ama” about her problem. She told the old woman that she found it difficult to say the joyful psalms on days when she felt sad, and conversely that she found it very difficult to say the sad psalms on days when her mood was joyful.

So she proposed a solution and asked for the ama’s approval. Could she perhaps say joyful psalms only when she felt joyful and could really put her heart into her prayer? And then she would say the sad psalms when she felt sad and could be in tune with their attitude. (Of course, she would be careful to say all one hundred fifty psalms each day as required of good monastics!)

The old ama thought for a moment and then said, “My daughter, it is clear that you have much to learn about prayer. Don’t you understand that it is precisely on your bad days that you should be saying the joyful psalms and it is precisely on your joyful days that you should pray the sad psalms? For you need to be reminded that you are not the only person on earth and therefore when you are sad you need to join those who are happy and pray the joyful psalms with them, and when you are lighthearted you need to think of those who are heavyhearted and praise God with them. In this way you will be delivered from your self-centeredness and have some hope of achieving the holiness you seek.”

So, as we are so often reminded, “It’s not about us or me!”

Call to Life, in the section on prayer reminds us from the Rule that “Nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God.” (RB 43.3). Then by way of enhancing that phrase for Benedictine women of the Federation of Saint Scholastica, goes on to note: *Prayer is at the heart of Benedictine life. Humble awareness of the faithful presence of God, asceticism, silence, and solitude prepare the sister for prayer and open her heart to hear God’s word. Benedictine worship is centered in the communal prayer of the liturgy, both the Liturgy of the Hours and the Eucharist. The experience and example of the community together at prayer is an essential support to every community member and a witness to the world of the praying church. The daily and seasonal rhythm of the Liturgy of the Hours provides a way to make all time holy. Communal celebration of the Eucharist unites the sisters to the universal church in its ongoing memorial of the paschal mystery.*

And so I go back to the day I spent at prison. I sensed that the community gathered there was focused and understood why they were there. There was energy in the group that seemed to me to be contagious. Corrections officers, drug and alcohol counselors, resident cooks, superintendents, professional educators, artists and prisoner-musicians all joined in unison. Our physical presence together was truly inspirational. So when I noted at the beginning of my comments that I thought of the community during the day I spent at prison, it seemed to me that intentionality was the magic word...We were there on the campus of the prison in support of both corrections personnel and prisoners.

What we do in prayer together, on good days and bad, on the exciting and the ordinary, in praise of the God of all creation, is one of the great gifts we both give and receive as a praying community. Let us thank Saint Benedict for the guidance and inspiration he has shared with us in providing for us this most wonderful and important aspect of our life together.

Happy Feast!

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