

MONASTICISM AND MINISTRY: INSIGHTS FROM ST. BENEDICT ON PASTORAL CARE

THE THIRD ANNUAL WALTER SILVESTER MEMORIAL LECTURE.
ST. PATRICK'S CAMPUS, AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY, MELBOURNE
27.10.2009

"The Church... has been sent by Christ to reveal and communicate the love of God to all..." (*Ad Gentes Divinitus/The Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity*, n.10).

These words from the Second Vatican Council are central, it seems to me, to our understanding of ourselves as Church. Each word and phrase of that half sentence deserves prayerful attention from us. We, the Church - have been sent by Christ - to reveal God's love - and to communicate God's love - to all our brothers and sisters. This is a succinct vision of the mission of the Church, the mission of each of Jesus' disciples. It is inclusive of us all. We are all called and sent to reveal and communicate God's love to others. We don't need years of formal study to equip us to carry it out. We don't require degrees. We don't need to cross the world to foreign lands in search of a theatre of action. It is enough **to be an authentic and loving disciple, here, and today**. If we are, we will already be continuing Jesus' mission of revealing and communicating God's love to those with whom we live and come into contact. Monks are no exception. They, like all of you, serve this mission in their own particular way. But we all have the privilege and responsibility, as Church, of bringing the Good News to others, sharing God's life and love with others.

Tonight, as we honour the memory of Fr. Wally Silvester who lived the Church's mission so wonderfully, I will try to offer **a few insights on pastoral care from St. Benedict**. Benedict had **a rich understanding** of both the **human heart** and the **Gospel**. This conjunction has made him a wise guide in his own day and through the centuries. Cistercian monks, who follow the *Rule* St. Benedict, do not exercise a ministry outside the monastery comparable to that of the parish priest, members of active religious congregations, various other associations or individuals. Nevertheless, we live a close community life which calls for much mutual care and service. I hope that what I have to present will assist you in discerning how you too can minister to others by revealing and communicating God's love, from where you find yourself, and to them where they are in their life's journey.

Benedict was born at Nursia in central Italy around 480. Christian monasticism had been around for some two centuries by then. After a brief period as a student in Rome, Benedict became a monk and eventually founded a monastery at Subiaco, and later another at Monte Cassino. He died around 540. Pope St. Gregory the Great gave us his *Life* as the second book of his *Dialogues*. Along the way, probably around 530, Benedict wrote his *Rule*. This has proved to be his most enduring gift to us. The *Rule* is a reasonably short document of a Prologue and seventy-three chapters, some of a couple

of pages, others no longer than a third to half a page. It was written, as he said, for cenobites, those who live in a community, under a rule and an abbot. It became, in time, the Rule followed by most monks of the West, that is, of the Latin rite. In addition, his *Rule* has provided inspiration for countless others who have never been near a monastery. Today many, many God-seekers, in a vast diversity of circumstances, turn to him for wise guidance in living their spiritual life. This gives me the courage to mine the *Rule* for what might be of value to you in living your discipleship and serving the Church's mission. I have had the benefit of Benedict's teaching during fifty years of monastic life, and, in addition, I have endeavoured to find inspiration and encouragement in his portrait of the abbot as I have exercised the leadership of my community at Tarrawarra over the past twenty-one years.

Benedict, in his *Rule*, deals with two dimensions of relationship. One is the vertical relationship between abbot and community, the abbot's pastoral care. The other is a horizontal relationship between the members of the community, their mutual care and service. The horizontal also extends to monastic guests. What he has to say in both these situations, I believe, has value for tonight's topic. Further, they shed light on each other.

Benedict gives a clear orientation when he says: "**Let (the abbot) recognise that his goal must be profit for the monks, not pre-eminence for himself**" (64:8). This surely has a universal application in each and every situation of ministry. Simply put, ministry is first and foremost **about the other**, not about me. This is pure gospel. "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve" (Mt.20:28). "I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full" (John 10:10). This is the Good Shepherd understanding of pastoral care. To put the accent on oneself rather than on the other is to be "only a hired man" (John 10:13). Jesus' dedication to his life-giving ministry was total, carried to the limits of "laying down his life for his sheep" (John 10:11). This is the background to Benedict's summons to the abbot "to recognise that his goal must be profit for the monks". Often enough in history abbots have not kept this "goal" in view. Power and status in certain societies have caused abbatial amnesia. They, and other "servants of the servants of God", have "lorded it over" (Luke 22:25) others instead of wearing the apron of service and washing the feet of those for whom they have responsibility (cf. John 13:1-16). Benedict was aware that it is only too easy for us to twist any relationship to our own benefit. **All of us** have to keep an eye on the compass and correct our course so that our goal is brought back to **profit for the other**.

An extension to this question of clarity of goal is found in another place where he writes of the abbot:

Above all, he must not show too great concern for the fleeting and temporal things of this world, neglecting or treating lightly the welfare of those entrusted to him. Rather, he should keep in mind that he has undertaken the care of souls for whom he must give an account (2:33-34).

In other words, first things first. **The priority is persons**, not projects or properties. He goes on to quote Jesus: "Seek first the kingdom of God

and his justice, and all these things will be given you as well" (Mt.6:33; cf. RB 2:35). Benedict's abbot has responsibility for the temporal affairs of the monastery as well as many other areas of service. Administration, especially when resources are meagre, can become a preoccupation. But "the welfare of those entrusted to him... the care of souls" must remain his top priority. Some years ago I read the *Chronicle of Bury St. Edmund's*. Bury St. Edmund's was one of the great and influential monasteries of medieval England. I was struck by the huge expenditure of time and energy the abbots obviously invested in legal and administrative matters. One would hope that they delegated pastoral care of the community to the Prior of the monastery because they certainly would have been "treating lightly the welfare of those entrusted to them" otherwise. The reverse would have been preferable, namely, delegating temporal administration, and devoting themselves to "the care of souls".

What Benedict is teaching here has application to all situations in the Church. Pope, priest, parish pastor, parent: **haven't we all a call to make persons our priority?** Whatever our intentions, to do otherwise is to slip away from the gospel perspective. Jesus gave consistent witness to this truth. Each of us would have favourite examples. I think of his time spent in dialogue with the woman at Jacob's well (John 4:1-42). There he crossed two lines in the sand of his religious culture to meet with her simply as a person. John tells us that the disciples "were surprised to find him speaking to a woman", while she herself has a similar response to the fact that he reached out to her *across the Jewish-Samaritan divide*, relating to her in her own right and uniqueness. This attitude led him into conflict with the religious authorities of his day, for instance with regard to doing good to those in need on the Sabbath. On one occasion he challenged them: "If any one of you here had only one sheep and it fell down a hole on the Sabbath day, would he not get hold of it and lift it out? Now a human being is far more important than a sheep, so it follows that it is permitted to do good on the Sabbath day" (Mt.12:11-12). What shocked his critics, of course, was that he was saying not only that "a human being is far more important than a sheep", but also a person is more important than the Sabbath.

The Second Vatican Council gave attention to the dignity of the human person in its *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World/ Gaudium et Spes*. One sentence reads: "**Believers and unbelievers agree almost unanimously that all things on earth should be ordained to the human person as to their centre and summit**" (n.12). This is the theory but we often get sidetracked in the practice. Losing sight of the wisdom of Jesus' "seek first... and all else will be given you as well", and Benedict's warning against showing "too great concern for the fleeting and temporal things", we also unintentionally, perhaps, relegate the people in our lives to a secondary position. It happens in all situations. One example could be borrowed from family life. Parents want to do the best they can for their children. This can trap them into working longer hours in order to provide more and more in material and educational opportunities. That is fine. Unfortunately, an unintended outcome sometimes is that they are less and less available to one another and to the children. The relationship can become weakened or even strained to breaking point. Something that should be growing is stagnating or dying. Benedict's advice to the abbot about

ensuring first things remain first in our scale of priorities seems to be relevant here. All of us need to do a regular check on how our practice is stacking up against our intentions. Am I, in fact, neglecting or treating lightly the welfare of those entrusted to me?

Benedict's emphasis on the person suggested to him a range of **attitudes and behaviours to be developed, others to be avoided**. I will begin with the latter. Please make the relevant transposition to your own concrete life-situations.

Disqualifying characteristics in an abbot, according to Benedict's job description, are covered in the following sentence: "**Excitable, anxious, extreme, obstinate, jealous or over suspicious he must not be**" (64:16). Benedict was always more concerned about **how** a person performed in a position than in **what** he did. He was sensitive to the creation of a climate in which the partner to the dialogue would be able to be as receptive as possible. For instance, he thought there were times when a monk needed to discuss with his abbot why he would find it difficult-to-impossible to take up a task being asked of him. He encouraged the monk to front up honestly but advised that he "**should choose the appropriate moment and explain patiently to his superior the reasons why he cannot perform the task. This he should do without pride, obstinacy or refusal**" (68:2-3). Benedict excels in his interest in subjectivity, in the inner quality of our relating. He knows that the best results come from being aware of what is going on in myself, and what is going on in the other. He believes that nothing positive is achieved by allowing my nerves to set the agenda, by muddying the waters between us, by charging around like a bull in a china shop, by gratuitously throwing hand-grenades, by running off at the mouth. So he advises the monk mentioned above to "choose the appropriate moment", which is probably not while one or the other party is in the grip of disturbed emotions.

Maybe the appropriate moment is not before the other has had a caffeine fix for the start of the day. "He should patiently explain... the reasons": Benedict puts great store by being reasonable. "Without pride, obstinacy or refusal": neither getting on one's high horse nor digging in will lead to a satisfactory outcome. For these reasons Benedict was convinced that the abbot's ministry, anyone's ministry, would be severely hampered by an "excitable, anxious, extreme, obstinate, jealous or over suspicious" personality. His advice to the community was not to go there in an election. Of course, there will be some of these negatives in all of us. The aim, in view of improving one's ministry in the formal or more informal sense, would be to become as conscious as possible of the static any of these qualities creates and try to minimise the damage.

Benedict also suggests **positive attitudes and behaviours** that facilitate the ministerial relationship. "**Let him strive to be loved rather than feared**" (64:15). This is not meant to be heard as an unhealthy seeking to fulfil one's own need to be loved at any price. Indeed the sentence which precedes it reads: "... we do not mean that he should allow faults to flourish, but rather, as we have already said, he should prune them away with prudence and love as he sees best for each individual" (64:14). Benedict knows that a loving father or mother will have to exercise a certain tough love at times. But he also knows that this will be more likely to bear fruit when

the existing relationship is one of love rather than fear. Striving to be loved in this context is a matter of having worked at removing the obstacles to being perceived as one who will do the best for the individual, pruning faults with "prudence and love" where that is the loving thing to do.

I always find a smile on my lips and a warm glow in my heart when I hear Benedict urge the abbot "to be concerned about the measurement of the (monk's) garments that they not be too short but fitted to the wearers" (55:8). This attitude translates to his pastoral practice as well. There, too, there is no question that one size fits all. He would have the abbot be clear that he has "undertaken a difficult and demanding burden... directing souls and **servicing a variety of temperaments**, coaxing, reproofing and encouraging them as appropriate" (2:31). He instructs him that "**he must accommodate and adapt himself to each one's character and intelligence**" (2:32). My mother, as one of eight and the mother of six, had distilled this wisdom in her often repeated, "we are all different". This service of "a variety of temperaments" has, as a basic prerequisite, the need for the gift of **discernment or discretion** which Benedict calls "the mother of virtues" (64:19). He "must show forethought and consideration... be discerning and moderate" (64:17). "...he must so arrange everything that the strong have something to yearn for and the weak nothing to run from" (64:19). Pastoral ministry takes into account the particularity of the talents and limitations of each person, the graces received and the stage of growth attained.

Benedict had no illusions about the woundedness of each one of us. He thought a good starting point in the abbot's responding to this reality was that he "**distrust his own frailty**" (64:13). The safest and most authentic way in ministry is that of "the wounded healer". From this base of self knowledge, those who minister to others can amend their own lives and be gentle and compassionate in helping others. "He is to distrust his own frailty and remember *not to crush the bruised reed* (Is.42:3)" (64:13), Benedict says in one and the same breath. Honest knowledge of one's own neediness grounds compassion for fellow strugglers. Pastoral responsibilities are at the same time a privilege and an aid to working out one's own salvation. Realising his accountability in the sight of God for those entrusted to his care, the abbot, says Benedict, is "careful about the state of others' accounts, (and) becomes concerned about his own, and while helping others to amend by his warnings, he achieves the amendment of his own faults" (2:39-40).

Benedict's pastoral advice concerning care for those in difficulties is solidly based in the gospel. "The abbot must exercise the utmost care and concern for **wayward brothers**, because *it is not the healthy who need a physician, but the sick* (Mt.9:12)" (27:1). The imagery of medical treatment is used to tease out some of the initiatives open to the healer in ministering to those in spiritual trouble: "The abbot should follow the procedure of a wise physician", says Benedict. "After he has applied compresses, the ointment of **encouragement**, the medicine of **divine Scripture**, and finally the cauterising iron of **excommunication and strokes of the rod**, and if he then perceives that his earnest efforts are unavailing, let him apply **an even better remedy: he and all the brothers should pray for him** so that the Lord, who can do all things, may bring about the health

of the sick brother" (28:3-5). One of his initiatives is to make use of a go-between, someone else who may have a certain influence with the brother: "mature and wise brothers who, under the cloak of secrecy, may support the wavering brother, urge him to be humble as a way of making satisfaction, and console him lest he be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow (2 Cor.2:7). Rather, as the Apostle also says: Let love for him be re-affirmed (2 Cor.2:8), and let all pray for him" (27:3-4). Law and order are not the primary concern. "His goal must be profit for the monks". **Mercy and love** are the **over-riding qualities** of his pastoral activity: "He should always let mercy triumph over judgment (James 2:13) so that he too may win mercy. He must hate faults but love the brothers. When he must punish them, he should use prudence and avoid extremes; otherwise, by rubbing too hard to remove the rust, he may break the vessel" (64:10-12).

Flexibility in pastoral approaches is a constant principle with Benedict. He recommends appropriate means be sought according to the needs and capacities of the person being accompanied. "In his teaching, the abbot should always observe the Apostle's recommendation", says Benedict, namely "use argument, appeal, reproof (2 Tim.4:2). This means", he continues, "**that he must vary with circumstances**, threatening and coaxing by turns, stern as a taskmaster, devoted and tender as only a father can be. With the undisciplined and restless, he will use firm argument; with the obedient and docile and patient, he will appeal for greater virtue; but as for the negligent and disdainful, we charge him to use reproof and rebuke" (2:23-25).

At this point I will switch the focus to what wisdom can be garnered from Benedict's treatment of the **horizontal relationships** between community members, and between monks and the wider community. Benedict was quite clear that he was writing his *Rule* for a close Christian community where the members truly sought God (58:7) "**with the help and guidance of many**" (1:4).

A primary source for an understanding of the spirit of the fraternity he wished to establish is chapter 72 of the *Rule*, entitled "**the good zeal of monks**". Here Benedict is gathering up what is closest to his heart before signing off. Much earlier he had a lengthy chapter of maxims covering a range of recommended "tools for good works" (RB4). Now there is a much shorter collection of maxims with **a single focus: the love between community members**. It is worth hearing the whole text at this point:

Just as there is a wicked zeal of bitterness which separates from God and leads to hell, so there is a good zeal which separates from evil and leads to God and everlasting life. This, then, is the good zeal which monks must foster with fervent love: *They should each try to be the first to show respect to the other (Rom.12:10)*, supporting with the greatest patience one another's weaknesses of body or behaviour, and earnestly competing in obedience to one another. No one is to pursue what he judges better for himself, but instead, what he judges better for someone else. To their fellow monks they show the pure love of brothers; to God, loving fear; to their abbot, unfeigned and humble love. Let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ, and may he bring us all together to everlasting life (*Rule 72*).

Respect, patience and a self-transcending love are the characteristics which are to mark the relationships in Benedict's community. It is a community modelled on the ideal of the early Christian community of Jerusalem in the *Acts of the Apostles* where all were "united heart and soul; no one claimed for his own use anything that he had, as everything they owned was held in common (Acts 4:32; also 2:42-47; 4:32-35). This "communism" has always been vulnerable to the ravages of human selfishness. Hence Benedict's insistence on those elements which would foster and guarantee the "united heart and soul" described by Luke in the *Acts of the Apostles*, namely, a deep respect for each other, the greatest patience with the inevitable weaknesses present in every person and in every community, and a generous preferential option for the welfare of the other. All of this, year in and year out, constitutes a very unspectacular **mutual ministry**. "To their fellow monks they show the pure love of brothers".

Mutual ministry is to take concrete form, for instance, in "**serving one another in love**" (35:6) in a variety of circumstances. One is in the refectory service, that is the **preparation and service of meals**. Benedict insisted that unless prevented by sickness or important business all were to participate for, he says, "such service increases reward and fosters love" (35:2). Those who were not strong were to be given help "so that they may serve without distress" (35:3). Further, Benedict was also at pains to provide that "the greatest care" (36:1,10) be afforded to those who were **sick** in the community. "An attendant who was God-fearing, attentive and concerned" (36:7) was to be appointed to ensure that the sick suffered no neglect. But the relevant word of God quoted by Benedict extends to all the community, namely, "I was sick and you visited me" (Mt.25:36). Every member of the monastic family is expected to make themselves responsible if the occasion presents itself. Another ministry within the community already mentioned is that of **prayer for those in difficulties** of one kind or another.

There is one final area of ministry treated by Benedict which I would like to mention. This is the ministry to guests (RB 53). Both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures placed great emphasis on the duty of **hospitality**. Monks, even those who lived as hermits in the desert, knew this was a sacred duty. They would break both their rule of silence and their fast in order to welcome the guest. St. Jerome has a rather charming gloss on St. Paul's direction to the Roman community to "**pursue** hospitality" (Rom.12:13). He wrote: "Our invitation to guests should not be a mere light form of words, spoken, if I may use the phrase, with the surface of the lips; we should be as eager to detain them as if they were robbers carrying off our savings" (*Letter* 125). Benedict also was very positive in his attitude to hospitality as compared with his predecessor and primary source, the anonymous Master. He wrote: "**All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ**" (53:1). Through the centuries, communities following the *Rule* of Benedict have maintained **monastic guesthouses**, not necessarily to be equated with the more particularly designated modern retreat house. Benedict's welcome was universal: "Proper honour must be shown **to all**, especially to those who share our faith (Gal.6:10) and to pilgrims" (53:2). In fact, our experience at Tarrawarra is that we are sought out by Catholics (priests, religious and laity), Christians of other denominations, Jews, Muslims,

people of other faiths, and seekers of no definite commitment. This is pleasingly consistent with our location within the multi-cultural, multi-faith Australia of the twenty-first century. We see it as our responsibility to provide **friendly space** in which the guest is free to continue his or her inner journey. That includes accommodation, table fellowship with fellow guests, an invitation to share the community's prayer, some opportunity for spiritual guidance if desired and if someone is available at the time, and above all, friendly space so that they can listen to the heart. This is a ministry that every Christian, indeed every human being, can extend to others in a multitude of formal or informal situations on a daily basis. "Pursue hospitality", St. Paul continues to urge. The ministry of the kind word or smile is not to be despised or neglected. Benedict quotes the Old Testament: "A kind word is better than the best gift (Sir.18:17)" (31:14).

Benedict always has his disciples take "**the Gospel for (their) guide**" (RB Prologue 21). So, **the servant Christ** who washed the feet of his disciples is Benedict's **model of the mutual service** of Christians "when they serve each other in love". "I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you" (John 13:15). When we serve each other it is **Christ who serves**. At the same time Benedict has us remember that it is also **Christ who is served**. There is a passage which underpins all his teaching about community, mutual ministry, horizontal relationships, namely, the judgment scene in *Matthew* 25:31-46. He explicitly quotes from there in a variety of chapters. "I was naked... I was sick... I was a stranger... Whatever you did for one of these least ones you did for me" (cf. RB 4:15-16; 36:2-3; 53:1). This identification of Christ with the brothers and sisters of the Christian community was crucial to Benedict's spirituality: "**Whatever you did for one of these... you did for me**" Mt.25:40).

I return to the words from Vatican II with which I began this reflection: "**The Church... has been sent by Christ to reveal and communicate the love of God to all**". Christ was sent by the Father to this same end: to reveal and communicate God's love to all. St. Paul refers to Christ in *Romans* as "**God's love made visible**" (Rom.8:39). You and I are sent to reveal to each other, and to our brothers and sisters, the unseen God who is Love (John 1:18; 1 John 4:8,12,16). We are sent **to be**, in our time and place, "**God's love made visible**". We are to share, **to communicate "the love of God** (that) has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given us" (Rom.5:5). My purpose tonight has been to share something of St. Benedict's wisdom so that each of us may carry out the mission, the ministry, entrusted to us in family, Church, society: to be revealers, and communicators of God's love.