



Abbey Letter
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Fall 2021

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"God has used St. Gregory's to touch my life from my first visit as a young teenager in the early 70s. The holy space created by the stewardship of the monks is a blessing to me and those that I come in contact with." – Stan Dellinger, retired officer, South Carolina Department of Corrections

"I have been visiting St. Gregory's Abbey since 1991. The monks have been there through the ups and downs of my life." – Ann Gaston, deacon, Episcopal Diocese of Chicago



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Benedict's Realism

The past year and a half has been traumatic and disorienting in many ways, and not only because of COVID-19. There have been many social tensions as well, some caused by the pandemic and others interlaced with it. Now that we might be emerging from the worst of the pandemic (we hope) it behooves us to take stock. The package of trauma has many elements to it, not least a collective grief over loved ones dying alone of COVID-19 and deaths that would have happened anyway that couldn't have the funerals fitting for the occasion.

Often a crisis brings people together, helping one another to get through it. There has been much of that, from medics working overtime under severe stress and others doing their daily jobs to keep stores stocked. But the divisiveness has been astounding and deeply troubling. With many people denying that there was a pandemic, let alone a need for a vaccine to stop it, there is a sense that two contrary worlds are co-existing uneasily in the same space. Other social problems, such as race issues, have been subject to the same escalating polarization. Conspiracy theories of all kinds have run rampant. It's enough to make one wonder which end is up or if there is even an up and down any more.

Since St. Benedict is considered a master of realism, I feel led to review a few basics in his monastic Rule that help us discern what is real and how to live in reality. The basic principles are simple, simplistic even, but simple principles are often the most profound and most challenging to act out. There are two preliminary considerations to make. First, traumatic events such as the pandemic have a sense of unreality about them. It is easy to think that it can't be happening even when the evidence to the contrary is very strong. Second, over-confidence that we know better than other people what is real and what isn't is the best way to get a distorted view of the truth.

It is well-known that manual work is one of the lynchpins of Benedictine practice. Manual work immerses us in reality because the material world is what it is and not what we want it to be. When we are tending a garden or preparing food, we have to adjust to the reality that presents itself. Lest one think that office work saves us from this sort of resistance, we need only think of computers that seem to have minds of their own. Benedict insists upon respect for the tools that we use, using them with care so as not to break them. They, too, have their concrete reality that we must accept. More important, manual labor is oriented towards human relationships. One cleans house not just for one's own sake but for the sake of the others who live there. Benedict's admonition that the monks should serve one another, referring to waiting at table, applies to all work in the monastery. The human respect that work inculcates in us is much augmented when we remember that Rome was still a slave society in Benedict's time. Far from believing in slavery, Benedict believed in obedience, a virtue freely given to others and freely received. Regardless of the social origins of his monks, all of them took turns doing what was considered "slave work" at the time.



Many times in the Rule, Benedict insists on mutual respect between the members of the community. Just as there is a reality to the things one works with while doing manual labor that requires respect, so there is a reality to each person we encounter which must be respected all the more. It is, of course, difficult, actually impossible, to penetrate the reality of another human being. That is precisely why we must respect other people to a profound degree, especially those who are different from us. That Benedict counsels the abbot to treat each monk in a way suitable to each one, sharply reprimanding one and gently urging another, indicates a need for the abbot to discern respectfully the character of each monk. The cellarer of the monastery is advised to deal tactfully with each monk and visitor who requests something from the monastery's stores. If someone should be importunate, the cellarer should remain respectful and gently refuse the improper request. If respect helps us see reality, it follows that conflict is the quickest way to distort reality so that the persons involved cannot see the truth of one another. A power struggle between the abbot and the prior, to use Benedict's example, polarizes the community and distorts all relationships and destroys respect between persons. To return to the cellarer as a model of respect: Benedict says that the cellarer (and all monks) should treat the tools as if they were the sacred vessels of the altar. The way Benedict would have the cellarer treat people makes it clear that people, too, should be treated as if they were the vessels of the altar. This admonition shows us that work is closely integrated with worship.

For Benedict, the foundation for interacting respectfully with things and people is corporate worship, known to monastics as the Divine Office. Many people these days don't see any reality here, but Benedict couldn't conceive of reality without God as the creator and redeemer of the world. It is worth noting that values such as respect for things and persons are not visible in the sense that trees and trowels are visible. When it comes to values, we must look under the surface for the basis of these values. For Benedict, values are grounded in God. The Divine Office immerses us in the Christian story as active participants. The Psalms, which are the backbone of the Divine Office, are profoundly realistic about human experience between humans and between humans and God. That is, the Psalms lead us to expressions of joy, sorrow, even rage, emotions we feel all the time as we make our way through life. The Office is done communally, which means we also have to work with the strengths and weaknesses of ourselves and others in our varying abilities to sing and recite the office well. We are made conscious of the people around us and of the people we are praying for. We are also made aware of God. Fundamentally, we sense God truly through respect and awe, the attitude with which Benedict would have us listen to the Gospel as it is read. Moreover, the office has the ability to ground us emotionally, even when its content takes us into the depths of pain. That is to say, the Divine Office can be a powerful resource for helping us live with traumatic situations such as the pandemic.

Several times, Benedict makes it clear that respect for other people is grounded in the Gospel. The guests, most particularly those who are poor, are to be treated as Christ. The same goes for those who are sick. By making himself vulnerable, Jesus identifies with all those who are vulnerable. The psalms of lament open our eyes and hearts to the reality of victims. In dying on the cross, Jesus revealed the reality of victimization for all time. Even people who consider almost everything in the Bible to be legendary tend to see the suffering of Jesus as true and real. The French thinker René Girard pointed out many times that amid the scepticism and relativity of much postmodern thinking, the truth of the victim is a bedrock reality that reins in other flights of fancy. Even with the decline of Christianity, concern for victims keeps the Christian heritage alive, at least for now. But there is a darker side to this concern for victims. Many people fight for recognition as victims, claiming to be greater victims than others. Meanwhile, other people compete with others on behalf of their "favorite" victims at the expense of other victims.



Once again, competition and conflict distort reality and the truth of victims is lost. The concern for victims, then, needs to be open to all victims and must avoid the rage and vengeance that, far from helping victims, creates more victims.

Far from being fixated on Good Friday and the suffering of Christ, Benedict encourages his monks to spend Lent looking forward to Easter with holy longing. Benedict knows full well that it is the Resurrection that reveals the full reality of the victim because the Resurrection *is* God's gesture of forgiveness. It is after the Resurrection that the people in Jerusalem could bear being told truthfully what they had done to Jesus and be cut to the heart because they were also being invited to be baptized into repentance and be saved. When we have acted wrongly and have participated in social injustice such as racism, we should be cut to the heart and should repent, but if all we receive is accusation then we are also receiving a distorted version of our wrongs and we have no way out of them. This is why Benedict invokes the parable of the Good Shepherd when advising the abbot on how to deal with a delinquent monk. It is forgiveness which gives such a monk the best chance to see the truth of the wrong he has done. Benedict brings forgiveness deep into the liturgy when he says that the Our Father should be recited aloud at Lauds and Vespers with special attention to the verse "Forgive us as we forgive" because of the "thorns of contention" that are likely to spring up. Benedict makes it clear that it takes forgiveness to clear away the thorns of contention that distort reality.

Reality is not static but dynamic. As we take stock of what is real in the world about us, we also need to envision where we would like to go from where we are. This doesn't mean indulging in wishful thinking. Diseases such as COVID-19 don't fade away just because we wish them to but only if we do something about them. Respect for things and for people, with special care for victims, gives us a vision of God's kingdom where Benedict would have all of us headed. In the steps of humility, we live constantly in the presence of God who urges these values on us. We enter the place of the victim when necessary rather than raise ourselves up in competition and strife with others. We repent of our sins and social complicities so as to join the publican in fearing the fearful judgment, but then also finding ourselves carried away by the perfect love of God which casts out fear. At the end of the Prolog to his Rule, Benedict expresses the hope that we will "run the path of God's commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love," and that we will "through patience share in the sufferings of Christ that we may deserve also to share in his kingdom." Our hope for the kingdom is the hope that *all* will be sharing in it, the only possible hope if we hold respect for all.

– Abbot Andrew

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