

Ab AUSTRo

Newsletter of
Notre Dame Priory

July/August 2019 No. 28

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Where to begin this month's chronicle which actually covers two months? The major event of June was Fr Prior's trip to Europe with Brothers Bede and Gregory. The goal: visiting some monasteries and holy places to ask God's protection and seek fraternal support for our foundation in the antipodes. The brothers were everywhere welcomed with fraternal interest.

In many ways the most important moments of the tour were pilgrimages in honour of St Benedict. In Subiaco, we visited the cave where the saint spent three full years in prayer and penance, and where he was purified by God and made into the saintly abbot who would give to the Church its oldest order and to the world one of its major civilising influences. Father Prior and the brothers prayed there for the grace to be worthy sons of the great Patriarch, and to solidly establish Benedictine life in Tasmania.



At the Abbey of St Benoît-sur-Loire in France we venerated the relics of St Benedict where they have been kept since the late seventh century. Fr Prior was privileged to offer Holy Mass in the crypt at the altar of the relics. This too was a time of intense prayer and supplication, crowned as it was by the precious gift received from the local abbot, Dom Etienne, of a first-class relic of the saint: bone dust from the reliquary. This was our first ever relic of St Benedict

in the community. However, at another stop on our tour, we were given a bigger relic, with a quite visible piece of bone of the saint. From rags to riches in such a short time: we left with no relics of the saint, and returned with two! It goes without saying that the solemnity of St Benedict on 11 July was celebrated this year with the greatest devotion, honoured as we were to have the Father of western monks among us through his precious relics.



We were most grateful for the warm welcome received in all the monasteries we visited: Flavigny (accompanied by Archbishop Porteous, see below), Fontgombault, St Benoît-sur-Loire, Sept-Fons, Randol, Le Barroux, La Garde-Freinet, Villatalla, Monte Oliveto Maggiore, Norcia, San Anselmo, and Silverstream. The entire trip was unforgettable and will long be remembered as foundational for our community.



Brother Chronicler

QUODCUMQUE DIXERIT VOBIS FACITE





JESUS MARIA JOSEPH

I am come to cast fire on the earth,
and what will I, but that it be kindled?

Lk 12:49

My Dear Friends in Jesus and Mary,

St Benedict gave us monks his “tiny Rule” as a way of life from which monks of every generation have drawn light and guidance. Even though written specifically for monks, it contains a number of spiritual teachings that can readily be assimilated by all the faithful. This should come as no surprise, since in the mind of St Benedict, the monastic life is nothing other than the Christian life lived to its fullest potential. As one commentator said, the Rule contains the quintessence of the Gospel.

Having given over the past couple years a commentary on chapter 7 concerning the virtue of humility, I propose this month to start another series on other passages of the Rule. Let’s begin with the Prologue. So it begins:

“HEARKEN, my son, to the precepts of thy master and incline the ear of thy heart; freely accept and faithfully fulfil the instructions of thy loving father, that by the labour of obedience thou mayest return to Him from whom thou hast strayed by the sloth of disobedience.”

The very first word of the Rule is “Hearken – Listen”. If words are important, opening words are even more so, as they can set the tone for the entire work, or they can stress an attitude that will run throughout.

Listening is a fundamental attitude that is necessary for everyone. Listening means being open to other people’s input, it means not having an attitude of self-sufficiency. It is an oft-repeated command in Holy Scripture: be silent, stop to listen, take in what you are being told, do not interrupt. What you might be wanting to say may not really be as important as what others might have to say. If listening to others is important, listening to God is vital. If we do not listen, we know nothing. If we are always talking, others – including God – cannot be heard.

St Benedict addresses himself to “My son”. This way of referring to the would-be monk immediately inserts monastic life into the great reality of the divine family. It is with the affection of a father for his son that St Benedict shares with us his teaching. Father to son, son to Father – such is

the fundamental relationship that guides the Rule at every page. Some more recent religious rules are more formal, spending more time on judicial aspects or details of life. The Benedictine Rule remains familial; the monastery remains a family under the authority of a Father, the Abbot. Each member knows that he is treated with the dignity of a son, and that he must honour the Father of

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the community as representing the paternity of God. It is God Himself who is honoured in the respect shown to the Father of the monastery.

The first words, “Listen, my Son”, establish right from the start a relationship of confidence and trust. The Father knows he must teach, guide, admonish. But the son knows that his true good lies in letting himself be taught, challenged, goaded on to greater things.

And what must the son listen to? The “precepts of the master”. St Benedict, with all his care to establish a relationship of father to son, does not hide the fact that the father is also master, or teacher. He has the knowledge of the ways of salvation and perfection, and his duty is to teach. This “precepts of the master” is reminiscent of psalm 118, the great psalm of the law of God, which, after contemplating at length the beauty of God’s law, concludes with these words: “Let thy hand be with me to save me; for I have chosen thy precepts. I have longed for thy salvation, O Lord; and thy law is my meditation. My soul shall live and shall praise thee: and thy judgments shall help me. I have gone astray like a sheep that is lost: seek thy servant, because I have

not forgotten thy commandments”. “I have not forgotten thy commandments”: such is the way to beatitude, even in this life.

But the first words of the Prologue also bring in another attitude, which goes further than just listening and knowing, namely “accepting and fulfilling”. Acceptance means that one takes them into one’s heart and embraces them. Fulfillment means that one lives by them. The words of the book of Sirach come to mind: “Blessed the man who meditates on wisdom, and reflects on knowledge; who ponders her ways in his heart, and understands her paths; who pursues her like a scout, and lies in wait at her entry way; who peeps through her windows and listens at her doors; who encamps near her house, and fastens his tent pegs next to her walls; who pitches his tent beside her, and lives as her welcome neighbour; who builds his nest in her leafage, and lodges in her branches; who takes shelter with her from the heat, and dwells in her home” (Sirach 14:20-27).

Such passion for the truth, for God, for virtue will bear fruit, for it will allow one to overcome all the obstacles that lie in the way to salvation. St Benedict does not hide that obedience to the commandments is labour for our fallen nature: “that by the labour of obedience thou mayest return”. As the master gardener labours strenuously to keep weeds out of his garden, for he knows that otherwise he will harvest no fruit, so the soul that truly seeks God labours unceasingly to keep the weeds of disobedience away. Such a soul knows that disobedience is actually a form of sloth, of laziness, and that the path to God is a return to the paternal home forsaken by sin.

There is no room for cowardliness in the spiritual life. Might that not be the reason that among those cast out of God’s kingdom in the Apocalypse – and first among them! – are to be numbered the cowards: “But as for cowards, the unfaithful, the depraved, murderers, the unchaste, sorcerers, idol-worshippers, and deceiv-

ers of every sort, their lot is in the burning pool of fire and sulfur, which is the second death” (Ap 21:8).

We can all be cowardly at times, but there is one realm in which we can never afford to be, and that is in the realm of our conversion to God and our salvation. St Benedict understood that, and so, as a good father, he shows himself to be quite challenging. But even as he does so, he places his teaching in the context of a relationship, for it is only once a relationship has been established that one can then lay upon souls the laborious demands of authentic spirituality. Laborious, but not burdensome. St John tells us: “His commandments are not burdensome” (1 Jn 5:3) or rather they are burdensome when one perceives them as being imposed by a rigid and harsh master, but when one considers that they are the salutary advice of a loving father whose desire is to lead us to perfection, everything changes. The commandments are then borne with love, assuming of course we have a little bit of love in our hearts. If we don’t or if we don’t have enough, let’s remember that our Father has plenty to share, for he is the “Pius Pater” as the Latin text has it. One who is “pius” is one who is at once pious, dutiful, gentle, honourable benevolent, kind, gracious. All those qualities are found to their perfection in our Eternal Father whose commandments are love, and they should be found in all those who take part in any way in His divine authority, in the Church, in religious life, in the family.

May St Benedict obtain for us all the spirit of divine adoption, the spirit of being truly sons and daughters of such a good Father who knows what is best for us and who, in spite of any mishaps of our past, wants to bring us back into His intimacy.

Fr Pius Mary Noonan, O.S.B

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Update from the Priory

Beloved Friends,

In the radiance of the solemnity of St Benedict, we were blessed with three new oblates. On 11 July, Peter and Laure Kelly, and then on 25 July, Cathy Powell were clothed with the white oblate scapular. We give thanks to God for these souls who seek to live according to the spirit of the Rule of our Holy Father St Benedict, receiving spiritual support from our community, but also supporting us with their prayers and sacrifices.



One other highlight of the month for which we are so grateful is the arrival of Dom Mark Bachmann from the abbey of Clear Creek, Oklahoma. Father, who gave us our community retreat around this time last year, is spending two full months with us. Among other things, he is teaching a course on the history of ancient philosophy to our young philosophers.



Brother Chronicler mentioned the European tour and the pilgrimages in particular. Our stays in various monasteries was a very important one, especially for the two junior monks who accompanied me. They saw close up how large monasteries function, and this has given them something to work for. We hope and pray that one day here in Tasmania a beautiful classical

style monastery will adorn the landscape and provide a haven in which many souls may take refuge, as they do in the great monasteries of Europe. My personal intention in making this trip was also to ask for help from the various monasteries we visited. I can say

that numerous fraternal bonds have been created, the future potential of which cannot be underestimated.

On the Jerusalem Estate front, things have made tremendous progress. Thanks to the help of licensed electricians and plumbers, we have been able to put the finishing touches on the minor renovations to the old house. Assuming a positive outcome with our planning application, we can then start building the monks' future living quarters.



Many have expressed concern about reports on our community. Let me say two things: Christian charity demands either that rumours be ignored, or that the person whose reputation is damaged be approached personally. If you have any concerns about the community, please write to me. Secondly, our ecclesiastical superior is not the Abbey of Flavigny, but the Archbishop of Hobart. Please feel free to contact him directly about anything which concerns Notre Dame Priory.

Such trials are an inevitable part of the foundation of any monastery. It is so true that many saints would even say that the absence of such trials would be a greater concern. So, let not your heart be troubled! We have Our Lady of Cana as protectress. Please pray to her for us, that she may crush the head of the ancient serpent and so let us be at peace.

Father Prior

P.S. In September we will be testing a new format for our newsletter. Stay tuned!

