

“With Widened Hearts”:  
A Commentary on the Prologue of the  
*Rule of Saint Benedict*<sup>1</sup>

AGNES DAY, OCSO

“Listen . . .”

This first word of the Prologue is a most significant one. With love, it is the key to the monastic, contemplative life. Listening is not a synonym for hearing. Listening implies an attentive waiting, a ready openness full of hope. We want to listen to God, and this listening is our prayer, our inner space, our very emptiness, which God fills with his Presence as and how he wills. We do not listen for what we might have expected or imagined, but for the God of surprises. He is not tamed to our bidding. He is real and free and quite beyond our capacity to comprehend, much less control. But one thing we know beyond a shadow of a doubt because he has freely given us his Word: he is Love, and his purpose is Love. We want to respond, and so we listen . . .

Listening and loving are other-directed, single, simple. The attitude of listening love takes us out of ourselves in a good way. It is both affective and effective, because it implies welcoming, pondering, and following what is heard. To listen to advice means to carry it out. In this case, what is heard is the Word of God, living and effective. He is the advice—we follow him, listening, absorbed.

The greatest enemy of such listening love is not exterior noise, but

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1. When Mother Agnes was abbess, she gave talks on the *Rule* either at Chapter or before Compline. Quotations from the *Rule* are taken from *St. Benedict's Rule for Monasteries*, trans. Leonard J. Doyle (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1948).

what goes on inside us. We need to silence our preoccupations: worries, curiosities, day dreams, criticisms; the machinations of the “managing me,” the lamentations of the “poor old me.” If we attend wholly to God, he will take care of us. We are free in his love. This word, *listen*, is the *Rule* in a nutshell, even the Gospel in a nutshell. “This is My beloved Son, *listen* to him.”

*“Listen, my son . . .”*

Saint Benedict addresses his *Rule* to “my son” or “my child.” This is very personal. As his followers he addresses you and me individually, in the singular, in the closest relationship to himself. Although we are centuries removed from him, there is a living link in his spirit. Perhaps he even saw us in his vision of the universe!

In God’s providence these words, “my child,” are full of grace tailored to your need and mine. There is in them the echo of Saint Paul’s words “in Christ Jesus by the Gospel, I begot you.” Saint Benedict lives on in the Kingdom of Heaven—the Church has set her guarantee of truth on that. From heaven, through his words, he brought us forth in a birth within our birth as Christians, as a further development of the grace of baptism. The relationship continues and grows.

*“Listen, my son . . . my daughter.”*

In Saint Benedict’s vision of the whole world in a ray of light, he saw everything in relation to God, everything in Christ who is the Light of the world, everything in relationship with that single focal point. This vision was a concretization of the sacramental view of life that was Saint Benedict’s. Relationship itself is a sacramental to the Benedictine mind. We are father and son, mother and daughter only as a sign of the profound reality of our filial relationship with God, who is Relationship. A sacramental does not confer grace in itself as a Sacrament does, but only acts as a vehicle for grace in proportion to our attitude. If we will, “everything is grace.”

“Listen, O daughter . . . incline your ear. Forget your own people and your father’s house. So will the King desire your beauty. He is your Lord, pay homage to him.” The human relationship points beyond itself to the Lord, whose Face we seek.

*“Listen . . . to your Master’s precepts, and incline the ear of your heart.”*

It is not clear whether Saint Benedict is referring to himself here as “Master” or to Christ. Probably, in the supernatural vision that is his, he means both. He is a Master in the school of Christ, but Christ stands by him as the Master. Saint Benedict give us general principles that we are to take into our very center, to make them our own. And then the specifics, our individual ways, will be taught to us by the Holy Spirit. He will not lead us above or around or away from the Master’s precepts, but deep within them.

To incline the ear is to turn one’s ear toward the speaker, or place a hand behind one’s ear to push it out to funnel sound into it more clearly. The heart too has an ear, in a spiritual sense. The more unreservedly and constantly we “incline the ear of our heart,” the more we will understand.

*“Receive willingly and carry out effectively your loving father’s advice, that by the labor of obedience you may return to Him from whom you had departed by the sloth of disobedience.”*

Obedience is a labor. It’s not easy to follow another’s will, even though we may see that it is an expression of love, at least in theory! It is just not easy to follow another’s will, because we have long experience of following our own. We are used to trusting our own preferences, coming from our experience, judgment, and brilliant ideas. The obedience that is asked of us by Saint Benedict is not a surrender of our intellect. It may not be clear that the material deed asked is actually the best way to do something. The important point is that we are being offered a chance to show our love in response to God’s love in the act of obedience to the will of another. To receive the instructions of another human being for the love of God is a very good start, to be completed by an act, and such an act is not fruitless. With and in Jesus, we must learn obedience through what we suffer, realizing that unlike his, our suffering comes from the checking or contradiction of our own cherished wills. We are to welcome and carry out the command faithfully, that is, in a spirit of religious faith, which looks beyond the human to the divine dimension, while following the instructions with care.

*“To you, God, my words are now addressed, whoever you may be, who are*

*renouncing your own will to do battle under the Lord Christ, the true King, and are taking up the strong, bright weapons of obedience.”*

The military imagery that makes its first appearance in the *Rule* here may not appeal to us; however, it is right out of the desert fathers, at the origin of the Christian monastic life. It is also good to recall that Saint Paul uses it, and it is even found in the Gospels on the lips of Our Lord. “Or again, what king marching to war against another king would not sit down first and consider whether with ten thousand men he could stand up to the other who was advancing against him with twenty thousand? If not, then while the other king was still a long way off, he would send envoys to sue for peace. So in the same way, none of you can be my disciple without giving up all that he owns.” Monastic obedience is a strange warfare, a struggle of love against all that would hinder or block its fullness, and most of that is within ourselves. What do we own more intimately and inviolably than our own will? The human will is not evil in itself, but only subject to the weakness inflicted on our nature by original sin and reinforced by personal sin. It is a precious and God-given faculty, given us that we might freely choose to obey. The Father desires our will’s free response, for love must come out of freedom. Only love can be great enough to lead us to renounce our wills—our love and his.

Why are the weapons of obedience strong and bright? They are that, and also noble, because they were forged in the furnace of the heart of Christ. They are ours for the taking up, if we will. Who are we fighting against? Whoever or whatever says to God, “I will not serve,” the dark spirits Paul indicates, or elements in our own selves. We fight that God’s Kingdom may come and his will be done; his Kingdom that is love, and his will that is salvation. We are well armed with the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God; both as his promise and as Holy Scripture. The sword is shining with truth, the truth that will set us free. And that is what obedience is all about—being set free from the things that would enslave us; the greatest of which is pride. We can do anything counting on God. Our shield is faith in him who is also our sure hope. Much of our battle is joined within what we do: our work as well as our prayer of the Divine Office, the *Opus Dei*. There are many opportunities to choose to follow the will of another in a sacramental way in these common areas of our monastic lives.

*“And first of all, whatever good work you begin to do, beg of Him with the most earnest prayer to perfect it, that He who has now deigned to count us among His children may not at any time be grieved by our evil deeds.”*

The practice of offering our work to God at its beginning should be a real prayer, even though it be as brief as the making of the sign of the cross. The sign of the cross made with attention and love, the name of Jesus invoked in the heart, these are powerful prayers and sources of grace for us in each work that comes to our hands to do. A good work undertaken in a spirit of pride loses its goodness—it does not bear fruit of the sort the Lord looks to find burgeoning in the lives of his branches. We must stay united to him—vitaly, humbly, truly.

*“For we must always so serve Him with the good things He has given us, that He will never as an angry Father disinherit His children, nor ever as a dread Lord, provoked by our evil actions, deliver us to everlasting punishment as wicked servants who would not follow Him to glory.”*

The phrase that stands out in this rather frightening passage of the Prologue is in the last sentence, “would not follow him . . .” It underlines human freedom and the willfulness of damnation. We have the means by the free gift of God, and we know the way in Jesus. He himself goes before us, always ready to help us. Weakness is not failure. The only real failure is, “No, I won’t follow.” Jesus has prepared a place for us in his Father’s house, and it is the dearest wish of his Heart that we go with him there. The condition is so simple: a free and unshakable yes.

*“Let us arise, then, at last, for the Scripture stirs us up, saying ‘Now is the hour for us to rise from sleep.’”*

This is a call to awareness, to fuller consciousness. As the dream world is to the world of sense and experience, so is the latter to the world of grace. The Word of God breaks through to us in our everyday life, waking our attention to God’s plan, alerting us to God’s work, stirring us up with God’s life. These are vibrant realities beside which this natural life seems colorless night. And yet how quickly we drift back into the shadow. “Now,” he cries to us, “Wake to the burning now! Rise! It is already morning!”

*“Let us open our eyes to the deifying Light . . .”*

How much there is packed in this segment of a sentence, especially in the word *deifying*. If Scripture itself did not canonize its use, we would say that it is entirely too bold a word—implying that we could somehow become God! God wants to make us one with him—not indistinguishably of course, but as created beings, as ourselves. The light is there, and we have the faculty to receive it—we have only to open the eyes of our will, to do what is within our power, to express our “yes.” The Light filters to our heart as Love, and Love transforms us more and more into Christ. The more we gaze on him, the more we will become the image of that which we behold, and the less conscious of ourselves as beholders. As the eye was made for light, so humanity was made for God.

*“Let us hear with attentive ears the warning which the divine voice cries daily to us, ‘Today if you hear His voice, harden not your hearts.’”*

God speaks to us in many ways. Here is one: the Divine Voice cries to us in our own voices, since we recite or sing Psalm 94 daily at Vigils. We hear God’s voice when a passage of the Divine Office touches our hearts. When this happens we must be ready to let it penetrate into them; not hardening them because God’s word may be demanding, may face us with painful truth or the necessity of change. If we do stay soft to God’s word, do dare to be vulnerable and to trust his care, a strange thing happens: peace. We begin already to enter into his rest.

*“And what does He say? ‘Come, my children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord. Run while you have the light of life, lest the darkness of death overtake you.’”*

There is an urgency in this little passage—Saint Benedict alerts us to the urging of the Holy Spirit to come, to listen, to run, and not to procrastinate. Our time on earth is limited; each moment is a chance to love that will soon be gone, never to return. Life is a one-shot affair.

But we are still here, so discouragement has no ground to claim, much less despair. If we have missed past moments, we still have the present one, and the sun is still shining on the way.

*“And again: ‘He who has ears to hear, listen to what the Spirit says to the*

*churches’ . . . ‘Come, My children, listen to Me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord.’”*

Following the advice of Saint Benedict, let us linger a bit longer to listen still more deeply to what the Spirit says to the churches, realizing that the Divine Voice is crying to us, “Come.” This “come” echoes all the “comes” in the New Testament. “Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will refresh you.” “He who comes to me, I will never cast away.” “Let the little children come to me.” Coming to Jesus means faith, a faith that is ready to abandon reservations, to commit ourselves and translate it into life. We don’t always need to understand. It is enough that we trust him. “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of everlasting life, and we have believed and come to know that you are the Holy One of God.” By such listening we grow in sensitivity to his invitations. Please God, some glorious day, we will be ready to hear the final “come”: “Well done, good and faithful servant, come, share your Master’s joy!”

*“And the Lord, seeking His laborer in the multitude to whom He thus cries out, says again, ‘Who is the man who will have life, and desires to see good days?’”*

In our old Usages it was prescribed that the *Rule* be read through to the novice three times. Following each time the novice was questioned before the community as to whether she wished to continue in the Cistercian life. It was part of the discernment process, in symbolic form. The Lord cries out to a multitude, but he tests again and again the few who respond, that they may know on what they have entered and choose freely to continue. God is looking for a laborer, not a specialist. He wants someone who will throw all his or her energy into whatever is asked, whatever needs to be done, in a context that is primarily spiritual. The glory of this laborer (whom he addresses in the singular) is that he or she is his laborer.

The whole vocation is compassed here—to serve day and night—yes—this is our vow of conversion—and to be his.

*“And if, hearing Him, you answer, ‘I am he,’ God says to you, ‘If you will*

*have true and everlasting life, keep your tongue from evil, and your lips that they speak no guile.”*

This answer: “I am he,” reminds us of Samuel’s response when the Lord called him in the night, “Here I am,” and Isaiah’s response to the Lord’s query “Whom shall I send?” “Here I am. Send me!” It reminds us also of Our Lady’s “Behold the handmaid of the Lord,” and Jesus’ “I come to do your will, O God,” quoting the psalmist.

A response is expected. But note the *ifs*. *If* you answer. *If* you would have true life. It has to be a free answer, a voluntary offering. Having received our *yes*, God puts before us the first condition—control of what we say. Not so easy—but without it, we cannot live in charity, and love is, of course, the essential.

*“Turn away from evil and do good . . . .”*

The second condition Saint Benedict puts on the lips of God seems so obvious and fundamental as to need no comment: to turn away from evil and do good. What is so different about that? Nothing, really, except intensity. The Gospel can be lived with varying degrees of charity and self-gift. The way Saint Benedict outlines in the rest of his *Rule* is intended to be total as far as humanly possible. He makes this way practical point by point. Enthusiasm isn’t an optional adjunct—we are to do our best to be filled with God in all we do—turning away from all that is not consonant with his love, expressing his love in all we do. If we take this for granted, we have not really let it search us.

*“Seek after peace and pursue it.”*

The peace Saint Benedict places in a position of preeminence is not a wishy-washy quality. It flows from the strong inner peace of Christ, which is his gift. The peace the world can give can be combined with injustice, selfishness, etc. The peace we are to seek has to do with love, other-centeredness, a total *yes* to God lived out in all its implications. It is a quality that radiates from its possessor and logically should radiate from a Benedictine-Cistercian community in concentrated form. It creates an atmosphere that absorbs troubles, restores balance, and frees the heart for prayer, for joy, for God.



*“And when you have done these things, My eyes shall be upon you and My ears open to your prayers; and before you call upon Me, I will say to you, ‘Behold, here I am!’”*

“These things” is in reference to what came immediately before this passage, that is, keeping our tongues and lips from evil or guile, turning away from evil and doing good, and seeking, pursuing peace. When our speech, our deeds, and our heart are truly engaged in the service of love, we are already living in the promised union of love with the Father and the Son. We are living “in the Spirit.” “Anyone who loves Me will be true to My word, and My Father will love him; we will come to him and make our dwelling with him.”

To try to be Christ-centered in all we think, say, or do is to live out our “Here I am!” to Christ’s call. What awe and wonder to know, then, beyond and within, the voice of the Lord saying, “Behold, here I am!”

*“What can be sweeter to us, dear brethren, than this voice of the Lord inviting us? Behold, in His loving kindness the Lord shows us the way of life.”*

It is in his loving kindness, not in our goodness or merit or potential or for any human reason that the Lord invites us to follow him. And he points out the way. It is the way of life and more life—a life of growing fullness of love. Saint Benedict is right. What could come to the ears of our heart with greater sweetness than such a call?

*“Having our loins girded, therefore, with faith and the performance of good works, let us walk in His paths by the guidance of the Gospel, that we may deserve to see Him who has called us to His kingdom. For if we wish to dwell in the tent of that kingdom, we must run to it by good deeds or we shall never reach it.”*

The first image here is of someone in a long, flowing robe, in the process of hitching it up short with a double-stranded belt for freedom of stride in walking. The walking becomes running because the way is long and the time short. Perhaps the long garment symbolizes our natural life. We are urged here to restrain it in a certain way so that it will not hinder us or even trip us up, in order to gain freedom of movement in the spirit. We are not told to take it off, or tear or mutilate this garment: just to keep it out of the way of our good deeds. Our movement has direction, pur-

pose, and urgency. We have a journey to make, and it will take precisely our lifetime, with no more time out for rest stops or side trips. And at the end, if we have run well, the Kingdom, the dwelling, the Lord's rest, the joy of the Master!

*“But let us ask the Lord, with the Prophet, ‘Lord, who shall dwell in your tent, or who shall rest on your holy mountain?’ After this question, brethren, let us listen to the Lord as He answers and shows us the way to the tent, saying, ‘He who walks without stain and practices justice.’”*

What is going to follow in the text is an elaboration of what it means to walk without stain and practice justice. In general, though, it means an upright and honest relationship with God. All the rest flows from that. Jesus has washed us clean in baptism. What about the dust of the way: the falls, the messes we get into? We have to let him wash our feet. Walking without stain means we do something about our stains, no matter what the cost to our pride. It means we keep trying, always ready for a fresh start, with the purity of heart that seeks God in and above all else. We are made for the vision of God, and to practice justice is to seek his Face.

There is a curious mixture here of who and the way. The person who will dwell in the Lord's tent and rest on his holy mountain is the one who follows the way. The Lord's answer to our question of who is to show us the way, and the way is a who.

Now add the thought that Jesus is the Way. He is also the tent pitched among us, and we are to dwell with him, and he with us. And he is the One who gives us rest.

To walk without stain and to practice justice is, therefore, to live in Christ; to let him live in you. Only he is without stain, only he is just. So let his love fill your life and your deeds that the Father can look at you and see only Jesus.

*“He who speaks truth from his heart; he who has not used his tongue for deceit . . .”*

If we are to speak truth from our hearts, then our hearts must be true, for “out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks.” What is a true heart? It is a humble heart, since humility is truth. It is a heart that has given itself to Jesus and learned from him. It is a heart in which

Jesus dwells, for he is the deepest Truth. Love will cast out all the fear and self-interest that leads to deceit in any form—not all at once, but gently, as dawn disperses darkness. As we realize his love, what we say with lips or lives will always be him. From the security of his understanding, merciful, and personal love, we can dare to be true.

*“He who has done no evil to his neighbor; he who has given no place to slander against his neighbor . . .”*

Saint Benedict continues with his instructions to those who seek to dwell and rest with the Lord in his Kingdom. Charity to our neighbor is a *sine qua non*. If we do not love the people we see, our love for the God we cannot see is an illusion. Love means seeking the good of the person loved—it is practical and unfailing. It seeks to strengthen and build up, to heal and help. It seeks to be a channel for Christ’s peace, forgiveness, and love. What a marvelous opportunity we have to live this way in our community! How quickly we can see when we fail—and how much support there is to start again!

*“It is he who, under any temptation from the malicious devil, has brought him to naught by casting him and his temptation from the sight of his heart; and who has laid hold of his thoughts while they were still young and dashed them against Christ.”*

Another pair of instructions for the one who seeks to dwell with the Lord in his Kingdom concerns control of thoughts. Without an evil thought, there would never be an evil deed. We don’t have much, if any, control of the thoughts that barge into consciousness. But we do have the power to reject the thoughts that our conscience detects as evil. This power is strongest when the thought first comes. It rapidly decreases as we inspect the thought and become fascinated by it. Therefore, Saint Benedict recommends prompt and even violent rejection of the evil thought. Dash it against the rock, the unshakable love of Christ. Turn your thoughts to him. The name of Jesus is powerful—let it fill your heart.

It is good to be very aware that no matter how quickly or how often a bad thought returns there is no sin if it is rejected as soon as we are aware of it. On the contrary, each rejection is growth in the love of God.

Evil thoughts buzz for attention like a swarm of flies in a picture win-

dow. If we are absorbed by the scene beyond the window, we aren't going to be unduly distracted by the flies. If, however, we let every fly annoy us, we will miss the loveliness the window frames—the sunlit moment, the passing deer. Let us be so fascinated, so filled by God and the works of his love in our world that no evil has room to grow large in our minds. We can swat away the temptations without taking our gaze from the glory. The devil's game is to lead us from distraction to preoccupation to discouragement and ultimately to despair; but it's all false. Let's not give him the honor of our panic.

*“It is they who, fearing the Lord, do not pride themselves on their good observance; but convinced that the good which is in them cannot come from themselves and must be from the Lord, glorify the Lord's work in them . . .”*

The way to the heavenly meeting tent in which we long to dwell is not simply a matter of living a good life. It is a matter of living in awareness of the source of good. There is no virtue in denying the good that is worked in us and through us. That would not be the truth.

It is tricky, though, to be sure we rejoice in God, in the spiritual successes that may be ours from time to time. The discernment is easier when we consider the total picture: that is the experience of failure, too, which all must meet. Do we come through it with trust in God's love deepened, or are we totally crushed and cast into despair? If we habitually attribute the good in us to God, there is no room for despair in the experience of our fragility.

*“Hence the Lord says in the Gospel, ‘Whoever listens to these words of mine and acts on them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on rock. The floods came, the winds blew and beat against that house, and it did not fall, because it was founded on rock.’”*

The image of the rock is a Biblical image of God. It implies his steadfast love, his strength, his fidelity to his promises. The image is applied to Christ, specifically and significantly, in several places.

If we listen to Jesus' words, take them to heart, and act accordingly, we build our spiritual life on the rock of his love. Nothing is going to dissolve his fidelity out from under us. Drawing strength from his solidity, the personal house we've built of his words withstands all the storms of

trials, temptations, and challenges to our faith—not because our love is unshakable, but because his is. Conviction grows from repeated experiences of weather in wild storms, but it requires, of course, action in accord with what we believe.

*“Having given us these assurances, the Lord is waiting every day for us to respond by our deeds to His holy admonitions. And the days of this life are lengthened and a truce granted us for this very reason, that we may amend our evil ways. As the apostle says, ‘Do you not know that God’s patience is inviting you to repent?’”*

This first mention of patience in the *Holy Rule* is very striking. God’s patience comes first! Patience is really a God-like quality. Later we will be asked to share by patience in the Passion of Christ, to be patient with others, with circumstances, and with ourselves. These later instances all derive from God’s patience with us, his suffering of our foibles. And we think we must be patient with God, when he seems not to hear our requests! How backwards, upside down, and inside out is this perception, but how human! We need time to accept ourselves and others, to have the courage to begin to respond and to amend. We need time to grow in faith. In the face of such patient love as God’s for you and me, there is always hope that today it will make the difference.

*“For the merciful Lord tells us, ‘I desire not the death of the sinner, but that he should be converted and live.’”*

For some people, it is most difficult to believe in God’s supreme good will toward them. They grew up with the idea of God as a stern Judge, who saw everything and weighed up merits and demerits to the tiniest fraction, and then they could expect to get what they deserved. After they have lived life awhile, and especially after they have tried to live in truth before the Lord, the pile of demerits becomes impossible in their eyes. They don’t see how they could deserve anything but death. God isn’t like that, though. His ways and his thoughts are as far above our ways as the sky is over the earth, as Isaiah says. His ways are life, and his thoughts are mercy. All we have to do is turn to him, to be converted—but that turning must be from the heart.

When we experience this, we begin to learn to be patient with oth-

ers, to practice thinking mercifully, truly desiring for the other what we know God desires for us: conversion and a life that is lived to the brim in his presence, and that means growing in peace and joy, no matter what storms come!

*“And if we want to escape the pains of hell and attain life everlasting, then while there is still time, while we are still in the body and are able to fulfill these things by the light of this life, we must hasten to do now what will profit us for eternity.”*

The sense of the slipping away of time is all too familiar to most of us. It can be quite terrifying to stand with awareness in the stream of present moments that sweep past quickly never to return; to watch the sun of this life pass its meridian and decline toward the west. But our discomfort is not so much a matter of clinging to this life as of the sense of how little we have accomplished. Saint Benedict says, “there is still time . . . there is still light . . . but hurry and do your good deeds NOW.” Oh, the preciousness of NOW!

*“And so we are going to establish a school for the service of the Lord . . . .”*

Naturally we tend to understand words like *school* or *service* in their common meanings in our contemporary culture. The Latin word *schola*, which we use in our monastic vocabulary for a core group of singers, might be closer to Saint Benedict’s meaning. A *schola* has to practice every day. Its members have to give, give together, and to follow someone’s interpretation and teaching. They don’t “graduate,” because a *schola* isn’t that kind of a school.

What the *schola* is to the choir, so the monastery should be to the local church; not a separate entity, but a concentration. And the service of the Lord, what is that? Charity of course: love of God and love of neighbor. Putting the two together, we arrive at the concept of a *schola* of charity.

Are we that? Am I a good *schola* member? Can people say, “See how they love one another?” Thank God we have a chance for “continuing education.”

*“In founding it we hope to introduce nothing harsh or burdensome. But if a certain strictness results from the dictates of equity or the amendment of*

*vices or the preservation of charity, do not be at once dismayed and fly from the way of salvation, whose entrance cannot but be narrow.”*

The difficulties and trials in monastic initiation are not artificially imposed. They arise from the very process of growth in prayer and from the resistance of nature to the gift of oneself; a gift which is fundamental to becoming a monk. The *Rule of Saint Benedict* guides us to gift in faith. We cannot grow in faith without exercise, and exercise against obstacles, but no one sits around and thinks up obstacles to try the vocations of those in formation.

Naturally, we don't like pain, whether it be physical, psychological, or spiritual. It is only acceptable when we see or believe in a good beyond it. Pain is incidental, but inevitable in the attainment of that good. We must trust God in faith in his power and love, no matter what pain we feel.

*“For as we advance in the religious life and in faith, our hearts expand and we run the way of God's commandments with unspeakable sweetness of love.”*

There is this further transformation that occurs gradually, although the awareness of it may come on us suddenly, and as it were by surprise. We realize that pain and trial are no longer horrible obstacles in our path—they still occur, but they've lost their power to block the horizon. Love is light, and the heart has ballooned; it even uses difficulties as leverage for a winged stride that has become a run. It may cease to notice them at all, because the greatness of its joy leaves no room. It is a snowball process, because the more we rejoice to run the course in love and faith, the faster we go, the easier it becomes, and the more filled with the energy of joy, until there are no words for such a great reality, and we fly. It is good that Saint Benedict tells us this at the outset, to help us weather the earlier rough spots that we feel with every nerve in our bodies. The devil loves discouragement. God loves faith.

*“Thus never departing from His school, but persevering in the monastery according to His teaching until death, we may by patience share in the sufferings of Christ and deserve to have a share also in His kingdom.”*

As Saint Paul said in his Epistle to the Philippians, “because of the supreme advantage of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, I count everything

else as loss. For him I have accepted the loss of all other things, and look on them all as rubbish if only I can gain Christ, and be given a place in him . . . and partake of his sufferings by being molded to the pattern of his death, striving toward the goal of resurrection from the dead.” Saint Benedict has put this aspiration into practical monastic terms, in a sentence full of hope. Perseverance in living according to Christ’s teaching means holding the Word, giving it moisture and room and time to break open and send roots deep into our hearts. The Word is love, and it brings forth a harvest of love. It is a suffering to wait to become all love, because part of us is and part isn’t yet. We have to bear with and believe in the becoming—in ourselves and in others—thus sustaining the essential climate of hope.

An old proverb says, “Patience hath a perfect work.” Remember the blind and deaf Helen Keller and her wonderful helper Annie Sullivan. Annie was very patient in the true sense, even though she got exasperated. The heart of patience is not giving up—persevering. The work of patience is perfect in two senses: what we are trying to do will eventually come right if we keep trying, and even we will eventually come right by what patience has worked in us: humility, hope, trust, and love. The key to it all is its relation to the sufferings of Christ—a relation that becomes union in the tremendous mystery of his love of the Father in the Spirit.

If we knew its value, we would welcome with great joy every little opportunity to be patient. Monastic life is very rich in opportunities!

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