

“Ancient monastic authors often stressed their wish to be of use to readers. Like them, Michael Casey has written a *useful* volume, a volume to live by. Drawing on a wealth of sources, and reading deeply in the book of experience, he shows what a vast perspective is indicated in the ‘little Rule’ of Benedict, what fullness of life is in store for those who follow it with courage and coherence.”

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“*Seventy-Four Tools for Good Living* is Michael Casey’s ingenious way of rendering the wisdom of St. Benedict for our times. As a master teacher, he weaves together sources from the monastic tradition and contemporary insights through these seventy-four tools. If this is not his best book, it is certainly his most readable and gracious offering to his students and readers. This is a book that comes from his personal *lectio* and living the monastic way of life in Australia. It is also a book I can use for *lectio* and living my monastic way of life here in Indiana. Lay contemplatives, especially oblates, will find this a cut above the books published in most bibliographies on monastic spirituality. This book matters!”

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Our Lady of Grace Monastery

“Michael Casey brings a deep lived knowledge of the monastic tradition to this splendid set of reflections on Benedict’s Rule. He manages to marry faith commitment to pastoral common sense in such a manner that monks and laity as well can find answers to that request made to the old desert dwellers: Give me a good word. Casey, in fact, gives us many good words.”

—Lawrence S. Cunningham  
John A. O’Brien Professor of Theology (Emeritus)  
The University of Notre Dame

“In my regular university course on the Rule of St. Benedict as a mirror to present-day culture there is close reading of some chapters of the Rule. To my shame I tended to neglect chapter four a bit. Michael Casey’s deep reflections in this remarkable book are nourished by a half century of monastic reading and deep psychological and existential insight. I can now draw from nearly 300 pages of wisdom on the fourth chapter of Benedict’s Rule. Just to quote from Fr. Michael’s preface: “There is much more in Benedict’s Rule than meets the superficial eye.”

—Wil Derkse  
Andreas van Melsen Chair for Science,  
Society and Worldviews (retired)  
Catholic Radboud University of Nijmegen  
The Netherlands

# Seventy-Four Tools for Good Living

*Reflections on the Fourth Chapter  
of Benedict's Rule*

Michael Casey, OCSO



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*Imprini potest*: Abbot Steele Hartmann, OCSO, 26 January 2014.

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*For Richard Franklin*

*After fifty years*



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## Abbreviations

CC	<i>Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina</i>
CCCM	<i>Corpus Christianorum: Continuatio Medievalis</i>
Dil	Bernard of Clairvaux, <i>De diligendo Deo</i> in SBOp 3
Div	Bernard of Clairvaux, <i>Sermones de diversis</i> in SBOp 6A
DSp	<i>Dictionnaire de Spiritualité</i> (Paris: Beauchesne, 1937–95)
EM	<i>Exordium Magnum</i>
Hum	Bernard of Clairvaux, <i>De gradibus humilitatis et superbiae</i> in SBOp 3
PL	J.-P. Migne, <i>Patrologia Latina</i>
RB	The Rule of Saint Benedict
RM	The Rule of the Master
S.	Aelred of Rievaulx, <i>Sermo</i>
SBOp	<i>Sancti Bernardi Opera</i> , 8 vols. (Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1957–77)
SC	Bernard of Clairvaux, <i>Sermones super cantica canticorum</i> in SBOp 1–2
SChr	Sources Chétiennes (Paris: Cerf)

Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.



## Preface

Half a century ago, when I was a novice, a venerable old monk (whom I now realize was only in his late forties) held up a diminutive copy of the Rule of Saint Benedict and proclaimed, “You will find all the wisdom you will need to live a good monastic life in this Rule.” At the time I thought he was exaggerating. Fifty years later I am of a different opinion. There is much more in Benedict’s Rule than meets the superficial eye.

To begin with, as Benedict’s final chapter indicates, the Rule does not stand alone. It was intended as a practical gateway to the more extensive and richer tradition that preceded it and that animated most of its provisions. By living according to Benedict’s Rule, we not only move into the world of John Cassian and Saint Basil but also are invited to go further back to the scriptural basis of all Christian and monastic living. Benedict’s hope is that ultimately we pursue our spiritual journey by the guidance of the Gospel (RB Prol 21).

The more time I spend with the Rule the more I become convinced that it yields its deepest meaning only to those who are prepared to engage with it through close reading. This means reading very slowly; considering every word, every phrase, and every sentence; and trying to comprehend not only what is expressed but also the hidden meanings that

lie beneath the words, in the space between authorial intent and written text.

For close reading to be more than arid pedantry, we need to allow the text to enter into dialogue with our lives. Drawing from our experience, we learn to appreciate more fully what Benedict is saying and, sometimes, why he is saying it in the way that he does. Conversely, the text may illuminate our own experience by helping us to understand elements of our unique past and to offer guidance concerning our future. If we so choose, reading the Rule of Saint Benedict can be life-changing and life-enhancing.<sup>1</sup> These are the principles that have guided this presentation of Benedict's fourth chapter: "The Implements: Good Works."

This is not a commentary but a book of reflections, written sequentially over the space of a year. As reflections, each individual section not only mirrors the part of Saint Benedict's text under discussion but also draws together different strands from more than fifty years of monastic reading. It has also been modified by my experiences around the time of writing, including the thoughts that happened to come to me from the liturgy and from whatever I was reading around that time. In particular the reader will note the strong influence of the *Sermones* of Saint Aelred of Rievaulx, which I was reading during the same period that these reflections were composed.

As with some of my other writings, I recommend that this book be read slowly one section at a time. Its purpose is not only to communicate my reflections on a given topic but to encourage readers to continue the process of reflection for themselves, applying what is written to their own lives and drawing on the wisdom and insight that the years have brought them.

The book was not written by following a master plan but created from moment to moment, following Saint Benedict's text. This means that there is some contingency in my comments. If I were writing the book today, my thoughts may

well have drifted in a different direction. This also means that repetition is inevitable, partly caused by the repetition in the text of the Rule and partly from my own thoughts spontaneously revisiting a topic already raised. The astute reader will notice that there are parallels with what I have written in other books and articles. Sometimes I have added a reference to these in the notes.

In writing this book I have been compelled by Saint Benedict's text to venture into some areas of monastic *conversatio* that were relatively unfamiliar to me, and so my understanding of monastic spirituality has been broadened in the process. It is my hope that the reader will have a similar broadening experience.

It is my hope also that these reflections will be useful beyond the context in which Saint Benedict has written. Nevertheless, in sections of the book in which I am offering an interpretation of Benedict's teaching, I have usually done so in the context of a monastery of men. This happens to be the situation with which I am most familiar. In reading ancient texts all of us have to work hard to apply it to our own different situations. I am confident that readers will be able to take the lessons that Benedict gives beyond their gendered and cloistral origins into their own world of experience and still find them profitable. Where possible, however, I have tried to keep my writing gender neutral.

I am happy to acknowledge that, as I wrote these pages, I have kept Terrence Kardong's commentary open nearby and, to my profit, have often referred to it, though, obviously, he is not to blame for any inadequacies in my interpretation of the Rule.



## The Implements: Good Works

<sup>1</sup>In the first place, to love the Lord God from the whole heart, the whole soul, the whole strength, <sup>2</sup>then, to love the neighbor as himself. <sup>3</sup>Then, not to kill. <sup>4</sup>Not to commit adultery. <sup>5</sup>Not to steal. <sup>6</sup>Not to lust. <sup>7</sup>Not to speak false testimony. <sup>8</sup>To honor all people. <sup>9</sup>Let him not do to another what he does not wish to be done to himself. <sup>10</sup>To deny himself to himself in order to follow Christ. <sup>11</sup>To restrain the body. <sup>12</sup>Not to embrace delights. <sup>13</sup>To love fasting. <sup>14</sup>To improve the lot of poor people. <sup>15</sup>To clothe a naked person. <sup>16</sup>To visit a sick person. <sup>17</sup>To bury one who is dead. <sup>18</sup>To come to help in trouble. <sup>19</sup>To console one who is feeling pain. <sup>20</sup>To make himself a stranger to the actions of the world. <sup>21</sup>To put nothing before the love of Christ. <sup>22</sup>Not to go all the way with anger. <sup>23</sup>Not to prolong a time of rage. <sup>24</sup>Not to hold deceit in the heart. <sup>25</sup>Not to give a false peace. <sup>26</sup>Not to abandon charity. <sup>27</sup>Not to take an oath in case one breaks it. <sup>28</sup>To bring forth truth from the heart and from the mouth. <sup>29</sup>Not to return evil for evil. <sup>30</sup>To do no injury, but to endure patiently injury done to oneself. <sup>31</sup>To love enemies. <sup>32</sup>Not to return curses to those who curse but rather to bless. <sup>33</sup>To endure persecution for righteousness. <sup>34</sup>Not to be proud. <sup>35</sup>Not to drink much wine. <sup>36</sup>Not to eat much. <sup>37</sup>Not [to be] sleepy. <sup>38</sup>Not [to be] lazy. <sup>39</sup>Not [to be] a murmurer. <sup>40</sup>Not [to be] a detractor. <sup>41</sup>To commit his hope to God. <sup>42</sup>When he sees something good in himself, to attribute it to God and not to himself. <sup>43</sup>But let him know that evil done is always from

himself, and let him attribute it to himself. <sup>44</sup>To fear the Day of Judgment. <sup>45</sup>To be terrified of hell. <sup>46</sup>To desire eternal life with all spiritual yearning. <sup>47</sup>To have death present before one's eyes every day. <sup>48</sup>At every hour to keep guard over the actions of his life. <sup>49</sup>To know for certain that in every place the Lord is watching him. <sup>50</sup>Immediately to crush the evil thoughts coming into his heart on the rock of Christ and to manifest them to a spiritual senior. <sup>51</sup>To guard his mouth from evil and depraved speech. <sup>52</sup>Not to love much speaking. <sup>53</sup>Not to speak empty words or those leading to laughter. <sup>54</sup>Not to love much or violent laughter. <sup>55</sup>To listen willingly to holy readings. <sup>56</sup>To engage in prayer frequently. <sup>57</sup>To confess to God daily in prayer with tears and groaning his past evil actions. <sup>58</sup>Also, to avoid these evil actions. <sup>59</sup>Not to go all the way with the desires of the flesh. <sup>60</sup>To hate self-will. <sup>61</sup>To obey the instructions of the abbot in all things, even if he himself should act otherwise. (May it not happen.) [Let the monk be] mindful of the Lord's instruction, "What they say, do; what they do, do not do." <sup>62</sup>Not to be willing to be spoken of as holy before he is; but first to be so that it may be said more truly. <sup>63</sup>Daily to fulfill by deeds the instructions of God. <sup>64</sup>To love chastity. <sup>65</sup>To hate nobody. <sup>66</sup>Not to have jealousy. <sup>67</sup>Not to give scope to envy. <sup>68</sup>Not to love contention. <sup>69</sup>To flee elation. <sup>70</sup>To venerate the seniors. <sup>71</sup>To love the juniors. <sup>72</sup>In Christ's love to pray for enemies. <sup>73</sup>Before the sunset, to return to peace with those with whom there has been a quarrel. <sup>74</sup>And never to despair of God's mercy.

<sup>75</sup>Behold, these are the implements of the spiritual craft. <sup>76</sup>When they are used by us, unceasingly, night and day, and given back on the Day of Judgment, we will be paid the reward from the Lord which he himself promised. <sup>77</sup>"What God has prepared for those who love him, eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it arisen in the human heart." <sup>78</sup>The workshop where we diligently work at all these is the cloister of the monastery and stability in the community.

## Introduction

### The [Monk's] Implements: Good Works

The tools of the monk's trade are good works.<sup>1</sup> The monastic enclosure is his workshop. Because a monastic rule has as its principal focus the practicalities of daily life, Saint Benedict begins his presentation of monastic virtues and values by an ample list of dos and don'ts. Saint Benedict is promulgating his moral catalogue with monks in mind. Most of the precepts he offers come from standard lists found in earlier Christian writings and are applicable to almost anybody, but Saint Benedict is thinking mainly of how these values and practices are lived out within the context of a monastery. This, of course, does not prevent present-day readers from interpreting this chapter for themselves in a more general context.

There are very few surprises in the content of this chapter. What is unexpected is that a man of Saint Benedict's spiritual stature should have included such a long and sometimes banal catalogue for the guidance of his monks. We know of other such lists. To begin with, there are the Ten Commandments. Saint Paul offers us a series of some twenty-six pungent precepts in Romans 12:9-21. And, of course there are the 613 commandments of rabbinic Judaism. Who, we may ask, can get their heads around a list of seventy-four admonitions? The brain cannot handle so many different items. Overwhelmed,

most of us are inclined to set our minds on cruise control and simply glide through the list without paying too much attention to its details. This is a pity, because the evidence suggests that, although Benedict borrowed most of his content from previous lists, he made sufficient changes in both substance and style to indicate that he had thought through his material very carefully, and, presumably, he wants us to take it seriously.

I would like to say a little about my approach to the sources of this chapter. It is possible to spend a lot of time examining the pedigree of each of the recommendations that Benedict makes, tracing them back to their original formulation. This research can be useful to the extent that it may throw light on the primitive meaning or context of a particular item. The fact remains, however, that the primary determinant of meaning must be its inclusion in a rule written for monks living under a rule and an abbot. For one as habitually economical with words as Saint Benedict, drawing attention to these various elements of behavior may well indicate that there is danger that their importance may be overlooked. Why include an admonition if it is completely self-evident or always observed?

Benedict's principal and immediate source in this chapter, as it is through much of his Rule (especially in the opening sections), is the so-called Rule of the Master. There are, however, important differences. While taking over much of the Master's third chapter on the art of holiness, Benedict completely omits his supplementary fourth chapter on the spiritual tools to be used in the practice of the divine art. More important, Benedict severely summarizes the seventeen verses of the Master's extravagant eschatological conclusion into four short verses with a distinctly different flavor. Benedict's view of the final reward of a life dedicated to good works is much more sober and restrained than that of his source. There are around thirty other significant changes that

Benedict makes to the Master's list: additions, omissions, and variations, including the exclusion of the opening profession of faith in the Trinity, although this may have been a later addition to the Master's text.<sup>2</sup> It is clear that Benedict, while borrowing extensively from his major source, did so with a great deal of freedom, determined to make his text say exactly what he wanted it to say. Researchers have identified further sources behind the Rule of the Master. These are important because they serve as reminders that these precepts are paralleled in the writings of earlier fathers of the church, particularly Cyprian of Carthage and Basil of Caesarea.<sup>3</sup>

To give concreteness to his description of the art of spiritual living, Benedict uses the images of workshop and tools. The first thing about a workshop is that it is a place to work. In the Prologue, Benedict demonstrates that he is fully aware of the crucial role played by grace in the spiritual life, but he is equally conscious that to make progress we need to exert ourselves. That is why the image of a workshop is apposite. It would be nice if monastic life were simply a matter of sitting under a shady tree by a babbling brook, contemplating eternal verities. We know that it is not. It is a place of work and effort and struggle; it is a war zone in which the need for spiritual combat repeatedly reasserts itself. And it is a long war. This is why Benedict emphasizes, at the end of this chapter, the need to keep at our task, to persevere, to put into practice the crucial monastic virtue of stability. We will need to keep investing effort in the spiritual craft over a long period if we are to have much hope for any real progress.

One of the great dangers faced by monastic practitioners is that, after a few months or a few years or a few decades, we become weary of investing so much effort in the spiritual pursuit with so little evidence of having made very much progress. We need to be encouraged to keep plodding forward in the lifelong task of acquiring the virtues we still lack. John Cassian gives us these words of Abba Theodore:

We must always extend ourselves with unceasing care and solicitude to acquire the virtues, and we must constantly occupy ourselves in these exercises, lest when forward motion suddenly ceases, loss occurs. For, as we have said, the mind is not able to remain in one and the same state—that is, so that it does not experience either growth or diminishment in virtue. Not to increase is to decrease, because when the pursuit of going forward ceases, there will be a danger of going back.<sup>4</sup>

In a workshop there is usually an array of tools; the artisan knows when to use one and when to exchange it for another. Not all the tools are used simultaneously but only when the particular task demands it. In the same way, we will not be confronted with the need to engage in all the various good works at every hour of every day. Most often the need for one or another of them will manifest itself from time to time. Today may be relatively free of challenge. Tomorrow I may be overwhelmed by feelings of envy so that I can barely think of anything else. Then is the time for the struggle against envy to commence. But at some point, envy too will cease its harassment, and I will be forced to turn my attention in another direction. I cannot clothe the naked or feed the hungry or welcome the stranger if nobody around me is naked, hungry, or foreign. The challenge is to recognize the call of the moment and to respond to it rather than seeking to impose on the reality of daily life a preprogrammed assortment of good deeds.

Such a long list may seem intimidating. Even more daunting is the fact that it is not exhaustive. For example, although it uses the imagery of work, the list does not include any reference to daily work or to the more characteristic work of the Liturgy of the Hours. Between them, these two signature activities occupy more than half of the monk's waking hours, and Benedict himself devotes many chapters to them. Even so, here they pass unremarked. This omission may serve as a reminder that any list of good works will be ultimately incom-

plete because no list can envisage all possible opportunities for doing the right thing.

It would be wrong, however, to conclude from the title of the chapter that Benedict's workshop is dominated by a concern with manufacturing virtues. From a total of seventy-four recommendations, thirty-eight—over half—detail courses of action to be avoided.<sup>5</sup> “Not to be proud, not to drink much wine, not to eat much, not [to be] sleepy, not [to be] lazy, not [to be] a murmurer, not [to be] a detractor” (4.34-40). Of course, resistance can sometimes be a highly active process, but strictly speaking, it has no external product. To be a good and virtuous monk it is not necessary to be always and visibly engaged in good works; often it is a call to a more interior virtue that consists in refusing to give consent to a particularly harrowing temptation. There will be times when the inclination to sin will be so strong that simply doing nothing may well be considered high virtue. Sometimes monastic life consists more in deliberately turning aside from evil than in positively doing good. Even then, that is not the whole story; once a solid quota of virtue is attained, “being good” may consist simply in being fully attentive to spiritual reality by a kind of disconnectedness with observable behavior, working by rote while interiorly engaged elsewhere.

If I were asked to draw a picture of a good monk, what image would I conceive? Would he be a doer of good deeds or one who refrains from what is wrong? Maybe I would portray a monk rapt in silent contemplation or fervently singing the Divine Office. Perhaps I would choose to imitate the twelfth-century Cistercian miniaturists who painted jolly portraits of monks engaged in all sorts of rustic tasks. All of these options successfully show an aspect of what a good monk is and does—but not the whole reality. For this I would turn to a painting in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, attributed to Fra Angelico (1395–1455), titled *Thebaid*, reproduced on the cover of this book.

In this canvas one can see multiple expressions of the monastic ideal through around fifty vignettes of monks engaged in a variety of activities: ecstatic prayer, manual work, hospitality, fraternal communion, and all sorts of mutual service. This painting is a great reminder that to be a good monk we have to be prepared to do all sorts of things—even contrary or contradictory things—as occasion demands. There is an element of unpredictability in the monk’s day. As Saint Benedict says at the beginning of “On the Measure of Drink”: “Each has his own gift from God: one this, another that” (RB 40.1).

When Saint Bernard speaks of the monastery as an anticipation of heaven, *paradisus claustralis*, he thinks of unity as being its characteristic constituent. The unity of which he is thinking is not the reductionist uniformity that comes from the suppression of multiplicity but the harmony that results from diverse elements working together toward a common goal.

The monastery is truly a paradise, a region fortified with the ramparts of discipline. It is a glorious thing to have men living together in the same house, following the same way of life. How good and how pleasant it is when brothers live in unity!

You will see one of them weeping for his sins,  
another rejoicing in the praise of God,  
another tending the needs of all,  
and another giving instruction to the rest.

Here is one who is at prayer  
and another at reading;  
here is one who is compassionate  
and another who inflicts penalties for sins.

This one is aflame with love  
and that one is valiant in humility.

This one remains humble when everything goes well  
and this other one does not lose his nerve in difficulties.

This one works very hard in active tasks,  
the other finds quiet in the practice of contemplation.<sup>6</sup>

The list is, of course, illustrative rather than exhaustive. The point is that, at a particular time, any one of these activities is appropriate to the good monk, even though others in the community are engaged in different occupations. It is not expected that anyone engage in all of them—especially at the same time.

Of course, a similar variety is witnessed in every community with different members performing different functions, but it is also realized in the life of each individual who, at different times, may be called on to be involved in a variety of services or ministries alongside the basic activities of monastic *conversatio*. Thus, in the course of a lifetime, we will probably experience different seasons—periods in which the graces and challenges will differ substantially, and our primary fidelity will be to respond to the reality of each moment rather than trying to hold on to what has passed or look forward to what may be reasonably expected of the future. This is why we tell newcomers: “You don’t have to wait for profession or ordination or graduation; you can start living a full monastic life from the very beginning.”

This chapter on the implements of good works can serve as a checklist of whether we are making the effort to do the deeds that follow from our commitment to the Gospel and resisting behavior that is contrary to the Gospel. It can serve as a kind of examination of the integrity of our conscience. Do we see only those faults or omissions where we can claim to be blameless by some form of rationalization? Are we becoming one of those who will say to the Lord, “When did we see you hungry or thirsty or naked?” This inventory of good works is meant to prod our consciences to see possibilities for virtue that we habitually overlook. For Benedict’s list to be effective, however, we have to have acquired a certain level of self-knowledge and a capacity for radical self-honesty. Those who are complacent and self-righteous, who never admit to making mistakes or to being governed by weakness or blind

to opportunities, will inevitably find in this chapter no incentives to purer and more generous living. They may even begin to purr: "All these things I have kept since my youth." Let us remember the warning, "Let those who are still standing take care lest they fall" (1 Cor 10:11).

I note that there are seventy-four items on the list. This means that if every day we took time to ponder a single one of the first seventy-three items we should traverse the whole list five times in a year. The final point, "never to despair in God's mercy," is worth recalling every day. Such an exercise, seriously undertaken, would provide abundant matter for a thorough examination of conscience and perhaps move us out of our usual interior preoccupations into a more objective self-scrutiny.

Above all, we should not regard this list as something trivial and elementary that we may safely pass over without reflection. This facile dismissal cloaks a more somber reality. There is an ingrained resistance to much that is prescribed here, coming from both nature and nurture. We do not want to live in this way. We want to be left alone to live our life as we please, to fill our cup with every enjoyment available to us, and to avoid anything that might occasion effort on our part. We already do plenty of good deeds, though mostly of our own choosing. We do not want someone coming along to ask us to do more or to take us out of our comfort zone. We don't want to be stretched. It is even possible for us to begin to rationalize this position in the manner of David Hume, seeing too much virtue as unnatural and unattractive. This is what the Scots philosopher of the eighteenth century wrote:

Celibacy, fasting, penance, mortification, self-denial, humility, silence, solitude and the whole train of monkish virtues; for what reason are they everywhere rejected by men of sense, but because they serve to no manner of purpose, neither advance a man's fortune in the world, nor render him

a more valuable member of society; neither qualify him for entertainment of company, nor increase his power of self-enjoyment? We observe, on the contrary, that they cross all these desirable ends; stupefy the understanding and harden the heart, obscure the fancy and sour the temper. We justly, therefore, transfer them to the opposite column, and place them in the catalogue of vices.<sup>7</sup>

The instinctive sympathy we feel for such a standpoint indicates that to put this chapter into practice will pose a great challenge for us. Taken as a whole, Benedict's list is indicative of a viewpoint that many good people of our own time would regard as foolish, excessive, inhuman, and even scandalous. Such a life is unthinkable without a radical conversion—a total change in the way we see things and evaluate the issues that confront us. This profound conversion is expressed in the fundamental reorientation of our life and, more especially, through a diligent and detailed determination to implement Gospel values not only in the major matters of life but also in situations that are superficially insignificant. Fidelity in little things is a means by which we signal our wholehearted commitment to God. As so often in human relations, it is the little things that matter most. "Quantitative judgements don't apply."<sup>8</sup> Just as our genetic signature permeates every cell of our body, so our basic will to serve God expresses itself not only in the major decisions that shape our life but also in small gestures that often pass below the threshold of public awareness. We do not have to express our following of Christ in heroic feats of achievement or endurance; often the giving of a cup of cold water suffices. Benedict's list announces that everything matters. Nothing is unimportant.

Saint Paul's reminder in the second chapter of the Letter to the Romans can serve as an incentive to the practice of virtue: "Are you not aware that the kindness of God is leading you to conversion?" (Rom 2:4). The word he uses is

*metanoia*, familiar to us from the gospel tradition. A change of thinking is required if we are to accept the truth of what he is saying. God's kindness toward us goes beyond our own self-acceptance. God sees us as capable of better and so is continually urging us to change our thinking, to reevaluate our priorities, and to upgrade our behavior. This is a theme to which Saint Benedict repeatedly returns in his Prologue, finally citing this very text, "Are you not aware that the patience of God is leading you to repentance?" (RB Prol 37).<sup>9</sup>

## 1-2

**In the first place, to love the Lord God from the whole heart, the whole soul, the whole strength, then, to love the neighbor as himself.**

Far from being an esoteric discipline, accessible to only a few high-level practitioners, monastic spirituality grounds itself on this most fundamental and universal of all precepts: the indivisible love we must have for God and neighbor. In Saint Benedict's mind, the monk is no different from the commonplace Christian—with the same ideals and the same struggles; what is distinctive is that monastic life provides a more expansive opportunity to understand and to practice Christ's new commandment in daily life. It is ordinary Christian discipleship lived in a protected environment that is designed to make discipleship simpler to practice and more difficult to avoid.

The original sources of this double commandment are Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18.<sup>1</sup> Jesus combined them, as some of the rabbis did, to form a concise summary of human obligation. We are to love God and to love other people. In this dual precept is contained all that the law and the prophets enjoin (Matt 22:40; Gal 5:14). In this form, the double commandment is well known to us, and as a result, we are inclined to allow it to pass us by without our paying too much attention. Although Saint Benedict places it at the

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head of his list of tools for good living, we are inclined to do no more than register its presence and then move on.

To begin with, it is worth asking ourselves how love can be the content of a law or commandment. Laws usually concern external actions, since there is no way for interior dispositions to be accessible to external enforcement. I can be constrained to bow to the king, but I cannot be forced to have reverence for him in my heart. The law can compel me to abstain from murder and mayhem, but it cannot insist on my having a positive attitude toward others. Furthermore, as Saint Paul insists, the written law may be eloquent in telling us how to live, but it is impotent when it comes to helping us develop those dispositions that will enable us to fulfill such noble demands. We are left in the lurch; we are given ideals and expectations that are impossible to achieve with the resources that we have.

This is why it is important to insist that Christ's injunction to both vertical and horizontal love is not, strictly speaking, a commandment—whether a new commandment or an old one. It is, rather, an exhortation to transcend the order of law and obligation and to operate on a higher plane. In calling us to love one another as he loves us, Christ is calling us to be perfect—not only in the sense of being complete human beings, but also as perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. From our vantage point, this is an impossible task, the dimensions of which we are not even able to imagine. What does it mean to be infinitely perfect in all the circumstances of our daily life? How can a necessarily imperfect human being realistically aspire to such perfection?

The very impossibility of this “commandment” indicates that the way of Christ cannot be reduced to the level of law, ethics, or morality. The “law” of Christ (Gal 6:2; 1 Cor 9:21) is not a written law given externally. It derives from the Spirit of life, and its effect is to liberate us from any written code that serves only the “law of sin and death” (Rom 8:2).

It does this by removing our innate incapacity to do good. In the phrase coined by Saint Augustine, the law of Christ gives what it commands. The freedom that Christ came to bring is not primarily a release from external obligations but the graced capacity to live under the impulsion of the Spirit of love, to live a life that would otherwise be impossible for us. It is freedom-for rather than freedom-from. Christ's gift is to endow us with the ability to live the life of love for which our nature was created and for which every human heart yearns but which is far beyond our own resources.

The distinctive love by which Christians are recognized is not merely the result of an affectionate nature or the acquisition of skills or a suitably nurturing social situation. It is a gift of God which both fulfills and simultaneously surpasses our nature's desire to be loved and to love. Christian love (or *agape*) is the infusion of the divine loveliness and love into the human spirit, repairing the damage which love's absence has wrought and lifting up the human to the level of the divine. Simultaneously, it is an upgrading of our perception so that we are able to see just how lovable our neighbor is. This gift enables us to see through the objective failings of other persons to reach the inner core of their being, where everything is beautiful. This is not a human quality or skill but a gift of God that is both sign and guarantee that we are already living on a supernatural plane.

Such love is a gift because it cannot be self-generated. It arises out of an encounter with God. It is easy for us to reduce religion to a particular mode of thinking or a particular mode of acting. In other words: to see religion merely as theology or morality. In such an approach, the kind of love about which we are speaking is thought to be the result of an act of the will. We try harder and *force* ourselves to love; love is thought to be something pushed out from us by willpower. Alternatively, love is something into which we trick ourselves, as it were, by using our intellect to move our concentration away

from that which repels us and look on the bright side, hitherto hidden from us. In both of these incomplete solutions, love is seen as the fruit of human effort. On the contrary, unconditional love is a gift, and it cannot be generated by human effort. It derives its energy from the intrinsic attractiveness of the other.

True religion, although it gives birth to systems of thought and behavior, is not identified with them. The religion that leads to love derives its force from a meeting with God, from our experience of ultimate reality. In this encounter, whether conscious or below the threshold of consciousness, God is revealed and given to us. It is by this divine self-communication that the seed of love is planted in the soil of our hearts. It is as though we are born again, born from above, as St. John says (John 3:3).

Saint Bernard of Clairvaux wrote a monastic treatise that he titled *De diligendo Deo*. This is often translated as “On the Love of God” or “On Loving God.” Both of these are incorrect. The title refers not to us or to our activity but to God: *De Deo*. And the quality of God that is highlighted is God’s loveliness. The correct rendering is “On the God Who *Must* Be Loved” or, more loosely, “On the God Whom It Is Impossible Not to Love.” To see God is to love God; to meet God is to love God. We cannot come face-to-face with God without falling in love with this essentially lovable Other.

If love for God must be taken as a commandment, then it should be seen as an obligation to put ourselves in the way of meeting God, for this is the only means by which divine love is infused into our hearts: “For the love of God has been poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom 5:5). The active presence of God in our hearts impresses upon us the reality that we are loved, and our response to being loved is to love in return. The Latin term for this return of love, as used by Augustine and Bernard, for example, is *redamare*: “to love back.”<sup>2</sup>

This leads us to remember the well-known conclusion that the condition for giving our love to another is our first receiving love from someone. In the same way, we love God because we have experienced that God first loved us (1 John 4:19). The more we have experienced God's love, the more likely we are to return that love. If the monastery is considered to be a school of love, then this is because, first, those who enter monasteries do so because they have experienced something of the wonder of God's love and, second, because monastic life is an environment where we learn to experience ever more intensely the love that God has for us and the love that other persons also have for us. In this way we gradually become adept at responding to the love we have first received. This is why Saint Bernard, in discussing the skills necessary for creative community living, reverses a familiar formula of Augustine and speaks instead of the art of "being loved and loving." We learn to love by learning to accept love from others. One who never received love will never know what love is and, as a consequence, will be unable truly to love others. The most that can be achieved is the semblance of love: self-love passing itself off as concern for others. We learn love by being loved. We learn the love of God by experiencing God's unconditional love for us. When that happens, everything else in the spiritual life falls into place.

Love is undivided and indivisible because God, its source, is one God, on whom all beings depend for their existence. The human heart cannot simultaneously experience love and hate.<sup>3</sup> When we are touched by love, we are taken over by a force which knows no limits, draws no boundaries. "The measure of love," says Saint Bernard, "is to love without measure."<sup>4</sup> This can be interpreted in two ways. Objectively, nobody is excluded from our love; it embraces God and all his creation in an act which is both falling under an attraction and self-gift. Subjectively, love totally touches, engages, transforms, and elevates all of our faculties and powers. This is what it

means to love “with the whole heart, the whole soul, and the whole strength.” We cannot imagine a man who has fallen profoundly in love with the woman of his dreams loving her only some of the time and with only a part of his affections. Real love implies a totality of involvement; it is a case of all or nothing.<sup>5</sup>

To love “with the whole heart, the whole soul, and the whole strength” implies a total absence of inner division. In the monastic tradition only the monk who has, by God’s grace, attained purity of heart is in full possession of his selfhood and so is able to love with such complete intensity. Such a love cannot be achieved by systematic programs of self-improvement; it can come to us only as a gift from God. This is because loving God with the undivided totality of our being is an act that is impossible for us so long as we are marooned in space and time. It is an act that belongs to eternity. This is what Romano Guardini writes on this point:

The more a man wills the Absolute, the more he himself participates in its character. The more firmly and energetically he strives for the good, the more he grows into the nature of the Absolute—Goodness. Consequently, if a man willed a thing wholly good in itself, and willed it with complete candour and with all his heart, pouring into this willing and doing the full measure of his vital force, a mysterious thing would happen. He would have passed into eternity.<sup>6</sup>

What this means is that loving in this way, fulfilling this “commandment,” is possible only in heaven; the nearer we are to doing this, the closer we are to entering eternal life. By God’s grace even now we have been given the gift of eternal life; its capacity to transform us is, however, dependent on willingness to recognize and receive this gift and to allow it to reshape and reform our lives to the likeness of Christ.

The Letter to the Ephesians broadens the theological horizons of the commandment to love both God and neighbor.

It envisages Christians called to a double unity. We are simultaneously one with Christ and through Christ with the Father, and one with the other members of Christ's body. This unity is revealed through the use of many words to which the prefix *syn-* has been added, indicating togetherness. We come alive together with Christ; we are raised together with him and are seated at God's right hand together with him (Eph 2:5-6). But we are citizens together with other Christians, joined together with them, built up together with them, inheriting together with them, forming one body together with them, participating together with them, bound together with them by love, and held together with them (Eph 2:19, 21, 22; 3:6; 4:3, 16).<sup>7</sup> By being united with Christ, we are automatically united not only with the Father but with all who are in Christ.

In the commandment to love with the whole heart, the whole soul, and all one's strength, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux sees a reference to three complementary modes of love:

O Christian, learn from Christ how you are to love Christ. Learn to love sweetly, to love prudently, and to love strongly. Sweetly, so that we are not seduced [by pleasures]; prudently, so that we are not deceived [by errors]; strongly, so that we are not turned away from love of the Lord by oppression. . . . See that whether these three [qualities] are not also handed down to you in the Law when God said, "You must love the Lord your God from your whole heart and from your whole soul and from your whole strength" (Deut 6:5). It seems to me—unless there happens to be a more appropriate meaning to this threefold distinction—that the love of the heart refers to a certain affective intensity, the love of the soul refers to the operation and judgment of reason, and love with [the whole] strength refers to constancy and vigor of spirit. Therefore, love the Lord your God with total and full affection of the heart. Love [God] with all the vigilance and caution of reason. Love [God] also with all [your] strength so that you may not be afraid to die for

love [of God] for “Love is as strong as death and passion is as harsh as hell” (Song 8:6).<sup>8</sup>

His conclusion is: “To love with the whole heart, the whole soul, and the whole strength is not to be led astray by pleasures, not to be seduced by falsity, and not to be broken by injuries.”<sup>9</sup>

There is another point that can be made about the wholeheartedness of love. The rabbis interpreted this wholeheartedness to which the verse of Deuteronomy refers as meaning that we are to bless God with both good and evil impulses (*yetserim*).<sup>10</sup> Even the shadows in our personal history are called upon to bless the Lord. We may not exclude our sins, because in some way, these unfortunate choices belong to the integrity of who we are. They are not to be banished from consciousness. As we grow in self-knowledge we become more aware of aspects of our being that displease us. Some of these we can eliminate by industrious self-discipline. Some of them drop away as the years pass. Others remain and will remain permanently as a goad to our complacency. We never graduate from a state of being utterly dependent on God’s mercy and forgiveness. In fact, the more we advance along the spiritual path, the more aware we become of our impediments, of the many ways in which we are resistant to God’s love, and of the burdens we carry as a result of choices made in the past. We are not to ignore these liabilities; they also must join in our hymn of praise to the God of grace. The shadow is part of our reality, and so in a spirit of faith, we thank God also for the darkness in our life, for the mistakes we have made, for the abuse we have inflicted on ourselves. Our very unworthiness of love makes the God who loves us ever more lovable. It is only to the extent that we see God neutralizing these malign aspects of our being that we begin to grasp the height and depth, the length and breadth of God’s all-embracing love. And so, in our own small way, we

are able to respond in kind. And as it grows within us, this divine love creates a desire to make some reparation to those we have harmed by our selfishness, indifference, or malice.

A point well made by John Macquarrie is that love for others is not always a matter of seeking closer union; sometimes it is expressed by giving other persons as much space as they need as they advance toward a fuller humanity. Love can be a deliberate standing back in order to allow others to find their freedom. It is not an absence of care or concern but selfless desire that the other person may grow. "Most typically, 'letting-be' means helping a person into the full realization of his potentialities for being."<sup>11</sup>

For Saint Benedict, living by this double love, in all its various expressions, is a sign that a monk is really giving himself to the life to which he has been called. In a sense, nothing else matters much. A good monk is one who, in the course of a lifetime, keeps coming closer to God and to his fellow human beings. The opposite is one who is self-willed, self-centered, self-pitying, voluntarily isolated, and permanently disgruntled. It would be idealistic to expect that such persons are never found in monasteries.