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Conversation with Saint Benedict

The Rule in Today's World

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Preface

Conversation with Saint Benedict is a book of essays. The saint, of course, is long dead, but we can still dialogue with him because he left us a written testament to his monastic thinking, now known as The Rule of St. Benedict. In effect, we can ask Benedict about the monastic life by studying his Rule. We can also ask him questions about certain aspects of our own culture, but these latter, of course, have to be approached indirectly. The obvious reason is that Benedict lived in the sixth century, over 1500 years ago. Nonetheless, we can deduce his attitude toward modern issues by a careful study of what he has to say about the monastic issues of his own day.

The present group of essays began with a set of talks on contemporary questions such as the use of electronic media. In those talks I was mainly trying to get at features of our culture I find difficult and troubling. In short, I am criticizing some things about life as we now find it. But as I added to that particular series of essays I began to feel a twinge of guilt because I could easily have been accused of "culture bashing." The reader could readily come to the conclusion that I am alienated from my own times and culture.

That is not really the case. While I am a Benedictine monk who has left the "world" to live a secluded life, I did not do so (fifty years ago!) because I hate the world. In fact, I am very interested in the world I live in and I try my best to know what is going on in it. Moreover, even though I know there are some things about contemporary culture that are rather troubling and even ugly, I also think there are some features of the Rule

of Benedict that can be called into question. In addition, I think modern monks have distorted some of Benedict's teachings. Therefore I wrote a series of parallel essays dealing with the second category as well, namely, what could stand improvement in monasticism, ancient and modern.

My method in all these essays is essentially to first present the problem, whether in modern or monastic culture, and then propose some solutions to the problem. So, for example, after I pose a problem in modern culture I follow up with material from the Rule of Benedict that I think can contribute to a solution. Conversely, when dealing with the elements of the Rule or monastic practice that I find wanting, I first give the monastic theory and/or practice and then present my own suggestions for improvement. Since I am living in the twenty-first century, these suggestions stem from my own culture.

What are my qualifications for such an enterprise? What do I know about modern life? This is not an idle question since I live in a remote monastery and do not move about much in secular life. I do a certain amount of traveling for business, but this mostly takes me to other monasteries. Yet no matter how much monks claim to have "fled from the world," we ourselves come from the world. And the world also has a way of following us into the monastery. For example, in my own monastery we make no pretense of excluding the mass media. We watch television, we use the Internet, and we take a fair number of current journals—far more than the average household! So we know what is going on.

Regarding the Rule of Benedict I am not just a casual observer. As a Benedictine monk I am bound to follow it as a living rule for life. Granted, we have modified it in some important ways, but it is still our basic life program. But beyond that I am a scholar who spends much of his time studying the sixth-century Rule of Benedict. I have invested a good deal of the past thirty years into probing the Rule for its meaning. That means both exegesis and hermeneutics: I try to determine what the Rule meant when it was written, and I also try to meditate on what it can mean for us today. A book like the present one is primarily aimed at the hermeneutical enterprise. I will not spend much time with detailed exegetical examination of the ancient text.

By now it should be obvious to the prospective reader that this is not primarily a scholarly book. In fact, I will not provide any bibliographical references to other scholarly works. I might mention other interesting literature in passing, but I will not examine it in any depth. The focus here is on practical issues and practical solutions. These issues may be fairly subtle ones of the spiritual life that will demand theological answers. Nevertheless, I will not engage in any extended theoretical discussion.

Besides being mainly practical, these essays will be somewhat opinionated. I will not take any pains to disguise my own views of matters, whether of present-day affairs or of the monastic ethos. I will only write about what I care about, and I do so in order to exert some influence. What other reason is there to write? I know full well that my jabs at the modern climate, say, "rant radio," will not change anything. Still, somebody has to fight back! As far as the monks go, I also know that my criticisms of their customs, for example the impractical clothing of Benedictine men, will hardly convince many monks to change. But I don't want to depart the world, monastic or secular, without saying my piece.

Assumption Abbey, Richardton, North Dakota
3 March 2011

Chapter One *Laughter and Tears*

St. Benedict and the Entertainment Culture

Entertainment Culture

The term "entertainment culture" may not be familiar to the listener or reader. It does not refer to a certain segment of society such as the broadcast industry, but to *all* of our society. My thesis here is that our whole civilization has gradually become immersed in entertainment. In some ways entertainment, which traditionally was meant as a respite from the wear and tear of ordinary existence, has now become the "default mode" of life for us.

No doubt this strange development is partly the result of technology. Our brilliant discoveries and inventions have eliminated a good deal of the drudge work that occupied the average person for most of history. If you are old enough you may remember the predictions of the social scientists who told us that within a few years we would have a lot of leisure time on our hands. For some people that time has come. Of course, others still have to work at two or three jobs to put food on the table or to put the kids through college. But for many people the question now is how to fill up the time between rising and bedtime. The answer to that question, again for many, not for everybody, is the mass media. Many people now watch television for hours a day; others listen to the radio all day long (mostly while multitasking). And many now use the Internet for leisure. The result is that the media are entrusted with the job of keeping us entertained.

Perhaps it would be good at this point to venture a definition of the word entertainment. One of the many meanings given us by Webster is that entertainment is something pleasant to amuse us or distract us. Now of course not everything on radio or television has precisely that purpose. There are serious programs that mean to stimulate our minds with commentary on the real world and its problems. Moreover, some of the offerings in the media can be described as art in the formal sense, which is never something that merely amuses or distracts. Still, I would contend that most of what we now find in the media can be included under the heading of entertainment. Granted, not all entertainment is bad for us. Our mental health requires that we not be serious all the time. We need relaxation and respite from the cares of life, and we cannot tax our brains too much with hard material. Even the Desert Father Antony sometimes used to relax with his disciples. When rebuked by a "philosopher" for his frivolous behavior he replied that the bow that is kept continually strung soon loses its power.

Nevertheless, as I already indicated, the proper role of relaxation is to serve as a short break from a life of work. When entertainment becomes the whole of life or takes up too much of our time we become shallow and frivolous. One of the signs that this may well be happening to us today is the ubiquity of the word "fun." Notice how much that word is used to describe things that never used to be thought of that way. Recently my niece wrote me that she and her husband were finding their new baby "fun." Someone tours the Metropolitan Museum, comes home and says he had "fun." The next thing you know, people will come home from Mass and tell us that it really was "no fun."

One of the more disturbing aspects of this pan-entertainment culture of ours is the way that category is invading other spheres. For example, we notice that the news is gradually morphing into a form of entertainment. It used to be that the TV news was fairly serious business. Sometimes the ads were a jarring contrast because of their banality or frivolity. But now it is the news itself that is sometimes presented as a form of entertainment. It can also be very disconcerting to be reading a serious magazine and suddenly find yourself in a new genre that is something else altogether. Then you glance at the top of the page and see the notice: "paid political advertisement." When entertainment invades everything, you don't quite know where you are.

Of course, not everything in this world is to be taken seriously. For example, sports have a way of turning into a matter of life and death. Some years ago a South American soccer player was shot dead on the street by an irate fan because he allowed a freak goal in the World Cup.

Clearly something has gone wrong there. Periodically sensible athletes, and especially professional ones, have to remind the fans that sports are just entertainment. When a Chicago Cubs fan interfered with a foul ball that may have cost his downtrodden team the pennant he was run out of town. Hard as it is to take, people have to hear the truth that "after all, it's just a game."

One of the more insidious aspects of constant entertainment is the way it serves to shield us from the truth. If entertainment is basically pleasant distraction, the question has to be asked: from what? The old Romans had a clever trick of providing the population with bread and circuses to keep their minds off the grimness of their lives. With people today, at least in the developed world, ordinary life is not so hard to endure, but what may be harder to bear is the distressing condition of too many other people in our world. Notice that the news now hardly ever focuses on Africa. Why? Maybe because it might cause us sleepless nights.

Another depressing development in the field of entertainment is that humor is no longer very funny. Obviously humor is a matter of taste, but I am not the only one who has noticed that comedy shows now often seem to lack the magic that is essential to real humor. We all know what it is like to watch boring TV shows that supply their own laugh-tracks in the background. It seems to me that for some reason the entertainment world has gradually lost its creative spark. It could be that I am just getting old and crabby. Maybe I have been reading too much John Climacus. But for the life of me I do not find the entertainment industry very entertaining any more.

Hollywood is a perfect example of what has gone wrong. Because film-making involves such vast amounts of money, the choice of subjects cannot be left to the artists and directors. Rather, the bankers and pollsters demand films that will draw people to the box-office. In practical terms that seems to mean simplistic plots spiced up with lots of sex and violence, and so we rarely find a major film any more that actually stretches our capacity to think and feel. People nowadays do not expect to experience serious art in the movie theatre. They go there for distraction. But rather than continue this jeremiad, let me point out some passages in the Rule of Benedict that may speak to this situation.

Laughter and Tears in RB

As our principal text let us read from RB 49, the chapter on Lent. Since monasticism is inherently ascetic, and since Lent is the Great Church's time of ascesis, we might expect that St. Benedict's little treatise will be

super-ascetic. That is, in fact, the way it begins: "At all times the lifestyle of a monk ought to have a Lenten quality" (RB 49.1). But after invoking this towering ideal, Benedict comes down to earth: "However, because few have that kind of strength, we urge them to guard their lives with all purity during these Lenten days" (RB 49.2). Then he continues: "The proper way to do this is to restrain ourselves from all evil habits and to devote ourselves to tearful prayer, reading, compunction of heart and asceticism" (RB 49.4).

Nowadays this might strike us as fairly daunting, but it probably did not look that way to Benedict's readers in the sixth century. In fact, the sources for this last verse show that it was standard Lenten thinking for the whole church at that time. In chapter 49 Benedict is not drawing from his usual monastic fonts but instead from the Lenten sermons of Pope Leo the Great. Leo did not preach these sermons to monks but to the people of Rome. So in this chapter we are not looking at super-asceticism but ordinary Christian catechesis, at least in ancient times.

In the text quoted above the thing that caught my notice was the phrase "tearful prayer." What on earth is he talking about? Is that a misprint? As a matter of fact, Benedict uses this same phrase three other times in his Rule (RB 4.55-57; 20.3-4; 52.4), so we can say that it was part of his basic mental horizon. If we do a bit of digging into the early monastic texts, as Irenée Hausherr did in his classic book *Penthos*, we find that the old monks *loved* to weep at prayer. Unlike us, who seem to think them shameful, they thought tears are a gift of God, not something to be avoided but something to savor.

What does that say about people in the sixth century? Could it just mean that they were simple people whose emotions were much closer to the surface than ours? In his book *The Waning of the Middle Ages,* Johannes Huizinga says that medieval people could be made to cry and laugh much more readily than we. A missionary I once talked to in the Philippines said of his aboriginal congregation back in the hills: "They just want me to make them laugh and make them cry." He wasn't being dismissive, just realistic.

Still, there is more going on here in the Rule, for we note the presence of a very significant phrase standing alongside "prayer with tears." Benedict also speaks of "compunction of heart." We probably have a general idea of what that means, but a closer look at the etymology of "compunction" is quite revealing. It refers to the very concrete action of poking something with a sharp object, and even penetrating it. This sounds painful, since the object of this poking is the "heart." But not just any heart; this is a hard heart that needs to be jabbed out of its obtuseness.

Compunction can be achieved in different ways. In Chaim Potok's novel *My Name is Asher Lev*, the Rev, who is a Jewish rabbi, regularly wakes his young son up in the middle of the night. Then he tells him sad and terrible stories to make him weep. What is the point of this apparently sadistic behavior? "I know my son has a mind," says the Rev. "But I want to make sure he also has a soul." In other words, if he can't teach him empathy the game is lost, and tears are a sign of empathy.

But probably Benedict is not thinking of empathy in his chapter on Lent. When he talks about the need for the monk to jab his heart during his Lenten prayer he is surely talking about his conscience. And certainly he wants us to confront our sins during this time. For Benedict is convinced that his monks are sinners. He begins his Rule with a blunt demand that they renounce their sins but he knows they still remain sinners in need of forgiveness and redemption. It was not unknown in past times to run into monks who said they came to the monastery to atone for their sins, and whose monastic existence remained focused on that project. One of our brothers used to make the Stations of the Cross every day of the year, including Christmas.

Before we become completely absorbed in the business of repentance we should notice that Benedict's Lenten program is not entirely mournful. In another verse where he recommends some more Lenten practices, this is what we find: "Let him deny his body some food, some drink, some sleep, some chatter, some joking, and let him await Holy Easter with the joy of spiritual desire." This can hardly be described as a gloomy remark! We see the typical Lenten abstinence from some food and some drink, but what about the rest of it?

To say that his monks should cut back on "some chatter, some joking" implies that they were known to do some of both! That is not the kind of thing you find spelled out in many of the old monastic Rules, nor do you find it in our modern vocation brochures. But it is simply a fact that monks often can be playful. Admittedly, the word used here for "joking" is *scurrilitas*, which in English (as "scurrility") implies dirty or off-color talk. And in fact a lot of the ancient Roman and Greek comedy on stage was extremely foul-mouthed. But the benign meaning of *scurrilitas* is simply "joke."

Benedict has a certain reputation as a sourpuss because at several places in the Rule he warns the monks against laughter. (*risus, scurrilitas*, 4.54; 6.8; 7.59, 60; 43.2; 49.7). I would contend, however, that most of these texts need to be carefully qualified for various reasons. For example, in the Instruments of Good Works it is not just any laughter that is prohibited, but raucous, explosive guffawing. You do hear some of that in the

monastery but I think people recognize that not all of it is very mirthful. Sometimes people are just braying out of insecurity, unhappiness, or whatever. A couple of these passages against laughter (especially RB 6.8 and 7.59, 60) are drawn directly from the Rule of the Master, and he really was a humorless character.

At this point, however, we really cannot remain with the ancient mentality. We also need to listen to modern psychology, which usually contends that a sense of humor, far from being an aberration, is quite necessary for a healthy emotional life. That is the case because life is usually long and hard. If we can't see the inherent silliness in much of it and look at it with fond indulgence, then we are in trouble. This is all the more necessary in monastic community life, especially in a small community. There we live so close to one another, really cheek by jowl, that we get to know each other's slightest foibles. If we can't laugh at them we are lost.

As one of my now-deceased confrères used to say, "The best jokes in this place are walking around." This was doubly funny because he was one of the wildest characters in the community, a man whose eccentricities have provided posterity with an endless supply of mirth. He once drove down the freeway the wrong way; when he noticed his error, he backed up—into a big sign that caved in the back of the car. This he did not notice, although he admitted that the "ash fell off my cigar." When he got home he saw the crushed trunk, so he quickly wrote an elaborate explanation, marched into the abbot's office, and flung it down on the desk. The abbot was without a clue, but he knew better than to push the matter with Father Tom.

Rather than descend into anecdotes we should return to the text of RB 49. Certainly Benedict has more to say than just that we should cut back on our silliness during Lent. In fact, he weighs in with one of the most profound remarks in the entire Rule: "Let him await Holy Easter with the joy of spiritual desire" (RB 49.7). If I had to pick out one of Benedict's pithy sayings to take along to a desert island, I think this is one I could not do without, for it is almost breathtaking in its theological vision and also its psychological wisdom.

First we should note the term joy or *gaudium* in Latin. Since we throw this word around fairly casually, it may not strike us as remarkable. Yet it only occurs twice in the entire Rule of Benedict, and both of those usages are found in this same chapter on Lent! Of course this could be interpreted in more than one way. We could say it just proves that Benedict was a really a dour spirit. But that is not at all the case, for there are other signals throughout the Rule that indicate he was anything but glum.

Indeed, one of the most significant pointers to Benedict's essential happiness is his determination that "sadness" (*tristitia*) not pervade his mon-

astery. No less than ten times he goes out of his way to prohibit behavior he fears will bring sadness to the brothers. Life on earth has its inevitable sorrows, some we bring on ourselves and others that cannot be avoided. But where we *can* avoid saddening one another, Benedict demands that we do so. And frankly, it is not easy to maintain good morale in the monastery.

At this point we might refer back to our initial remarks about the Entertainment Culture. Surely the deepest dynamic of that culture is the felt need to promote good morale in society. It is thought that if people can be kept amused at least they won't do anything wicked or harmful to others. Apparently, though, this strategy is not working in the Arab countries, where some people are not at all amused by American pop culture. Even in the monastery monks may try to cope with sadness or depression by immersing themselves in pop culture. But it won't work. And besides, the whole monastic tradition militates against that sort of thing. No, monks need more substantial reasons to be joyful and not sad.

Benedict provides precisely that kind of solid reason for Lenten joy, for he insists that it is based on longing for Holy Easter. In fact, he uses an especially pungent expression for this longing: "the joy of spiritual desire" (*spiritalis desiderii gaudio*). Someone with a delicate sense of human foibles might question Benedict's use of "desire" in this sentence. After all, isn't Lent precisely about the suppression of our desires? No doubt that has some truth to it, but it might also be that we have an excessively ethereal idea of the spiritual life. Could it not be possible that Lent is about *increasing* our longing or desire? Remember that the longing is for Holy Easter, not for carnal things.

"Spiritual joy" can be a key to understanding the word "desire" in this sentence. "Spiritual" in this verse could refer directly to the Holy Spirit. So Benedict is talking here about a gift of the Holy Spirit and not just some virtue we exercise by sheer will. At any rate, the "joy" he is discussing here is a special kind of joy. It is by no means superficial happiness that can evaporate at the slightest setback. This is a deep joy that can even coexist with serious human suffering. I can be joyful when I am dying of cancer.

But the deepest dimension of this whole notion of spiritual longing is the goal, namely, Holy Easter. We must remember that Lent is not self-contained; it is not meant for itself. No, it is strictly a run-up to Easter. No matter how seriously Christians take their Lenten asceticism, it is not really the point. It is not the bottom line. All this Lenten seriousness culminates in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and also in the promise that if we are with him in his carrying of the cross we will also be with him in our own resurrection. Since this is the whole goal of our Lent, it ought not to be a grim or depressing exercise.

Notice, please, that Benedict does not say that we may be sorrowful now but with Easter we will be joyful. Jesus says something like that (the woman in childbirth), but at least in RB 49 Benedict teaches that Lent itself ought to be joyful. Since we know very well what it is leading up to, our Lent should be suffused with deep joy. If we are in Christ we have no reason at all to be dejected or despondent. Psychologically we may still struggle with these tendencies, but theologically we are already "citizens of heaven," with no reason to lack joy.