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Relatos e reflexões

HOSPITALITY IN THE BENEDICTINE MONASTIC TRADITION

*Brother Aaron Raverty, OSB**

Conflicts, wars, violence, and intolerance are noteworthy and newsworthy in our world today. Of course, these have plagued humanity from the very beginning. Because of our modern communications technology, we hear about these conditions sooner and in more detail than in times past. In my work as an anthropologist, I know that humans - despite our common humanity - are very diverse in many ways. Our variety in physical characteristics, languages, and ways of life is really our greatest strength, but we humans do not often think of them in this way. No, we frequently use these differences to hate, exclude, and do violence to one another.

I like to think of Benedictine monasteries past and present as “islands of tolerance” in a sea of intolerance. Our Holy Father Benedict

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in his rule for monasteries shows us how to go beyond mere tolerance of human difference to the active welcoming of hospitality. If we could come to think of all people as our guests, our world would be a very different place.

St. Benedict seems to have expected that many different people would come to the monastery. He even placed a porter at the monastery's entrance to make sure that visitors would always be recognized and greeted. St. Benedict took special care that the poor be noticed as guests. Listen to what he says in chapter 66: "As soon as anyone knocks, or a poor man calls out, he [the porter] replies, 'Thanks be to God' or 'Your blessing, please'; then, with all the gentleness that comes from the fear of God, he provides a prompt answer with the warmth of love" (vv. 3-4).¹ Besides the poor, Benedict is also very solicitous of travelers ("pilgrims"): "Great care and concern are to be shown in receiving poor people and pilgrims, because in them more particularly Christ is received..." (53.15). Hospitality is provided not only in the form of food ("the abbot's table must always be with guests and travelers" [56.1]), but lodging as well, since St. Benedict, speaking of the guesthouse, says that "adequate bedding should be available there" (53.22).

As Benedictines, our guest apostolate is more important than ever today. With so many people out of work, more and more are becoming impoverished. We hear stories every day of how difficult it is in many large cities and small towns in the USA to keep food shelves stocked, since the food disappears faster than others can donate it. Many people who considered themselves middle-class citizens are losing their homes and finding themselves out on the street - a situation they never would have imagined. At our monastery of Saint John the Baptist in Central Minnesota, many come to us as guests. Of course, there are always operating costs associated with the upkeep of a guesthouse, and we suggest that our visitors pay a particular fee. However, we accept whatever donation we receive from them. Some are not able to pay anything, and some are unable to pay our suggested rate, but we would never think of turning them away! In fact, some of our guesthouse visitors donate above and beyond what we request, and this helps us to serve those others who cannot afford it.

¹ All references to the Rule of Benedict are taken from *RB 1980*, ed. Timothy Fry, OSB (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981).

Accepting guests (and “monasteries are never without them” [53.16]) is indeed an act of charity, but it nevertheless demands some discernment. At the beginning of chapter 53, St. Benedict says that “all guests... are to be welcomed as Christ” (v. 1), but shortly thereafter he counsels the discernment of prayer to guarantee the guests’ good intentions: “prayer must always precede the kiss of peace because of the delusions of the devil” (v. 5).

Surely St. Benedict must have been aware of the story in Genesis 18, where Abraham offers hospitality to the three visitors. Given the desert environment where Abraham and Sarah pitched their tent, both food and water were precious goods. Thus, all desert dwellers placed a high value on hospitality to those pilgrims who wandered in as strangers. When I read this Scripture passage, I am always moved by the enthusiasm shown by Abraham in welcoming these visitors into his camp. Would that we all could be as anxious to serve our unannounced guests as Abraham was! These visitors were complete strangers to Abraham. A question to ask ourselves: would we be as willing as Abraham to welcome as guests those who were complete strangers into our homes, living quarters, or monastery guesthouses? Would there be some danger in doing this today? Once again - the need for discernment. Let’s return for a moment to our reflections on the Rule of Benedict. In chapter 62, St. Benedict (a lay brother among other lay brothers) welcomed priests who came to join the monastery, but only if they submitted to the obedience required by the rule. He likewise openly received a visiting monk, “but if during his stay he has been found excessive in his demands or full of faults, he should certainly not be admitted as a member of the community” (61.6).

When I consider Benedictine hospitality, I like to extend this notion to the dialogues we initiate with those of other religious and spiritual backgrounds, especially with non-Christians. My work with the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (MID) has convinced me that dialogue itself is a form of hospitality. Whether we engage in the dialogue of life, action, religious experience, or theological exchange,² we are caught up in the movement of the Holy Spirit as an invitation to learn about the “Other.” Embracing difference is a challenge for us to grow, a challenge to our discernment of the subtle ways of detecting this movement of the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ in and through difference. Still, not everything in non-Christian religions is beneficial or comes from the Holy Spirit; we

² See the Vatican documents *Dialogue and Mission* (1984) and *Dialogue and Proclamation* (1991).

must use discernment here, too. As *Dominus Iesus* cautions us, “it cannot be overlooked that other rituals, insofar as they depend on superstitions or other errors (cf. 1 Cor 10,20-21), constitute an obstacle to salvation” (21).

Hospitality in the “dialogue of life” invites the “Other” to share stories of struggles, hardships, and joys. Thus do we share our common humanity, a humanity Jesus Christ shared with us in his incarnation and paschal mystery. Since God wills that all be saved (1 Tim 2,4), we never know, in offering hospitality, how we might be acting as instruments of Jesus Christ, guided by the Holy Spirit, gently leading others to a knowledge of God and to the free gift of salvation. St. Benedict himself says repeatedly in chapter 53 of his rule (vv. 1, 7, and 15) that we are to see Christ in the guest. Like Abraham in Genesis 18, we may unwittingly be welcoming angels, the very messengers of God, in offering hospitality to others.

Scripture tells us that “it is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20,35), and hospitality is something we usually think of as extending to others, but we are all recipients of hospitality at one time or another, too. In fact, in order for hospitality to work, we have to graciously receive what others give us. One of the blessings of being a Benedictine monk is that I have often been on the receiving end of extensions of hospitality myself from other monasteries when I have been a pilgrim traveler. This is an important aspect of the Benedictine tradition. Our Founding Father was aware of this and devoted his entire chapter 61 in the Rule of Benedict to this theme of “visiting monks.” When we come full circle in the cycle of hospitality - as both givers and receivers - we experience the fullness of charity and may truly be called peacemakers.

Throughout the centuries, Benedictine monasteries of men and women have been described as “powerhouses of prayer,” but I would like to think of them as “way stations of hospitality,” as well. Nor should we forget that our English word *hospital* comes from the same Latin root as *hospitality*. As sacred sites of healing, Benedictine monasteries should be places where pilgrims come to find refuge and make themselves whole again. Those contemporary conditions that I mentioned at the beginning - conflicts, wars, violence, and intolerance - are open wounds that would find some remedy in the healing balm of monastic hospitality. All of us have in some way and at some time been scarred by the evils of a society

lacking in love. Benedictine monasteries have traditionally been places where weary souls have found rest and renewal.

Saint John's Abbey has extended hospitality to the influx of Spanish-speaking migrants into Central Minnesota through the work of the Benedictine staff of Saint Boniface parish in nearby Cold Spring, Minnesota. Since 2004 the Casa Guadalupe Hispanic Ministries, originally inspired by the outstanding outreach of this church's parish ministry, has welcomed Spanish-speaking immigrants and has tried to serve their material and social needs as well as bolster their faith commitment. Our monastery's Justice and Peace Committee continues to recommend Sunday Mass collections for migrant causes. Saint John's Abbey has sponsored Chinese students for theological education in our graduate school and seminary, and I hosted and oversaw educational initiatives for a Tibetan Buddhist monk from Kopan Monastery in Kathmandu, Nepal, who lived with us for several months and returned to his monastery in East Asia after receiving training in health care and computer technology.

In sum, the Benedictine monastic tradition of hospitality calls us to embrace difference in a loving spirit of reverence. Although we may at present experience this difference as discord in our sorely troubled world, my hope is that Benedictine monasteries of men and women will, through their service of hospitality, point to a radical future where these differences will be celebrated and embraced in the Kingdom where the "light... from God" (Prol. 9) of love and mercy will be all in all.