

CSL Convocation - 14 June 2023
Sermon by Br. Anskar Nonken, OSB
For Feast of St. Benedict (11 July Transferred)

I speak to you in the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.
Amen

I came to my first convocation in May of 2012 as a guest. I was assigned a shepherd who was to make sure that I got where I needed to be when I needed to be there, help me navigate the Community's offices and services, and to answer any other questions I might have. I met my shepherd at the airport hotel before getting on the bus, and then we used the travel time on the bus to get to know each other a bit.

Now back in the day, all the room keys were just in the doors to the rooms. One just needed to go to the bulletin board at the entrance, find your room assignment next to your name, and proceed to room...which I did without trouble. I went and unpacked and headed back upstairs to meet my shepherd to head over to the gather/welcome meeting. Just one problem...he was nowhere to be found...he had disappeared. A search ensued, including going and looking in the room he was supposed to be in. But alas, no shepherd. Some other kind hearted companions made sure I got to the meeting. When we returned to the residence hall, there was my shepherd having arisen from his nap...that he had taken in the wrong room...which is why no one could find him.

In retrospect, perhaps that was a sign of what my future journey to monastic life profession would look like.

There were 5 people in my entry class. I was the last in my group to take annual vows as I added several years to my formation along the way. And then my solemn profession was delayed by a year due to the pandemic. However, I am the only member of my class that is still part of the Community. So, while it was hard watching those around me move forward in the process without delay, I am thankful that my journey had the peaks and valleys, and twists and turns that it did. I think it was God's way of making sure that things happened only when I was ready and not before. I needed a lot of shaping and molding (as any of my numerous formation guides could tell you).

And so today, as we celebrate the Feast of St. Benedict and as we get ready to witness our sister Marie Patricia taking her first annual vows, I want to spend the next few minutes reflecting on our readings this morning in light of the three fold Benedictine vows of stability, obedience and fidelity to monastic life. And how those vows have come to life in my life, in hope that maybe it will stir in you a memory of what they mean to you, or the ways in which their incorporation has touched your life.

Stability

At its most basic level the vow of stability for me is being committed to a way of living out my baptismal vows in a particular way as outlined in the Rule of Benedict as interpreted by this Community. It is a commitment that is to be lived out in this Community in particular not just any Benedictine community. But I think this vow also applies to other parts of my life as well. In it I am encouraged to seek stability in all aspects of my life (work, relationships, prayer, study and play).

I think this is the same sort of commitment that Jesus is talking about in this morning's Gospel. Notably, up to this point in the story of Jesus ministry, the disciples and the crowds following Him have been awed watching Him heal people, cast out demons, and open up the scripture. They must have been feeling pretty good about the guy they have chosen to follow. But now Jesus lets them know that things aren't always going to be all about miracles and joy. In the 2 verses immediately preceding the start of our reading, Jesus tells them that they must be willing to value following him more than their relationships with their families and, in fact, more than they love their own life. Saying to them that if they want to be his disciples then they must take up their own cross and follow him (Luke 14:26-27).

Jesus then draws comparisons to two initiatives: building a tower and undertaking a military campaign. In both of these stories the message is clear: you need to pause now and figure out if you are willing to pay the cost of discipleship before you sign up. Would be disciples must acknowledge at the outset that following Jesus may cost them everything, and they cannot know for sure what lies ahead.

Towards the end of the prologue, Benedict also speaks to the cost of entering into this way of life when he cautions that those who are signing up for "the school of the Lord's service" (RB, Prologue v45) that although he wishes not to make things overly burdensome, they may be faced with "a little strictness in order to amend faults and to safeguard love" (RB, Prologue v47). He then goes on to encourage them "Do not be daunted immediately by fear and run away from the road that leads to salvation. It is bound to be narrow at the outset. But as we progress in the way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God's commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love. Never swerving from his instructions, then, but faithfully observing his teaching in the monastery until death, we shall through patience share in the sufferings of Christ that we may deserve also to share in his kingdom" (RB, Prologue vs48-50).

I think his teaching regarding stability is clear here: If we want to reach our reward, we must be prepared to stick it out through the tough times. Of course for us who are cloistered in the heart, we know that our monastic calling requires further balance. All of us have other commitments also, whether that is to secular jobs, spouses, children, our churches or to all of those. Regardless, we entering this way of life are still called to give our whole selves to serving Christ but how we live that out must take into consideration all the different ways and people we are called to serve. Stability requires

that I have weighed the cost and determined that my life permits me to follow Jesus in this particular way with this community.

Obedience

The vow of obedience speaks to the way I respond from a place of love: first, to God; second, to the Superior who represents Christ in the community; and, third to all my brothers and sisters through whom Christ's light also shines. I don't believe obedience requires me to be in full agreement with all member of the Community, or decisions made by the Community. But it does mean that my response at all times should work towards the building up of the Community and its ability to shine Christ's light into the world. As Paul said in the letter to the Philippians, "Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world" (Phil 2:14-15). Perhaps this is a timely reminder as we get ready to select a new Superior tomorrow. Undoubtedly, there may be some who won't see their first choice elected. But once the Community, led by the Holy Spirit, has made a choice, I believe all of us are called to do all we can to support this person. When we took (or will take) our vows we promised to do just that.

Fidelity to Monastic Life

The vow of fidelity to monastic life to me is a commitment to keep my focus on those things that lead to God and away from those things that would lead me away from God. In practical terms that means doing those things I have committed in my monastic vocation to do: daily prayer and meditation, study of scripture, and continued formation. It is doing those things that, as the Psalmist said, will allow me to develop deep roots that are nourished by living water (Ps 1:3) so that I am able to withstand any disappointments or challenges that might come my way in this earthly life. It is not allowing myself to be distracted by worldly things.

Of course we know that we can do none of this on our own. It isn't as if saying the words make any of these vows an immediate reality in our lives. As we say in the rooms of recovery, we work for progress not perfection. Some days we will do better than others, and on those days, we give thanks to God for his grace and the gifts he has given us. When we don't do so well, we give thanks to God, and then ask Him to forgive us. And then we strive, with His help, to do better the next day.

I think there is a reason Benedict called it a "school for the Lord's service". He knew that it would be a lifelong journey that would only find its perfect end on the day we leave this earthly life and join with those who have gone before and now sit at the feet of Jesus.

And so today we give thanks for Father Benedict and for his rule, which offers wisdom, guidance, and direction for a clear path to serve Christ for those willing to make a commitment to a life of stability, obedience, and fidelity to monastic life. Amen.