

The Advice of St. Benedict

Benedict (480-547) lived in the sixth century in Italy during the disintegration of the Roman Empire. As a young man he sought the solitude of living in a cave where he underwent a deep religious experience. In time, with some disciples he came to found a monastery some eighty miles south of Rome. Benedict created a "little rule for beginners," which contained directions for all aspects of monastic life. Included in this rule is an explication of the qualities of the Abbot (Chapter 2). Listen carefully to what Benedict had to say some 1500 years ago and ponder how much might still be true today. This rule remains central to how Benedictine monasteries are governed and led in our time.

Qualities of the Abbot

To be worthy of the task of governing a monastery, the abbot must always remember what his title signifies and act as a superior should. He is believed to hold the place of Christ in the monastery, since he is addressed by a Title of Christ, as the Apostle indicates: You have received the spirit of adoption of sons by which we exclaim, Abba, father. (Rom 8:15). Therefore, the abbot must never teach or decree or command anything that would deviate from the Lord's instructions. On the contrary, everything he teaches and commands should, like the leaven of divine justice, permeate the minds of his disciples. Let the abbot always remember that at the fearful judgment of God, not only his teaching but also his disciples' obedience will come under scrutiny. The abbot must, therefore, be aware that the shepherd will bear the blame wherever the father of the household finds that the sheep have yielded no profit. Still, if he has faithfully shepherded a restive and disobedient flock, always striving to cure their unhealthy ways, it will be otherwise: the shepherd will be acquitted at the Lord's judgment. Then, like the Prophet, he may say to the Lord: I have not hidden your justice in my heart; I have proclaimed your truth and your salvation (Ps 39:11), but they spurned and rejected me (Isa 1:2; Ezek 20:27). Then at last the sheep that have rebelled against his care will be punished by the overwhelming power of death.

Furthermore, anyone who receives the name of abbot is to lead his disciples by a twofold teaching: he must point out to them all that is good and holy more by example than by words, proposing the commandments of the Lord to receptive disciples with words, but demonstrating God's instructions to the stubborn and dull by a living example. Again, if he teaches his disciples that something is not to be done, then neither must he do it, lest after preaching to others, he be found reprobate (1 Cor 9:27) and God some day call to him in his sin: How is it that you repeat my just commands and mouth my covenant when you hate discipline and toss my words behind you (Ps 49: 16-17)? And also this: How is it that you can't see a splinter in your brother's eye, and never notice the plank in your own (Matt 7:3)? The abbot should avoid all favoritism in the monastery. He is not to love one more than another unless he finds someone better in good action and obedience. A man born free is not to be given higher rank than a slave who becomes a monk, except for some other good reason. But the abbot is free, if he sees fit, to change anyone's rank as justice demands. Ordinarily, everyone is to keep to his regular place, because whether slave or free, we are all one in Christ (Gal 3:28, Eph 6:8) and share alike in bearing arms in the service of the one Lord, for God shows no partiality among persons (Rom 2:11). Only in this are we distinguished in his sight: if we are found better than others in good works and in humility.

Therefore, the abbot is to show equal love to everyone and apply the same discipline to all according to their merits.

In his teaching, the abbot should always observe the Apostle's recommendation, in which he says; Use argument, appeal, reproof (2 Tim 4:2). This means that he must vary with circumstances, threatening and coaxing by turns, stern as a taskmaster, devoted and tender as only a father can be. With the undisciplined and restless, he will use firm argument; with the obedient and docile and patient, he will appeal for greater virtue; but as for the negligent and disdainful, we charge him to use reproof and rebuke. He should not gloss over the sins of those who err, but cut them out while he can, as soon as they begin to sprout, remembering the fate of Eli, priest of Shilo (1 Sam 2:11-4:18). For upright and perceptive men, his first and second warnings should be verbal; but those who are evil or stubborn, arrogant or disobedient, he can curb only by blows or some other physical punishment at the first offense. It is written, Thy fool cannot be corrected with words (Prov 29:19); and again, Strike your son with a rod and you will free his soul from death (Prov 23:14). The abbot must always remember what he is and remember what he is called, aware that more will be expected of a man to whom more has been entrusted. He must know what a difficult and demanding burden he has undertaken; directing souls and serving a variety of temperaments, coaxing, reproving and encouraging them as appropriate. He must so accommodate and adapt himself to each one's character and intelligence that he will not only keep the flock entrusted to his care from dwindling, but will rejoice in the increase of a good flock. Above all, he must not show too great concern for the fleeting and temporal things of this world, neglecting or treating lightly the welfare of those entrusted to him. Rather, he should keep in mind that he has undertaken the care of souls for whom he must give an account. That he may not plead lack of resources as an excuse, he is to remember what is written: Seek first the Kingdom of God and his justice, and all these things will be given you as well. (Matt 6:33) and again, Those who fear him lack nothing. (Ps 33:10).

The abbot must know that anyone undertaking the charge of souls must be ready to account for them. Whatever the number of brothers he has in his care, let him realize that on judgment day he will surely have to submit a reckoning to the Lord for all their souls - and indeed for his own as well. In this way, while always fearful of the future examination of the shepherd about the sheep entrusted to him and careful about the state of others' accounts, he becomes concerned also about his own, and while helping others to amend by his warnings, he achieves the amendment of his own faults.