



HOLINESS OF HEART AND MIND: A BENEDICTINE PERSPECTIVE

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By way of introduction let me say that my best childhood friend was a Methodist—perhaps more in name than in practice, however. I dare say, he learned more about Catholicism than I about Methodism in our youthful conversations! Until my recent forays to the library and this present conference, my knowledge of the Wesleys and of Methodism was meager at best. I knew some of the great hymns, but little more. I am deeply grateful to Dr. Randy Maddox and to the speakers and participants in this present conference for the knowledge that has been given and the insights that have come.

In the matter of Benedictinism my knowledge is somewhat more adequate. I was fifteen years old when I first came under the influence of the Benedictine monks at Mount Angel Abbey in Oregon in the United States. I have been there now for more than forty years, and have been a professed member of that community of monks for thirty-six years. During these years I have been assigned, among various duties, the offices of junior master and novice master. Such positions involve teaching those who enter the monastery the “way,” the *Rule of St. Benedict*. The following reflections on “holiness of heart and mind,” then, are based on a study of the *Rule of Benedict* and the Benedictine tradition from the sixth century to the present, but also and equally they are based on my attempt through the years to understand, in a practical way, the principles of Benedict’s

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Rule, and to integrate his ideal for holiness into my own life and to help others to integrate that ideal into their lives.

The composer-compiler of the *Rule of Benedict* was a practical man and his legacy in that document known as the *Rule of Benedict* is a practical guide for those who seriously pursue the call to holiness. Benedict's program is not for an elitist group within the Christian body, but rather for ordinary people. On this very general level we find a true common ground between Benedict and John Wesley. The desire to build a plan, to offer a program, that leads the ordinary person to holiness—this was, it seems to me, in the heart of each of these men.

The term "holiness" is not to be found in the *Rule*, and yet the *Rule* deals exclusively with the reality that we now generally call "holiness"—the union with God even while here on earth and its expression in the way one thinks, speaks, and acts. A person, in the past and in the present, would in fact only be admitted into a Benedictine community if he desired to live by the *Rule* and thereby strive to live a holy life. Benedict presumes that one who comes to the monastery and asks to be accepted there is a man of faith in God and that he has come to the monastery, in Benedict's own words, "to seek God." In the chapter of the *Rule* on receiving new members into the community (ch. 58), Benedict says that the first concern must be whether or not this person "truly seeks God" (ch. 58:7). If he does "truly seek God," then Benedict offers him a program for this "seeking."

This little book of seventy-three chapters, the *Rule of Benedict*, appears at first glance (and perhaps even at tenth glance!) to be a complex document. I hope, in what follows, to show that Benedict's program for holiness is actually a very simple program. I also hope to indicate the compatibility between the mind of St. Benedict and the mind of John Wesley.

Benedict's program, when analyzed, involves four steps. The first step down this path to holiness is summed up in the word "listen"—the first word of the *Holy Rule*. This path toward holiness is a response—a response to God. For a lifetime, the monk's first obligation is always "to listen." He will listen—and listen to God—in the reading of the Scriptures, in the liturgy, in the *Rule*, in the tradition, in his abbot, in his reading, in his quiet prayer, in his fellow monks, and in his own heart. Only when he listens is he able to make the journey to holiness, for holiness is the end result of responding to the divine voice one has heard.

Actually, one can properly say that the journey on the path to holiness is itself holiness. The end result would be a holiness similar to Wesley's "Christian perfection." Let me here repeat the quotation with which Dr. Maddox concluded his paper:

Now, therefore, after ascending all these steps of humility, the monk will quickly arrive at that perfect love of God which casts out fear. Through this love, all that he once performed with dread, he will now begin to observe without effort, as though naturally, from habit, no longer out of fear of hell, but out of love for Christ, good habit and delight in virtue. All this the Lord will by the Holy Spirit graciously manifest in his workman now cleansed of vices and sins" (ch. 7:67-70).

But the way to the state of Christian perfection is a way of maturing, of growing, of developing over a period of time, as the quotation just cited indicates. This process itself can lead to a kind of confirmation of holiness, a state in which one habitually thinks, speaks, and acts in a holy way. In all of this, it is God who speaks through the various means, the ways, to holiness. God is always the initiator in holiness. The individual must respond, to be sure; he must be intimately involved in the process of becoming holy; he must live the *Rule*; he must "truly seek God." He must be active, not passive. His "yes" to the divine voice, his authentic personal cooperation—these are essential, without a doubt. Still, the movement toward holiness begins with God's initial grace, His call, and it is carried on with God's subsequent grace, as well as the monk's cooperation with both the initial and subsequent grace of God. In the *Rule's* final chapter Benedict says: "Then with Christ's help, keep this little rule that we have written for beginners. After that, you can set out for the loftier summits of the teaching and virtues we mentioned above, and under God's protection you will reach them" (ch. 73:8-9). Benedict's language is not theologically precise or specific, but he clearly indicates here that the monk will "keep this little rule" by grace, when he says "with Christ's help" he will do it. The phrase "with Christ's help" is not by any means a passing, unimportant statement. And when he refers to the "loftier summits," he again clearly shows the necessity of grace. He says that the monk will reach those "summits" "under God's protection." These are the final words of the *Holy Rule* and they portray gently, but clearly, that Benedict sees the way to holiness to be the work of God and the work of the monk. God will not coerce the monk to become holy; the monk must employ his own energies and determination in the process.

What actually is the response the monk gives to this listening? How does the follower of Benedict's way respond to the divine invitation? The answer to these questions is found in chapter seven of the *Holy Rule*, the chapter on humility. This chapter is the heart of Benedict's *Rule*. It is the center out of which flows all the rest of Benedict's admonitions for living a life of holiness. The monk's response to God's invitation to holiness is an interior attitude, an attitude that we call humility. As usual, Benedict does not define his term, but he describes, and in detail, the way to this essential virtue. One can rightly say that the monastic life is a lifetime of "doing"—of doing particular practices. These exterior practices, which really are Benedict's program for holiness, are in reality, however, worthless as a means of progress in holiness unless they flow out of this interior attitude. In fact, without humility, one simply would reject out of hand many of the practices prescribed by Benedict in his *Rule*. In his chapter on obedience (ch. 5) Benedict indicates the absolute necessity of this inner spirit of humility. He says:

If a disciple obeys grudgingly and grumbles, not only aloud but also in his heart, then, even though he carried out the order, his action will not be accepted with favor by God who sees that he is grumbling in his heart. He will have no reward for service of this kind; on the contrary, he will incur punishment for grumbling, unless he changes for the better and makes amends (ch. 5:17-19).

In John Wesley's terms, humility would be one of the foundational "tempers" or

"affections"—an inner motivating power or inclination that leads to exterior action. Humility is to be an "enduring disposition" for the monk. The monk who "listens carefully," who hears the divine voice, grows strong, with the passing of time, in this "temper," and as a result he comes to see his own relationship to God and to all other human beings as it really is. The foundational "temper" of humility frees him to live in truth, with no pretense, no false knowledge, no delusions about himself. It frees him from himself so that he can love—can love God, can love his fellow monks, can love others. This is a point to which we shall return later. For Benedict, after faith itself, nothing is as important as humility; no interior attitude is as influential for holiness as is humility.

In his chapter on obedience (ch. 5) St. Benedict says: "The first step of humility is unhesitating obedience, which comes naturally to those who cherish Christ above all else" (ch. 5:1-2). Obedience, then, is the third factor in Benedict's plan for holiness. These factors, we should note, are intimately connected with each other: God speaks; the monk listens; his listening leads him to an interior humility; this interior humility leads then naturally to exterior obedience.

Benedict begins the Prologue of the *Holy Rule* by counseling the one who seeks God to listen to advice a loving father is going to give to his son. Benedict counsels: "...welcome [this advice], and faithfully put it into practice" (Prol. 1). In other words, in the day-to-day, practical order, obey this rule. He continues: "The labor of obedience will bring you back to him from whom you drifted through the sloth of disobedience" (Prol. 2). The "disobedience" Benedict here refers to is sin. Like John Wesley, Benedict took the fact of sin seriously and his way to holiness makes sense only to those for whom sin is a strong reality. Holiness is, in fact, the replacement of sinfulness in a particular life, a particular person. Holiness doesn't exist in itself, but in a person who responds by humble obedience to God's call.

Benedict goes on, speaking in glowing terms, of the one who takes on obedience, and he shows its centrality to the whole schema of things when he says: "This message of mine is for you, then, if you are ready to give up your own will, once and for all, and armed with the strong and noble weapons of obedience to do battle for the true King, Christ the Lord" (Prol. 3). Obedience is clearly not the response of a cowering weakling; it is the response of one imbued with the strength of faith. The pursuit of holiness, even with its underpinning of divine grace, is a battle. The image Benedict uses is that of warfare. But Benedict would not have one intimidated by this war. We can see this from the tone of his statements. Obedience, precisely because it is given to God, assures success in the battle against the evil of sin.

In the Benedictine *schema* for holiness, obedience holds the place of honor—one might mention in passing, that is frequently and seriously challenged today in our age of emphatic belief in personal rights. For Benedict obedience is not personal discernment; it is a submission of one's will, of one's whole being, to another person, God's representative, the abbot, and to a way of living, the *Rule*. It is a submission made in faith and a submission that makes sense only because of faith. The monk believes the *Rule* to be a valid, concrete expression of the Gospel of Christ (Prol. 21) and he sees the abbot as the living embodiment of the *Rule* (ch. 64: 20). Benedict boldly asserts in chapter two that the abbot "is believed to hold the place of Christ in

the monastery" (ch. 2:2). A Benedictine is rightly said, then, to live "under a rule and an abbot"—and this is no small thing, let me assure you! But for the monk, this is the way to holiness.

It is important to take special note, in the quotation from the *Rule* cited above, when Benedict speaks of the monk's "unhesitating obedience." "Unhesitating obedience," seen in itself, can be a frightening reality, even an inhuman reality. What makes this kind of obedience possible, what makes it also essential in Benedict's plan for holiness of life, is found in the conclusion to the sentence: "...unhesitating obedience, which," he says, "comes naturally to those who cherish Christ above all else" (ch. 5:1-2). Benedict lived long before the "theologies" or "spiritualities" the later Christian centuries would produce. Benedict, for instance, has no specific "Christianity" in his *Rule*. Yet we find, in examining his *Rule*, an almost laser-beam focus on faith in Jesus Christ—and not just an intellectual faith in Jesus Christ—important as that is. In the words quoted, Benedict says that this kind of obedience will make sense to those who "cherish" Christ, who love Christ—and who love Him "above all else." This is a striking statement of faith, and it is a faith enlivened by that central "temper" for John Wesley—love. Once again, we see how well Benedict and Wesley agree with each other.

A careful search of the *Holy Rule* and the writings of John Wesley, I am convinced now, would produce several more significant parallels in their approach to Christian holiness of life. The sense of community, for instance, the importance of accountability within the community, regular prayer and fasting, the importance of the psalms, Benedict's chapter on the tools of good works—all these are areas where the minds of Benedict and Wesley find a meeting. Time to pursue these is not now at hand, so let me conclude with one final factor in Benedict's plan that is also central to Wesley's plan.

Regarding the importance of "affections" or "tempers," we can find in the *Rule* innumerable citations indicating Benedict's "moral psychology," to use the term employed by Dr. Maddox. The initial tone of the *Rule* is set in the prologue. These are the opening words of the prologue: "Listen, my son, to the master's instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart. This is advice from a father who loves you" (Prol. 1). One might very well expect a "rule" to summon or to command or to demand. Instead, Benedict, like a "loving father," speaks gently and tenderly, addressing a "son," and asking that this "son" listen with "the ear of his heart." What will attract the seeker to listen to Benedict and then follow the way to holiness that he is holding out? It is the heart as well as the mind, and Benedict knows this. Later in the Prologue we hear Benedict speaking in almost poetic terms about the "light" and the "voice" of God: "Let us open our eyes," he says, "to the light that comes from God and our ears to the voice from heaven that every day calls out" (Prol. 9). These are not logical or rational persuasive terms that Benedict uses, but rather wonderful images that appeal more to the desire of the heart than to the thought of the mind. And again, in the middle of the prologue, Benedict continues: "What, dear brothers, is more delightful than this voice of the Lord calling to us? See how the Lord in his love shows us the way of life" (Prol. 19-20). It is undoubtedly the winning over of the heart, of the affections, of the inner person, that will compel to action, that will move

a person to take up and live out this rule for holiness. At the prologue's conclusion Benedict urges on the one seeking God with these words: "...as we progress in this 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" (Prol. 49). We shall "run," he says; not mosey, or dawdle, or even just walk. We shall "run," and with enthusiasm! We shall do so, he says, with "our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love." These are words of joyful excitement! These are the words of one who is himself energized to action by love!

In a sense, Benedict would wonder what we are talking about when we speak of his "moral psychology." But he would know that he had to speak "to the heart," to "capture" the heart, if his, what he calls "way of life," were to be accepted and embraced fully. Love is central to Benedict. His *Rule* encourages love; his *Rule* demands love. The single point of his *Rule for Monks* is love. Listen to his splendid chapter seventy-two, the second-last chapter of the Rule.

Just as there is a wicked zeal of bitterness which separates from God and leads to hell, so there is a good zeal which separates from evil and leads to God and everlasting life. This, then, is the good zeal which monks must foster with fervent love: They should each try to show respect to the other (Rom. 12:10), supporting with the greatest patience one another's weaknesses of body or behavior, and earnestly competing in obedience to one another. No one is to pursue what he judges better for himself, but instead, what he judges better for someone else. To their fellow monks they show the pure love of brothers; to God, loving fear; to their abbot, unfeigned and humble love. Let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ, and may he bring us all together to everlasting life (ch. 72).

St. Benedict is not often referred to in terms of love. Obedience or humility are virtues more generally connected with him and his *Rule*. The golden thread that runs through the *Holy Rule*, however, is precisely this thread of love—love of God and love of one another. His *Rule* is a call to love and is a sure way for one to learn to live in love.

To LISTEN to the divine voice, then to respond to it with HUMBLE OBEDIENCE through the years converts the heart of the monk to LOVE. This is Benedict's "little" program for Christian holiness, and I think John Wesley would like it very much!

NOTES

All citations in this paper from Benedict's *Rule* are taken from: *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in English*, Timothy Fry, O.S.B., ed. (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1982).

