

tudes, the fruits of the Spirit and St Paul's hymn to charity in 1 Corinthians 13). Life together at perpetual close quarters soon shows us up to ourselves and to one another. Saints are either made or marred. The grace of repentance, a sense of humour and the ability to get up again and have another try, make it possible to carry on in faith or, as St Benedict says, even WITH JOY. The end in view is life together in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Such challenges, of course, have to be met and lived through in the Church at large as well. But in the monastic setting everything is intensified. It is taken on willingly and knowingly, and can in itself become a work and prayer for that oneness of heart and mind which we seek as Christians, and which is the prelude to the fulness of Unity that our Lord wills for us. Though we may not all be called to the monastic life, St Benedict's words to his monks and nuns can become our blueprint too:

. . . there is a good zeal which keeps us from sin and leads to God and everlasting life. Let monks and nuns therefore, exert this zeal with fervent love, recognising others to be of more importance than themselves (Romans 12:10). Let them most patiently endure one another's infirmities, whether of body or mind. Let them vie with one another in obedience. Let no-one follow what he or she thinks good for self, but rather what seems good for another. Let them cherish fraternal charity, love their abbot or abbess with sincere and humble affection, and prefer nothing whatever to Christ. And may he bring us all alike to life everlasting.

Rule of St Benedict, Chapter 72.

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*'That they all may  
be one'*



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**Life Together** - Benedictine pointers to unity.

There are three things St Benedict looks for in an aspiring monk or nun: a genuine search for union with God, a strong attraction to the daily round of liturgical and personal prayer, and a realistic willingness to accept all the demanding discipline involved. Community life is not a soft option, and, without these three undergirding dispositions to anchor the novice deep into God on the personal level, would be impossible.

It is the same in the Church at large. Before we can hope to live positively and fruitfully with one another in mature relationship, we must first be looking to God and seeking to grow in personal integrity and union with him in response to his grace. In reality, of course, the personal and corporate growth processes are going on simultaneously, which helps to account for some at least of the stresses and tensions in church life. We are all going at a different pace, not yet able to see things in the same way.

The individual aspect of the monastic life is in fact the bedrock. God's call to each is specific and the response of each is unique and deeply personal. The very name 'monk' reminds us of this: *monos* - Greek for 'alone', 'solitary'. This is a concept rich in implication, suggesting firstly the eremitic or solitary life-style of the first monks of the desert. Their aloneness involved a cutting off of all they held dear, a radical detachment from people and the things of the world. But there is a more positive side as well. *Monos* also implies THE ONE, THE HOLY - God alone. The monk and nun set out on a journey towards holiness, in order one day to attain unto God.

Naturally it doesn't follow that every monk or nun has to start off as a solitary, although this was actually how St Benedict himself began. Long experience taught him, however, that in reality the rigours of life in solitude are not for beginners but rather for well-seasoned brethren and sisters. Only after facing the challenge of life together, with all its demands, are the

majority of people ready to fight the powers of evil on their own, in battle against what St Benedict calls their evil thoughts and vices of the flesh.

Be that as it may, every monk or nun, like every believer, has to face up to this personal combat sooner or later. There is no other way through to salvation, for God's grace does not save us without our free co-operation. If we love him we will keep his commandments. "Be holy, for I am holy," he says.

We are powerless to do this of ourselves all the same, since it is by grace that we are saved, through faith, and that not of ourselves . . . (*cf Ephes. 5:8*) St Benedict makes this clear throughout his Rule. Right at the start he says that before beginning anything at all we must beg of God to bring it to fulfilment. The whole attitude of the monk or nun must be one of humility - they know that without God they are but bad and worthless labourers. Christ must become the centre of everything and he is to be loved and served above all else.

How necessary all these dispositions are in our prayer for unity and our relations with one another. Grounded in Christ, we have to be totally dependent on his grace, recognising our own poverty. We too will have to battle against the vices of pride, anger, jealousy, self-assertiveness and so on, in thought as well as action. The unity we aspire to goes hand in hand with our sanctification.

St Benedict's Rule legislates for the whole of life, for everything has to be made sacred. The daily round of prayer together in chapel and the times spent in personal prayer, meditation and spiritual reading are the frame-work holding all together. Here again we see a mingling of the individual and corporate. Monks and nuns gather together up to seven or eight times a day to worship God in the Eucharist and Offices. This is an immense privilege and also an exacting responsibility. St Benedict describes it as the *work* of God. Personal feelings and idiosyncrasies have to be sacrificed for the sake of the corporate offering, made as perfectly as possible to God, day in day out. It has been said that a monk or nun's work for Christian Unity begins with their neighbour in choir.

But this routine would easily become a dead, mechanical weight if it were only a matter of externalities. It is instead intended to be a heartfelt offering of worship and prayer. Mind and voice, St Benedict says, are to accord together. Thus each individual monk or nun seeks, through recol-

lected prayer of the heart, to offer the totality of self to God so that the corporate worship might be forged into a unity of praise. This is an ideal which has to be worked at and the rare moments when it is attained are not easily forgotten. Worship of this sort unifies and is itself a prayer that the Unity Christ wills for his Church might indeed be fully realised.

All the prayer and the varied activities of the rest of the day flow into and out of the corporate worship. Life is destined to become continual prayer. God's presence is to be recalled always. The rulings of monastic silence are meant to safeguard this, together with the regular and balanced rhythm of manual work, reading and study, personal prayer, eating and sleeping, recreation. It is a simple, family sort of life meant to have as few distractions as possible, though the unexpected not infrequently intervenes. Peace is the characteristic Benedictine motto but it is peace at a price.

St Benedict speaks of the hard and rugged ways that lead to God and urges newcomers not to fly in dismay from what at first must seem difficult. There is no easy way to holiness. Monks and nuns undertake to live according to the gospel counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience, having no personal possessions, no personal sexual relationships, and no independent choice about many of the things normally taken for granted in life. In addition, Benedictines take a vow of stability which grounds them in one place and ties them to one set of people usually for life. These things are embraced knowingly and willingly, for they are the well-tried ways that can lead us, beyond self-will and self-indulgence, to God.

But it is often enough the actual life in community that proves the greatest test. The benefits are immense but the price can be high. St Benedict reminds the abbot of the difficulties he will encounter in trying to adapt himself to a variety of temperaments and enjoins him to seek to hold all together impartially. He is to show equal love to all the members of the community, whatever their gifts or talents might or might not be, or whatever their previous status in the world. Individual strengths and weaknesses are to be taken into account, all the same, so that the strong have something to strive after and the weak nothing at which to take alarm.

If this is difficult for the abbot or abbess, it is equally so for everyone else. Every member of the community is seeking to grow into the likeness of Christ and that means living according to all those hard-to-come-by virtues like patience, meekness, gentleness, self-control, charity. (*cf The Beati-*