

Dear Friends,

For some years now I have lived in the parish of Ealing Abbey, and have come to know well the monastery and the life of the monks, who are following the way of St. Benedict, laid down in the 6th century in the little book known as his *Rule*.

I was able to join a parish visit to Italy a while ago to see places associated with him, including his birthplace in northern Italy, a typical small Italian town with a central square called Norcia.

There had been a Benedictine monastery here, which was revived in recent times by a group of largely American monks. In order to make an income they started brewing their own beer for sale, and very delicious it is! The town had suffered an earthquake just before our visit, when the abbey building was damaged. Then later a more serious earthquake destroyed the place completely. The monks are now reviving another disused religious house on a hillside outside the town, which should be more secure.

Another place we visited was the great monastery of Monte Cassino in the south, founded by Benedict himself, which likewise has been destroyed and rebuilt several times in the course of its history, the last time at the end of the Second World War when it was occupied by German forces and bombed by the allies.

In the Rule Benedict is insistent that the monks should work to support themselves (brewing beer, printing, making candles - whatever it may be) and it is the balance between work and prayer and the other aspects of human life which people find attractive in his way. It is a demanding calling, but not so demanding that it cannot be lived by anyone who wants to dedicate himself or herself to it. Benedict recognises, for instance, that people do have needs - for food and clothing - and makes provision for these, so that nobody need be distracted by lack of the necessities of life. A little detail which amuses many: he says that clearly alcoholic drink is not suitable for religious life, but these days nobody will agree that, so he allows that the monk be supplied with a pint of wine per day - that sounds a lot, but we are not sure what exact measurement he means. At any rate it is clear that he believes human needs should be met, so that the monks can be comfortable in their life together and so able to dedicate themselves to seeking God in prayer, worship and reflection.

You might think that the Rule of St. Benedict, the only one of his writings to come down to us, would be full of deep spiritual insights, but in fact it might seem disappointingly humdrum, mostly taken up as it is with practical suggestions for regulating the life of the community. It provides a framework in which people can live together harmoniously, and so be free to pursue their own journey of faith. Here is Benedict's wisdom, that we each have our own individual relationship with God and this can best be developed in community with others. Some people, a few, may be called to a totally individual life, but for the most part it is the daily interaction with others, the mutual love and respect as well as the irritations and problems we encounter, that train us in how to grow in relationship with each other and through with that to grow in relationship with God. As a writer on the Benedictine way put it, 'God is exceedingly concrete reality, and it is only in the concrete reality of my life as it is that I can meet him.'

We can see perhaps that the life of the monk is one specialised example of the vocation of all people, which is to know and love God in the reality of our lives as they truly are - and for most of us that will mean the life we have with other people. Christ himself interacted with others individually, but he gathered around him a *community* of followers, whom he could train together to carry on his work of making God known.

The Gospel reading for this third Sunday of Easter continues the story of the two disciples who met the risen Lord on the road to Emmaus. On arriving at their destination they had invited him to stay with them as it was getting late in the day, and it was when they shared a meal and he broke bread for them that they realised it was indeed the Jesus they had known and had seen die come back to life. Returning to Jerusalem and gathered with the others, Jesus appeared to them and again shared a meal: "'Have you anything here to eat?' he said, and they offered him a piece of grilled fish, which he took and ate before their eyes.'

It is, I believe, no accident that enjoying a meal together with others is at the heart of our religion, as it is of the Jewish faith of which we are descendants. It is not just a matter of providing ourselves with what we need in order to live, but it is the experience of food and drink drawing us together in enjoyment of the good things of life and the company of each other that gives us a foretaste of the joys of the kingdom to come. Benedict makes special provision for how meals are to be arranged in the monastery, each one serving the other and listening as they eat to improving reading.

The kingdom is often spoken of as a heavenly banquet to which all are invited. And of course as Christians we believe that the sacred meal of the Eucharist is one of the principal means given to us to know the resurrection life of the risen Christ - and it is something we can only celebrate with others.

On the third day, the day of new life, Christ was present at a wedding feast in Cana. When the wine ran out (how can you celebrate a wedding without wine?) he provided a vast quantity of first-class wine. The wedding feast is perhaps one of the best images of what God intends for his human children, for as a wise rabbi put it,

*When you come to the judgment seat  
God will have only question to put to you,  
Did you enjoy my creation?*

Wishing you every blessing in this Easter season, Fr. Robin

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