

Monastic Obedience: A Matter of Faith, A Response of Love
Teaching: Sister Karen Joseph

Obedience is a difficult topic to address. As Jane Tomaine said at the beginning of this chapter, “This may very well be the least popular chapter in the book. Who wants to obey?” How true! Yet, we must pursue it as St. Benedict places a lot on this theme.

Listening and ongoing dialogue are important between ourselves and others; they are also imperative in our relationships with one another. And we know the value that Benedict places on **MUTUAL OBEDIENCE** (RB 71). Being raised in a country with a highly individualistic culture where *personalism approaches pathology*, and independence is raised to an art form, this concept of mutual obedience becomes a counter-cultural challenge. And, in addition to the influence of our culture, we are all too familiar with that something within ourselves which impedes our open listening to and learning from others - that which the ancient monastics called *"self-will"*. If I am not able to tame my egotistic desires, my obstinate self-will, I have already erected a wall, preventing my openness to others. One of the fathers of the desert is quoted as saying that *"self-will is like a brass wall against God, (and against the neighbor)."* Little wonder that Benedict tells us to *"hate the urgings of self-will"* (RB 4:60). Recall his description of the "most detestable kind of monastics, the sarabaites" (RB 1:8, 9): *"Their law is what they like to do, whatever strikes their fancy. Anything they believe in and choose, they call holy; anything they dislike, they consider forbidden."* This description is presented as a stark contrast to the obedience and *open listening* that characterize the monastic cenobites/Benedictine Spirituality.

The old books pictured obedience as very top-heavy, and newer books sometimes consider it a matter of consensus or total "mutuality." Somewhere in between is the Benedictine way, with a basis in RB Ch. 5 (Obedience) and 68 (On Impossible Tasks). Most importantly, monastic obedience is a *matter of faith*. Everyone in our world has to be obedient to something or someone. There are laws to which we are subject, social demands, employers, cultural norms. We go through life being obedient, and often not realizing that obedience is a part of everyday existence. But *"monastic obedience"* is something different. It is chosen. It is deliberate. Hence, it frees us! It is, or needs to be, accomplished in faith and with the "love that impels" (RB 5:10).

Practically every chapter of the RB speaks of or alludes to obedience in some way. It is vital to Benedictine identity, so we need to address it. The RB loses no time in bringing the topic to our attention. The first word of the Prologue, **LISTEN**, sets the scene. Prior to and essential to obedience is the *art of listening*. In its ideal form, we who seek God have the guarantee that God will be found if we *listen* with open minds and hearts to the Divine message that comes to us through human mediators. Then having received this guidance, in a spirit of faith, we respond with love and put it into action. Our response of love is our obedience. Often it may be difficult, and Benedict readily acknowledges this. It demands work, the "*labor of obedience*." But to fail in that labor is to drift into the "inertia/sloth" of disobedience, a laxity with which most of us are familiar. And we have also known this to be a depressing experience because it leads us away from God. Perhaps our very laziness is one of our biggest hurdles to be faced.

We all *listened* readily to God's voice when we made our decision to enter into a marriage, into a particular work/ministry/profession or Benedictine Oblate Oblation. That was obedience, and for most of us the struggle to respond fully, to be faithful, has been part of our continuing growth. At different times in our lives we have faced a need to *listen* again, now even more intently, in order to renew our deliberate choice to respond in faith and love. The first call was usually enthusiastic, clear and direct. Subsequent calls are not always so clear. After all, when God speaks to us through human mediators, we are not always so certain that the prioress/spouse/boss is really channeling God's will to us. We are "smart enough" to know how they came to their decision. The waters of the channel are muddied with others' counsel and opinions, and those others may not seem especially qualified to channel God's will. They might not know the whole picture (we may be thinking). They might have their own agendas (we may suspect). They might not understand what I want and why. And yet, the prioress/spouse/boss listens to the others and, sometimes does not seem to be hearing me. At such times, obedience does indeed become a "labor." And it is at this point also that Benedict moves away from any concept of the ancient "blind obedience."

In fairness to my spouse, my boss, my prioress and to myself, I must tell him/her my view of the matter. I am encouraged in RB 68 to let her know that I consider it difficult to accept her determination as from God. And the other person, my spouse, or my prioress, is to listen to me also if they are to be obedient. The final call is God's, and can only be determined when the Spirit speaks through both of us, when the conversation is

honest, open and simple (no hidden agendas). If, after my presentation and their gentle listening, their decision is unchanged, then there is only my decision in faith to obey in love, trusting in God's help (RB 68:5). This entire chapter, appended by St. Benedict, softens that concept of absolute obedience set forth in RB 5. My theory is that these final chapters of Benedict's Rule were written through the influence of St. Scholastica. I am not sure that scholars would agree. But, in my opinion, these chapters bear the mark of a woman's touch!

Ideally, monastic obedience is always practiced in this context of open reliance on the Holy Spirit speaking through both people involved, for us: Prioress and sister, spouses, employers and employees. But there will be other times when obedience is required ***"under difficult, unfavorable or even unjust conditions ... and our hearts quietly embrace the suffering involved"*** (RB 7:35). Benedict calls this the fourth degree of humility. In our monastic situation, superiors are elected, but as we all know, they are not immediately, or sometimes ever, imbued with the totality of virtues. They remain as weak as the rest of us. Benedict even acknowledges this fact but remains uncompromising in the obedience expected of monastics, (RB 4:61) using the words of Scripture itself to bolster his expectation: ***"Obey the orders of the prioress unreservedly, even if her own conduct - which God forbid - be at odds with what she says. Remember the teachings of the Holy One: 'Do what they say, not what they do.' "(Mt.23:3)*** [cf. RB 2:2 ("She is ***believed*** to hold the place of Christ"; RB 28 (Those Who Refuse to Amend) "Let the ***faithless*** one depart")] **Obedience is a matter of faith.** And those of us whose obedience has been tested in adverse and unwelcome situations have known our reliance on the strength of faith. Probably we have even come to discover that God can indeed write straight with crooked lines. (ex. Benita: when things turned out unexpectedly well/new learning)

We are not a law unto ourselves. As Christians, as Benedictine Oblates and monastics, we must make decisions and choices, only after having carefully considered their effects on others. We must **care** about other people and be sensitive to how our life and choices impact them. In a society where most people build themselves up by tearing others down, our monastic spirituality turns the world upside down. Monastic spirituality says we honor and reverence one another. We avoid "winner and loser" situations but work to create win/win outcomes. Yes, in the mind and heart of Benedict we *ble*ss one another with our **listening** and **responding**

presence. *"Obedience is a BLESSING to be shown by all, not only to the prioress, but also to one another..."* (RB 71:1) So we can speak of the **"labor"** of obedience, the **"suffering"** of obedience and the **"blessing"** of obedience. In our life experiences we reach across boundaries of differences in our diverse personalities, we listen with openness and respect to each other, and we believe in the wisdom and goodness of each person, giving each the benefit of the doubt; not "overly suspicious". Is it too much to hope that our fragmented, competitive, and self-serving world will experience some healing through the "blessing" of our obedience? Obedience has a rippling effect.

Benedict understood that we need the wisdom of one another. I like to think of Benedict's chapter on Mutual Obedience as a chapter on sharing our wisdom. Or perhaps, more profoundly, **the art of midwifery**, mid-birthing. St. Paul describes the yearning for God in terms of the labor pains of a woman about to give birth:

"We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies"

(Rom. 8:22-23)

Monasticism is a process; Benedictine spirituality is a process. Coming to full union with God is a process - a yearning, a groaning. And the truth is, whether we like it or not, we need one another to grow in this process. We need to be **"midwives"** to one another by sharing our wisdom, by being humble enough to ask for and accept the wisdom of one another, by being willing to ***listen***. The literal meaning of the word mid-wife is **"with-woman."** That is, the person who is with the birth-giver ... someone who is willing to assist another from her own experience of giving birth, of bringing forth new life. A loving presence, male or female, is a powerful support during any struggles. (ex. Benita=midwife)

I think this image is a good one because obedience can be one of our most demanding virtues, sometimes associated with our most painful experiences in community life, family or parish.

In these situations our mutual listening and responding in faith and love has been and will be able to triumph over the suffering. Even Jesus, as we remember, *"learned obedience through what he suffered."* We have also learned that, equal to the pain has been the growthful moment of being *"born anew."* I believe we call this the Paschal Mystery: Life/suffering, death and resurrection. But this is usually only perceived and acknowledged in retrospect! At the time of the experience it doesn't feel very "life-giving." Seeking the wise counsel of another (prioress, spiritual director, and friend) can be a **"mid-wife-ing"** moment, the blessing of obedience.

In the latter part of Chapter 71, "On Mutual Obedience", Benedict refers to relationships that are broken or ruptured, of misunderstanding. (Read RB 71:6-8) Benedict reminds us that stand-offs, pouting, rejection, external alienation are not the Benedictine way...*"Then and there, without delay, fall down on the ground at the other's feet to make satisfaction, and lie there until the disturbance is calmed by a blessing"* (RB 71:8). In the heart and mind of Benedict, it is not a question of right and wrong, who is offended and who is sorry, **BUT**, who is to apologize and who is to forgive. Quickly. Immediately. Now. (cf... Fr. Kenneth: Forgiveness is a process)

CONCLUSION:

As I said at the beginning of this conference, I realized that it is a very difficult topic, not very popular. After all, it is one of the most distinguishing marks of Benedictine, particularly in relationship to apostolic or evangelical communities. Benedictines have their own particular expression of obedience, especially in relationship to the prioress. Monastic obedience is a Holy Listening on everyone's part, husband and wife, prioress and sister, young and old, new members and seasoned members. We are all in a posture of listening every day of our lives, in little ways and in more significant ways from time to time. The more significant listening moments may also be "mid-birthing" opportunities where our shared wisdom and mutual obedience bring new life to one another, to our families, our workplace, and our neighborhood and to our community as a whole.

Always, in all ways, those who follow Benedictine spirituality consider the good of the whole in our decisions and choices. Allowing teachers to teach, mentors to mentor, friends to challenge, prioresses to encourage, spouses to be honest can mean new life, and enable good zeal to prosper in families and community. Lethargy, complacency and grumbling are not becoming to Benedictines. Benedictine obedience is holy listening because it leads to God. *"The first step of humility is unhesitating obedience, which comes naturally to those who cherish Christ*

above all" (RB S: 1). After all, this is a matter of faith! And a response of love! Relying on the Holy Spirit, may we practice **unhesitating** obedience, even "*earnestly competing in obedience to one another" (RB 72:6)* and cherishing Christ above all!