

Rule of Benedict 5: Obedience

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If I were to ask you what you love about obedience, your first response just might be to scoff. Love obedience?! It isn't always the most pleasant aspect of monastic living. However, were I to ask why we profess obedience, you might be able to cite a few more positive reasons: Obedience brings order to a community. It is something we do out of love. It helps form us into more Christ-like people. It's about listening to the needs to our community and the people around us. It may not be easy, but it is valuable.

I invite you to read and reflect on RB 5, and then to think about what the chapter has in common with the early Christological hymn from Philippians 2:5-11:

Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus, Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bend, of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

In both of these texts, we hear themes of humility, trusting in God, and not holding on to one's own status. Ultimately we aim to be obedient because Christ himself was obedient. He trusted in God the Father, and out of his obedience, redemption was made possible. In this juxtaposition, we thus can talk about obedience in terms of relationship with God, relationship with others, and relationship with oneself. Obedience a baptismal call of all Christians, and monastic obedience finds its meaning in this larger context (Rees, et al, 189).

Context: Major Sources

When seeking the meaning of a text, it is good to start with context, then to look to content, and then to see what meaning emerges. RB 5 has for its major source the *Rule of the Master* (RM), a "fourth generation rule," written about 530 CE, per Adalbert de Vogüé. The *Rule of Benedict*, by contrast, is a "fifth generation" rule, probably written between 530 and 560. Some scholars think the RB might possibly have been written by an older, wiser, Benedict redacting what he wrote in the RM as a younger, more idealistic man. In any case, RB 5 parallels RM 7, keeping some aspects from the RM, but omitting a lot, removing large sections that were redundant or had questionable theology. Benedict also brings in higher sense of the glory of God. His major emphasis here is on unswerving obedience to a superior who mediates the will of God. It is important to note that RB 68 (Impossible Tasks) and 71 (Mutual Obedience) balance this chapter, and there is no RM parallel for these; thus they represent a softening influence clearly from Benedict himself.

When we look at the sources from the *Rule of the Master*, we find great influence from Cassian, Pachomius, Sulpicius Severus, Augustine, and Cyprian, particularly Cassian's *Conferences* and *Institutes*, to which Benedict directs the attention of the ambitious monastic toward the end of the Rule. RB 5 makes several Scripture citations, including several from St. Benedict's favorite books: Matthew, Psalms, Luke, and 2 Corinthians. These Scripture verses provide structure to entire chapter.

What we see when we look at some of the early sources alongside what we have in RB 5, we begin to get a sense of different monastic cultures being brought together in an interesting mix (Terrence Kardong, *The Benedictines*, 73 [Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1988]). While Pachomius and Basil wrote for cenobites, and focus on fulfilling God's will in community, Cassian gives us the culture of the desert tradition, in which one would attach oneself in strict obedience to a chosen elder, learn virtue and the ways of God, and eventually become an independent hermit oneself, to whom others would go for direction. Recall how RB 1 tells us of the different kinds of monks, where cenobites may eventually become good enough to become hermits, and do "single-handed combat" with the devil. When this desert approach is taken from Cassian and put into a more communal context by the *Rule of the Master*, it creates a completely different culture: monks now are to be supervised and strictly obedient forever, rather than with an eye toward their own eventual independence.

The RM in some ways promotes a disturbing abdication of responsibility; the monk is to obey no matter what, and the abbot is held responsible at the judgment. As Kardong notes, in RB 5, Benedict softens the doctrine but not theme: the disciples is to obey immediately as "grateful response to God," not to resist with murmuring (74). The abbot is the main locus of authority, and holds place of Christ (RB 2.2); as we hear repeated more than once, "Whoever listens to you, listens to me" (Lk 10:16). Yet the RB does offer some balance to the abbot's authority, as noted in RB 2.1, and calls for the monk to be obedient to others, too (RB 71). In the *Rule of Benedict*, obedience is always about discerning God's will, which today means we also listen to the Church's interpretation of the Bible and teaching (Kardong, 76).

Context within the Rule

When we look at the context of RB 5 within the *Rule* itself, we can consider the order of chapters around this one and note the topics addressed:

- Ch. 1 Kinds of Monks
- Ch. 2 The Abbot
- Ch. 3 Calling the Brothers for Counsel
- Ch. 4 Tools for Good Works
- Ch. 5 Obedience – note v. 1: "1st step of humility = unhesitating obedience"
- Ch. 6 Restraint of Speech
- Ch. 7 Humility – note v. 10: "1st step of humility = fear of God before one's eyes"
- Ch. 9 Liturgy...

Thus we see that RB 5 builds off of the context established about *cenobites* being under a *superior*, further developing some aspects of *Tools for Good Works* and helping us to understand *silence* and *humility*. Obedience is one of the tools of good works, but then it gets its own chapter, along with humility and several others. Obedience and humility are both emphasized and interrelated in RB: each has its own chapter, but each is mentioned elsewhere as well. A good structural analysis of how

the verses of the chapter are arranged could also show us some important themes, but I'll pass over that exercise today.

Content and Meaning

Moving on to assessment of the content of RB 5, we can see that St. Benedict uses repetition to emphasize several important concepts. First is the idea of hearing or listening. Obedience, as we have come to know, comes from the Latin *ob audire*, to listen or hear. This is a huge theme throughout the *Rule*, from the very first word of the Prologue. In RB 5, the emphasis is on the need for the disciple to “hear” the voice of God through the will of the superior. As gets quoted twice within this chapter, “Whoever listens to you, listens to me” (Lk 10:16); the disciples is to follow the “voice of authority.”

A second main theme in this chapter is the idea of obedience that is immediate, ready, swift. We hear that obedience is to be “unhesitating.” Benedict quotes Psalm 18:34 as a model: “No sooner did he hear than he obeyed me.” Good disciples “immediately put aside their own concerns... leaving whatever’s in hand “unfinished.” They take up the “ready step of obedience.” When a superior gives a direction, the disciples responds: “almost at the same moment, then... both actions together are swiftly completed as one.” The obedience is “not cringing or sluggish or half-hearted.”

If a monastic does not pause before responding, it is because he or she lives the third main theme of this chapter, to lay down or abandon one’s own will. Rather than one’s own direction, they “carry out the superior’s order,” “put aside their own concerns, abandon their own will, and lay down whatever they have in hand, leaving it unfinished.” They are willing to “take the narrow road... no longer liv[ing] by their own judgment, giving in to their whims and appetites; rather they walk according to another’s decisions and directions, choosing... to have an abbot over them.” In this way, the monastics follow the example of Jesus. They “conform to the saying of the Lord, ‘I have come not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me’ (Jn 6:38).” Their obedience is “free from any grumbling or any reaction of unwillingness.”

The chapter indicates that we may have different motivations for being obedient. First, and most important, is the love of Christ, which “comes naturally to those who cherish Christ above all.” As St. Benedict notes, “it is love that impels them...” Another motive for obedience is fear of the punishment of hell: “because of the holy service they have professed [duty], or because of dread of hell.” When addressing the kind of willingness a disciple ought to have, we hear, “he will incur punishment for grumbling, unless he changes for the better and makes amends.” Another, more positive motive is the aim for heaven, as we hear of people being obedient, “for the glory of everlasting life,” “to pursue everlasting life.”

All of this can lead us to consider: What motivates us to be obedient? Are we trying to be like Christ? Are we operating out of fear of repercussions if we aren’t? Do we think we’ll get a reward? Other motives for obedience could be more mundane. Perhaps we have a simple desire for order. Perhaps it takes too much trouble to decide for oneself. Perhaps we’re just doing what we’ve always done. Whatever the reason, it is important to be aware of why we are (or are not!) obedient. In the modern era, people tend to be suspicious of obedience. Certainly many have a fear of curtailing one’s “freedom,” and history has taught us to fear abuses of obedience to authority, as Adolf Eichmann and others can attest. This has led to some desire to shift the monastic model to some more collegial practices. It is important to be obedient for good reasons, rather than out of desire to escape responsibility.

In Summary

As we look at RB 5, we can see that Benedict considers obedience to be a blessing. In our own experience, we know that despite its challenges, obedience can be a really good thing. Obedience is part of recognizing that our own judgment often leads us astray on whims. It is part of becoming like Christ.

Obedience given to superiors can express obedience given to God (Lk 10:16). It can be a way to God (RB 71). Yet what has to be going on with our hearts in order for our obedience to be something worth giving to God? When we pray the "Our Father," rather than praying that our own name be exalted, or our own will be done, or our own kingdom come, we pray to God: "Hallowed be *thy* name. *Thy* will be done. *Thy* kingdom come." This prayer that we pray so often is fundamentally about giving up one's own will and trusting God's. This may be a difficult thing to mean, but aiming toward it is part of basic Christian practice.

One important issue is taking stock of where our obedience is directed. In contrast with secular leaders, who may have dubious intentions, within the RB, obedience is given to a superior who also follows the Rule (RB 3.5). Benedict sets an ideal for the superior to be someone of highest virtue.

He also addresses the possible failures of leaders: the disciple is not to obey in blindness, but to say something if a task is impossible. As we see in RB 64.5, if a community conspires to elect a wicked abbot, the local Christians are to step in and do something. At the same time, the *Rule's* call for obedience is a challenge: can we believe that God is using the people and situations right around us to lead us to holiness? Note again how RB 68 (Impossible tasks) and RB 71 (mutual obedience) balance RB 5. It seems that RB 5 is fundamentally about reducing one's ego, while these other chapters are about developing the ability to find and respond to God in whatever fashion God may ask something of us. We need both of these aspects of obedience, but we have to start with giving up always getting our own way. This is hard. It takes a lot of trust to believe that the world will be okay if I'm not the sole one in control of everything. In all of this, we also come to see that love has to be the basis of obedience or it becomes a caricature. Rather than being an excuse to be infantile or irresponsible for our actions, ultimately obedience should be a gift of love we give to God.