

the rule of benedict:  
you're part of something bigger



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Homily for Feast of St Benedict

I've had this conversation with several folks recently about a little kernel of wisdom that has become very important to me. In some ways it's the reason I get up in the morning and get about my day. But I notice that it's a piece of wisdom I don't hear a lot of meditation teachers talk about. And the piece of wisdom is this: "You're part of something bigger." Just that simple! You're part of something bigger. On the one hand, it makes life simpler because that means I don't have to understand everything; I don't have to have all the answers. I just do my part and trust that I am part of a bigger picture, a bigger plan of which I may not see the full scope. On the other hand, it sets the bar higher, because I have to think of something or someone beside myself. I'm part of something bigger.

Where I got that little piece of wisdom was from the five truths that Richard Rohr gives as a distillation of the main insights that a young man is supposed to learn during the rite of initiation into manhood: "Life is hard. You're going to die. You're not as important as you think you are. You are not in control." Those are the first four. And then comes the one that really stayed with me these past almost twenty years: *Your life is not about you*. Richard says that this is the essential and summary experience of the rite of initiation for a young man, the main thing he has to learn at some point:

You must know that you are a part of something and somebody bigger than yourself. Your life is not about you; it is about God. Henceforward, the entire human experience takes on a dramatically different character. We call it holiness.<sup>[1]</sup>

One of the folks I was speaking to about this is a friend of mine, a wise woman who is recently retired after having been a teacher for almost 40 years. I told her how often young men just can't hear this. And she said to me that she thought this generation cannot access the humility to accept the fact that their life is not about

them, because everything in their world mitigates against that. I think she may have been a little hard on “this generation.” This is a perennial problem for us human beings (it certainly was for me), but I would concur that it is even harder for young people nowadays to reach this insight, even those who are pursuing a spiritual path, because so many of the spiritual paths in contemporary popular culture are so heavily influenced by the self-help movement, and involved in kind of remedial self-esteem work. As David Brooks put it, popular spirituality often has a tendency to begin with the self and end with the self; it “begins with self-investigation and ends in self-fulfillment” (even though one of the universals of the spiritual path that I have discovered is the common theme of getting beyond the self!).

Brooks is writing about a series of historical figures that he thinks display great character. (In this particular chapter he’s writing about Victor Frankl, the Viennese Jewish psychiatrist who spent years in the Nazi concentration camp.) According to Brooks the road to character lies in asking, “What does life want from me? What are my circumstances calling me to do? In this scheme of things,” he says,

... we don’t create our lives; we are summoned by life.... This perspective begins not within the autonomous self, but with the concrete circumstances in which you happen to be embedded. This perspective begins with an awareness that the world existed long before you and will last long after you, and that in the brief span of your life you have been thrown by fate, by history, by chance, by evolution, or by God into a specific place with specific problems and needs. Your job is to figure certain things out: What does this environment need in order to be made whole? What is it that needs repair? What tasks are lying around waiting to be performed?<sup>[ii]</sup>

I think he goes a little too far on the other side to make his point. Self-investigation is vitally important, as is self-fulfillment. What I would add, however, is that self-investigation has to include investigation of the world around me too, the world and the people of which I am a part. And self-fulfillment can actually never be reached until we realize that we're part of something bigger.<sup>[iii]</sup> That too is our self in some way. We're not impermeable membranes; we are part of an ecosystem. Enter the Rule of Saint Benedict. From one perspective you could say that Benedict is always reminding us that we are part of something bigger. It's instructive that the Rule starts out with the word *Obsculta*—Listen! Not to say that it's necessarily something *outside* of us, but at least that something *beyond* us is calling us: the voice of God. And *if today you hear that voice, do not harden your heart!* And then immediately (still in the Prologue) Benedict speaks of “the labor of obedience.” *Oboedire*—to go in the direction of what has been heard. I'm back to what my friend said about people needing humility to accept and realize that their life is not about them; that they are a part of something bigger. When she said that, I thought to myself, “That's it; that's exactly what a monk is supposed to learn—the humility to go in the direction of that voice that calls from beyond.

We had a series of conferences on what I was calling the “universal evangelical principles” of the Rule, trying to get to the core of the Rule, its spiritual teaching, beyond how many psalms to recite, or the horarium, or how much wine and what kind of clothes. We had at least two different lists of Benedictine values that we looked at which included, obviously, the awareness of God and the primacy of God; respect for persons in a communal life; love for the *Opus Dei*; the dignity of work, the value of hospitality and stewardship; listening, moderation, stability, silence and simplicity; the love of learning and the love of beauty. These are all marvelous traits and

values. But I keep coming back over and over again to these two that go together and strike me as *the* fundamental values of the Rule: humility and obedience which Benedict presents as an antidote to presumption, vainglory, and selfishness.<sup>[iv]</sup>

Obedience to the Rule, to any rule, to following a common observance, isn't about a bunch of staid old precepts nor about slavish scrupulosity: it's about being part of an ancient tradition and practice. And it requires humility to admit that you're part of something bigger. Obedience to the abbot (or prior) is not just about obedience to the abbot (or prior): it's about obedience to Christ. This is why Romuald tells the hermit Venerio that if he is carrying the cross of Christ he should go and submit himself to his abbot, and then go back and live his eremitical life. You're part of something bigger! (One of the members of the Sangha reminded me recently how he had heard Alessandro tell me in front of everybody in his homily when I was installed as prior that my job too was to be obedient—to the community!) Even mutual obedience, which is so central to Benedict's teaching—maybe even the very *core* of it—, isn't just about the person in front of you. That person also represents the whole Body of Christ and the whole mystery of the Church. Your life is not just about you! You're part of something bigger. You belong to each other.

We are, you are, I am, part of something bigger: a community, a congregation, an order, a Church, a tradition; not to mention a place, a diocese, a state, a country, until that circle expands to realize being part of a lineage of spiritual seekers everywhere and from all time. As our own Constitutions point out at the very beginning, we are part of humanity's quest for the Absolute in various religious traditions that gave rise to expressions of monastic life long before the coming of Christ. We are part of the human race, and so, as

*Gaudium et Spes* articulates so beautifully in its opening lines: “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.” Or to paraphrase Thomas Merton, to look out at other people, even on a crowded, noisy street in the middle of a city, and realize that they are mine and I am theirs, that we cannot be alien to one another even if we are total strangers. It’s like waking from a dream of separateness. I’m part of something bigger, which I must obey. Is this too what Benedict intuits when at the end of his life he has a vision in which he sees the whole world in a single ray of light?

One of the marvelous things about our Camaldolese tradition is our wonderful focus on the individual, and along with that the special focus on the solitude of the cell, especially in the hermitage. Without giving any of that away, Romuald left us something that ensures that we stay grounded and connected, the Rule, which is always reminding us that we are part of something bigger—the whole Body of Christ, the fullness of the one who fills all in all. Let’s let Benedict remind us today to *obsculta*—to listen and then *oboedire*—go in the direction of what we’ve heard, the voice of God sounding through the church, our community, my brother or sister right next to me, as well as the whole world around us.

cyprian, 11 july 17

[i] Richard Rohr, “Boys to Men: Rediscovering the Rites of Passage for our Time.” *Sojourners*, May-June, 1998, 21.

[ii] David Brooks, *The Road to Character*, 22.

[iii] I must say, Baba Hari Das, the guru who founded Mount Madonna Center, is a great example of this. Among his 19 Rules for Self-Development are “expressing love and kindness in words and actions in dealing with others; expressing compassion in our actions toward those who are suffering physically or emotionally; keeping busy with selfless service; being humble and giving respect to others; performing our duties towards your family, society and country with pure and selfless intent.” These are exercised for *self*-development!

[iv] For example, though Benedict provides for and permits some private initiative when it comes to austerities, especially during Lent, he is not a big fan of heroic feats of asceticism. But this famous moderation of Benedict isn’t a watered down asceticism. It’s that Benedict’s emphasis is on the mortification of the will more than mortification of the body, and so-called monastic perfection, monastic asceticism, is based on humility and obedience, which manifest themselves as patience, generosity, love and service within the community. In this way of thinking, following the common rule isn’t mediocrity; it’s humility. As Don Benedetto wrote (which I keep coming back to), it may be only a rule for beginners, but until we get those things right we shouldn’t be presuming to climb the stairway to heaven.