

Part Six
Community: Bringing Us Altogether to Everlasting Life



“Then the novice prostrates herself/himself at the feet of each member to ask her/his prayers, and from that very day s/he is to be counted as one of the community.”

- RB 58:23

“Let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ,
and my Christ bring us all together to everlasting life.”

- RB 72:11-12

“This then, is the good zeal which members must foster with fervent love: They should each try to be the first to show respect to the other (Rom. 12:10), supporting with the greatest patience one another’s weaknesses of body or behavior...” - RB 72:2-4

Trying to find “community” in the Rule of Benedict is like asking fish to find water. There is no special chapter on community, no clear explanation of the role of community in the life of the monastic. And yet for Benedict community is the means by which we come to know God. The Benedictine way is not a solitary journey. We cannot progress in the spiritual journey as long as we think we can “go it alone.”

In fact Benedict has nothing but scorn for those who attempt to lead a spiritual life without the support and discipline of a community. “...there are the monastics

called gyrovagues, who spend their entire lives drifting from region to region, staying as guests for three or for days in different monasteries. Always on the move, they never settle down, and are slaves to their own wills and gross appetites.” (RB 1:10-11)

In a culture that has done so much to glorify the myth of “rugged individualism,” it may be at hard at first to understand Benedict’s insistence on community and his condemnation of what we would see as wandering spiritual seekers. However, like most provisions in the Rule, the central role of community is based on a solid understanding of the limits and needs of human nature.

The Benedictine way is a spirituality for the long haul. Most of us sincerely want to deepen our relationship with God; we want to progress in the spiritual journey. But most of us also need help along the way. Without people to support and challenge us, we can easily become lax in our discipline. We begin to encounter dryness, difficulties and obstacles.

Benedictine spirituality is for people who know that they need the help, support and discipline of a community. Benedict does not envision the monastic way of life as a way for people who want to seek God only as long as it is easy. The Benedictine way is a guide which acknowledges the spiritual journey which is not always easy or smooth but together we can do it.

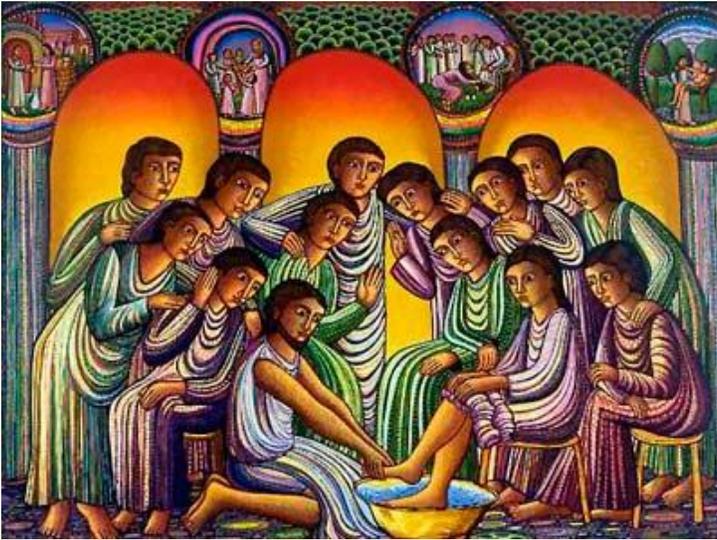
Questions for Reflection:



- Have you ever tried to “go it alone” in your spiritual journey? What was the result?

- In what ways do you need help from others in getting to know God more deeply?

- Do you have a community? How do they encourage and challenge you in your spiritual life?



Wearing Down the Edges: The Process of Community

So how does community help us to seek God? Left to our own devices most of us can be remarkably blind to the areas where we need to grow. There is little room for this kind of blindness when we have the discipline of community. The abbot of one Trappist monastery remarked that “we walk around naked here.” He obviously did not mean this literally! But living with people day after day, whether in a monastic community or a family, means that we are quickly stripped of all of our illusions about ourselves and others. We see our own weakness and limitations as well as our strengths and gifts. In community we quickly learn that no one is completely a saint or a sinner. We are equally broken, equally whole and equally loved by God.

In community we are known just as we are, not simply in terms of the persona or personality we want to project. We can no longer pretend that we are different than we really are. The places where we need to grow are usually very obvious to the people we live with and eventually we come to see them, too.

Benedict knew that when we “support with the greatest patience one another’s weaknesses of body or behavior...” we will be changed. Community means learning to be patient with people whose habits, idiosyncrasies and personalities irritate us. In community we have to live and work with people not of our choosing. Community means a daily rubbing against one another, day in and day out in all our frailties and weaknesses.

The key to community’s being an instrument of our transformation is that we can’t just decide to leave one day. We don’t stay in community only as long as it is easy or makes us feel good. For Benedict community meant a lifetime commitment to the same group of people, the nice ones and the mean ones, the gentle ones and the angry ones, without distinction and without end. The monastics of Benedict’s community and of any monastic community today make a lifetime commitment to stay with this group of people. It is a commitment to stay

through the hard times and the good times, no matter how the community may or may not change. One of the specific vows that every Benedictine makes is that of “stability,” to stay with this group of people in this particular community for the rest of his/her life.

If we know we can't just leave when certain people get on our nerves or because the group is changing in a way we don't like, we learn that we will have to change. A commitment to community, whether a monastic community, a family, a parish or church means that I can only change myself. The person next to me may or may not become less angry, but I have to learn to try and understand that anger and not react to it personally. The community may or may not learn to move faster in making decisions and changes, but I can learn to see their reluctance and gently provide a new way of seeing things. The people who irritate me may or may not change but I can learn that my irritation may be a reaction to some part of myself that needs to be changed.

The process of being part of any kind of community is like water wearing against a rock. Slowly, gradually, even imperceptibly we are changed. Our edges are smoothed away and ultimately we will be transformed if we are willing to stay with the process.

Questions for Reflection:

- How have the communities in your life challenged and changed you?

- Have you ever left a community because it seemed too hard to stay or because they wouldn't change enough?

