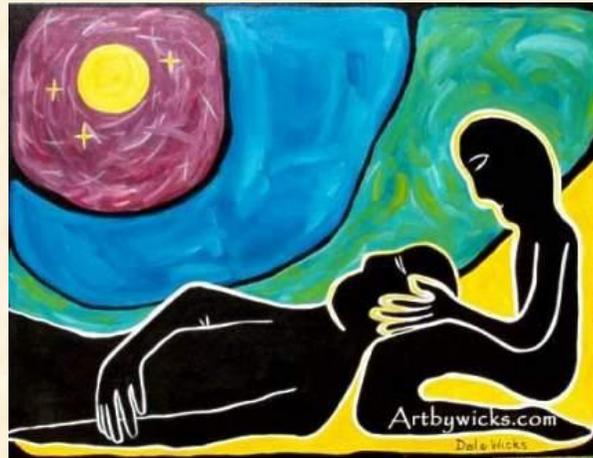


Part Seven

Obedience and Humility: The Paradox of Submission and Freedom



“It is love that impels them to pursue everlasting life; therefore, they are eager to take the narrow road of which the Lord says: ‘Narrow is the road that leads to life.’”

- RB 5:10-11

“Now, therefore, after ascending all these steps of humility we will quickly arrive at that perfect love of God which casts our fear.”

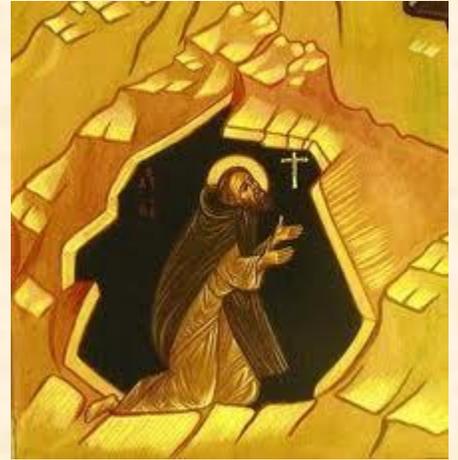
- RB 7:67

Obedience and humility are two central themes in Benedictine spirituality, but they are also two concepts that are very strange to modern ears. The idea of obedience conjures up stereotypes of monks and nuns being ordered to do impossible tasks in the name of obedience. In an age that prizes “self-esteem,” humility seems like a problem to be remedied rather than a virtue.

To Benedict, though, obedience was the heart of the spirituality journey, a key tool of our conversion and humility was the fruit of proper obedience. Is it possible to make sense of these concepts in an age so far removed from Benedict’s time or are they simply outmoded concepts best left on the dust heap of other outmoded spiritualities?

Obedience: Who Do We Listen To?

The language that Benedict used is probably not the language most spiritual writers would use today, but the dynamics of the spiritual life have not changed. For Benedict obedience was a tool or spiritual practice to help monastics reach a point where at the center of their lives was God rather than their own ego or what he called “self-will.” In this understanding a person was humble when he or she had reached a point when the love and presence of God was clearly manifest in his/her life.



To give up our self-will or ego means to put God at the center. We all need a strong ego or sense of self in order to survive in the world. If we don't have a healthy sense of ourselves, we easily become doormats and victims, unable to cope as healthy, functional people. The problem comes when our egos are not satisfied with a simple, healthy level of self-esteem. On some level most of us believe (or at least act like we believe) we are the center of the universe. We want our needs met and we want them met now. We struggle with wanting to put ourselves first, even if we know that others should come first. We want to love God more but we can't seem to get past our fear of letting go. We want to feel that we are in charge of our lives, rather than God. We echo Paul's dilemma: “For I do not do the good that I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.” (Rom. 7:19)

For most of us this dilemma of letting God be the center of our lives is simply part of the continuing struggle of our spiritual life, a very gradual process of letting go of control bit by bit into God's hands. For Benedict, though, giving up “self-will” was something that could be done through the practice of obedience. We all need help, we need to trust someone who has the spiritual maturity to help us see beyond our blind spots. In Benedict's community this meant obedience, following the judgment and directives of the abbot or prioress and the provisions of the Rule.

All of us need some practical help in realizing that God, not our ego, is our center. In obedience we allow a wise person or community help us on our way. We need

to trust someone who has the spiritual maturity to help us see beyond our blind spots.

In the monastic tradition however, this obedience was never a cult of personality, with monastics blindly following the dictates of a charismatic leader. Obedience was always mutual, never simply hierarchical. Benedict's Rule specifically dictates that obedience is to be mutual, between the members. The head of the monastery is not simply a popular figure everyone spontaneously gathers around. The abbot or prioress is elected by the community which has discerned his or her gifts for leadership based on the quality of his/her spiritual life. The prioress or abbot is to be subject to the provisions of the Rule; he or she cannot rule according to his or her whims or the trends of leadership theory. The Rule is the ultimate basis for all decisions and leadership. Finally, the abbot or prioress is enjoined to see him/herself in the role of Christ the servant to emulate the obedience of Christ to his Father.

The point of obedience in the Rule of Benedict is not subservience but service. Just as Christ deferred to the will of God to serve and die for humanity, so we too become obedient to others and serve as Christ served. This mind-set of obedience is something we probably never fully achieve; it is a gradual process of giving up of self-centeredness by listening to and responding the valid spiritual authorities in our lives. We listen and respond to the needs of our families, our Church, the suffering of the world and put their needs first, ahead of our own.



Questions for Reflection:

- Where are you being called to be obedient in your life?
- What makes it hard to be obedient, to listen and respond?
- Are there ways in which you are determined to “do it yourself” rather than allow God or others to help you?
- In what ways are you guided by your own sense of self rather than the sense that God is at the center of your life? What helps you to return God to the center of your life?

Humility: The Soil of Our Heart

The result of this long, difficult process of obedience is not a cringing, servile follower. The fruit of obedience in the Benedictine tradition is someone whose heart has been transformed by the indwelling presence of God. The humble person is someone whose first reaction is not “what’s in it for me?” but rather “How is God present in the needs of the other?”



Benedict sees humility as the result of a long process. As with obedience humility is not something we achieve immediately or without long effort. The image he uses is that of the ladder. Paradoxically we “ascend” to humility by “descending” or giving up our self-centeredness.

This process of humility begins with a constant awareness that we are in the presence of God. We are not entities unto ourselves, hiding the actions or parts of ourselves that we don’t like and don’t want known. Instead we are always in the presence of the God who knows our actions and our hearts, our gifts and our failings. With this constant mindfulness of God’s presence, it is harder to hide behind our illusions. In the presence of other people we can hide our anger, our impatience, our deceitfulness. We can pretend to be something we are not. But Benedict reminds us we cannot hide our hearts from God.

This begins to force us into a radical honesty. Before God we are who we are, no more and no less. We can no longer deny our failings nor take credit for our gifts. This is the beginning of humility. We are no longer the center of our own private little universe. The process of humility makes us abdicate our thrones; we are no longer the king or queen of our personal realm. We need to cede that position to God.

Benedict describes someone who has achieved humility as someone who is a person for others. The humble person does not complain about difficult circumstances or tasks but takes them in stride and learns from them. He or she is not afraid to admit faults and transgressions but does so without defensiveness

or excessive justification. The humble monastic follows the common desires and decisions of the community without second-guessing or complaining.

The final culmination of this process of humility is worth quoting at length.

“Now, therefore, after ascending all these steps of humility, we will quickly arrive at the ‘perfect love’ of God which ‘casts out all fear’ (1 John 4:18). Through this love, all that we once performed with dread, we will now begin to observe without effort, as though natural, from habit, no longer out of fear of hell, but out of love for Christ, good habit and delight in virtue. All this God will by the Holy Spirit graciously manifest in us now cleansed of vices and sins.” RB 7:67-70

Clearly humility is the fruit and result of a transformed heart. When our hearts are rooted and grounded in the center that is Christ, the soil of our heart will bear this fruit of deep humility and love for God and others.

Questions for Reflection:



- What words or images do you associate with “humility”?
- Who is someone you know who is humble? What qualities make him/her humble?
- What are the aspects of your life that keep you from deeper humility? How will you work on changing those aspects of yourself?