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Arrival at Perfect Love and the Steps of Humility

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In Chapter Seven of *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, Benedict draws on Cassian's *Institutes* and *The Rule of the Master* to develop twelve steps of humility. Beginning with the fear of the Lord as the first step, Benedict builds a trajectory for monastic progress in this most central virtue of monastic life. Ultimately, progress leads to the twelfth step, where a monk manifests humility "in his bearing" in all he does (RB 7:62), and then to "that perfect love of God which casts out fear (1 John 4:18, RB 7:67)."¹ Here the monk can do all things "no longer out of fear of hell, but out of love for Christ" (RB 7:69). Having been purified of vices, the monk enters a new world, where the love of God and neighbor completely orients his life.

In considering the context of the arrival at perfect love, we can see that in Benedict's view, such bliss comes only after ascending all the other steps of humility (RB 7:67). Attaining perfect love of God and one's neighbor does not happen overnight, but comes as the conclusion of a long process of growth and conversion. Benedict draws on his sources for this material: while Cassian simply enumerates signs of humility to be noted in monastic progress (*Inst.* IV.39),² the Master takes these and builds them into rungs of a ladder to be climbed (RM 10).³ Though Benedict softens some of the "climbing" language by simply describing each of the steps as stages to be lived, clearly he still sees such progress as a process of upward movement toward a summit (RB 7:5).

In the reality of lived experience, in all likelihood Benedict's steps of humility rarely actually occur in the particular order he describes. Yet in placing fear of the Lord as the first step (RB 7:10), Benedict sets up a broader chiasmic context for development toward perfect love. By working from fear toward a final stage where "perfect love ... casts out fear" (RB 7:67), he creates a chapter on humility which ultimately denotes how one is to move from fear to love of God. The evocative language of 1 John 4:18 provides Benedict the grounding for his brief but alluring description of the goal: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear because fear has to do with punishment, and so one who fears is not yet perfect in love."

¹ As quoted from Timothy Fry, ed., *RB 1980: The Rule of Benedict in Latin and English with Notes* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981). Hereafter all references to the Rule of Benedict from this version will be indicated by RB, followed by chapter and verse number, and all biblical references (outside of the ones that are direct quotations from RB) will be taken from *The New American Bible* (Nashville, TN: Catholic Bible Press, 1987).

² John Cassian, Jerome Bertram, transl., *The Monastic Institutes* (London: Saint Austin Press, 1999), 64.

³ Luke Eberle, transl., *The Rule of the Master* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1977), 131-139.

The fuller biblical context of 1 John 4:18 describes God's love for us and the way we are to love each other. In 1 John 4:7-21, the author of 1 John calls Christians to participation in the love of God. It is God who first revealed love to us (through Christ) and enabled us to love each other (4:9-12, 19). In acknowledging Jesus as the Son of God and in loving, we remain in God and God remains in us (4:14-17). Ultimately, love is brought to perfection as we develop confidence in God's love for us, to the point where we do not fear judgment. Fear of punishment has slipped away (4:17-18). Yet if our love for God is to be true, we also must love our neighbor (4:20-21). The verses immediately surrounding 1 John 4:18 deal particularly with confidence in God in the face of judgment (4:17), and the fact that we are able to love because God first loved us (4:19). These verses speak to the relational shift that happens as we respond to God's great love for us. When we come to trust in God's love for us, at a certain point we do not fear being punished. We know God's mercy and have confidence in our safety in God's presence.

This theme of confidence in God also is brought out in the *New Jerome Biblical Commentary* on this passage.⁴ Confidence does not just arrive with the development of a personal relationship with God, but through growth in love as lived in the Christian community. The ability to love may come from God's initiative, but it takes root in humanity only through love for one another. We must keep God's commandment to love, which necessarily includes love both for God and for one's brothers and sisters. Then, confidence in God's love for us arises in part because in our living we love each other in such a way that our consciences are clear (NJBC, 29). Cultivating warm feelings about God isn't enough in Christianity; we have to live the life and do the hard work of loving people.

This larger scriptural framework shapes the meaning of Benedict's use of 1 John 4:18 in RB 7:67-70. When Benedict speaks of arriving at perfect love, he implies that love for God has been developed through the long, sometimes difficult exercise of loving one's brothers and sisters. Practice leads to habit. Certainly the monk may come to the point where observance comes "without effort, as though naturally" (RB 7:68), but perfect love of God is tightly bound to long practice of love for neighbor, the latter rarely coming easily in every situation.

Moreover, if we consider how Benedict roots RB 7 in

⁴ Pheme Perkins, "The Johannine Epistles," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, eds. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 992. Reference from this source will be cited in the body of the text as NJBC, followed by section number.

the growth toward perfect love described in 1 John, we can see that all the steps of humility are grounded in love for one's neighbor. In "loving not [one's] own will" (RB 7:31), submitting to a superior (RB 7:34), and following "what is endorsed by the common rule of the monastery" (RB 7:55), one respectfully allows the collective wisdom of the community, or of a superior, to guide one's life. In enduring hardships (RB 7:35-43) or bearing harsh treatment (RB 7:49), one practices sacrifice for the sake of the other. In confessing sinful thoughts to superiors (RB 7:44-48) and

admitting one's inferiority (RB 7:51, 64), one practices trust in the goodness and gentleness of others. In controlling one's speech and laughter (RB 7:56, 59-50), one learns to express only kind things about others. Humility is not about masochism or self-degradation, but about honesty regarding one's place in the world, a recognition that I am one among many other people equally loved by God. To be in right relationship with God, we must work to be in right relationship with each other. Within Benedictine community, monks and sisters have the opportunity to



Cor Mariae, Chase Becker

practice daily the love of neighbor that is part of loving God. What impels growth in love? As 1 John 4:19 says, “We love because he first loved us.” God initiates love. At the human level, often it is another’s love for me that invites me to love in a similar way. In one sense this is about modeling behavior. The everyday stuff of love is based on very basic actions. Yet at another level, as we are loved, God opens up something within us that allows us to love from our own hearts. This can be a beautiful gift, an unexpected flowering of grace. We likewise can do this for others. As John of the Cross says, “Where there is no love, put love, and you will draw forth love.”⁵ As Benedict knew so well, though, being loving toward those who grate against our own sensibilities is more difficult. Community allows us to practice patience with the faults and differences of others. When we can bear with each other in love, we can build trust, knowing that we are safe and accepted, even with our imperfections. Yet love also means risking pain. Care, openness, and trust can be rejected or scorned. Few people can be completely loving and patient with others all the time; some hurt is inevitable. “Tough love” can mean making excruciating choices out of respect for the common good. Even the purest of love is subject to the agony of separation by death or other natural parting. To grow in love, though, means to take the risk of pain. It means shutting one’s mouth when it would be easier to talk back. It means offering oneself when one may not necessarily be well-received. It means sacrificing time, energy, prestige, and ultimately one’s whole being, for the sake of God and the other. As Terrence Kardong notes, in Christ we have an example of this kind of humble, sacrificial love.⁶ Likewise, in being

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joined to the Body of Christ, we have hope of being raised with him to glory. For Jesus, no level of abasement is too low. As various patristic writers suggest, Benedict’s use of Psalm 21:7 in the seventh step of humility, “I am truly a worm, not a man” refers allegorically to Christ’s own unspeakable humility in becoming incarnate and being crucified.⁷ Jesus’ bridging the ontological chasm between being God of the universe and becoming as lowly as a worm seems almost unimaginable to us. Yet we are led to believe that no level of degradation is beyond God’s willingness to inhabit, or beyond God’s ability to redeem. “What can separate us from the love of Christ?” Paul asks (Rom. 8:35). Benedict, with Paul, sees the humiliation of persecution, and even death, as no match for God’s glory: “But in all this we overcome because of him who so greatly loved us” (RB 7:39, quoting Rom. 8:37). While the Master may seem to suggest we may attain this bliss and glory only in heaven, Benedict offers every encouragement that our growth in love can flower into delight and joy in God even on earth. We are told that, having started with fear of the Lord, after ascending the steps of humility, one “will *quickly* arrive at that perfect love of God which casts out fear” (RB 7:67, emphasis mine). Through God’s love, eventually we will live lovingly, not out of fear of some hellish afterlife, but “out of love for Christ, good habit and delight in virtue” (RB 7:69). In the Prologue, Benedict urges us “not [to] be daunted immediately by fear,” but promises that “as we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God’s commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love” (RB Prologue 48-49). We have every reason to hope that if we follow Christ’s way of humility, our desire for God will be filled.

⁵ John of the Cross, “Letter to Madre Maria de la Encarnacion, 6th July 1591,” as quoted in *St. John of the Cross*, by Peter Tyler, (New York: Continuum, 2010), 143.

⁶ Terrence Kardong, *Benedict’s Rule: A Translation and Commentary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), “RB 7 Overview,” 161.

⁷ Mary Forman, OSB, “Worm Theology” (lecture, St. John’s University-School of Theology, Collegeville, MN), November 7, 2011.

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