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Traveling Together to Ward Off Fear: Lenten Reflections During the Coronavirus Pandemic

Laura Suhr OSB

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, lsuhr001@csbsju.edu

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ABSTRACT:

Reflections on life in a Benedictine Monastery provide insights into how the Benedictine way of life can help Christians during the trials and tribulations of the coronavirus pandemic.

Humility, community living, and our inner attitudes can also deepen our experience of Lent.



Traveling Together to Ward Off Fear

Lenten Reflections During the Coronavirus Pandemic

by *Laura Suhr, OSB*

At the beginning of Lent 2020, in a letter dated February 26, Sister Susan Rudolph, OSB, Prioress of Saint Benedict's Monastery, said: "Sometimes there are temptations to side-step obligations for an easier, more pleasure-filled opportunity; sometimes self-righteousness wins over listening, charity, and kindness; sometimes laziness is supported by a ream of rationalization, and sometimes an attitude of 'I don't care' seems an easier pathway... Lent is a time to renew ourselves on our journey to full engagement in the monastic life and recommit ourselves in seeking God."¹

Shortly after Lent 2020 began the world was shocked at the spread of COVID-19, the uncertainty, and the drastic restrictions that were immediately put into effect. As a result, some of our Lenten resolutions had to be put aside, such as attending daily Mass, going to the gym, or visiting loved ones in a care facility. Perhaps some of us thought, "Well, now what?" or "How long will this be?" In that moment of confusion, our faith was tested an all too fitting

¹ Susan Rudolph, OSB, "Lenten letter to the community," (2020), 1

allegory for Lent. Yet, no matter the circumstances, as Christians, we are still called to live our faith with integrity.

Due to the prevalence of COVID-19, many of those temptations to side-step obligations for an easier, more pleasure-filled opportunity were no longer an option. At Saint Benedict's Monastery, we (the sisters), are blessed to have a workout center and chapel. Most of the members live and work right at the monastery. This allowed less disruption to our routines. However, adjustments still had to be made due to the outbreak of COVID-19. Current programs from our Monastery and Spirituality Center were canceled or postponed. Planning ahead for future events was still in process. It proved a challenge to stay motivated, knowing that many of the events would likely be canceled with the increasing uncertainty of just how long this pandemic might last.

An aspect of humility is recognizing our gifts and being willing to offer them in service to others. 1 Peter 4:10 reminds us: "Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms."² While ordinarily the sisters are asked to serve in a particular ministry, at the start of the pandemic, it became critical that we use our variety of gifts to serve the community as needed during this unordinary time. All our employees were asked to stay home from work, but to remain on-call. This allowed us to comply with the state shutdown and to minimize traffic in and out of our monastery. As a community, we had to cover those positions. Sisters volunteered to help cook and serve meals, as well as take on extra charges for cleaning. No longer could we look at the sign-up sheet for volunteering and think, "Well, I could do that, but maybe I will come back later and see if someone else has filled in the blank spot. If it is still blank when I come back, then I guess I will do it."

Our monastery is situated adjacent to the College of Saint Benedict (CSB) which was founded in 1913 by our community. Two of our sisters lived in separate apartments in the dorms for over 15 years. As the COVID-19 virus continued to spread across Minnesota, CSB was deemed an appropriate place for overflow for those with COVID-19 to recover in isolation. On March 27

² Holy Bible, NIV 1 Peter 4:10 <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+Peter+4%3A10&version=NIV>

our sisters received notice to move out with an expectation that they would be out by March 30. There was no prior warning, no time to dwell on the loss, no time to anticipate the change or even plan how to pack. These sisters had to be humble enough to allow members of the community who were capable and had the time to come in and start boxing. Items were then transported to a new room where they slowly began to unpack, reflect, and allow that space to become a new home. It was a time of transition, a time for a new beginning back at the monastery.

According to Saint Benedict, “The eleventh step of humility is that we speak gently and without laughter, seriously and with becoming modesty, briefly, and reasonably, but without raising our voices.”³ Humility is needed from the sisters who graciously gave of their time, energy, and talent to help clean and pack. The eleventh step of humility reminds us not to judge or raise our voice in frustration but instead attend to the task at hand with seriousness in order to keep things moving, especially in the short time frame. It means using the skills of organization as best as possible to help the sisters find their things in their new space. This was challenging since there was limited time to label boxes and many hands involved.

An additional amount of humility can be found as one reflects on their own situation. What would it be like if someone just came and had to pack up my bedroom or apartment? Would I be happy and helpful, as the sister I worked with graciously was, or would I be overcome with grief and just sit and cry? Would I be willing to rely on the gifts and insights of others to assist me in this daunting task?

Saint Benedict writes in his *Rule*: “We urge the entire community during these days of Lent to keep its manner of life most pure and to wash away in this holy season the negligences of other times. This we can do in a fitting manner by refusing to indulge evil habits and by devoting ourselves to prayer with tears, to reading, to compunction of heart and self-denial.”⁴

Self-denial came in new and unexpected ways during Lent 2020. Many of us likely became more aware of our negligences of other times. Most of us might

3 Benedict, *RB 1980*, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1981), 201

4 Benedict, *RB 1980*, 253

have been surprised at what we found ourselves getting upset over during this time. At Saint Benedict’s Monastery, we might not choose to call what we are giving up self-denial, but because of our obedience and trust in our Prioress and leadership team at our monastery, our state and national government, and the information from the health care experts, we were willing to give up many of the things we had grown accustomed to, even if some of us were doing so a bit begrudgingly. According to Saint Benedict, we were practicing the third step of humility by submitting ourselves to our superior in all obedience.⁵ We were asked to uphold a new level of asceticism. While this new asceticism is in many ways forced, it is in fact true asceticism as we must look internally at our attitudes and behaviors when things are not available to us. We are in control of how we react.

As we looked to our leaders, it was important to remember it takes humility to shut down a state, a college, or a church and to tell people to stay home and not travel due to the fast spreading of COVID-19. Shutting down gatherings and restaurants affected people’s lives in very dramatic ways. Businesses were forced to let employees go, parents were working from home while also caring for children. Routines were disrupted. There were many uncertainties. Knowing all of these undesirable effects and still choosing to enforce mandates takes humility, humility that points to a greater good and reminds us to love and protect our neighbor.

At the beginning of the pandemic, I was holding a training for the CSB students who were planning to be my counselors for our Girls, God and Good Times Catholic Benedictine Summer Camp. Part of what they do each night at camp is pray *Lectio Divina* with the campers. During the training, we prayed *Lectio Divina* using a section of *A Guide to Living in the Truth* by Michael Casey. The line that stuck out for me was: “Humility brings with it a fundamental happiness that is able to cope with external difficulties and sorrow.”⁶ This has come back to me several times since then. I continued reflecting on how important that is for us during this time of uncertainty and fear. In his book, *Truthful Living*, Casey also writes, “Truth-filled living is

5 Benedict, *RB 1980*, 197

6 Michael Casey, *A Guide to Living in the Truth: Saint Benedict’s Teaching on Humility* (Ligori: Ligori/Triump, 2001), 2

the soul of humility.” Truth-filled living means not denying COVID-19 exists or thinking we are invincible to it. It means following the rules and guidelines because we have to. It means being humble enough to realize our own vulnerability during this time of difficulty and sorrow, and yet, being grounded enough in faith to trust in God and find deep within us genuine happiness to help us cope amidst confusion.

In her 2020 Lenten letter, Sister Susan acknowledged how easy it is to have an “I don’t care attitude” because it is an easier pathway. An “I don’t care attitude” became stronger, for many of us, the longer we were asked to remain in our homes. At the monastery, we had food, heat, toilet paper, and other essentials. We were able to go outside and see the signs of spring. We prayed Liturgy of the Hours and had each other, even if it was at a distance of six feet. However, there was still a lot of giving things up and grief and sadness that goes along with this. It is important that we acknowledge this grief and sadness in order to change our initial desires of complaining and hopefully maintain attitudes of gratitude.

Casey writes, “humility is a question of recognizing the truth of our present situation as deriving from the past and beginning anew.”⁷ He is not talking about COVID-19 here, he is talking about our past bad habits. At the start of the pandemic, many of our go-to bad habits were no longer an option and perhaps were being exposed. At the monastery, there were no French fries or vending machines, no shopping to get JIF peanut butter or snacks, no visiting a life-long friend who is on hospice, no traveling to see family, no traveling of family to see us. This was a hard reality to accept. What do we do when we find ourselves wanting to cry because the things that usually bring us comfort and help us to cope are currently not an option? When we may never get the opportunity to visit someone who is dying or attend their funeral? When we even just want to give a family member or a friend a hug but we cannot because we are six feet apart? How, in that moment, can we live humble lives?

Casey writes, “Humility is truth, and truthful living is most aided by a realistic attitude to ourselves and to others.”⁸ What better time than Lent to consider

7 Michael Casey, *Truthful Living: Saint Benedict’s Teaching on Humility* (Petersham: Saint Bede’s Publication, 1999), 34

8 Casey, *A Guide to Living in Truth*, 36

shedding our false selves that part of us that, along with our ego self, and insecure self, is created by our own thinking. Basil Pennington describes it in this way: “False self is an identity based on what you have, what you do and what others think about you. In stark contrast to this is the true self, in Christ, which is who we are before God and in God – Christ living in us, as Paul put it to the churches in Galatia.”⁹ Can we recognize it as a time of conversion to call us back to fully embrace our baptismal call and all that entails? In her Lenten letter, Sister Susan wrote: “Integrity calls us to respond by words and actions ‘Yes, here I am to do your will...to prefer nothing to the love of Christ’ as our way to promote the unity of all things in Christ, the Kingdom to which we belong. This witness to integrity is a sign of hope considering the contradictions and chaos that we experience in the breaking news of the day.”¹⁰

Most of us break promises to ourselves on a very regular basis, which makes them hold very little power in our lives. Rachel Hollis writes: “Our subconscious knows that you, yourself cannot be trusted after breaking so many plans and giving up so many goals.... You’ll only get to your highest level of training.”¹¹ During Lent, we probably set goals that involved not breaking promises to ourselves. Even though the prevalence of COVID-19 may have caused these goals to shift, perhaps our new situation may open us up to asking others for help and accountability. Can we trust each other enough to be our honest selves, even in our struggles and fears? Can we trust our communities of support, even if virtual, to be there for each other in a loving, gentle way?

In her article, “Climbing St. Benedict’s Ladder of Humility Together: Perceptions of Age in a Monastic Community,” Hannah Vanorny, OSB, uses the ladder of humility described by Saint Benedict in his *Rule* to explain the dynamics of life in community. She writes: “The wonderful thing about a monastic community is that we do not climb the ladder separately; we do it together, encouraging and moving each other along, allowing our rough edges to be rubbed off as we work to achieve conversion of life. Traveling

9 Basil Pennington https://www.azquotes.com/author/40328-Basil_Pennington

10 Susan Rudolph, OSB, *Lenten letter to the community* (2020), 1

11 Rachel Hollis, *Girl, Wash Your Face: Stop Believing the Lies About Who You Are so You Can Become Who You Were Meant to Be* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2018) 12; 14

together is a great way to ward off fear. It is difficult to be fearful when we have such wonderful women by our side, helping us along and accepting our help. Being able to see the lighter side helps too.”¹² With COVID-19 lurking about outside of the monastery, news of more cases confirmed each day, and so much uncertainty about how exactly it spread, there was certainly a lot of fear during the spring of 2020. Remembering we are all in this together and trusting in God together, helped to ease some fear.

Our Benedictine community tried to help ease the fear of moving by graciously welcoming the sisters that had to abruptly move to their new living group. Despite the chaos of moving, we certainly did have moments where we saw the lighter side of community, such as when a bag broke, scattering items about (a moment to laugh or cry?). We also blasted our CD as we transported things across campus in the monastery mini-van. This was the same music many of us helping with the loading and unloading had planned to listen to together in the mini-van on our way to the 55 and Under gathering in Indiana, that very same weekend. God provided an opportunity for us to exercise humility, by finding happiness and joy together, despite the sadness and disappointment of not being at the 55 and Under gathering of Benedictine sisters from communities across the United States.

Casey writes, “Humility does not mean denying gifts; it means making use of them in a spirit of thankfulness and celebration and avowing that what we have is something that has been freely given to us.” One of our sisters who is 78 was out for a walk, heard our music, and got very excited because she actually recognized a song! She decided to help us out with the moving. She’s a farm girl who was able to use her gift of strength to help. I am also very mindful of the sisters who, in former years, would have been incredibly eager to help. Sr. Mary Core, OSB, is quoted to have said, “Humility is not the same thing as humiliation. But you do need to let go of the false self. You need to put others first. And you need to recognize your own limitations. Sometimes, that means being able to say, I can’t do it right now, because I am too tired or

ill or out of sorts.”¹³ I have witnessed the challenges aging can bring and how difficult it can be for some sisters to adjust to the reality of a weakening body. I admire the sisters who graciously said, “I’d love to help, but I can’t. However, I can pray.”

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we continued gathering for prayers but sat farther apart and wore masks. Some of the community felt very comfortable moving about the monastery and attending prayers while maintaining a social distance. Some of the sisters preferred to be self-quarantined. It takes compassion and understanding to let each sister do what is best for her. It takes humility to listen to the sister who is very anxious. To be patient and understanding with the sister who keeps sanitizing the door knob and scooting her chair away from yours, who then, only two moments later, comes and talks to you right in your face because she cannot hear well and just needs a gentle reminder to not pull her mask down and to take a few steps back. But, this is part of a call to communal life, to living a life of humility. We need to replace fear with love.

Some people see Lent as a spiritual journey, others as a pilgrimage. As we reflect on Lent, as we move from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday, let us remember we are not alone but united with others who search for a renewed relationship with the Risen Savior.¹⁴ The community walks together even if, for the duration of 2020 and 2021, we are at a minimum of six feet apart or on a screen. Michael Casey informs us that Saint Bernard of Clairvaux’s treatment of humility as truth was the awareness that one of the naturally occurring consequences of humility is a sense of solidarity with other human beings, compassion, and communion.¹⁵ Humility joins us with the rest of the human race. The word humility is related to humus, which means from the soil or earth. As we begin Lent each year, many of us receive ashes on our forehead. Whether we hear the words “Repent and believe in the Gospel” or

12 Hannah Vanorny, OSB “Climbing St. Benedict’s Ladder of Humility Together: Perceptions of Age in a Monastic Community,” *The American Benedictine Review* 70 no. 4, (December 2019): 421

13 *The Benedictine Value - and Gift - of Humility*, <https://www.smmsisters.org/who-we-are/sister-stories/86/the-benedictine-value-and-gift-of-humility>

14 John McIlhonn, *Forty Days Plus Three: Daily Reflections for Lent and Holy Week*, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press 1989), 9

15 Michael Casey, *Truthful Living: Saint Benedict’s Teaching on Humility* (Petersham: Saint Bede’s Publication, 1999), 36

“Remember you are dust, to dust you shall return,” may we reflect on those words and their call to humility. During Lent, may we let go of our pride and seek to treat others with compassion, to honor their fears and allow space for forgiveness.

