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A Sacred Time and Sacred Space

by

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A Paper Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Theology of Saint John's University,
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Master of Arts in Theology.

SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
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This Paper was written under the direction of

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Signature of Director

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A Sacred Time and Sacred Place

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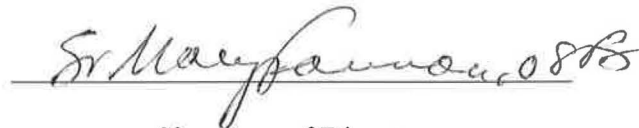
This paper examines the Rule of Benedict, Chapter 58:9-16 and how Benedict incorporates the use of time in this period of the novice's initial formation. Interpretation was based on a critical reading of the text against its sources and the monastic tradition. Secondary material was also consulted. This paper demonstrates that Benedict was insistent that the new members make an informed decision regarding a life commitment. Benedict's use of triads and repetition were also examined in relationship to RB 58:9-16. This exegetical study demonstrates the importance of a specified time and place for the novice to prepare himself/herself for monastic profession.

This paper may be duplicated.

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September 6, 2000
September 6, 2000

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in this paper.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Sr. Mary Forman, OSB", written over a horizontal line.

Signature of Director

A handwritten date "June 12, 2001" written in cursive script over a horizontal line.

Sr. Mary Forman, OSB

September 6, 2000

Where are you? This is the first question God asks of humans on this earth according to Genesis. Yet, in their shame, they hid from God and could not answer for they no longer had a sense of place—physically, and in their relationship with God. Stability was not valued or practiced by these first people. They lacked perseverance in their heart to seek God; as a result, they were cast out from the garden and then lacked a home as well. They had become, in fact, spiritual nomads. Benedict, however, in the sixth century not only sees perseverance, or stability, as a value, it is the first promise made by the newcomer to progress in his monastic way of life. Benedict provides an opportunity for stability of place and of heart. “Monastic stability gives people a place where they can eventually feel secure enough to stop hiding, come out of the bushes, be seen for the kind of people they are, and enter into honest, caring relationships with other persons and with God.”¹

Honest, caring relationships are not achieved immediately or without perseverance. Benedict tells us in the prologue that he intends to “establish a school for the Lord’s service” (Prol. 45)²; although the students in this school do not graduate. Benedict expects his monks to “faithfully observe his teaching in the monastery until death (Prol. 50).”³ Vogüé states that this means that monastic life is “entirely formative from the postulant’s arrival until his last breath.”⁴ When newcomers arrive at the monastery they are first asked if they seek God. Truly seeking God is already a condition for entering the Benedictine way. “Although it is at the beginning God’s desire—God seeking human persons; our seeking God is a response.”⁵ God’s question is, “Where are you?” The Benedictine response must necessarily be, “Here I am”—here in the same

¹ Charles Cummings, *Monastic Practices*, CS 75 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1986) 167.

² *RB 1980*, eds. T. Fry, I. Baker, T. Horner, A. Raabe, M. Sheridan (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1980), 165.

³ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁴ Adalbert de Vogüé, “Formation and Promises Of The Monk According To St. Benedict,” *Word and Spirit* 17 (Petersham, MA: St. Bede’s Publications, 1995) 33.

⁵ Aquinata Böckmann, “Seeking God The Benedictine Way,” *Tjurunga* 53 (November 1997) 6-7.

place with the same people seeking God together. Benedict realizes the difficulties inherent in living with others and with self. In order for the newcomer to realize this as well, he provides a specific time and place for discernment.

Unlike the Rule of the Master, harshness and suspicion do not characterize Benedict's rule. Yet, the prologue of Benedict's rule does say, "the good of all concerned . . . may prompt us to a little strictness in order to amend faults and to safeguard love (RB, Prol. 47)".⁶ This passage comes to mind when reading the Rule of Benedict's Chapter 58, The Procedure For Receiving Brothers. The novice is subjected to trials and harsh treatment and makes private promises before the public reception into the religious community. The reader must look beyond the surface of this chapter's words to discover the love that characterizes Benedict's community. Benedict does not take commitment lightly and does not expect the newcomer to make a hasty, uninformed decision. This is demonstrated in vs. 9-16 in chapter 58 of his rule.

This passage begins with vs. 9, "If he promises perseverance in his stability, then after two months have elapsed let this rule be read straight through to him,"⁷ and ends with vs. 16, "nor to shake from his neck the yoke of the rule which, in the course of so prolonged a period of reflection, he was either free to reject or to accept."⁸ Chapter 58 is the first of four chapters (58-61) that treat the process of receiving new members into the community. Chapter 58 is the "normal" case while the others are exceptions.

Verses 9-16 deal specifically with the new member's first promise of stability, the rule being read three times at various intervals, and the novice's acceptance or rejection of the rule. Although ending with a reminder that the new member is now not free to leave, the central verse appears to be v. 14 which says, "If after due reflection he promises to observe everything and to

⁶ *RB 1980*, 165.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 267.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 269.

obey every command given him, let him then be received into the community.”⁹ This verse reflects the tri-fold promise of profession: *conversatio morum* (“he promises to observe everything”), obedience (“to obey every command given him”), and stability (“let him be received into this community”). But how does the newcomer get to this point?

Repetition is a tool Benedict favors throughout this chapter; this passage is no exception. In fact, repetitive action is the key that unlocks the doors of entry to Benedict’s monastery. The repetitive structure of this passage reinforces the importance of Benedict’s teachings. This is evident in the Latin text. In v.9 the novice promises (*promiserit*) perseverance in stability, and again in v. 14 the new member “promises (*promiserit*) to observe everything and to obey every command.”¹⁰ For a third time, the novice will promise in v. 17: “he comes before the whole community in the oratory and promises (*promittat*) stability, fidelity to monastic life, and obedience.”¹¹ Within chapter 58, promise is always an action on the novice’s behalf done in regards to living the monastic life. This verb, *promiserit*, occurs three other times within the Rule: 59.3, 60.9, and 4.76.

The occurrences in chapters 59 and 60 also deal with new members: children and priests. The parents of the children offered to the monastery promise to never give the boy anything, while the entering priest must also promise to keep the rule and stability. It is interesting to note that in 4.76, the chapter entitled “The Tools For Good Works,” it is not the monk promising. In this case, it is God who is acting. In return for a lifetime of unceasing use of the “tools of the spiritual craft,” the monk will receive a promised reward from God: “What the eye has not seen nor the ear heard, God has prepared for those who love him (1 Cor 2:9).”¹² There is a promised reward for a life dedicated to God. It is in chapter 58 that the novice vows this life to God. The

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 266-267, 268-269 [Latin and English on facing pages respectively].

¹¹ Ibid., 268-269.

promise is conditional in both cases; if one promises and fulfills this promise, then there is an action to follow. In 4.76, the reward is everlasting life. “The Master and Benedict, following Scripture, often appeal to this hunger, this hope . . . as the great spring which moves one to practise the whole spiritual art.”¹³

The Rule of the Master also uses the word “promise” in chapter 90.64, 67. Verse 64 reads, “Let the entire Rule be read to him, and let him promise (*promittatur*) to put it into practice.”¹⁴ While this alludes to Benedict’s use of the verb a stronger reference is found in v. 67: “If after the abbot has told him all the aforesaid he promises (*promiserit*) to obey in every regard and to be always ready to put into practice all his admonitions and those of the Rule, then let him be received into the monastery.”¹⁵ Like Benedict, the Master uses a conditional clause: the novice must promise in order to live in the monastery.

Benedict’s three uses of “promise” in chapter 58 not only relate to the candidate’s future life in the monastery, but also particularly pertain to the monk’s initial formation. Speaking about vs. 9-16 Vogüé writes:

Benedict speaks twice about promises. In connection with the first reading of the Rule, the novice first promises “perseverance and stability” (58, 9). Then, after the third reading, it requires from him the promise “to observe everything and to keep every command given him” (58, 14). This second commitment has a double object: “to observe” everything relating to the Rule which has just been read, whereas “to keep what one commands him” aims rather at the particular orders received from the superiors. On

¹² Ibid., 187.

¹³ Adalbert de Vogüé, *The Rule Of Saint Benedict: A Doctrinal and Spiritual Commentary* CS54 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1983), 87.

¹⁴ *The Rule of the Master*, trans. Luke Eberle CS6 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1977), 264. Latin text taken from *Regula Magistri La Règle Du Maître* Vol II, trans. Adalbert de Vogüé SC106 (Paris: Les Éditions Du Cerf, 1964), 388-9.

¹⁵ Ibid.

the whole, one finds three more or less distinct promises, the first of perseverance or stability, the second of observation of the Rule, the third of *obéissance* to the superior.¹⁶

As seen by the first of the three consecutive promises (RB 58.9, 14, 17) of the novice, Benedict is concerned with perseverance in stability. While it is true that the Rule overflows with references to stability, one must note that Benedict, in his penchant for triads or repetitions of three, employs a form of the word stability (*stabilitas, stare*) three times within this short passage. “If he promises perseverance in his stability (*stabilitate*), then after two months have elapsed let this rule be read straight through to him”(RB 58.9).¹⁷ “If he still stands firm (*adhuc steterit*), he is to be taken back to the novitiate and again thoroughly tested in all patience” (RB 58.11).¹⁸ And again in RB 58.13, “If once more he stands firm (*adhuc stat*), let four months go by, and then read this rule to him again.”¹⁹

After finally gaining entry to the novitiate, the new member must immediately in v. 9 promise perseverance in stability. Benedict’s way to God is primarily Christocentric. For in the New Testament, Jesus exhorts his apostles to “remain here and stay awake with me” (Mt. 26:38)

“The word ‘remain’ is the principal New Testament verb for stability, and is also translated as abide, be united to, live in, dwell in, stay with . . . Stability is a promise to stay here with Christ and with these others, and to stay awake to support each other during the struggle.”²⁰

It is an active process on both the candidate’s and the community’s part. “The candidate will

¹⁶ Adalbert de Vogüé, “Les critères du discernement des vocations dans la tradition monastique ancienne,” *Collectanea Cisterciensia* (Fleurus, Belgique), 51 (1989): 123. “Benoît parle deux fois de <<promesses>>. En relation avec la première lecture de la Règle, il fait d’abord promettre par le novice <<persévérance et stabilité>> (58, 9). Ensuite, après la troisième lecture, il exige de lui la promesse de <<tout observer et garder ce qu’on lui commande>> (58, 14). Ce second engagement a lui-même un double objet: <<tout observer>> se rapporte à la Règle qui vient d’être lue, tandis que <<garder ce qu’on lui commande>> vise plutôt les ordres particuliers reçus des supérieurs. Au total, on trouve donc trois promesses plus ou moins distinctes, la première de persévérance ou stabilité, la deuxième d’observation de la Règle, la troisième d’obéissance au supérieur.”

¹⁷ RB 1980, 266-267 [Latin and English on facing page respectively].

¹⁸ Ibid., 268-269.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Charles Cummings, 173.

persevere through the ups and downs and will not give way when hardships come . . . What is intended is not a static fixation but rather a steadfast persevering on the way to God.”²¹ After two months the candidate encounters the first reading of the Rule. The new member must either accept or reject what is heard. Come in or leave. If the candidate stands firm (*adhuc steterit*), he is taken back to the novitiate and tested again tested in patience (v 11). And again in v. 13, after another time of probation, standing firm (*adhuc stat*) is the condition for the novice to progress in the formation process. “Benedict still hints that the young person is free. He is still standing, he has taken a stand, he sticks it out, he remains firm, he perseveres on the path he has begun. Whoever can’t persevere there also cannot persevere locally in the monastery.”²²

While chapter 58 has echoes of the Rule of the Master, the Master uses the term *stabilitate* only once. In his chapter 88, entitled “Delaying the Admission of Brothers So That They May Deliberate About Committing Themselves To Stability”, verses 1, 3 state: “When there has been presented to the new brother by the Rule through the abbot all the foregoing about committing himself to stability (*stabilitate*) . . . let such still be granted a period of two months to deliberate with themselves.”²³ The Master does present this as a time of discernment for the new member, but the chapter continues in his typical distrustful manner. One follows the Master’s way or the devil’s way; there is no area in between. If one does not commit oneself to the Master’s way, he is treated as a suspected thief and sent back to the world to “let the devil reclaim this citizen of his” (RM 88.14).²⁴ While Benedict may have adopted the term *stabilitate* from the Master; he certainly did not embrace the spirit of RM 88.

²¹ Aquinata Böckmann, “Chapter 58 The Procedure For Receiving Brothers” (paper presented in Rome on 21 March 1983), 15.

²² Ibid., 18-19.

²³ *The Rule of the Master*, 257; Latin: *La Règle du Maître*, II. 368.

²⁴ Ibid., 258.

Another of Benedict's terms, *deliberatio*, employed in chapter 58 warrants closer examination. Twice this word appears in this chapter, but is not found elsewhere in the entire Rule. The first instance is in v. 14, namely, that after due reflection (*deliberatione*), the candidate promises to observe everything and to obey every command given him. The novice is again reminded in v. 16 that he had a prolonged period of reflection (*deliberationem*) to make his decision. Commitment is a serious matter to Benedict and he wishes to impress this upon the new member. The novice is making a life decision and should not take it lightly. The importance of prayer and seeking God is stressed throughout the Rule, but only in chapter 58 does Benedict use the term reflection. Commitment certainly involves a decision that takes time not only on the part of the novice, but also includes God and the entire monastic community. The "emphasis upon his deliberation show(s) a concern that he make the decision to commit his life with full knowledge, reflection and freedom."²⁵

The novice has twice made promises during this period of reflection. What has influenced or aided the candidate to this point? Benedict's love of triads once again acts upon and with the new member. While Benedict may have used triads as a literary device, it is interesting to note that "the number most frequently used in connection with sacred matters is three. This number naturally suggests the idea of completeness—of beginning, middle, and end."²⁶ It is logical to assume Benedict considered entering the monastery a sacred matter. Perhaps this is the reason for the multiple triads within the initial formation program—including a beginning, middle and end.

[Benedict's] twelve months of formation are divided into three periods, of two six and four months, respectively. At the conclusion of each of these periods, the Rule is

²⁵ Claude Peifer, "Appendix 5. Monastic Formation and Profession," p. 444, in *RB 1980*.

²⁶ *The Interpreter's Dictionary Of The Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 564.

solemnly read to the novice. St. Benedict here amplifies the program of the RM, which has only two months and a single reading of the Rule before profession. The repeated stress upon the Rule is intended to let the candidate know precisely what obligations he is undertaking.²⁷

Vogüé, also, highlights the difference between the Rule of the Master and the Rule of Benedict, yet also discusses

the fundamental importance of the Rule appears still more sharply when one considers initial formation, where, the Scripture and the Fathers disappearing, its reading is only mentioned . . . At least, this triple repetition during the novitiate year marks an insistence with regard to the legislation of the Master, who did not speak formally about multiple readings. Compared with Caesarius and with Donatus, who read the Rule to the postulant “frequently,” Benedict is more precise. The other legislators speak only about one reading of the Rule. Still they do it only in the 6th century, because no written *regula* was of use to the instruction of the postulants of Pachomius, Basil, Cassian and the Four Fathers, whereas the Spanish legislations of the 7th century prescribed only that the professed sign either a written commitment, or the *pactum* which binds the members of the community.²⁸

²⁷ Peifer, “Appendix 5,” 444.

²⁸ Adalbert de Vogüé, “La formation et les promesses du moine chez saint Benoît,” *Collectanea Cisterciensia* (Fleurus, Belgique) 53 (1991): 51-52. “L’importance fondamentale de la Règle apparaît plus nettement encore quand on considère la formation initiale, où, l’Écriture et les Pères disparaissant, sa lecture est seule mentionnée. Les trois fois où on la lit au novice en l’espace d’une seule année correspondent-elles au *saepius* de sa lecture en communauté, selon l’interprétation donnée à ce mot par la tradition bénédictine? [p. 52:] En tout cas, cette triple répétition au cours de l’année de noviciat marque une insistance par rapport à législation du Maître, qui ne parlait pas formellement de lectures multiples. Comparé à Césaire et à Donat, qui font lire la Règle à la postulante <<fréquemment>>, Benedict est plus précis. Les autres législateurs ne parlent que d’une lecture de la Règle. Encore ne le font-ils qu’au VI^e siècle, car aucune *regula* écrite ne servait à l’instruction des postulants chez Pachôme, Basile, Cassien et les Quatre Pères, tandis que les législations espagnoles du VII^e siècle prescrivirent seulement de faire souscrire au profès soit un engagement écrit, soit le *pactum* qui lie les membres de la communauté.”

Although Benedict mandates three readings of the Rule, he was definitely influenced by other monastic writers before him. Caesarius of Arles writes in Reg. 58 in his Rule for Virgins:

Whoever comes for the monastic way of life, let the rule be read again rather frequently to her in the parlor (guest room); and if with a prompt and free will she professes that she will fulfill all the institutes of the rule, let her be there for as long as it seems just and reasonable to the abbess. But if she says that she cannot fulfill the rule, then let her not be accepted within.²⁹

This text is somewhat ambiguous as it suggests multiple readings of the rule. It is “read again rather frequently.” Is the newcomer to stay in the guestroom until a decision is reached? Does Caesarius assume the candidate has previous knowledge of the rule? Whatever the case may be, it appears the decision is made without any practical experience or formal training regarding the rule. Apparently, the newcomer may not be making a lifetime decision as the abbess can determine the length of the stay, unlike Benedict who insists on a perpetual commitment.

RB 1980 also cites the Rule of Macarius as a source for this passage of Benedict’s Rule. Macarius writes in chapter 23: “Thus if someone from the world should wish to be converted in the monastery, let the rule be read to him when he enters, and let every practice of the monastery be made clear to him. And if he should accept all things suitably, let him be fittingly received by the brothers in the cell.”³⁰ Here one finds a singular reading of Macarius’ rule with no probationary period. There is, however, a conditional clause indicating action on the parts of both the newcomer and the community. This verse is similar to RB 58.14, which states: “If after due reflection he promises to observe everything and to obey every command given him, let him

²⁹ *Incipit Recapitulatio huius Regulae 58 in S, Caesarii Arelatensis Episcopi Regula Sanctarum Virginum aliaque opuscula ad sanctimoniales directa*, ed. by Germanus Morin, in *Florilegium Patristicum tam veteris quam medii aevi auctores complectens* 34, ed. by Bernhardus Geyer and Johannes Zellinger, trans. by Mary Forman (Bonnae: Sumptibus Petri Hanstein, 1933), p. 30.

then be received into the community.”³¹ This comes only after a full year of reflection by the novice in Benedict’s community. However, Macarius does not provide any length of time for discernment.

The Master, on the other hand, provides two months for discernment, but his rule is seemingly read only once to the candidate, although this practice is referred to in three different chapters depending on the type of monk: a new monk or a private monk (*conversus*). He states in chapter 87.3-4 with regard to the private monk: “But if he says that he can be obedient in all things, then let this Rule of the monastery be read to him. When the reading of the Rule is finished and the abbot has explained the prerequisites in his own words, and the new brother has replied that he is ready to put it all into practice, then let the abbot go on . . .”³² The abbot continues by questioning the new brother about his possessions. The Master next alludes to this reading of the rule in chapter 89.1 immediately before the new brother promises obedience in all things.³³

Chapter 90. 64, 67 appear to be a reiteration of what was already set forth in the previous chapters but this chapter explicitly pertains to the new monk: “Let the entire Rule be read to him, and let him promise to put it into practice . . . If after the abbot has told him all the aforesaid he promises to obey in every regard and to be always ready to put into practice all his admonitions and those of the Rule, then let him be received into the monastery.”³⁴ The new candidate is immediately received. “There is no ritual accompanying this; that will come at the end of the year of probation. At that time the monk is given the monastic habit and he also receives the

³⁰ *Early Monastic Rules*, trans. Carmella Virgilio Franklin, Ivan Havener, J. Alcuin Francis (Collegville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1982), 49.

³¹ *RB 1980*, 269.

³² *The Rule of the Master*, 253.

³³ *Ibid.*, 258.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 264.

tonsure.”³⁵ In both cases the Master does provide for a period of deliberation (the *conversus* is given two months and the new monk is given a time of discernment, but a period of a year passes before receiving the habit), albeit, the Master’s main concern appears to be the unwavering promise of obedience from the candidate, new or private.

Given the background of early monastic practice, the modern reader may be surprised at the triple reading of Benedict’s Rule and the harshness of this probationary period. The newcomer is to be tested again and again; yet, Benedict knew what was at stake and wanted his community members to be informed. Today, his intervals of time appear rather short compared to our modern-day three years of temporary commitment and other various times of initial formation (postulancy, etc.), not to mention the year-long novitiate. “Although Benedict has considerably increased the interval foreseen by the Master, this ‘entire year’ and ‘prolonged deliberation’ are still a small thing compared to the stakes, nothing less than the person’s destiny for time and eternity.”³⁶ A lifetime for Benedict is a sacred time and a sacred matter. The reason Benedict assigns time periods of two months, six months and four months is still unclear. Vogüé posits that the “rougher the trial, the shorter it can be. Inversely, less energetic treatment must be prolonged.”³⁷ It follows then that the time the newcomer spends in formation is an intense period that requires the novice to expend much energy.

During the period of initial formation the novice performs three actions: promising (stability), reflecting and entering. Keeping in mind the many “*si*” clauses within this passage, of RB 58.9, 10, 11, 13, 14, one must also be aware that the community or a representative of the community is also acting in a way that correlates to the novice’s actions. They in fact are reading the rule, testing the candidate’s patience and receiving the novice into the community. While the

³⁵ Terrence G. Kardong, *Benedict’s Rule: A Translation and Commentary* (Collegville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1996) 480.

³⁶ Adalbert de Vogüé, *The Rule Of Saint Benedict*, 282.

novice makes promises at the beginning and end of this phase, these promises do not hold the same obligations. Starting out, the novice says he wishes to stay and pursue the life. After a relatively short time (one year), he promises again. “The second promise means that he wants to make profession and bind himself permanently to all the obligations of the monastic life.”³⁸ The inclusion incorporating *promiserit* in vs. 9 and 14 indicate the importance of not only the promise, but also those actions specified in the verses in between. Verse 9 states: “If he promises (*promiserit*) perseverance in his stability, then after two months have elapsed let this rule be read straight through to him.”³⁹ The inclusion is completed in verse 14: “If after due reflection he promises (*promiserit*) to observe everything and to obey every command given him, let him then be received into the community.”⁴⁰ It is during the specified time within these verses that the candidate learns more about God, the community and himself. His intentions are brought to light and if they are not to “truly seek God” it will hopefully be apparent to him and the monastic community.

After the year has passed, the novice must make a final decision. Verse 14 adds obedience to the Rule and the abbot—the two cannot be separated. “Obviously, these are not two separate and distinct obligations. Stability adds to obedience the element of perseverance in it, as well as connoting the cenobitic context and specific place in which that obedience is normally to be rendered.”⁴¹ The tone has changed considerably. The conditional clauses have ended. After his time of deliberation, the novice is now resolved to live his life as a Benedictine and to be received by the community.

³⁷ Ibid., 283.

³⁸ Peifer, “Appendix 5,” 445.

³⁹ Ibid., 266-267 [Latin and English on facing pages respectively].

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Peifer, “Appendix 5,” 465.

The novice has promised perseverance in stability, to observe everything and to obey every command.

The first recalls the beginning of the first phase, when the postulant “continued to knock” in spite of harsh treatment. The second has an evident relation with the second phase, centered on the Rule. The third, on the other hand, does not correspond to a stage of probation. It is rather called by the connection of both authorities which govern the monastery: the Rule and the abbot. Having promised to obey the one, Benedict naturally adds the other one.⁴²

This final promise seems to be based on the similar verse in the Rule of the Master which says in 90.67, “If after the abbot has told him all the aforesaid he promises to obey in every regard and to be always ready to put into practice all his admonitions and those of the Rule, then let him be received into the monastery.”⁴³ Benedict does adjust this statement slightly. One change to note in Benedict’s Rule is that the novice is to be received into the community, into relationships with others. While the Master’s use of “monastery” may have this intention, it could also connote the place or the building where the monks reside, as his concern is typically not for the relationships between the monks as it is the monks’ obedience to the superior.

It is at this point in this passage of RB 58.15, that Benedict reverts to the use of time-- although here it is not a span of months or even a year. “From this day forward he is no longer free to leave the monastery.”⁴⁴ The newcomer had three occasions to accept or reject the rule.

⁴² Adalbert de Vogüé, “Les critères du discernement des vocations dans la tradition monastique ancienne,” 123. “La première rappelle le début de la première phase, quand le postulant <<persévérait à frapper>> malgré les rebuts. La seconde a une relation évidente avec la deuxième phase, centrée sur la Règle. La troisième, en revanche, ne correspond pas à une étape de la probation. Elle est plutôt appelée par la connexion des deux autorités qui régissent le monastère: la Règle et l’abbé. Ayant fait promettre d’obéir à l’une, Benoît ajoute naturellement l’autre.

⁴³ *The Rule of the Master*, 264.

⁴⁴ *RB 1980*, 269.

Upon the final acceptance, the candidate has willingly given up this freedom. Only death or the devil may take him from the monastery now.

Following from the situation of acceptance, in v. 16 the novice is reminded of this period of discernment and is informed that one is now not “to shake from his neck the yoke of the rule.”⁴⁵ The quoted source for this phrase is the *Vita sancti Macarii Romani* 2 that states:

Therefore we, the brothers aforementioned in the title, Theopilus, Sergius and Hyginus, by divine favor renounced the world and came to this monastery, which is in Mesopotamia of Syria, in the midst of two rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates, where the most famous man, the hegumen Asclepion, lived as the Father of many monks. There at last we joined together, having been received with joy by the aforesaid Father and all the assembly of brothers, and submitting to the yoke of the rule as a bond, we lived together in common life.⁴⁶

Here the earlier writer refers to the yoke of the rule as a bond shared with the other brothers in this monastery. Benedict adds “to shake from his neck,” connoting a more negative view of this yoke.

The image of the yoke immediately calls to mind Mt. 11:29: “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves.” While a scripture reference is not indicated, this passage would certainly come to mind when a monk heard this expression. Like a beast of burden, the novice is now not able to rid himself of this commitment to share in the yoke of Christ. Yet, the reward for toiling under the yoke of the Rule also has its reward: everlasting life (or “rest for yourselves”). Böckmann says in her analysis of this passage that “during this time of reflection the candidate could freely choose to

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ *Vita sancti Macarii Romani servi Dei, qui inventus est iuxta paradisum, auctoribus Theophilo, Sergio et Hygino, in Patrologia Latina* 73: Vitae Patrum, ed. J.P. Migne, trans. by Mary Forman (Paris, 1849) col. 415.

accept or refuse this yoke, the cross of Christ. However, having once accepted it on his shoulders he may no longer shake it off, knowing that it is the yoke of the Lord.”⁴⁷

The year of novitiate has come to an end. The candidate has been tested in patience, taught and received by the community. A formal, public commitment follows in the remainder of RB chapter 58.

Successively having made the novice promise to persevere in stability, to observe the Rule and to obey the superior, Benedict makes him recapitulate this triple commitment in the definitive promises of stability, of “life and morals” and obedience. The year of novitiate appears so as a methodical preparation for the solemn act which ends it. One after the other, the commitments of the profession have been proposed privately to the candidate, in connection with the first and last reading of the Rule . . . Test by patience, test by the Rule: this double probation effectively entails a life which will be perpetual obedience to the Rule and also perpetual patience. At the end of the Prologue, did not Benedict define the existence of the monk as a participation in the sufferings of Christ by patience?⁴⁸

A lifetime—the existence of a monk—was not too short of a time for Benedict to expect himself and his monks to share in the sufferings of Christ. Benedict was aware of the passage of time in the monastery. The monk is called to make the best use of it as possible after the final profession. This is still the expectation for Benedictines today—a lifetime of seeking and serving God.

⁴⁷ Aquinata Böckmann, “Chapter 58 The Procedure For Receiving Brothers,” 20

⁴⁸ Adalbert de Vogüé, “Les critères du discernement des vocations dans la tradition monastique ancienne.” “Ayant successivement fait promettre au novice de persévérer dans la stabilité, d’observer la Règle et d’obéir au supérieur, Benoît lui fait récapituler ce triple engagement dans les promesses définitives de stabilité, de <<vie et moeurs>> et d’obéissance. L’année du noviciat apparaît ainsi comme une préparation méthodique à l’acte solennel qui la termine. L’un après l’autre, les engagements de la profession ont été proposés privément au candidat, en relation avec la première et la dernière lecture de la Règle . . . Épreuve par la patience, épreuve par la Règle: cette double probation entraîne efficacement à une vie qui sera perpétuelle obéissance à la Règle et aussi patience perpétuelle. A la fin du Prologue, Benoît ne définissait-il pas l’existence du moine comme une participation aux souffrances du Christ par la patience?”

Benedict wrote chapter 58.9-16 for the candidate entering the monastic community following a tradition that did not place much emphasis on a formal period of discernment before making a commitment.

Not only did he create the one-year standard, but he coined the very words ‘novice’ and “novitiate.” . . . The same holds true for the novice master . . . [who] has true spiritual authority (winning souls) and a good deal of responsibility for discerning the vocation of the novice . . . All in all, it seems that a definite program and institution has developed from what was still informal in the earlier tradition.”⁴⁹

In fact, it is Benedict’s one-year novitiate that is still the standard for all religious communities today. But realizing that one year was not enough time to discern, the modern church has added at least another three-year “temporary” profession before a lifetime commitment is made.

Some argue that even these added years are not enough time in today’s culture. Certainly the one-year is not sufficient; there are jobs to be ended, financial decisions to be made, perhaps a house to be sold. The complications can be seemingly endless. But perhaps it was not the calendar time Benedict was concerned with after all. Kardong argues that Benedict’s triads may just be a “literary trope.”⁵⁰ Benedict was certainly aware of the “sacredness” of the use of three’s in scripture. His multitudinous use of triads in this passage emphasizes the extreme importance and sacredness of this time, whether two months, a year, or three years. That time is characterized by intensity and trials and should have limits. It is a time of promising, reflecting and entering; of reading, testing and receiving. Ultimately, it is the time when the candidate, hopefully, begins to understand stability, fidelity, and obedience: the end of initial formation marks the entrance to the school of the Lord’s service. This school, the monastic life, “is quite

⁴⁹ Terrence Kardong, 482.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

only a long formation, and in this formative life one can be formed only by living it.”⁵¹ It was obvious to Benedict, as it is today, that the monastic way of life is not to be everyone’s way of life. Yet for those who choose the monastic way, the time spent in the novitiate is invaluable. Lessons learned here will serve the monk throughout life.

The early Hebrew people are an excellent example of a people abiding in God’s steadfast love. Those abiding in Benedict’s monastery are called to the same faithfulness. They sought God in the desert. The monastic is called to seek God in community under a rule and an abbot. Seeking implies the orientation of the whole person to God. “May we seek what ought not be found, and continue seeking after we have found it, for what ought to be found is hidden, so that it will be sought, and what will be found is unending so that it will be sought incessantly.”⁵² Thus will the monk find God and continue searching for God.

Sacred time and sacred space--these are the formative tools that help monks find their place in God. The monk is to listen and respond within the context of the community, the Rule, and the abbot. Chapter 58.9-16 proves to be a microcosm of the entire Rule, for the life of the novice is reflective of the life of a professed monk. One is constantly seeking God, listening, being tried in patience, and learning more about what it means to live the monastic life. In the novitiate the monk may occasionally ask of God, “Where are you?” Listening within the monastery, not hiding and not ashamed, the monk can easily hear God’s steadfast response, “Here I am.”

⁵¹ Adalbert de Vogüé, “La formation et les promesses du moine chez saint Benoît.” “La vie monastique n’est tout entière qu’une longue formation, et à cette vie formatrice on ne peut se former qu’en la vivant.”

⁵² Aquinata Böckmann, “Seeking God The Benedictine Way,” *Tjurunga* 53 (November, 1997), 6.

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