



General Secretariat For the Synod of Bishops



Benedictine Spirituality

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In the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, the abbot is depicted as a teacher and spiritual father who presides over the life of a community; Benedict describes the monastery as a “school of the Lord’s service” where one is guided in living the paschal mystery (*RB*, Prol. 45, 50). One of the elements of guidance for the community stands early in this 1,500 year old Rule, in Chapter 3, “Summoning the Community for Counsel.” It was clear for Benedict that important and major decisions were to be made by the community, as a whole. We would like to consider how the text of this one chapter in the *Rule of Saint Benedict* points out significant perspectives of synodal procedure in the monastic tradition, and rooted in the texts of Sacred Scripture. This Chapter centers a synodal process of decision-making; it should be noted that other parts of the Rule also echo the teaching of Chapter 3.

In the opening sentence of Chapter 3, Benedict makes it clear that when anything of importance is to be considered for the life and well-being of the community, the whole community shall be called together. Together as a group, they would best understand what is at stake, and so proceed with wisdom and prudence.

Benedict suggests in that opening verse that the matter is explained by the abbot. This may at first sound prejudicial; but there may be genuine prudence in it. Hearing the matter from the leader of the community accomplishes several things. It should be expected that he will have a certain insight into matters, a broader vision of the implications under consideration, and a possible way forward that can then be critiqued by the community at large. It also serves the purpose of knowing the leader’s mind, why thoughts are formed in this way, and a possible vision forward. It can be helpful to know what the leader is thinking, and within the presence of all present, there is a certain freedom which comes from being able to share honestly how another may see a different direction for solving the problem; in other words – the superior does not have a hidden agenda by being the last one to speak. Everyone knows where he stands.

We can note that this opening verse speaks of *important matters* which should be brought before all; later in v. 12, the text writes of *less important business* which is handled by a group of seniors, probably a reference to an elected council of the community. We mention this only as a concern in present day situations where everyone can feel that they need to be aware of everything; the result is often that little or nothing ever gets accomplished as it could be, or even worse, a chaotic situation. There must be a level of trust, confidence, and respect in a group that is elected or chosen, so that the process can move forward with the voices of an elected group of the community, when it is a less important matter.

There is something that can almost be taken for granted in reading through this text: both listening and speaking. Today we live in a culture of many words; it can be that there are so many words that we *hear* the person speaking, yet fail to *listen* to what is said. For Saint Benedict, listening is a key element to growth in the spiritual realm and to the well-being of communal life. For Saint Benedict, he counsels us to “listen with the ear of the heart” (*RB*, Pro. 1). That is a beautiful image for us to ponder in the context of synodal

discernment. To listen with the ear of the heart is something akin to the practice of *lectio divina*, where we believe we are taking in a word that comes to us from God. If we do that as a practice in our manner of reading the Scriptures, it will become the way that we listen in other contexts of our life. When someone comes to us to discern something important in their life, we listen with a rare receptivity because we believe we can be of genuine help. It is a considerable challenge for us to take on that posture of listening with the ear of the heart. And yet, it accomplishes two things: first, it enables us to hear with a depth that poses questions within us; and second, it values both the person and the message that is being offered us. Benedict will enlarge this notion in Chapter 6 on “Restraint of Speech,” or “The Importance of Silence,” as an element of spiritual doctrine. Again this is fostered in Chapter 4 on “The Tools of Good Works.” There he writes, “Guard your lips from harmful or deceptive speech. Prefer moderation in speech” (*RB* 4:51-52). To listen with the ear of the heart stands as a noble virtue for synodal encounter.

Saint Benedict counsels that in calling the community together, after listening to what each one has said, the community members are “to express their opinions in all humility, and not to presume to defend their own views obstinately” (v. 4). In the Rule of Saint Benedict, humility carries a whole Chapter (7) of no less than 70 verses, and is thus considered one of the elements of Benedict’s spiritual doctrine. In his layout out the importance of humility, Benedict quotes the Scriptures 42 times in this chapter alone to emphasize its importance. There could be a very important connection here between humility and the willingness to listen with an open and obedient heart, because it is in this context that the will of God is manifested. In the synodal process, the openness to what may be revealed in definitely seeking the will of God in a particular situation. How does the will of God manifest itself? The Scriptures tell us in Ps 25:9, “[God] guides the humble in right judgment; to the humble he teaches his way.” Humility holds the potential of being able to be the pathway to right judgment in a matter that is seeking an answer or solution. The Book of Proverbs teaches, “When pride comes, disgraces also comes; but with the humble is wisdom” (11:2). Certainly, the synodal process seeks to make decision touched by the wisdom of all the participants bringing their accumulated life experiences, personal judgment, and practiced wisdom.

In this third Chapter of the Rule, Benedict takes special care to note that the reference to *all* who should be heard, writing, “the Lord often reveals what is better to the younger.” In a society that favored the voices of elders, this is a special contribution of the manner of community discernment. In 1 Samuel 3, we read the call of the young Samuel to ministry as a prophet. Immediately following the call narrative, the text reads, “Samuel grew up, and the LORD was with him, not permitting any word of his to go unfulfilled” (1 Sam 3:19). In the context of this Scripture passage, a young man is called to reveal God’s will to his mentor, Eli, who had lost favor with God because he and his sons had lost their way in following God’s precepts. The young can often have a vision that takes the elder generation beyond where it presently stands, seeing with new perspective and insight into contemporary situations. In a Synod, that role of the young might also be extended to those who live on the periphery, the poor and excluded who see things differently from the majority.

On the expectation of obedience in this situation, Benedict makes it clear that this teaching is not only offered to the members of the community, but also to the abbot. Notice how the text reads: “Yet as it is proper for disciples to obey their master, so it is also fitting for the master to arrange everything with foresight and fairness” (v.6). Several times in the Rule, Benedict uses this expression, “with foresight” (*RB* 41:4-5; 64:17).¹ Someone reading the Rule of Benedict would naturally think that, in our day and age, the abbot holds a power that is more than should be given to a human being. However, here we see that he holds the abbot accountable for all of these decisions that come before the community. In his best efforts at listening, the leader of the community stands as the one who is responsible, not only to the community, but also to and before God. In the synodal process, this can take a number of different expressions. Not only

¹ Aquinata Böckman, *A Listening Community: A Commentary on the Prologue and Chapters 1-3 of Benedict’s Rule* (College, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2015) 190.

the Pope, but also those who stand as the person responsible for a committee, a report, a discussion, and importantly, a decision. This presents a significant challenge in the ways of discernment, for those who carry the responsibility; they have to weigh what they believe is best, with what others have considered the most advantageous, with what is possible, and with what likelihood of success the decision can proceed for the good of all. At the same time, there is the challenge of discerning the will of God, which is rarely an easy decision, unless the Gospel itself speaks clearly and directly on the topic. Weighing all the information and deciding what is best is truly a sacred endeavor, as it often involves the well-being of individuals and their future. The account of one's actions before God is almost always an awesome and frightening personal endeavor – the just and merciful Judge.

To conclude with some points of synodal advice from the Benedictine *Rule* and spirituality, we would make the following observations.

1. The practice of listening “with the ear of the heart” sets in motion a pathway to authentic discernment of the will of God. While it certainly calls the Scriptures as a significant source, it also respects the way that God can speak through others when *all* have pondered and listened in faith.
2. Benedict has a sense of inclusivity which invites the whole community to participate in the process of discernment, especially a consideration of the young. This active participation of all should be done in a spirit of humility, ennobling all members of the community as vessels of wisdom, truth, and good-will.
3. At some point in the discussion of the community, someone, or a small council, will need to recognize and determine a way forward; in faith, those involved in the process need to be willing to be obedient and humble in accepting the process as authentic as humanly possible.
4. The synodal process expects an openness to have one's heart moved to change, with the belief that God can speak to us through others, even the unsuspected one. And matters of less importance should be entrusted to a smaller group whose wisdom is respected.
5. While in a synodal process many voices, opinions, and suggestions are heard. The great challenge is to discern where wisdom, pastoral insight, and the good of all is best served.

The closing words of this chapter of the *Rule* conclude with a quotation from Scripture. For Benedict, the word of God stood as the pinnacle of wisdom, and it still speaks loudly to us today: “Do everything with counsel, and you will be without regret afterward” (Sir 32:24[16]).