

Ruminations on the Life of St. Benedict

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In this essay I am going to do a number of things. I am going to be autobiographical but I am also going to ruminate, to use an ancient monastic term: ruminate upon the life of St. Benedict and the *Rule* that he produced that has guided me over the last thirty-seven years of visits and retreats here at Mount Saviour.

I came first in 1964, at the age of twenty-seven, having been ordained a priest for hardly a year, and I became an oblate of the community in 1968. That is a very precious relationship that has sustained me through the various turnings of my life, that have taken me from parish to parish and then to the Diocese of Chicago, and now taken me to the office of Presiding Bishop and Primate of the Episcopal Church.

Let me begin by drawing from the wisdom of a contemporary monastic, Matthew Kelty, a monk of Gethsemane, who says that the monastic life is essentially a search for reality. The paradox is that from the outside it often seems so unreal, with its costumes, its customs, its patterns of life that can appear exotic and removed from reality as we know it. I have known religious communities intimately since the age of fifteen, when I was sent away by the boarding school chaplain for spiritual direction at the hands of an Anglican monastic in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and I continued to know that community intimately through my university years. As a priest I have given retreats and spiritual direction to religious, heard their confessions, and served as Episcopal visitor to a community of women and a community of men. As such I've been privy to the intimate joys and struggles, the failures, and the victories that have marked the lives of these men and women. I've shared the anxieties of superiors, resolved conflicts, dealt with

untoward behavior, celebrated moments of grace and fidelity, and labored with my monastic brothers and sisters to discern in various contexts the shape of their future.

What has impressed me and strengthened me along the way through these various relationships has not been the perfection of the men and women I have shared community with but rather their persistence. That is the thing I think is so important: the persistence of those who perceive themselves called to the religious life. I say all this because it is so easy to be romantic about the religious life. You find your favorite monastery and they sing beautiful psalms. You come and bask in it all and the human struggles and all the stresses and strains are offstage. You only see one dimension of it, and the cost of persistence doesn't really get revealed in the outward manifestations that we so often see. That is why I mention my own associations, because there is actually nothing romantic about my respect and affection for those who espouse the religious life. Their heroism is very real to me, not because they avoid things but because they face things.

Paul, in the fifth chapter of the letter of the Romans, says that "suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." The suffering here is the suffering that happens when we are conformed to the Paschal mystery. The pattern of dying and rising, which becomes the truth of our lives by virtue of our baptism, is lived in a very deliberate way by those called to the religious life. It doesn't mean a kind of masochism, but it means facing into things and being dislocated, in terms of one's own inherited realities. It means being disillusioned, which is very positive because it means illusions and untruth are taken away from us. It means confronting our poverty, being cracked open, as it were, by the Paschal mystery. It means coming to terms with ourselves—our actual selves—which are the sum total of all that we have lived, including wounds and scars that we carry with us. It means embracing that actual self and being disabused of the idealized self that we so often create for ourselves to offset who we actually are. We seek to structure the person we would like to be and struggle to become that person,

but it isn't necessarily who God is calling us to be. And so in embracing the actual self—who we really are in terms of the life we have led—and allowing the ideal self, which is an illusion, to be shattered and overturned, we open the way to what we might call the real self: the real self, which is the product of grace working in us and not our own self-construction.

I think here of the apostle Paul, who clearly had a self-constructed piety; he's very forthright about that in the letter to the Galatians. He talks about outstripping his contemporaries in his own religious observance. I think he was trying to offset what he later describes as "the thorn in his flesh." But no amount of self-constructed piety could deliver him from that source of shame and embarrassment, that source of being burdened and incomplete and imperfect. And so, after his conversion he prays to the risen Christ "take this away from me." He prays three times, we are told. And Christ's reply is, "No, my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

And so it is as we enter into the Paschal mystery—either by virtue of the life we lead as baptized members of Christ's body, or as monastics, which is another form of living the baptismal mystery—we have to confront our poverty. Ultimately, we have to be taken apart. We have to be turned inside out and we discover that dying and rising, losing and finding, being poor and yet rich are the paradox that doesn't make logical sense, but it makes existential and personal sense as grace embraces us and conforms us to the pattern of Christ.

I have seen many a novice and postulant trying to be the "ideal" monastic: often judgmental of the senior members of the community for their seeming laxity, or in most cases their obvious humanity. And I've seen them maintain that posture for awhile, often with great strain, until suddenly they collapse and everything falls apart, often in some very humiliating way. They have a temper fit in the middle of the refectory, or throw food, or do something untoward and they are embarrassed and furious with themselves for having transgressed this ideal self they've been trying to create and live. But that is really a moment of truth. It is where grace can begin the costly and excruciatingly specific work of transformation. It is where reality can grasp them as

Christ in the icon in front of the altar grasps the wrists of Adam and Eve and yanks them out of their coffins, their old constructions, into the new life of the resurrection. And resurrection is sometimes experienced in a painful way because it's not easy or pleasant to be yanked out of our stuckness or our limitations or our idealized selves and pulled into reality.

I am struck by two things that Benedict says at the end of chapter four in the *Rule*, the chapter that deals with the tools for good works, which is a catalogue of right behaviors and attitudes that could be used to reinforce notions of an ideal monastic self. He says, "Place your hope in God alone," and I think he means here place your hope in God's love alone. Even more important, he says finally, "Never lose hope in God's mercy," meaning simply that as you try to live this catalogue of goodness and you fail miserably, instead of descending into self-castigation, open yourself to the love of God, the compassion of God, the enlivening mercy of God.

I think here of Julian of Norwich, that very wise woman of the fifteenth century who said, "In our sight we cannot stand, in God's sight we cannot fall. As I see it," she continues (imagine the authority of saying "as I see it"), "both are true but the greater truth belongs to God." We often see ourselves only as fallen, and God, in God's love for us, sees us as standing. And so part of growing into the authentic self is to make some room for that love of God which always seeks to embrace us and raise us up. Now let me say a word or two about how I first came to Mount Saviour. I came here in 1964 at the invitation of a Roman Catholic priest of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia by the name of Thomas Lawler. He knew something of my interest in the liturgical movement and monasticism, and he said to me, "Mount Saviour is just the place for you." I had no idea what he meant, but I accepted his invitation. And so, in May of that year I came on retreat with a group of newly-ordained Roman Catholic priests from the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. I believe that Tom Lawler had picked each one of us deliberately. We were all assistants or curates in some fashion having difficult times with senior pastors whose views of the Church were clearly out of sync with reality. And we had the answers; we knew just what the Church should

do and what the Church should become, albeit in its Anglican or Roman Catholic forms.

That first retreat was an overwhelming experience. Father Damasus gave two conferences each day and I was mesmerized by the breadth and depth of his ruminations. Father Martin, at that point, was the guest master. I remember one day Father Damasus reading to us from the Book of Revelation. He said, "Now listen very carefully, gentlemen." (Probably for members of the community this is a very familiar passage because I am sure he didn't simply use it with a group of newly ordained clergy.) Christ addresses the church at Ephesus, or rather the angel of the church of Ephesus, saying, "I know your works, your toil and patient endurance." And we thought of ourselves patiently enduring idiotic pastors with limited views. "I know that you cannot tolerate evildoers, you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not and have found them to be false. I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name and that you have not grown weary." And we said, "Yes, yes, yes, that's us." Then he paused and a slightly unholy smile played across his face and he went on with the next verse. "But I have this against you, you have abandoned your first love." And with that he shut the Bible and said firmly, "Gentlemen, never become technicians of the sacred. Always live the mystery deeply and personally or your priesthood will be shallow and your ministrations threadbare." Those aren't exactly his words. I don't think he would have said threadbare, but anyhow, that is the gist of what he said. At that, I was convicted, as I think all of us were, and I have never forgotten that particular moment. I go back to it again and again.

I've used the same text both with priests, when I was a diocesan bishop, and with bishops when they've gathered together, to reflect on Episcopal ministry. In all instances, the text calls us back to a deep living of the Paschal mystery lest we become superficial and external and products of what Father Damasus called the "*église mécanique*," the mechanical church. In any event that was a life-changing experience.

In addition to the wonderful contemplative liturgy and the celebration of the Hours that drew us all in and opened the

psalmody and the scripture to us in new ways, I remember one afternoon Father Damasus saying, “Franciskus, come we take a walk”—sort of a declaration—so we headed off across the field to the west of the chapel. In those days clergy on retreat wore cassocks and I was in my snappy Anglican cassock made by Whipples of London, which doesn’t have buttons down the front and is double-breasted. People would look at it and say, “What order do you belong to?” At one point I said “I’m an Anglican.” They said, “We’ve never heard of the Anglican fathers.” I realized that I needed to be more specific.

But in any event, I was honored to be invited to take a walk and as we set off across the field I constructed one of those artificial questions we sometimes ask to show how much we know. I think it was something about responsories at vigils, because it was to show that though I was an Anglican I knew a thing or two. In any event, I posed my question and he stopped, looked as though he were thinking about the question, and put his hands on my shoulders and shook his head with what would I say was a slight smile and a slight sadness and he said, “Oh Franciskus, you are so very, very Anglican.” And I knew I’d been found out. And it was the mixture of insight and affection that made him my *abba* on the spot.

Subsequently, I remember coming on retreats and sometimes after Compline he would say, “Franciskus, go to the kitchen and get a corkscrew and come to the Casa Abbaziale,” which of course, as most of you know, was a rebuilt chicken coop. There we would have a glass of wine and talk. It was a very special time for me and a very special relationship.

When in 1968 I made my oblation, I did so in the crypt in front of a window that depicts the life of a monk, a window which, along with the others, has come to mean more and more to me over the years because the windows together depict the mystery of time. I visit the crypt every time I am here and I contemplate the windows: the days of the week, the seasons of the year, the hours of the day and the times of prayer associated with them, the life cycle of a monk and all of us who are baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ, the Paschal mystery depicted in the fourth window.

As I look at these windows and situate myself in these various dimensions of time, David's prayer comes to mind, the prayer he prayed after bringing the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem: "Who am I, O Lord God, that you have brought me as far as this? Yet in your sight this is still not far enough." I experience a kind of looking back, a taking stock, a realization that this is a resting place from which I go forth to a new season, a new sequence of days, seasons, hours of the day, a new dimension of living the Paschal mystery.

I also find myself again and again reflecting upon the Benedictine vow of stability: the importance of place and of staying put. And though it means something different, obviously, to the members of the community who live here, the very fact that when I come back there are familiar faces here means a tremendous amount to me. And the very fact that the place in all its dimensions is here makes it possible for me to reground myself and look backward and forward.

I realize more and more how much I can appropriate what is going on in my life by virtue of the stability of a place I know and can return to, and there, reluctantly, acknowledge that the name of the game is to be crucified with Christ so that it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me, and that, kicking and screaming and resisting all the way, it is possible that Christ is being formed in me, and that I am being conformed to the image of God's Son, as I hope is true of us all.

As I ponder all this, I realize being conformed to the image of Christ is a lifelong process. To use the first word in the *Rule of St. Benedict*, it is a lifelong process of *obsculta*, of listening: listening and being present, not simply to scripture or to sacrament, but listening and being present to the events of our lives because the events of our lives are, in their own way, words by which God addresses us.

Over the years three sentences have helped me to listen. The first is from Teilhard de Chardin: "By means of all created things without exception the divine assails us, penetrates us and molds us." I try to remember these words when dreary things happen or hideous e-mails are brought by breathless secretaries into my presence, asking "What are you going to do about this or that or

the other thing?" I think even this is part of how I am being shaped and molded, as much as I may resent the form it takes.

The second is an observation made by an Orthodox monk when asked by a young layman what was the heart of his prayer for all of the years he had lived the monastic life. He said, "The very circumstances of your life will show you the way." And so when I want to fly away like the dove in the psalm and take my rest at some distant place, and not have to deal with where I find myself, I think: No, these very circumstances are part of God's way with me even though I may not be able to see it right now.

And the last sentence comes from a disciple of Thomas Merton, James Finley, who says, "A simple openness to the next human moment brings us into union with God in Christ."

These sentences help me to listen, to listen in the spirit in which Benedict invites us to listen.

I note here that in scripture the fundamental stance of a person or a community of faith is, of course, one of listening. The great confession of our Jewish brothers and sisters, the *Shema*, begins, "Hear O Israel the Lord is our God, the Lord alone." Every day our Jewish brothers and sisters open their ears to hear. And then the last book of the Bible, as quoted in the prologue to the *Rule*, tells us that anyone who has ears is to listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. And again Psalm 95, which is an integral part of vigils, invites us to harken to God's voice day by day: "If you hear his voice today do not harden your hearts." So *obsculta*, listening, is integral to our fidelity, not simply as monastics but as persons of faith baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ.

With this notion in mind of listening as a way of being shaped and formed and conformed to the image of Christ, I've reflected upon the life of St. Benedict as set out in the dialogues of St. Gregory. What we are given there is an account of listening, careful listening. The New Testament word for obey really means to listen: to listen intently; to yield yourself, surrender yourself, to what you are hearing; to harken to God's voice in whatever way it comes to us—as word or event or the circumstances in which we find ourselves. Gregory's *Life of Benedict*, written about fifty years after Benedict's death, is filled with miracles and has

been discounted as real history, but I think the outline of his life may be fairly accurate.

As a young man, Benedict went to study in Rome, was horrified by Roman life and resolved to embrace the religious life. He turned his back on his studies and fled with his nurse. He later left his nurse behind and went off to a cave in Subiaco, where he was alone and concealed for three years. I think at that point he was listening to the words of the desert tradition in which people went off as solitaries to caves and isolated places and there struggled with the demons and sought to yield themselves to the will of God. As he continued his solitary life he was ministered to by a monk of a nearby monastery, who brought him bread and let it down in a basket.

At length, Gregory observes, the time came when Almighty God decided to reveal Benedict's virtuous life to others. So how does God do this? Does God send a word directly to Benedict? No, he speaks to Benedict through others. In this case (I think this is rather charming) there was a priest preparing his Easter lunch and in a vision the priest is told, "How could you prepare these delicacies for yourself while my servant is out there in the wild suffering from hunger?" So the priest is told to prepare an extra portion of Easter dinner and take it off and find Benedict. The priest arrives and says, "Today is the great feast of Easter." And Benedict replies, "It must be a great feast to have brought me this kind of a visit." And then they say grace and eat the meal. So Easter is celebrated by the sharing of a meal. I think that is a wonderful way in which the Paschal mystery is proclaimed to Benedict. There is no liturgy mentioned but just a great big meal. This is the beginning of being led out of solitude.

The next thing that happens is that some shepherds find him and think he's a wild animal. They then realize that he is not a wild animal at all, he's a servant of God. So, rather than pursuing him through the thicket, they sit down and listen and are edified by what he has to say. And this is God calling Benedict to speak a word out of the depths of his own experience of God in prayer. This is then the beginning of Benedict being turned toward the world, being taken out of his desert sense of himself into a new relationship with the human community. And we are told that many people came to visit him and changed their way of life

because of his wise teaching, I wonder at this point if a certain amount of ego gratification didn't creep in here. As humble as he was it must have been in some way satisfying to have people come and say, "Oh, just a word of life, please: oh, that's so helpful."

At this point he suffers a violent temptation of the flesh, which I think knocked him down a few pegs and reminded him that he wasn't some sort of idealized desert father, but he was altogether human and had to deal with human realities, indeed even the flesh in the form of temptations. And so he rolls in the thicket and is victorious over sin and temptation and, we are told, led to a new maturity.

I think that new maturity didn't mean simply the conquest of the flesh but rather the recognition that he was a person of flesh. He made friends with the flesh. In a way, the temptation lost its power. Temptation has its power when we are terrified and do not acknowledge its presence. So often we keep secrets, even from ourselves and those secrets become a kind of power that can overwhelm us. It is by acknowledging our temptations, acknowledging our frailties, and our humanities that we then, in many instances, can be set free from the oppressive power they sometimes have over us. In any event, out of this new maturity many placed themselves under his guidance. And Gregory tells us that with the passing of this temptation Benedict's soul was like a field cleared of briars and soon yielded a rich harvest of virtues and the renown of his name increased.

So here he is in a new place, wiser, more mature, and people are coming to him. He's careful not to allow too much ego gratification to slip into his ministry. Then some monks arrive from presumably the monastery Vicovaro and say, Our monastery is an absolute mess and your reputation is well known; would you please come and be our abbot? And Benedict warns: "If I come I'm going to make some changes, because your way of life and my way of life are not congruent." And they say: "Fine; come; we need a renewal program. We need a reshaping, rethinking our ministries and our charisms, or whatever." So he becomes their abbot. They soon tire of his resolute style, his zeal, and take drastic measures. They poison a pitcher of wine on the abbot's table, but as Benedict makes the sign of the cross over it before

pouring it out, the pitcher shatters and Benedict knows instinctively that it has been poisoned, and he leaves them. He says, "May Almighty God have mercy upon you," and with that he returns to the wilderness he loved.

Now I think this is probably where Benedict learns something about the limitations of humanity in community. He had gone with all this reforming zeal and been, I assume, unyielding in his application of his principles and hadn't made enough room for the human reality and the limitations of those under his care, which ultimately drove them to this drastic and extreme measure. It is my sense that out of this experience Benedict emerged in an expanded awareness of a need for proportion and prudence, of leniency. We certainly see this reflected in the *Rule*.

Along this line, I think of a story about Antony of Egypt with which some of you may be familiar. One day a visitor from afar who was on his way to visit the great Abba Antony in the desert came over a hill and saw Antony with members of his community playing with bows and arrows, obviously engaged in some kind of recreation. The visitor was horrified that they would be engaged in anything this-worldly and superficial. So he went up to Antony and said: "This is shocking that you would be out playing like this. You are meant to be men of prayer." Antony was silent—that is always the way with the desert monastics: they were silent—and he said: "Pick up the bow." The visitor picked up the bow. Antony said, "Put an arrow in it and draw it and let it go. Now quickly put another arrow in it. Now put another arrow in it. Now put another arrow in it." And the visitor finally said, "If you keep doing this, the constant tension will break the bow." And Antony replied, "And so will the human spirit break if it is never allowed to relax." Antony clearly understood the limitations of our humanity.

I think that out of his experience at Vicovaro, Benedict was led to a more temperate place in the application of his principles. In any event, at this point in the story Gregory describes Benedict as coming to live with himself: *habitare secum*. Out of this cumulative experience of being addressed through these various events and circumstances, Benedict was being matured and coming home to himself in grace and truth in a whole new way.

And so we are told that Benedict now lives in the presence of his heavenly father. I think that coming home to himself, recognizing his own tendency toward zeal, recognizing other dimensions of himself, brought him a kind of self-awareness that made him now truly wise. And I might say self-awareness is a gift of grace. It is very different from self-analysis, which is something we do to ourselves. Augustine of Hippo is very clear that self-knowledge is related to knowing God: "How can I know God without knowing myself . . . may I know you, may I know myself?"

John of the Cross says that self-knowledge is the springboard by which we rise to knowledge of God. Actually the two are the same: to know oneself in grace and truth is to know God, because one can only know oneself truly as one is embraced by God's profligate compassion and love. Benedict came home to himself and was ready for a larger ministry. So he established twelve monasteries, with twelve monks in each and in each an abbot.

The only other thing that I would add here is the wonderful encounter with his sister, Scholastica. This encounter is marvelously captured in a fresco at Subiaco in which Benedict and his sister are dining together: Benedict is looking anxious and Scholastica is looking sly and knowing. The story is as follows. Scholastica, from early childhood, was dedicated to God, was religious, and once a year she and her brother would come together to reflect on holy things and to ponder the mystery of God. On this particular visit, at the end of the day, Benedict said, "I have to go home now to the monastery," and Scholastica replied, "But brother dear, we have so much more to share about what we've experienced of God." And he said, "I really must go. I can't stay. I can't be away from the monastery overnight." So Scholastica turned her eyes heavenward, and suddenly, accompanied by lightening and thunder, a violent storm arose that made it impossible for Benedict to leave. "Sister what have you done?" he cried out and she responded, "Well, you didn't listen to me so I turned to God and this is the result." And so they talked all through the night. At this point, Gregory observes, Scholastica proved mightier, since hers was the greater love. Three days later she died and Benedict saw her soul in the form of a dove being carried to heaven. Benedict's encounter with his sister taught him

something about human bonds and relaxing rules in favor of larger goods. Benedict was a learner all through his life: listening, listening, listening. The very circumstances of Benedict's life showed him the way. He listened to each encounter as the voice of invitation, the voice of God in Christ, inviting him and calling him deeply into the unfolding of God's will.

Here it is important to note that God's will, and the doing of God's will, which we often think of in terms of capitulation to divine directives, really has a very different meaning. The word "will" in Greek, *thello*, means, among other things, to feel affection for. Thus, the will of God is God's affectionate desire for us, not just "will you do this by nightfall and therefore be obedient." It's not that way at all; the will of God is God's deep desire for us. In the same manner, I have a will for my children, which is their happiness, their fulfillment, their maturity. I agonize when they seem to go in a direction I think is unwise, but I know they have to discover that on their own; and I rejoice when they do something or discover something that seems to increase them and bring them joy and greater personhood. That's what God's will is in relationship to us. God loves us deeply, and the will of God is really an expression of God's affection for us and deep desire for our full flourishing.

This richer understanding of God's will is evident in the baptismal experience of Jesus. "You are my beloved son, you are my beloved child, my chosen one in whom I rejoice." In some way God says that to each one of us and that's the heart of God's will for us.

I think that is where the *Rule of Benedict* leads us. I think that's where Benedict's own fidelity to listening led him: away from a kind of crushing asceticism into a self-welcoming sense of God's own affection that gave him a freedom that allowed him then to be a wise father, an encourager to his monks, not simply in his own day but across the years. The *Rule*, therefore, can be seen as the fruit of listening: listening to his own life, listening to the monastic and ascetic tradition that preceded him and was contemporary with him. The *Rule* is drawn from many sources, most notably the *Rule of the Master*, but it's also drawn from his own experience, his capacity, as it were, to live with himself.

As I look at the *Rule* there are several things that stand out. The first is the whole notion of conversion, *Conversatio morum*, which the Collegette edition of the *Rule of St. Benedict* translates as fidelity to the monastic life. In an article by John E. Lawyer in *Cistercian Studies* entitled “*Conversatio* and the *Rule of St. Benedict*,” the point is made that *conversatio* comes from the word *conversio*, meaning to turn around.¹ It is a passive form of the verb and it means to be turned around: to be turned around frequently. And by extension it means to have dealings with, to live with, to be shaped by. Thus it carries several levels of meaning. *Conversatio* has to do with duration, something that is ongoing and habitual; it is a process and it has to do with dynamism; it’s a verb of motion, of being turned; it means something is going on all the time.

It also has a social connotation. It is usually people who knock off our rough edges, who minister the word to us, the word that converts us and turns us around. The ancient monastics of the desert used to say, “Life and death are in the hands of my brother or my sister,” meaning that through one’s brother, one’s sister, one’s fellow limb of Christ’s risen body, one is sometimes accosted, one is challenged, one is supported and affirmed, one is encouraged, one is brought to a greater sense of awareness, one sees oneself more accurately through the eyes of another and in that way we are changed, which is what conversion is all about. And so *conversatio morum* is really a lifelong process.

To use a phrase from the Anglican mystic, William Law, “Conversion is the process of Christ.” That is, Christ happens to us over time through others whose lives touch ours. Though this way of being informed to Christ happens with particular intensity in a monastic community, it has to do with *all* the manifestations of community in which we live as members of Christ’s body. It certainly has to do with our being configured in familial patterns as well. I have been profoundly changed by my daughters, who know me better than I know myself, and can anticipate my every response before I even open my mouth. I am astonished and convicted by some of their insights.

I invite you, if you aren’t familiar with it, to look at the window downstairs that depicts the life of a monk. The left-hand panel shows an overturned city surmounted by swirls of water.

The right-hand panel shows a city right-side-up with swirls of water beneath it. The swirls indicate baptism and our being turned over and upside-down and inside-out by the Paschal mystery, our being baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ. Between those two panels are a shovel, a ladder, and an altar. The shovel represents work. The ladder represents *lectio*: the rumination, the chewing over of scripture and the ancient text. The altar represents the life of prayer and sacrament. So there is work, *lectio*, prayer: body, mind, and spirit. Above we see arrows bound together, which represent community. We are Christ to one another, as Father Martin has said. Below is a crozier representing the authority of the abbot. Authority properly means the capacity to give life, and so the abbot, who represents Christ, is to be a life-giver to the community and is to speak the word of Christ in such a way that the community can hear it, receive it, and be enlivened by it. The abbot, says Matthew Kelty, himself an abbot, needs a firm hand, not a hand that crushes but a hand that protects the monk from the forces that fight against him, and his own self-destructive urges. I have found this to be true in my abbatial life as a bishop.

The whole *Rule*, therefore, is an exercise in structured listening. It describes, in Benedict's phrase, a "school for the Lord's service," in which I am still a student, with a particular emphasis on

how to run the path of God's commandments with the heart overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love. This is a love which is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, a wild, unbounded, profligate love that exceeds all that we can ask or imagine or even begin to understand because it is God's love which overwhelms all fear, all self-judgment, a love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Notes

1. John E. Lawyer, "*Conversatio* and the *Rule of St. Benedict*," *Cistercian Studies* 27, no. 1 (1992): 13-21.