

## SOLEMNITY OF ST BENEDICT: 2023

One of the greatest of the saints could be Sarah Smith who lived in a small house in Golders Green and who volunteered at a foodbank in her parish. She was mugged on her way home, dying from her injuries. Or it might be Tendai Mawidow who decided not to become a priest or take up the university offer despite his brilliant 'A' Level results because his family depended on him getting a job which could feed his family and educate his younger brothers and sister. It might even be Jane and Philip Woods who have fostered children from many different and difficult backgrounds.

In other words, the greatest saint may be an ordinary person, indeed must be an ordinary person, this is both encouraging and terrifying, that holiness is within our reach. Pope Francis reminded us of this beautiful truth in *Gaudate et Exultate*:

*"We are all called to be holy by living our lives with love and bearing witness in everything we do, wherever we find ourselves."*

Soren Kierkegaard recognised this in his extended meditation on the man of faith. In *Fear and Trembling* he writes that he had looked long and hard for the person of faith; then he realised that the man and woman of faith is an ordinary person. The man or woman of faith is a natural person who lives in total harmony with God's plan. I wonder if this is not the reason that the Rule of St Benedict and Benedict himself is so attractive, because he is so balanced and ordinary. Benedict himself refers to his rule as 'a little rule for beginners'. Benedict's very ordinary life may very well be characterised by two words. Certainly, it was these two words that arose from prayerful reflection for this homily and from a conversation I had with him. The two words were loving and leaving.

Was it not a love and passion for learning that encouraged the young Benedict to leave his family and hometown in Norcia to travel to Rome so as to study? Was it not his passion and love for 'finding God' that later led him to leave Rome for a quieter rural setting with his elderly nurse? Then it was his awakening love for solitude and prayer that urged him to leave the nurse who had served him well, for the austerity of the cave at Subiaco. But love did not leave him at peace, it led him to abandon his eremitical life and respond to the eager request from others to be their guide, that led to the foundations of Subiaco and to Monte Cassino. Love and leaving.

What might these words have to say to us who an Anglo-Saxon Abbot Aelfric described in a sermon for St Benedict's Day as: 'students of Jesus'. Benedict's monastic Rule evolved

through the years as Benedict grew in the monastic journey and experience. His considered reflections were based on the Sacred Scriptures and the earlier Rule of the Master, and they arose from his own lived experience of seeking and loving God that compelled him to leave not only his family but all that was familiar.

Benedict insists that the love of Christ must come before all else, and that it must find expression in the love of others in the dynamics of community life as a school of charity and service, where there is mutual obedience and care in all humility, as is described in the Acts of the Apostles. This way of life that puts into action Christ's love benefits all and not only those within the walls of the monastery, for the Gospel of love is for all and love is the heart of the Rule.

The challenge we face today remains the same as it had been for Benedict: "How are we able to constantly love and leave behind the familiar, especially one's personal preferences – our comfort zone - for the sake of new expressions of this adventure in love?" Let us never forget we are above all else "students of Jesus".

I think of the words written to us from the Dicastery for Consecrated Life earlier this year – a letter for the World Day of Prayer for Consecrated life. The letter takes up the energetic phrase of Pope Francis at the General Audience on 11<sup>th</sup> January this year. He said:

*"Mission is the oxygen of the Christian life: it purifies it."* The letter takes it up:

*"To live mission in God's way as consecrated people, we need the breath of the Spirit, who oxygenates our consecration, who widens our tent, who does not allow the desire to go out and reach out to others fade or to be eclipsed, who rekindles the missionary fire in us. He is the real protagonist of mission and at the same time the one who maintains the freshness of our faith so that it does not wither away."*

Love and leaving have taken Benedictines throughout the centuries, and ourselves included, on a journey to embrace new ways that God invites us consider: new ways of praying, of working, of relating with one another, of using the resources that God has surrounded us with, or just simply, new ways of doing things. But everything, always for the sake of loving. For only then can leaving the familiar behind and embracing the newness of life make sense.

Benedict shows us the way. He felt the urge to leave behind the familiar in pursuit of love. He had the strength and courage to do so only because he loved first and had been captured by love himself.

Although the word PAX is etched into the doorway of the great monastery of Monte Cassino where he died, the saint lived through global crises in the second part of his life. The last fifteen years were a time of war, destruction and hardship with shortages of food and basic goods. In 540 there was a climate crisis when the sun was often surrounded by a cloud of dust caused by volcanic eruptions. This led to global cooling and floods, food shortages and earthquakes. Before his death in 547, there was pandemic of bubonic plague – the plague of Justinian, 541-549AD – which swept through the Byzantine Empire and is estimated to have killed 30-50 million people. In this crisis, St Benedict forged a rule to help his monks live together before God and in peace.

Today St Benedict inspires you and me to find a new balance in our way of life. A renewed energy for mission a deeper desire to search for God and encourage others to join us on this exciting journey. We have in the Gospel and the Rule tested medicine for the ills that beset us. Let commit to take this medicine consistently and correctly and live. To live in love and to leave behind all that prevents us from being “students of Jesus”.

Abbot Robert Igo, OSB

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