



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



Mass of the Twenty-fifth Jubilee of Profession of Brother Symeon Gillette October 24, 2004

“O God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” The prayer of the tax collector, in the Gospel we have just heard, the tax collector who, Our Lord tells us, went home justified.

Saint Benedict sees this prayer, made with downcast eyes, as expressing the twelfth and final step of the great journey toward humility, the goal of the monastic spiritual struggle, and therefore as expressing the very heart and soul of the monastic life. Standing before God, the tax collector sees the truth about himself: that he is in himself nothing, that the only thing that is his own is his sinfulness, that every good thing in him comes from God. But his prayer is not simply the acknowledging of this; it is, essentially, asking for something, asking for the loving mercy of God. He would not ask for it if he did not trust that he would receive it. What is it, then, that he sees about God which makes him trust with all his heart that he, though a sinner, will receive the loving mercy of God? The Communion Antiphon of this Mass tells us: “Christ,” it says, “Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering to God.” Christ, who is God, loved us and gave himself up for us. “Though he was in the form of God, Jesus did not count equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.” When we contemplate this great mystery with all our heart, we see that we are nothing, nothing but sin; we ask for the Lord’s loving mercy, knowing that we will receive it because to give it is the very reason why he came; then, having received it, before such love, we cannot but offer, give, our whole self to him in return. That is the great inner movement of the monastic life: the contemplation of the Lord who is love, the humble receiving of his loving mercy, the loving, joyful gift, by his grace, of oneself to him forever.

It is the monastic life, the monastic vocation which we celebrate today; we celebrate that vocation, and twenty-five years of faithfulness to it. Like every Christian vocation, it is utterly a gift from God: we cannot produce it for ourselves in any way whatsoever. And as with every Christian vocation, faithfulness to it is also a gift from God: we cannot be faithful to it except by the grace of God, although that grace requires our cooperation, and so, although the cooperation is itself made possible by grace, nevertheless we rightly praise and honor the one who has been faithful. But we do not today celebrate the monastic vocation and faithfulness to it in the abstract; we celebrate and give thanks for that very concrete, particular monastic vocation and fidelity which is the Lord’s gift to the one whom we hold specially in our hearts today. To this we come by way of the Second Reading: “I am being poured out as a libation,” Saint Paul says, “I am being poured out as a libation . . . [b]ut the Lord has stood by me and given me

