

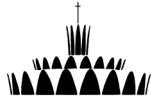
How can the Abbot – a Sinful Man – be an Icon of Christ to the Brothers?

The abbot, we saw in the last chapter, must be good, he must be wise, and he must be loving -- loving each of the brothers in a way that is a true icon of Christ's love for him. So he will be able to teach others to serve the Lord.

But now we encounter a difficulty. For, as Saint Benedict clearly knew, as is shown by many references in the Rule, the abbot, the very human abbot, is not altogether good: he has imperfections, indeed he is a sinner, he can, indeed, give commands which are unjust, injurious; the abbot is not altogether wise: he can make errors, he can be foolish, indiscreet, improvident; and the abbot is not altogether loving: he can be more feared than loved, he can be harsh, he can be relentless and demanding, he can be jealous, he can have favorites, he can be interested in his own preeminence, he can fail to let mercy triumph over judgment. Please God, these things will not be the main things to say about an abbot; please God, goodness and wisdom and love, even a considerable degree of them, will be found in him. Nevertheless, how, if the school which is the monastery has a teacher with weaknesses and flaws and sins like this, can it succeed, or anyway fully succeed, in the project of teaching disciples to become servants of the Lord?

It is not inappropriate to notice, first, that Saint Benedict foresaw the possibility of a man becoming abbot who was, quite simply, unworthy of the office, and that he provided principles in chapter 64 which would serve as the foundation for a procedure by which he could be removed through the intervention of the local bishop, other abbots, or Christians in the vicinity. But let us suppose that the abbot, although not so unworthy as to be disqualified from holding the abbatial office, nevertheless has, in a greater or lesser degree, at least some of the faults mentioned above. What then?

We have first to consider that in the very next chapter after the

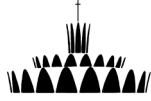


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first abbatial directory, chapter 3, Saint Benedict, as if well aware of the problem posed by the weaknesses and faults of the abbot, lays down requirements that the abbot consult widely. First, he says, “as often as anything important” -- *anything* important -- “is to be done in the monastery, the abbot shall call the whole community together” He is to hear the advice of the brethren, and ponder it, but then he is “to treat of the matter with himself” and do what he judges to be wiser. Here is where the celebrated observation occurs that the Lord often -- *often* -- reveals what is better to the younger. Then it is said that in less important matters the abbot is to take counsel with the seniors only -- but the result is that with respect, it would seem, to all his decisions, he is to take counsel. Here we should also note the general directives in chapter 64 which form the basis for the system of visitation and for some measure of oversight by the local bishop. In our own day not only has the system of visitation been fully developed, but church law now renders many decisions of an abbot invalid if they are not preceded by taking counsel in the required ways. All this will certainly safeguard the community against poor decisions by the abbot.

We note next that the Rule provides that the abbot’s spiritual authority should be shared by a number of other monks in the community. The first to be mentioned in the Rule in this capacity are the deans, spoken of in chapter 21. Although they are prominent in the Rule of the Master, with their functions fully and exhaustively described in that Rule, in the Rule of Benedict they are strangely elusive, although less so if we assume that the references to “seniors” at certain other points in the Rule, not least in the Disciplinary Code, refer to them. In any case, they are certainly envisaged by the Rule as present in any community which is “rather large”, and they undoubtedly share in the abbot’s teaching and disciplinary role; moreover, a monk can make a manifestation of conscience to one of them, and -- it would appear -- to one of them rather than to the abbot. All this means that there are a number of other monks who can supplement for the abbot’s weaknesses, and to whom brothers can turn, within the limits allowed by the abbot, for teaching of service to the Lord in areas where the abbot’s limitations make him not the best of teachers.



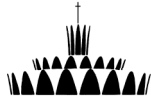
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The same points can be made about the Prior and the Novice Master, as they are portrayed in the Rule, and indeed, in view of the prescription of chapter 71 of mutual obedience, it can even be said that in some measure all the monks senior to a given monk in some measure share in the abbot's teaching authority, and may be turned to by the monk for guidance.

Despite all this, it will remain the case that in many areas, and in fundamental areas, the monk will be called upon to submit to the abbot's teaching and disciplinary authority. What then if there are manifest inadequacies in the abbots virtue, wisdom and love? It is at this point, I believe, that we must turn to what after all is the very first thing Saint Benedict says about the abbot, and which we have so far not mentioned, viz., that "he is believed to hold the place of Christ in the monastery". As is frequently pointed out, what Saint Benedict says here is that the abbot is *believed* to hold the place of Christ; that is, the recognition of the abbot's fundamental role in the monastery can only be by an act of *faith*. Now faith, as the Letter to the Hebrews says, is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. That is, what is believed by faith is a supernatural mystery which cannot be known by the natural reason. This relationship of the abbot to Christ, viz., that he is Christ's representative in the monastery of which he is abbot, is a supernatural reality which exists only by the special grace of God, and which can be known only by faith.

What are the consequences of this supernatural reality that the abbot stands in the place of Christ in the monastery? First, the abbot is given a certain grace of office -- this is conferred on him by his blessing by the bishop. The Rule of Benedict does not explicitly mention this blessing, but the Rule of the Master does, and undoubtedly the Rule of Benedict assumes it, and assumes the reality of the grace of office which it confers. In virtue of this grace of office the abbot not infrequently, even often, makes a virtuous decision even though he is not fully virtuous, makes a wise decision even though he is not fully wise, makes a loving decision even though he is not fully loving. The monk, and maybe above all the abbot, must trust in this grace of office.

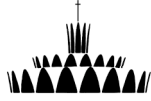


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Yet, still, it can happen that the abbot does not cooperate with his grace of office, and so still makes a decision marred by his lack of full virtue, his lack of full wisdom, his lack of full love. At this point the Rule allows the monk, after trying to fulfill the abbot's command, to go to him and to explain why, as far as he can see, the command is impossible. The abbot may relent. But what if he persists in his command? Here we come in the Rule to the ultimate mystery in the monk's relationship to the abbot, the mystery of the suffering of obedience. First, the Rule gives two very clear teachings, which, like the abbot's standing in the place of Christ in the monastery, must be believed by faith. The first is (chapter 68) that despite all appearances, what the abbot asks is expedient for the monk, will be for his good. This could only be so if God exercises a special providence in the situation and makes the command of the abbot, which is less than virtuous, less than wise, less than loving, an occasion for the monk's own profit. The second pertinent teaching which the Rule gives is in chapter 2: if a monk carries out an order of the abbot which is less than virtuous, less than wise, less than loving, the fault of such an action will, because of the monk's faithful obedience, be ascribed to the abbot, not to the monk. Finally, the Rule intimates that this crucifixion of the monk's will in obedience to the abbot's imperfect, even unworthy, command, is the highest way of sharing in the paschal mystery, in what the monks called the white martyrdom, in the sufferings of Christ that we may be worthy to share in his kingdom; also, the highest way of sharing in the great model of obedience provided by Christ himself: "I came not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me." And the Rule explicitly teaches, in its treatment of the fourth degree of humility, that this crucifixion of the monk's will in obedience to what is even described as an unjust command of the abbot is a royal road to the end and goal of the monastic life, to what we call contemplative prayer, to the experiential, transforming knowledge of the love of God for the monk: "In all this we overcome because of him who so greatly loved us."

The abbot as the teacher of the service of the Lord: in the end we come to a very difficult and demanding place, to a great mystery, a mystery of darkness but through which we come to the



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light, a mystery of faith and trust in the resurrecting and transforming power of God working through weak and fragile human instruments. This is why, surely, the Rule teaches that all the monks, brothers and abbot, must through their life grow not only in virtue but also in *faith*. “Now is my soul troubled; and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour? But for this cause came I unto this hour. Father, glorify thy name.’ Then came there a voice from heaven, saying, ‘I have . . . glorified it, and will glorify it again.’”