



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



Solemnity of the Passing of Our Holy Father Saint Benedict

Saint Louis Abbey

March 21, 2011

9:00 a.m. Mass

Homily

The Church, in her long meditation on their lives, has come to see that Saint Benedict, together with Saint Joseph, have been given to us as the patrons of a happy death: Saint Joseph, because he died in the company of Jesus and Mary; Saint Benedict, because of the glorious circumstances of his passage, by way of physical death, into glory. What should we learn, from a meditation on the circumstances of Saint Benedict's passing, about what we, especially as his sons, should pray for and should hope for with regard to the last phase of our earthly life and our passing by physical death into the world to come?

The last phase of Saint Benedict's earthly life begins with the last visit between Saint Benedict and his sister Saint Scholastica. In this visit, Saint Benedict is taught a profound, and final, lesson in humility and love: by his sister's prayer, he is reduced to powerlessness, and he learns that in the end the mystery of our existence here is all, and only, about love. After this meeting, it appears, from Saint Gregory's account, that Saint Benedict was no longer able to perform any miracles of power, no longer able to do any great external actions. The time of action had ended, the time of contemplation had begun, the time of miracles had ceased, the time of visions had come.

What was this last time of Saint Benedict's earthly life like? It seems that it was not long in duration: perhaps a few years long, perhaps little over a year in length. With regard to the part of it from its beginning up to the beginning of Saint Benedict's actual dying, Saint Gregory mentions only two characteristics, presumably the dominant characteristics, very wonderful characteristics. First, there was holy conversation with friends. What a lovely thought as to the last phase of earthly life, holy conversation with friends. And here is how the conversation is described: it was devoted "to the praises of God"; it was "about the joys of the heavenly life"; with it the friends "passed the whole night in vigil and rejoiced together in holy words about the life of the Spirit"; it consisted in "the sweet words of life"; by it, "although the friends could not yet enjoy the sweet nourishment of the heavenly homeland, they could at least have as it were a taste of it by longing for it." Then, visions, and the greatest of these were in the company of friends. They were all about the incorruptibility of the soul, and the glory to which the purified soul is destined. He sees the soul of his sister "leaving her body and penetrating the secret places of heaven under the form of a dove", and thus, the transformation into love, the grace, the loveliness, the beauty of the purified soul. He sees the soul of his friend Germanus "carried up to heaven by angels in a fiery sphere", and thus, the power, the brilliance, yes, almost the terrifying holiness of the deified soul, the soul almost, as it were, transformed into God. Then, the supreme vision, the fulfillment of his life such as



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



it could be in this world, the hundredfold reward in this world of which the Gospel speaks: the measureless light pouring down from heaven into the night sky, driving the night's darkness away with the brilliance of the brightest day; the external light itself only a symbol of the inner light of God expanding his soul toward infinity; the full cognition of the entire created universe, but a cognition of what was as it were a tiny speck in a ray of the divine light; and then what Gregory refers to simply with the words: "his soul, seeing the Creator" And all this with his friend Servandus nearby, and after he is released from as it were the unbreakable grip of the ecstasy, he is so overwhelmed that he, the great teacher of silence and gravitas cries out again to his friend, just by his name: "Servandus! Servandus! Servandus!"

Then, finally, after these years or this year of holy conversation and vision in the company of friends, Saint Benedict's actual dying and death. First, there is the premonition of death, and in the case of the great saint, a precise prophecy of it, first, of the exact day a year before its arrival, then, six days before, the order to open his grave. Then, shortly thereafter, the attack of the fever which was to end his earthly life. And here is all the suffering of death, all its sharing in the Passion of Jesus: "he was weakened," says Saint Gregory, "he was weakened with severe suffering." Yet, throughout the suffering, there seems to be, by the Lord's grace, a kind of sovereign mastery on Saint Benedict's part over the whole proceeding: he orders the opening of his grave before his dying begins, and at the end it seems that death responds to Saint Benedict's command, for when Saint Benedict orders that he be taken to the oratory, death, seemly in response, comes to the meeting place Saint Benedict had decided upon. Thus we understand what the old catechisms meant when they said that, although Almighty God saved us from eternal death by the Passion, Death and Resurrection of his Son, nevertheless he left us in a necessity of incurring physical death, in order to keep us humble, in continual vigilance, and mindful of our original guilt and thankful for his inestimable goodness, and when they said that we should now not look on physical death as a punishment for sin, so much as freedom from sin, and a gate and entrance into eternal glory. And there is the Letter to the Hebrews: "Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross" Then his death: at his order, he is carried into the oratory by his brethren – and here are the brethren, the friends, again -- he receives the Body and Blood of the Lord in the form of Viaticum and is thus fortified for his departure, and then the brethren hold him and his feeble limbs up, and he stands, and his arms are held up to heaven, and he breathes out his last breath together with words of prayer – and there is that unceasing prayer which is the monk's joyful task and ineffable blessing in this life, and there is that "into your hands I commend my spirit" of the Lord. Then, the final vision, which he had first seen, and which he then alerts brethren that they will see: the pathway, stretching from his cell eastward and upward into heaven, strewn with rich garments and flashing with innumerable lights, the path, the heavenly personage says, on which Benedict, the beloved of the Lord, ascended to heaven. But no one is seen on the path, the path is empty: for what we become when we enter into the glory and the joy of the Lord cannot be imagined or conceived by us in this world.



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



This, dear brothers, this is what a happy death is. You may say, “Well, yes, that is the death of a saint, of a great saint; but we cannot expect any such thing.” But I want to say ‘No’ to that, not because I am anything, but because the Church tells us to say ‘No’ to that. ‘No,’ the Church says, ‘we are to pray for a happy death, for such a happy death, pray always for it, ask Saint Benedict’s intercession for it, therefore, always hope for it.’ A happy death of holy meditation on the joys of heaven, of the fullness of contemplation, of vision, of the suffering of death triumphantly overcome, of the entrance into unspeakable glory, all in the company of our brothers, our friends. Yes, to pray for this. And if we say, ‘Well, it does not always seem to be so’, then how do we know what goes on inwardly in the person who is dying. And if we say, ‘Well, but I have not been a worthy son of Saint Benedict; I have not fully left the world, worldliness, I have not struggled to uproot vice and grow in virtue; I have not struggled to go to Christ, to love Christ above all, as Saint Benedict did’, if we say that, then let us remember the very last tool of good works which Saint Benedict insists on: “Never, never despair of God’s mercy.” Hear, then, and make your own, and always pray, this beautiful old prayer to Saint Benedict for a happy death:

Saint Benedict, my beloved Father, by those merits of yours, by which the Lord deigned to do you the honor and give you the happiness of so glorious an ending, I pray you that I may find you present at my death, interceding for me that there may be fulfilled in me all the promises of Jesus.
Amen.