



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



Who is the Porter? by Brother Linus Dolce, OSB

[One of the delights of the Rule of Saint Benedict is that even the driest of chapters may prove to contain a quite unexpected amount of juice. It just needs some teasing out. Brother Linus does some teasing for us. Ed.]

*In the calefactory Brother Agathon and Brother Bessarion are entertaining a guest,
David.*

David. Help me out here. Who is the porter?

Agathon. Which porter?

Bessarion. What do you mean *which* porter? We haven't got a porter!

A. Silly novice. Of course we have a porter. In fact, we might even have more than one.

D. You mean, you don't know?

B. I've been here for an entire year and I've never seen the porter!

A. That's too bad.

B. You must mean Brother Cyrus.

A. Not quite. He's the guest master.

B. But he's the one who greeted me at the airport, helped me with my luggage, showed me to my room . . .

A. The porter doesn't haul stuff. He is as helpful, though, as the guest master. Also, Brother Cyrus is too young to be a porter.

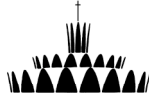
B. Then you must mean Brother Edlogius. But he's dead.

A. Now that you mention it, he was a porter of sorts. A secret porter, you might say.

B. He was rather hidden.

D. I want to know who is the present porter. Take me to the porter's lodge. Please.

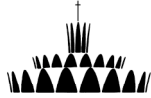
A. We haven't got a porter's lodge *per se*.



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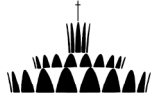
- B.* If there's no porter's lodge, how can there be a porter?
- A.* Mark my words, there is a porter.
- D.* Help me out here. You guys built a brand new monastery and didn't put in a porter's lodge. Did you run out of money?
- A.* Of course, money was a factor in the planning, but a minor one. We have many very generous benefactors. There were no bake sales or car washes to raise the money for this place.
- D.* Then why no porter's lodge?
- B.* Yeah, why no porter's lodge? Where is a visitor supposed to go? Suppose someone drops by unexpectedly? How is he going to be able to find anybody?
- A.* We're monks. We're not supposed to be found.
- B.* Suppose the unexpected someone is a *woman*. She'd enter the enclosure! Imagine the scandal: a woman wandering the cloister corridors!
- A.* You're both in love with a romantic ideal based in the Middle Ages.
- D.* Yes! I can see it: a large wall with a rusty iron gate. Just beyond the gate is a small hut with a square window. An old sign over the window reads "PORTER." A light from inside reveals a figure shrouded in a black hood.
- A.* This is the 21st century. We have telephones and e-mail.
- D.* So the porter has a telephone and a computer.
- A.* Typically, although, the secret porter had neither.
- D.* Okay, okay, so if the porter has a telephone and a computer, then he's basically just a secretary. Is that it?
- A.* Now that you put it that way, the secretaries do resemble porters in that they do a lot of pastoral work. We could call them para-porters.
- B.* Para-porteresses!
- D.* You mean the porter is a *woman*?
- B.* Oh, brother!



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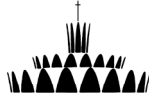
- D.* Oh, sister! So what does *The Rule of St. Benedict* say about the porter?
- A.* Chapter 66 is devoted to the porter of the monastery. Brother Bessarion, could you read for us?
- B.* In verse one, Benedict writes: "At the door of the monastery, place a sensible old man – "
- D.* So there's a porter for each door of the monastery?
- A.* Listen for the spiritual content.
- B.* Verse one. "At the door of the monastery, place a sensible old man – "
- D.* It says "man" not *woman*.
- A.* Indeed. The original Latin says *senex sapiens*. *Senex* refers to an old person, usually a man but sometimes a woman. *Sapiens*, here translated as "sensible," comes from *sapientia* meaning "wisdom, good sense, discernment, prudence." The point is that the old man is wise in both theory and practice. The phrase "sensible old man" captures this thought. Let's continue.
- B.* Verse one. Again. "At the door of the monastery, place a sensible old man who knows how to take a message and deliver a reply – "
- D.* Now I get it! The job of the porter has been replaced by an answering machine and e-mail! That's why you won't take me to the porter!
- A.* David, be patient. *Listen* to what Benedict is saying. The very first sentence of the Rule says: "Listen carefully, my son, to the master's instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart." In Chapter 66 Benedict is not merely legislating a practical function. Within the notion of "porter" lie deep spiritual truths. Listen for the wisdom. Then you will be able to see the porter in this monastery.
- D.* Okay. I'll try.
- B.* Verse one. Take four. "At the door of the monastery, place a sensible old man – "
- A.* You see, the old monk has endured many trials. He has persevered for decades. He has a very close relationship with Jesus. The old monk has acquired some of Jesus' wisdom. For instance, the porter has learned how to be silent. He knows when to speak and how to speak. Thus, he is tactful and isn't prone to gossip.
- D.* You said an "old" man. What was the porter when he was a young man?



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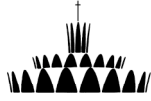
- A. He could have been anything. Even a prior or an abbot. Let's continue.
- B. Verse one. "At the door of the monastery, place a sensible old man who knows how to take a message – "
- A. In order for the porter to take a message, he must welcome the visitor and listen to the visitor. The visitor is to be welcomed as Christ. In so doing the porter puts the visitor at ease and is able to discern the visitor's needs. Why did Christ send this person to us?
- D. How will the porter know if the visitor was really sent by Christ?
- A. The porter has a discerning wit. Brother Bessarion.
- B. Verse one. "At the door of the monastery, place a sensible old man who knows how to take a message and deliver a reply – "
- A. You see that the porter links the monastery to the outside world. This link is one not merely of kindness and courtesy but also of compassion. He shows Christ to the world.
- B. By the way, this is verse one. "At the door of the monastery, place a sensible old man who knows how to take a message and deliver a reply, and whose age keeps him from roaming about."
- D. It sounds like the porter is frail and feeble.
- A. The old man might be frail, but he commands great respect. Much like Yoda.
- D. Oh! The Jedi Master in *Star Wars*! He might hobble around with a cane, but he's powerful! So the porter is a modern-day Yoda.
- A. There are some similarities. Porters are old. They walk with humility and dignity and are highly revered. Unlike Yoda, they aren't masters of the Force. Rather, they are men of prayer. Let's listen to that verse again.
- B. Verse one. Take eight. "At the door of the monastery, place a sensible old man who knows how to take a message and deliver a reply, and whose age keeps him from roaming about."
- A. "Whose age keeps him from roaming about." This sounds like stability, the vow of stability. Benedict's porter has spent his entire monastic life living, praying, and working in one community. The virtue of stability indicates perseverance, which comes from a lifetime of faithful trust and obedience to God . . . What does the next verse say?



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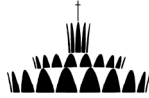
- B.* At last, verse two. "This porter will need a room near the entrance so that visitors will always find him there to answer them."
- D.* How can that be? All of the cells are *upstairs*.
- A.* The issue is availability and a willingness to serve others. Brother Bessarion, please...
- B.* Zooming right along to verse three. "As soon as anyone knocks, or a poor man calls out, he replies, 'Thanks be to God' or 'Your blessing, please.'"
- D.* Does the porter really say *that*?
- A.* Some porters do. Here, you're likely to hear an inquisitive "Come in?" or an exuberant "Come in!" or a cheery "Hullo!" Let's listen to verse three again.
- B.* Verse three. "As soon as anyone knocks – "
- A.* "As soon as." There is no hesitation. Prompt obedience. It comes straight from the heart.
- B.* "As soon as anyone knocks – "
- A.* "Anyone." There is no discrimination or favoritism.
- B.* "As soon as anyone knocks – "
- A.* The porter hears right away. He's always vigilant.
- B.* As I was saying. "As soon as anyone knocks, or a poor man calls out, he replies, 'Thanks be to God' or 'Your blessing, please.'"
- D.* Beautiful. So attentive.
- A.* Now you're getting it. Brother Bessarion.
- B.* Verse four. "Then, with all the gentleness that comes from the fear of God, he provides a prompt answer with the warmth of love."
- A.* This verse is so juicy. Let's listen to it again slowly.
- B.* Oh, brother. "Then, with all the *gentleness* that comes from the *fear of God*, he provides a *prompt* answer with the warmth of *love*."



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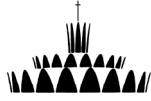
- A. Well done. Gentleness: this man is humble. Fear of God: this is Benedict's very first step of humility. In Chapter 7, it says...
- B. Let me find it. "The first step of humility, then, is that a man keeps the fear of God always before his eyes and never forgets it."
- D. So mindful...How many steps of humility are there?
- A. Twelve. In fact, if we read carefully, we can find that all of them are embodied in the porter.
- D. Wow! So what's the second step?
- B. Oh nooooo!
- A. Maybe that's a bit more than we can tackle at the moment. Let's just skip to steps six and twelve, and you'll get the idea.
- B. "The sixth step of humility is that a monk is content with the lowest and most menial treatment, and regards himself as a poor and worthless workman in whatever task he is given."
- A. In his prime the monk who is now the porter likely held a high profile position with significant authority and responsibility. Eventually, this monk had to relinquish his power and control. Today, he is the lowly porter. Eventually, he will have to relinquish even that. He is in the final stages of his preparation to enter the kingdom of Heaven.
- B. "The twelfth step of humility is that a monk always manifests humility in his bearing no less than in his heart – "
- A. That's the porter! Stooped with downcast eyes, he manifests his contrite heart. Just like the publican in Luke's gospel: "not daring even to raise his eyes to heaven, he beat his breast and said, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner.'"
- B. Back to verse four. "Then, with all the gentleness that comes from the fear of God, he provides a *prompt* answer –"



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- A. Prompt answer: there's the unhesitating obedience again. Like the fear of God, obedience, too, is an aspect of humility.
Notice how obedient is the porter. He is obedient to both the visitor and the recipient of the message. He is also obedient to Jesus by honoring the visitor. And to the Abbot by remaining at the lodge. And to God. ...This is a concrete illustration of perfect love.
- D. I don't get it. What does obedience have to do with love?
- A. Listen again.
- B. Verse four. "Then, with all the gentleness that comes from the fear of God, he provides a prompt answer with the *warmth of love*."
- A. Love! This porter is not a robot. He cannot be replaced by an answering machine or a mailbox. He is a person that loves. The Latin says *fervere caritatis*. *Caritatis* comes from *caritas* meaning "affection, love, esteem." The porter welcomes the visitor with kindness and holds him in esteem. This is a warm welcome. *Fervore*, translated as warmth, is the origin of fervor. Behind the porter's warm love is a great zeal: a zealous love for Christ and brother.
- D. What does this have to do with obedience?
- A. By being obedient to the visitor, the porter is showing mercy. He inconveniences himself in order to wait on the caller and the called. By being obedient to the task at hand, the porter is obeying the Abbot and ultimately Jesus. Through the vows of obedience and stability, the porter knows with certainty that Jesus wants him to do this task that has been dropped on his doorstep. How could the porter refuse anything that Jesus asks? Jesus is his maker and his savior. He *loves* Jesus and will do *anything* for him, however menial, however demanding.
- D. Obedience is an expression of love, love for Jesus and for neighbor.
- A. Yes.
- B. May we continue? Verse five. "Let the porter be given one of the younger brothers if he needs help."



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- A. Benedict wants the porter to be competent. The task needs to be performed well. In the event that the porter, say, isn't too well, he is to be assisted. This is the hallmark of brotherly love: bearing one another's burdens. And it is so fitting that a younger brother provides the assistance. By spending time with the porter and seeing him work and pray, the young brother is learning from a master. Learning important things like *patience*.
- B. Then in verse six it says: "The monastery should, if possible, be so constructed that within it all necessities, such as water, mill and garden are contained, and the various crafts are practiced. Then there will be no need for the monks to roam outside, because this is not at all good for their souls."
- D. What have water, mill, and garden to do with the *porter*?
- A. There is a lot of wisdom contained in that verse.
- B. It's getting late.
- A. This verse provides the context for the porter. Clearly, the monastery is a cloistered area of prayer and work. At the same time, though, the community has dealings with the outside. At the junction between these two worlds resides the porter. It's an image of heaven and earth with Christ as the portal.
- D. Now I *must* see the porter!
- B. The bell is ringing for Mass.
- A. Let's go.