**Chapter 2: Qualities of the Abbot**

January 10, May 11, September 10

*Let the abbot always remember that at the fearful judgement of God, not only their teaching but also their disciple’s obedience will come under scrutiny. The abbot must, therefore, be aware that the shepherd will bear the blame wherever the father of the household finds that the sheep have yielded no profit. Still, if they have faithfully shepherded restive and disobedient flock, always striving to cure their unhealthy ways, it will be otherwise: the shepherd will be acquitted at the Lord’s judgment. Then, like the Prophet, they may say to the Lord: “I have not hidden your justice in my heart; I have proclaimed your truth and your salvation (Ps.39[40]:11) but they spurned and rejected me” (Isa. 1:2; Ezek. 20:27). Then at last the sheep that have rebelled against their care will be punished by the overwhelming power of death.*

In their roles and in their person, community members accept that they are to be involved in the life of the community and that the life of the community will involve itself with them. But, in all this, where does the responsibility for one’s own life begin and end? It can be tempting to give oneself over to the flow of life together, and the intentions of community leadership, while not giving sufficient attention to our own heart-felt needs. All too often self-denial can masquerade as the avoidance of deeper truths. The longing of our hearts can sometimes be buried under blind duty and a busy mind.

In the rule, it is the task of the abbot to help fellow community members balance and discover their responsibilities to the community and themselves. Responsibility grows in the interplay between the personal and the communal. In this mix the Divine lives and breathes as we practice our ability to respond *both* to communal and personal needs. The mix is right when both the community and its members are flowering. The abbot facilitates and guides this.

Often in this mixing we rebel, we stall, we lie to ourselves. Growth in responsibility can be such a challenge, so much so that we often avoid it. The abbot is there to help bring us back to our way of responsibility – to help us hear it and respond to it. Freedom is found and lived when responsibility is the expression of our hearts. Healthy community leadership helps us to discover this.

Problems arise when the abbot attempts to be responsible for us or has not enough interest in helping responsibility grow in us. This is the leader themselves not being responsible. Benedict wants responsible leaders: those with enough wisdom to know the changing line that responsibility sometimes takes, and yet discerning and discrete enough to act when responsibility is theirs.

An abbot is one who lives personally in the light and mercy of God. Nothing else is as important as this. As they live, they draw others into this light and mercy, helping them to live in it themselves. This light sees and reveals the truth in behaviour and intention. In this light, we see that responsible growth is also about accepting consequences and learning from them. If we choose not to learn we risk our faith, that is, we expose ourselves to the judgement of the God (or god) we know.

Is the judgement of God (or god) condemnation? If the abbot and community are living in the light and truth that the Gospels present, then any false god of punishment is giving way to the God of mercy and compassion. The “overwhelming power of death” becomes, then, for the rebel, the darkness of a God unknown; divine love and mercy remain largely unexperienced. The life of the rebel does not have love and mercy as context and fulfilment. The one who rebels, does not know that there is nothing to fear.

Perhaps we punish ourselves with the fear and effect that arise from a turning from love? Surely there is price and punishment enough in our rejection, our turning away?

To leave self behind, to live less self-consciously, is to allow the changing of that in us which spurns, rebels, rejects, and punishes. It is a going beyond egoism, of an existential over-emphasis on the self-conscious mind. Both meditation and community are a practice in self-denial. Self-denial simply means living less self-consciously. Living less self-consciously means we are more immediately responsive loving ourselves, each other, and God.

In an abbot’s acts of everyday kindness, whatever they may be – a cup of tea, a warm smile, a quiet word, a courageous act of approach, a return to the manta – the abbot engenders responsibility, guiding all who would see into love’s light and truth.

When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said, 'Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.' Then bending down again he continued writing on the ground. When they heard this they went away one by one, beginning with the eldest, until the last one had gone and Jesus was left alone with the woman, standing in the middle. Then Jesus straightened up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' She replied 'No one, sir’. Then Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go! And from now on do not sin again.' (John 8:7-11, RNJB)