**Chapter 2: Qualities of the Abbot**

January 13, May 14, September 13

*In their teachings, the abbot should always observe the Apostle’s recommendation in which he says: “Use argument, appeal, reproof” (2 Tim. 4:2). This means that they must vary with circumstances, threatening and coaxing by turns, stern as a taskmaster, devoted and tender only as a parent can be. With the undisciplined and restless, they will use firm argument; with the obedient and docile and patient, they will appeal for greater virtue; but as for the negligent and disdainful, we charge them to use reproof and rebuke. They should not gloss over the sins of those who err, but cut them out while they can, as soon as they begin to sprout, remembering the fate of Eli, priest of Shiloh (1 Sam. 2:11-4:18). For upright and perceptive monks, the abbot’s first and second warnings should be verbal; but those who are evil or stubborn, arrogant or disobedient, the abbot can curb only by blows or some other physical punishment at first offence. It is written, “The fool cannot be corrected with words” (Prov. 29:19), and again “Strike your children with a rod and you will free their souls from death” (Prov. 23:14).*

Community has a life of its own. This life must continue in love if its members are to grow in responsibility and grace. And in any community, we contribute to and create what the communal is. We both give life to the community and live in its life. This life can be of the Holy Spirit (the love-life of God), and can be of other spirits, other motivations. It is always something of a mix. It is the task of the abbot, along with the support of others wise in the Spirit, to preserve community as more a part of the love-life of God. In this, the ask is that all community members become aware of what motivates them, of what they are influenced by, and how they live.

All can co-create community with the Spirit of God. Leadership in the Christian and Benedictine community must safeguard this culture of co-creation with the Spirit. This is what it means to safeguard love. Every action is a creation growing from what motivates us. In a Christian community we are invited to grow into Christ: the living motivation of Divine Love in and with us.

In a garden the gardener removes weeds so that other plants can be sown and grow. Sometimes they might leave in something unrecognised, leaving it to grow until it reveals itself; the only way to name the weed is to let it grow. So too, in community. Naming motivation and behaviour that is not consistent with the life of love may not happen until we have a full enough expression of it; impatience, anger, jealousy – or whatever it might be. Expression can aide understanding. This is normal and part of life. It is ok for this expression to happen; indeed, it is necessary and important. It is how we learn. Amid all this, leadership maintains compassion while we come to know what can change in us and our actions.

Paradoxically, growth in mercy and compassion happens as what is inconsistent with the Spirit grows in a loving environment. Nothing is wasted.

In the practice of arguing, appealing, and reproving – a practice grounded in mercy and compassion – the abbot helps us to see what is sprouting and wisely discerns what might need to grow as an aid to self-knowledge, or alternatively what needs to be weeded from our communal and personal lives. In time, if we want it, we can come to know in ourselves what influences us and our actions. We come to do our own weeding, growing in the practice of virtue. We are then happy to be helping what is of God to grow in and around us – a patient and careful work.

Before God and before Christ Jesus who is to be judge of the living and the dead, I charge you, in the name of his appearing and of his kingdom: proclaim the message and, welcome or unwelcome, insist on it. Refute falsehood, correct error, encourage – with the upmost patience in teaching. (2 Tim 4:1-3, RNJB)