**Chapter 2: Qualities of the Abbot**

January 15, May 16, September 15

*Above all, the abbot must not show too great a concern for the fleeting and temporal things of this world, neglecting or treating lightly the welfare of those entrusted to them. Rather, they should keep in mind that they have undertaken the care of souls for whom they must give an account. That they may not plead lack of resources as an excuse, they are to remember what is written: “Seek first the kingdom of God and his justice, and all these things will be given you as well” (Matt. 6:33), and again, “Those who fear him lack nothing” (Ps. 33[34]:10)*

*The abbot must know that anyone undertaking the charge of souls must be ready to account for them. Whatever the number of monks they have in their care, let them realise that on judgement day they will surely have to submit a reckoning to the Lord for all their souls – and indeed for their own as well. In this way, while always fearful of the future examination of the shepherd about the sheep entrusted to them and careful about the state of others’ accounts, they become concerned also about their own, and while helping others to amend by their warnings, they achieve the amendment of their own faults.*

The first words here might seem to hold a contradiction. Surely concern for the temporal is to care for others? We need to eat, we need clothing, shelter, money, good health, an education. However, The rule points us to the Gospel understanding that “too great a concern” for these things is to neglect the welfare of the whole of us (Matt 19:19-26). We are temporal *and* spiritual. The temporal is the place where we grow in spirit. As we do this together, we support each other while worry recedes.

We soon come to see that many a want is dressed up as a need. The uncovering of this can be painful. Do I really need those new shoes, that new phone? The practicalities of communal life soon show us what is important: a new dinner table or a new television, a new car or my children’s education? The presence of those with us who are wise in spirit helps us to see where we are blind to the kingdom. The kingdom is that way of being conscious in the world that realises and embraces how little we actually need.

The abbot is never above their fellow community members; they are on the same journey as everyone else. And conversion is not done in isolation, not done apart from others. We become love in Christ by loving, and we can only deepen in love as we love. The abbot models for us that Christian spirituality is thoroughly human. Only together are we healed enough to grow in love.

Loving is the forgetting of self. God as self-emptying (forgetting) love shows us this. We need to be on a journey of healing and transformation to realise this. The journey is the experiencing of this healing and transformation. We follow the abbot, and other leaders, on this journey as we all walk together. Our originality, our naturalness, is of this love. Together we journey back to this original way of being.

Consequently, community is a place of revelation and struggle, honesty and deception, joy and pain. The balanced abbot has space in themselves for all of this so that community may be a catalyst for a balanced human journey for all. Community can be a gentle and compassionate place to ‘crash and burn’ and an encouraging place to thrive. Both are necessary. For many, crashing and burning is part of the journey into thriving. Wisdom knows this.

Seeking the kingdom is about charting a course into honesty. Community is learning the gentle art of honesty: how and when to be honest with both ourselves and others. At the heart of this we have our common meditation. Meditation is the still and silent practice of honesty. In community we discover that “we cannot meditate and not be honest[[1]](#footnote-1)”.

Gentleness is so important. John Main describes gentleness as perhaps The Rule’s “most important characteristic”[[2]](#footnote-2). It is easy to lose sight of this as we repeatedly get lost in egocentric hardness and performance. We often look at the words of the rule through the eyes of the ego and miss its gentle spirit. Growing in gentleness is growing in Christ. An abbot, as an example of Christ for all, is gently and tenderly full of care. In this they show us what it is to be in Christ and of Christ. To be gentle in Christ is to forget ourselves; in this forgetting we are most ourselves.

Brothers and sisters, even if someone is caught in some fault, those of you who are spiritual should set that person right in a spirit of gentleness; and watch yourselves that you are not tempted too. Carry one other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ. Someone who thinks himself important, when he is not, deceives himself; but each one should examine his own work and so have cause for boasting for himself, and not for anyone else. Each one has a personal load to carry. (Gal 6:1-5, RNJB)

1. Laurence Freeman [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ref? [↑](#footnote-ref-2)