**Chapter 3: Summoning the Monks for Counsel**

January 16, May 15, September 16

*As often as anything important is to be done in the monastery, the abbot shall call the whole community together and explain themselves what the business is; and after hearing the advice of the monks, let them ponder it and follow what they judge to be the wiser course. The reason why we have said all should be called for counsel is that the Lord often reveals what is better to the younger. The monks, for their part, are to express their opinions with all humility, and not presume to defend their own views obstinately. The decision is rather the abbots to make, so that when they have determined what is more prudent, all must obey. Nevertheless, just as it is proper for disciples to obey their master, so it is becoming for the master on their part to settle everything with foresight and fairness.*

Community, like all human undertakings, is not immune to what can adversely motivate opinion: perhaps the seeking of status, stubbornness, a certain anxiety, the hidden insecurity of a personality not enough loved (among others). As we have seen, what is important is that the abbot and enough of the community are wise in their own humanity and in the divine love-life. It follows then that wise leadership consult all the community before important decisions. Why?

The rule tells us here that if leadership is wise it will not presume all wisdom. Wise leadership accepts its limitations and seeks the wisdom of others before deciding. It is not authoritarian; it is discerning and discreet, sensing when the Spirit is moving in discussion and decision. Discretion can also sense an opinion rising from an isolated mindset, one that may not have the common good in focus. Discretion also knows when to leave something undecided, and when to approach people by themselves.

What is of most importance is that the abbot explain the matter at hand well to all, giving a humble and honest account of their understanding and suggestions. This is a model for all to follow.

The younger among us often have little or no agenda, or at least are less under the influence of hidden motivations. They can see and say things that someone caught in these things can miss or perhaps refuse to see and say. Younger, of course, is not simply an age thing. We can be ‘young at heart’. We can develop through life from the naive innocence of a child to the wise innocence of an elder. During times of counsel all can be touched and shaped by the wise among us – whoever they are.

When listening has been done well enough there naturally comes the time for decision and action. Here this is done in the context of a communal life. It is in this communal life that the uniqueness of each person can be found and expressed. While consensus in an important decision may or may not be found, what is of more importance is that the life of the community continue to grow in the welcoming and acceptance of all its members.

There will be times when we will be on the ‘wrong end’ of a communal decision. This is a time of discovery, a time to experience the reasons why we hold ideas tightly; a time to experience attachment. Perhaps at these times, it may be good to recall our original decision for community – when we first decided to be a part of this human and spiritual enterprise before us. When we become a part of something bigger to which our hearts were drawn and given – a marriage, a family, an order, a parish, a congregation, a friendship – what we forgo can become a way to grow in love for others. We become more deeply a part of an ongoing event of (other-centred) love.

Community is both personal and communal. The personal without the communal becomes individualistic, the communal without the personal becomes communalistic. Community teaches us that it is possible for the personal and the communal to be in a harmony. The reality may be that, at any one time, one or the other may need to take the lead. What is important is that neither are lost to each other.

We discover that meditating as a community helps with the tempering of mind around ideas and opinions. There is a risk that identity invested in ideas can become ideology. Ideology, held rigidly, can go against the spirit of the rule and the Gospels. Together, as we consistently practice giving attention to that deeper place of wisdom within us, we discover ourselves letting go of ideas as identity. We can then accept decisions that have the communal life as a focus, decisions that we may have had more difficulty with before our experience of meditating together.

So then, as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, now live your lives in him, be rooted in him and built up on him, strengthened by the faith you have been taught and overflowing with thanksgiving. Make sure that no one captivates you by philosophy or by an empty deceit of human tradition, that is according to the principles of this world and not of Christ. (Colossians 2:6-8, RNJB)