**Chapter 1: The Kinds of Monastics**

January 8, May 9, September 8

*There are clearly four kinds of monastics. First, there are the cenobites, that is to say, those who belong to a monastery, where they serve under a rule and an abbot.*

*Second, there are anchorites or hermits, who have come through the test of living in a monastery for a long time, and have passed beyond the first fervour of monastic life. Thanks to the help and guidance of many, they are now trained to fight against the devil. They have built up their strength and go from the battle line in the ranks of the monks to the single combat of the desert. Self-reliant now, without the support of another, they are ready with God’s help to grapple single-handed with the vices of body and mind.*

*Third, there are the sarabaites, the most detestable kind of monks, who with no experience to guide them, no rule to try them as “gold is tried in a furnace” (Prov. 27:21), have a character as soft as lead. Still loyal to the world by their actions, they clearly lie to God by their tonsure. Two or three together, or even alone, without a shepherd, they pen themselves up in their own sheepfolds, not the Lord’s. Their law is what they like to do, whatever strikes their fancy. Anything they believe in and choose, they call holy; anything they dislike, they consider forbidden.*

*Fourth and finally, there are the monks called gyrovagues, who spend their entire lives drifting from region to region, staying as guests for three or four days in different monasteries. Always on the move, they never settle down, and are slaves to their own will and gross appetites. In every way they are worse than the sarabaites.*

*It is better to keep silent than to speak of all these and their disgraceful way of life. Let us pass them by, then, and with the help of the Lord, proceed to draw up a plan for the strong kind, the cenobites.*

After the words of the prologue, full of persuasion and invitation, we are presented with what could be seen as a sketch, or a summary, of commitment. Benedict presents us with the reality of human commitment in a monastic context. He asks, what kind of monastic do you want to be? More generally the question could be: what kind of contemplative do you want to be? Another question in this chapter is: what do you want your relationship with the world to be?

What is meant by ‘the world’? Perhaps a different name might be ‘the system’. This system is one that does not have a commitment to love as its base. The system serves itself; its way of operation is competition, it sees vulnerability and compassion as weakness. It is a worldview of individualised self-interest, one that doesn’t understand the true nature of sacrifice.

At the heart of sacrifice is the decision to allow love to have its way with us. Sacrifice is central to the ‘Copernican Revolution’ of the soul. Rather than have ego at the centre, which is what the system stimulates, sacrifice is an action that removes ego from the centre, putting there instead a love that by its nature is selfless. This is both at once revolutionary and normal.

Love asks of us a full yes to the ways in which love is revealed. Only then can this revolution of love happen in us. The ego wants to say yes on its terms. It does not trust enough that love will be enough.

The cenobite commits with a full yes. The hermit is one mature in this yes. The sarabaite and the gyrovague are at best lukewarm; their yes is conditional, changeable, unstable.

The cenobite is saying yes to a different system of relationships: the community; a structure that is there to safeguard and promote love (the rule), and the guidance of those who have lived this system and structure (the abbot, among others). The community, the Rule, and community leadership provide a counter-balance to the worldly system, indeed an alternative. It is an alternative that, in its compassionate commitment to other-centredness, provides a way of life that is bigger than the ego and draws the heart.

Perhaps, over time, in our commitments we can feel at one time enthused, another time lukewarm, and then ready to leave. If our first yes was wise enough and from the heart, maybe we are coming to see that commitment cannot be based on transient emotion or loose thinking. In our commitments desire is tried and motivation is purified. As this happens our ‘inner hermit’ is developed: someone who is mature in relationship, enough to stay the course of loving even while the inner life buffets.

The challenge of a full yes shapes character. Away from support and guidance it can be easy to walk a line of least resistance, a line that does not require self-reflection or asks us to be accountable, in kindness and compassion, to each other. A commitment to others, our fellow humanity with their unique characters and gifts, people who challenge us, creating tension in and among us – this keeps us honest. In this challenge and tension grace refines character; its fruit is a depthing in love already with us.

Therefore from now on we regard no one from a human point of view. Even if we have known Christ from a human point of view, we now no longer do so. So that anyone who is in Christ is a new creation. The old things have passed away; see they have become new. (2 Cor 5:16-17, RNJB)