**Chapter 2: Qualities of the Abbot**

January 9, May 10, September 9

*To be worthy of the task of governing a monastery, the abbot must always remember what their title signifies and act as a superior should. They are believed to hold the place of Christ in the monastery, since they are addressed by a title of Christ, as the Apostle indicates: “You have received the spirit of adoption of children by which we exclaim, abba, father (Rom. 8:15). Therefore, the abbot must never teach or decree or command anything that would deviate from the Lord’s instructions. On the contrary, everything they teach and command should, like the leaven of divine justice, permeate the minds of their disciples.*

What does it mean to hold the place of Christ? It is not a place from which the abbot boasts, from which the abbot draws attention to themselves. The contemplative stance is all about attention moving into silence, so the contemplative leader is one who is soaked in this silence. Silence, alive and loving, is the home of divine justice.

A contemplative leader knows in their bones that life begins and ends with the ongoing decision of abandonment to grace. A meditation practice is this decision’s centre.

The more we practice meditation the more we come to know in our own thoughtless experience that God’s justice is mercy; that God’s life is a love we are made for, not one that we make.

The abandonment to the gift of God’s life with us is the task of all of us. This is what inner conversion is: the changing of our minds into Christ by grace. Christians can become, each uniquely, Christians – ‘little Christs’. The leader is walking this road of conversion, one step ahead and one step behind, calling all the community to walk with them.

A leader in grace is patient and is growing in patience. Their leadership has at its heart the space required for the conversion of all community members. Their touch is light, their presence significant, and their firmness is full of a compassion that cannot repress mercy.

The abbot is hands on and hands off at the same time. They allow room for others to grow in responsibility – to themselves, the community, and all humanity. An anxious and rigid leader cannot do this; they end up filling the space with their own control. A community has a life of its own that is created by all its members. A contemplative leader does not attempt change via manipulation and exploitation.

Community is about waking up to the possibilities that follow from being less reactive and more present to relationship and example. Like the abbot, the community follows in the way of Christ: tend to your own example and accept the challenge of relationship. Jesus was led by relationships, and by his Father *in* relationships. This is our challenge.

Relationship means being open to another point of view. It follows that others will do things differently and not to our timetable. However, community and humanity cannot grow if there is no opportunity for unique expression. With this opportunity comes growth in a respect for the whole life of others – even if what they do or what they might ask of us makes no immediate sense. Sense comes as we negotiate, as we give and take together. And at times we defer to the deeper wisdom that leadership has; then we grow in something that we did not know of.

And so community is also the chance to mature in self-leadership. This could be called the development of our ‘inner abbot’. This ‘inner abbot’ is the permeation of our mind with Christ, the Christ-self. This permeation happens as we live that death to the wants of boasting, control, and survival.

As the chosen of God, then, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves in heartfelt compassion, in generosity and humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with one another; forgive one other if anyone has a complaint against another. Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you do the same. Over all these, put on love, the bond of perfection. And may the peace of Christ reign in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. Always be grateful. (Col 3:12-15, RNJB)