

OUR FAMILY NEWS



For Oblates of St. Bede Abbey, Peru, Illinois

Summer 2012



Welcome All Guests as Christ

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All arriving guests are to be received as Christ, for he will say: I was a stranger and you welcomed me. RB 53

Despite our familiarity with the Rule of Benedict, few of us, I suspect, confronted by strangers at our door asking to be taken in, would respond by inviting them in, praying with them, washing their hands and feet and giving them a meal and a bed. What would we do? Direct them to a nearby motel? Drive them to the local homeless shelter? Offer them some money for a meal? Would we even open the door, or would we, instead, call 911 and report suspicious “outsiders” in our neighborhood?

True, the vast majority of contemporary travellers no longer make a habit of arriving unannounced and expecting to be put up, even at a monastery. Yet, like the rest of the Rule, Chapter 53, “On the Reception of Guests,” has an underlying theology that holds lessons for contemporary monastics and their oblates. With the help of two Benedictine scholars—Aquina-ta Böckmann and Terrence Kardong—I want to reflect on this theology, focusing on the words *all* and *receive*, and to consider how it applies to our lives. What would happen if we really did receive all we encountered as Christ?

Kardong notes that although “hospitality is a bedrock monastic principle,” none of the other Rules Benedict might have considered when writing his suggest that monks receive all guests. In fact, he points out, “only clerics and monks are welcome” in the monastery governed by the Rule of the Master (421). Böckmann states that the word *all* “is given special emphasis” and notes that Benedict repeats it three more times in the passage. She calls his use of the word “astonishing and radical” (173). Benedict was not naïve; he knew such hospitality would be difficult. The majority of guests would be poor; some would be freeloaders unwilling to lend a hand to contribute to their upkeep; some would be the gyrovagues Benedict warns against in Chapter 1 of the Rule; and, given the political realities of the religious wars and heresies of Benedict’s time, some might be dangerous enemies. Yet, monks are to extend to all strangers the hospitality they would extend to Christ. If how we love ourselves is the measure of how we are to love our neighbor, then “our love for Christ is to be the measure of how much we are to love strangers” (174).

Kardong points out that Benedict considers the monastery “the house of God,” so that in welcoming the guests, Benedict “wishes the community to be well aware of its own humble status as ‘strangers and guests’ in the house of the Lord.” Both he and Böckmann draw attention to the word *suscipere* that Benedict chooses to express “receiving” or “welcoming” in the chapter title. The word, Böckmann notes, can mean “to take up, to take upon oneself, to take care, to support,” and forms of the word are used seven times in this chapter in connection with “Christ, guest, charity” (173). Both she and Kardong note that it is the same verb new community members use when being received into the community. The language here, Kardong states, “almost forces us to remember our profession” (435). The monks whose pleas for admission were received favorably now live as houseguests of the Lord. In offering hospitality to strangers, those same monks “are merely extending the merciful hospitality” they received from the Lord (435).

Through our hospitality, Böckmann says, “we move toward strangers, letting them come in so that they, through our love and friendliness, become our friends.” Friendship, however, can hold more risks than the stranger at the door. Jesuit theologian Michael Himes claims “friendship is the essence of what it means to exist.” It involves our physical, intellectual and emotional being. We come to exist in our friendship, and, thus, in giving friendship we “lose our life in order to find it” (Mt 10:39). Inviting someone in to ourselves in this way, Böckmann notes, “presupposes that we are at home with ourselves” (164). Sometimes, the poor person, the one to whom “particularly diligent care and concern is to be shown,” can be a special problem in this regard “because we have not yet accepted poverty, abandonment, and our own need for help as a reality” (180). We can easily see from this how “the sixth and seventh steps of humility, where the monastic sees him- or herself as nothing and accepts it, are the preconditions for meeting others with



open hands and in an attitude of receptivity” (205-6).

Offering hospitality to *all* means opening to “something uncertain and unexpected.” Practicing Benedictine hospitality is a challenge for the “control freak” or the Type A personality. Showing true hospitality to unexpected guests, Böckmann warns, requires us “to renounce the desire to fix and anticipate every detail” (174). When we welcome everyone as Christ we are welcoming the God of surprises who arrives when we least expect, sometimes disturbs or upsets us, perhaps even shatters our established system. “He is always larger than we think and different from our concepts.” When we refuse to answer, however, or only peek timidly from behind a curtain to judge whether or not it is safe to open the door of our home or of ourselves to the one who is knocking, we are “in danger of missing Christ’s coming” (175).

The details regarding guests in Chapter 53 show Benedict’s concern “to preserve quiet, prayer and peace in the community” (199). The abbot and those specifically assigned by him to care for guests are to interact with the strangers, but no other monk “is to associate

or speak in any way” with the guest “unless he is commanded to do so” (v. 23). Some guests, Kardong notes, are attracted to the monastery precisely because they “find us spiritually attractive and wish to know more about us” (435). Every monastic community must find its own fitting way of keeping the tension inherent in the reception of guests from becoming disruption of the wrong kind; every one of us must do the same. Practicing hospitality does not mean we must abandon our obligations to family and employers or our relationships with other friends. Once a guest has shown a willingness to join us by accepting our “kiss of peace,” we make room for him or her in our lives, but our relationship with that person is one of mutual giving and receiving.

Böckmann notes that the instructions Benedict gives “need not be fulfilled literally on the practical level” but should rather “inspire our imagination as examples and indicate how we ought to act in other circumstances” (171). With that in mind, how might we who are unlikely to have many unexpected guests—unless we’re living in a popular vacation spot—see Chapter 53 as applicable to our lives? For example, what is our attitude toward undocumented aliens? We have gospel examples, of course, in the impoverished couple turned away from the inns in Bethlehem, the couple who later had to take their young son and flee as political refugees to Egypt.

Less politically charged is our attitude to new people in our parish, on our street or in our social circle. Do we risk opening ourselves to friendship? Do we tend first to their needs, listening to their story, ready to be surprised, willing, perhaps, to be disturbed? If they are “poor” or “different,” do we show them genuine special concern prompted by humble acknowledgement of our own neediness and dependence on God? What about encounters with strangers that do not involve our greeting them but their greeting us? Consider, for example, the person who finally answers us after we’ve waited on hold for consumer support or the clerk in a convenience store on the high-

way. Each of these meetings is an opportunity to enter into a brief friendship with a stranger. Do we smile, even over the telephone line, and say silently, “I am about to talk to Christ”?

Böckmann notes that “all the instructions in Chapter 53 are obligatory in the sense that from them we can infer the quality, radicality and direction of our actions” (171). We must never forget, however, that one day Christ will ask us, “I was a stranger. Did you welcome me?”

—Kathy Martin

Sources

Böckmann, Aquinata. *Perspectives on the Rule of St. Benedict*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press. 2005.

Kardong, Terrence G. *Benedict’s Rule: A Translation and Commentary*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press. 1996.

YouTube video. “The last lecture with Fr. Michael Himes.” <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hs3UCUqy8cg>>



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We welcome your submissions to this publication, either instructive or reflective, whether prose or poetry. They should in some way relate to the *Rule of St. Benedict*, Benedictine spirituality, and/or the oblate program. The editor reserves the rights to choose material for publication and to edit as necessary.

UPCOMING EVENTS

The annual oblate picnic is set for

Sunday, July 15, from noon to 3:00 P.M.

in the shelter across from the Academy.

An on-site retreat for oblates conducted by Abbot Philip is scheduled for the weekend of July 20-22. For information call Br. Nathaniel at (815) 223-3140, ext. 233.

Chicago oblate Mary Angelastro passed away in April. Kindly remember her in your prayers.

Rolling Meadows oblate Lew O'Donnell, who for so long has been such an animated presence at our meetings, has transferred the stability of his oblation to Marmion Abbey in Aurora because of the difficulties of travel. Kindly keep him in your prayers as well.

A Letter from the Director of Oblates

Dear Friends,

I would be much amiss if I did not recommend to you, as a follow-up to Kathy's trenchant essay, a book written by her daughter, Kathleen Martin, entitled *Kamakwie—Finding Peace, Love, and Injustice in Sierra Leone*. This memoir of a several-week stay in Sierra Leone gives more than a glimpse of the global implications of the concerns voiced by Kathy, yet still from an intimate, highly personal perspective.

As I have written elsewhere of the book, "Read it and, at once, let your heart break and your spirit soar."

Br. Nathaniel Grossmann, O.S.B.

Abbey Summer Prayer Schedule (May 28–Aug. 11)

Visitors are welcome to join the monks for Mass and for the hours of the Divine Office. Conventual Mass is celebrated on the first level of the abbey church, the hours of the Divine Office on the second level. During the summer, the monks' schedule is as follows.

6:00 A.M.	Morning Prayer*
8:15 A.M.	Conventual Mass**
12:00 Noon	Midday Prayer
5:30 P.M.	Evening Prayer***
7:20 P.M.	Night Prayer****



* on Sunday, 7:00 A.M.

** on Sunday, 10:00 A.M.

*** on Saturday, Evening Vigil at 7:20 P.M.

**** on Saturday, Evening Vigil

