

### III

## *Living with the Contradictions*

*'run while you have the light of life' Prol 13*

The Rule of St Benedict addresses itself to us, each of us, just as we are. St Benedict understands human nature, its strengths and weaknesses, limitations and potential. He respects the mystery that each person is, and the result of this is that the thrust of the Rule is never towards dictating, rather it is towards the inner disposition of the heart. This is an approach which follows from his firm understanding that each of us is a highly complex being, and that allowance must be made for this.

When a novice enters the monastic community and lays the vows on the altar, the prayer is always *Suscipe me*, accept me, O Lord. These are wonderful words that I too can come back to, time and again, as a prayer for myself: accept me, O Lord, just as I am, in my frailty, my inadequacy, my contradictions, my confusion. Accept me in my complexity, with all those discordant currents that pull me in so many directions. Accept all of this, and help me so to live with what I am that what I am may become my way to God. Accept the tensions and help me to hold them together, so that I may learn to live fully, freely, wholly, not torn apart but finding that balance

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and harmony that will allow me to discover my point of inner equilibrium.



I suspect it is true of all of us that the older we grow the more urgent it becomes that we learn to live with these discords within ourselves, and live with them in such a way that we are neither fragmented nor exhausted; not succumbing to lassitude or depression but rather learning how to hold tensions together and let them become powers for good, powers to liberate and affirm us, powers to release the energy to allow us to run the way to God that is St Benedict's concern in the prologue to the Rule: "Run while you have the light of life . . . Run on the path of God's commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love."

What I have gained from the written text of the Rule has been made more vivid and immediate for me by the way in which the themes addressed by the Rule are reflected in Benedictine monastic buildings themselves. Living for ten years under the shadow of Canterbury cathedral has furnished me with images that have slowly worked themselves into my subconscious, have fed me and sustained me and above all coloured my understanding of the Rule and of the life to which it gives rise. Two images in particular seem illuminating. In the crypt, built in the twelfth century when St Anselm was abbot and archbishop, the massive romanesque pillars bear amazing carved capitals. The four sides of one show



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a succession of scenes: on the first, a carefree jester throws a fish into a bowl as he perches on another's head; on the second, a lion, an amiable creature with a curling tail, smiles an innocent, warm smile. On the third side the mood changes: here we find strange, devouring creatures that feel like elemental forces at work attempting to swallow or destroy one another. Finally, on the fourth side there is a double-headed monster combining male and female features. Here is the contradiction between the light and the dark, the masculine and the feminine, the life-enhancing and the life-destroying. This portrayal was put here, in this holy place, by men who were not afraid to carve what they knew and present it to God in the heart of their monastic crypt. I find here a very simple message that we all need to hear: being committed to God is not about being nice. It is about being real.



The second image comes from the vault of the nave, built towards the end of the Middle Ages. Stand beneath that triumph of late Gothic building and you find pillar and arch, rib and vault, all brought together in one great harmonious unity, each separate and individual part linked both with the other elements and with the whole. Here is the Pauline analogy of the body of Christ spelt out in stone. Here is a statement in the structure of the church itself of that common life experienced by the medieval Benedictine community and well described in a sermon

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by one of its thirteenth-century abbots “Being many we are one body, members of one another. And one spirit gives life to our whole body through the members and parts, and brings about a mutual peace . . .”

But to discover the secret of this harmonious unity, this peace and concord, one has to climb the hidden stairways and explore the space between the stone vaults and the roofs above. Here is thrust and counter-thrust. Here is never-ending conflict. The high vaults strive to push the walls outwards; the flying buttresses strive to push them inwards. Here are columns, arches, walls all locked in unceasing combat. This great cathedral is maintained, and has been maintained for centuries, through the interplay and interdependence of contradictory forces, the unremitting pull of opposites.

The keystone is firm at the point of equilibrium.  
The boss is still at the heart of the tensions.



If there is a single reason why the Benedictine way of life has remained dynamic across the centuries, I suspect it is because the Rule carries within itself this same ability to hold together opposing forces, conflicting tensions. I believe that the Rule is able to feed the divergent streams within each of us because it is itself made up of divergent streams. It is precisely here that its fecundity lies, as does also that of my own humanity; the riches of my own make-up



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depend upon allowing these streams to work dynamically within me.

Living in a cave at Subiaco, St Benedict knew the solitary life of a hermit for many years before founding his community of monks at Monte Cassino. Here is something profoundly important for all of us. Unless and until I first learn to respect my own solitude, revere my own identity, recognize the mystery that I myself am, I cannot respect that same solitude in others, revere their own identity, and recognize them for the mystery that they are. The harmonious interaction of any individual, as of any community, demands a strong affirmation of both principles. If one is weak the other will dominate; if both are weak the result will be inaction rather than interaction. Just as in any community there will be both sorts of people, the solitary and the communal, so also each one lives a common life and yet also requires time apart, some form of withdrawal. It is the recognition and affirmation of both which allows me fully to realize the extent to which I am separate and alone, and yet also profoundly connected to others in brotherhood and sisterhood.



The holding together of body, mind and spirit is one of the most basic of the tensions in the Benedictine way of life. The Rule tells us that we are made up of these three elements, that we go to God – and also achieve our own full humanity – through recognizing and respecting the role of each element.

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This balanced way of living was something written into the daily and hourly routine (horarium) of the monastery; time for work, for study, and above all time for prayer. It promotes rhythm and balance, a pattern of alternating activity, for which I am deeply grateful because it challenges me to become a full person and a whole person. I must learn to respect the whole of myself. If each of these elements is accepted, honoured and enjoyed, each can become a way of reaching God as well as of becoming the integrated human being God is calling me to be.



But then I encounter another contradiction. The Benedictine vow of stability calls me to stand still, to stand firmly planted not on any plot of ground (which is likely to be impossible) but within myself, not running away from who I am. Yet in the vow of *conversatio morum* (which literally translated means “conversion of manners” or “conversion of life”) I am presented with the necessity of living open to continual conversion, ready to grow and change and move on. On the one hand I find that I must stay still; on the other, that I need continually to change. As I try actually to live in this way I find that here I encounter a fundamental tension that I know I can never expect to escape or evade, but one which answers a deep need in me, so that simultaneously I stand firm and yet also I move on.



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In the Prologue St Benedict makes it clear that he has unshaken confidence in my use of my natural gifts and free will to serve God: my particular gifts are the actual medium through which God acts on me. Yet he is telling me that I cannot do anything good unless God first turns to me, calls me, extends his grace to me – reminding me that I am a totally dependent creature, my nature powerless without God's grace. Here again I am clearly presented with a tension that runs throughout my life. I am nothing without God; it is his grace that calls me and upholds me. Yet my human nature is good, and God looks to me for the activity that will make use of my gifts. Again, I believe that if I can enter into this paradox and incorporate both these elements into my life I shall escape that passivity that encourages me to do nothing at all and hand everything over to God, or that terrifying compulsion of over-activity that comes from reliance upon my unaided self.



Now from the interplay of these contrasting elements, and from the determination not to let one dominate, comes a vigorous interaction of all which brings with it energy. And in a world in which we see so frequently on the one hand energy directed in so many different directions that it is totally disseminated into some quite frenetic activity, and on the other hand inaction, sometimes to the point of paralysis, it is good to be confronted by the Rule, and by the energy which diffuses the Rule.

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For St Benedict does confront us right at the start with the marvellous, challenging and invigorating Prologue. He addresses us all, and calls out to us all with a sense of urgency. There is urgency in Christ's call to us (the Lord calls out and lifts up his voice again), and the urgency which is expected from us in our response (it is a battle and it is also a race: there is nothing passive here). It is time to rouse ourselves from the point to which we have drifted through the sloth of disobedience. It is high time to get up, high time for us to arise from sleep. We must open our eyes. We have above all to run, a word which he uses time and time again.

Run while you have the light of life.  
Run on the path of God's commandment.  
We must run and do now what will profit  
us for ever



We must run on, press forward all the time. And here St Benedict presents us with yet another tension. He tells us time and again that it is today that is essential, that it is today which gives us the opportunity, the time and the place for our encounter with Christ. But he is also pointing us forward to a consummation in the future. So, simultaneously with this insistence that we should live fully now comes this vibrant and restless sense of movement and of growth which points us on all the time to our heavenly home, to the place where we really in the



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depth of our being most long to be. "Are you hastening toward your heavenly home?" he asks in the final chapter.

I find here a mysterious sense of time. I am told about patience and perseverance, about waiting quietly, about living totally in the moment. Yet I am also told about the need to run. Sometimes I feel as though I am being asked to be one of the disciples, leaving everything and rushing forward to follow Christ. Sometimes I feel as though I am being asked to be Mary at the foot of the Cross, standing and waiting. But again I know that I have to hold both together; I have to run and I have also to wait. I also know St Benedict would tell me that ultimately it is only love that makes sense of time. "As we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God's commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delights of love."



It becomes clear that what St Benedict is asking of me, on the one hand, is to live a life of love and service to others, of hospitality which in its widest sense means reaching out to others because I see Christ in everyone. But on the other hand I am also to pay attention to my own need for solitude; to keep "enclosure", which in its widest sense means place and time for withdrawal; to find above all time for contemplative prayer. For what the Rule discloses is a life in which prayer and the constant awareness of the presence of God are never lived out at the

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expense of concern for the demands of ordinary daily life, of attention both to things and to people. This requires of me nothing less than holding on to a contemplative centre, a heart of prayer in the midst of my busy daily life.



There is one further paradox, the ultimate one, that I am asked to live out: the paschal mystery, Christ's death and resurrection. Dying and rebirth is the most fundamental, the most mysterious paradox of all, so mysterious that I shall never come to any full understanding of it in this life. St Benedict tells me to keep death daily before my eyes. Yet Easter is the pivotal point of the Benedictine life, as it is of any Christian life.

Unless I face the darkness I cannot experience the light.

Unless I face death I cannot know new life.



As I attempt to live out all these various contradictions day by day, I find it at once easy and manageable, and totally demanding. Again surely that is as it should be, and actually what I would really wish. For until tension enters my life I feel no need to become more than what I am. Until I am stretched I shall not grow. Often it is very painful; often I would prefer to stay with whatever makes the least



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demands on me. Yet since I know in my heart of hearts that I grow by opposites, not by simple progression along a single line, I welcome the juxtaposition of two texts right at the start of the Rule; the promise that “the way will be narrow” and the promise that “my burden is light”. St Benedict does not attempt to suppress the opposition between them. Instead he shows us how they will be reconciled when he quotes from Psalm 118: “I have run the way of your commandments, for you have enlarged my heart.” Here then are two contrary affirmations brought together by this subjective solution, by the inner disposition, which is love.

And here at last I touch on the key to everything else. I can say two things about the Rule of St Benedict.

It is all about love.

It points me to Christ.

Perhaps in the end these two statements are no more than two expressions of the same truth. Ultimately the whole meaning and purpose of the Rule is simply “Prefer nothing to the love of Christ”.



Christ is the cardinal point through which everything in the monastery passes: time and place and things and persons, all ordered by Christ. Everything gains its meaning and its significance in and through Christ.

The Christ-centredness of the Rule and of the life

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to which it gives rise is overwhelming. Christ stands at the head of every avenue. The way of St Benedict is pervaded with the idea of sacramental encounter with Christ, in liturgy and office, in material things, in the circumstances of daily life, above all in people.

Christ is the beginning and the end, the ground of my being and the goal of my seeking. With Christ all things become possible; without Christ nothing makes sense.

When St Benedict uses that simple phrase “for the love of Christ” he is saying it all, summing up where the whole Rule is leading us. Everything points to that figure of Christ asking to be received, listened to, loved, followed. In the Rule St Benedict is giving us practical help towards creating space for the presence of Christ in our lives. He offers us the opportunity of finding Christ, of experiencing his love. He is showing us the Easter Christ, present to us now, who knows human strength and weakness, joy and pain, and in that humanity reaches out to our own humanity.



This Christ is a man who himself lived with tension and contradiction and inner conflict.

He is a man surrounded by friends who yet withdraws to be apart in the desert.

He is a son and yet he separates himself from his family and asks “who is my mother and who are my brothers?”



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He stays alone with himself through long nights of prayer but still journeys on on a road that he knows will bring him to suffering and to death.

He is the redeemer who on the Cross holds together the vertical, pointing towards God, and the horizontal, arms stretched out to the world.

In Christ all things will be brought together.

In Christ all things will be well.



*'In Christ all things are held together'. Making this a prayer of thanksgiving, rejoicing and trust, I say it to myself time and time and time again.*