

The Solemnity of St. Benedict

by Abbot David Altman, OCSO

What characterizes all of our lives is that we are receivers. We have received and continue to receive the gifts of our existence, our lives, our educations, our social environments, our faith. What determines the quality of our lives, is what we decide to keep and hold, what we want to value.

Our lives show what we have chosen to value. We think and speak and act out of our knowledge and understanding, and we impart to people around us what we have taken to ourselves. They too are always receivers and keepers of what they experience, and they experience us.

The first object of consideration for everyone's knowledge and understanding ought to be where they received all the gifts freely given. Gifts don't come from nowhere or nothing. Like everything else nothing can only give what it has, which is nothing. Only something or someone as good or better than what He gives, can be the giver of all gifts we have.

This is why the wisdom literature in the Old Testament is constantly trying to direct the thoughts and attention of readers to the creating God. People limit their horizons, they limit their vision to created gifts, as if that's all there was. No matter how good they are, created elements are limited in their ability to satisfy, and they cannot give life beyond this one. That's why even some of the most brilliant individuals among humankind are the most foolish. They refuse to see beyond their present lives, and so they live for this life alone. When the inevitable disappointments come, they are devastating, because people have no recourse to anything for support except the life of their bodies.

We are obliged to be thankful in prayer, daily, for the faith that gives us the fullness of knowledge and understanding. Our awareness of the meaning of life enables and prompts us to work, not for our own selfish time-bound interests, but for God's eternal interests and ours. His primary interest in us is not for a life that's passing behind us all the time. God has his unlimited vision on our eternal life of the future, and He prompts us, more or less severely, to join our vision with His, so that He can join our lives to His.

It is encouraging look at ourselves early on in our spiritual lives, say ten years ago, or twenty or fifty. Whatever direction we chose, everyone is much further down that road. We've made progress. Here is motivation to acquire more progress. There's more life to be acquired. When we look at our beginnings, we can see the truth that God chose the weak and lowly so that our gifts of faith, wisdom, and accomplishment, are from God's power. We have nothing of our own to talk about except God, and so we ought to confess frequently that we waste much of our time, we waste God's gift of time, when we fail to place ourselves before the Lord.

In this connection of personal obligation before God, there are degrees of attainment. Some people aim for the least degree of accomplishment, and that's all they get. Do they finish up with eternal life? Possibly, through the mercy of God. They show how poor their lives of love really are. Their love of God is adulterated so much with love of self, that their real love almost dies, and sometimes does. God doesn't need to condemn mediocrity. Mediocrity condemns itself.

We have a promise of life that is designed to bring us beyond ourselves, beyond this life. After all, the God of infinite wisdom and love challenges us to cross an infinite distance, but with our limited wisdom and love. Even a long life's work cannot cross infinity. Only infinity can cross itself. Infinity is crossed by itself, and infinity has in fact shared infinite life with us in Jesus, the Son of God.

In our commitment to God, it's perfectly legitimate to ask, "What's in it for me?" We rightly expect a return on our most important investments of time, energy and life. God's answer is that, in return for the complete gift of ourselves, He gives us the gift of Himself. That sounds like a fair deal, but when you consider the identities of the ones giving and receiving, you can see the incredible disproportion of the infinite reward compared to the finite effort.

Then the greatest wisdom of all is found in St. Benedict's Rule where he puts forth the minimum observances that lead to a departure from self and an arrival at God. The catch is that, however important wisdom and understanding are, they are qualities of the mind that make for faith. There's much more. We have decisions to make on the basis of our faith, and these choices are expressions of our love, which is the one unifying force between us and our divine destiny.

St. Benedict is famous for the wisdom he expressed in this Rule, which is the basis for Western monasticism. The ideas in the Rule are still important, because they lead to the two qualities of mind and heart that everyone needs in order to attain our purpose in life, union with God. We need to grow in God's wisdom and love.

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