

## SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



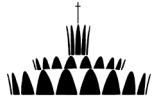
### **The Charism of the Monk: to Share in the Sufferings of Christ**

“Persevering in the Lord’s teaching in the monastery until death, we shall through patience share in the sufferings of Christ that we may deserve also to share in his kingdom.” In this celebrated passage, a passage whose central importance is indicated by the fact that it forms the conclusion of the Prologue of the Rule, Saint Benedict, following the entire early monastic tradition, teaches that by faithfully living the monastic life the monk will come more and more to share in the Lord’s Paschal Mystery, his Passion, Death and Resurrection, and he teaches that this is the fundamental charism of the monastic life. We may say that, just as the charism of the Dominican is to preach and to teach, just as the charism of the Jesuit is to serve the Church in whatever way is required at the time, so the charism of the monk is to share in the Paschal Mystery. This is the work of the monk, this, in the Church, is what the monk is for. Let us see a little in detail how this is so.

First, how do we share in the Passion and Death of the Lord? Both Saint Benedict, and Cassian -- and Saint Benedict is following Cassian very closely at this point -- teach that our sharing in the Passion and Death of the Lord is brought about most fundamentally by the fear of God, by obedience, and by humility. Saint Benedict starts with obedience, and his capital text on this matter is that of the third step of humility: “The third step of humility is that a man for the love of God subject himself to his superior in all obedience, imitating the Lord, of whom the apostle says: ‘He was made obedient even unto death.’” The Scriptural quotation is of course from the great passage from Philippians in which Saint Paul presents the Passion and Death of the Lord as the supreme expression of his humility and of his obedience to God the Father and to his holy will, and his Resurrection and Ascension as the reward for that humility and obedience; it is the passage which the Church chooses as the Second Reading of the Mass for Palm Sunday, read just before one of the Synoptic accounts of the Passion:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

This obedience, by which we imitate the Lord in his Passion and Death, is for Saint Benedict a step or degree of the fundamental monastic virtue of humility, the first degree of which is fear of the Lord, which causes us to want to obey the Lord’s will and



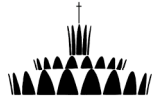
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the sacrament of that will for the monk, the will of the superior, and the second degree of which is not loving one's own will; together these two make the obedience of the third degree possible. For Saint Benedict, then, the foundation of our bearing the image of the Lord's Passion and Death is humility; humility's first degree is fear of the Lord, and that fear leads to the third degree of humility, obedience, by which our conformity to the Lord's Passion and Death is explicitly shown.

Cassian's teaching in Book IV of the *Institutes* is the same, but he starts his exposition with the fear of the Lord. "The fear of the Lord," he says, "is our cross. As then one who is crucified no longer has the power of moving or turning his limbs in any direction as he pleases, so we also ought to affix our wishes and desires -- not in accordance with what is pleasant and delightful to us now, but in accordance with the law of the Lord, where it constrains us" -- that is, in accordance with obedience. Here we have each of Saint Benedict's first three degrees of humility: the fear of the Lord, not taking pleasure in the satisfaction of one's own desires, and obedience. And for Cassian, as for Saint Benedict, underlying these is humility. For in Cassian's treatment, our first step toward humility is the fear of the Lord, and then the first two signs of humility are these: "first, that a man has all his desires mortified", and secondly, that a man "puts no trust in his own opinion, but all in the judgment of his superior, and listens eagerly and willingly to his directions."

The great cenobitic teaching of the West is, then, that the monk is fundamentally conformed to the Passion and Death of the Lord by humility and obedience, imitating Christ who, according to Saint Paul in the Letter to the Philippians, by his humility and obedience submitted even to death on the Cross. But for Saint Benedict -- and the same is true for Cassian, although we shall not pursue his teaching on this point -- there flow from humility and obedience two other great monastic virtues which as it were extend and intensify our sharing in the Passion and Death of the Lord: these are patience and perseverance. We examined what the Rule has to say about patience a few weeks ago in a Chapter for the perseverance of the novices, in which we noted that according to the Rule a chief virtue in which the novice is to be tested is patience. If we study the various passages in the Rule in which the word 'patience' or a derivative of it is used, this is what we find: first, in the chapter on the instruments of good works, we find that the monk is to bear injustices patiently (4:30), that is, injustices done him by other people -- and that means in a monastery injustices done him above all by brother monks. Then, in the text on the fourth step of humility in Chapter 7, we find again that the monk is to bear patiently "hard and contrary things and even injustices", but this time they are coming from the superior -- so it could be from the Novice Master, the Prior, the Dean, and so forth, but in the end, of course, what must chiefly be in Saint Benedict's mind as the source of the hard, contrary and even unjust things is the Abbot. Connected with this is the passage in Chapter 68 on the assignment of an impossible task in which it is prescribed that the monk who finds the assignment "altogether too much for his strength" is to "choose the appropriate moment and explain patiently to his superior the reasons why he cannot perform the task." But again, back in the passage on the fourth step of humility, the brethren are mentioned again as the source of what



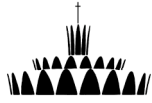
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must be borne patiently: the monk is to bear with “false brothers, endure persecution, and bless those who curse [him].” We find two other passages using the words ‘patience’ or ‘patiently’: in Chapter 38 we are told that the sick brothers must be patiently borne with, especially when they make excessive demands. And then, in the celebrated Chapter 72, on divine and fraternal charity, we are given as it were a summary statement: the brethren are to bear one another’s weaknesses of body and behavior with the greatest patience.

What we discover from these texts, then, is this: what is to be borne with patiently by the novice, and by every monk, is *his brother monk*, from the brother monk who is lowest in choir order to the brother monk who is Abbot. This brother monk can be the source of “contrary things” -- e.g., opinions different from my own about matters about which I care greatly: the proper interpretation of the teaching of the Church, the customs of the house, the liturgy, this or that practical decision before the Chapter. But further, he can also be the source of actual injustices -- and, it must be said, the case particularly mentioned is that of the superior, and of the Abbot. The brother monk can, further, be false in some way or another, he can be a persecutor of myself, he can actually curse me -- strong language, but that is the language Saint Benedict uses. And then there is the whole range of difficult things about my brother monk which are not the opinions he holds, or hard things he in one way or another inflicts on me, but just weaknesses -- of body, or of temperament over which he has no control, or indeed moral weaknesses, which don’t result in any injury to me, but which are so discouraging, so disheartening, especially when I consider that by my vow of stability I am to live with him -- no, rather, be a brother to him -- the rest of my life. No wonder then that Saint Benedict suggests, in the great passage from the end of the Prologue with which we began, that the way in which conformity to the Cross of the Lord is most visibly, although not most fundamentally, expressed is through patience: again: “Never swerving from [the Lord’s] instructions, then, but persevering in his teaching in the monastery until death, we shall *through patience* share in the sufferings of Christ that we may deserve also to share in his kingdom.”

In that same conclusion of the Prologue we have the other virtue which extends and intensifies our sharing in the Passion and Death of Jesus, and that is perseverance. Perseverance is the going on with the fear of the Lord, with humility, with obedience, with patience, the going on with this sharing in the Lord’s Passion and Death, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year. So in the Rule the question about the postulant is, does he persevere in his knocking and persist in his request; the question about the novice is, does he promise perseverance in his stability; the question about the monk is, does he persevere in sorrow and penance (25:3), does he endure persecution for the sake of justice, does he persevere in obedience in the face of hard and contrary things and even injustices; in short, does he persevere in all of this in the monastery *until death*, as Saint Benedict says, for -- and here is the great Scriptural basis which he gives for his teaching -- for “he who perseveres to the end,” says the Lord, “will be saved.” No wonder, then, that failing to keep one’s lifetime vows and



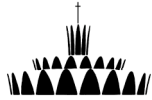
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abandoning the monastery and the monastic life is such a miserable thing, such a destruction of the meaning of one's life which the Lord had wished to give to one.

But now, if briefly and by way of gesture, we must look at the monk's sharing in the other and ascending moment of the Lord's Paschal Mystery, that is, his Resurrection and Ascension, for even on this day, especially on this day, his Passion and Death may never be meditated on without reference to his Resurrection just as, even during the Easter season, his Resurrection and Ascension may never be meditated on without reference to his glorious wounds. In the text with which we started, that of the third step of humility, there is one phrase on which we have not yet reflected: that is, that it is "*for the love of God*" that "a [monk] subjects himself to his superior in all obedience, imitating the Lord . . . ." In this text, the love of God is the motive, the driving force -- "the love of Christ urges us", as Saint Paul says -- the driving force which leads the monk to the obedience, humility, renunciation, patience and perseverance by which he shares in the Passion and Death of the Lord, and it is this love and its source and its consequences which constitute his sharing in the Resurrection of the Lord. The love of God is the motive for sharing in the Passion and Death of the Lord, but it is also the fruit of sharing in them, for, as we are told at the end of Chapter 7, it is by ascending all the steps of humility that we arrive at that "*perfect love of God which casts out all fear.*" This love is purity of heart, for, Saint Benedict tells us, when it is attained the Lord's "workman" is "now cleansed -- purified -- of vices and sins." It brings with it all virtues, for, he tells us, "through this love, all that [the monk] once performed with dread, he will now begin to observe without effort, as though naturally, from habit, no longer out of fear of hell, but out of love for Christ, good habit and delight in virtue." And of course, insofar as it is the authentic love of God, it brings with it its other component or moment, the love of neighbor in God; thus Saint Benedict constantly offers as the motive of love of neighbor the fact that Christ is in the neighbor, that the neighbor is Christ, that the brethren are all one in Christ. Finally, this love of God brings that "pure prayer" which Saint Benedict speaks of in Chapter 20, and again in Chapter 52, as the culmination of the prayer of the Divine Office and of all monastic prayer, that prayer which consists, so far as is possible in this life, in the wordless, imageless, conceptless loving contemplation or contemplative loving of God as he is in himself, the "gazing on God alone", "the feeding on the beauty and knowledge of God alone", as Cassian puts it.

All this is already an extraordinary, supernatural sharing in the Resurrection of the Lord, an extraordinary, supernatural resurrection of the soul. And therefore, it is accompanied by joy, "by the inexpressible delight of love", as Saint Benedict puts it. But there is more. For in the next step of humility, the fourth, the monk first becomes aware of the source of his love for God, and that is *God's love for him*. In this step, in which the monk perseveres in imitating Christ in his obedience even in the midst of what is difficult, contrary and full of suffering, he suddenly is given the great insight, and cries out, says Saint Benedict, in the words of Saint Paul: ". . . in all this we overcome *because of him who so greatly loved us.*" Here is the first explicit reference in the Rule to God's love for us, to the great source of our love for him, the great source of our very



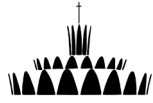
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being, of all that we are: "We love, because he first loved us," says Saint John. Now there is a true communion of love between God and the monk: the monk loves God, but the infinitely greater and deeper reality is that God loves the monk. The communion of mutual love always brings union, and so, at the summit of the monastic and Christian life, we come to that great indwelling of the Most Holy Trinity in the human being, and the human being's dwelling in God. Cassian speaks of it in these terms:

Then will be brought to realization in us that prayer of our Savior which he prayed to his Father on his disciples' behalf when he said: 'That the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and they in us.' And again: 'That all may be one, as you Father in me and I in you, that they also may be one in us.' Then that perfect love of God, by which 'he loved us first', will have also passed into our heart's disposition, and this prayer of the Lord will be fulfilled, which we believe can in no way be rendered void. This will be the case when every love, every desire, every effort, every undertaking, every thought of ours, everything that we live, that we speak, that we breathe, will be God, and when that unity which the Father now has with the Son and which the Son has with the Father will be carried over into our feeling and our spirit, so that, just as he loves us with a true and pure and indissoluble love, we too may be joined to him with a perpetual and inseparable love and so united with him that whatever we breathe, whatever we understand, whatever we speak, may be God. . . . This, then, is the goal of the monk, and this must be his whole intention -- to deserve to possess the image of future blessedness already in this life and as it were to begin to taste the pledge of that heavenly way of life and glory in this mortal body.

Human words can carry us no further. But this is a sharing in the Resurrection and Glorification of the Lord indeed, this is already the resurrection of the soul from the death of sin to the newness of life in Christ, this is already the beginning of the fullness of resurrection at the end of time. This is why Saint Benedict speaks of the joy of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit who is the Love of God, and who is within us, this is why he says that the monk's whole life should be a looking forward with the joy of spiritual desire to holy Easter, this is why the old monks spoke of already entering the Kingdom of God, of the paradise of the cloister, of the life of the angels; this is why they understood when the resurrection of the soul began already to spill over into the monk's body, as with Saint Antony, who emerged after many years from the tombs in which he had been living, now already old, but looking fresh and vigorous and youthful, and as with the old man Chaeremon, who, more than one hundred years old, was so bent with age and with constant prayer that as he moved around his hands were on the ground, but whose face shone with radiant light, like the face of an angel.



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We shall be greatly blessed if in the course of our monastic life we shall even momentarily touch these great glories. Nevertheless, by God's grace -- not by our own powers -- if only we persevere, then we are being formed daily into this image, this sacrament, of the Lord's Passion and Death and Resurrection, and, if only we persevere, then on that day we shall become fully the Mystery whose sacrament is being formed in us here. So we return to the point from which we began: the monk's specific charism is to be formed into the image of the Paschal Mystery; this is his work, under the grace of God. The days of the Sacred Triduum are, then, the monks' days in a unique way. Today we bless and thank the Lord for his saving Passion and Death, and for the share in them which he gives us. On Easter may we bless and thank him as, by his mercy and grace, we rise with him to new life.