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ISBN: 978-0-8146-3787-6

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Nickolas Kleespie, OSB
Saint John's Abbey, Collegeville, MN

Benedictine Living

Reflections for Prayer and Meditation

Kate Ritger



LITURGICAL PRESS
Collegeville, Minnesota
www.litpress.org

Kate Ritger is an oblate of the Sisters of the Order of St. Benedict in St. Joseph, Minnesota. She currently serves as the caretaker of the Common Ground Garden, a ministry of the Sisters of the Order of St. Benedict, where she combines caring for the earth, growing food, and building community around a vibrant local food system. Kate has also served in campus ministry, hospital chaplaincy, group spiritual direction, and retreat work. She is the coeditor of *Prayer in All Things: A Saint Benedict's–Saint John's Prayer Book* (Liturgical Press).

Cover design by Stefan Killen Design.

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ISBN 978-0-8146-3787-6

Contents

Humility
- Day 1 9
- Day 2 11
- Day 3 13
- Day 4 15

Stewardship
- Day 1 18
- Day 2 20
- Day 3 22

Prayer
- Day 1 24
- Day 2 26
- Day 3 28

Obedience
- Day 1 30
- Day 2 32
- Day 3 34

Community Living
- Day 1 36
- Day 2 38
- Day 3 40

Authority
- Day 1 42
- Day 2 44
- Day 3 46

Work
- Day 1 48
- Day 2 50
- Day 3 52

Listening
- Day 1 54
- Day 2 56
- Day 3 58

Hospitality
- Day 1 60
- Day 2 62
- Day 3 64

Community for Ordinary People
- Day 1 66
- Day 2 68
- Day 3 70

Awareness of God
- Day 1 72
- Day 2 74
- Day 3 76

Moderation
- Day 1 78
- Day 2 80
- Day 3 82

Stability
- Day 1 84
- Day 2 86
- Day 3 88

Peace
- Day 1 90
- Day 2 92
- Day 3 94

Humility

Day 1

All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

—Luke 14:11; see Rule of Benedict 7

When you burn dinner, do you say to yourself, "I'm a failure; how could I be so stupid to walk away from the stove?" Or do you say, "Oh, what a silly mistake, let's pull out soup from the freezer instead"? When you make a flippant and biting comment to a coworker, do you say to yourself, "I'm a terrible person," or "Gosh, that just flew out of my mouth, it was a mistake"? There's a difference happening here, and the difference is between shame and guilt.

Brené Brown, a professor of social work, defines shame as "the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging."[1] Shame focuses on who we are at our core. Guilt, on the other hand, is the fact of having made a mistake; therefore, it focuses on our actions and how they match up with our values and beliefs.

This is what God believes about us at our core: "The word of the Lord came to me saying, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you'" (Jer 1:4-5). And "Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house . . . 'See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame'" (1 Pet 2:5-6). We are God's beloved children. God does not look at us with shame. God does not compare us to other people. God does not expect us to be perfect. God does not need to exaggerate our gifts and abilities. Throughout the Rule, Benedict, so steeped in Scripture, gives countless opportunities to try again when we've made a mistake.

How do you respond when you've done something you wish you hadn't?

How does Brown's articulation of shame and guilt resonate with your life?

Take a moment today to remember you are God's beloved.

Note

1. Brené Brown, *I Thought It Was Just Me* (New York: Penguin, 2007), 5.

Humility

Day 2

All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

—Luke 14:11; see Rule of Benedict 7

Since 1939, thousands of people around the world have been engaging the spiritual program of Alcoholics Anonymous and working the twelve steps. The first of the steps helps people to acknowledge their lack of power over alcohol and their inability to manage their lives. Alcoholism is a disease; like cancer or diabetes it cannot be cured or overcome through willpower, and it is not a decision to be an alcoholic.

Someone in the program said to me that to practice this first step is to admit on a daily basis that there is emptiness in our lives. Emptiness is not in and of itself a bad thing. She reflected that emptiness can be turned into spaciousness if we invite God to be part of it.

There are seventy-three chapters in the Rule of Benedict and humility ranks number seven. The first step of humility, as Benedict

writes it, is that one "keeps the fear of God always before [one's] eyes (Ps 35[36]:2) and never forgets it" (RB 7.10). Joan Chittister, OSB, comments, "When we make ourselves God, no one in the world is safe in our presence. Humility, in other words, is the basis for right relationships in life."[1]

Right relationship with God, ourselves, and anyone else in our lives demands spiritual fitness. Are we talking to God? Are we going to God with other people? And are we doing it frequently and consistently? These grounding questions can bring us into the spaciousness of God's love.

Name and describe someone you know who invites God to transform his or her emptiness into spaciousness. What does this look like?

What are things you would like to do, but don't? What stands in your way?

Take a moment today to lovingly admit your emptiness.

Note

1. Joan Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 62.

Humility

Day 3

All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

—Luke 14:11; see Rule of Benedict 7

Annually I go through a hiring process for summer and fall garden assistants. I often find that the college students are hesitant to talk about what would make them a good fit for the job. Perhaps this is an example of what Marianne Williamson describes in her famous quotation from *A Return to Love*: "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you *not* to be? You are a child of God."[1]

The Rule of Benedict's fourth and fifth steps in humility are perseverance and self-revelation. Life in community can be about the almost constant experience of brushing up against each other and recognizing our abilities and limitations. And

just like anywhere else, life in community can be a place to hide from ourselves and others.

"[Jesus] said to them, 'Is a lamp brought in to be put under the bushel basket, or under the bed, and not on the lampstand? For there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!'" (Mark 4:21-23). In this passage Jesus commands there to be no secrets, virtues self-consciously hidden or vices tucked away in shame. Benedictines will persevere in this life together through honest and kind self-revelation.

Who are you afraid to be, both in strength and in weakness?

Who invites you to growthful self-revelation?

Take a moment today to reflect on your light.

Note

1. Marianne Williamson, *A Return to Love* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 165.

Humility

Day 4

All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

—Luke 14:11; see Rule of Benedict 7

Benedict's eighth, ninth, tenth, and eleventh steps of humility invite us to participate in a community of learners who are nothing alone. Joan Chittister notes, "When we know our place in the universe, we can afford to value the place of others. We need them, in fact, to make up what is wanting in us."[1]

Parker Palmer, Quaker educator and spiritual writer, tells a story about visiting a university to give lectures. Before arriving, Palmer told the host professor that he would speak for about twenty minutes and then open the rest of the hour and a half time slot to conversation. The professor said it wouldn't work; the students wouldn't talk. Palmer did it anyway. At first it was horrible; no one talked and he felt like he was drowning. Then a small hand went up in the back of the room and someone responded. The comment wasn't brilliant but it was a start; the

person took a risk, and soon more students followed and an excellent conversation ensued.

Palmer describes education as a group of people gathered around a body of material—for example, a poem, a story, or a theory—responding to "What do you know about this?" Often, as the professor anticipated, people are resistant and sometimes respond in frustration to this educational process. "Shouldn't the teacher provide the wisdom?" "I don't want to hear from my classmates and I'm certainly not paying money to hear myself talk." We all have something to give, but we may not know it yet.

After the class ended, the professor walked Palmer out of the building and said, "You used the most amazing technique; I've never seen it before!" "Oh?" Palmer responded, "What was that?" "When a student was about to respond you waved them on and said 'Please.' And after they finished you said 'Thank you.'" Palmer said, "I was drowning up there! Of course I said 'please' and 'thank you'!"

Sometimes it is horrifying to recognize our vulnerability and need for others. At other times it is an immense relief to know and release ourselves into our interconnectedness. We are at the same time needy and desperately thankful for the role of others in our lives. Over and over again Benedict reminds us that we are beginners on a spiritual journey to God together.[2]

When are you humble? In what circumstances is it difficult for you to be humble? Explain.

When are you filled with gratitude? In what circumstances is it difficult for you to be grateful? Explain.

Take a moment today to interact with someone in a way that honors his or her place in your life.

Notes

1. Joan Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 72.
2. Rule of Benedict Prol. 2, 4, 5, 73.

Stewardship

Day 1

Creation is the Lord's and we are its keepers.

—Upon This Tradition[1]

My sister used to have a T-shirt from Muir Woods in California that read, "I am a keeper of the trees." I imagine Dr. Seuss's fluffy yellow Lorax popping out of a crevice in a giant redwood tree to claim the same statement. Some translations of the book of Genesis also use this language of keeping: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it" (Gen 2:15). And the American Confederation of Benedictine Sisters similarly defines stewardship around keeping: "that we use what we are and what we have for the transformation of culture because creation is the Lord's and we are its keepers; we hold it in trust."[2]

How often do I think of myself as a "keeper"? To "keep" has a completely different tone than to "have dominion over" or even to "care for." "To keep" suggests a radically different type of relationship. If I'm going to keep my three-year-old niece's secret,

I'm going to savor the special relationship we have, and hold her secret safely until she wants it to be shared with the rest of the family. We've made a covenant in love. Famously, God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth" (Gen 9:12-13).

Recycle, conserve water, turn off lights and appliances when not in use, carpool, grow your own food, bring canvas bags to the store, combine errands into one trip to save fuel—all of these tips could appear in a handout on living on a budget, but they are also responses to being a keeper. The sisters of Saint Benedict in St. Joseph, Minnesota, are also keepers of shared goods: shared cars, an internal swap shop, vegetable and flower gardens, financial resources, a library, a fitness space, yard care equipment . . . and the list goes on.

For what/whom are you a good caretaker or keeper? In what ways?

For what/whom are you not a good caretaker or keeper?

Take a moment today to reflect on your covenant relationship with God.

Notes

1. Conference of American Benedictine Prioresses, *Upon This Tradition III: Of All Good Gifts: A Statement on the Nature of Stewardship in the Lives of American Benedictine Sisters*, ed. Ruth Fox, OSB (St. Joseph, MN: 1980), http://www.msb.net/Community_About_UTT_UTT3.html.
2. Ibid.

Stewardship

Day 2

Regard all utensils and goods of the monastery as sacred vessels of the altar.

—Rule of Benedict 31.10

One Sunday during the distribution of Communion at Saint Benedict's Monastery, a wine carafe was broken in the hands of a young woman in early formation with the community. The schola was leading the communion hymn and while the soft "tink" of breaking glass was hardly noticeable, small shards and several big pieces covered the altar cloth. I assume that the young woman was horrified, her face washed in red. She tried to maintain her composure and gather the pieces, but another sacristan came to her rescue, and I'm guessing told her to leave it for the time being and clean it up after the liturgy. A sacred vessel of the altar was broken.

There are at least two ways of reading "regard all utensils and goods of the monastery as sacred vessels of the altar"; both are insightful. One way is to regard all utensils as if they are as holy as

the sacred vessels of the altar: clean your garden rake as gingerly as you wash a communion cup, tidy your car as thoroughly as you clean the chapel's sanctuary, and maintain the dishwasher as meticulously as you service the organ.

A second way of reading this line is to hold the sacred vessels of the altar with the holiness we hold all "ordinary" utensils of our lives. The eucharistic dishes, the presider's garments, the Sacramentary, and the wine carafe are all part of life; they can be broken, ripped, or torn, and we aren't meant to be attached to them. I think this second line of thinking offered compassion to the novice on that Sunday morning.

What are the ordinary and sacred vessels of your life?

How do you interact with these vessels?

Take a moment today to give thanks for the vessels of your life.

Stewardship

Day 3

Whenever new clothing is received, the old should be returned at once and stored in a wardrobe for the poor.

—Rule of Benedict 55.9

I wish Benedict would have written "stored in a wardrobe for those who need it" instead of "for the poor," but maybe the distinction wasn't important in his context. It's important in my context as I work for food justice in central Minnesota. There are many reasons why people don't have or eat fresh, local food. Cost, location, and time are three big reasons. We are all in need in different ways, and it is through personal relationships and sharing our wealth that our needs are met.

Joan Chittister reflects that "Benedictine spirituality does not understand a world that is full of gorgeous garbage while [others] lack the basics of life."[1] At Common Ground Garden of Saint Benedict's Monastery, we grow and distribute food. Distributing food is complicated work. Each week produce is harvested and distributed to garden subscribers, folks in the area who pay a

lump sum in the spring for fresh vegetables throughout the growing season. On Fridays we sell to the St. Joseph Farmers' Market patrons. We sell wholesale to the Minnesota Street Market, the local food and art co-op in St. Joseph, and Nick's Third Floor, a local food restaurant in downtown St. Cloud. Friends and community members who contribute to the garden in a variety of ways receive vegetables. We also regularly take produce to the St. Joseph Community Food Shelf and the St. Cloud Catholic Charities Food Shelf. Last, the sisters of Saint Benedict's Monastery and the gardeners eat a lot of produce. Hundreds of people eat of this one garden and make the effort possible.

In what ways are you wealthy/blessed? What and how do you share?

Make a "gratitude list." For example, include specific physical resources, people, and communities that enrich your life.

Take a moment today to learn about the path of an item in your life that is "thrown away." For example, clothes not purchased from a department store, food pulled from grocery store shelves, new cars that are not sold from the lot.

Note

1. Joan Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 146.

Prayer



Day 1

The function of prayer is to change my own mind, to put on the mind of Christ, to enable grace to break into me.

—Joan Chittister, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily*[1]

"It seems like cedar waxwings are everywhere! . . . God shows me love through their presence." This is how a friend recently described a shift she experienced in her prayer life. She's an oblate of the Sisters of Saint Benedict, a graduate of their college, and recently moved to the east coast with her husband. My friend misses proximity to the monastery for prayer, spiritual direction, and relationships with the sisters, and was aching to deepen her faith life when she met another oblate who lives in the area and who started a "school of Christian spirituality." A number of Christian churches have partnered together to offer classes on spirituality and prayer. My friend started taking the classes, met other people who want to grow in their faith, and found herself recognizing God's presence in unexpected places.

My friend commented, "The cedar waxwings have been special birds to me for a long time. Every day this week I saw them, flying out of the tall oak to the berry bush in our backyard, and then back again. And then this morning we saw them as we walked to church. I have wanted to grow closer to God, and through the birds, God is showing me love." No place is an unexpected place for God. God is with us as we get cut off in traffic. God is with us in difficult conversations with partners and coworkers. God is with us as we find our way in new places and in new communities. God is with us. As Joan Chittister writes, "prayer is designed to enable people to realize that God is in the world around them."[2]

Name and reflect on an experience you've had of prayer opening you to a new way of being, seeing, doing, or responding. Describe this experience.

Describe an experience of seeing God's love for you in an "unexpected place."

Take a moment today to receive singing birds as God's invitation to come closer.

Notes

1. Joan Chittister, OSB, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990), 35.
2. Ibid., 28.

Prayer



Day 2

The function of prayer is to change my own mind, to put on the mind of Christ, to enable grace to break into me.

—Joan Chittister, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily*[1]

Online dating forced me to remember I am beloved.

When I signed up for an online dating service, I knew it was going to take time and energy. I wanted to fully engage the process—I was serious about seeking a life partner. What I didn't anticipate was the vulnerability I would feel. You write a bit about your life, what brings you joy, what you hope for in a partner, and post a few photos of yourself—click submit and you're out there for all to see.

I opened my email the day after I signed up and saw that no one had contacted me. A week went by and no one wrote. I wrote friendly little emails to men who were interesting and attractive to me. No one responded. "Why doesn't anyone like me? Is my description of myself too serious? Aren't my pictures flattering? Do I live too far away?"

These are not questions that helped me to love myself. These questions perpetuated the idea that something was wrong with me and I was not worthy of another person's love. If a man did not write to me it was because we were not a match, and that was not my fault, nor was it something I wanted to change. I quickly realized that if I was going to make it through my six-month subscription to the service, I needed to wholeheartedly believe that I am lovable in God's sight, my sight, and the sight of others. It is one of the best prayer lessons of my life.

When is it easy/difficult for you to know God's love?

Describe a prayerful person you know.

Take a moment today to speak kindly to yourself of your self-worth.

Note

1. Joan Chittister, OSB, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990), 35.

Prayer



Day 3

The function of prayer is to change my own mind, to put on the mind of Christ, to enable grace to break into me.

—Joan Chittister, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily*[1]

One day during my oblate live-in experience, a sister at the lunch table commented, "You know, sometimes I kind of zone out during Liturgy of the Hours and the psalms just roll over me and don't connect to my life much. But other times I'm so aware that even if the psalms aren't voicing *my* experience at the moment, I am voicing the experience of someone somewhere." Somewhere in the world a person is wailing a lament. Somewhere a person is raising a joyful voice. Prayer reminds us that the earth does not revolve around us, but that we are part of the experience of the universe, and that our prayer can offer compassion and support to someone who needs it.

I physically feel different when I remember my presence and prayer in the world stretches beyond my everyday life. My shoulders relax and stretch down my back. It feels like my heart, my

entire chest cavity, opens up and out toward the world around me. While I expand my scope of compassion, I also receive a bigger range of compassion.

How do you pray?

How do you live prayerfully, with attention to God and those around you?

Take a moment today to pray for someone you don't know.

Note

1. Joan Chittister, OSB, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990), 35.

Obedience

Day 1

Obedience, Benedict says—the willingness to listen for the voice of God in life.

—Joan Chittister, OSB, *The Rule of Benedict*[1]

The gospel reading from John about "doubting Thomas" recently prompted new reflections for me (John 20:19-31). Spiritual writer Kathy Hendricks comments in *Give Us This Day*, "like so many others, I tend more towards cynicism and suspicion over news that sounds too good to be true . . . we expect the worst from our leaders, our media, our celebrities, and, at times, even our families."[2]

Before reading Hendricks's reflection, I wouldn't have named myself a cynical person, but I too find myself casually saying, "it is yet to be seen" or "we'll see if they show up." With these statements I think I am protecting myself from being constantly disappointed or identified as naively optimistic. I believe that God wants a life for me that overflows with joy, love, and goodness. Other people disappoint me and add to my cynicism and

suspicion, but Hendricks leaves someone important off the list: me. I often disappoint myself with my blunderings and self-centered slipups, and when I let my fears get in the way of who I really want to be.

Obedience in the monastic tradition continually wraps us in wisdom that transforms our brokenness to wholeness, and calls us to draw closer to God. Obedience in this case calls me to self-compassion. "Do not fear, for I am with you" (Isa 41:10), and "stand and walk, and sin no more" (see Matt 9:5). I deserve it. And as Jesus said to Thomas, he too says to me, "Peace be with you. . . . Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe" (John 20:26-27).

What cynicisms and suspicions get in your way of listening for the voice of God?

Who calls you back to obedience?

Take a moment today to offer yourself compassion.

Notes

1. Joan Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 20.

2. Kathy Hendricks, "Skeptics," Reflection, *Give Us This Day* 3, no. 4 (April 2013): 74.

Obedience

Day 2

Obedience, Benedict says—the willingness to listen for the voice of God in life.

—Joan Chittister, OSB, *The Rule of Benedict*[1]

My basketball career didn't extend beyond grade school, but I learned an important spiritual lesson in it: pivot to new options. If I am dribbling down the court and stop, I cannot resume dribbling, but I can pivot, hold one foot in place and rotate around to take a shot at the basket or find a teammate open to receive a pass. Obedience meets us at the pivot point.

If I'm going about my day and something happens that throws me off course, I am brought to a pivot point. Maybe I forgot my wallet at home so I don't have money to stop at the grocery store. Maybe a coworker said something that touched a sore spot in me of embarrassment. Maybe I received a bill that I wasn't expecting. Regardless of the situational or systemic episode, I have the opportunity to pivot to new options.

Joan Chittister reminds us in *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily*, "No one really has full control of their own lives. . . . Conversion . . . is a willingness to let go, to be led beyond where we are, to where we can be."[2] Saint Benedict says that obedience is listening for the voice of God in life. What option can I pivot toward that opens me to new life? How can I live into my strength and freedom? How can I lean on God and other loving people in my life more? How can I be a prophet of justice? Obedience to God's will calls us to pivot from death to new life.

What practices do you have for opening yourself to daily conversion, to be willing to be led beyond where you are now?

Take a moment today to identify options you have in response to a "stopping point."

Notes

1. Joan Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 20.

2. Joan Chittister, OSB, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990), 134, 144.

Obedience

Day 3

Obedience is a blessing to be shown by all.

—Rule of Benedict 71.1

More often than I'd like to admit, I steer clear of publications that I perceive are written from the other side of the ideological spectrum. And I rarely invite people to dinner who annoy me, don't fit in my social circles, or live in ways I deem irresponsible.

Obviously this isn't the model Jesus gave us. Jesus healed lepers and cripples, ate with tax collectors and prostitutes, and graciously received the anointing of women. Saint Benedict also pushes our comfort zones to include people we might not initially think are part of our community. It isn't until chapter 58 of the Rule that Benedict even discusses how the monastery should receive members, implying that it isn't the first thing on his mind, and in that chapter there is no evidence that admittance is based on being rich or poor, liberal or conservative, or fashionable or frumpy.

In chapter 61 on the reception of visiting monastics Benedict writes, "A visiting [monastic] from far away will perhaps present [oneself] and wish to stay as a guest in the monastery." He or she "may, indeed, with all humility and love make some reasonable criticisms or observations, which the abbot [or prioress] should prudently consider; it is possible that the Lord guided him [or her] to the monastery for this very purpose" (1, 4). Not only are people from other groups allowed to live in the monastery but they are also welcomed as a possible gift from God, with an ear to learn from them. Benedict constantly calls us to broaden our perception of who can be instruments of God's grace.

Who would you not invite to a dinner party? Why?

Who could you easily receive criticism from? Why?

Take a moment today to read something you would typically pass off as "too liberal" or "too conservative."

Community Living



Day 1

Kindness shown them.

—See Rule of Benedict 34.4

Elie Wiesel wrote, "What God gave Adam was not forgiveness from sin; what God gave Adam was the chance to begin again."[1] Hurts, misunderstandings, conflicts, and differences in opinion are natural and normal parts of all relationships and community living. So also is the practice of reconciling, or re-circling. To re-circle is to come around again to the hurts and joys, pains and moments of gratitude in a relationship. All of it, our vulnerabilities and giftedness, are part and parcel of who we are and cannot be separated or left behind in our relationships.

And as we come around again, we need to bring a heart of compassion, starting with self-compassion. Paul Gilbert, in his book *The Compassionate Mind*, identifies eight reasons why we resist self-compassion: (1) we have been taught to put others before ourselves, (2) we think we are already self-compassionate, (3) we think it is weak or soft to be self-compassionate, (4) we think we

don't deserve it, (5) we fear becoming proud, (6) we dislike ourselves, (7) self-compassion raises buried issues, and (8) we believe self-compassion might prevent us from the hard work of growing.[2]

My experience has repeatedly been that relationships, specifically community living, either bring me to a breaking point where self-compassion or implosion are the only options left, or members of my community show me that the light of compassion I endlessly shine on others needs to include me. My resistance to self-compassion is deep, but thankfully it is rising to the surface more and more and I am able to consciously choose a different response. And as a result, I experience a dance between the kindness I show myself, kindness others offer me, and re-circling in my relationships with myself, God, and people in my community.

What have you found to be helpful as you "re-circle" in your relationships?

Why do you resist self-compassion? Which of Gilbert's reasons resonates with you?

Take a moment today to invite greater self-compassion into your life.

Notes

1. Quoted in Joan Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 159.

2. Paul Gilbert, *The Compassionate Mind: A New Approach to Life's Challenges* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger, 2010).

Community Living



Day 2

It was distributed to each as any had need.

—Acts 4:35; see Rule of Benedict 34

I saw a family at church with a teenage son, a grade-school-age daughter, and a younger son with Down's syndrome. It was obvious to me that the child with Down's was a special part of the family: the sister held his hand as they entered church and helped him dip his hand into the baptismal font and sign himself with the sign of the cross. As they settled into their pew, the older boy happily pulled his little brother onto his lap and whispered gently in his ear. After Mass, I noticed the family again, and as they headed toward the door, I overheard the girl complain, "It's not fair, I want to go to the beach. Why does he always need to take a nap after lunch?" The dad swept up his daughter into his arms and reminded her about how her brother gets tired faster than she does, and they would go to the beach after his nap. The little boy had a need and the family structured its plans around it.

Chapter 34 in the Rule, citing Acts 4:35, says nothing about distributing goods based on who worked the hardest, who was the favorite, who was the most charismatic, or who looked the part. It says, "Whoever needs less should thank God and not be distressed, but whoever needs more should feel humble because of his [or her] weakness, not self-important because of the kindness shown him [or her]. In this way all the members will be at peace" (3-5). If someone's body is constantly cold, perhaps he needs an extra sweater or set of warm socks. If a member of the monastery works outside the community at a site not convenient for public transportation, she probably needs a car at her regular disposal. If a family member is studying to complete a degree, he likely needs more time to devote to reading than his usual household chores.

It's easy to admit that as children we complained of unfairness, but we also complain as adults. As Benedict notes, peace comes when we are not distressed that our "little brother" received something we did not need, and he is not gloating over his "extra helping." Both perspectives draw us into more intimate community that leans together for support, not apart in competition.

How do you respond when life doesn't feel fair?

When is it easy/difficult for you to receive out of your need?

Take a moment today to name what is distributed to you based on your need.