

Benedictine Hospitality and Spiritual Direction

by

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Monastic spirituality has in recent years attracted the interest of a wide range of people outside the cloister. Many books have been written exploring how lay people can apply this ancient spiritual wisdom to their complex modern lives. As an Associate of southern Star Abbey, a Cistercian Monastery at Kopua, Hawkes Bay, I focus my life around monastic spirituality, and am interested in how monastic values can illumine facets of the art of spiritual direction.

Whenever I visit Kopua, I am warmed and amazed at the generous hearted way in which guests are welcomed and looked after. Benedict said in his Rule “All guests who come should be received as Christ.”¹ I believe this attitude is relevant to all Christians, not just to monks, and specifically I will explore what this means for spiritual directors as they welcome and work with directees.

In the West, monasticism owes its development to the Italian St Benedict (480-543). His Rule spread rapidly and thousands of monasteries were founded in Italy, France, Spain and England over the next 1000 years. In 1100 a reaction against increasing laxity in Benedictine houses resulted in a new house at Cîteaux in France being established to follow the exact observance of the Rule of St Benedict, giving rise to the Cistercian order. In discussing Western monasticism, I am referring to Benedictine-Cistercian monasticism. For hundreds of years, until the widespread establishment of inns and hotels, monasteries provided hospitality for travellers. “Hospitality has come to be known as the “fourth vow” of the Benedictines, so seriously do they take this instruction to honour all who present themselves.”² Benedict had this to say in Ch. 53 of his Rule:

*Let all guests who arrive **be received like Christ,**
for He is going to say,
"I came as a guest, and you received Me" (Matt. 25:35)...
In the salutation of all guests, whether arriving or departing,
let all humility be shown.
Let the head be bowed
or the whole body prostrated on the ground
in adoration of Christ, who indeed is received in their persons.
After the guests have been received and taken to prayer,
let the Superior or someone appointed by him sit with them.
Let the divine law be read before the guest for his edification,
and then let all kindness be shown him.
The Superior shall break his fast for the sake of a guest...
Let the Abbot give the guests water for their hands;
and let both Abbot and community wash the feet of all guests....
In the reception of the poor and of pilgrims
the greatest care and solicitude should be shown,
because **it is especially in them that Christ is received...**³*

¹ Rule of Saint Benedict, Ch. 53

² Vest, Norvene , p. 130

³ Rule of St Benedict, Ch. 53

At Southern Star Abbey hospitality is still practised in very similar ways, although the abbot and monks no longer need to wash the feet of guests, who usually arrive shod and by vehicle. However, the readiness to break the normal rule for the sake of a guest's comfort is still practised. Recently, when I was at the abbey, I picked up the wrong book for one of the Hours of Office in the church. Without seeming to look at me, the guest master in his stall noticed, and quietly arrived by my side with the correct book and page. I had never seen a monk leave his stall during prayers before, but it was done so graciously that I felt cared for rather than embarrassed.

Whoever comes let him or her be received as Christ himself. This is stated three times in Chapter 53 (bold type added). Christianity always implies a call to receive the other as Christ, but it is the monasteries which for centuries have taken this call seriously. When guests arrive, the guest master welcomes them and shows them to the guesthouse. Guests vary widely, from people in ministry seeking spiritual refreshment to someone with a personality disorder or mental illness looking for acceptance and company. In spiritual direction, when we meet with new directees we are also welcoming strangers. What will they be like? "Will he be interesting, tedious, challenging, or ...deranged?"⁴ As spiritual directors, we can choose who to accept as directees, but if we always avoid those we find challenging, are we going to miss God speaking to us through these strangers? Although it will be an uncomfortable journey, we can learn the most from directees whom we find confrontational and challenging, or reticent and reluctant to talk about their experience of God. Vest reflects that true hospitality involves relating to the guest from our deep Christ-centre rather than from the constraints of ego-safety: "such relationship means openness to the possibility that I will be changed, essentially, by something this other might do or say."⁵ In discussing hospitality, Henri Nouwen said that it is essential to see and acknowledge our natural fear of and hostility towards strangers. "The act on the stage of our life will probably always look better than what goes on behind the curtains, but as long as we are willing to face the contrast and struggle to minimize it, the tension can keep us humble by allowing us to offer our service to others, without being whole ourselves."⁶

Esther de Waal, in her commentary on the Rule, says that Benedict "has prepared me to welcome all, regardless of rank and to treat each according to need, so that there is no uniformity, but consideration for weakness or infirmity."⁷ This awareness of and response to each person's different needs is one of the outstanding strengths of Benedict's rule, and is also at the heart of spiritual direction. At Kopua, the guest master and abbot talk with an enormous cross-section of people who come as guests: their careful listening and still centre allows them not only to minister to Christ in the other, but to hear Christ speaking to them through the stranger.

⁴ Guenther, Margaret, p. 8.

⁵ Vest, Norvene p. 130

⁶ Nouwen, Henri, p. 71

⁷ De Waal, Esther

Benedict spends 70 verses in Chapter 7 of the rule teaching about true humility, which enables both monks and spiritual directors to be open to receive from Christ in the stranger as well as to give. Moreover, spiritual directors must have the humility to trust in their own director, to seek hospitality themselves with another, to ask for help and also be the weary, vulnerable traveller.

Benedict's chapter on hospitality finishes:

*On no account shall anyone who is not so ordered
associate or converse with guests.
But if he should meet them or see them,
let him greet them humbly, as we have said,
ask their blessing and pass on,
saying that he is not allowed to converse with a guest.*⁸

The tone changes suddenly, forbidding ordinary monks from conversing with guests. Kopua's own statement on hospitality includes a similar clause:

*Let those whom the providence of God
has led to the monastery be received by the brothers
with reverence and kindness
but without allowing this service to impair monastic quiet.*⁹

At Kopua the monks may occasionally have a quick word if guests meet them about the grounds, but Sundays after Mass is the only time they really converse with guests. Esther de Waal comments that Benedict is here holding two things in tension: the wonderfully warm and generous reception, but also the protection of its enclosure. It is because the silence and prayer are respected that the monastery has something to give its guests. "I know that the same is true of my own experience. Unless I have time to withdraw, unless I can preserve and protect the innermost space of my own life, I too become so drained and exhausted that I am not fully present to those who come. Benedict is establishing boundaries.... As any good psychologist would tell us, this is one of the most essential lessons that we all need to learn."¹⁰

The guesthouse at a monastery is always clean and ready to receive fresh guests. Repetitive physical work is very much a part of monastic life, providing opportunity to combine work and prayer (*ora et labora*). As spiritual directors, we also welcome guests into our space, either our home or office. In the journal *Presence*, Patricia Blakely wrote about welcoming the stranger and preparing for spiritual direction in the home. Like the monks, "I've learned to see the preparations I make in my home as a form of embodied prayer that prepares me to be hospitable to 'the stranger' in my spiritual directees... while I am cleaning, clearing, and quieting my physical surroundings, I am also cleaning, clearing and quieting my inner self."¹¹ Having run a part-time business helping people to declutter their homes, Blakely has much

⁸ Rule of Benedict, Ch. 53

⁹ Southen Star Abbey, *Reception of guests*

¹⁰ De Waal, Esther

¹¹ Blakely, p. 28

practical advice on how to prepare the home to welcome strangers, through cleaning, clearing, making it comfortable and quiet, offering refreshment, sharing beauty and setting it apart as a sacred space. “Most important is what is *not* there. No family photos. No newspapers or popular magazines. No best-seller books. No miscellaneous detritus of my personal life. This kind of physical space clearing is what I do naturally. It is not “hard work” for me; I actually enjoy it.”¹² Guenther, a university professor, offers similar practical advice on preparing an office as a hospitable space: “Before a meeting, I try to arrange the chaos on the desk into tidy piles and to push the word processor into its unobtrusive corner, minimal gestures of transforming “business” space into “holy” space.”¹³ She makes the space welcoming through the use of “icons, a plant or a few flowers, gentle light, a comfortable temperature, and quiet... I always disconnect the telephone and hang a “Do not disturb” sign on the door before we begin our work.”¹⁴

Henri Nouwen speaks of hospitality as the creation of a free space where a stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy, experiencing the receptivity that allows them to reveal their gifts. However, he believes there is a place for confrontation in hospitality, showing our values through an unambiguous presence. This is expressed not through words, but through the space into which the stranger is received: “I am always fascinated to see how newcomers in my room look around, make comments about the furniture, the paintings and most of all the books on the shelves. Someone notices the cross on the wall, another makes a remark about an Indian mask; others ask how Freud, Marx and the Bible can be together in one book case. But everyone tries to get a feel of the place just as I do when I enter for the first time someone else’s space.”¹⁵ No-one staying at a monastery is in any doubt about the beliefs and priorities of that place: try looking for a mirror in the guest rooms! So we seek to make a space that is as welcoming as possible, but which portrays our values, deepest beliefs and life style, without being distractingly personal or cluttered.

Benedict’s Rule opens with these words: “Listen, O my son, to the precepts of the master, and incline the ear of your heart”. This listening with the ear of the heart, with real presence to the other person, Nouwen calls one of the highest forms of hospitality. “Why is listening to know through and through such a healing service? Because it makes strangers familiar with the terrain they are travelling through and helps them to discover the way they want to go. Many of us have lost our sensitivity for our own history and experience our life as a capricious series of events over which we have no control. When all our attention is drawn away from ourselves and absorbed by what happens around us, we become strangers to ourselves, people without a story to tell or follow up.”¹⁶

Guenther calls spiritual direction ‘holy listening’, listening with presence and attentiveness. Listening with the ear of the heart is a wonderfully incarnational way to recall our attention

¹² *Ibid*, p. 29

¹³ Guenther, p. 15.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 16

¹⁵ Nouwen, p. 100

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 95 - 96

repeatedly to our key task as spiritual directors: to listen for the ways in which God is trying to reach each of us.

Although Benedictine and Cistercian monasteries are Catholic, people from any or no denomination find rest and acceptance there. The shared dialogues with monks from other traditions, which began in the time of Thomas Merton, who believed that they would contribute to monastic renewal in the Western church, have revealed a similarity in transcendental experience. For several decades now, both men and women monastics have been in advance of congregational churches in their openness to other faith traditions. Howard Addison has written a book *Show Me Your Way: The Complete Guide to Exploring Interfaith Spiritual Direction*. He believes that we are witnessing the dawning of a new era of interfaith tolerance and exchange, signalling the expansion of interfaith spiritual direction, which Addison defines as "the interaction of your own knowledge and longings with the insights of a guide beyond your religious home."¹⁷ In his book Addison introduces three interfaith spiritual directors, uncovering in their work of "a commonality among faiths at the contemplative level."¹⁸ It is the spiritual practice of hospitality which lies behind this new interreligious dialogue, which seeks to listen and understand, not to convert or correct.

In writing about guests, Benedict instructs "let all kindness be shown him," for in entertaining guests we are entertaining Christ. This is the spiritual basis of the hospitality spiritual directors extend to the directees they invite into their homes and offices. "Hospitality is hard work," Guenther admits, "made even harder by the necessity that it appear effortless."¹⁹ The first step is to prepare the space, so that when the guest arrives they may be greeted graciously. Guests in monasteries are often travellers, calling in as part of their physical journey. Directees are spiritually on the way, and when they are weary and homesick, depend on the kindness of strangers. Monasteries offer a hospitality that tends to both the outer and inner needs of guests; this type of hospitality is a template for spiritual directors. It helps them to recognize the travel-weary part of their 'guests' that needs to simply sit and rest before speaking about the journey they are on, finding the strength to be hospitable to their own souls. An incarnational spirituality fosters awareness of these physical needs as well as the spiritual. Benedict's rule also reminds us that we need to hold our openness to the other in tension with our own need for silence and solitude, so that we are truly able to 'listen with the ears of the heart'. Benedict's instruction on true humility reminds spiritual directors that we can reach out to others, but we are in constant need of help ourselves. For spiritual directors, the fact of being entrusted with another's soul can be overwhelming. Fortunately, for the director overcome with performance anxiety, the Holy Spirit is actually the true director: "if I am ready to relinquish my role to the true host, the burden of responsibility drops away and the space I have prepared becomes gracious and holy."²⁰ As spiritual direction begins to follow the trails blazed by monastics in interfaith dialogue, showing hospitality to those of other faiths is becoming the cutting edge in spiritual direction today.

¹⁷ Addison, Howard A.

¹⁸ *Ibid*

¹⁹ Guenther, p. 10

²⁰ Guenther, p. 39

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