



St. Scholastica Priory, 271 North Main Street, PO Box 606, Petersham, MA 01366

FAILURE'S WISDOM

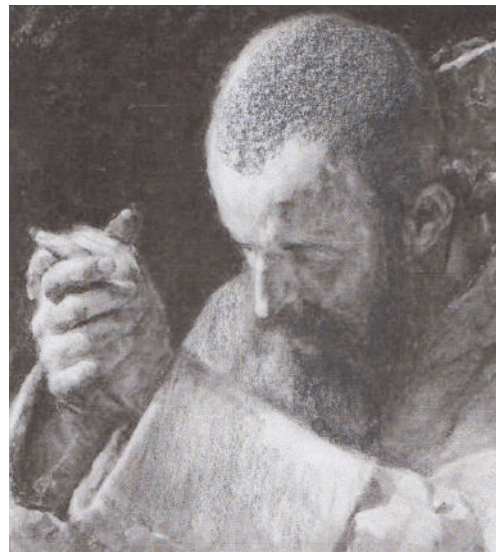
St Benedict was young when he went to Rome to study. Students then could be as young as 14 and as old as 30. He arrived in that huge city and found its way of life so debased he fled. He didn't go back home. Instead he found a cave.

Except for Romanus, a monk living nearby, who supplied bread for Benedict during the three years he lived in that grotto, no one seems to have known about him. Until a priest, led by the Lord, brought a meal to share with him on Easter day. Word spread, shepherds saw him and he was no longer hidden.

What we know of St Benedict's life is thanks to St Gregory the Great (540-604), who wrote not a biography in the modern sense, but one that is meant to edify and inspire. It is filled with many extraordinary actions and events in St Benedict's life. Strangely it even includes a kind of failure - the monks from Vicovaro. These men were not from a monastery that St Benedict founded. He was still a hermit living in the cave. St Gregory writes, "Not far away was a monastery where the father of the community had died. The whole community came to the venerable Benedict and asked him insistently to become their superior. For a long time, he refused and put them off, as he foresaw that his way of life could not fit in with theirs. But eventually, overcome by their entreaties, he agreed." (Dialogues, Book 2: Chapter 3)

St Benedict was literally, body and mind, moved by these men who came to him with their desire for help. He wasn't blind that their ways were very different from his own. Yet it was this community that convinced him to end his seclusion and become their superior.

He had been right, though. In time those monks, sincere though they may have been when they begged Benedict to come, had changed their minds. They were more than tired of him. They wanted him out. Their solution did not involve calling a chapter meeting, a gathering of all who had made their life-commitment, to discuss the impasse or even simply to tell him to leave. Instead, their solution was poison. Poison poured into



the wine cup at his place in the refectory. The blessing St Benedict made over the cup shattered it and revealed their intent. He packed up and headed back to his blessed cave and nourishing solitude.

St Gregory does not spare in describing the despicable behavior of these men who turned against St Benedict. They were a rotten lot. Yet, I think we have a debt of gratitude to pay them. Not, of course, for what they planned to do to rid themselves of this holy man. Thank God, they came around to a holy way of life at some point in another way. But, gratitude for moving Benedict to live in

the midst of their community, failure though it was. St Gregory says that, "Then he (Benedict) returned to the place of his beloved solitude and alone, under the eye of his Creator above, he dwelt with himself." (Dialogues, Book 2: chapter 3)

"He dwelt with himself," under the eye of God. Surely, St Benedict pondered this collapse in Vicovaro. The men he went to help were a sorry lot. Yet, from the Rule St Benedict eventually wrote, we know he wouldn't have just written it off as all the fault of others. He would have questioned himself "under the eye of his Creator above." That searching had to have affected what St Benedict would pass on from the wisdom and practice of the past and add from his own experience and self-knowledge living the monastic way.

Scholars of the Rule of St Benedict have pointed out that the original end of the Rule of St Benedict was Chapter 66: *On the Monastery Porter*. The last line is, "As regards this Rule: we wish it to be frequently read in the community, so that none of the brothers may excuse themselves on account of ignorance." (RB 66:8) Surely that is a closing statement. But strangely seven more chapters follow that ending. Topics covered are: what to do when going on a journey, what to do when a task seems impossible, not to defend another monk, mutual obedience, the crown of the Rule - on Good Zeal and the last chapter. All very important elements that guide our monastic lives. But all were added *after* he wrote his own rule and had lived it for a while. These monks were formed with the Rule of Benedict from the start. Things he realized needed to be covered and expanded.

But what about *before* those first men came and formed a whole new community

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using the Rule St Benedict wrote for them, the very first house of its kind? What might have been included from what he learned from the Vicovaro failure? Wanting to insure that this experiential wisdom was included.

We know that someone wrote a rule before St Benedict wrote his. It was a text Benedict knew well. He used much of it word for word and he also left large sections out - and then there are the diamonds that are uniquely his.

The first is found very early on in the second chapter about the kind of man the abbot ought to be. There he adds these lines: "And he must know how difficult and arduous is his received task of ruling souls and serving different temperaments: complimenting some, rebuking others, using persuasion with still others;. Above all he must not, by disregarding or undervaluing the salvation of the souls committed to him, be more solicitous for transitory, earthly, and perishable things; rather let him always ponder that he who has received the ruling of souls must render an account of them...." (RB2:31-36) We don't know what went wrong at Vicovaro but can't you hear in these words a life-lesson learned?

Then in the very next Chapter Three, on summoning the brothers for counsel. Benedict lays down clearly how the abbot should consult the community from the eldest to the youngest. The young often are free of the old prejudices that build up over years and the elders have hard earned wisdom. Then, and only then, the abbot takes it all into account and makes the decision. Possibly something he realized he lacked at Vicovaro - to consider the Holy Spirit working in more than the abbot.

Scattered throughout the Rule St Benedict added warnings and reminders to the monks - that is expected. But the new thing he added were reminders and warnings to the abbot! "In all his decisions he is to ponder the retribution of God." (RB55:21) He cautions the abbot "not to disturb the flock committed to him, nor, acting as if his power were unlimited, establish anything unjustly: instead he is always to ponder that for all his judgments and deeds he will have to give an account to God." (RB63:3) St Benedict was not afraid to say about him, "Nevertheless, the abbot is to bear in mind that he must give an account to God of all his judgments, lest the flame of envy or jealousy be kindled in his

soul." (RB 65:22) Although, St Benedict already has a long chapter on the qualities of the abbot in Chapter Two, words mostly taken from that earlier Rule, he adds another chapter all his own that is titled: The Appointment of the Abbot. It has very practical steps about the process, but also describes his hopes for one leading God's flock. Here he says, "He must know how much more fitting it is to provide for others than to preside over them... He should always allow mercy to triumph above judgment, so that he may receive mercy... He is to hate vices and love the brothers. But in correcting them he is to act prudently and avoid extremes, lest in trying too ardently to scrape off the rust, he breaks the vessel: his own frailty he must always keep before his eyes, recalling that the bruised reed is not to be broken... he should strive to be loved rather than feared... he is to be discerning and moderate, reflecting on the discretion of holy Jacob, who said: If I drive my flocks too hard, they will all die in one day..." (RB 64)

Yes, I think we need to be grateful to those monks at Vicovaro who were the furnace where St Benedict's gold was refined and his heart expanded. So much so that when he was pressed to come out of that cave again - he did. What would cause him to take that step again? He actually answers that question himself in the very first chapter of the Rule on The Various Kinds of Monks, among which he includes hermits. This is the last verse of that very first chapter, "Let us proceed with God's help to make provision for the cenobites - the strong kind of monks." (RB1:13) Is there gold in our failures? Lessons to be learned to open us? "Dwell with yourself under the eyes of the Creator above." MMEK

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HAPPENINGS

January 4—We celebrate patronal feast days rather than birthdays in the community. The feasts of the superiors are celebrated by both houses with additions that are merry! On Mother Mary Elizabeth's feast day, Fr. Gregory and those in formation created a circular labyrinth poem to celebrate her. There were all sorts of props placed to adorn Mother Mary Elizabeth to make the day even more festive.



January 13—We had a talk by Dr. Filippo Gianferreri on "The Extraordinary Role of Dante's Divine Comedy". He was able to convey Dante's writing in an engaging and contemporary way. He is from Italy and is here as a Visiting Assistant Professor at Smith College. He has a beautiful family who have had the joy to meet!



January 28—Mother Mary Elizabeth and Sr. Mary Angela went to Illinois to help take care of their sister Mary. To all who helped us pray - our deepest thanks! Mary is better but "keep 'em coming!" They were there during the deep freeze!



Ongoing--Mr. Steve Baldwin has been working with Sr. Monica to build more shelving for our display area, which now includes original photo cards, art cards, rosaries, wooden bowls, platters, and whatever else these talented sisters produce! We hope to soon have an online shop.

February 20—Sr. Mary Frances and Sr. Christine went to Cambridge for a lecture entitled, "Liturgy Matters: Benedictine Women's Communities in Medieval England" by Katie Bugyis. They were so delighted they asked her to come to Petersham. That will happen in the near future.



February 23-25—Mother Mary Elizabeth flew to Alabama for a meeting hosted by the Conference of Benedictine Prioresses in conjunction with the meeting of the abbots. Abbot Gregory Polan, the current Abbot Primate was one of the speakers. Sr. Lynn McKenzie, a canon lawyer, was extremely generous with her time in helping us to implement the directives of Cor Orans, a new Vatican document for contemplative women religious.



March 4—We had the great joy of witnessing Sr. Maria Isabel renew her simple vows, part of the new five year requirement from Cor Orans to make solemn vows. Keep our formation sisters in your prayers! They pray for you!

March 5-8—We had some philosophy students from Boston College on retreat to experience monastic life first hand. They even attended Vigils and had two periods of lectio in their days here. Their wonderful professors spent their spring break here with them.

March 18—Mother Mary Elizabeth and Sr. Maria went to visit with Sr. Emmanuel who has been away helping her Dad who has a very serious diagnosis and needs her care. It was so good to be together!



March 27—On our semi-annual Oblate Retreat Day, we had the joy of having nearly thirty oblates here with us. Sara Vargas made her final oblation. All the rest are specially remembered in our prayers, too.

Begins page 4 Sr Christine Silver Jubilee

What about Mardi Gras?

On the Saturday before Mardi Gras there would be a parade in Lockport and the whole family would go to two different places to catch the necklaces and things. Then we'd go to my grandmother's and we would have chili and hot dogs and my mom would bring the King cake. That's Mardi Gras cinnamon cake and it has yellow, purple and green sugar on top – the Mardi Gras colors. There's a little baby Jesus inside and the person who gets it has to get the cake the next time!

You don't like purple, do you?

Yes. (Laughs.) When I was younger some of my family members would have tickets to the LSU football season. And about once a year I used to go to a game – a birthday present from my aunt and uncle.

You don't like football do you?

Yes I do! But I don't pay as much attention to it as I used to.

Tell us about your vocation.

I was working and I lost my job and couldn't find another one. So I thought maybe God wanted me to be a nun.

In 1992, the contemplative Dominican nuns in Lockport were advising me in my discernment process and they brought me to the Tickfaw sisters, because I wanted the contemplative life and they thought that might be a good place for me. I met the community and when my dad came to pick me up we decided that I'd enter on February 10, St. Scholastica's feast day. Sr. Mary Boniface was my novice mistress – she was a good one.

I made vows on March 13, 1994. Fr. Lambert Reilly (later Abbot) of St. Meinrad's Archabbey, Indiana gave the retreat.

Mother Mary Clare gave the solemn vows retreat. May 25, 1997 I made solemn vows. In 2009, we came up north to Peter-sham.

Was it an adjustment?

Yes, and both my parents generously said to go. The schedule was different and the life. Here we have the Divine Office, the Latin which I had to learn, and Gregorian

chant. The weather is a lot different – a lot of snow! That was an adjustment.

Do you have hobbies?

I like listening to audiobooks on aspects of American history and the English Reformation. I also make many crochet items.

What is your monastic work?

Correspondence for the community, bell-ringer, cook and wherever else I'm needed. (Sr. Christine is a whiz at dates and addresses.)

What is it that you love about the life?

I just love it. That we pray for the world. The aspect that I like is that it is balanced --- we have our work time, lectio and spiritual reading, and the Divine Office is in Latin and in English. I really like the Latin.

So, you've reached the 25th mark. Any reflections or words of wisdom?

We all need to persevere with the Lord no matter what kind of Christian life we live. Jesus died for all of us and so we put our love and trust in Him. He will not give us anything that He would not also give the grace to endure.

So I just keep on doing what I'm doing, for the glory of God.

Interviewed by Sr Mary Frances



wonder what it is like?



Come and see!

Monastic Weekend

June 14-16 & October 11-13

For details see:

www.stscholasticapriory.org

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ALLELUIA

Our Eastertide gift to you is a novena of Masses offered for your intentions at Pentecost!

On March 13, we celebrated Sr. Christine's 25th anniversary of vows. Because of the weather, we're celebrating the jubilee on May 4. To mark the occasion, Sr. Christine was interviewed. She hails from Louisiana, and her southern accent is as thick and savory as gumbo, one of her favorite foods.

Tell us about your family background.

My dad was Cajun. His family came from France to Nova Scotia and they came down to Louisiana, I think around Thibodaux, in the 1700s. Then to Lockport where I grew up. Mom was English, Italian, and I'm sure they had some French in there. On my mom's side we descended from John of Gaunt in England.

So that's how you got your secretary skills?

(Laughs.)

In Grand Isle, Louisiana, the whole family used to go crabbing on the beach. The whole family made it a day. My grandmother was good at it---she used to love to go. They had this big net, and they'd attach chicken necks to it with string, and then they'd take a net with a handle on it and they'd go underneath the water with it and they'd catch the crabs. It was off a jetty in the middle of the beach. That was the Gulf of Mexico. We'd take them home and boil them outside. They'd put newspapers on a big picnic table and the crabs on top and the whole family would eat it there.

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