

STATIO CONFERENCE

**DISCIPLINE:
Towards Learning and Freedom
By
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Introduction

Every year at St. Scholastica's College, Manila (SSC), we focus on a particular aspect of our school theme and on one or two Benedictine values. When classes begin, the entire first month is devoted to school theme orientations given by the School President to all stakeholders - students, administrators, faculty, staff and parents.

In 2008, when we articulated our Ten Hallmarks of Benedictine Education, we deliberately did not define them. No single definition can exhaust their richness. True enough, other meanings were made known to us through concrete circumstances and events of our life as a school community, both good and painful.

Our Ten Hallmarks begin with Christ-centeredness, the mother value. It ends with Service. Over the years we have seen the hallmarks as a web - interconnected and complementary. Such is the case with discipline, it is the sister-value of obedience, humility, community, *conversatio, ora et labora*, stewardship and so on.

In this statio conference, we are invited to reflect on discipline. My first context will be the school setting. The second will be our monastic community.

Why Discipline?

Our school orientation is always launched with this question - why do we need this value? Why pray? Why work? Why serve? Why be humble? Why be hospitable? What sense does it make to us today as a Scholastican community?

In the Prologue of the **Rule of St. Benedict (RB) vv.45-47**, we read, "Therefore, we intend to establish a school of the Lord's service. In drawing up its regulations, we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome. The good of all concerned, however, may prompt us to a little strictness in order to amend faults and safeguard love." Let us take a closer look at these verses.

Verse 46: In drawing up its regulations... This verse establishes the presence of discipline in monastic life and that it is considered necessary (*v.47: may prompt us...*). This is not a matter to argue about. There are rules and regulations, guidelines, policies, standards, ethic and code of conduct to follow everywhere. We know the regression and decadence that ensue when discipline breaks down. Our daily experiences reflect it – from the road traffic to the daily tasks, big and small. We need discipline even more in religious life because it is a life of total self-donation to God. Sr. Joan Chittister, OSB (*A Spirituality for the 21st Century*, 2010) writes, "The

spiritual life is not something that is gotten for the wishing or assumed by affectation. The spiritual life takes discipline.”

Verse 46b: we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome ... This verse “softens” the face of discipline which we would normally associate with punishment and prohibitions. Sr. Joan posits, “The difference between Benedict and other spiritual masters of his time lay in the fact that Benedict believed that the spiritual life was not an exercise in spiritual gymnastics.” The monastic environment indeed is not unbearably punitive but it is not also laissez faire. This is where the delicate balance comes in. The discipline of the Rule is a “little strictness.” It does “not crush the bruised reed” and push persons beyond what he or she can take. But, at the same time, it does not let faults go by, it prunes them so they do not multiply into unmanageable proportion. It challenges and encourages the weak, negligent and errant to strive for something more, to strive for their growth in this journey of following Christ. The key words for us are moderation and common sense (RB 31:12; 70:5).

Verse 47: The good of all concerned, however, may prompt us to a little strictness in order to amend faults and safeguard love. This verse tells us that discipline is not an end in itself but serves a three-fold purpose: to advance the **good of all concerned**, to **amend faults**, and to **safeguard love**. It cannot be denied that in the history of religious life strict observance of rules and regulations and practices have taken on greater importance than the task to be formed in the heart and mind of Christ or to be followers of Jesus who are zealous to commit ourselves to his vision as well as joyful and generous in our self-giving. The harsher the forms of discipline the more sacrificial and holier they were thought to be. This situation bred fear, anxiety, nervousness, disappointment, scrupulosity and pettiness, harsh judgments and condemnation. Discipline is turned into a fetish instead of focusing on love that it is supposed to safeguard. Yet over and over again St. Benedict calls us to grow in inner freedom to love, to serve, to give of our self rather than becoming rigid law-abiding monastics.

So what then is the Benedictine discipline that will lead us to learning, to freedom, to the good of all concerned, to amend faults, to safeguard love, to progress in this way of life, to run the paths of God’s commands – the discipline that will expand our hearts and make it overflow with inexpressible delight of love as we make our homerun towards the God of our desiring?

A. The challenge of discipline

There is not one cradle of discipline – we are formed by all the discipline we learned from home, school and community. However, home is where we received our first lessons. Childhood is the time when we were first introduced to the “world of limits.” When we were told “no, you can’t have, do or say that” – this created awareness that there is a limit to what we can have, do or say because this world is being shared with others, because behaviors and desires have boundaries, actions have consequences and because the world is not at the service of our every whim, caprice and fancy. It deflated our ego, de-centered our self and planted the seeds of responsibility and accountability. This is different from parents restricting the child to explore and hinder them from developing healthy autonomy and sufficiency.

Robert Taibbi in his article in Psychology Today entitled “Discipline: 5 Ways to Do It Right” (2011) has this opinion:

“Discipline is more subtle and more important. It's about teaching your child self-regulation, about self-responsibility, and ultimately about creating a sense of security. We now know from research on infant mental health that children as young as 6 months can begin to grasp the concept of No. This setting of boundaries, when combined with a nurturing relationship, helps your child feel safe. Children without discipline feel anxious, are constantly testing to find and define limits, and over time feel entitled and become demanding. Through discipline your child isn't just learning who's the boss, he's learning how to shape his world. “

Although parents, family and home are the first shapers of our personal discipline and ethic, community also shapes us. The discipline of the particular era contributes likewise to the formation of our conduct and character. I grew up in a small close-knit town where everybody knew everybody else. In this context, the enforcers of discipline were not only parents. Neighbors, extended family and especially old folks minded other people's business when it came to forming and raising a child to be a good member of the town, not only of a particular family. Discipline happened then within an intricate web of social relations. The strong cultural motivator for good behavior was “hiya” or shame.

Growing up I have also noticed that my home town followed an unwritten code of conduct – people swept their yards, planted flowers, disposed of their garbage, stopped all that they were doing to pray the angelus when the church bells rang, cleared the streets by 6:00 PM, respected neighbors' property including their barking dogs, appeared at town's festivities and activities as revered social obligations, walked the dead home to the town cemetery. A law enforcer carried a stick, a whistle and a flashlight, rarely a gun. The worst crime I heard of as a child other than the wayward drunkard was the thief who passed by a neighbor's house and stole their clothes left overnight on their clothesline. Townsfolk talked about it for days and were so certain the thief was an outsider, in short, not sharing our common code of discipline.

It is in school where the expectation for discipline is highest because of character formation and learning. The ideal is to form students who are self-motivated, who set their goals and take the necessary steps to achieve these goals, who are internally motivated to follow rules and procedures because it is the right thing to do and who have a healthy sense of self-management to put their talents, gifts and resources to good use. Parents may be ambivalent about school discipline and may not always agree with us but discipline and value formation are the main reasons for bringing their children to our school.

In search of Benedictine discipline for our institutions

In SSC, we have struggled these past years to find the Benedictine formula for discipline “that is not harsh, not burdensome”, that protects “the good of all concerned, amends faults and safeguards love.” The task is made even more complicated in our present context when corporal punishment is prohibited and correspondingly actions of those in authority, especially teachers, are under intense scrutiny. Corrections are oftentimes labeled as verbal abuse or harassment. A lawyer stands by questioning almost everything including procedures and technicalities of due process, at times reducing matters into polemics. Furthermore, in our digital world people defend what they say and do under the banner of self-expression. On top of this there are threats to run to the media to publicize and sensationalize an issue. Moreover, at a time of social

networking when reaction time has been considerably shortened, when the first to report a story gets the sympathy and when propaganda gets the upper hand over investigation, it is a small wonder that there is reluctance to enforce discipline at home, in school and in our community.

An approach we discovered that incorporates the elements of Benedictine discipline is Restorative Discipline (Discipline that Restores) based on the principles of Restorative Justice (RJ). Howard Zehr (2002) defined RJ as “a process to involve, to the extent possible, those who have a stake in a specific offense and to collectively identify and address harms, needs, and obligations, in order to heal and put things as right as possible.” RJ philosophy is built upon the beliefs that wrongdoing is harm, that there is need to repair relationships, build community, “make things right”, teach self-governance and plan for the future. It is grounded on the values of accountability and healing.

RJ takes into consideration the offender, the victim and the community. Most often traditional school discipline is focused on the offender and on making amends (“serving sanctions” as we call them). But restorative discipline also addresses the victim and what needs to be restored to him/her. Likewise, it recognizes the effect of the misbehavior on the community. For example, it is not enough to do community service for online bullying, an offense that is becoming increasingly rampant among the young. The victim’s reputation has been damaged, his or her good name has been destroyed and needs to be restored. In SSC we have made the letter of apology part of the restorative discipline process. On one occasion, a letter of this kind had to be written several times until the offender was able to write one with the realization of the damage done to the victim. This is the Christian process of reconciliation and healing.

During this year’s Lenten season, I suggested that we go the extra mile beyond confessing our sins by putting a big box outside our school canteen and in the spirit of restorative justice tell everybody that if they have taken something from the canteen without paying, they should return the item or pay for it. Just drop the item or payment in the box, no questions asked. We are not only restoring what has been taken but restoring the harmony in the community and putting right the relationship of trust. Likewise, in an effort to form the community in accountability and responsibility, we multiplied our “honesty zones” in the campus (honesty hub, honesty café, honesty pencils, honesty toiletries) which operate on the honor system when using a service or buying an item. Some of these were successful, others not. It takes time for learning and formation to happen but we rest content with small gradual steps than a meteoric leap of change.

Practicing discipline as a community is a daunting challenge. Some sectors expect discipline to be practiced only by or enforced upon certain groups in school – for example, the students or the staff. Some think they are above the law or are a special class altogether or that the school community revolves around them. They rationalize tardiness, absences, non-fulfillment of requirements, non-observance of school regulations and policies. There is a double bind. But the text on discipline, RB Prol. 45-47, speaks to all of us not only to a sector of our community –



The good of all concerned, however, may prompt us to a little strictness in order to amend faults and safeguard love.



This is further articulated in RB 2:22 where St. Benedict addresses the abbot, “Therefore, the abbot is to show equal love to everyone and apply the same discipline to all according to their merits” and in RB 3:7 – “Accordingly in every instance all are to follow the teaching of the rule and no one shall harshly deviate from it.” If ever there are people to be favored in the community, St. Benedict says they are the weak members – the old, the sick, the very young.

B. Discipline in monastic life

If we go through the entire Rule, we will be able to read an underlying call to discipline in every chapter. St. Benedict refers to the “discipline of the rule” several times. Discipline is required in prayer, work, study and lectio; it is needed in dealing with our “desires and appetites”, with material things and ownership; there is discipline to be practiced by people in positions of authority and responsibility such as the abbot, prior, cellarer, porter; there is the discipline of body and behavior and when doing various tasks in the monastery. St. Benedict, in fact, devotes the entire RB 4 to various forms of discipline –

- the spiritual discipline - love God with whole self; renounce self to follow Christ; let love of Christ come before all else; keep watch over all actions; devote self to prayer and holy reading
- the discipline in relating with others – not to harm anyone; to honor everyone; love enemies; not to act in anger; rid the heart of deceit; not to be proud; not to grumble or speak ill of others; not to be envious, jealous or quarrel with anyone; respect elders and love the young; make peace or settle disputes immediately;
- the ascetical discipline – love fasting; discipline your body; do not pamper self; refrain from too much eating, sleeping and laziness; do not gratify the flesh; discipline thoughts and speech;
- the discipline of doing corporal works of mercy – relieve the lot of the poor; help the troubled
- the discipline of obedience – hate urgings of self-will.

Let us reflect in detail, however, on three particular areas: the discipline needed to live community life, the discipline at prayer and at meals, and the discipline in speech in order to have a deeper understanding of the purpose of discipline in our monastic journey.

Discipline in community

Considered a moderate, more gentle and compassionate rule than the Rule of the Master, St. Benedict devotes eight chapters of the Rule (RB 23-30) to various forms of punishment for faults, additional five chapters (RB 42-46) on community guidelines on discipline, a section in

RB 65 to deal with the faults of the prior, and two chapters, RB 69 and 70, to regulating other community conflicts.

RB 23 enumerates the faults resulting from the breakdown of discipline: stubbornness, disobedience or defiance of orders of superiors, pride, grumbling and despising the precepts of the Rule. Furthermore, faults are distinguished into lesser and serious ones as mentioned in RB 24 and 25, with the Abbot taking up the task of making the distinction. What are these offenses about? Sr. Joan Chittister OSB (*Living the Rule Today*, 1982) posits that these chapters talk about rupturing the community. Such is the regard of St. Benedict for the life of the community that the offense does not go unpunished and that the highest form of punishment is to be banished from the community. Sr. Joan continues to say,

“If you are responsible for rupture in community, Benedict asks you not to attend prayer or table with us. For if you are not going to nourish the community yourself, do not come to chapel to be nourished by the praying community; do not come to table to be nourished by the sharing community. We need nourishment from you, too, and you have ruptured it.”

The forms of punishment, ranging from the corporal to exclusion from the community, and the manner of reproving the errant member are clearly defined in RB 23, 24 and 25. Readers today will find that these punishments to amend faults do not sound as “little strictness” at all. However, the reader will also see in the eight chapters a repeated call “to amend” faults or “to reform.” Not only does this show that there are incorrigible and recalcitrant members but that all attempts are being made to bring the “wayward” member to conversion. Sr. Joan calls this the “discipline of metanoia.”

After the hard blows of discipline in RB 23, 24, 25, and 26, a tender chapter follows - RB 27. All the actions in this chapter are not directed to punishment but to conversion and to growth

- the abbot must exercise the utmost care and concern for wayward brothers
(v. 1)
- he ought to use every wise skill of a physician and send in *senpectae*, that is, mature and wise brothers who, under the cloak of secrecy, may support the wavering brother, urge him to be humble as a way of making satisfaction, and console him lest he be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow (vv. 2-3)
- let love for him be reaffirmed, and let all pray for him (v.4)

The second half of the chapter shifts the attention and addresses the abbot and not the errant member. The leader's role is not mainly to enforce the discipline and the corollary punishment but to be a caring shepherd with great “compassion for weakness.” The leader is tasked to carry the wayward member back to the flock or to the community. This is also found in the first part of the Rule (RB 2:23-29). The abbot is enjoined to use different disciplinary measures to different people and circumstances, combining sternness and tenderness (RB 2:24).

Everybody in the community, from the abbot to the members, are called to be responsible and accountable for the community. The discipline being enforced is meant to protect and safeguard the life that we live together. Our failure to participate fully in the growth of the community demands that we make satisfaction and change our ways (conversion). Fr.

Terrence Kardong OSB (*Commentaries on Benedict's Rule: II*, 1995) adds another viewpoint to the penalty being meted out – the displacement also serves as an ongoing education to the community (“done in the sight of all”).

Recalling Prol. 45-47, it is for certain that the discipline of conversion is to safeguard the good of all and the life of the community. Ultimately, it safeguards the vocation of the wayward member.



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Discipline at prayer and at meals

In the short chapter, RB 19, St. Benedict talks about the Discipline of the Psalmody - “Let us consider, then, how we ought to behave in the presence of God and his angels, and let us stand to sing the psalms in such a way that our minds are in harmony with our voices (v. 6,7).”

This is followed by RB 20: Reverence in Prayer – “In community, however, prayer should always be brief; and when the superior gives the signal, all should rise together (v. 5).”

The discipline mentioned in these two chapters regards the disposition of being present, mindful and alert (“mind and voice in harmony”), of being brief and of praying together.

In RB 52:2, “complete silence” and “reverence for God” in the oratory are added. Furthermore, praying should also be devoid of external behavioral display but with an interior attitude of devotion (“not in a loud voice, but with tears and heartfelt devotion,” v. 4).

St. Benedict requires yet another form of discipline - not to come late for prayer (RB 43: 4-12) and for meals (RB 43:13-19). Fr. Kardong writes:

“No doubt Benedict demanded promptness in all phases of that (monastic) life, but he was especially insistent that monks not come late for the Divine Office and for meals. Tardiness at these exercises is an offense that requires satisfaction before it is forgiven.”

What could be the deeper reasons for this discipline to be observed at prayer and at meals? Fr. Kardong believes that the behavioral norm of going quickly to Office upon hearing the signal is backed up by an important spiritual and monastic principle: nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God. The value in question he said is not really punctuality but obedience. This seems to be inspired by John Cassian’s emphasis on total availability to the call of God, or to respond to a summons. Fr. Kardong adds,

“...we should recall that Benedict lived before the invention of the clock. Consequently, he is not asking his monks to come on time, for they do not know what time it is. He can only ask them to come when summoned, which is a different thing ...”

Other than obedience, he further notes, “Surely the ultimate reason why tardiness at the Divine Office is unacceptable is because it is irreverent.” The deeper reason then is theological – “Because God is the all-holy-one, the proper approach to worship is reverential awe. It is hard to see how late arrival is a fitting expression of this kind of adoration.”

By observing this discipline of punctuality, mindful attention and alertness, silence and interior receptivity at prayer, the monastic is safeguarding his or her relationship with God, which is the all important project in the monastic journey. The interior desires of obedience, love of God, love for the community are exteriorly manifested in the discipline of putting down everything and hastening to the oratory, of putting aside all concerns and distractions during prayer time and praying together with the community.

The discipline at meals, on the other hand, is mentioned in RB 38 and 43. They involve:

- silence : RB 38:5 - “ Let there be complete silence.”
- punctuality, praying and eating together : RB 43:13 – “...come to table before the verse so that all may say the verse and pray and sit down at table together...”
- not leaving the refectory early : RB 43:17 – “Anyone not present for the verse said after meals is to be treated in the same manner.”
- untimely eating : RB 43:18 – “No one is to presume to eat or drink before or after the appointed time.

Other than the silence to be observed at table, the common theme in the discipline expected at meals in Chapter 43 is *being together* – that is, together in praying at meals and in eating and in finishing a meal, neither ahead nor late. It is obvious that what is being safeguarded here is love for community where Christ is manifested and where the living of our monastic life takes place. Fr. Kardong summarizes this: “For Benedict, eating, like liturgy, is done in communion with others. To do it apart from the community is felt to be a punishment. To do it alone voluntarily is an aberration in need of correction.”

Let us recall the purpose of discipline in the Prol. vv. 45-47 --



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The reasons for the discipline at the oratory and at the refectory go beyond order, efficiency, routine and propriety. Rather discipline safeguards our relationship with God and our community from disintegrating. It promotes communion.

Discipline in Speech

RB Chap. 6: Restraint of Speech is where St. Benedict first talks about the discipline in speech -

- watch over your ways in order not to sin with your tongue (v.1)
- put a guard on your mouth and refrain even from good words (v.1)
- curb evil speech (v.2)
- no vulgarity and gossip and talk leading to laughter (v.8)
- be silent and listen (v.6)

In the chapter that follows, RB 7: 56-60, the ninth, tenth and eleventh steps of humility continue the admonition of controlling the tongue; remaining silent; avoiding empty chatter; not raising voice; and speaking gently, briefly and reasonably. Sections in the Prologue and RB 4 also deal with the discipline in speech.

Scholars agree that monastic speech is characterized by two things: silence and good speech (“thoughtful talk” as Sr. Joan calls it). We need to discipline the tongue in order to foster a listening attitude to make us listen to the God within, to respect persons and to build community. Sr. Joan puts it succinctly:

“But Benedictine spirituality is a builder of human community. When talk is unrestrained, when gossip becomes the food of the soul, then the destruction of others can’t be far behind. When talk is loud and boisterous, when we make light of everything, when nothing is spared the raillery of a joke, the seriousness of all life is at stake and our spirits wither from a lack of beauty and substance.”

It is not only in a Benedictine community that discipline in speech is highly emphasized and valued. Members of peace advocate Thich Nhat Hanh’s community live the so-called Fourteen Precepts of the Order of Interbeing (*Peace in Every Step*, 1991). The 9th precept says:

“Do not say untruthful things for the sake of personal interest or to impress people. Do not utter words that can cause division and hatred. Do not spread news that you do not know for certain. Do not criticize or condemn things that you are not sure of. Always speak truthfully and constructively.”

Simply stated but hard to live. Discipline in speech also aims to promote peace in the community. St. Benedict strongly condemns murmuring or grumbling for it destroys peace, it destroys community (RB 5: 17; 23:1). Sr. Joan comments that Benedict does not punish severely for everything, for incompetence or lack of spiritual intensity or ignorance or weaknesses of the flesh. He punishes harshly only for the grumbling that undermines authority and the rebellion that paralyzes it, and above all for the destruction of the sense of community itself.

We recall Prol. vv. 45-47 –



The good of all concerned, however, may prompt us to a little strictness in order to amend faults and safeguard love.



We come to conclude again that the goal of discipline in speech is not to refrain from speaking and interacting or something external. It is to refrain from speech that destroys persons and eventually corrodes, paralyzes, breaks down the community. Discipline safeguards community, our most important resource in living monastic life and the monastic ideal. At the end of the day, we only have each other to walk the path with towards God. We cannot destroy our companions on the journey.

Conclusion

In this life of following Jesus and committing our lives to his vision, discipline is an indispensable means to direct and safeguard our journey, our vocation and our living of the vows. At one time or another we have experienced how becoming lax in the discipline of monastic life has distanced us from our relationship with God and with one another. However, if discipline is also detached from its deeper theological and spiritual meaning, it will be reduced to a set of rules and regulations. When it becomes an end, the legalism is oppressive and thwarts growth, divides community and hurts persons. If it is absolutized, it becomes a block to our next experience of God.

There are so many areas of discipline in monastic life that can still be discussed, nevertheless, whichever way we reflect on discipline, it redounds to protecting one important thing. Fr. Kardong summarizes, “When all is said and done, the essential Christian attitude is love. This is the only fitting response to God’s loving initiative...Benedict is well aware that all Christian and monastic virtues are subsumed under the rubric of love...”

Jesus, we remember, did not come to abolish the law or merely followed its precepts. Rather he fulfilled and perfected it by the force of love. He showed us how to live and die for God’s vision. So compelling is this vision that life is to be lived in a certain way. Discipline falls into place within this God agenda. On our part, living the values enables us to embrace what he modeled for us and transforms us to make a depth-response to the love of God.

May this journey be one of growth in internalization of the Benedictine values that will bring us to well-being and holiness. May we all arrive at the inner freedom and maturity to live according to the values that Jesus lived and preached so that we may, in turn, become Christified.

Suggested questions for reflection and sharing

1. How can Benedictine discipline challenge our present context – be it our personal context, community, or the situation in the country and in our world?
2. In what area of your monastic life do you find yourself struggling with the value of discipline? What can be done?

3. What can be changed in the discipline practices in our community and in our ministry/apostolate such that we all grow in inner freedom, responsibility and accountability, in greater love for God and one another?
4. Recognizing that the RB discipline practices were adapted to their time and context, how can we practice discipline in our day and age – highly wired, information saturated, fast-paced, of extreme mobility and changes - while keeping in mind the reasons of discipline to promote the good of all, amend faults and safeguard love?

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