

STATIO CONFERENCE

STABILITY

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It had been suggested that the theme of this month's Statio be *Fidelity to Everyday Life* rather than *Stability*. It would have been equally appropriate, but having done research and reflection on the topic and discovered the variety of contexts from which it can be viewed, I have become even more comfortable with this familiar Benedictine term. The meaning of the word has been explored not only by Benedictine but also non-Benedictine writers, providing us with fresh insights for creatively living out our vow of stability. May the following thoughts be helpful for a reflection on this first of three vows which constitute our religious profession. (Insights are articulated and appear in bold print.)

Joan Chittister, OSB and the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, Pennsylvania launched an outreach program in April 2011 on the net. Considered a new form of monastic life for a new society of the Internet age, it is actually a monastic movement for lay people designed to respond to the great hunger and thirst for spirituality that exists in today's world. "Monasteries of the Heart" is a monastery "without walls" — it unites individuals and groups by Benedictine values, not necessarily geographic location. MOH provides individual seekers now numbering 5,000 (among whom is a membership of 1,800), a monastic website for spiritual sustenance and personal growth. It provides both creativity and **stability** by enabling community groups to form both online and by the formation of small on-site communities of like-minded seekers who meet in parishes, homes, neighborhoods and prisons.¹

Stability here means connectedness which is on call, available to answer to the needs of individuals of any time and any place. MOH members near and far can count on each other through the internet.

Schlabach, a convert to Catholicism, writes that, however much one loves the church, every Christian will find something to dissent from, if quietly. Loyal dissent, in other words, must be an expression of the very practice of **stability** that holds loyalty and dissent together. Dissent can either express a bad habit of discontent or express the virtue of courage in the face of injustice. By holding loyalty and dissent together, therefore, stability shapes both for the better. As a practice that keeps people involved constructively in their communities through good times and bad, stability ought always to be operative in our lives.²

The same author affirms that Joan Chittister, a 'loyal dissenter' whose commitment to critiquing church tradition from within that very tradition is a model for the kind of conversation not only the church needs but also that which our globalizing world needs. Christians need to practice loyalty and dissent in order to bring about continuity and change in their own sustainable communities.

According to Casey, stability comes from the word *stare*, to stand, but stability is not immobility. It is the knack of remaining constant in the midst of change... The best way to persevere is to keep growing. This will not occur without periods or relative slackness and occasional wobbles, but the important thing is to keep moving forward, to keep adapting to changed circumstances and to re-orient oneself towards the goal.⁴

The practice of stability means being loyal, yet able to disagree with others within the same community. Communities can work for continuity with tradition and at the same time be open to change.

Shall we not then, in this instance, venture to call Pope Francis a loyal dissenter? From what we know of what he has been doing since he began his papacy he seems to be carrying out the role.

Cistercian Augustine Roberts, looking at the RB, says a similar thing: what commends the model of stability in the text (Rule of St. Benedict) together with the patterns of authority, obedience, and measured openings for loyal dissent³ —is precisely that it has engendered a tradition in which flexibility, adaptation, critique and reform are possible within the nurture of deep continuities. Roberts likewise says that Benedict's introduction of stability had something to do with the instability of his own time, in the 6th century.⁵

Chittister compares the meaning of stability and intransigence. It is important to understand the difference between the two. Stability roots us in a past that, like good ground everywhere, nourishes what is growing. Intransigence roots us in a past that has been petrified in order not to have to grow at all. Keeping customs can sometimes be a hindrance to human advancement. It could be a bad sign when people say "we have always done it this way."⁶

For Merton, the reason Benedict introduced the vow of stability into his Rule is precisely because he knew that the limitations of the monk, and the limitations of the community he lived in, formed a part of God's plan for the sanctification both of individuals and of communities. In making this vow, "the monk renounces the vain hope of wandering off to find a 'perfect monastery.' That requires deep faith, and a recognition that finally, 'it does not much matter where we are or whom we live with, provided we can devote ourselves to prayer, enjoy a certain amount of silence, poverty, and solitude, work with our hands, read and study the things of God, and above, all love one another as Christ has loved us."⁷

Stability is very important to cultivate wherever possible and to the extent possible. In particular, the gift to seek is the kind of stability that is content with what God has given and is not always restlessly seeking a more ideal setting. Ultimately there is no escape from oneself, and the idea that things would be better someplace else is usually an illusion.⁸

The Benedictine vow of stability is to help to the monastic to stay put, to be content where s/he is, and to grow roots in her vocation.

In the Scriptures, the notion of stability could be found in Jesus' words (Lk 10:5-10): *Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave.* In other words, settle down and don't go from house to house looking for a better deal or a better meal. Pick a house and stay there, set down roots in the community where you minister, eat what is set before you and develop the deep relationships that are necessary for evangelization and the proclamation of the gospel.⁹

In the Old Testament (Genesis 28:12) there is no worse model of stability than Jacob running away after he steals his brother Jacob's birthright. God intervenes. In a dream, Jacob sees a ladder planted firmly on earth, extending into heaven... Beside where Jacob lies, if only for a few hours of stolen sleep, God stands with his feet on the ground to say, "the land on which you lie I will give to you and your offspring."

There it is, —stability as pure gift. God meets Jacob when he is a homeless scoundrel on the run and says, "I love you. I want you. I will make this place for you and I will meet you here."¹⁰

In the midst of change and confusion stability does not depend on our ability to resolve the dilemma we find ourselves in. Rather, it depends on the character of the one who promises to loves us as where are. Faith is a response to that love, rooting us in the reality of God who is faithful. Stability demands that we do the long, hard work of life with other people in the place where we are.¹¹

Stability needs to be cultivated. It means to persevere. And yet, it cannot be acquired. It is a gift.

Stability in the Rule is discussed by Rees in terms of the monastic's continual search for God, his residence within the monastery and community, as well as his perseverance in his

monastic vocation. Standing firm, or patient perseverance, is what St. Benedict meant by stability, for stability is the outward expression of perseverance.

It is possible for a monastic to remain within the confines of the monastery all her life, and yet be unstable in the Benedictine sense. S/he may become so preoccupied with her own work that s/he has no time either for God or for the community. A monastic's heart must be genuinely committed to God and to the community, or else s/he will seek diversions which will deflect her from her vocation.¹²

In a similar track, our Mother Adelaida Ygrubay, speaking to formandees, teaches that remaining in the enclosure is different from the stability which we need. The fallacy of our times is: we need diversity of experiences to grow and develop, go places, meet people, do things, then one will know what one wants. But we also need to ask "Who am I? What should I do? What is my function in the world and within God's people?" Monastic life is saying that the answers to these questions cannot be found out there or in here, in the convent. She writes: "Unless you have found your Center, where the Real Self is, a self [that is] made in the image and likeness of God, and recognized your true purpose in life ... you can run/travel everywhere and be the most popular, most accomplished, most experienced, most ... EVERYTHING ... and all that will still be empty." Stability is a commitment to live from within.¹³

In another book, Casey writes that St. Benedict is not interested in a quick burst of initial enthusiasm that quickly burns itself out when confronted with the reality of everyday challenges. Stability is one of the fundamental values of Benedictine spirituality. Once we begin something we stay with it until the process is complete—whether it is a question of reading a book all the way through from beginning to end (RB 48.15), remaining constant during the process of initial formation (RB 58.9), or faithfully practicing all the virtues throughout one's entire life (RB 4.78). Stability is a result of an enduring act of the will giving assent to God's grace... we will often be tempted to do things that are inconsistent with the fundamental direction of our lives. We will sometimes allow bad habits to take root in us that create anxiety and consume our energy. If, however, there is a central commitment to monastic life or Christian discipleship such incidental wanderings will not destroy us. So long as our core commitment remains substantially intact, there will be within us a constant invitation to return from our wanderings, like the Prodigal Son who heard the voice of conscience saying, 'come back to the Father.'¹⁴

Stability is a total commitment. When we allow ourselves to take on self-serving endeavors, we are not genuinely committed to be the religious we profess to be.

For Norris, sometimes the conviction that it is God who has brought two people—or a community—together is all we need to keep us in the struggle to nurture and maintain relationships of trust, respect and love. Committing to such stability is never easy but it is worth a try.

She continues, –when we opt for stability we face a cosmic struggle. There are internal battles, of course, anger, pride, boredom. But to commit to stability also means accepting people as they are... of course conflicts will come. Our job is to face them openly and honestly and above all, to seek reconciliation. Stability is essential to this process.¹⁵

The need for stability is not confined to monastics. Micah, quoting Chittister expresses the wisdom of the lay in that stability is found in the everyday. There will always come a day when this job, this home, this town, this family seems irritating and deficient beyond the unbearable. The spiritual work of stability happens then." Stability, he writes, enables me to outlast the dark, cold places of life until the thaw comes and I can see new life in this uninhabitable place again. But for this to happen, I must learn to wait through the long winters.¹⁶

Stability means to accept ourselves and others in our community as they are. It helps us to be tenacious, to hold on when the going is rough because of conflicts.

Christian wisdom about stability points to the true peace that is possible when our spirits are stilled and our feet are planted in a place we know to be holy ground. When we get this stability of heart deep down inside of us, real growth begins to happen.¹⁷

Stability of the hearts is a topic which Chittister develops lengthily. Speaking for American religious, Chittister finds stability the antithesis of the relentless seeking that for her is so prominent a part of American religious life. Stability is tedious; it restricts our freedom and limits our potential. Her insight is provocative: there comes a time to set seeking aside, abandon our seeking, settle down, and allow God to find us where we are. We do not seek God, God seeks us. He offers us stability when he is faithful to us.

What we need only stability can provide—a way of life founded on solid ground, freeing us from the illusion that we can live without limits. Stability helps us to do the necessary foundation work so that we can pay close attention to what is going on around us, and adapt to changing conditions without losing our sense of place.

The heart's true home is a life rooted in the love of God but the Christian tradition insists that this love is always God's mercy directed at us before it is our response of trusting love. God offers us stability in the only thing that cannot fail—God's faithfulness itself.¹⁸

Ultimately, there is stability of the heart which is a gift to us, God's gift of faithfulness.

Finally, Hartgrove says that it is hard to ignore the power of stability especially at these times in our personal and communal lives when we need something solid to hold on to... Our bones seem to know that rapid change and constant motion are hazards to our spiritual health.¹⁹

Our Monastic stability

What about us monastics in our priory in the Philippines? We are also products of our culture and environment and these remain a part of us after we enter the convent. The mobility which creates instability is reflected in our ways. Many of our families, relatives and friends, have migrated to other countries for greener pastures. Those who are here, mostly senior citizens, have moved from their matriarchal/patriarchal homes to condominiums. While Sunday masses continue to be celebrated at all hours in parish churches and shrines, even within columbaries (today's cemeteries where ashes of our beloved dead are enshrined), the shopping malls are equipped with chapels where crowds go for mass at all hours of Sunday. Or people church-shop to look for a community outside their own parish where the homilies are better proclaimed and deliver a message which is more meaningful to them. On church affiliation, people move from faith to faith, from being born Catholics to being born again.

There are more and more unstable and failed marriages, including annulments, and the number of single parents who are not necessarily widowed, are increasing. Our youth have become global citizens and netizens. Our connectedness and our easy mobility affect how we witness to the faith, not always with the desired results. Our lack of stability is not wholly our fault but we do cooperate to some extent with its contours.

What does it mean that monastics take the vow of stability?

In the words we learned when we were formandeas preparing for profession: the meaning of stability is to remain in the congregation for life. Stability is a commitment to a common life, to community, prayer, to common table, recreation, and mutual service which creates an environment for stable relationships in which community members can come to know and support one another.

Put in other words, stability is being the best of who you are, wherever you are. Bringing the best of what you can bring to whatever the situation is that you are in, to staying with the

spiritual life, staying with the search for God at this moment in time. It brings the best out of you. It doesn't stop you from growing; it demands that you grow.²⁰

Mother Irene Dabalus challenges us with the question: isn't stability so limiting, narrowing us down in our movement and vision? We have to reflect deeper on this, because stability is basically a paradox. The deeper question is: how do we live within boundaries yet open to the movement of the Spirit calling us to go beyond, to the new? She quotes Sr. Helen Lombard as saying, "This is ultimately the challenge and the amazing paradox of Stability: to live with our history, individually and together as a "coenobium," rooted in Christ, with a listening ear, a discerning heart, open to continuing conversion, free to hear the call of the Spirit in our Today and daring and courageous enough as Benedictine women to respond, to go beyond..." This precludes fidelity to community and fidelity to a life of praise.²¹

Stability in our missionary Benedictine congregation means belonging to a community (congregation) for life and going with it to the beyond where we can reach the world to which we were sent.

To end, a long quote. Abbot Primate Notker Wolf, OSB, a man who we know as one who follows a most unstable lifestyle being always on the move, in planes, trains, metros, or cars in the pursuit of his function, shares the following:

Often I often get asked how I can reconcile such a life with the Benedictine *stabilitas loci*. *Stabilitas* however doesn't mean immobility but an anchorage from which, in the course of time, inner stability grows. This inner grounding is what matters.

Flexibility is not in itself something negative. But I can only be flexible from a fixed point since I will otherwise lose my bearings. Even the most flexible employee needs time and a fixed place for withdrawal. For me, being part of a community and an established rhythm stabilizes me in the midst of my hectic professional life.

Even when we are assailed with demands from every direction, there is one way of deflecting these claims on us: *presence*... I hardly feel that I am in a different time zone. I am now simply "at home" wherever I happen to be. I do not feel the time differences... I arrive and am at home. *I am there*—and plunge into my work as if I had never been anywhere else. And the upheavals are not so bad at all because they succeed one another so quickly. I have no time to experience them as upheavals. And this also has to do with presence: with arriving somewhere and immediately being *there*—as in Zen meditation.

To remain balanced, you must frequently drop your anchor. My anchor is being in my own four walls now and again. It does me good every so often to sleep in my own bed and sit at my own desk and attend to a few essential matters. When I have been at home for a short while, then I am able to set out again. When I am away I try to be fully present for the people I meet. I am there. I am open for these people, and enjoy their pleasure when they show me everything. And even if it is still also a bit hectic when they are taking me around it is still also delightful. People's love can be almost overwhelming. But it is also a support and an anchor...

It is clear that the tempo of the world and our lives is constantly getting faster. Nobody can get away from this but the most important thing is to know who I am and what I want. It is not a question of choosing between the alternatives of slow or fast. I must know what is required when.²²

To sum up our insights:

- ❖ Stability is for sustenance and personal growth.
- ❖ Stability is for healthy, open, constructively critical community living.
- ❖ Stability is a connectedness disregarding time and space.
- ❖ Stability is from within; it is stability of the heart.
- ❖ Stability is community through good and bad times.
- ❖ Stability in the RB has for its purpose to counteract the instability of the members of the monastic community—their limitations and the limitations of the community. There is no perfect community.
- ❖ Stability needs to be cultivated. It engenders perseverance in times of trial.
- ❖ Stability is a gift, God's stability (faithfulness) to us.

- ❖ Stability is a paradox. It brings out the best in us and does not stop us from growing. It does not limit us but challenges us to be free and go beyond the shores of our own limitations.
- ❖ We do not practice stability when we seek diversions which will deflect us from our vocation.

Reflection/discussion questions:

1. From the insights above, what would each individual sister need in order to sustain her life and growth with her co-sisters in our Benedictine community?
2. By staying in relationship, true transformation can take place. What practices do our communities need to sustain and/or introduce in order for us to be able to reap the fruits of a life lived together in stability?
3. How can you develop your faith and trust in God whose stability/fidelity towards us is the source of your own stability?
4. You may have additional insights you wish to add. Please share them.

Notes:

¹<https://www.monasteriesoftheheart.org> *Monasteries of the Heart: A New Movement for a New World*. Benedictine Sisters of Erie, Pennsylvania.

²Gerald W. Schlabach, *Unlearning Protestantism: Sustaining Christian Community in an Unstable Age*. Brazos Press. 2010.

³RB texts on: Obedience RB 5; and humility 7; battle of holy Prol 40; eagerness for 58:7; grudging 5:17; in impossible tasks 68; labor of Prol 2; mutual 71, 72:6; obedient monks 2:25, 73:6; of abbot's disciples 2:6; of juniors to seniors 71:4; of prior 65:18-21; of priests 62:4, 62:7-11; promptness 5:4-9; to abbot 2:17, 3:5-6, 4:61-62, 7:34; third step of humility 7:34; to Christ at all times Prol 6; to every command 58:14; to rule 7:55, 62:11; unhesitating 5:1; vow of 58:17; weapons of Prol 3; Deans of the Monastery 21; Excommunication for Faults 23; On the Election of the Abbot 64; The Prior of the Monastery 65; If a Brother is commnaded to do impossible things 68; That the Brethren be obedience to one another 71. Counsel: On calling the brethren for counsel 3; On the Election of the Abbot 64.

Note: the word dissent does not appear in the RB; but what Fr. Augustine Roberts, OCSO refers to as 'measured openings for loyal dissent' could be found in RB 3 and 64.

⁴Michael Casey, OCSO, *Strangers to the City: Reflections on the Beliefs and Values of the Rule of Saint Benedict*. Paraclete Press, Brewster, Massachusetts. 2005. p191.

⁵Augustine Roberts, OCSO, *Centered in Christ: A Guide to Monastic Profession*. Monastic Wisdom Series. B15. 3rd ed. 2005.

⁶Joan Chittister, *Listen with the Heart: Sacred Moments in Everyday Life*. Sheed & Ward. U.K. 2003.

⁷Thomas Merton, *Sign of Jonas*. 1st ed. 1953. Harvest Book. Mariner Books. Pocketbook 2002.

⁸Joan Chittister. *The Monastery of the Heart: An Invitation to a Meaningful Life*. Bluebridge. 2012.

⁹ cf. Chittister. *Ibid*.

¹⁰Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *The Wisdom of Stability: Rooting Faith in a Mobile Culture*. Foreword by Kathleen Norris. Paraclete Press 2010. In Paperback. pp 14-15.

¹¹ cf. Hartgrove. *Ibid*.

¹² Daniel Rees and English Benedictine Congregation. *Consider your Call: A Theology of Monastic Life Today*. Cistercian Publications. Issue 20. Kalamazoo, Michigan. 1980. Digitalized 7 Mar 2007.

¹³Mother Adelaida Ygrubay, OSB. Handwritten Notes from lessons to Juniors. Upated March 21, 2014.

¹⁴Michael Casey, OCSO. *The Road to Eternal Life: Reflections on the Prologue of Benedict's Rule*. The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota. 2010. pp 60-61.

¹⁵Katheleen Norris, Foreword in Hartgrove, *ibid*. pp viii-ix.

¹⁶Micha Boyett. *Found: A Story of Questions, Grace & Everyday Prayer*. Worthy Publishing: Tennessee. 2014.

¹⁷Hartgrove. *Ibid*.

¹⁸Chittister, *ibid*.

¹⁹Hartgrove, *ibid*. pp10-12.

²⁰Chittister, *ibid*.

²¹Mother Irene Dabalus. Retreat Notes: Stability: 5thday of the retreat. N.d.

²²Notker Wolf. *Make Time for Yourself: It's Your Time*. Trans. Gerlinde Büchinger-Schmid. Sue Bollans, Ed. D.K. Printworld (P) Ltd. Publishers of Indian Traditions. 2010. pp31-34 *passim*.