

Triumph of the Cross – first profession

One of the marks of genius in Saint Benedict is his rendering of Chapter 58, “The procedure for accepting brothers.”

By the time Benedict writes the Rule in say, 530 AD the monastic tradition has been in existence for 250 years.

So there is lots of wisdom about incorporating new members into the community.

But Benedict takes that tradition and distills it; he gives structure to the idea of a novitiate year, he provides a place for the work of formation and a person as a guide.

Benedict also tells us how to do profession, with such elegance and simplicity, that to this day, we more or less follow his instructions.

Benedict gives a clear identification of the three vows:

committing oneself to stability, obedience, and a monastic manner of life.

The novice is to write out these promises in his own hand – so that the gravity of these spoken words can sink in.

The vows are made before God and the saints, the holy ones, before the abbot and the community.

The vow statement is then placed on the altar and signed or marked by the one making profession.

Then that famous formula –

Suscipe!

Receive me, O Lord, as you have promised, that I may live, and disappoint me not in my hope!

This is sung three times, repeated each time by the community.

This sung prayer is surely the psychological and theological highpoint of the rite.

The vows are left on the altar through the Eucharistic action and offered to God with the gifts.

We pray that these holy intentions will be lifted to God as the bread and wine are, that the Holy Spirit will make them holy and consecrated as the bread and wine are.

Every Eucharist we celebrate together as a community takes us back to this moment of self-offering and invites us to deepen that commitment.

There is a litany in which the whole gathered assembly prays that what God has begun in these monks will be brought to complete fruition and completion.

Benedict is clear that from that time on the individual should be considered a member of the community.

This means not only living and praying with the community but really depending on the community for what he needs.

Profession is about mutual trust, about giving and receiving.

This is where community is built up and where transformation occurs.

Later on, as we live our vows,

we may want to try to take some of what we put on this altar back, or to put conditions or footnotes on it.

However, God wants our whole self – no strings attached.

As Christ emptied himself in taking on our humanity and poured himself out completely on the cross, so we hope to let go of everything, over many years, and be filled with God's Spirit.

Celebrating profession on this feast day reminds us of the cross that is surely part of every human person's life, whether that occurs in illness, in loss and grief, in disappointment, frustration and failure.

But we always need to remember that there is a triumph in the cross, that evil did not win on that dark day, that Jesus was not overcome by sin and death.

As Philippians 2 says so wonderfully,

Because of Jesus' complete emptying of self, he was raised by God and given the name that is above every other name.

This is the transformation each one of us hopes to share in, not alone, but a Benedict says, "may he bring us all together to everlasting life."

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