



## ST. BENEDICT

Homily of the Right Reverend Dom Jean PATEAU  
Abbot of Our Lady of Fontgombault  
(Fontgombault, March 21<sup>st</sup>, 2024)

*Ecce nos reliquimus omnia et secuti sumus te.*  
Behold we have left all things, and have followed Thee.  
(Mt 19:27)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,  
My dearly beloved Sons,

**O**N THE FIRST SUNDAY in Lent, the Church invited the faithful to follow into the desert the Lord Who had been led there by the Spirit. On the second Sunday, we climbed Mount Thabor where with the three privileged disciples, Peter, James, and John, we encountered the face of the transfigured Lord.

The call of the desert, renouncing the world and its attractions so as to give himself the leisure to seek ceaselessly the beloved face, such are the motives that from the prime of his youth guided St. Benedict towards solitude.

As we celebrate his being called into God's presence, we give thanks for this life, which he trod on a path of light from its very first moments until the hour of death. St. Benedict has stood fast. He has persevered. He has finished his course, fighting until the end the good fight.

The reading taken from the Wisdom of Sirach has just evoked the high priest Simon's works. He repaired the Temple and fortified the sanctuary. He laid the foundations of double

depth, the high buttresses of the Temple precincts. He fortified the city against siege. What is more, he had large water cisterns dug so as to quench the thirst of the denizens. Building up the city to protect life in it, giving this life the power to develop by ensuring a water supply, such are indeed the works of a prudent and persevering government.

As she applies this text to St. Benedict, the Church reminds us of the admirable work of civilisation the holy monk has carried out. The many monasteries which have covered Europe throughout the centuries remain both as witnesses to the fruitfulness of his work, and the depositaries of an heirloom meant to bear new fruits.

This heirloom is contained in a Rule, and in a life, a few episodes of which have reached us through the *Dialogues* of the holy Pope Gregory.

However, the first building St. Benedict strove to edify was not made out of stones. One is not born a builder of monastic houses, and even less the founder of an order, or the patriarch of the Western monks. One becomes such. How so? By perseveringly, day after day, expecting the Lord's call and word, and listening to it. An action that wouldn't be deeply rooted in contemplation would have very little chance of success, and even less of withstanding the onslaught of time. Every disciple of Christ, every evangeliser should remember that.

The privileged place where the calling of the Lord may be heard, where His word keeps resounding, is the heart, as Madeleine Delbr el affirms:

If you go unto the ends of the world, you will find God's traces; if you go deep down into the innermost part of yourself, you will find God Himself.<sup>1</sup>

As an illustration, St. Benedict uses an evocative expression in the chapter of the Rule treating of the reception of vocations: *Habita secum deliberatione*, "Having deliberated with himself." After teaching the novice the hard and harsh things by which we go towards God, after the elder having a talent

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1. *Alcide, Guide simple pour simples chr tiens* [*Alcide, A Simple Guide for Simple Christians*],  ditions du Seuil (1968), p. 60.

for winning souls has examined whether the novice truly seeks God, whether he has zeal for the work of God, whether he is obedient and eager to accept life's humiliating events, after the newcomer has heard three times the text of the Rule of monks, there remains a step which only the novice can take: making the promise to keep all the points of the Rule, and to persevere in this purpose until the end of his life. This promise, made before God, can be made only after a careful deliberation, after retiring into the secret of one's heart before God, after dwelling with oneself, there where God also wants to dwell.

St. Gregory uses in his *Dialogues* this expression: *Habitare secum*, "To dwell with oneself." St. Benedict after giving up his student life had retired into a cave. However, the secrecy of his retreat could not be preserved, and many would frequently come and see the holy man. Monks from the neighbourhood chose him as their superior. Very quickly, though, they felt the pangs of remorse. They made the decision to poison the water on the table of the man who was disrupting their lives, since he wanted to reform their dissolute manners. The plot was unmasked by a miracle, and Benedict "forthwith returned to the solitude he loved so much, and, alone in the sight of Him who sees all things from above, he dwelled there with himself."

This expression gives rise to a little development, which cannot be given here fully but which I invite you to read. Let us simply note these few explanatory lines:

If the holy man had wanted to keep constrained under him those who had unanimously conspired against him, and were so contrary to him in life and manners, it might perhaps [...] have withdrawn the eye of his mind from the light of contemplation. Tiring himself out to correct the faults of others, he might have neglected his own faults; and so he would perhaps have forsaken himself, and yet not gained others. For every time by an excessive presumption we are transported out of ourselves, we "are," and yet we are not "with ourselves," because not looking into ourselves, we are wandering about other things.

I may well say, therefore, that this venerable man dwelled with himself, because he always kept guard on himself with great circumspection, always watching himself under the all-

a. *Dialogues*,  
ch. 3.

seeing eye of his Creator, always examining himself; and thus, he never debased the eye of his mind by allowing it to stray outside of himself.<sup>a</sup>

Dwelling with oneself is an essential condition to follow Christ. Dwelling with oneself is the antidote against frittering our time away, which is what the world entices to do, it means a life choice to be led in conformity with our various vocations.

Whereas we are soon going to enter the Holy Week, we need to ask ourselves whether we already have at some moment made the choice to dwell with ourselves, if we take action so as to give up frittering away our own time, as well as the others'. To receive the grace of God, to collect it as it passes by us, shouldn't we begin with recollecting ourselves? Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart.

As a conclusion, let us once again quote Madeleine Delbr el:

Deserts must be fought for, they are not freely given. We shall wrench the deserts of our lives out of the secret of our human hours only if we use violence against our habits, against our sloth. It's something difficult, but essential for our love...

For we are built in such a way that we cannot prefer Thee without a harsh fight, and that Thou, our Beloved, wilt always be weighed up by us against this fascination, this exhausting obsession we have for our puny baubles.<sup>b</sup>

b. *Op. cit.*,  
pp. 100-101.

Amen.

