



# THE CYBER TOOLBOX

A Monthly E-Newsletter of Benedictine Spirituality

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November-December, 2009

Welcome to the “The Cyber Toolbox!” a monthly E-Newsletter with practical suggestions and ideas for bringing the teachings of St. Benedict alive in your daily life.

## **Why wasn't there a November Cyber Toolbox??**

For those who were looking for the November issue of *The Cyber Toolbox*, my apologies.

In Chapter 68 of The Rule – “Assignment of Impossible Tasks to a Brother”, Benedict describes what the monastic must do when faced with “a burdensome task” or something that the person feels that he or she cannot do (RB 68.1). As much as I enjoy writing these articles for you, with my very busy fall retreat schedule, the November *Cyber Toolbox* became such a task. As November arrived and galloped along, my “super-responsible” muscles kicked in and the weight of not doing the newsletter was too much!

Benedict explains that after trying to do the task if the person sees “that the weight of the burden is altogether too much for their strength,” then they are to find the right time and explain patiently to their superior why they feel that they cannot perform the task (RB 68.2). While having lunch with a friend I shared my angst over not getting to the November issue, explaining patiently the reasons why – one program after another and no time to reflect on the November fruit – generosity. Wisely as an abbess, Katharine said, “Why not do a November-December issue?” In a spirit of Benedictine obedience (listen carefully and respond), I jumped on the idea.

So friends, please “Do not grumble” (RB 4.39). I ask that you support “with the greatest patience [my] weakness of body [and] behavior” (RB 72.5) and enjoy this combined Advent-Christmas issue of *The Cyber Toolbox*!

I send prayers for a blessed Advent and Christmas for you, your family and your friends!

And now, we continue our exploration of the connection between the Gifts of the Spirit as presented in Paul’s Letter to the Galatians and what The Rule of St. Benedict can teach us about these gifts. We reflect now on “generosity.”

## **“Generosity”**

*“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”*

Galatians 5:22-23

The sixth Fruit of the Spirit is *Generosity*, defined as “the habit of giving freely without coercion.” The months of November and December seem to be a good time to talk about generosity as gift-giving is on our minds. I found it interesting to learn that the Latin root is *genus*, meaning “birth.” In Old French the word was *genereux*, which meant “of noble birth.” What is it that we give “noble birth” to through our generosity? How is generosity revealed in the Rule of St. Benedict?

A major focus of the Rule is how to live with other people. From the Prologue where Benedict instructs, “Let peace be your quest and aim,” to the end of the Rule where he reminds us to pursue not what we judge better for ourselves, but what is better for someone else (RB 72.7), the Rule is packed with actions that model generosity. To peer more deeply into what the Rule says about generosity I’d like to focus on Chapter 31 – Qualifications of the Monastery Cellarer.

The cellarer is the individual who dispenses the goods of the monastery. What strikes me first of all are the personal qualities Benedict sees needed in the cellarer: “someone who is wise,

mature in conduct, temperate, not an excessive eater, not proud, excitable, offensive, dilatory or wasteful" (RB 31.1-2). These are qualities which turn a person outward to others rather than inward on themselves forming the root from which the tree of generosity springs. Benedict says that the cellarer "should not annoy the brothers"(RB 31.6). I like this because it speaks to the consideration of others that is crucial to generosity.

A theme for the cellarer is to treat others with respect. If someone makes an "unreasonable demand," the cellarer "should not reject him with disdain and cause him distress" but simply and humbly deny the request (RB 31.7). This is good 21<sup>st</sup> century self-differentiation, i.e., your behavior towards me does not determine my behavior towards you. Here's an example. In a world where the over-saturation of advertising can up the ante for the latest "whatever," it's tempting to respond to a child demanding the latest Ninetendo game or the hottest pricy Abercrombie shirt with "You don't need that!" or a derogatory remark. Instead, we can follow the cellarer...simply and humbly deny the request without disdain. Keep to the facts and not to the emotion. That's generosity.

The cellarer is to treat all the tools and goods of the monastery as if they were the sacred vessels of the altar (31.10). With such reverence for these things we could imagine that he or she might hold things closely or be reluctant to let that favorite tool be used by someone else. I know that I'm careful about who I share books with. I like to have them returned and in the condition that they were lent! But generosity prevails in the Rule. Benedict says that the cellarer is "not [to be] prone to greed, nor be wasteful and extravagant with the goods of the monastery" (RB 31.12) and to give the allotted food "without pride or delay" (31.16). Especially at this time of year we can open our hearts and generously share ourselves and our closely held material possessions with those in need.

Here's an instruction that really struck me about the cellarer as a model for generosity.

"If goods are not available to meet a request, he will offer a kind word in reply, for it is written: A kind *word* is *better than the best gift* (Sirach 18:17 and RB 31.13.)

Even if the monk is angry, the cellarer is not to act on the defensive or hurl back the anger, but offer a kind word in reply. The "kind word" is better than the best gift, says Benedict quoting the Book

of Sirach; the kind word is a gift of generosity given freely expecting nothing in return. It is a gift that gives a noble birth to love.

Perhaps you and I could consider giving the "kind word" as our gift this Christmas. The kind word can be given to many...and without cost, other than perhaps loosening the grip on our ego.

If a rough word is spoken to us, instead of creating more animosity with a reply "in kind," we can instead

*offer a kind word in reply.*

That special toy that we so wanted to give our child or grandchild or niece or nephew is sold out? Instead of harumping, we can

*offer a kind word in reply.*

When a family member neglects to pick up an item of food we needed at the store or forgets that important errand, instead of the sigh and the blaming look, we can

*offer a kind word in reply.*

After waiting in line for 15 minutes we finally stand before a harried check out clerk who is gruff and unpleasant. Instead of hurling back a frown, a scowl or a burst of angry words,

*offer a kind word in reply.*

Offering a kind word may take more time and energy and may not be what we really feel like doing at that moment. It will take discipline on our part. But recall what Benedict says in Chapter 4 – The Tools for Good Works: "Your way of acting should be different from the world's way; the love of Christ must come before all else" (RB 4.20-21). The kind word puts the love of Christ first. If you and I are to be "mature in conduct" as the cellarer, offering a kind word is a sure step on the path of generosity and *is better than best gift* (Sirach 18:17 & RB 31.14).

In the seasons of Advent and Christmas and into the New Year, let's promise to act differently than the normal knee-jerk reaction born of self-centeredness (*me, my, mine*) and instead think generously (*you, yours, us, ours*). When we succeed we will give a noble birth to love.

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## *The Tool of the Month*

### **Give the Best Gift – A Kind Word**

**Purpose of the Tool:** To practice a simple but profound act of generosity.

**Background on the Tool:** We can become instant givers of generosity and give birth to goodness and love when we hold to a standard of respect for others. We need not respond to others as they are to us. With God's ever-present help we can follow the cellarer, move beyond the emotion of the moment and place the love of Christ first.

**The Tool:** Be on the lookout for times when you can "offer a kind word in reply." Include everyone—family, friends, strangers, the clerk in the discount store, the teller at the bank, the homeless woman on the street, etc. Remember to offer yourself a kind word. You can include your pets, too!

When you offer the kind word, notice how you feel and what happens in the situation. Does something shift or change in you or in the situation? If you forget to offer a kind word (Yep, it'll happen) and opt for a standard "harumpf" or the classic growl, notice how you feel then and what happens in the situation.

At the end of the day look back and recall when you offered a kind word, giving thanks to God who helped you bring a noble birth to love.

December 1, 2009

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### ***Upcoming Programs***

A quick announcement about two programs in the coming winter-spring.

#### **Spirituality for Everyday Living – A Journey with St. Benedict**

A year-long program on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of each month January – May and September – December from 5:00 pm to 7:00 pm at St. John's Episcopal Church in Bala Cynwyd, PA (a suburb of Philadelphia).

Share a simple meal, prayer and explore the richness of Benedictine Spirituality as a framework for the Christian life.

For more information contact the church office at 610-664-4517 or email [office@stjohnlm.org](mailto:office@stjohnlm.org).

#### **"Benedictine Spirituality for the Frazzled – Part 2: Finding Holiness in Our Work"**

April 15, 2010 – Holy Cross Monastery in West Park, New York

For more information contact Holy Cross:

Phone: 845-384-6660

Email: [questhouse@hcmnet.org](mailto:questhouse@hcmnet.org)

[www.holycrossmonastery.org](http://www.holycrossmonastery.org)

#### **"Embracing Prayer in Your Daily Life**

May 1, 2010 – Our Lady of Guadalupe Monastery in Phoenix, Arizona – Sponsored by the Benedictine Cell Group of Victorville California.

For more information contact Jane right now. Another contact will be provided in the next newsletter.

#### ***A Website Update***

[www.stbenedictstoolbox.org](http://www.stbenedictstoolbox.org)

The link to sign up for *The Cyber Toolbox* is now working on the *St. Benedict's Toolbox* website. Please share this with church members and friends.

I will soon be updating my program list on the website along with some other updates and changes.

#### ***Plan a Retreat or Program***

Jane is available to do retreats and programs in the Benedictine Tradition. Content is personalized to maximize the relevance and benefit to attendees. Programs will bring the ideas to life in a practical and down-to-earth way. Retreats are modeled by Benedictine balance—time alone and time together, and time for rest, study and prayer.

To schedule a retreat or seminar or if you have questions about a program, contact Jane at 908-233-0134, cell-908-463-3252 or send an email to Jane at [jtomaine1685@verizon.net](mailto:jtomaine1685@verizon.net).

*"Place your hope in God alone."*

RB 4.41