

The Passing of Our Holy Father St. Benedict
March 22, 2021
Reflection by Sister Pat Coughlin, OSB D. Min

St. Benedict is renowned as a wisdom figure and as a teacher of wisdom, and our first reading is meant to draw our attention to this. It's a poem from Proverbs, one of the books in the Jewish Wisdom Tradition. I chose to concentrate on wisdom partly because I had a hard time finding similar themes among the three readings we're given for the feast, and partly because it's so relevant for our time of disruption, confusion, lostness, and loss.

Sometimes we misunderstand wisdom, and think that it's something that comes automatically with age.

Or we see it as sitting back and watching the world go by, or knowing about a lot of things, or something we get from a guru, or a reward for performing certain activities or keeping the rules.

The speaker of Proverbs, a teacher or parent advising a beloved student or child to incline their ear and heart to wisdom. For the speaker, wisdom comes from God and the way to wisdom is faithfully walking the path of the Torah because reverence for God and God's law is the beginning of wisdom.

The term "wisdom" is an ancient one, and has had many different meanings and nuances over the centuries: taking the long view of things; awareness of the deeper meaning of the universe and our place within it; a genuine sense of awe; acting out of a sense of ethics and morality. My favorite description of wisdom is knowing that underneath the chaos of the world there is a coherent, compassionate love that invites us to cooperate with it; it is not just believing in this force but *seeing* it and living its reality. (I got this one from Bill Redfield of the Wisdom School, a program founded by Episcopal priest and hermit Cynthia Bourgeault.)

Cynthia esteems St. Benedict greatly because she sees him as preserving the wisdom tradition which is the base of all the great religions of the world, the tradition that values surrender, detachment, compassion and forgiveness. She says, "Benedict faithfully molded the strands and fragments of the wisdom tradition, which was fading away in the 5th century, into a balanced and orderly rule of life through which receptivity to deeper meaning would continue to be cherished and cultivated."

And she gives Benedict credit for giving the world one of the greatest wisdom tools ever developed,

Lectio Divina. Here is how she describes Lectio's four steps: **Lectio**, is a slow reading of a

passage, allowing it to resonate in the body. **Meditatio** is a pondering of the words in the passage with the intellect and allowing their nuances to be understood in relation to our life issues. In **Oratio** our emotions resonate with the words, and that leads us to prayer or to simply sitting with our feelings. **Contemplatio** brings our body, intellect, and emotions together as we rest in God. From this comes deeper understanding and creative vision.

The sage in Proverbs advises that we treasure wisdom. We don't have to be scholars or mystics to walk the wisdom path. It means being present to the work and the people we encounter. It means that, bit-by-bit, we relativize, not hate, our own egos in favor of cultivating the truth that we are an integral part of a greater whole.

St. Benedict patterned his life and teaching after Jesus. Those who truly encountered Jesus experienced the encounter as a wisdom event because they they opened their hearts to his power to awaken the wisdom within them. Some got it; others like the disciples in today's gospel did not. After Jesus' powerful teaching against the pursuit of riches and high places, they asked "What's in it for us?"

Well, what is in it for us? Perhaps it's Benedict's PAX: not freedom from stress or responsibility, but freedom from the need to control everything, freedom from needing everything, freedom from not surpassing everyone, freedom from having our way in all things, freedom from the shackles of conventional wisdom about what's important in life, freedom to see the goodness in all things and people.

As we enter the final weeks of Lent and celebrate Easter in the spirit of Jesus we can move a little beyond having our center in our small selves.

Somehow there's always a poem from Rumi or Hafiz:

If ten lamps are in one place
each differs in from from another
yet you can't distinguish whose radiance is whose
when you focus on the light.

In the field of spirit there is no division;
no individuals exist
Sweet is the oneness of the Friend with friends.
Catch hold of spirit

Help this headstrong self disintegrate
that beneath it you may discover unity,
like a buried treasure.