

“...[W]hoever of you does not renounce all that you have cannot be my disciple.” Renouncing what we have is not just a material issue; it is also about our self-absorption, our own righteousness, our tendency to see what we want to see and be blind to what we don’t. To insist we’re smarter than everybody else. To fear looking stupid or weak if we admit we need help. Or to fail to take charge and make a stand because of our anxiety about the reactivity that may be set loose. As parish or diocesan leaders and consultants, those tendencies will have a huge impact on our effectiveness and on the shape of our own spiritual lives.

The necessity of renouncing all that we have is not a rule for the sake of making life difficult or of putting up artificial barriers; it’s a statement of fact. When we are all bound up with our own needs, agendas, and priorities, it isn’t possible to hear where God is calling us. In the Benedictine tradition, this idea of renouncing all that we have is also fundamental to the development of humility and the practice of obedience.

Now Benedict expected actual obedience. That is, doing what the abbot says, cheerfully, in the service of God. Bob and I use the Benedictine Promise quite a bit in our consulting work and the Obedience part is the most difficult to get at without raising hackles.

So instead of focusing on the “obey” element of obedience, we tend to talk a lot about obedience as mutual listening in community. As the capacity to do what Esther de Waal says is to “hear and then act upon what we have heard, or, in other words, to see that the listening achieves its aim.” She goes on to say that “[w]e are not being truly attentive unless we are prepared to act on what we hear.”

Yet much as we talk about mutual listening in community, I know that when we say “mutual,” we often mean, “I may change my mind if you are adequately convincing, but probably not. That said, rest assured I’ll be polite and only criticize you behind your back.”

I have found it personally important to at some point give up this appearance of mutuality and assume that the Episcopal Church, my rector, my fellow parishioners, some of our bishops, this order, our superior, have something to say to me and to all of us that goes beyond individual agreement or disagreement. I have some fundamental obligation to submit my will to theirs.

I find that really hard. And I also find it important to remember that this understanding of Benedictine obedience is not based on mere positional authority. It’s not about brute power. Rather, it is grounded in a shared life of common prayer and a common understanding of what the parish church is all about. Benedict’s obedience isn’t an abstraction. The vow to obey is in the context of stability and conversion of life, and within a community of monks dedicated to following Christ. The abbot is not a random tyrant but “a father who loves you.”

As an Order, it seems to me that much of the past few years has been connected to building a shared understanding of who we are and what our vocation calls us to become. That shared understanding forms the basis for faithful obedience and for doing some hard work and for looking at uncomfortable truths.

It also seems as if we are intentionally taking on markers of stability – the habit, agreeing to come to a monastic house for two years in a row, conforming to the common prayer norms. These are ways to help us listen more deeply, commit more freely, and respond less fearfully. My hope is that our renewed stability and obedience leaves us more open to pathways of conversion as we continue to discern our gifts as a community, to develop a formation process that makes sense of those gifts and brings them to fruition, and to continue to live into the Promise of the Order in our ongoing transformation in Christ.