

# PASSAGES

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## ESTHER DE WAAL ON THE BENEDICTINE VOW OF STABILITY

*Esther De Waal visited St. Paul's in October 1992 as part of our centennial celebration. Her presence among us struck a deep chord. The third of three Benedictine vows she spoke on was stability.*

Early on, Benedict has a very scathing description of the person he calls the gyrovague: the restless spirit who wanders about, always seeking the new, not grounded, not rooted. Stability is just to counteract this in our lives. It asks us — again in a lovely phrase from Thomas Merton — to remain in one good place. But obviously it can't mean, for us who are laity, one geographical spot on the ground. That would be totally impossible and very ironic for me, jet-setting around the world to talk to you about stability.

It's much more fundamental than that. It means standing still, standing firm, and it comes from the Latin word [meaning] "to stand." Staying still in my very center. Not trying to run away, to escape. Not indulging myself in any of those escapist fantasies which say, "if only things had been different in the past," or "when things are different in the future...when I have a new job, another relationship, when I live in a different place, when I'm through with my midlife crisis." To live by the power of stability closes for us all those escape hatches, won't let us indulge in those fantasies, forces me to face reality,

forces me to see that God is here present, in my life now, in *this* place, *these* circumstances, surrounded by *these* people. And if I cannot find God here and now, it's [unlikely] that I will find Him anywhere else, tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. So this is the vow that says, stick there; go where flight will be impossible; stay where the battle is actually going on; confront what has to be faced, perhaps fought out. Enclosure in the monastic sense has to be interpreted for us [as] to remain within the enclosure of the place, the situation, even the limitations where we find ourselves, and [to] take that as the given reality.

There's a book that I'm very fond of. It's one of Henri Nouwen's earliest books, *Genesee Diary*. It's one of the wisest books. He is an extremely busy man. He is a priest, a lecturer, a counselor, and a writer. He's always rushing from one thing to another. And he goes and spends seven months in the Abbey of the Genesee. Again, a Trappist life which will be regulated by the understanding of the Benedictine rhythm. And there — he's very honest about it — he gradually comes to grips with himself under the inspiration of the life of the Rule. What he did isn't available to us, of course, to take ourselves off for seven months to a Trappist monastery. But we can live by the insights of the Rule and, above all, this vow of stability. He goes in, being

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pulled in all directions, no single-mindedness. He is always rushing from one thing to another and as a result he is always exhausted, distracted, all over the place. What he discovers gradually, I too came to know rather reluctantly: that here and now is what is important. Because it is God Himself who wants you at this place and in this time. He leaves the Abbey resolved that, wherever he may be — at home, traveling, or in universities — he wouldn't feel restless, wishing to be somewhere else, doing something else. But he would realize that there was the possibility, wherever he was, of being at home. At home in himself and at home with Christ. He says Christ speaks to us, tells us: "You have a home. I am your home. Claim your home. It is right where you are: in your innermost being; in your heart."

He goes [on] to say, the more attentive I am to such words, the more I come to realize that I don't have to go far to find what I'm searching for. The tragedy was that I was so possessed by fear that I was always trying to find that inner place, my home, somewhere else. I was pursuing success, more knowledge, sensations, pleasures, greed, and that way, what happens is [that] we become strangers to ourselves, people who have no rest, who are never at home.

So this is the vow that asks of us to be earthed in the fundamental, rounded reality of the given. To stay with ourselves and not to run away. And again how basic this is, how this vow touches something that's universal, fundamental, gives me

a place to stand. We all know what [T.S.] Eliot means when he talks about "the still center at the heart of the turning world." Now, in today's world and today's society, this is something that, although I do believe we need [it], is very countercultural.

There's a modern and present-day Australian Trappist monk called Michael Casey who is very wise and writes very wisely about the vow of stability in today's world. He says [that] what is involved is perhaps best seen in comparison to what he calls "nobility of mind." He says it's like the remote control device for changing channels, which is a really eloquent symbol of today's restlessness, even more eloquent than power or fame. There are many persons who simply cannot persevere with something as undemanding as watching a television channel without switching, because you might be missing something better somewhere else. Or again, he says, in a rather nice illustration of what God asks of us, it's a marathon and not a sprint.

The whole question of stability means that we stay around and allow the process to work in us, work on us, that we give it a chance to work. It's a bit like cooking a sponge cake and endlessly opening the oven door to see whether it's rising or not. One can have that special sort of equanimity which says, "I have initiated a process and it's futile for me to expect results before the allotted time has elapsed." It's a bit like going parachuting. As the plane is going up, it's awfully high, about 500 feet, and you say, "I won't go up higher, I'll jump out here." Well, you can do this if you like, except if there isn't enough space for the parachute to open, you will go splat on the ground. So you have to hang on until you get high enough for the parachute to open. So basically, this is the vow about working our way through it. That's what perseverance is all about. It is letting work the natural process of growth that has been initiated by God's call.

This is really the perseverance and the steadfastness of the Psalms: "Renew a steadfast spirit within me"; endurance, holding on. The monk, unrestrained, goes on without weakening

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or seeking escape. Persevere until death, Benedict tells us. Perseverance in the long haul. Refusing to give up if it's for the long haul gives a pretty different perspective.

I like the words of Thomas Culliman, who is a Catholic Benedictine monk today. He now lives in Liverpool, which is just ordinary inner-city life. He writes about stability in his life, which is very much like many of ours: "I think that staying power is a quality we need very badly. Not so many people have it. They seem to lack long-term courage, creative patience, the sort of patience that knows how to go on and on [how] to hang on to the vision."

So, if we have stability in our lives it means that we will walk the major road of life until the end, no matter what. That we will be constant of heart and unremitting in our personal spiritual effort. The purpose of stability is to center ourselves in something greater than ourselves. It is to center ourselves in God's hand, God's process for each one of us. And Joan Chittister, an amazing modern American Benedictine, tells us that where I am is where God is for me. So that whatever the doubts and difficulties around me, I can — if I will — simply stay still enough in my own heart to find God there. It's a vow to still the wandering heart. It's an antidote to that fragmentation which comes from never settling in to where I am or what I'm doing or what I'm meant to learn.

She goes on finally to say that, ultimately, it's about our inward disposition. It shows that I want to live life deeply, not on the superficial, mobile levels of contemporary society. It all depends upon my recognition of the faithfulness of God. I am certain of God and that is why I hold on. God keeps His side of the covenant and He will help us all to keep our side. It is the certain, guaranteed faithfulness of God which makes our stability possible.



I just want to add a footnote that takes us back to the start. Each vow is interconnected, woven together in a process of the return of the prodigal. You really have to hold together in dynamic tension. You see, if I have just stability without

continual conversion, then I'm static, I don't grow, I fossilize. Equally, if I journey on without standing still in my thoughts, I'm a wanderer, endlessly searching. Both of them are incomplete unless all the time I'm listening to the voice of God and discerning His voice, that conversation by which *He* becomes [the] point of reference in myself.

I [have] said how important [the vows] have been to me in my own life — they have touched me at many different levels. They tell me a great deal about myself. They have helped me to live with myself, which is something that ultimately all of us have to do. I don't think either the church or society educates us for this. But many of us, and not through choice, find ourselves living on our own. Even if we aren't, we still have to live with ourselves, because it is only by living with myself that I can really make other relationships possible. I think these vows address themselves to my core humanity. Listening — how basic and how fundamental that is. I need to hear, I need to be heard if I'm to be fully human. I need to journey on, to live open to change. This is Jung's psychic reality. This is what so many of the myths are all about. The search, the quest, seeking, that speaks to my deepest humanity. I also need to stand still, to be at home in myself. Without my innermost base I'm disoriented and distracted and useless to myself and to others. These vows also tell me much about forming and holding relationships, whatever they may be — family, partnership, marriage, community. [They tell me] about sensitivity and openness in listening; about moving on or choosing to fossilize; [about] being open to the new; about holding on through the long haul; not giving up when things are difficult, just simply the steadfastness of staying there.

I also believe that we can see in them the agenda for the church, for the parish, for any institution that wants to be continually alive, renew itself, and move forward. I find in them a vision and a challenge. Here is a warning about denial and the refusal to hear. Here is the call to become a listening people. Here is a warning

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against being static. Instead, people are called to transformation from the old to the new, [to be] an open people [and not] cling to the idols of the past. Also a warning against running away and escaping from the difficult things — a challenge [to be] a steadfast people.

Finally, these vows, ever since St. Benedict, are pointing us beyond himself, beyond anything he could write, to the Gospel in Christ. He points to these vows to help us to remember, all the time, the place of Christ in our lives. Obedience reminds us of *Christ, the word*: I hear. Conversatio, of *Christ, the way*: I follow. Stability, of *Christ, the rock*: on whom I build.

I'd like to end with a prayer by Thomas Merton, as his life and his understanding deepen my own perceptions of the Rule. He says of Christ: He is the whole meaning of our life, the whole substance of our monastic life. Nothing in the monastery makes sense if we forget this great central truth. We come seeking truth and Christ says, "I am truth." It is in that Christ that I find myself restored, healed, made whole, made free, brought home to God.

*Christ is the whole meaning of our lives.*

*The whole substance of our ordinary daily working life in the world.*

*Nothing in our lives makes sense if we forget this great central truth.*

*We come seeking truth and Christ says I am the truth.*

*It is in Christ that we find ourselves restored, healed, made whole, made free, brought home to God. 🌀*

