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## Tradition and Adaptation

Patrick Henry, Ph.D., Fr. Columba Stewart, OSB

from *Benedict's Dharma*, September 2001

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**Patrick Henry:** To talk to us about the chapter on tradition and adaptation, I'm delighted to introduce my very dear friend Columba Stewart who is a monk of St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, the St. John's Abbey Formation Director, professor of theology at St. John's University and author of, among other things, *Cassian the Monk and Prayer and Community: The Benedictine Tradition*. That's all on the card Columba gave me. I probably knew that, but then he also has one final word. He says, "Texanity." And he knew that I would say this because whenever he and I are together, I cannot resist saying that he's a native of Houston, I'm a native of Dallas, we went to rival high schools many year's apart—he's a lot younger than I am—and if we were in the borders of Texas, we would have nothing good to say about each other. But outside those borders, we stick together like brothers [laughter]. In any case, I am delighted to introduce to you my fellow Texan, Columba Stewart.

**Columba Stewart:** Thank you Patrick. I feel in the interest of full disclosure I should show you my card [laughter]. And say that I plan to be charismatic and resourceful this afternoon rather than bossy and domineering [laughter]. I need to say just a word before I go any further and that is to let you know how I come at a challenge like the one I've been set this afternoon—and that is both as a monastic practitioner and as a student and teacher of monasticism. So what I may have to say this afternoon may be a bit more text-oriented than some of the other reflections we've heard and that's just me. So I'm not trying to be heady or academic or avoid experience or anything like that.



**Patrick Henry**, Ph.D., (here on the left with Fr. Patrick Barry) recently retired as executive director of the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research at Saint John's Abbey and University, Collegeville, Minnesota. He was the editor of *Benedict's Dharma*.

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**Fr. Columba Stewart**, OSB, is a monk of St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, the St. John's

I'd like to talk about four topics this afternoon which come out of my reading of the Buddhist responses in this chapter. Those four topics are: one: Tradition, adaptation, and interpretation; two: Community structure; three: Leadership, Succession, and Limits; and four: Obedience. Each of these will be fairly brief.

So first, tradition, adaptation, and interpretation. It's always difficult for someone who writes about these subjects to read somebody else's because you want to rewrite it. Or you want to say "What they really should have talked about is this." So I add to the title, Tradition and Adaptation, the word "interpretation." I do this deliberately because I think it's something we need to be mindful of. Benedictines today read the Rule of Benedict through interpretative lenses that have become so familiar to us that we are not always conscious of wearing them. These lenses are closely related to the way that Christians in the monastic tradition read the Bible—serious about the meaning of the text, but also non-literal in our interpretation of it.

Now I say this because one of the challenges that any of you have ever tried to read the Rule, even in Abbot Patrick's elegant rendering of it, have surely faced is navigating its stern and sometimes absolutist language. And some of our commentators picked up on that challenge. I know that this particular challenge is not unique to Christians or Benedictines and that the scriptures of all religious traditions have their canons of interpretation, ways that people navigate and negotiate the difficult parts of them; and that every religious tradition has its own demands of sensitivity and suppleness of approach to such texts. But I do want point it out at this point because it helps me to situate these Buddhist commentaries on the Rule. I find in them a deep respect for Benedict's wisdom combined with some uneasiness about the absolutist tone of some of his instructions, particularly on obedience. I'll say more about obedience in a few minutes at the end of these remarks, but for now let me simply name that hermeneutic issue. The tension between fidelity to the text and then finding a way to interpret and apply it in cultural circumstances very different from those at the time of its composition, is an obvious challenge for those of us who try to live the Rule of Benedict. And it is always a challenge for those who read the

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Rule with an eye toward adapting it to their own circumstances. So that's all by way of, sort of, prologomenon.

Now to some of the real stuff—community structure. I was quite struck in the first part of this chapter by Judith's appreciation of the importance of structure in the formation contemplative community.

One of the great discoveries of early Christian monastic figures—and this always happens in any monastic tradition when people start to do it seriously—was the necessity of rules for preserving charity, and not just for the sake of orderly running of an organization. The biography of St. Pocomius, the 4th century monk who was considered the founder of the communal monastic life in southern Egypt, relates that when he first tried to establish monastic community, his intention was that his disciples would learn purely from his example rather than from explicit instruction and expectation. And, in time, he thought they would just begin to do what he did and the community would kind of take shape and form from his example. That had been the way he had been trained as a monk because he was first trained as a hermit. This community experiment he was undertaking was new. That standard formation of hermits would simply involve apprenticing oneself to a spiritual elder and just imitating what the elder did. Nor did Pocomius require his first followers to depend on the group for their material needs. Instead, they retained their own property and contributed to the community from their own resources.

Well, the experiment as you might expect was something of a disaster. His naivete became evident when the first cohort of novices were quite happy to let him do all the work [laughter], and instead of learning from his example and then sort of taking up and then doing their part, they just sat back and let him do the cooking and answer the door and organize the prayers and everything else. The text also reports, kind of *inter alia*, that these were very sturdy fellows, these novices, and that Pocomius himself was not very robust, so he's kind of living with a bunch of bullies [laughter] who don't get what he's trying to do. The story is fascinating because—this is the official biography of Pocomius, mind you—it shows him becoming more and more depressed and resentful as they continue to fail to get it and to follow his leading by example. The story culminates in a time of intense prayer where

Pocomius goes off in a kind of depressed and angry funk and he prays at great length and the manuscript breaks at this point and then it picks up again towards the end of the prayer and it says, "Full of resolve, he took the iron door bolt of the monastery [this kind of great thing which closed the gate] and chased them out of the monastery [laughter] with the fear of God driving him onward." It then says he started, over with a new cohort, and I might just note here that St. Benedict, as many of you know, also had a disastrous first round as being an abbot. So learning by painful experience is very much a part of the Christian monastic tradition, as I'm sure it is of the Buddhist.

So Pocomius starts over with a new cohort, but this time, The Life tells us, he established rules for them, taken from the Holy Scriptures. What it means of course is policies—about food, clothing, sleeping arrangements and so on. So that by the time the time of St. Benedict's work, some 200 years later, the cenobitic or communal monastic emphasis on structure was taken for granted and Benedict's focus on ordered service in the community and his fierce comments about private property and the danger it poses to the kind of monasticism he envisages are explicable by those 200 years of Christian cenobitic monastic experience, and surely by his own experience as someone who had tried to form community. For Benedict, for someone to be fully a part of a monastic community meant to give oneself fully to something larger than the self, and the structures of community for him were markers of that call to altruism. So I think that's all obvious enough, but it's helpful to see some background.

The third thing I want to talk about is Leadership, Succession, and Limits, and I know that the next chapter of the book is more focused on leadership, but as I read the commentaries in this section of the book, several people touched on aspects of monastic leadership, both in positive and problematic aspects.

It's clear to any reader of Benedict's Rule that the chapters on the abbot are among the richest in the text and perhaps also the most clearly expressive of Benedict's own experience. As you know from reading the Rule, he actually has two substantial discussions of the qualities required for monastic leadership. This pattern of having an

early discussion of a topic and then a later discussion of a topic is one we'll see again with respect to obedience. In chapter 2 of the Rule, Benedict hands on an edited version of material from an earlier text, The Rule of the Master. Now I don't think Benedict's Dharma contains a discussion of that issue of the Rule of the Master and the Rule of Benedict, but it will be familiar of many of you. There is this most longer monastic rule from shortly before the time of Benedict which is anonymous. It's called the Rule of the Master because it frequently refers in it to a monastic teacher, abbot, by the title of Master. It's three times as long as Benedict's work. It gives him some of his richest material, but it is also clearly the work of a neurotic and paranoid monastic leader [laughter]. Now I don't have time here to illustrate that contention, but if you read the Rule of the Master, it's obvious. And Benedict's genius and originality is shown in large part by his editing of that earlier work as well as in his original material. I'll say something illustrative of this in just a moment.

So in chapter 2, Benedict is giving us an edited version of The Master on the monastic superior. But then in chapter 64 of the Rule, Benedict presents an entirely original approach that develops some of the same themes from chapter 2, but with particular emphasis on pastoral adaptability to the variety of personalities one finds inevitably in human and monastic community. One of the distinctive features of Benedict's teaching on the abbot, compared to The Master's, is for Benedict, the monastic superior is clearly accountable to the rule, just like everybody else in the community is. Whereas for The Master, the abbot's teaching is identified explicitly with the voice of the Lord, and the Rule is the Lord speaking through the master, the abbot of the community. Benedict has a very different conception. Although the abbot stands in the place of Christ, as representing Christ to the members of the community in a powerful way, as you all know the superior is not the sole mediation of Christ to the community. Benedict is also very careful to say that the hierarchy goes: Christ, gospel, Rule, abbot, community, with the abbot clearly under the authority of both gospel and Rule. If you read The Rule of the Master, each chapter begins with a question and then the answer comes in this form, "The Lord replied through the master..." and there's the material—a very different take. I say this because there was a concern among some of the commentators, and

surely among some of you, that Benedict seems to identify obedience to the abbot too absolutely with obedience to God and I think we need to work with that as a group.

Another key aspect of this is that, by doing this, by putting the abbot under the authority of the rule, Benedict has developed the constitutional framework of the monastery to the point that there is a guarantee of continuity from one leader to another. Whereas you have the impression that in the master's monastery, when the abbot died everything was up for grabs. This is partly because, in his neurotic paranoia, the master did not establish orderly means of transition. In his monastery, the abbot was not chosen by the members of the community as in Benedict's, but the abbot designated a successor and if the abbot died there were contingency plans for what you did. And if the abbot recovered, having already appointed a successor, there were contingency plans for what you did. And Benedict sweeps it all away by saying, let the superior be chosen by the community. And the Rule is the guarantee of stable transition from one regime to another.

Fourthly, obedience. One of the particularly challenging aspects of Benedict's teaching, and this was evident in this chapter on commentary is his emphasis on ready, and even what seems to be, absolute obedience. Yifa notes that Benedict's linking of the monastic master with the Supreme Absolute Power is disturbing, and that the Rule advocates a more significant renunciation of the will than the Buddhist codes do. That may well be. It certainly is the case that in reading Benedict on obedience, one vividly confronts the challenge of interpretation I opened with this afternoon. But I think it's also important to place Benedict's teaching on obedience, especially in chapters five and seven, the toughest chapters on obedience, within the context of both his sources, and the develop teaching founded in the final chapters of the Rule, as I was suggesting for the abbot. Let me do that very briefly.

One way to think of Benedict's approach to obedience and its original context would be to see him as a mediating figure, historically. And to do this, you have to realize that, when I talk about Benedict, I see him as the culmination of an earlier tradition, not as the innovator and the

beginner of monastic tradition. That may be a different way of viewing him than some of you are used to. So, if you think of the earlier monastic tradition before him, particularly in Egypt, as emphasizing very much absolute obedience as a formative practice, indeed the formative practice, you might imagine that as a kind of vertical axis of obedience: God, teacher, monastic, and that that is the focus. But Benedict compliments that vertical understanding of obedience with what you might call a more genuinely communal or cenobitic perspective, in which obedience is also seen as vital to preserve charity in the community and to cultivate the altruistic reflexes that should characterize somebody who lives with others. So to that vertical axis of God, superior, teacher, and then monastic, we can add a horizontal dimension that Benedict calls, most poignantly, mutual obedience.

His sources such as John Cassian and The Master emphasize the vertical, whereas Benedict includes that horizontal perspective, a perspective he learned from the monastic writings of, you may be surprised to hear, Augustine—whom we always think of harshly and whom we blame for so many of the problems of modern Western Christians, not realizing that in his monastic teaching, Augustine chose a very different side of himself, and that some of Benedict's best soundbites about pastoral sensitivity and love for one another, in fact, are stolen from Augustine.

Now the most famous examples of this horizontal perspective on obedience in the Rule are those two later chapters, the assignment of impossible tasks, chapter 68, mutual obedience, 71, and its twin, the good zeal of monastics, chapter 72. In them, you see a real shift of emphasis from obedience as regulation, to obedience being a matter of sensitivity and discernment. And the fact that Benedict opens the door to dialogue between monastics and their superior indicates that he expected, in the 6th century, that his own monks would have minds of their own and would use them, both with respect to assignments he made to them and in their relations with one another. When each member of the community was expected to discern what was better for another rather than for himself and to act on that altruistic basis.

Obviously there are tensions in the Rule between the obedience taught

in its opening chapters and the obedience presented in its closing chapters, and I will not deny them. But let me suggest that that might be a good tension—reflecting as it does the interplay of the ascetical and interpersonal imperatives of opening up the will, letting go or letting relax that self will, or one’s very own will, that Benedict and other writers emphasize as crucial to the monastic project of opening it up to other and larger perspectives. It’s noteworthy that although the final chapters of Benedict’s Rule on obedience are the most original, drawn from his own mature monastic experience, he doesn’t eliminate the early ones, so we’re left with that tension.

A final remark about the will and monastic obedience. One of my brothers in community and it might have been me—the saying I’m about to relate has become apocryphal enough that I don’t even remember if I was the one who first heard it, but I’ve repeated it many times—one of us was complaining, so it certainly could have been me, to our abbot, Timothy, about the fact that others in the house weren’t doing what they were supposed to be doing. So, whatever it was, whether it was coming to church or taking out the trash, or whatever it was, they weren’t doing it. And his reply was brief but memorable. He said, “Look, we’re all volunteers here.” That was actually not just the sort of frustrated exclamation of an abbot, but a profound remark, because Benedict’s call for a whole hearted obedience was spoken in a context of fundamental freedom, not of coercion. The monks could leave anytime they wanted. Obviously religious authority can be abused. And obviously any of us can submit ourselves to obedience for reasons that are pathological. It has happened, does happen, and it will happen again. But I don’t think that any monastic practice or value should be assessed with only its debased form in view. The whole point of Benedict’s teaching on structure, leadership and obedience after all is that expanded heart he describes at the end of the prologue and the love that casts out fear. Thank you.

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Continued in **Tradition and Adaptation: Discussion  
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