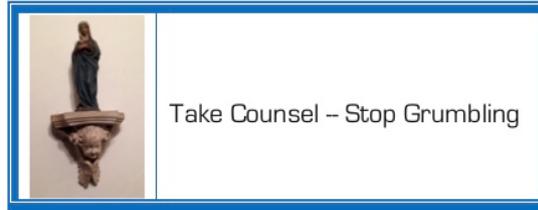


Benedict's Methods for Taking Counsel



Chapter Five of the Rule of Saint Benedict

As often as anything important is to be done in the monastery, the abbot shall call the whole community together and himself explain what the business is; and after hearing the advice of the brothers, let him ponder it and follow what he judges the wiser course. The reason why we have said all should be called for counsel is that the Lord often reveals what is better to the younger. The brothers, for their part, are to express their opinions with all humility, and not presume to defend their own views obstinately. The decision is rather the abbot's to make, so that when he has determined what is more prudent, all may obey. Nevertheless, just as it is proper for disciples to obey their master, so it is becoming for the master on his part to settle everything with foresight and fairness.

Accordingly in every instance, all are to follow the teaching of the rule, and no one shall rashly deviate from it. In the monastery no one is to follow his own heart's desire, nor shall anyone presume to contend with his abbot defiantly, or outside the monastery. Should anyone presume to do so, let him be subjected to the discipline of the rule. Moreover, the abbot himself must fear God and keep the rule in everything he does; he can be sure beyond any doubt that he will have to give an account of all his judgments to God, the most just of judges.

If less important business of the monastery is to be transacted, he shall take counsel with the seniors only, as it is written: Do everything with counsel and you will not be sorry afterward (Sir 32:24).

Life in the parish would be more harmonious if the rector consulted with others frequently. This isn't the formality of the standard vestry or parish meeting. It is a time of listening and exploration. There need to be times when everyone in the parish is invited, Times when it is the formal vestry, Times when it is "the seniors" – former warden's, retired priests.

There is a need to take care in the invitation to the whole community to nudge people who may frequently be overlooked. In Benedict's era that was those who were younger. In our day it may be the younger and the older. Think of groups and individuals in the parish that may feel unheard in their daily life. No need to paternalize. Just make sure they have really heard the invitation to participate.

Grounded in Daily Prayer and Sunday Eucharist

An assumption within Benedict's thinking is that those coming together to consult are also together every day in the divine office and at the Sunday Eucharist – they live a life of common prayer and reflection. Because they live by Rule, in a common pattern of spirituality, and because they have been initially formed over many years, they come to a time of listening with a common base of understanding and competencies.

Parish communities aren't monastic communities. We don't live together. We don't take vows binding us to that particular community.

What a parish community can do is ground its taking counsel in more than the rector waving a collect over the beginning of a meeting. Shape a community of the Daily Prayers of the Church, Sunday Eucharist, and reflection.