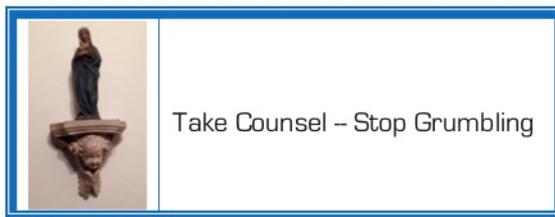


Grumbling or Murmuring



From *Fill All Things: The Dynamics of Spirituality in the Parish Church*, Robert A. Gallagher, OA Chapter 3 "The Benedictine Promise." You have permission to use this document in its entirety as a handout.

A second theme that has a strong connection to the listening climate is how leaders and members deal with the grumbling in our hearts.

Benedict's passion for listening and mutual self-giving in community is made clearer and tougher by his objection to "grumbling" or "murmuring." Parish leaders know all about this way of complaining. New ideas and problem solving will not create, in themselves, a healthy community that stays healthy. The parish must attend to its spirit. Grumbling is the manifestation of communal cynicism and passivity, of a victim stance. In individuals it can become an addictive behavior that eats away at the person's integrity.

Our listening and responding builds community when freely given to one another and to the whole community. In the Rule our obedience is only "acceptable to God and agreeable to people" if it "is not cringing or sluggish or halfhearted, but free from any grumbling" The Rule also speaks of responding gladly because if people respond only "grudgingly and grumble, not only aloud but in their hearts, then even though the order is carried out, their actions will not be accepted with favor by God, who sees that they are grumbling in their hearts." [Chapter Five of the *Rule of Saint Benedict*]

Addressing the issue of grumbling might include at least six elements.

1. Develop those listening and problem-solving processes mentioned above. There needs to be a healthy process for people to cope with the feelings, frustrations and ideas they have; a process that is an alternative to the grumbling. This is a way of doing what Benedict did in taking counsel with others in the community around truly significant matters.
2. Establish a "no grumbling" norm. We need to ask people to honor each other and the well-being of the community. If the community has ways to listen and to work together in improving its common life, members need to be asked to use that process. There needs to be an explicit invitation to exercise self-discipline over what and how we speak in addressing issues and especially when things don't go our way.
3. Actively nurture emotional and spiritual maturity. There are a couple of very conservative women I have frequently talked with during the years of fighting in the Episcopal Church. They are in a minority in the church and in their own parishes. One is a priest, the other a lay woman. Here's what I have heard from them about what allows them to remain in a church that they disagree with over several very important issues. In reference to our friendship, "I would not want to be part of a

church that would not include you.” (We have different opinions.) “I don’t want to do anything to harm the unity of the church.” And, “I have changed my mind before, so I don’t want to be so arrogant as to assume that I might not change my mind about these things.” They each exhibit humility and self awareness. The parish’s work of formation needs to include shaping this kind of maturity. We need to be clear about what we are doing in formation. It is about the virtues and Christian character. It is not about getting people to agree with our view on current issues in the church or society.

4. Train and support leaders in their ministry with chronic grumblers as well as those who are especially insistent around a particular issue. Train leaders in how to: listen to upset or anxious members, explain the parish’s position, and invite people to participate without trying to take responsibility for convincing people. Have leaders learn to be firm in inviting members to offer their concerns and ideas in the community’s normal processes for channeling and testing rather than having the leader accept responsibility for the member’s issue. Make sure that leaders know that polling members behind the back of the rector is a big “no-no.” The destructiveness of such behavior lingers in a parish community and poisons relationships.
5. Accept that grumbling will take place. Even in parishes that have done all the above there will be times of grumbling, times when the pressures within the community will erupt. Responding with a legalistic “we have a no grumbling norm,” or a moralistic, “This is very harmful behavior,” is likely to only make the situation worse. Even the most mature communities will have difficult emotional and spiritual periods. We are all “grumblers” sometimes.
6. Confront the chronic grumblers. Every parish seems to have a few people who live under a cloud of unhappiness with the clergy and/or the parish. At some clergy gatherings there is occasional joking about trading grumblers or asking the diocese to establish a special parish to transfer all these people into. In one parish the leadership identified two people fitting the category. Each had an idealized parish they carried in their head. For the one it was an innovative parish that attracted “funky” people, for the other it was several Anglo Catholic “flagship” parishes. Each had their complaint about “inclusion.” The one wanted an approach to communion allowing the non-baptized to receive, the other felt “conservatives” were not welcome enough. Each had particular issues they would name when engaged. If an issue was addressed the complaining would shift to a new topic. The parish leaders noticed two constants. The first was that there was a history to the behavior. Years could pass, leaders could change, but the grumbling stance was maintained. The second was that each was unable to cope with the authority of the wider community. Neither could graciously live in something real that was larger than themselves and their own imagination.

A healthy parish confronts the constant grumblers. It’s a process of challenge and invitation. A challenge to change the stance they have taken, to put on kindness and patience. In John Gardner’s terms it’s to become loving-critics, rather than unloving-critics, toward the parish and its leaders. The invitation is to a fuller and more real life, to experience the embrace of the Blessed Trinity from within the parish’s life. This work is in the best sense “pastoral.” It is pastoral care for the individual, and pastoral oversight of the parish’s life. It’s also pastoral self-care for the clergy and lay leaders. Few things wear on a priest more than parish habits that enable and reward the constant grumblers.

We also need to take note that Benedict has a bias. He's a leader of a community and he writes from that perspective. Parish rectors get it—how nice to eliminate the constant noise of people complaining and suggesting all their new ideas. For a no-grumbling norm to have integrity Benedict's call to consult with others needs to be effectively implemented. There are at least three things needed.

1. **Availability.** This is accomplished by a pattern or routine of listening processes. People need to experience survey-feedback, testing processes and community meetings as things that happen regularly. When I know the time to say my piece will come I can hold my peace. When the issue has urgency and importance, or there is possible harm to a person or community, that calls for a more timely response.
2. **Appropriate to the issue and circumstances.** Some issues are best dealt with by the routine listening processes. Ideas about how to improve parish life or add some new element may be managed by asking people to bring them to the next community meeting when we will collect all such thinking. A person enraged about something the rector did to them requires a more personal and immediate response. At times we need a face-to-face conversation. Other cases call for a third party to mediate or facilitate.
3. **Genuineness.** Listening and its benefits are not just accomplished by using the right methods and skills. The listening needs authenticity. It must be real. People can tell when the leadership has no "in-box." Some rectors function in a strongly narcissistic manner. In *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times*, Peter Steinke points to a pathological narcissism. He defines that by quoting Alexander Lowen, "excessive investment in self at the expenses of others." Then he notes seventeen characteristics, a few of which are reproduced below.
 - "The person is capable of seeing only her own perspective, is intolerant of disagreement, doesn't discuss ideas but imposes them, is single-minded, believes in her own superior wisdom, and doesn't need help from others."
 - "The person is ruthless toward those who do not reflect back his projected image of specialness. He is vindictive, vengeful, devaluing, and abrasive. He publicly humiliates other and wants others to be wholehearted supporters."
 - "The person is prone to lying and an expert at disguise."
 - "The person presents herself impressively. She is clever, charming, seductive, persuasive, self-assured."
 - "The person is more interested in being admired than loved."

If the vestry avoids availability, appropriateness, and genuineness in what it does then the priest can be the balancer. More often it will be the wardens who need to help the priest get perspective and engage what needs to be engaged. This doesn't need to be a confrontation with the priest but an empathetic intervention when the stress of the work and life get overwhelming.

In general wardens function best when they see themselves as the rector's collaborators and supporters. They can help the priest be his best self. At other times they need to ask hard questions, challenge and occasionally insist on alternatives with a strong rector. That can require wisdom, courage and a high degree of social intelligence. We've seen wardens who want to micro-manage the priest and those who side step any confrontation with her. When the priest cuts off listening and communication it may be up to the wardens to intervene and help the priest move toward a more open and listening stance.

When lay or clergy leaders cut off two-way communication for any reason they risk more conflict in the parish. Not being receptive in spirit, lack of empathy, or refusing to meet with someone, may set off troubles that could have been avoided.

Speed Lees has a model of conflict levels that assumes that if we fail to skillfully address conflict at one level it is likely to press onto a higher level. For example, we can take what he defines as a level two disagreement, in which the energy is about solving the problem, or a level three "contest" in which the parties want their way but don't want to hurt others, and push it to a level four or five. Level four is "fight/flight" in which people are willing to hurt others, and level five is an "intractable situation" in which significant damage can be done to the someone's reputation, position, and well being. If leaders fail to listen when a person or a group connected to the parish requests it, they become responsible for what happens when those people seem to go crazy.

It's easy to blame the "crazies" because their behavior seems so over-the-top or "emotional." But what choices have we left them with? They need to submit to a situation that seems mistaken or even unjust or they need to press their case at the risk of damaging themselves or the parish. Leaders need to work at keeping level two and three conflicts at those more manageable stages by empathetic listening, a collaborative spirit, and an attempt at mutual problem solving.

This is about the well-being of the whole parish community and about each individual's growth. The community needs to not have its attention and energies constantly taken away from its common life and work by having to deal with the complainers. The single most important thing a parish does to manage this is to have reliable listening processes and genuineness in the listening. It is these processes and that stance that sorts the healthy challenges from the chronic grumbling.

The individuals most given to complaining need to be in an environment in which they might come to terms with themselves and life in community. For that to happen leaders need to help the parish learn to tolerate discomfort at those times when there is tension and conflict. It is at those times that a community can develop its ability to persevere and live in stability of life. And it is the stability of the leaders and the parish community that offers its most troubled members a chance to find a new life.