

# PRACTICAL WISDOM AND DISCERNMENT IN THE RULE OF ST BENEDICT

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## **Introduction**

The Rule of Benedict (RB) compiled by Benedict of Norcia (c.480-547) is one of many rules that emerged during a period of intense monastic experimentation.<sup>1</sup> Although we cannot give a precise date most commentators would assign its composition to a few years before Benedict's death c. 540. I deliberately use the word 'compile' because Benedict drew on a number of sources principally the Old and New Testament, the Rule of the Master<sup>2</sup>, Cassian's Conferences<sup>3</sup> and the *Small Asceticon* of Basil the Great (c.330-379) which Benedict refers to as 'the rule of our Holy Father Basil.'<sup>4</sup> From the ninth century the RB became the principal guide for coenobitic monastic life and was widely disseminated especially after the advent of printing.<sup>5</sup> Benedict's practical experience, tempered with prudence, balance and wisdom enabled him to compose a rule for monks that, in spite of its antiquity, remains in use by Benedictine and Cistercian monks, nuns and oblates throughout the world.

As a literary genre the RB has been described in a number of ways: a kind of wisdom literature, a manual of practical wisdom, a virtue ethic, a text book for high performance coaching and a guide to the spiritual qualities of leadership. Benedict himself describes it as "this little rule we have written for beginners" (RB 73:8) and the monastery, where the rule is practised, is "a school of the Lord's service" (Prologue 45) and "the workshop where we toil faithfully." (RB 4:78)

## **Wisdom and Practical Wisdom in the Rule of Benedict**

My aim in this paper is to show that although Benedict does not use explicitly the term 'practical wisdom' it is implicit in a great deal of what he says especially in the context of human relationships. In order to illustrate this I would like to take you through a close reading of a number of passages where the terms 'wise,' 'prudence,' 'discretion' and 'discernment' are used. For the textual analysis I have relied heavily on the commentary and notes on the RB by Terence Kardong OSB (1996) and Timothy Fry OSB (1981).

In his rule Benedict uses the words 'wisdom', 'wise' or 'wisely' on a number of occasions. However, he never uses the term 'practical wisdom.' The absence of this term brings us to

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<sup>1</sup> For a critical Latin text and English translation with notes and commentary see Fry, T. (Ed.) (1981) *RB 1980: The Rule of St Benedict in Latin and English with notes*, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, USA. And Kardong O.S.B., T. (Ed.) (1996) *Benedict's Rule: a translation and commentary*, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, USA.

<sup>2</sup> Eberle O.S.B., L. (Ed.) (1977) *The Rule of the Master: Regula Magistri*, Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo, Michigan, USA.

<sup>3</sup> Cassian, J. (1997) *The Conferences*, Paulist Press, New York, USA.

<sup>4</sup> This is the Latin version translated by Rufinus of Aquileia (c.345-410). For a detailed history and textual analysis see Anna Silvas, Basil of Caesarea, S. (2005) *The Asketikon of St Basil the Great*, OUP, Oxford.

<sup>5</sup> This came about mainly through the composition of the *Capitulare Monasticum* by Benedict of Aniane (c.750-821) which won the approval of both the Emperor Louis (778-840) and the Synod of Aachen in 817.

ask how Benedict understood the term ‘wisdom’ by itself? Less frequently Benedict uses the word ‘prudent’ or ‘prudence’ or the synonym ‘discretion.’ Again, how did Benedict understand or contrast the words wisdom and prudence (*sapientia* with *prudentia* or *discretio*)? From his early student days in Rome Benedict may have had some familiarity with the pagan philosophers, especially Aristotle<sup>6</sup> and Plato. However, even if he was influenced in some way, in order to maintain the orthodoxy of Christian teaching, he would have been anxious to refrain from quoting them.

## Wisdom and the Influence of Scripture

Benedict uses the word ‘wisdom’ or ‘wise’ six times only.<sup>7</sup> The first two are quotes from the psalms. In the first instance, in the chapter on humility (RB 7:27), Benedict uses wisdom in the sense of it being knowledge (*intelligens*). This he does only once. Subsequent references to wisdom always use the Latin ‘*sapientia*.’ Quoting from Psalm 13 v.2, “the Lord constantly looks down from heaven on the human race to see if there is anyone with the wisdom to seek God.”<sup>8</sup> An examination of Psalm 13 reveals that the author is contrasting the fool and the wise person. The fool in the bible is not so much an ignoramus or even a theoretical atheist or agnostic. Rather he is one who has his values all wrong and acts as if God neither notices or wishes to react to his deeds or thoughts. A further point to notice in the Latin original is that the wise person is synonymous with someone who is continually seeking God.

In the second instance, this time from RB 19:4 ‘On the proper manner of singing the psalms’ Benedict, quotes Psalm 46:8 exhorting his monks to ‘sing wisely’ (*psallite sapienter*). Here he is saying a number of things. First, that the singer should concentrate and behave reverently during the recitation of the divine office (the *Opus Dei*). The Grail Psalter translates this verse as ‘singing with all your skill.’ So secondly, we might add that technical and musical competence is an additional requirement. In fact Benedict says, that rather in order of habit, only those who have the ability should read and sing in public.<sup>9</sup>

Benedict accepts and encourages personal spiritual authority. When Benedict writes about ‘wisdom of teaching’ he is drawing on passages from scripture such as Proverbs 24:14 and Sirach 23:2 and 50:29. This phrase is used also several times by Augustine and other patristic writers. It probably refers to a thorough knowledge of the bible. Before books were readily available, large passages of scripture, especially the psalms and gospels, would be memorised by heart. But, above all, the biblical learning had to be internalised before it could be called spiritual wisdom. This spiritual wisdom is the fruit of the many hours that the monk would have spent in sacred reading (*lectio divina*) ruminating and meditating on the text, line by line.

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<sup>6</sup> Here I am thinking particularly of Aristotle (1976) *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Penguin, London. Book VI, v and his reference to the intellectual virtues especially the distinction between ‘wisdom’ and ‘practical wisdom’ or ‘prudence.’

<sup>7</sup> Taken from English translation in Kardong O.S.B., T. (Ed.) (1996) *Benedict's Rule: a translation and commentary*, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, USA.

<sup>8</sup> “*Dominus de caelo semper respicit super filios hominum, ut videat si est intelligens aut requirens Deum*”

<sup>9</sup> Is this form of wisdom reminiscent of Aristotle’s third intellectual virtues, namely an art or technical skill (τέχνη)?

## Wisdom, Leadership and Co-Responsibility

Now I come to the third example of the use of wisdom. Benedict places great emphasis on the qualities and virtues of monastic leadership and the ‘senior management team’ of the monastery. Two chapters he devotes exclusively to the qualities and choice of Abbot (RB 2 and 64) and then one each to the Abbot’s deputy or Prior as he is called (RB 65), the Deans or Councillors (RB 21) and the Cellarer or Bursar (RB 31). Further chapters touch on the qualities of other officials such the Guest Master (RB 53: 21-22), the Novice Master (RB 58:6), the Infirmarian (RB 36:7), the Porter (RB 66:1).

Speaking of the Deans of the monastery (RB 21:4) Benedict says that they are to be chosen for the “merit of their lives and the wisdom of their teaching (*sapientiae doctrinam*) not for their rank.” These are people, says Benedict, who the Abbot “can confidently share the burdens of his office.” That phrase “merit of their lives and wisdom of their teaching” is exactly the same as used for the ‘Qualities of the Abbot’ (RB 64:2) thus reinforcing the point that the Deans share in the essential authority of the Abbot. In the next verse he warns the Deans and the Prior against being puffed up with pride. Notice too the reference that they should be chosen ‘not for their rank.’ Rank remains important for determining each person’s place in the community but when it comes to a leadership role ‘merit of their life and wisdom of teaching’ take priority. We tend to associate wisdom with older people but Benedict is saying that young people can be both wise and messengers of God’s will in a particular situation or decision. (RB 3:3).

A couple more examples, and here the emphasis is more akin to a practical wisdom that is based on experience. An important preoccupation for leadership was with monks who went astray or were excommunicated, usually on a temporary basis. There is a series of chapters (RB 23-30) that are sometimes referred to as ‘the disciplinary code.’ Here are a couple of quotes.

The abbot should focus all his attention on the care of wayward brothers, for it is not the healthy but the sick who need a physician. Thus, he should use all the means that a wise physician would. For example he might send in *senpectae*, that is, wise, elderly brothers, who know how to comfort the wavering brother as if in secret.” (RB 27:1-3)

If this endeavour should fail there are two further solutions; love and prayer. Quoting St Paul, “let love for him be reaffirmed and let everyone pray for him” (Corinthians 2:8). According to Kardong this chapter is an original creation of Benedict. Benedict often uses medical metaphors like ‘wise physician’ to describe human qualities. Here the reference is primarily to Jesus who identified himself as a physician in Matthew 9:12.<sup>10</sup>

In the following chapter RB 28:2-4 these medical metaphors are repeated and developed,

But if he still does not improve or if, God forbid, he even tries in his arrogance to defend his actions, then the abbot should proceed like a wise physician : when he has furnished poultices, the oil of encouragement, the medicine of Holy Scripture, and finally the cautery of

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<sup>10</sup> Kardong O.S.B., T. (Ed.) (1996) *Benedict's Rule: a translation and commentary*, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, USA. p. 240

excommunication and whipping<sup>11</sup>, and if he sees his efforts have accomplished nothing, let him try still a greater thing: he and all the brothers should pray that the Lord, who can do all things, will heal the troubled brother.

The kind of wisdom that Benedict is speaking of here is a wisdom derived from experience, especially the experience of dealing with wayward people. In fact most of the references to wisdom in the RB are in the context of human relationships, either the Abbot with his monks, or the monks with one another or with people outside the monastery.

Chapter 53:21-22 for instance gives a good example of this relationship with those outside.

A brother who is full of the fear of God should be assigned to the guest quarters. A sufficient number of beds should be made up there. And the house of God should be wisely managed by wise persons.

Notice that the guest house is referred to as the ‘house of God’ (*domus Dei*), an indication of how important guests are in the RB. “All guests who arrive should be received as Christ, for he himself will say ‘I was a stranger and you took me in’” (RB 53:1). This is how the monks, normally confined to the monastic enclosure, exercised the love of neighbour. There is too a double reference to wisdom in respect of the qualities of the guest master ‘wisely managed by wise persons’ (*sapientibus et sapienter administratur*). By implication the wise monk is someone who is ‘full of the fear of God.’ Benedict uses ‘fear of God’ or similar phrases in the context of a number of monastic officials such as the cellarer or bursar (RB 31:2), the infirmarian (RB 36:7) and the porter (RB 66:4). They all need to be motivated by Christian virtue rather than worldly wisdom. The term ‘managed’ (*administratur*) is also important because it contrasts with proprietorship thus emphasising the fact that the monks merely manage the house of God, they are stewards and custodians, not owners. Their primary function is to be of service to others, to exercise charity, either inside or outside the monastic community. In RB 66:1 Benedict recommends that

A wise old monk should be stationed at the gate of the monastery. He should know how to listen to people and how to speak to them; his age should prevent him from wandering about.

The porter held a strategic position because he was the ‘gatekeeper’, he monitored the intersection between the world and the cloister, the secular and the holy.<sup>12</sup> He is also a mediator, hence the need for a special discretion together with experience and knowledge of people. We might suggest that what Benedict is recommending here, and in similar passages, is that to possess practical wisdom is synonymous with fearing God. In the various descriptions of his monastic officials Benedict is describing what it means to possess

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<sup>11</sup> The RB makes several reference to the use of corporal punishment mainly in the context of children who might have been ‘obliterated’ to the monastery.

<sup>12</sup> We have to remember that Benedict was anxious to establish boundaries between the cloister and the world. This was a turbulent period, socially, politically and religiously in sixth century Italy. In order to protect his monks from this undue influence he established the ‘enclosure.’ This does not mean that Benedict viewed the secular world as totally bad, rather it was a fallen world that had to be redeemed. In later centuries the monasteries were an important tool in evangelising, civilising and educating those outside the monastic enclosure.

‘practical wisdom’ as he understands it without actually calling it that. The examples quoted above make reference to a practical wisdom which is implicit rather than explicit.

The final example of wisdom is in the context of the election or installation of the Abbot (RB 64:2). The Abbot exercises an important and indispensable role in the community. His responsibilities are so important in fact that Benedict devotes two chapters to his appointment. “Let the candidate be chosen for merit of life and wisdom of teaching, even if he hold the last rank in the community.” The abbot must combine both good example and spiritual learning which has been expounded in RB2. But wisdom of teaching is only one side of the coin, the abbot has to ‘walk the talk.’ He teaches by words and by example.

Again, wisdom is linked to human behaviour and relationships. Here is one example taken from RB 64:16-19, which for me epitomises the genius of Benedict and his understanding of human nature. Writing about the Abbot,

He should not be restless and troubled, nor extreme and headstrong, not jealous or over suspicious; for then he will have no peace. In his commands he should be farsighted and thoughtful. And whether it is a question of spiritual or material matters, he should give prudent and moderate orders. He should mediate on the prudence of holy Jacob who said: ‘if I make my flock walk too far, they will all die in one day (Genesis 33:13). Taking heed of these and other passages that extol discretion, the mother of virtues, he should arrange everything so that the strong are challenged and the feeble are not overwhelmed.

You will have noticed the use of the words ‘prudence’ and ‘discretion’ here. This leads me to consider the relationship between wisdom, prudence, discretion and discernment.

## **Prudence**

Prudence is so fundamental to Benedict’s vision of leadership that he hardly feels the need to explicitly stated. On a number of occasions, referring to the qualities of the Abbot in RB 64: 12 & 14 he exhorts the Abbot to ‘act prudently’,

When he must correct someone, he should act prudently and not over do it. If he is too vigorous in removing the rust, he may break the vessel...we do not mean he should permit vices to flourish but that he should prune them with prudence and charity.

Notice here how prudence and charity are linked. Not allowing vices to flourish sometimes means using ‘tough love.’ At other times it means not crushing the bruised reed. Again, and above all else, prudence must be exercised in the Abbot’s relationships with other people especially the monks under his pastoral care.

In respect to how visiting monks are to received as guests in the monastery (RB 61:4-5) Benedict advises the Abbot that if the monk should point out some shortcoming calmly and with humility then the Abbot “should consider the matter carefully. Indeed the Lord may have sent him for that very purpose.” So, just as the Lord may reveal his will through the voice of a young monk (RB 3:3) the Lord may do the same through a visiting monk. The ability to listen attentively and deeply is another characteristic of monastic prudence. Neither is there any indication that the superior should not take risks. A monastic leader constantly is

having to take risks but only after measured consideration. Ultimately one's judgement is deferred to trust in God.

As we just heard Benedict describes 'discretion as the mother of virtues.' He only uses the term once in the whole Rule and that in the context of Chapter 64 in the election or installation of the Abbot. In this instance the advice is not referring so much to the ability to guide souls but rather the wisdom to recognise how much the monks can bear in terms of ascetical practices, work load and so on. How much rest and relaxation do they need? This is practical wisdom.

## Discretion and Discernment

One of the problems about translating the Latin 'discretio' to mean 'discretion' is that more often than not the English term 'discretion' is understood as meaning 'discreet' i.e. a characteristic of someone's behaviour, the ability to keep a confidence. However, the Oxford English Dictionary gives more weight to 'discretion' meaning "the action of separating or distinguishing, discriminating between two or more alternatives, discerning or judging." So I am going to continue making the assumption that discretion and discernment are synonymous. To complicate matters Kardong translates '*discretionem*' of RB 64:18 to mean 'prudence.'<sup>13</sup> Fry translates it 'discretion.'<sup>14</sup>

According to Kardong, Benedict is probably borrowing the phrase "*discretionis matris virtutum*"<sup>15</sup> from Cassian's Conference 2.2.4 who says that all other virtues lose their value when they become unbalanced. This is a crucial statement because the implication is that discretion is the key to the virtuous life. There is also a link between discretion and balance or moderation. It would be useful to keep in the back of your minds that for Cassian there were three essential prerequisites for the exercise of discretion, the first was humility, the second purity of heart and the third balance or moderation.<sup>16</sup>

This is what Cassian writes on the lack of discretion,

For we often see that those who keep fasts and vigils most rigorously and who live far off in solitude in wondrous fashion, who also deprive themselves of any belongings to such an extent they do not so much as allow a single day's food or one denarius to be left over, and who even fulfil the demands of hospitality with the utmost devotion, are so suddenly deceived that they are unable to bring to a satisfactory conclusion the work they have begun and they cap off the highest fervour and a praiseworthy way of life with a disreputable end.<sup>17</sup>

Cassian goes on to define what he understands by discretion,

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<sup>13</sup> Kardong O.S.B., T. (Ed.) (1996) *Benedict's Rule: a translation and commentary*, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, USA. p.536

<sup>14</sup> Fry, T. (Ed.) (1981) *RB 1980: The Rule of St Benedict in Latin and English with notes*, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, USA. p. 283

<sup>15</sup> Migne, J. P. (Ed.) (1860) *Patrologia Cursus Completus: Series Latina*, J P Migne, Paris. Vol 49, col.526

<sup>16</sup> Incidentally, the application of moderation and balance was also crucial to Aristotle's application of the 'doctrine of mean' in determining the moral virtues. Aristotle (1976) *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Penguin, London. Book II, vi, (p.99)

<sup>17</sup> Cassian, J. (1997) *The Conferences*, Paulist Press, New York, USA. II, 1, 3 (p.85)

This then is discretion. According to the words of the Saviour, it is called the eye and the light of the body in the Gospel; “Your eye is the light of your body. If your eye is single, your whole body will be light. But if your eye is evil, your whole body will be darkness.” The reason for this is that it see and casts light on all a person’s thoughts and actions and discerns everything that must be done. But if this is evil in a person – that is, if it has not been fortified by true judgement and knowledge or has been deceived by some error and presumption – it makes our whole body darkness – that is, it obscures all the clarity of our mind and also our actions, wrapping them in the blindness of vice and the darkness of confusion.”<sup>18</sup>

From Cassian’s description of discretion we can deduce that is just as much a spiritual gift as a human one, if not more so.

In chapter 70 the Latin ‘*sine discretione*’ (without discretion) is translated as ‘wildly’ or ‘rashly.’ An unbridled temper is unacceptable but here it may be indicating that in some circumstances there is a legitimate anger. The wise disciplinarian should know the difference. This is too is part of practical wisdom.

Although Benedict does not give any details about the process of discretion or discernment, Cassian does. Benedict must have been familiar with these texts and ideas. For Cassian discretion was an indispensable tool for the monk albeit spiritual or practical.

Unless a monk has sought this grace with utter attentiveness and, with sure judgement, possesses discretion concerning the spirits that enter into him, it is inevitable that, like a person wandering in the dark of night and in deep shadows, he will not only fall into dangerous ditches and down steep slopes but will even frequently go astray on level and straight ways.<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore it is connected with wisdom, knowledge and understanding,

Herein is wisdom, herein is knowledge and understanding. Without them can neither our interior dwelling be built nor spiritual riches be gathered, as it is written: “With wisdom a dwelling is built, and with knowledge it is set up again; with understanding its cellars are filled with all precious and good things.” (Proverbs 24: 3-4)...These words clearly indicate that no virtue can either be perfectly attained or endure without the grace of discretion.<sup>20</sup>

As for that important prerequisite of humility Cassian continues,

True discretion is not obtained except by true humility. The first proof of humility will be is not only everything that is to be done but also everything that is thought of is offered to the inspection of the elders, so that, not trusting in one’s own judgement, one may submit in every respect to their understanding and may know how to judge what is good and bad according to what they have handed down.<sup>21</sup>

What emerges strongly in both Cassian and Benedict is the need to take advice from an elder or someone who is wise. One’s will or judgement needs always to be submitted to the

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. II, II, v (p.85-86)

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. Conference II,I,4 (p.84)

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. Conference II, IV,3-4 (p.87)

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. Conference II, X,1 (pp.90-91)

authority of another, normally the Abbot. Not only is the superior more detached from the situation, he possesses a ‘grace of state’ and is able more clearly to see the full picture.

Notice here that Cassian refers often to discretion as being a grace, a gift from God. Does this mean there is nothing the monk can do to acquire discretion by his own efforts? It is a crucial question and one which has occupied the minds of many monastic theologians and historians down the ages. Accusations that Benedict, following Cassian, was semi-Pelagian are sometimes levelled.<sup>22</sup> Time or space does not allow us to consider this further but it raises an important issue in relation to practical wisdom and our discussions over the next few days. Can practical wisdom be taught or learned exclusively through human experience? To what extent does practical wisdom, exercised in a Christian context, depend on the free gift of God, or the talents we are given?

Here it is important also to make a distinction between discernment and other forms of decision making. In RB 3 ‘On calling the brethren to council’, which immediately follows the chapter on the ‘Qualities of the Abbot’ Benedict describes a ‘discernment process.’ This is not an exercise in democratic decision making. The decision remains with the Abbot. The purpose of the consultation is to discern the will of God, that is why, as I said earlier, Benedict puts emphasis on listening to all, especially the young. Benedict recognises that in addition to scripture and the rule the Holy Spirit might want to speak to the Abbot through one or several of his monks. Notice that the monks are to speak with all humility and not defend their views obstinately. This process does not remove from the abbot the burden of making the decision. But hopefully it makes it easier to discover the ‘will of God’ in a particular situation. Notice how listening is very important. It is a listening with the heart as well as the mind.

This RB Chapter 3 illustrates perhaps a possible distinction between discernment and discretion. Could we say that discernment has to precede discretion? We use discernment to gather as widely as possible the relevant facts, the variables, the data connected with a particular issue or problem. This the Abbot does by listening to his community. The second stage, discretion is the act of making the choice no matter how difficult it might be to give it practical effect. In the RB this decision is reserved to the Abbot. It is his responsibility alone.

## **Conclusion**

Now I would like to draw this paper to a conclusion. So far I have said nothing about the relationship between wisdom and discernment, as understood in the RB, and current business practice. The brief that you will have received earlier in the year described practical wisdom as “that ability to discern effective means for attaining the firm’s morally good ends in light of particular and unique circumstances.” This brief was framed with the assumption that compared to the virtue of justice, the virtue of ‘practical wisdom’ had received insufficient consideration from both the academy and business. I would suggest that this close

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<sup>22</sup> Semi-Pelagians, such as Cassian, while not denying the necessity for grace, maintained that the first steps towards the Christian life were normally taken by the individual and grace supervened only later. Their position was roughly midway between Augustine’s extreme form of predestination and Pelagius’ heresy that held that man could take the initial and fundamental steps towards his own salvation. As we know Augustine’s view prevailed.



examination of the terms wisdom and discernment in the RB raises a number of important questions for our consideration in the coming days.

First, I have tried to draw your attention to some foundational texts, scripture and early monastic writings in particular, to help us understand what these terms ‘practical wisdom’ and ‘discernment’ might mean. Practical wisdom I would claim, first and foremost, is a biblical charism, it is a gift and a grace. This is something that Pope Benedict XVI in his latest encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* speaks about frequently.<sup>23</sup> Humankind receives this gift. In turn this gift enables it to give, to fulfil its human vocation in the world. Humankind is made for gift.

Prayer also, is an integral part of practical wisdom and discernment. It is our response, our co-operation with that gift. We seek enlightenment from the Holy Spirit to guide us in our actions. We need to ask ourselves, ‘have we become so bound up in worrying about the practical outcomes associated with difficult and complex decisions we need to be discerning more what is the will of God?’ Although the terms ‘practical wisdom’ and ‘discernment’ are not explicitly used in the RB they are implicit in fact they provide the foundation for the day to day governance of the monastery. Related to our understanding of practical wisdom is the question of where knowledge and experience fit in? Are they so much part of practical wisdom that in effect they are one and the same or aspects of the same thing?

Secondly, linked to this first observation, practical wisdom is about relationships, primarily with other people but beyond that the created world around us; the world that has been given into our stewardship. Practical wisdom and charity are inextricably linked. Consequently, the environmental implications of the decisions we make about the world’s natural resources form part of our daily agenda. But it is the human relationship that I would like to stress. In modern business there is a complex network of relationships and stakeholder interests. What part do practical wisdom and discernment play in balancing and harmonising all their different needs?

The third point is this. Should the firm and business enterprise be organizations that enable its members to grow in practical wisdom, prudence, discretion and discernment? Each is a ‘community of practice.’ Are they places where, to coin a phrase of Alasdair MacIntyre, ‘civility and the intellectual and the moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages.’<sup>24</sup> As I mentioned in the introduction, Benedict calls his monastery, which is a community of practice, ‘the school of the Lord’s service’ or the ‘spiritual workshop.’ In what ways should we be encouraging the places where we work to become more a ‘spiritual workshop.’ In an age of economic instability and uncertainty how realistic is this aspiration?

Fourthly, too often we can see things as ‘black and white’ and ‘either or.’ In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, almost fifteen centuries after the RB was compiled, our knowledge of modern psychology, human growth, Christian anthropology suggest that spiritual discernment, more than ever before, can aid what has become increasingly complex. It enables us to grasp and comprehend what is obscure or blurred, it reveals insight and understanding. By recognising small signs and indices discernment is a process that enables us to see the larger form, the

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<sup>23</sup> Benedict XVI (2009), *Caritas in Veritate*, CTS, London §34

<sup>24</sup> MacIntyre, A. (1985) *After Virtue: A study in moral theory*, Duckworth, London. P.263

greater picture. Because of lack of time we tend to construct ‘models’ or ‘solutions’ to help us. When we do this we can invariably over simplify a situation. In doing so we blind ourselves to part of the reality which seems unrelated to our immediate goals. Discernment can reveal, disclose what is hidden.

Finally the RB lays great stress on the spiritual qualities of leadership. But also on co-responsibility. Each person exercises an indispensable leadership role if allowed to. I have cited a number of examples. We are familiar of course with terms such as ‘emotional intelligence’ and ‘soft skills.’ In fact they have tended to become a cliché. How can these ancient insights, especially those about wisdom, prudence and discretion fit in to the vocabulary of 21<sup>st</sup> century business?

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