

RB 53 The Reception of Guests

¹**All guests who present themselves** are to be **received** as Christ who said: *I was a stranger and you welcomed me in (Mt 25:35)*. ² **Proper respect** should be shown to *all, especially fellow monastics and pilgrims (Gal 6:10)*.

³Once guests are announced, the prioress and community are to **meet** them with all the **courtesy** of love. ⁴They should pray together and be **united** in peace. (omit v5)

⁶The greeting ought to manifest **complete humility** toward guests who are arriving or departing: ⁷by an inclination of the head or **prostration**, one must adore Christ in them who is, in fact, **the one who is received**. ⁸When they have been received, the guests should be led (invited) **to prayer**, and afterward the prioress or another appointed should **sit** with them. ⁹Let the **Divine Law** be read to the guest for edification, and after that every sort of kindness should be shown the guest. ¹⁰The prioress or abbot may break their fast for the sake of a guest, unless it is a day of special fast which cannot be broken.

[omit 11-12] ¹²The prioress should **pour water** on the hands of the guests. ¹⁴When they have been washed, let them pray this verse: ***we have received, O God, your mercy in the midst of your temple (Ps 47[48]:10)***.

¹⁵The greatest care should be exhibited in the reception of the **poor** and pilgrims, for Christ is more especially received in them; for the **awe** of the rich wins them respect. [omit 16-24]

RB 53:1-15 Benedict is imbued with the spirit of Christian hospitality vv1-15
RB53:16-24 Practical application [omitted here]

Benedict exercises a good deal of prudent caution so as to protect the community

v. 1 “all”—the spirit of inclusivity is certainly characteristic of Jesus

- By the second sentence Benedict will begin to qualify this openness in view of various practical and doctrinal considerations
- The chapter begins on a positive and welcoming note, but it ends in a much less cheerful way
- Hospitality is a bedrock monastic principle, overarching as it does all the various forms of monastic life

“guests”—could also be translated “strangers” (Mt 25:35)

“who present themselves”—can imply a surprise visit and indeed it seems that this chapter is more about those travelers who arrive unexpectedly than guests who come for a planned visit

- In Benedict's time of poor communications and a lack of hotels and inns, monasteries were often the only place where one could find a safe place to stay for the night.
- Jesus' point has to do with those who are in need of hospitality and not honored guests who command shelter by their power or prestige.

“received”— This term will be used again in 53.14 where the monks give thanks to God for having received the gift of the guest.

- “receive/welcome”—is one of the keywords of this chapter with 7 appearances 53T,1,7,8,14,15
- To receive means to cherish, not capture

v. 2 “proper respect”— everyone is to be respected in the inclusive spirit of Mt 25, or it could indicate that each one is to be treated according to one's station in life

- Due to the great difference in lifestyle between the rich and the poor in ancient times, it was probably not possible to treat all the same.

v. 3 At this point it appears that RB 53 is modeled on a traditional hospitality motif that it ultimately rooted in Gn 18.

- Abraham is visited by 3 men in the desert; so assiduous is he in his performance of the sacred duty of hospitality that he races out to meet them, falls down to do them homage and begs them to do him the honor of staying for a meal. Here we see the Bedouin hospitality at its finest: the host declares himself blessed by the gift of the guest.
- The theological message is that true hospitality is in fact the loving reception of God.
- In Genesis, God returns the favor by giving Sarah and Abraham a child.

“meet”—the verb means to come forth gladly, not grudgingly

- The monastics were free to respond directly to guests.

“courtesy”—probably refers to cordial words and facial expressions rather than concrete acts of hospitality

- important for the morale of the guest

v. 4 emphasizes the primacy of the spiritual in the dealings of monastic with outsiders.

- The guest is received on the monastery's terms and not his or her own.
- When the monks put aside their religious character to deal secularly with seculars, then the enclosure is breached and true monastic hospitality is falsified.

“united”—is a very strong word, indicating a union of comrades

- a spiritual bond on a deep level
- The hospitality offered to strangers should not be a merely superficial crossing paths but a real sharing of spiritual gifts.

v. 6 “complete humility”— Benedict has added a characteristic personal twist to the material by making humility the basis of humanity (food).

- He returns to his main theme that hospitality should be based on faith in the divine presence encountered in the guest.

v. 7 “prostration”—this was the manner in which the Egyptian hermits greeted

- Submission to the power of God and the benevolence of the community.

“the one who is received”—it is a reiteration of the great lesson of Mt. 25:35 “You received ME”

- theme: Christ is received in the guest.
- Receive appears no less than 7 times in this chapter and must be considered a leitmotif.
- the profound implications of this usage comes clear in v. 14

“to prayer”—probably also means “to the oratory”

- the guest is being led deeper into the building and also into the life of the community
- To pray with the monastics is to penetrate to the very center of life.

“sit”—may mean “sit down to table”—means a meal

- Benedict uses the verb for sitting to listen to holy reading 9.5;42.3.

v. 9 “Divine Law”—is found in 64.9 and must refer to Scripture.

- Although it may seem strange by modern standards to make the guest listen to holy reading before getting fed, this is perfectly consistent with Benedict’s determination to let the guests know they are in a different realm from the one they just left.

v. 10 monasticism considered hospitality so important as to override asceticism

- The commandment of love (hospitality) is absolute.
- Since I receive Christ in you, I must also feed him.

The bending of the Rule for guests should not be allowed to disrupt community life.

v. 14 “*we have received, O God, your mercy in the midst of your temple*”—this psalm verse is used in a very meaningful and pointed way.

- in this context, your mercy could refer to the guest, who is considered the gift of God, much in the same way as in Gn 18.3 where Abraham begs the 3 men for the favor of dining with him.
- This is the prayer one sings at profession: “Receive me, O Lord, according to your promise that I may live (58:21).”
- in 53.14 the monastics recall that they have been received as guests by the Lord: that is the mercy they have received from God: therefore they must extend the same hospitality to the traveler.

v. 15

“poor”—are mentioned here for the first time, although they were obviously the ones who most need the hospitality of the monks

- Before the development of social institutions in modern times, monasteries were the principal care giver for the needy throughout Europe,

“awe”— means religious awe and wonder

- This reinforces the main theme (receive everyone and especially the poor as Christ).