

RB 56 The Prioress's or Abbot's Table

¹The table of the **prioress or abbot** must always be with **guest and travelers**.

²Whenever there are **no guests**, it is within **their right** to invite anyone of the community they wish. ³However, for the sake of maintaining discipline, one or two seniors must always be left with the others.

RB 56 only the guests and pilgrims normally eat with the abbot

v. 1 “prioress or abbot”—in RB 53.10 Benedict has already instructed the prioress or abbot to break the lesser fast days when eating with the guests

- RB 56 picks up on that arrangement and explains that the prioress's or abbot's table is to be separate from the community, no doubt so as to avoid disruption of the common life
- The notion of having the prioress or abbot function as the chief agent of hospitality is consonant with RB 53.1-15
- Though RB 53.16-24 seems to delegate this task to the guest-director, it never explicitly removes the duty of hospitality from the prioress or abbot.
- This is a sacred duty that ultimately falls back on the prioress or abbot, and the guest who is received warmly by the prioress or abbot certainly is reassured that the whole community welcomes her or him

v. 2 “no guests”—could mean “no”. Why should the prioress or abbot not eat with the community in such circumstances

RB 66 The Porters of the Monastery

¹A **sensible, wise** monastic should be stationed at the gate of the monastery. The monastic should know **how to listen to people and also how to speak to them**. ²The **porter** will need to have **quarters** near the gate so that those who arrive will **always find someone present** to answer their call. ³**As soon as anyone knocks** or a poor person cries out, she should respond **Thanks be to God! Or Bless me!** ⁴Filled with **the gentleness** of awesome **respect for God**, she must **quickly respond in the warmth of charity**. ⁵If the porter **needs help**, she should be given a newer member to assist.

⁶If possible, the monastery should be built so that all necessities such as water, mill and garden are contained within the walls so they can practice the various crafts there. ⁷That way it will not be necessary for the monastics to venture outside too often.

⁸We want **this Rule** read rather often in the community so no member can excuse herself **because of ignorance**.

“porters”—the title is plural, but the chapter speaks of only one gatekeeper

v. 1 “sensible”—the porter needs to be “wise” since he will be dealing with all sorts of people

- Given Benedict’s ideal of the monastery as a closed system with the gate as the meeting point between the cloister and the world, the porter becomes the mediator between the 2 spheres.
- Hence the need for special discretion and knowledge of people.
- Sensible is added to that of wisdom, which normally demands a certain experience of maturity in life.

“how to listen to people and also how to speak to them”—how to receive and give an answer

- The porter is not merely a functionary but someone who has a gift for dealing humanely with visitors.
- Since the porter is the only monk that many visitors meet at the monastery, it is very important that he treat them in a Christ-like manner.

v. 2 “porter”—the title “porter” is traditional in many monasteries, although it means something else in secular culture

- In modern monasteries, the porter functions as a receptionist.

“quarters”— If the gate of the monastery was part of an encircling wall, then the porter would need a hut, but if the gate was simply the door of a building, no separate habitation would be necessary.

“always find someone present”—this may seem like an unreasonable demand, but it is important to have someone on hand to deal with all who arrive.

- That is especially true of wayfarers in need of immediate hospitality.
- In ancient times, the gates of a monastery would be bolted at night, so someone arriving would need to call for special help from the porter.

v. 3 “as soon as anyone knocks”—is a vivid picture of what actually went on at the gates of an ancient monastery

- It is not just a zone for transacting business, but rather of succoring the poor and destitute.
- Their need drives them to cry out and not just politely knock.
- Just because the callers are powerless does not mean that they may be left to wait as if in some overtaxed welfare bureau. One hastens to respond to the Christ who is surely present in the poor.

“*Thanks be to God! Or Bless me.*”—both of these responses express the faith of the porter that in the guest he is encountering Christ.

- Benedict clearly shows that he regards the guest as a gift of God.

v. 4 This is one of those passages where Benedict, no doubt driven by strong feeling, attempts to convey importance and intensity by means of multiple modifiers.

“the gentleness”— The poor must be treated gently because they are specially loved by God.

“respect for God”—is one of Benedict’s key spiritual ideas

- The rich exercise terror on their own, but the poor have only Christ to protect them. That is why the Benedictine guest-director must be a God-fearer 53.21.

“quickly respond”—probably Benedict had seen enough abuse of the poor by monastic porters to convince him that this point must be driven home hard

- Since the pilgrim and stranger are Christ-bearers, it is also a sacred act for the porter to hurry to care for them.

“in the warmth of charity”—while it might seem to stretch our credulity to demand that the porter respond in love to all those who come, it is not unusual to find the idea in Benedict’s Rule.

- He says that monks are to be characterized by the good zeal that expresses itself in “the most fervent love.”

v. 5 “needs help”— Benedict enunciates the principle that those who exercise offices in the monastery must have sufficient assistance to carry out their work

v. 6-7 The message is clear enough—Benedict does not want the monks roaming about the countryside

- Practically speaking the fields of the monastery could hardly be contained within the walls

v. 8 Many scholars think that this was the concluding verse of an earlier version of RB.

“this Rule”—could conceivably refer to the regulation about not going outside the enclosure

- Could refer to the entire document

“because of ignorance”—for doing things not permitted by the Rule

General

The way we answer doors is the way we deal with the world.

How to receive the Christ in the other always.

If there is any chapter in the rule that demonstrates Benedictine openness to life and, at the same time, models a manner of living in the midst of society without being consumed by it, this is surely the one.

The monastic must never forget that the role of committed Christians is to always grow richer themselves so that they can give richly to others.