

RB 57 The Skilled Workers of the Monastery

¹If there are skilled workers [artisans] in the monastery, let them **practice** their crafts **with all humility** if the prioress permits it. ²But if anyone of these workers is so **proud of her expertise** that she thinks she is a **great gift to the monastery**, ³she should be **removed from her work**. Nor should she return to it unless **she has humbled herself** and the prioress permits it again.

⁴If some work of the artisans is to be sold, **those who are to transact the sale** should be **careful not to presume to engage in any deception**. ⁷The **evil of avarice** must have no part in establishing prices, ⁸which should, therefore, always be **a little lower than people outside the monastery** are able to set, ⁹**so that in all things God may be glorified** (1 Pet 4:11).

“**Skilled Workers**”—refers to anyone who has acquired uncommon skill in any form of work through training and practice: painting, sculpture, masonry, carpentry

- In ancient times the distinction between these categories was not so great as now
- Manning thinks this chapter may not be about monastics at all, but about the collaborators and intermediaries who work for the monastics.
- The Master concentrates on the need to sell monastic products much more cheaply than seculars can and thus give witness against avarice
- Benedict adds material on the workers themselves 57.1-3, thus personalizing the discussion.

v. 1 “**practice**”—it may seem strange that Benedict would bother to say that the monastics should work at their area of expertise, but in fact early monasticism was not particularly interested in skilled work

- Benedict does not set down precise regulations as to what work may be done by his monastics, but he does insist that it be done humbly

“**with all humility**”—skilled work, especially in the fine arts, is only arrived at through long discipline

- It requires uncommon concentration and intelligence, all of which engenders in the worker a spirit of independence and pride of accomplishment

v. 2 “**proud of her expertise**”— Need not be limited to fine arts but could apply to trades and crafts

“great gift to the monastery”—if one is a member of a community, all one’s talents and energies belong to the community by right; one is only doing one’s duty by contributing to the full

v. 3 **“removed from her work”**

- Benedict is concerned about cutting the monastic off from the spiritual roots of her vocation in obedience
- It would be imprudent for monastic authority to conclude that a highly gifted and productive monastic need be removed from his/her work except for the most serious reasons
- Divine talents are not to be squandered nor reduced to submission by authority
- The only spiritually useful form of humility is that which is fully accepted and internalized by the subject, and not imposed by authority on a resisting object.

v. 4 **“those who are to transact the sale”**— Generally the artisans or artists would not handle the business end of their work. The cellarer would be the ordinary person to carry out these transactions.

“careful not to presume to engage in any deception”—the deception here does not lie in defrauding the customer but in keeping back part of the sale price for oneself and not giving it to the community.

v. 7 **“evil of avarice”**—in RB 33 Benedict forbids private possession by a monastic.

v. 8 **“a little lower than people outside the monastery...”**—Benedict’s motive here is to insure that the monastery will never give the impression of driving a hard bargain for its goods

- To make sure they are to sell a bit more cheaply than the competition
- Today we should be aware that we have advantages that enable us to produce things more cheaply than seculars
- The demands of justice may require just the opposite from what Benedict wants, namely, that we refrain from undercutting

v. 9 **“so that in all things God may be glorified”**— The business of a monastery is to give glory to God. The monastery must have a sound economic basis in order to survive.

Esther de Waal

- The whole of life reflects the choice of God and the desire for the kingdom “so that in all things God may be glorified (1 Peter 4:11).
- Crafts persons and artisans in the monastery:
 - The monastic gives glory to God precisely by not working as others do, for material gain or for popular success.
 - Our skills are to be exercised with humility, with reverence, with restraint.
 - Noncompetitive and not concerned about either material gain or a personal reputation
- Theme of stewardship—of my skills and talents
 - Stewardship of all the material things in my life

Joan Chittister

1. There may be artists in a monastery.
2. They must themselves be humble about it.
3. An art is not to be practiced for the sake of money.
 - The development of the spiritual life does not depend on the suppression of beauty or the destruction of the self.
 - The gifts we have been given are for the doing of them, not the denial of them. We do not smother great gifts in the name of great spirituality.
 - The unusually gifted person or the person with the unusual gift is also required to see that their giftedness does not get in the way of their striving for sanctity.
 - No gift is given to tyrannize the community.
 - We are expected to learn to take our gifts in stride, to practice them because they deserve to be practiced and because the community can profit from them.
 - Aristotle wrote: “The aim of art is not to represent the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance.”
 - Any great gift is a revelation of the more in life, a natural expression of the spiritual, a necessary expression of the sacred.
 - Without the artist to show us what we ourselves do not see of the beauty of the world around us, we lose sight of the beauty of God as well.
 - Benedictine spirituality never substitutes conformity in discipline for the fullness of expression in life.
 - The function of the artist in the monastery—and in the life of us all—is to make the transcendent visible; to touch the soul in ways that match the soul; to enshrine beauty so that we may learn to see it; and to make where we live places of wonder.
 - Benedictine spirituality develops goods so that people can have them.
 - It is Benedictine to develop our gifts and distribute their fruits as widely and broadly as possible so that justice, but not profit, is the principle that impels us.