

## RB 2 QUALITIES OF THE Prioress

<sup>1</sup>The **prioress** [head of the cenobium; spiritual & pastoral leader] who is worthy of governing a monastery ought always to remember what she is called; she should live up to the name of superior by her actions. <sup>2</sup>She is *believed to hold* the place of **Christ** [role of spiritual leader: makes Christ present] in the monastery, <sup>3</sup>as the Apostle indicates: “You have received the *spirit* of adoption. When we cry, Abba! Father!—Imma! Mother!” (Rom 8:15) [filial relationship between monastics and Christ] <sup>4</sup>Therefore, the *prioress* ought not to teach, arrange or command anything not in accordance with the law of God. [if the abbot/prioress is to make Christ present and effective for the community, she must, like Christ, “live by every word that comes from the mouth of God” & be imbued with the biblical spirit.] <sup>5</sup>Let her **teachings** and **commands** be kneaded into the minds of her disciples, like the leaven of **divine justice**, *permeate* the minds of the community. [balance between power & wisdom in monastic authority; permeated by divine justice] <sup>6</sup>Let the prioress be *constantly mindful* of the fact that her teaching and the obedience of her disciples will eventually come under scrutiny. [responsibility for souls] <sup>7</sup>The prioress must, therefore, be aware that the **shepherd** [Abbot/prioress is the shepherd; Ez.—shepherd who calls each sheep by name & the good shepherd who knows all of the sheep & they know the shepherd. The shepherd is responsible for the flock and for the spiritual health of the members.] will bear the blame if the owner of the sheep finds them less than profitable. <sup>8</sup>Of course, it is quite another matter if the shepherd has devoted all concern to a restless and disobedient flock, and gone to every length to *correct their sick behavior*. <sup>9</sup>Their *shepherd* will be absolved in God’s judgment, and she may say to God with the Prophet: “I have not hidden your *justice* in my heart. I have proclaimed your truth and your salvation, (Ps 39(40):11) but they spurned and rejected me.” (Is 1:2; Ezek 20:27) <sup>10</sup>The sheep will receive the final punishment for rejecting her care: *death* will *overwhelm* them.

<sup>11</sup>Furthermore, when someone accepts the title of prioress, she should direct her disciples by a **twofold teaching**. <sup>12</sup>That means she should demonstrate everything that is good and holy *by her deeds* more than by her words. She should teach gifted disciples God’s commands by words,

but she will have to personally model the divine precepts for those who are *stubborn* and dull. <sup>13</sup>Moreover, her deeds should show her disciples that what she teaches as harmful is really *not to be done*, “lest she be found guilty after having preached to others.” (1 Cor 9:27) <sup>14</sup>Then God may address her some day as a sinner: “Why do you proclaim my *just deeds* and take my covenant on your lips? For you have hated discipline and thrown my words behind you” [Ps 49(50):16-17] <sup>15</sup>and “You noticed the speck in another’s eye, but did not see the plank in your own.” [Mt 7:3][ Two fold teaching: example & words; lives out the ideas by her deeds; mirrors its values. A spiritual leader lives the spiritual life to its fullness. RB invests massive authority in the abbot/prioress; it counterbalances it with grave responsibility (Last Judgment). God is faithful to the covenant.]

<sup>16</sup>The prioress *must not play favorites* in the monastery. <sup>17</sup>She should not *love* one more than another, unless she finds one more excellent in good deed and *obedience*. <sup>18</sup>The freeborn *must not be placed* ahead of the slave. <sup>19</sup>But the prioress *is free*, if she sees fit, to change any one’s rank as justice demands. <sup>20</sup>For whether slave or free, we are all one in Christ, [Gal 3:28; Eph 6:8) and under one God we bear the same *yoke of service*; “with God there is no favoritism.” (Rom 2:11) <sup>21</sup>Only in this are we distinguished in God’s sight: if we are found better than others in *good works* and humility. <sup>22</sup>Therefore, the prioress is to **show equal love to everyone** and apply the same discipline *to all* according to their merits. [The emphasis is on evenhanded fairness and love to all types of persons. The leader’s personal feelings cannot be the same for all the members, but these feelings are not to be the basis for the order of affairs in the monastery. People are to be ranked in the order they came to the monastery, to Christ. Benedict wants people in positions who embody good works, obedience and humility. The abbot/ prioress can change the rank if s/he sees fit. The image of the Christian life as servitude is an indispensable basis for equal justice in the Church. The need to translate high ideas into concrete life patterns is emphasized throughout the Prologue of RB. The leaders needs to be a wise director of souls. Discretion in handling others is needed as being able to adapt appropriately to each person. The leader recognizes in each person and situation, the level at which they will work best.]

<sup>23</sup>In her **teaching**, the prioress ought always stay close to the apostolic pattern: “Correct, entreat, reproach.” (2 Tim 4:2) <sup>24</sup>Thus she should **vary her approach according to the situation**: mixing threats and enticements, showing sternness, devotion and tenderness. <sup>25</sup>With the undisciplined and restless, she will use firm argument; with the obedient, mild and patient, she will appeal for greater virtue; but as for the negligent and disdainful, we charge her to use reproof and rebuke. <sup>26</sup>She should not gloss over the sins of those who err, but *cut them out while she can*, as soon as they begin to sprout. <sup>27</sup>For the upright and *perceptive*, the first and second warnings should be verbal; <sup>28</sup>but those who are *evil* or stubborn, arrogant or disobedient, *can be curbed* only by blows or some other physical punishment at the first offense. It is written, “The fool cannot be corrected with words” (Prov 29:19), <sup>29</sup>and again, “Strike your children with a rod and you will free their souls from death.” (Prov 23:14) [ Deals with the need for flexibility in authority due to the variety of individuals who make up a cenobitic community. People don’t all learn the same way; they don’t all grow the same way; they can’t all be dealt with in the same way. Call each individual to become more than they were. Obedient, docile and patient are desirable characteristics in a monastic, but such temperaments may have a tendency to passivity, discouragement & despair. They need help and encouragement. Quick action must be taken before things get out of hand. Eli was a weak and ineffectual father who failed to check the corruption of his sons. Perceptive monastics can be corrected by words. Others might need physical punishment. Words and actions are necessary in a good spiritual leader. The abbot or prioress must live up to their calling. ]

<sup>30</sup>The prioress must always remember what she is and remember what she is called, aware that more will be expected of one to whom more has been entrusted. <sup>31</sup>She must know what a difficult and demanding burden she has undertaken: **directing souls** and serving a variety of temperaments, coaxing, reproofing and encouraging them as appropriate. <sup>32</sup>She must so accommodate and adapt herself to each one’s character and intelligence that she will not only keep the flock entrusted to her care from dwindling, but will rejoice in the *increase* of a good flock. <sup>33</sup>Above all, she should neither neglect nor undervalue the welfare of the souls committed to her by paying more attention to fleeting, earthly, perishable matters. <sup>34</sup>Let

her constantly remain aware of the fact that it is souls she has undertaken to direct and she will have to give an account of them. <sup>35</sup>She should not plead *the danger of material decline*, for Scripture says: “Seek first the reign and justice of God, and all these things will be given you as well”, (Mt 6:33) <sup>36</sup>and again, “Those who reverence the Holy One lack nothing.” (Ps 33[34]:10) [The leader is the spiritual director and the server of the community. The abbot/prioress must keep clearly in mind their own weak souls & dark minds & fragile hearts when they touch the souls & minds & hearts of others. Conversion is possible. Once chosen, the abbot/prioress’ weakness itself becomes the anchor, the insight of humility. The abbot/prioress must be more concerned about the spiritual needs of the monastery than its physical needs. The abbot/prioress has complete control and responsibility for all the affairs of the monastery.]

<sup>37</sup>The prioress must know that anyone **undertaking the charge of souls must be ready to account for them.** <sup>38</sup>Whatever the number of members she has in her care, let her realize that she will have to account for every one of them on judgment day, and certainly of her own soul as well. <sup>39</sup>She should live in continual awareness of the judgment that awaits the shepherd concerning the sheep in her charge. <sup>40</sup>And so the reckoning she must give for others makes her concerned about her own condition. The warnings she gives to others for improvement serve to *effect the correction of her own faults.* [Benedictine leaders are to birth souls, to lead the group. They are to live the life they lead; to love indiscriminately; to favor the good, to save their own souls, to be human beings, to grow in life. They are responsible for the members. If the monastic spurns & rejects the abbot/prioress in spite of all that s/he has tried to do to cure their unhealthy ways, then their final punishment lies with themselves. Monasteries become the image of a world where leadership exists for the people it leads and not for itself.]

## Questions

**“The Rule’s model for authority and leadership is a paradigm for any relationship...authority is not to control the other, it is to guide and challenge and enable the other.” How can I model this in my relationship daily?**

**Reflecting on the qualities of the prioress/wisdom leadership, what qualities are important for me to live Benedictine spirituality? Which of these qualities can I faithfully practice now or which are areas for further growth?**