COMMENT

Gospel and Order in the Rule of St Benedict

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INTRODUCTION

Members of the Church of England are part of an ordered Church with a given liturgy. That order is deeply embedded in our story and today all clergy and lay ministers function and carry out their ministries on the authorisation of the bishop of the diocese. The Church of England is an institution which has its rules, laws and codes of conduct. Because we have no doctrinal formulations of our own, the liturgy in the Church of England expresses much of our theology. While there have been many changes in liturgy, a given liturgy, or a liturgical structure within which certain texts are prescribed, is part of how we are.

Yet we are well aware that not all clergy understand this order, or even want to understand it. History provides us with many examples of whose who have pushed the boundaries of that order, sometimes very creatively. The Wesleys and the Methodist Revival in the eighteenth century, the Tractarians in the nineteenth century and the Charismatic Renewal in the late twentieth century have all contributed much to the life of the Church of England, and all of these have at times ignored or disobeyed church law. Today, we are aware of the enormous breadth of the Church of England, with some who are more Roman in their practices than the majority of Roman Catholic parishes, to those who are much more Free Church than the main Free Church denominations. Some of us occasionally wonder if the boundaries have not been pushed too far.

Then, of course, there are the majority of Anglicans, who are generally more law-abiding but who are not always minded to follow the law in each specific case, often for pastoral or pragmatic reasons. Most of us are aware of the temptation to avoid faculty jurisdiction sometimes, to ‘get on and do it’ on the grounds that ‘no-one will know!’ Certainly, back in the 1980s when I was an incumbent with a churchyard, I was utterly unaware of any law against burying in the churchyard those who had taken their own lives and, if I had
been aware of it, I would probably have ignored it. Some incumbents and parochial church councils have also on occasion taken a rather loose attitude towards the Church Representation Rules rather than have a vote at an annual parochial church meeting which might have seen some candidates not elected.

Law is often seen as getting in the way, preventing mission and pastoral care. Christine Hardman expressed all this very clearly in her article in the *Church Times* on 9 March 2018:

> Sadly, the perception still persists that ecclesiastical law is a negative, coercive, and oppressive instrument, which constrains the working of the Spirit by a series of obstacles and prohibitions. But a more nuanced understanding reveals the liberating force of law, which equips and enables the people of God to live out their faith with confidence.1

In this passage, Bishop Christine cogently expressed the value of law to safeguard justice, freedom and fairness. This is the prime justification for all law, even though law has too often been abused by those in power to serve their own ends. It is the argument advanced by St Paul when he writes to the Romans:

> For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God’s servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience.2

This view has also been advanced by many other writers from state, church and philosophy over the centuries. Machiavelli makes the case for the value of laws in his *Discourses*, arguing that both princes and popular republics that have lasted long ‘have had need of being regulated by the laws. For a prince who can do whatever he wishes is crazy; a people who can do whatever it wishes is not wise.’ Law protects people from authoritarian princes and mob rule.3 This is equally true in a church context, where law can protect ordinary parishioners from overbearing clericalism or dominant lay leaders, for ‘the church should be a place where boundaries are predictable and reliable so that people will not be harmed or exploited’.4 It is rules which make institutional life possible, for rules

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2 Romans 13:3–5.  
put limits on the abuse of authority\textsuperscript{5} and enable the building of trust between members of an institution, for without that trust ‘the institution itself breaks down and fails to fulfil its purposes’.\textsuperscript{6}

THE RULE OF ST BENEDICT

One example of this principle in action may be provided by reflecting on the Rule of St Benedict. Although it is not a perfect model, and has suffered at times over the years from abuse, it does offer us a way to understand the relationship between law and gospel, order and mission. As a Benedictine oblate of more than thirty years, I believe that the Rule offers a framework for flourishing, which has helped me to a fuller understanding of the role of order and law in the life of the Church and its service of the gospel, its mission.

For Anglicans, this Benedictine model is not as unusual as might be thought. Monastic and religious life ended in England and Wales at the Henrician dissolution and was unknown for nearly 250 years, but elements of that life survived in the Church of England. Thomas Cranmer drew heavily on the monastic offices of Mattins and Lauds to create Morning Prayer, and on Vespers and Compline to make Evening Prayer, and he was clear in his rubrics that the saying of these offices daily by clergy was part of their continuing formation as disciples and ministers of Christ.\textsuperscript{7}

More recently, there has been a substantial revival of interest in the Rule of St Benedict, for two main reasons. First, there has been the realisation that it can be a very useful guide to enrich people’s life of prayer and spiritual development. Esther de Waal was one of the early writers to use the Rule in this way and her first book, \textit{Seeking God}, was the forerunner of many others.\textsuperscript{8} Second, those responsible for leadership development in the Church have drawn heavily in recent years on the Rule and how it understands the role of the superior and the community. We shall return to this relationship later in the article. At this point, I am suggesting that the Rule can also illustrate for the Church how as a community and as individuals we can relate to law and regulation and how law can actually help us to live out the gospel and its values.

While some are doubtful about its authorship, the Rule of St Benedict was clearly written by one person as it has the same style, concerns and thought processes throughout. It is reasonable to accept the traditional view that it was written by Benedict himself, probably in the 540s AD, not long before his death in 547. There is a clear aim which runs through its 73 chapters: the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{5} W Everett, ‘Serving the Church and facing the law’ in Keenan and Kotva, \textit{Practice What You Preach}, pp 268–279 at p 271.
\item \textsuperscript{6} Ibid, p 274.
\item \textsuperscript{7} ‘Concerning the service of the Church’ in \textit{The Book of Common Prayer} 1549 and 1662.
\item \textsuperscript{8} E de Waal, \textit{Seeking God} (London, 1984).
\end{itemize}
transformation of both the individual monks and the whole community, that they may be more Christlike, more conformed to God’s ways and God’s will. As we read in the Prologue:

Therefore we intend to establish a school for God’s service. In drawing up its regulations, we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome. The good of all concerned, however, may prompt us to a little strictness in order to amend faults and to safeguard love. Do not be daunted immediately by fear and run away from the road that leads to salvation. It is bound to be narrow at the outset. But as we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God’s commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love. Never swerving from God’s instructions, then, but faithfully observing God’s teaching in the monastery until death, we shall through patience share in the sufferings of Christ that we may deserve also to share in the eternal presence.9

And in Chapter 4:

Your way of acting should be different from the world’s way; the love of Christ must come before all else. You are not to act in anger or nurse a grudge. Rid your heart of all deceit. Never give a hollow greeting of peace or turn away when someone needs your love. Bind yourself to no oath lest it prove false, but speak the truth with heart and tongue . . . Place your hope in God alone.10

The whole Rule is devised to enable this transformation to happen and the details which are carefully spelled out are designed to provide the framework. The vows which Benedictine nuns and monks take are those of stability, obedience and conversatio morum, and stability and obedience are very much to serve conversatio morum, which may be translated as ‘conversion of manners’ or ‘transformation’. Stability is important because it means staying where you are, working with the people you are set among, not running away when difficulties emerge, living and working with it, and growing through it. Obedience is important because it involves accepting the proper authority of the superior and of the community, learning not to want your own way in everything, to combat the individualism, the self-centredness, which hinders disciples from become more Christlike and growing in love. Individualism has no place for Benedict, as is clear from his views on the Sarabaites and the Gyrovagues in Chapter 1, and his views on owning personal property in Chapter 33. But a

10 Ibid, p 51.
proper care and respect for the individual does figure highly. So, for example, the abbot is to take care that he responds to members of the community differently, according to their characters. In Chapter 64, ‘On constituting an abbot or abbess’, we read:

The abbot and prioress must be chaste, temperate, and merciful, always letting ‘mercy triumph over judgment’ so that they too may win mercy. They must hate faults but love the members. When they must punish them, they should use prudence and avoid extremes; otherwise by rubbing too hard to remove the rust, they may break the vessel. They are to distrust their own frailty ‘not to crush the bruised reed’. By this we do not mean that they should allow faults to flourish, but rather, as we have already said, they should prune them away with prudence and love as they see best for each individual. Let them strive to be loved rather than feared.¹¹

This is part of the balance throughout the Rule between community and individual, respecting the differences between individuals, designed so that all might grow in Christ.

The other balance in the Rule is between the activities of each day, and Benedict lays down carefully how each of these is to be carried out. There are carefully appointed hours for prayer. The timings of the offices and their contents are precisely laid out, with variations for the season. There is also time set aside each morning for the community to study and learn. The community are all to work. The hours are again described, and the manner of work is to be appropriate to the needs of the community and the abilities of each member. Benedict was aware of the importance of recreation and he prescribes the hours for sleep at night, a chance to study or catch up on sleep after dinner, and a time for communal recreation each day (though we might think that the Conferences of St John Cassian are not quite what we would want to hear). All of the community are to be engaged in this life as far as they are able, and all of these activities are important in living the life, becoming more Christlike. For Benedict, they are all part of how the community and its individual members are formed.

**Obedience**

Obedience figures strongly in the Rule: obedience to the abbot and obedience to the community and other members of it. The sections on obedience do not always read well in our contemporary culture, and it is true that over the
centuries they have sometimes been abused by dictatorial abbots or controlling senior monks. As with all documents, we human beings are very good at lifting a few lines out of context and misapplying them to suit our own purposes. But the spirit of the Rule, I suggest, is different. Obedience flows from a sense of mutual respect for one another, a respect which is also to govern the relationships between the abbot and the community. So in Chapter 2, the abbot is reminded time after time that he is not to be an autocrat but a father in God, caring for the community. Here is just a part of that chapter:

The prioress and abbot must always remember what they are and remember what they are called, aware that more will be expected of one to whom more has been entrusted.

They must know what a difficult and demanding burden they have undertaken: directing souls and serving a variety of temperaments, coaxing, reproving, encouraging them as appropriate.

They must so accommodate and adapt themselves to each one’s character and intelligence that they will not only keep the flock entrusted to their care from dwindling, but will rejoice in the increase of a good flock.

Above all, they must not show too great a concern for the fleeting and temporal things of this world, neglecting or treating lightly the welfare of those entrusted to them. Rather, they should keep in mind that they have undertaken the welfare of souls for whom they must give an account.\textsuperscript{12}

The superior is to consult with the community, so that she does not take decisions on her own but listens to the wisdom of others. Chapter 3 describes this:

As often as anything important is to be done in the monastery, the prioress or abbot shall call the whole community together and explain what the business is; and after hearing the advice of the members, let them ponder it and follow what they judge the wiser course. The reason why we have said all should be called for counsel is that the Spirit often reveals what is better to the younger. The community members, for their part, are to express their opinions with all humility, and not presume to defend their own views obstinately. The decision is rather the prioress’s or the abbot’s to make, so that when the abbot or prioress of the community has determined what is more prudent, all must obey. Nevertheless, just as it is proper for disciples to obey their teacher, so it is becoming for the teacher to settle everything with foresight and fairness.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid, pp 43–45.  
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid, p 48.
Parts of the Rule are not to our twenty-first-century taste and parts today are overlooked in most Benedictine communities. It is a sixth-century document. Yet overall it is remarkably humane and considerate, setting out clear standards and expectations, but allowing for human frailty and differences. While it is understanding of human nature, and while it lacks the extremes of more aesthetic rules, it is not easy going. It constantly challenges the individual and the community to become the people they can be in Christ. For Benedict this is a way of life, in which the Rule is there to enable growth, development and Christlikeness:

So there is a good zeal which separates from evil and leads to God and everlasting life. This, then, is the good zeal which members must foster with fervent love. ‘They should try to be the first to show respect to the other’ (Rom. 12:10), supporting with the greatest patience one another’s weaknesses of body or behaviour, and earnestly competing in obedience to one another. No monastics are to pursue what they judge better for themselves, but instead, what they judge better for someone else. Among themselves they show the pure love of sisters and brothers; to God, reverent love; to their prioress or abbot, unsleighted and humble love. Let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ, and may Christ bring us all together to life everlasting!

... Are you hastening towards your heavenly home? Then with Christ’s help, keep this little rule that we have written for beginners. After that, you can set out for the loftier summits of the teaching and virtues we mentioned above, and under God’s protection you will reach them.14

CONCLUSION

Rowan Williams is among those who have sought to demonstrate that the relationship between gospel and law is not only a necessary one but one that can be creative as well. In his foreward to a report on the principles of canon law in the Anglican Communion he maintained that, properly understood, law is not some sort of imposition on an unwilling public but a way of securing two things for the common good. The first of these is consistency. Law promises that we shall be treated with equity, rather than according to someone’s arbitrary feelings or according to our own individual status and power. It gives all of us the assurance that we can be heard. The second is clarity about our various responsibilities. We all need ways of knowing who is responsible for particular actions or

14 Ibid, pp 177, 179.
decisions, so that we can act economically and purposefully, instead of being frustrated by a chaotic variety of expectations and recriminations. He goes on to maintain that law in the life of the Church is no different. Canon law, he argues, begins from the equity which flows from our membership in the Body of Christ. It also indicates who may do what and who is answerable to whom, because every Christian has to know how to work out their responsibility to God within the context of the various relationships and obligations they are involved in.¹⁵

Christine Hardman expressed this very succinctly in her Church Times article when she wrote: ‘Re-engagement with ecclesiastical law can only enhance the ministry, mission, and pastoral outreach of all clergy, whether freshly ordained assistant curate or beleaguered bishop.’¹⁶ Perhaps reflection on the Rule of St Benedict might assist us to make Rowan Williams’ views more of a reality in the life of the Church, as we come to see church law very much more as a framework for flourishing in the service of the gospel.

¹⁶ Hardman, ‘The Church’s servant’.