Leadership and joy
Insights from the Rule of Saint Benedict

Abbot John Klassen, OSB

I have lived monastic life as a Benedictine monk since 1971 and have served the community as abbot for fourteen years, so it is natural for me to write about leadership from that context, paying attention to the transferability of these observations to other environments. I will situate my discussion of leadership and joy in a Christian theological framework.

To the extent that we are able to see, recognize, and trust this saving pattern and action—the mystery of Jesus Christ's dying and rising—in our lives, we live in the joy of the Holy Spirit and in the other gifts of the Spirit.

For Christian people, joy is a gift, a fruit of the Holy Spirit. To speak of joy is to acknowledge the universe created by a Trinitarian God. The Spirit breathes on the waters of a formless void, and the creative word is spoken to unfold the heavens and the earth, making a place for humankind.

We experience joy as we discover the incredible sophistication and balance that is present in complex ecosystems. In the midst of the violence and randomness that are present in the unleashing of powerful physical events such as tsunamis, earthquakes, and tornadoes, the universe has within it the healing, renewing power of the Holy Spirit; new life is always emerging.

The Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ draws us into his dying and rising and provides a powerful theological framework for understanding and internalizing this mystery in our own lives. At the Vigil of Easter, we sing, proclaim, and exult with joy in this holy mystery. To the extent that we are able to see, recognize, and trust this saving pattern and action in our lives, we live in the joy of the Holy Spirit, and in all of the other gifts of the Spirit. Saint Paul is clear about this: the ultimate "proof" of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the presence of the Holy Spirit in the believing community (Rom. 8:9–11).

We experience joy because of our belief in the good news, because with Saint Paul we are always sharing in the dying and rising of Jesus (2 Cor 4:7–11). The battle has been fought, and it was won! This does not mean that we are happy all the time, that the tragic events of our time do not fill us with sadness. Those events might include the senseless killing in Newtown, Connecticut; the loss of dear family members or friends; or our seeming inability as a species to find nonviolent ways toward peace. Joy is not a psychological trick that allows us to fly at 20,000 feet, above the pain and suffering of our world. Joy is walking with the two disciples back to Jerusalem after encountering the risen Lord.

One of our fundamental tasks as leaders is the calling forth and developing of the gifts in each person in our institutions. This observing and calling forth of gifts in a community is a source of joy.

As Christians we are baptized into this dying and rising of Jesus Christ, grafted into this mystery and blessed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit. All Christian vocation is rooted in baptism, and it is nourished by word and sacrament.

Vocation

In his little book *Wishful Thinking*, theologian and writer Frederick Buechner defines *vocation* in a fresh way. "The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done. . . . The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."[1]

Buechner intends this to be a broad definition, to include all kinds of human activity for the good of the world, including religious and priestly life. The experience of vocation is a common biblical theme, whether in the call of Moses or in the call of so many of the leaders and prophets in the story of Israel.

Presence and experience of the Holy Spirit in vocation

Is the Holy Spirit original to Christian experience? Not by a long shot. According to the biblical testimony, the Spirit is present in the creation; in the work of prophets such as Elijah, Elisha, Ezekiel, Deborah, and Judith; in some kings, including Saul and David; and as wisdom. However, within a strict monotheism there

is little room for a full theological and spiritual reflection on the gift of the Holy Spirit to Moses, in the sense that we associate with later Christian theology. But the Spirit is at work in Egypt, Rome, Assyria, Babylon, China, India, in the cosmos beyond the Milky Way galaxy. This observation is not meant to discount the place in God's purposes of the people of Israel and its sense of covenant. The Spirit can't be constrained; it moves where it wills.

We come to our vocation of leadership with a strong sense of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the communities we serve. We believe that our respective communities are abundantly blessed with the gifts of the Spirit, witnessed in our parishioners, faculty, students, staff, and colleagues in leadership. We take as one of our fundamental tasks as leaders the calling forth and developing of the gifts in each person in our institutions. This observing and calling forth of gifts in a community is a source of joy.

Our lives are not lived in isolation but in the midst of real communities. So vocation cannot come from an act of will. It comes rather from listening to our lives to understand what they are truly about, quite apart from what we would like them to be about.

Educator and spiritual writer Parker Palmer has written many books about vocation and is most autographical in *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*.[2] His point is that we can try a lot of things before we find our true selves. For example, he writes that he lined up the loftiest ideals he could find and then tried to live out of those ideals. But no matter how well he did, he always fell short—because the bar was so high. These ideals, because they came from outside him, always felt unreal, like a distortion of his true self.

Vocation in this sense becomes an act of will, a grim determination that one's life will go this way or that, whether it wants to or not. This does not to work well, because the Spirit is always making new connections, and our gifts are being developed and shaped—or some may be going into remission—as we live our lives. Our lives are not lived in isolation but in the midst of real communities, parishes, congregations, colleagues, and families, where specific needs shape how we are responding. So vocation cannot really come from an act of the will. It comes rather from listening, from listening to our lives to understand what they are

truly about, quite apart from what we would like them to be about.

Vocation has its origins in the word *call*. My vocation is not a goal that I pursue. It is a calling that I hear. Before I can give direction to my life, I must listen to my life telling me who I am. I need to know the truths and values of my own identity, what I really care about at the end of the day. Behind this understanding of vocation is a truth that the ego does not want to hear—that there can be a great gulf between the way my ego wants to identify me and my true self. The desert monastic tradition of seeking spiritual guidance has always been about distinguishing the true and false self, where the false self is being aligned with the programs for success, achievement, and glamor that are so idolized in the dominant culture.

By contrast, living out of my Spirit-given gifts and strengths leads to peace, personal integration, and joy. When I am the John Klassen that God intends, that the Spirit has gifted, the result is joy and peace. If I insist on my own version of John, I will be looking for gifts I don't have, and trashing the real ones—a double negative. This line of thought reminds me of a Hasidic tale: Rabbi Zusya, when he was an old man, said, "In the coming world, they will not ask me: 'Why were you not Moses?' They will ask me: 'Why were you not Zusya?' "

The desert monastic tradition of seeking spiritual guidance has always been about distinguishing the true and false self, where the false self is being aligned with success. By contrast, living out of my Spirit-given gifts and strengths leads to peace, personal integration, and joy.

Finally, when we read the classical biblical and other accounts of vocation, we may be led to believe that there is one call and one response. In fact, there is a constant cycle of call and response in our lives, of getting it more or less right, of matching and mismatching.

My purpose for these brief reflections on vocation is to situate all the reflections that follow in a vocational context, using the word *vocation* in broad sense. No two leaders are exactly alike. Each will flourish when he or she is living out of a personal center. We want to make sure we are leading from the inside out.

Background on Saint Benedict and the Rule

I wish to provide a brief background on the Rule of Benedict (RB)[3] that serves as a major source for the following reflections. Benedict of Nursia (now Norcia) was born in 480 CE, and as a young student left Rome to seek the solitude of the caves near Subiaco in Italy. He lived there alone for three years and gradually developed a reputation as a holy man. Benedict was the beneficiary of a 200-year-old monastic tradition that had come out of Egypt to the West through the work of John Cassian. After some years, a group of monks invited Benedict to be their abbot or spiritual leader. From this experience he learned to be more compassionate, and his leadership became more pastoral. From living as a hermit and in community Benedict crafted the rule as we know it. This rule (way of life) represents a distilled version of the vast teaching about monastic life that emerged from the desert and from other monastics living in community. The rule was completed in about 530 CE.

Practical insights from the Rule of Benedict

Leadership, as the Rule of Benedict[1] imagines it (chapters 2 and 64, on the abbot or prioress), has to overcome our natural individualistic tendencies, both in the community and in the leader. Leadership always occurs in the context of a genuine community: leader and community are moving forward together.

It has taken me years to surrender to the wisdom of the group, to trust the wisdom of the group. With this surrender has come a genuine liberation from the need to control, and joy in the manner in which good decisions emerge.

On taking counsel. Benedict expands his fundamental insight into the life of a community with a remarkable chapter entitled "summoning the brothers for counsel" (RB 3). He writes, "As often as anything important is to be done in the monastery, the prioress shall call the whole community together and explain what the business is; and after hearing the advice of the sisters, let her ponder it and follow what she judges the wiser course. The reason we have said all should be called for counsel is that the Lord often reveals what is better to the younger" (RB 3:1–4).

It has taken me years of experience to surrender to the wisdom of the group, to trust that the community will rise to the challenge

and come to a good decision. With this surrender has come a genuine liberation from the need to control, and joy in the manner in which good decisions emerge from a thoughtful and prayerful engagement with an issue.

The most difficult challenge we face in community is to seek counsel without getting bogged down and losing focus. It takes skill and balance to design processes that seek input in a timely fashion, and move toward decision. An additional challenge is to bring a proposal to the community that has been well thought out but is not *fait accompli*. An ill-formed proposal will be shredded with objections and other thoughts. If a proposal is too zipped up, too complete, so that it is difficult for the community to offer real counsel—not just window-dressing input—the complaint will be, "He doesn't really want our ideas. This project is out of the chute—we are just rubber stamping."

Ignorance about oneself is seldom bliss. But facing one's shadow side is part of deep personal change. It is also part of liberation from fear.

Humility. In looking at the structure of the Rule of Benedict, and the block of spiritual teaching in chapters 5, 6, and 7 (on humility), one could argue that the desired outcome of Benedictine life is humility. The monastic journey begins with a certain humility, with the conviction that God is God and we are not. I am becoming more aware than ever of how difficult it is to receive criticism, no matter how constructive it is. The ego wants to protect the self and constructs a defense system to that end. Part of this is, of course, healthy. On the other hand, ignorance about oneself is seldom bliss. Facing one's shadow side is part of deep personal change. It is also part of liberation from fear. Part of this humility is acknowledging where I have acted out of a desire for self-preservation more than than out of courage.

Humility also allows for detachment. If we as leaders are to bring our ideas and gifts to the table of conversation, each individual has to be willing to let go of an idea, to let others turn it over, add to it, or subtract from it. In other words, the leader has to be willing to let the idea become the community's idea or project. If a leader tries to hang on to the idea, strategy, or project because of ego, then the dialogue will be blocked. If the prioress or abbot has pet projects that are rammed through and never

really become the project of the community, then as soon as that person leaves office, the community will begin to dismantle those projects.

Acquiring humility is a matter of learning about my blind spots. It's as though I have a hand of cards—five cards I hold and am able to see—and two or three are up on my forehead: you can see them and I am unable to. In other words, acquiring personal humility is the work of a community. I often kid that I have 130 monks working on my humility! Furthermore, we tend to think of humility as exclusively negative learning—I am discovering weaknesses, faults, and shortcomings. In fact, it also means discovering strengths, gifts, and blessings which I was unaware of or had not really received. Humility in this sense means coming to a warm and loving self-acceptance. The more progress I have made on this lifelong journey, the more peaceful and joyful I will be.

Acquiring personal humility is the work of a community. I often kid that I have 130 monks working on my humility! We tend to think of humility as negative learning, but it also means discovering strengths, gifts, and blessings I was unaware of.

This humility will reveal itself in tense situations, when the air is full of criticism and blame, with skills for listening, openness, and a nonjudgmental response. Self-deprecating humor can often reposition the conversation toward rationality and a greater awareness of the complexity of a situation. The humility a leader displays will tend to lead others toward the truth of an awkward or difficult situation.

Conclusion

The Rule of Benedict has given us a spirituality that has empowered human communities for 1500 years. I hope I have given you a glimpse of some of the spiritual resources present in it for reflecting on leadership and joy.

Notes

[1] "Vocation," in *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*, by Frederick Buechner (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993).

[2] Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 3.

[3] *RB 1980: The Rule of Saint Benedict in English*, edited by Timothy Fry et al. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981).
[4] The best full commentary in English is by Terrence G. Kardong, *Benedict's Rule: A Translation and Commentary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996).

About the author

Abbot John Klassen, OSB, is the tenth abbot of Saint John's Abbey, a Benedictine monastery in Collegeville, Minnesota. Before being elected in November 2000 he taught organic chemistry, applied ethics, and other courses at Saint John's University and the College of Saint Benedict.