

Fr. Curtis Miller July 11-12, 2020 Homily for the 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

This weekend, we commemorate St. Benedict, a Fourth Century monk and the founder of monasticism in the West. He wrote the first rule for monks and established the first monastery at Monte Casino in Italy. It's easy to assume that we've always had monks and nuns, but Benedict was the one who started this movement.

The life of a monk, since the time of St. Benedict, can be summed up in two words: "Ora et Labora," "Work and Prayer." This motto of St. Benedict describes the day of every monk, split between times of work and prayer, usually strictly scheduled. Especially in those early centuries of monasteries, but also today, monks had to labor at gardening and farming to produce enough food to feed themselves and to have products to sell to support their monastery financially. They needed to know a lot about soil, seeds, and growing plants. (It's no wonder that the father of the science of genetics, Gregor Mendel, was a monk, who carefully observed the inherited characteristics of the pea plants he grew.)

Benedict and his monks knew the necessity of tilling the soil, plucking out weeds, and pruning plants to promote growth. But he also knew that they had to put the same amount of effort into tending the garden of their souls. That is why they dedicated the rest of their day to prayer. They weeded out distractions, pruned away fears, plowed through selfishness, and gave prayer the time it needed. Jesus' parable of the sower and the seeds, that we heard today, would have been very meaningful to these monks, in both their work and prayer.

An important element of their lives was following a schedule. They established specific times for work and prayer, knowing that if they put it off, then when they finally got to the garden or the chapel, they would find their field too overgrown to be fruitful. So it is for us. Though we're not monks, because we have such busy lives, it's all the more important that we set times for ourselves to pray, to tend to our spiritual needs.

And as these monks, and any good gardener knows, all of this work we do out in our gardens is only preparation. If our gardens are to bear fruit, then they need the sun and the rain, which is beyond our control. For our spiritual lives, too, we can't force spiritual growth by our own efforts. We need to have those times when we just sit there and wait, in an attitude of receptivity, ready to receive whatever God gives us. Though our gardens are often afflicted with drought, we can be sure that God will always provide for our spiritual needs. As our first reading today, from Isaiah, reminds us, God sends out His Word to us, like the rain falling upon the fields, and it will not return to Him until it has borne fruit. In times when we feel spiritually dry, we first have to ask ourselves if we've taken the time to till the soil of our souls, to prepare to receive God's graces.

One thing that makes for rich, fertile soil in our gardens is compost (which we're all supposed to be doing now anyway). Compost is made of scraps and other stuff that we probably want to just get rid of and throw away. Yet it can also be transformed into a substance that promotes renewed growth. What is the spiritual analogy of compost? It can be past hurts and failures, weaknesses that we struggle with, and sins that we have brought to God for forgiveness. When we allow God to work upon all these unpleasant elements of our lives, He transforms them into the soil for new life and growth. So instead of trying to just get rid of these things or hide them, let's bring them before God, so that He can transform them into fertile soil for spiritual growth.

Several years ago, Pope Emeritus Benedict commented on this parable of the sower and the seeds, saying that it shows that God does not force His love on us, He only offers it to us. It's up to us to freely choose whether or not to accept it. God has the power to plant the seeds of His love and force them to grow, but He chooses not to use that power. Instead, God leaves us free to decide. Will we welcome and embrace God's love with open hearts, or will we shut it out with hearts hardened like stony soil? It's up to us. That is the truth about all loves. We cannot force people to love us or accept our love. We cannot force people to love each other. All we can do is encourage and invite, just as God does with us. Let us pray that God will pour out His grace upon our hard hearts, like rain falling upon the parched soil, so that we will be capable of loving one another and of receiving God's love.