

Reflections on St Benedict's Rule

On Silence

Michael Astley

Let us do as the prophet says, *I have said, I will keep my ways, that I offend not with my tongue. I have been watchful over my mouth: I held my peace and humbled myself and was silent from speaking even good things.* Here the prophet shows that, for the sake of silence, we are at times to abstain even from good talk. If this be so, how much more needful is it that we refrain from evil words, on account of the penalty of sin! Because of the importance of silence, therefore, let leave to speak be seldom given, even to perfect disciples, although their talk be of good and holy matters and tending to edification, since it is written, *In much speaking, thou shalt not escape sin.* The master, indeed, should speak and teach: the disciples should hold his peace and listen.

Whatever, therefore, has to be asked of the prior, let it be done with all humility and with reverent submission. But as to coarse, idle words, or such as move to laughter, we utterly condemn and ban them in all places. We do not allow any disciple to give mouth to them.

- *The Holy Rule of St Benedict, chapter VI*

Lately I have begun to wonder about this business of internet discussion forums, letters and articles in the Orthodox press, and other outlets of people's views, thoughts, opinions, and speculations about the reunion of the two parts of the Russian church. In such places, deeply-held beliefs and values often clash with those of others. The temptation is truly great to allow feelings of frustration, agitation, and anger to prevail, and it really is quite unhealthy, often spilling over into manifestations of these feelings, to the detriment of others and indeed, ourselves.

I think that there is much truth in what St Benedict has to say here. Even what appears to be uncontroversial and edifying discussion of the sort that goes on between those of like mind is potentially dangerous, for such groups of people often turn into mutual appreciation societies, where much praise and self-congratulation goes on, balanced only by the encouragement of resentment for the others, whichever group "the others" happen to be.

Of course, current events in our church are not the only catalyst for manifestations of this sort of behaviour. I often find myself caught up in precisely this sort of thing when trying to explain our holy Faith to those who have questions, or when speaking with those who have objections to various

aspects of it, or indeed in conversations that have little to do with Orthodoxy. On more than one occasion, what has at first seemed to be a wholesome exchange has later revealed itself to be a hotbed of temptation for me because of a lack of patience and humility. This is not because of deliberate provocation on the part of those with whom I converse – well, not most of the time – but simply because our fallen human state is such that many of us find it difficult to have these discussions without allowing ourselves to fall into sin. I know myself to be guilty of this. Indeed, I put these musings “on paper” because I have become more aware of this in my own interactions with others in recent weeks (and no, the irony of writing an article to express these thoughts is not lost on your author). I read St Benedict's quotation of Psalm 38 in his first paragraph above, and I know in my heart that I cannot say those words with any degree of honesty.

It is quite simply not good enough to keep on apologising for the sharp tongue or the hasty word, or even to check our words before we utter them. That may well help relations with our correspondents, and it is, of course, essential to acknowledge and confess our wrongdoing when we recognise it, and return once again to our loving Father, but this does not change the fact that we allow the anger take over our hearts in the first place. It is **this** that is damaging. Feelings of anger and frustration, and the nurturing of them, should not be in the same heart that is host to Christ. The two cannot co-exist and the one who is striving, by God's grace, to achieve an Orthodox mindset knows this. If any trace of such feelings is there, then there is still work to be done, prayer to be said, and grace to be asked for.

Perhaps it would indeed be better, in some cases, for us to remain silent when we find ourselves about to embark on what we consider to be normal everyday conversations but which, if we examine ourselves afterwards, we cannot but acknowledge have done little to move us further towards our life in God, and may have actually had a negative impact. Perhaps we would do well to focus our efforts, instead, on our theosis. Our monastics seem to have the right idea. Our monks of the Benedictine tradition observe what they call the Great Silence from the end of Compline in the evening until their first prayers the next day, they eat either in silence or while listening to spiritual reading by one of the brethren, and, while the Rule demands that they receive all guests as though they were Christ Himself, the brethren may not speak with the guests without the blessing of the Abbot.

Not all of us have the benefit of geographical seclusion, and we have to face others day by day, which can itself be a blessing to us and them, but the art of silent reflection in accordance St Benedict's rule for his monks, as opposed to constant chatter, would certainly make what we do say all the more meaningful when we do speak. All we need do is turn to the Gospels to see that we have very little record of any the spoken words of Our Lady. We have her dialogue with the Archangel St Gabriel at the Annunciation, her prophetic praise of God in the Magnificat at the Visitation, and her prayer to her Son for His assistance at the wedding at Cana, but we have little more than that. Yet, despite this, or perhaps partly *because* of this, she was open to God's grace in a way that few but the greatest of the Saints have come close to being.



Our holy icons show her with a small mouth and large eyes, saying little, yet seeking always to do God's will, and pointing all the while towards Christ. How much could we benefit from emulating her and asking her prayers!

During this holy season of Pascha, during which we proclaim the Resurrection with our joyous shouts of *Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and on those in the tombs bestowing life!* please join me in attempting, with God's help, to ensure that the same tongue and the same lips that proclaim the salvation of the world also remain free from the sort of idle speech that serves quite the opposite purpose, and let

us strive together towards sharing in the fullness of that life in the Risen Christ.

Most holy Mother of God, save us!

Michael is a parishioner of the St Elisabeth the New Martyr parish in Birkenhead, a parish of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia.