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## Leadership and Humility

Patrick Henry, Ph.D., Fr. James Wiseman, OSB

from *Benedict's Dharma*, September 2001

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**Patrick Henry:** Discussing leadership and humility, the last chapter of the book before Brother David's conclusion, will be Father James Wiseman. He's the former abbot of St. Anselm's Monastery in Washington, DC. He is currently chair of the Department of Theology at the Catholic University of America. He is the former president of the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue and he is editor of the MID bulletin. So he's right at the heart of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue life. Father James, welcome. [applause]

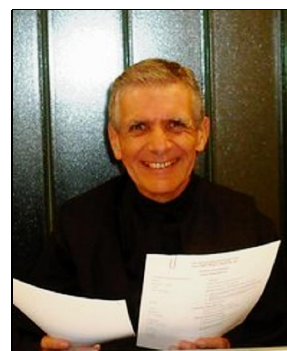
**Father James Wiseman:** There's also something else I might just say about myself and one other MID member in connection with this book. Those of you who have seen it already and have read Patrick Henry's preface will have noticed, as I did some weeks ago with great surprise, that Sister Gilcrest Levine and I had a lot to do with giving Patrick Henry the idea of the book, *Benedict's Dharma*. Because if you've seen that preface, Patrick Henry writes that, when he was at the Gethsemani Encounter in 1996 and Sister Gilcrest and I were giving our talks about living the Rule of Benedict in the 20th Century, it occurred to him that if we had only changed a few technical terms, we could just as well have been Buddhists speaking, as Christians.

I was honored to be told that, because—especially in our time—even in the last ten days or so, when there's so much talk about differences in religion possibly provoking all sorts of societal problems, I do believe that the more we can emphasize our common humanity the better. In fact, before I get into my presentation, I'd like to say just one other thing in that regard.



**Patrick Henry, Ph.D.,** (here on the left with Fr. Patrick Barry) recently retired as executive director of the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research at Saint John's Abbey and University, Collegeville, Minnesota. He was the editor of *Benedict's Dharma*.

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**Fr. James Wiseman,** OSB, is a monk of Saint Anselm's Abbey in Washington, DC, and teaches theology at the

In my undergraduate course this semester at Catholic U, I have about 27 students in a course on world religions. Most of them as you would expect are Catholic or at least some denomination of Christian. But I also have three Muslim students in that course. Last week, one of the Muslim students, a young woman, didn't come to class and she missed two days in a row, so I was somewhat concerned and actually afraid that maybe she had been somewhat persecuted by other people just because she was Muslim. So I called her up and it wasn't that really. She said she had been in phone contact with her parents in Kuwait and they were convinced that war is coming to the Middle East and actually, according to her, her parents expected to be killed. The father was saying therefore, "Please don't come home." And she told me that she wants to because if her parents are going to die, she wants to die with them—a very horrible thing to have to hear. Just listening to that, you have to focus on what we have in common just as human beings and forget that we are Christian or Buddhist or Hindu or Muslim or whatever.

At any rate, all think I'm supposed to do tonight is really say a few things about this material to help get discussion started and I'm going to focus only on three points. The first, is something to do with the challenge of being a superior in a monastic community. The second has to do with this whole business of humility, and then the third, which really isn't in the chapter I've been assigned but it was the topic that provoked so much whole group discussion earlier today and then we were asked to sort of cut that off and move to our dyads, is this whole business of the relationship of lay people to monks and whether there might be some possibility of what I would call either temporal vocation or temporary vocation. So let's see how that goes. As I go through this material, I will from time to time, in fact more than a few times, I'm going to be quoting a few sentences or short paragraphs from this book. Many of you will have read this material already, but I think some of you, maybe the majority of you, have not and as you hear some of these really wonderful reflections I think it will make you all the more eager to get a copy and read the whole thing.

Now this first point about at least some aspects of the challenge of

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being an abbot or abbess in today's monastic world. I'm going to start with just one little section here that Norman Fischer wrote. He says:

The way of the world is the way of self-protection. The monastery by contrast is a community in which one does not protect oneself, but instead relies on one's brothers or sisters to exercise their greatest wisdom on one's behalf. One makes the effort to trust the wisdom of the leaders as a way to develop a deeper and wider trust, trust in God to use St. Benedict's language. The assumption is that love prevails in a monastery, that if indeed the superior has been mistaken and the task you obediently performed turns out to be harmful for you physically or emotionally then the superior will finally excuse you from it or at least someone else will see what's going on and intervene. In the end then, in a monastery you can be assured of being protected from any real harm and in accepting a task against your better judgement, you are forced to stretch yourself in all ways. You'll confront your fear and mistrust, and if you can go beyond it, your love and trust will go.

I think that is basically true. However, I would also say and I think if Norman were here, and I wish he was, I think he might also say, that that's only one side of the picture and it's probably an overly rosy side of the picture. A bit later, he himself, in this same chapter on leadership and humility (and probably without intending it) if not corrects himself, at least compliments what I just read. Because a little more realistically he says:

A monastic community is like a family, and like a family it has plenty of jealousy, rivalry and antipathy as well as love. Even more so because the quiet and simplicity of the life and the fact that monastics can never escape from one another tend to magnify these emotions. In a monastery, as anyone who's ever resided in one for more than a few weeks will tell you, a small emotion that arises in response to a minor situation can feel gigantic.

Well, that is true, and any of you who have lived in a monastery more than a few weeks will know that that's true. And that's certainly a major challenge for any superior in a monastic community, abbot or abbess.

So how to meet it? Well, again, I'm just going to rely a bit on some of the things that are said here because I agree with them and I think they're put very well. Norman himself addresses in the same part of the chapter by saying that, the abbot has to take very seriously on the one hand all of St. Benedict's strictures against playing favorites or any sort of favoritism, and at the same time be sure that he or she, the abbot or abbess, is warm and affective towards the members of the community. Here's the way Norman puts it:

St. Benedict's Rule says it's crucial that superiors avoid favoritism. Naturally, abbots and abbesses, like any one else, will have those community members whom they like. It's important for superiors to be mindful of these preferences and scrupulous about never acting on them. This is a delicate matter because it's good to express affection. In fact, I'd say that warmth and affection are the basis of monastic life, and without them a monastic environment can easily become a lonely and barren place of religious idealism. If the imperative not to show favoritism were taken to mean the abbot or abbess should be cruelly distant, this would be a shame and a problem. So it's a challenge to express affection and to be a warm presence and, at the same time, not allow favoritism to influence decisions or actions.

I think that's very wise, very important.

Secondly, and this again is from some of the things that Norman Fischer says in the book here, it's important that the superior of a monastic community not be given to worry, what my mother used to

call, "Don't be a worry wart." Or as Abbot Patrick says in his translation of one of the sentences of the Rule: "Not to be given to excessive anxiety." And here's what Norman writes on that: "Probably the main expression of an abbot or abbess is his or her state of mind. A grumpy abbot or abbess is usually a bad one, as is one who is constantly sick because of overwork or overworry." What to do under the circumstances, and he writes from having been an abbot himself. He says: "In my own case, I decided at the outset that the best strategy was to make my own happiness a top priority, not in a selfish way but with the understanding that my happiness and lightness of touch as abbot was of utmost importance for the smooth functioning of the community."

This business of worry, there is more thought, it's a very important part of being an abbot or abbess: "They must worry in the sense of being concerned about things but at the same time should not get upset about things but just let go and be happy with doing their best and accepting the results." Again, that is so crucial. As I was reading that and teaching this course to the undergraduates on world religions, we were just doing the section on Hinduism and I was telling them how, in the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna keeps telling Arjuna you have to do what your supposed to do and don't worry about what is normally called the "fruit" of the work, just leave the results to the Lord. If the superior can do that, that's very, very important for the smooth life within the community.

It also reminds me, as some of you may have read, and I've always been very, very struck by this, and this doesn't apply just to superiors but to anybody in a monastery: the very last conference that Thomas Merton ever gave as novice master, and this was just the day before he entered the hermitage at Gethsemani, I think it was August 20th 1964, I think. He gave what would therefore be called his valedictory address to the novices. And just as in commencements of schools, the person giving the valedictory address tries to save up what seems most important. It always impressed me greatly that Merton's topic on that occasion was to be free from care. This was later published in some issue of Cistercian Studies, I'm sorry at the moment I forget which year it eventually appeared. But it's a wonderful conference and I regret I

don't have it with me and I don't memorize a lot of the phrases. But he says, so often we get devoured by care—care about this, care about that. And that was in the days when the Trappists were still using sign language and he says, somebody will make this sign to me and I'll make another sign back, and if that doesn't work, I'll make a real sign and he'll drop dead or something [laughter]. And apparently, at that time, from the context I would think that the monastery down there was having a lot of trouble with a plague of rabbits, which as you know reproduce very rapidly. He said, "You just got to let the rabbits be the darn rabbits and don't worry about them. Just not be upset about things."

Well, that is it, to be free from care, not to be, as Abbot Patrick said, given to excessive anxiety about anything, because if you are, it's going to appear in the way you look, the way you deal with other people, and it will have a very detrimental effect on the life of the community. So, that's all I wanted to say about the topic of leadership.

Now to say a little bit about humility here. The seventh step is the one that causes a lot of people concern. I might just add, by the way, that, and I think Father Columba could say this better than I and would know a little bit more of the historical details, but Benedict's source for this material was basically Cassian and in Cassian, it's really not a step like progression as though you're ascending one after another. It's just signs of humility and I think that's probably a better way to look at this than somehow to think that the twelfth step is more advanced than the first or something like that. But anyway, what Benedict calls the seventh step is this that "we should be ready to speak of ourselves as of less importance and less worthy than others, not as a mere phrase on our lips but we should really believe it in our hearts. Thus in a spirit of humility we make the psalmist words our own, 'I am no more than a worm with no claim to be a human person. I am despised by others and cast out by my own people.'"

You know, a lot of people read that and say, "How can I make that my own?" Now some saints have done it. I believe I'm correct in saying that you'll find somewhat similar expressions in St. Teresa of Avila, who is after all one of the greatest spiritual writers in the history of the

church. She is a doctor of the church, that is, an official teacher. And the way I think that is normally explained is that someone like Teresa was so intensely aware of the Holiness of God that even the slightest failings that she saw herself committing seemed monumental compared with infinite divine Holiness. So she was almost psychologically drawn to say, "I am the worst of sinners." And when she said that, she meant it. However, I would just add that not all of the saints have expressed themselves in that way. And another one who was in a way a disciple of St. Teresa of Avila and also a doctor of the church was Therese of Lisieux. She never called herself the greatest of sinners. In fact, she revealed in the fact that some confessor once told her that he judged that she had never committed in her life a serious sin. But, Therese was just as humble as Teresa of Avila because she didn't take the credit to herself. She says if that's true of me, it's only God's grace. And she went on to say if it hadn't been for that, I could have been a terrible sinner.

That is genuine humility but there are, in this book, by a number of the Buddhist authors, some reflections on the Benedictine understanding of humility which take a somewhat different approach and I think it's worth hearing because in some respects, even those of us who are Christians and even Benedictines or Cistercians might feel that, well, yeah, maybe this Buddhist approach has something to be said for it. So let me just read a little bit here from Norman and Joseph Goldstein and from Judith. Here's a little bit from Norman:

It seems to me that true humility would have to be not seeing any quality even called humility, not trying to acquire it or measure it, but simply trying to appreciate others and let go of concern for one's own accomplishments, spiritual or otherwise. This will always be an endless process because ego is sneaky and, even after its grosser manifestations have been reduced, its subtler tricks go on.

And a bit later he says, and speaking specifically of this seventh step of Benedict's Rule:

Benedict's seventh step requires the monastic to regard himself or herself as lower than all the others and to be content with lowly and humble tasks. This has to be understood carefully because it could easily play into a student's condition of self-loathing, strengthening this particularly potent form of ego when of course the opposite is what's intended. It might be more efficacious to stress not that the student is lower than all the others but rather she or he is neither lower nor higher than any one else in the community.

I think that's worth pondering. And Joseph Goldstein, early on in the book, has this to say:

In the seventh step of humility, I see a problem lurking—the paradoxical trick we play on ourselves when were proud of being humble. Benedict says we should be ready to speak of ourselves as of less importance and less worthy of others, not as a mere phrase on our lips but really believe it in our hearts.

And Joseph comments:

In Buddhist psychology, conceit is any sense of 'I am', which often takes the form of comparing one's self with others, and this means any comparison at all, whether I'm better than, equal to, or worse than someone else. Even when we think of ourselves as less than others, there is still the reference point of an I, an ego, and that is a root problem, the solution to which would be the absence of any one even to be proud.

And Judith, along the same lines, has this to say:

Buddhist teachings about egolessness may not parallel St. Benedict's teachings about humility. Egolessness is



manifested in the practitioner through a greater caring and personal availability to the needs of others, and a quality of expansive joy that accompanies all experience whether painful or pleasurable. While Benedict's steps of humility may serve a purpose on various stages of the path, for the Buddhist traditions I know, the steps do not represent a permanent contemplative style of life.

And what Judith says there about egolessness being especially manifested by personal availability to the needs of others is so beautifully illustrated by what I think is one of the nicest things in this whole book. Early on, I think it was yesterday night, Patrick Henry said he wanted this book to be primarily anecdotal. And a really great anecdote in here is something that Judith says about something in her family life and here's the way it goes. She writes:

Our habit of self-absorption is our primary barrier to contemplative life. Self-absorption is also a defense against the cares and troubles of other people around us. Years ago, at an early morning breakfast of pancakes in my dining room, a visiting Sri Lankan monk carried on a conversation with my four-year-old son who had just awakened from a nightmare. I will never forget how the monk held his fork very still and leaned over toward my son listening attentively to every detail of the boy's dream, the monk's eyes taking in the tousled and troubled boy. Finally my son noticed how present this monk was and he became silent as well. And then, looking directly back into the monk's eyes, the nightmare forgotten, he smiled and said, 'I like you.' He still speaks warmly of that monk.

And I was reminded of this the other day, there's a monk in my own community who, for a hobby, is taking lessons in the painting of icons and he goes every once in a while to a member of the Eastern Orthodox Church to study. He pointed out to me that he learned in one

of those lessons—and it’s something that we’ve probably all seen and never really thought about—that, if you look at the icons of saints in the Eastern Orthodox iconography, regularly the saints’ ears will be larger than normal and the lips much smaller than normal. It was explained to me that that points to the significance of it’s much more important to listen than always to be talking. And that’s exactly what the Sri Lankan monk was doing with the little boy, and it made all the difference. He was not self-absorbed. And I dare say that that monk would not say of himself, “I’m worse than anybody else.” He didn’t even make the comparison. In my opinion, that’s a better approach to humility than saying I’m worse than others or even just the same as others.

Lastly, even though as I said this isn’t from the last chapter of the Rule, we were talking earlier about this whole business of lay people and sometimes the desire to in some way imbibe something of the monastic tradition, and how that might be done. Yifa was saying earlier today how in her monastery in Taiwan there is no dearth at all of vocations and she, in her early forties, is already one of the seniors, and most of the community, hundreds of them are just in their thirties or so.

Well, it actually the same in some Christian monasteries and I think that’s often the case in some of the Christian monasteries in Africa. But we’re all aware I think that that’s not at all the case in most monasteries in North America or in Europe. Brother David, in his postscript, writes at one place, “Monastics are an endangered species, while the ranks of seriously committed lay practitioners are daily increasing.” My own monastery was founded by in Scotland back in the 1920s and that monastery in Scotland, St. Benedict’s Abbey, just closed, because they no longer had enough monks to keep the place going. I heard the other day, and I’m not going to name it because it might not be true and I don’t want to spread false rumors, one of the abbeys in the Northeastern United States has closed or soon will close. Whether or not that’s literally true, I think we’re all aware that in most Benedictine and Cistercian houses in this country, the numbers are now on average about half of what they were in the mid-1960s. And the average age is probably fifteen years higher than it was in the mid-1960s, and that is really a concern.

In my own monastery, where we have a school, our headmaster will often speak to the boys who seem reasonably developed and possibly would want to become a monk some day, whether they wouldn't like to join our community, and our headmaster, Father Peter, says that the answer he most frequently gets, and it's always no, but the reason is usually that they cannot conceive of staying in one place the rest of their lives. I would have thought that maybe celibacy was the bigger problem, but it's stability. As I say, it's not a statistically valid sample because it's just one group of high school juniors and seniors. But, if that is the case, it might make us want to take a closer look at what we've already heard of several times today and have even talked a little bit about, that, in many strains of the Buddhist tradition, it's not required that if you enter monastic life you stay there the rest of your life. It's fairly common to be there for a while and then when you've taken the training and imbibed the wisdom you feel you need, you leave and there's no dispensation needed from the Vatican or anything like that.

Let me just read you a little bit about what Norman and Joseph say about that. Here's a little bit from Norman:

People can come to our monastery for a number of years, can internalize the sense of what the practice is, and then find a way within their circumstances, after leaving the monastery, to create a structure. It seems to me that some training in contemplative life is helpful in order to carry it through a lifetime.

But as he says, it doesn't necessarily mean staying in a monastery the rest of your life. And he says that's especially true of his own Zen tradition. A bit later in the book he writes:

As a Mahayana form of monasticism, Zen tends to be rather flexible when it comes to these things. In Zen, the tradition has always been to come and go freely from the monastery, enrolling for a training period that can be quite intense but then going back to the home temple or wandering about.

And then Joseph Goldstein, likewise, speaking of his center up in Barre, Massachusetts, and I admit that's not, I think, technically a monastery, but it's certainly a monastic way of life...Here's what Joseph says:

Our insight meditation center is among the most readily accessible Buddhist centers. At our place you don't have to prove yourself or make any commitment long-term or short-term. You just show up.

Well, can we Christian monastics learn from that? I don't think we should follow the Buddhist's lead just as a pragmatic way of making sure our monasteries have a certain number of people in them at any time and not die out. But if this is what a lot of people need and want these days, then perhaps there ought to be a way of arranging for what I'm calling either temporary vocations or something along those lines. And, if so, I would be grateful to hear from any of you who are more familiar with the possibility what procedures should be in place to make sure that it goes as smoothly and helpfully as possible.

So those are the three main points I wanted to make and I'm just going to conclude with about two more minutes of something that has really nothing to do with this topic, but I think it's worth hearing anyway. Another anecdote from the book and then I'm going to illustrate how it's so wonderfully mirrored in something in our own Christian tradition. Joseph, early on in the book, is talking about the various precepts—don't kill, don't steal, and so forth—and here's what he says:

There's the story of the 18th century Japanese Zen poet monk, Riocon, who lived a very simple life in a small hut in the mountains. One day he returned home to find that someone had stolen even the few utensils that he possessed. He composed a haiku: The thief left it behind,  
The moon at the window.

And as I read that, I recalled that I had once read something rather similar from the early desert literature of the Christian monks and I looked it up and it went this way: There was an old monk out there in the desert and one day some brigands came and they took everything they could find from his hut and started carting it all away, But they over looked something that was sort of out of the way, a bag. And the old monk went and grabbed it and said, "Hey, you forgot this. Take this too." Now in a sense the story would be great if it just ended there. It did go on to say that they were so amazed at that that they brought everything back and repented [laughter] but it was just that wonderful sense of non-possessiveness that I think is common in monasticism at its best in all of our traditions.

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Continued in **Leadership and Humility: Discussion  
(Benedict's Dharma, September 2001)**

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