



[About](#) [Visiting](#) [Monastery News](#) [Prayer + Chant](#) [Support Us](#) [Q](#)

Chapter 3: Summoning the Brothers for Counsel

1 As often as anything important is to be done in the monastery, the abbot shall call the whole community together and himself explain what the business is; 2 and after hearing the advice of the brothers, let him ponder it and follow what he judges the wiser course. 3 The reason why we have said all should be called for counsel is that the Lord often reveals what is better to the younger. 4 The brothers, for their part, are to express their opinions with all humility, and not presume to defend their own views obstinately. 5 The decision is rather the abbot's to make, so that when he has determined what is more prudent, all may obey. 6 Nevertheless, just as it is proper for disciples to obey their master, so it is becoming for the master on his part to settle everything with foresight and fairness.

7 Accordingly in every instance, all are to follow the teaching of the rule, and no one shall rashly deviate from it. 8 In the monastery no one is to follow his own heart's desire, 9 nor shall anyone presume to contend with his abbot defiantly, or outside the monastery. 10 Should anyone presume to do so, let him be subjected to the discipline of the rule. 11 Moreover, the abbot himself must fear God and keep the rule in everything he does; he can be sure beyond any doubt that he will have to give an account of all his judgments to God, the most just of judges.

12 If less important business of the monastery is to be transacted, he shall take counsel with the seniors only, 13 as it is written: Do everything with counsel and you will not be sorry afterward (Sir 32:24).

Commentary by Philip Lawrence, OSB, Abbot of Christ in the Desert

This whole chapter speaks about the need of communication within the monastic community. The abbot is always to consult the community or the seniors. Saint Benedict recognizes that the abbot needs to hear the advice of the brothers. There are many times when the abbot may not want to consult, for many reasons. It may be difficult to explain how important this advice of Benedict is for handing on the wisdom tradition that he inherited. Experience has shown over and over again that the Monastery is best guided when the abbot does ask for advice and listens to his brothers.

Think of Saint Bernard who became angry at his own blood brother and made him leave monastic life. His monastic brothers then told him he was wrong. He was able to hear them and to apologize to his brother and re-admit him to the community.

The Rule and Saint Benedict presume that the abbot will make decisions and that he needs advice in making them. Sometimes there are abbots who do not want to make decisions or who seem incapable of making decisions. This does not work well for a monastery. Monasteries function better when the abbot makes the decisions after consulting.

It is also presumed that the monks will give advice and have thoughts about the various situations of the monastery. Sometimes our image of holiness can be that of a person without strong feelings, without thoughts of his or her own and without preferences. This is not the type of person we find in the Rule of Benedict.

Thus there is advice to present one's ideas and opinions with humility and not presume to defend them obstinately. A certain amount of defense is seen as part of presenting our views. These monks seem to be real human beings that Saint Benedict is legislating for, not listless and thoughtless beings.

This chapter shifts back and forth between advice to the abbot and advice to the monks. There must be a mutual respect for one another. This does not mean that there will not be disagreements, or even rather sharp disagreements. The abbot and the monks must both seek for God's will even though at times it may seem that more human disputes will prevail. The stronger each member of the community is in this search for knowing what is right and striving to do it, the better off the community will be.

It is not easy always to try to do what is right. Saint Benedict even tells the monks that no one is to contend with his abbot defiantly or outside the Monastery. This presumes that there is a non-defiant contention with the abbot that can happen in the Monastery and is probably even good for the health of the community.

It is difficult to speak about these rather intimate matters of a monastic community. Monks disagree among themselves and they do not always do

so gracefully. There are also less than edifying exchanges between abbots and monks from time to time. One could always wish that the Monastery were a perfect world, but it is not. Instead, our sanctification takes place in a real world in which we are less than perfect and even sometimes sinful.

One of the most difficult lessons of monastic life is that of humility and that is why Benedict has such a large chapter on humility. We must learn to apologize. We must learn to say to one another: "I am sorry." We must learn to accept the apologies of one another and continue striving to love and serve one another. At the heart of our salvation in Christ Jesus is God's forgiveness of us for all our offenses. Our response to that forgiveness must be to forgive one another. At the heart of monastic life must be this forgiveness and acceptance of another.

Like so many aspects of our lives, we must learn this forgiveness. We are not called to look at anyone else and ask if they have forgiven, but we must each pray that we shall always have the grace to forgive and accept. If we cannot accept and forgive yet in our lives, then we must pray for God to change our hearts.

One other aspect of this chapter is the necessity of accepting and living out the decisions that are made in community. This is so important for formation and for the on-going life of the community. Many times in our monastic lives we shall encounter decisions that we think are wrong or incorrect. Once we have had our chance to say what we think, and if the decision remains the same, then we must accept it and get on with living it in a positive way. This is very difficult but quite possible.

We must learn how to speak about the decisions in the community to guests or to other outsiders without ever demeaning the community or the brothers or the superior. We must learn how to speak about all the matters of community life in such a way that we show our sense of loyalty and belonging to the community.

Finally, when all is said and done, we must recognize that there is a strong asceticism in really living in community. It will not be easy for us at first, but will become easier in time. If we form good community habits now, we shall enjoy their fruits later.

May the Lord bless and guide us always.

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Study the Holy Rule of St. Benedict

- [Prologue Verse 1-7](#)

- Prologue Verse 8-14
- Prologue Verse 14-21
- Prologue Verse 22-34
- Prologue Verse 35-44
- Prologue Verse 45-50
- Chapter 1: The Kinds of Monks
- Chapter 2: Qualities of the Abbot
- Chapter 3: Summoning the Brothers for Counsel
- Chapter 4: The Tools for Good Works
- Chapter 5: Obedience
- Chapter 6: Restraint of Speech
- Chapter 7: Humility
- Chapter 8: The Divine Office at Night
- Chapter 9: The Number of Psalms at the Night Office
- Chapter 10: The Arrangement of the Night Office in Summer
- Chapter 11: The Celebration of Vigils on Sunday
- Chapter 12: The Celebration of the Solemnity of Lauds
- Chapter 13: The Celebration of Lauds on Ordinary days
- Chapter 14: The Celebration of Vigils on the Anniversaries of Saints
- Chapter 15: The Times for Saying Alleluia
- Chapter 16: The Celebration of the Divine Office During the Day
- Chapter 17: The Number of Psalms to be Sung at These Hours
- Chapter 18: The Order of the Psalmody
- Chapter 19: The Discipline of Psalmody
- Chapter 20: Reverence in Prayer
- Chapter 21: The Deans of the Monastery
- Chapter 22: The Sleeping Arrangements of the Monks
- Chapter 23: Excommunication for Faults
- Chapter 24: Degrees of Excommunication
- Chapter 25: Serious Faults
- Chapter 26: Unauthorized Association with the Excommunicated

- Chapter 27: The Abbot's Concern for the Excommunicated
- Chapter 28: Those Who Refuse to Amend After Frequent Reproofs
- Chapter 29: Readmission of Brothers Who Leave the Monastery
- Chapter 30: The Manner of Reproving Boys
- Chapter 31: Qualifications of the Monastery Cellarer
- Chapter 32: The Tools and Goods of the Monastery
- Chapter 33: Monks and Private Ownership
- Chapter 34: Distribution of Goods According to Need
- Chapter 35: Kitchen Servers of the Week
- Chapter 36: The Sick Brothers
- Chapter 37: The Elderly and Children
- Chapter 38: The Reader for the Week
- Chapter 39: The Proper Amount of Food
- Chapter 40: The Proper Amount of Drink
- Chapter 41: The Times for the Brothers' Meals
- Chapter 42: Silence After Compline
- Chapter 43: Tardiness at the Work of God or at Table
- Chapter 44: Satisfaction by the Excommunicated
- Chapter 45: Mistakes in the Oratory
- Chapter 46: Faults Committed in Other Matters
- Chapter 47: Announcing the Hours for the Work of God
- Chapter 48: The Daily Manual Labor
- Chapter 49: The Observance of Lent
- Chapter 50: Brothers Working at a Distance or Traveling
- Chapter 51: Brothers on a Short Journey
- Chapter 52: The Oratory of the Monastery
- Chapter 53: The Reception of Guests
- Chapter 54: Letters or Gifts for Monks
- Chapter 55: The Clothing and Footwear of the Brothers
- Chapter 56: The Abbot's Table
- Chapter 57: The Artisans of the Monastery

- [Chapter 58: The Procedure for Receiving Brothers](#)
- [Chapter 59: The Offering of Sons by Nobles or by the Poor](#)
- [Chapter 60: The Admission of Priests to the Monastery](#)
- [Chapter 61: The Reception of Visiting Monks](#)
- [Chapter 62: The Priests of the Monastery](#)
- [Chapter 63: Community Rank](#)
- [Chapter 64: The Election of an Abbot](#)
- [Chapter 65: The Prior of the Monastery](#)
- [Chapter 66: The Porter of the Monastery](#)
- [Chapter 67: Brothers Sent on a Journey](#)
- [Chapter 68: Assignment of Impossible Tasks to a Brother](#)
- [Chapter 69: The Presumption of Defending Another in the Monastery](#)
- [Chapter 70: The Presumption of Striking Another Monk at Will](#)
- [Chapter 71: Mutual Obedience](#)
- [Chapter 72: The Good Zeal of Monks](#)
- [Chapter 73: This Rule Only a Beginning of Perfection](#)

[SITE MAP](#)

"Let everyone that comes be received as Christ."

— *The Rule of St. Benedict*

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