

A unique feature of Benedictine monastic life is that a monk or nun professes a public vow of “stability” to the monastery they join. Except for the most serious of reasons (and that is determined by the abbot/abbess), the monk or nun will remain with their fellow monastics within the physical confines and mission of a particular monastery. For St. Benedict, remaining, in stability, in relationship with others of a like mind and common purpose, guided by a common rule of life, is the path to God and by which the individual monastic comes to knowledge of their full human and spiritual life.

St. Benedict gives concrete expression to the dynamic of Christian life set forth by Jesus in today’s Gospel. In today’s passage, Jesus employs the term “remain” eight times. To “remain” is to stay in the same place; to continue; to go on being; to endure; to persist; to last. Other translations of today’s passage utilize the verb “abide” to describe the life Jesus is inviting us to. To “abide” (for me personally) is a richer term. Abiding implies intimacy; life shared at its deepest level; living and resting in the heart of another as that other lives and rests within me; knowing even as I am known.

While this sounds simple enough, the reality is quite complex especially today. At the recent Pastoral Staff Study Day sponsored by the archdiocese, Dr. Christian Smith a sociologist from Notre Dame, presented an overview of the state of the Catholic Church in our country today, especially as viewed and lived by young adults ages 20-29 based on his research with these individuals beginning when they were 13 or 14 years old. What he found is that realities such as “remaining”, “abiding”, “stability” and “commitment” for the long term, let alone the whole of life, are foreign or even irrelevant realities when it comes to jobs: (some statistics say today a person may have five to seven different jobs before retirement) relationships: (a couple of years ago I read an article about the phenomenon of “starter marriages”—a couple marries to get the “feel” of it, and if after a time it “feels” okay they remain, if not they “cut their loses”); and regarding faith or church life: many today describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious persons”; picking and choosing among church teachings and practices, various Christian and non-Christian spiritualities, to craft their own private “religion/church.” The result, as Dr. Smith noted, is that we have

many young people today (but older adults too) who are increasingly lonely, isolated, and stunted in personal and spiritual growth since they lack connection in any meaningful way to a person or a community.

In inviting us to “remain” in him, Jesus offers us the way to happiness; fulfillment; life in him. But, we must desire it. We must personally choose it. And if we choose it, we must vow “stability”; must “remain”, “abide” in him through constant seeking of a deeper resting in him and he in us. Like St. Benedict, Jesus sees that this journey to self-fulfillment and life in God, is best experienced and mediated by joining with other like-minded seekers in community, in the Church, the means Jesus himself established. Through the Scriptures, the Sacraments, and the teaching of the Church known as Sacred Tradition, we are joined to Jesus the Vine and from him, as branches, draw the life needed to remain, and grow, in him, to “remain”; to “abide.”

As in any committed relationship, the way of “remaining” of “abiding” will entail pruning. Just as a vine is pruned of “suckers” that grow wild stealing the vital nutrients of the vine, robbing the branches of need substance, so too, at times we must be pruned. Pruning is painful, but if accepted can lead to growth. Early in my priesthood I experienced some very tough days in an assignment. I wanted to request a change so I could do ministry as I thought I was called to do; grow on my own terms. A wise priest told me, “If you run away now, what will you do the next time this happens? Keep running? Keep pursuing an elusive dream? Grab hold of Jesus here. He’ll give you all that you need.” I chose to stay and discovered teaching talents and found friendships that have enriched my life to this day.

For us as Catholics, the ultimate experience of “stability”, “remaining”, “abiding” in Jesus and he in us is here in Holy Mass in the act of the reception of Holy Communion. As we celebrate the first reception of this abiding gift of Jesus with our children again this weekend our celebration is an invitation to all of us to renew our belief, devotion and “stability” to Jesus who invites us to “Remain in me.”