

**Blessing of the Abbess Marie-Bernard**  
**Vinh Phuoc Abbey, Vietnam, August 29, 2022**

Dear Mother Marie-Bernard, I am grateful to the Lord that as abbot general I am able to bless, for the first time in Vietnam, an abbess, the second of Vinh Phuoc Abbey, who succeeds Mother Jean de la Croix whom I greet with gratitude for her faithful and fruitful service to your community as well as to the whole Order.

Among the many pieces of advice that St. Benedict gives to the abbot in the Rule, I have wondered which is best suited to an abbess. Certainly, all that is asked of the abbot also applies to the abbess, but we know that in the fatherhood of God that the abbot must reflect are also included all the qualities of a mother. The woman, the mother, by nature cares for life. In a world that despises life in so many ways, from abortion to wars, it is important to understand how in the Church and society women can give this priority and essential witness. Because if there is no care for life, death dominates.

There is a beautiful sentence to this effect in the Rule, in chapter 27, there where St. Benedict describes how the abbot should deal with brothers guilty of grave failings. St. Benedict asks the abbot to be conscious that "he has assumed the care of sick souls and not a despotic power over the healthy" (RB 27:6).

From the way St. Benedict expresses himself, it is clear that for him all souls are sick, all need care. For St. Benedict, sickness is above all spiritual, it is the state in which every human being is born carrying the legacy of original sin that needs an essential cure: the Redemption wrought by Christ dying on the Cross and rising from the dead. Jesus alone is our true physician, but he wants there to be people in the community and the Church who express his ability to heal and cure. For every human being, true healing is conversion, that is, moving from the tendency toward death to the desire for the "true and eternal life" of which St. Benedict speaks as far back as the Prologue of the Rule (Prol. 17). But this is not enough. In addition to the desire for life, which is in us by nature, we especially need to experience true life, the fullness of life that Christ offers us. Christ is the Good Shepherd who dies so that we may have life and have it in abundance (cf. Jn. 10:10). Caring for sick souls then means caring for the conversion of souls, caring for accompanying brothers or sisters on a journey that causes them to be born and grow in the life of Christ.

If a superior or superioress does not care for the conversion of every brother or sister in the community, for the *conversatio morum* that we promise in Profession, he or she will never be a true father, a true mother, a good shepherd, but only an official in the service of superficial and external aspects. The abbot and abbess must care for souls more than for anything external, as St. Benedict reminds us at the end of Chapter Two: "Above all, let him neither neglect nor undervalue the salvation of the souls entrusted to him, and let him no longer be solicitous for transitory, earthly and fallen things, but always think that he has received the

charge of guiding souls and that he will have to give an account of them" (RB 2:33-34).

Yes, a good abbot is one who feels himself to be a servant of the brothers' path of conversion through word, example and prayer.

When we think about these insistent appeals of St. Benedict, and when we understand that caring for souls means accompanying them with mercy on the path of conversion, so that they may grow in life for Christ, with Christ and in Christ, then all the tasks that an abbot or abbess must take on, in formation, correction, compassion, become clear. It also becomes clear when to be strict and when to show tenderness. The life of souls is the compass, guide and program of every good pastor. Love for their growth then becomes the inexhaustible energy in serving them day after day, an energy of love, a flame of charity, like that of every mother who, day and night, without discouragement, consumes herself, like Jesus, like Mary, for the true and eternal life of all humanity.

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