

Are You Frustrated by the Problems of Leadership?

by **Margaret J. Marcuson**

Do you see so-and-so coming and think, "Oh, no!" Does a problem arise, and your heart sinks? Leadership means dealing with challenging people and situations almost every day.

Help comes from an ancient source, the Rule of St. Benedict. Benedict founded the western monastic movement in the sixth century in Italy, and many communities which bear his name exist today. He wrote guidelines for the life of the community of monks, and his suggestions for the abbot, the leader of the community, are often as relevant now as they were 1500 years ago.

Benedict writes about "The Reception of Guests." Writing as a Christian monk, he says, "All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, who said: 'I was a stranger and you welcomed me.' Proper honor must be shown 'to all, especially to those who share our faith' and to pilgrims. Once guests have been announced the prioress or abbot and the community are to meet them with all the courtesy of love." (Joan Chittister. *The Rule of Benedict: Insight for the Ages*, p. 140). At the same time, Benedict is clear that the life of the community continues, and the overall manner of life remains the same even when guests are present.

Here are two principles that can help us with the leadership dilemmas that seem to disrupt our life: 1. We can receive difficult people and problems as guests in our lives and welcome them rather than steeling ourselves against them. They may be a chance to learn something we didn't know. I first read this passage when my children were in elementary school, and were home occasionally with snow days and sick days. I realized I could be open and hospitable to my own children rather than wishing I were back at work. It shifted my experience of those days completely, from feeling frustrated to having fun with the kids. When we resent and resist the problems that come our way, we are not able to learn from them, and they can become more intractable. If we allow them into our lives and allow ourselves to be interested and curious, as we would about a guest in our home, they may bring an unexpected gift to us. At the very least, we won't spend our time being unhappy and resentful about their presence.

2. We need to maintain the integrity and clarity of our purpose in the middle of the challenges. The life of the monastery had a clear purpose, and that was maintained even through the presence of guests. There were (and are, today, in monasteries) places where guests may not go. We can say to someone, I can give you half an hour, and keep to that limit. We can respond to an unexpected problem by addressing it as necessary but continuing to pursue our most important goals, without allowing the problem to throw us too far off track. For example, in a budget crisis, we may take the chance to redefine our goals to those we lead: "This is where I'm headed; it may take a little longer to get there, but I'm still committed to the goal."

So as we welcome the challenges, we maintain our purpose and direction. And the strength we gain from facing the difficulties helps develop our resources to meet our goals.