In his conferences on Chapter 7 of the Holy Rule of St. Benedict, Thomas Merton says that running through the entirety of the work is the one great theme that is the heart and soul of the monastic way of life for St. Benedict: obedience and humility – the core of Benedictine discipline, or spirituality.

It’s vital to keep in mind that the whole point of the Christian life – which is to say our basic VOCATION as Christians – is to make our way to the Kingdom.

- To do that requires, in a practical sense, that one become LIKE GOD – which is to say, like LOVE – to grow in perfect love, that love which casts out fear. This is what Benedict sees as the arrival point to his ladder of humility that we read about in Chapter 7 of the Holy Rule.

- The END or ultimate aim of monastic life – and by extension, all Christian life – is the Kingdom of God, and the immediate goal is PURITY OF HEART (perfect Love) which is described by St. John Cassian in his first conferences. Benedict at the end of his Rule cites Cassian’s Conferences, along with Basil and the Desert Fathers, as a means by which the monk can attain to the heights of perfection.

- Cassian likens PERFECTION to a farmer keeping his field clean of brambles and weeds so as to gain his purpose – to live a life free from care and with plenty.

  - FREEDOM from worry and fear – this is the basis of any real happiness we can attain in our world while “on the way.”

  - St. Benedict uses Psalm 34:13 to bring this to mind, “Is there anyone here who yearns for life and the desires to see good days? [READ out loud: RB Prol. 15-20]

  - Cassian reiterates the importance of having a goal, that is, “a mark for the mind, and constant mental purpose, for unless one keeps this before one’s mind with all diligence and persistence, the monastic will never succeed in arriving at the ultimate aim and the gain which he/she desires.” (Conf. 1.4)

- St. Benedict lays out the spiritual task in the first several chapters of the RB – from Prologue to chapter 7.

  - Chapter 7 is a culmination of this first and most vital part of the RB and serves as a synopsis, or summary, of all that preceded it – chapter 7 is entitled De Humilitatis – “On Humility”.

The Rule of St. Benedict has an intensely scripture-centered orientation which is hard to miss considering the vast number of quotes and allusions to passages from the Bible. Chapter 7 on humility is even more dense with scripture because Benedict believed that the way of humility was essentially the way of the Gospel – the Ladder of Humility is Benedict’s entire spiritual doctrine in summary form.
The use of a the image of a ladder is not new here, many earlier writers present spiritual life as an ascent, a kind of climbing our way from a merely earthly life to the pure heights of sharing in divine life. Remember already in Clement of Alexandria he presents the spiritual life, or the ascetical life, as a spiritual ascent to God.

The image of the Ladder to God/Heaven is a classical one found in the Hebrew Bible, from the story of Jacob’s ladder found in Genesis 28:10-17.

10 Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. 11 He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. 12 And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and messengers of God were ascending and descending on it. 13 And the LORD stood beside him and said, “I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; 14 and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. 15 Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” 16 Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, “Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!” 17 And he was afraid, and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”

St. Benedict writes,

Hence, brethren, if we wish to reach the very highest point of humility and to arrive speedily at that heavenly exaltation to which ascent is made through the humility of this present life, we must by our ascending actions erect the ladder Jacob saw in his dream, on which Angels appeared to him descending and ascending. By that descent and ascent we must surely understand nothing else than this, that we descend by self-exaltation and ascend by humility. And the ladder thus set up is our life in the world, which the Lord raises up to heaven if our heart is humbled. (RB 7.5-8)

- DANGER! A false dualism can easily creep in if one thinks that this image of ascent implies that earthly, mortal, embodied life is somehow evil, or to be rejected. This would be contrary to the Gospel, the first and perhaps most important part of which is the Good News about the incarnation – specifically, that God loves us so much as to humble the infinite divine Self, using St. Paul’s image from Philippians 2:6-11 – so as to let go his grasp on divinity in order to pour himself out as fully human, as a servant and not a noble, in fact the word St. Paul uses is doulos, which means slave.

- As Christ Jesus GOD submits himself in obedience like any human being: obeying the TRUTH, whom the human Jesus relates to as the “Father.”
God reveals the will of God’s good pleasure in the unfolding of ordinary events encountered by Jesus in his life, as well as God’s immediate will: this is Jesus’ mission, or sense of purpose (why he was sent): to reveal the Father through his healing and ministry of mercy, and the teaching of Torah given to Moses (Torah is a Hebrew word that means Instructions) – Jesus interprets the sacred scriptures, always remaining faithful to his message, his vocation, his mission and thus his very person - because for Jesus, he himself is the message – “even unto death on a cross.”

So one can see by this scripture passage in the Letter to the Philippians that OBEDIENCE and HUMILITY go hand-in-glove – there is no real humility without obedience, and no such thing as true obedience without humility.

The LADDER OF HUMILITY in paraphrase:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rung</th>
<th>Description of Interior Disposition or Exterior Expression</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Aware of God’s omnipresence – sees all, knows all, present to all</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>One does not love being willful, would rather be willing to obey</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>One submits to authority out of love for God and in imitation of Christ</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Endures difficulties, trials, frustrations calmly and with patience</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Admits to one’s critical thoughts, bad thinking, and sinful actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Content with less, with what is imperfect, or with menial treatment</td>
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<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Sees the needs of others first, strives for a higher opinion of others than self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Acts according to acceptable standards of behavior, not an exception to rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Is reserved, gentle, kind, and more ready to listen than to speak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Is not boisterous, loud, obnoxious, loving attention and admiration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Speaks with gentle respect and calmly, and without undue exaggeration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Does not swagger, carries oneself and dresses with modesty</td>
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</tbody>
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Chapter 7 is the longest chapter of the RB – and it is also one of the most important: it is a summation of the exterior conduct and interior dispositions, which are what Benedict means by calling the two sides of the ladder the body and soul, as an integrated, whole sense-of-self is needed to cultivate and demonstrate true humility – outward expression and inward
disposition are of a piece: the former without the latter is deluded while the latter without the former is dead.

“Working the Ladder” is a practice that does two things for the practitioner:

1. **Cultivates humility** – insofar as these are grades, or degrees, they can be practiced to instill in the monastic an abiding stance in one’s truth before God as creature, fearful of offending God and the punishment of sin, always ready to listen, to surrender self-will, etc.

2. **Demonstrates humility** – insofar as these degrees show that a monastic stands in one’s truth, disposed to do God’s will, to obey a superior’s commands, the work that will be difficult, to carry self outwardly with humility, reserved in speech, etc.

- Contained in RB 7 is Benedict’s schema for the growth of a serious and well disciplined “interior life” that is demonstrated outwardly by the way the monastic acts.
  - This is reminiscent of St. Paul’s teaching on the Christian life in Galatians 5.22 ff, where he contrasts the “works of the flesh” with the fruit of the Spirit.

…the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. Now those who belong to Christ [Jesus] have crucified their flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit, let us also follow the Spirit.

  - So for Benedict, the way the monastic treats others, receives correction, obeys directives or the Rule, and in every way exhibits “the tools of good works” listed in RB 4 will indicate the presence of true humility; Benedict’s list is far longer than St. Paul’s!

With the very first words of RB chapter 5 we have Benedict giving us a nuanced understanding of OBEDIENCE:

The first degree of humility is obedience without delay.
This is the virtue of those who hold nothing dearer to them than Christ.

- It’s important to note that Benedict’s chapter on OBEDIENCE begins with a statement on HUMILITY. Demonstrating that for Benedict, the two primary features of monastic character, obedience and humility, as I said, go hand-in-glove and cannot be parted each from the other.

- Obedience and Humility are so interdependent and co-inherent, that both can be said to pre-condition the other – they interpenetrate. Authentic obedience is an act of humility, AND to be truly humble requires an attitude of obedience.
This quality of obedience is different than the obedience exercised by the worldly – in the world of competition, persons often seek attention, or are attached to the need to impress or to attain the approval of powerful authority figures for personal gain.

- For the Benedictine, nothing is more dear, nothing more precious than Christ.

Hence, for the Benedictine, a worldly approach to obedience is not authentic, though it may garner admiration from authority, or from colleagues, it nonetheless serves to bolster the soul’s attachment to the need for attention or approval which an ego-centered self can crave.

- What St. Benedict is interested in is monastics who obey with the properly human motive (truly human because truly “God-like”) – a motive that is free from attachment, and ordered to God.

This “religious quality” of obedience is characteristic of a person re-formed – literally given a new “form” – by the grace of conversion, enjoying the state of the New Creation described by St. Paul in Romans (chapter 6-8).

- Timothy Fry’s 1980 translation of the RB (which is such a standard English translation anymore that it is often referred to simply as RB-1980), translates the second part of the opening lines of chapter 5 with a direct reference to this notion of the natural condition of the soul made new by grace: “…which comes naturally to those who cherish Christ above all.”

Humility and Obedience – which can both be expressed and deepened in us by “working the Rule”, most especially reflecting and striving to express the ideals found in Chapter 7.

***GRACE is the power by which we ascend the ladder of humility, and by which we make progress on the Way that leads to life – and as Benedict reminds us in Chapter 4 on the tools of good works, never despair of the mercy of God. Without God’s Mercy – God’s grace – being authentic and true, being humble and obedient, being authentically WHO WE ARE in spirit and truth – just won’t be possible.