

There's an old joke that goes something like this: there are three things the Holy Spirit does not know; where all the Jesuits are; what the Dominicans are thinking and what it is that all the Benedictines have in common – note, not with anyone else, though that's useful to consider, but with one another. This is usually taken to mean, as communities, but could as well refer to each of us as individuals. This is particularly true of Olivetans because, unlike all the other houses, the monasteries of the monks, at least, are not autonomous but subject, ultimately, in this world, to the Rule of an Abbot General in far away Monte Oliveto. An obvious response is to say that we all have the Rule of St Benedict in common but, of course, each monastic congregation and each house, has developed its own set of rules as a commentary on this and we've often ended up in strikingly different places, no two monasteries interpreting the Rule in quite the same way. This is true, even here, within this one worshipping community. So what do we have in common?

Perhaps the clue is to be found in today's gospel passage where Luke points us towards the great reversal of human values found also in Mary's Magnificat and the Beatitudes. Our role is not to lord it over others, whether within or outside the community, whether within or outside of the Church, but to be of service, and this, for monks and nuns, in that most counter-cultural sense of not seeking to be of any real use at all. This has all sorts of dangers but seems to honour St Benedict's original dynamic of withdrawal from the world in order to attempt that ideal of a self-contained world in miniature as a witness to a world beyond. One commentator notes that it's hardly ever been achieved in the history of monasticism, but the variety of monasteries and their various successes or failures in achieving this ideal, is evidence there is a norm we are all striving for. I think his argument is something like the idea that no one bird in a flock is exactly on course, but the mean value, the average of all the directions in which each individual bird is heading, will eventually take them to where they want to go. I'm not entirely convinced but it does raise the question of where it is we really want to go. Perhaps this is something the Holy Spirit *does* know, after all, and *we* need to find out.

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