



Excerpt from Benedict's tools for peace

Margaret Malone SGS, The Good Oil - September 2018

No doubt we would all agree that war is madness, as Pope Francis once said. We all long for peace, not only on the world scene, but locally and personally. The question we often ask is what can we do to be peace-makers at every level of our lives?

There is much throughout the whole *Rule of St Benedict* that refers to the topic of peace, but chapter four – “Tools for Good Works”, is particularly relevant to this topic. Benedict lists 74 tools for use in our lives. Though the chapter is a general chapter referring to varying aspects of Gospel teaching, many of the short statements contain points that, if lived out, would lead to peace on all levels. The most basic point I take from this chapter is that peace on the large scale must begin in our hearts and in our own lives.

The use of the word *tools* is interesting. Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury in commenting on this chapter of *The Rule*, notes that when we use tools of any kind – for example, work tools, a paint brush, the bow of a musical instrument – the tool itself becomes almost part of us by its constant use, a sort of extension of the hand. In the end we are so used to the tool that we do not even need to think about how to use it. But this takes much use and long practice.

The first of the tools is love. Love is the basis of all efforts towards peace and chapter four begins with Benedict reminding us of this key Gospel teaching. “First of all love the Lord your God, with your whole heart, your whole soul and all your strength and love your neighbour as yourself.” Archbishop Oscar Romero, assassinated in San Salvador in 1980 because of his work for peace and justice, once clearly connected love and peace when he said, “If there were love of neighbour, there would be no terrorism, no repression, no selfishness, none of such inequalities in society, no abductions, no crimes. Love sums up the law; not only that, it gives Christian meaning to all human relations”.

Peace-making begins as we act in love. Not content to speak in general terms, Benedict also goes on to speak of specific ways we act if we want to bring peace to all levels of our lives. We begin with respect for the other. If we put the love of Christ before all else, he says, we will act accordingly, because we see Christ in the other. We will not turn away when someone needs our love. We will not act in anger, even though we cannot help feeling anger at times. We may have reason to feel a grudge, but we are not to nurse that grudge. If we do, we will never have peace in our hearts.

Peace is also made or destroyed by the way we use words. We are not to be deceitful, never to give a hollow greeting of peace. A culture of criticism and complaining, speaking ill of others can also be so destructive of peaceful relationships. Envy, hatred, quarrelling and arrogance do likewise. Our words can be such instruments of division. Benedict knows so well that we can indeed kill one another with a word. We need to control our thoughts and guard our words. It all seems so simple, but we know in practice that such apparently simple things can make for peace or destroy it completely.

Benedict goes on to remind us that we find our peace in God who is at the heart of it all. We are to place our hope in God alone. We count on prayer for help to find that peace in our hearts and to overcome all that we do to destroy it. It is God who helps us to be bringers of peace to others, to make peace where there is division and antagonism.

The end of chapter four of *The Rule* leads to the difficult area of forgiveness. Father Daniel O'Leary, a well-known spiritual writer, once said that forgiveness is as essential as breathing. If we don't breathe we die. If we don't forgive we die in another way. Benedict advises us to make peace before the setting of the sun if we have a dispute with someone, and though that may not be possible in the case of very deep hurts where more time is needed, it is obviously good advice if it can be done. At least we can always do with another piece of his advice. He says we should pray for our enemies out of love for Christ. Above all, we can always do what the last tool, the seventy-fourth, suggests. "And finally, never lose hope in the mercy of God." What we cannot do, God will do.

The short ending of the chapter then takes us to the point where we began this reflection. These are the tools of the spiritual craft. They are to be worked at ceaselessly and faithfully, so that they become part of us. They are tools that are possible for all of us to use as we live our ordinary lives.