(Slide 1)

Learning to Live! (cf RB Prol 20)
Stability and Hospitality - An Invitation

(Slide 2)

Introduction: A Fleeting Moment in which Strangers Become Friends

Over a period of fifteen years, the Berlin-based photographer and architect ALEXANDER VON REISWITZ (b. 1965) photographed randomly selected individuals in various countries and cultural settings – people who simply happened to be in the same place at the same time.

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He captured people in staged "family portraits" – people who did not know each other at all and had never met before. Many of these people he approached for this project enjoyed this role-play. REISWITZ was amazed that so many of these strangers came together so quickly and willingly. Some even exchanged addresses afterwards before going their separate ways.

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Experiencing a "Counter-Culture"

Benedictine schools also bring together people who do not know one another and are initially strangers, but who then walk part of their life's journey together over the years.

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The students come into contact with Benedictine monks and nuns who are at home in the very place where the students themselves are learning and studying together for a time. The lifestyle of these Benedictine monks and nuns often differs significantly from what is considered mainstream in today's society. It represents a kind of counter-culture: in the monastery, several generations live together under one roof. The monks and nuns often stay for life in the place and community where they took their monastic vows. The daily routine in the monastery follows a consistent, regulated rhythm of prayer and work, speaking and silence, shared meals and rest, everyday life and celebration, solitude and communal living.

In the monastery, the day is not spent sleeping away, nor is night turned into day. None of this goes without saying for students attending Benedictine schools today. On the contrary, many of them are used to being on the move and are connected globally via social media. It is not uncommon for young people today to shy away from entering into lifelong commitments or ties whilst still young. Young people today love to experiment, to "reinvent" themselves, to try new things, then to shift their focus to something else and keep their options open. In their own families, it is often not possible to share meals together at set times. Leisure activities sometimes blur the boundaries between day and night; at home, young people might click through a myriad of TV channels out of boredom or chill out somewhere with friends.

Behind the restlessness of many young and older people today, there is often a longing for something that lasts, something one can rely on and trust. Many people today sense that, without a minimum of stability, reliability, loyalty, perseverance, resilience and a sense of responsibility, human life cannot flourish or succeed.

The character and shape of human life owe much to the specific place or environment in which it unfolds. This, in turn, challenges our lives with regard to its substance and quality: "Where do we really live?" and "How does this 'where' make us live?" These are crucial questions that students and educators at Benedictine schools – often situated in the vicinity of Benedictine monasteries – may ask themselves from time to time.

(Slide 6)
Exterior Stability
When visiting a monastery, one usually first encounters a brother or sister in the reception area of the community.

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Chapter 66 of the Rule of St Benedict sets out a striking number of personal qualities required of the monastery porter. These requirements essentially apply to all other monks and nuns who come into contact with guests, pilgrims or the students of the monastery school. The porter is to be a "wise'", mature monk who does not "wander about", but is "stationed at the gate", "so that those who arrive will always find him present to answer their call". The reliable physical presence required here is by no means self-evident today.

Nowadays, telephone calls often begin with the question: "Where are you?!" In our virtual, hyper-mobile age, the principle of reliable presence mentioned in the Rule of St Benedict can serve as an important impetus and, at the same time, an inspiration for Benedictine schools worldwide.

People who don't feel at home anywhere don't have a place where they can welcome strangers either. It is of great value if Benedictine monastic schools and universities today can be experienced as places where students feel welcome and at home, places with which they identify, where they feel rooted, because they encounter monks, nuns, teachers and staff, class mates and fellow students who are reliably there for them and make them feel: "You are welcome here! I am there for you!"

(Slide 8)
Inner Stability
It is quite revealing for our focus on "Stability and Hospitality" to take a look at the two similarly structured chapters of the Rule of St Benedict (RB 53 and RB 66) on welcoming people.

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Both speak of a zeal, a "mark", a "warmth of love" with which the abbot, the porter, indeed all the monks, should rush to meet those who come to the monastery. What is the source of this loving zeal? What is the heart, the deeper dimension, of Benedictine hospitality?

The chapter on "The Reception of Guests" (RB 53) in the Rule is preceded by the chapter on "The Oratory of the Monastery" (RB 52).

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It is surprising that BENEDICT begins his remarks on this central place in the monastery by describing the act of leaving the oratory, rather than – as would be more logical – entering it and what one does there. RB 52 would actually fit well after Chapter 20 at the end of the Liturgical Code, where BENEDICT speaks of everyone rising at the superior's signal after prayer – in order to then go out together and to leave the oratory. Obviously, BENEDICT has a different kind of "liturgy" in mind when he places the chapter on the oratory in his Rule immediately before the chapter on the reception of guests. The brothers leave the oratory, hurry to meet the guests and, after the greeting (bowing, prayer, kiss of peace), lead them (back) to the oratory for prayer.

Hospitality offered by Benedictine monks and nuns is rooted – just as the reception of students at Benedictine schools – in the heart of the monastery, in the oratory, where the monastic community and guests and students meet, where they stand together before God in prayer, so that they all may return to their daily tasks in the awareness of God's presence.
→ Benedictine hospitality, and with it the ministry of Benedictine schools, is nourished by such an inner stability, a stability anchored in God.

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Hospitality
Communication and Interaction
This inner focus and stability, achieved through living in God's presence, has an impact on human interaction within Benedictine monasteries and, of course, in the schools they run. The Rule of St Benedict illustrates this very clearly in the reception of visitors by the 'monastery's porter who stands in loving reverence before God.

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Right at the beginning of the chapter, BENEDICT emphasises that the porter must know "how to listen to people and also how to speak to them". Let us note the order of the activities mentioned here! The porter is first to "receive", to accept and listen, and only then to speak, to "give" an answer, to provide the requested information or advice.
→ This sequence is also crucial for Benedictine hospitality as a whole, for the manner of communication and interaction between monks, nuns and monastery guests, as well as between teachers and students at Benedictine schools.

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The Service of Listening
Exterior *stabilitas*—that sense of steadfast presence—and interior *stabilitas*—that inner unity and focus on God, who is ever-present and yet continually comes towards us anew through people, events, and situations—exterior and interior *stabilitas* are the prerequisites for that "listening" which BENEDICT places at the very beginning of his Rule. It marks the fundamental attitude of openness, receptiveness, acceptance, and active listening and engagement, which is intended to shape not only conversation with God but also interpersonal communication in Benedictine monasteries and their schools.

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DIETRICH BONHOEFFER, a German Lutheran pastor, theologian, and anti-Nazi dissident, was leading an underground seminary for training pastors in Finkenwalde. His monastic communal life and teaching there formed the basis of his book *Life Together* - a work that is still regarded as a classic of spiritual literature today.

One significant passage reads: (Slide 15)
"The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as love to God begins with listening to His Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them. It is God's love for us that He not only gives us His Word but also lends us His ear. So, it is His work that we do for our brother when we learn to listen to him. Christians, especially ministers, so often think they must always contribute something when they are in the company of others, that this is the one service they have to render. They forget that listening can be a greater service than speaking.
Many people are looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it among Christians, because these Christians are talking where they should be listening. But he who can no longer listen to his brother will soon be no longer listening to God either; he will be doing nothing but prattle in the presence of God too.
This is the beginning of the death of the spiritual life, and in the end, there is nothing left but spiritual chatter and clerical condescension arrayed in pious words. One who cannot listen long and patiently will presently be talking beside the point and be never really speaking to others, albeit he be not conscious of it. Anyone who thinks that his time is too valuable to spend keeping quiet will eventually have no time for God and his brother, but only for himself and for his own follies."

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Seeing Oneself Through the Eyes of Others
BENEDICT's chapter on the porter (RB 66) shows that the firm commitment of monks and nuns to Christ is not something that cuts them off from others, but rather makes them open and receptive in the truest sense of the word. JAKOB PAULA, the parish priest and spiritual director of the Carmelite nuns in Dachau/Germany, once drew a telling (and pun-filled) comparison between taking in a guest and taking a photograph. (Slide 17)

He wrote in a short essay: "A poor host may take in a visitor, but in the same way that one takes a picture with a camera or a smartphone. The camera does not change when taking a picture. It snaps the photo, but the image remains alien to it. At best, it is stored, but not truly taken into the heart. It is also completely indifferent to the camera whether it "takes in" a concrete wall with barbed wire or the cheerfully beaming face of a child."

"True hospitality leaves neither the guest nor the host unchanged," stated the German theologian and Head of Studies at the Catholic Academy of the Archdiocese of Freiburg, ALEXANDER FOITZIK. In any form of hospitality, it is important to resist the temptation to place our own ideas and beliefs above those of the people we are welcoming.

Monks, nuns, and visitors in Benedictine monasteries as well as students and staff at Benedictine schools should all come into contact with one another in such a way that they can be transformed by the encounter. Benedictine schools should provide a space of freedom in which students are welcomed for who they are. Only in this way Benedictine teachers, spiritual directors and carers can also learn from them. When Benedictine educators recognise how students see them, they can gain a deeper understanding of themselves. They have the opportunity, as it were, to explore their own lives and mission through the eyes of others. How do students perceive and feel about monks and nuns, monastic life and prayer, and the commitment of Benedictine educators to God and to the world?

(Slide 18)
Giving and Taking
I would like to indicate another book that can shed light on our topic and on what ST. BENEDICT is saying in his chapters on welcoming people and in particular in RB 66 on the porter. It is the famous philosophical novel *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* by the German philosopher FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE. [composed between 1883 and 1885]

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The book begins with a short prologue, in which the following is recounted: When ZARATHUSTRA was thirty years old, he withdrew from the company of his fellow human beings into the solitude of the mountains. After ten years he felt compelled to "bestow and distribute" to humanity the wisdom he had acquired during that time. Before he approached his audience, however, he encountered an old man, a hermit, in the forest. The two discussed ZARATHUSTRA's grand mission of proclamation. "I love mankind," ZARATHUSTRA declared, "I am bringing gifts unto men." The hermit laughed at him and said: "Then see to it that they accept thy treasures!" and then he made another suggestion: "Give them nothing. Take rather part of their load, and carry it along with them —
that will be most agreeable unto them [...]!"

The wise hermit thus refused ZARATHUSTRA's ambitions of "giving", of transmitting great ideas. He preferred a program of "taking" instead, of taking and carrying the burden of others, of alleviating their destiny, of taking away their sorrows and sufferings. However paradoxical that may sound - in Benedictine hospitality, as in the work carried out in Benedictine schools and universities — it is not solely or primarily a matter of "giving", of imparting knowledge, guidance, lofty ideals, and aspirations, but also of "receiving". Giving and taking must go hand in hand.

Like religion and pastoral care as a whole, Benedictine educational work must not be reduced one-sidedly to “giving”, to instruction, the transfer of knowledge, life guidance or therapy. Benedictine educators are called to give students what they themselves have received and taken in, and accepted from God and influential people in their lives. Alongside “giving”, their ministry always implies “taking” – “taking” also in the sense of alleviating the burdens that people bring with them when they come as visitors to Benedictine monasteries or as students to Benedictine schools. Benedictine hospitality includes listening attentively when people wish to speak their minds, it implies offering comfort, and relieving burdens.

(Slide 20)
To Carry (Away) Burdens
BENEDICT envisions the monastery porter as a monk who first knows how to welcome and listen before giving anything, before replying, providing an answer or information. But there is another important detail in RB 66 that should not be overlooked. Verse 3 reads: As soon as anyone knocks or a poor person cries out, he should respond “Thanks be to God!” or “Bless me!”
→ The porter asks those knocking at the monastery gate for their blessing.

(Slide 21)
In Hebrew, the term “barak (ברך)” means both “to bless” and “to kneel”.
Kneeling is not merely a gesture of reverence here. In the Arab world of the Mediterranean region, camels still kneel to this day so that they can be loaded with goods. A blessed person is therefore someone who has been given a gift, but at the same time someone who has been entrusted with a burden: the gifts and charisms bestowed upon that person are also tasks! They challenge the blessed person to bear responsibility, to take on the burden of service, and to relieve others of their burdens.

“Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way, you will fulfil the law of Christ,” writes St. PAUL in his Epistle to the Galatians. The biblical foundation for this fundamental Christian attitude is Christ himself, the Christus exemplum (Christ as an example) – an important topic in patristic theology.

In Chapter 27 of his Rule, BENEDICT also speaks explicitly of Christ’s “example” in order to emphasise, in a special way, the superior’s duty of pastoral care. Chapter 64 illustrates the ministry of the abbot, who is considered a “servant” amongst “fellow servants”, with explicit reference to the Old Testament Servant of God, who is not “excitable” and does “not […] crush the bruised reed”. In the Servant of God, who “surely has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases”, the Early Church saw the pattern of Christ and his mission. Benedictine monks and nuns seek to follow his example within the monastery, trying to be true “disciples” of Christ.

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER’s book, *The Cost of Discipleship* (published in 1937), is another classic of Christian theology. It focuses on an interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount, in which BONHOEFFER sets out what he believes it means to follow Christ.

He states in this book: (Slide 22) “God is a God who bears. The Son of God bore our flesh, he bore the cross, he bore our sins, thus making atonement for us. In the same way his followers are also called upon to bear, and that is precisely what it means to be a Christian.”

Being baptised, being called by God, and even God himself, can be a heavy burden. On the fourth step of humility in RB 7, the monk is called to persevere regardless of unjust treatment. BENEDICT encourages him saying with psalm 27:14: *sustine Dominum* – literally: “bear the Lord”. It is about perceiving the Lord and his presence in everything we experience in life and about our readiness to partake in Christ’s way of life.

Some translations of BENEDICT’s Rule try to attenuate the shock power of the original text here. TIMOTHY FRY (RB 1980) reads “rely on the Lord” (Ps 26[27]:14).
TERRENCE KARDONG translates “endure the trials of the Lord” .

BENEDICT, however, writes: “bear the Lord”.
Life with God is, and must be, a genuine relationship – with questions, rebellion, crises, reconciliation, repentance and renewed trust. There is always blessing and burden in a relationship, joy and pain. This is true in Christian community life as well as in our relationship to God.

BENEDICT returns to this reality in Chapter 72 on good zeal, a chapter that is of central importance for understanding the Rule as a whole. RB 72:5 states that the brothers “should bear each other’s weaknesses of both body and character with the utmost patience”. Here, BENEDICT uses the Latin verb *tolerare*, which can be translated as “to endure, to hold out (against)”, but also as “to bear, to support”, “to carry”.

St. BASIL, mentioned in RB 73, refers in his Rule, Question 177 on “How ought the strong bear the infirmities of the weak? (Rom 15:1)”, to the word of Scripture (Isaia 53:4) saying: To bear is to carry away and to cure according to what is written: he took our infirmities and carried our diseases (Isa 53:4; Matt 8:17), not that he contracted the infirmities in himself, but that he took them away from those who were in such case and cured them […] to bear, that is, to carry and take away […].
In Question 178 (“What is bear one another’s burden, and in so doing, what is the law of Christ that we shall fulfil? [Gal 6:2]”) BASIL states: […] in the vernacular use, “to bear” is said for “to take away” and “to carry away” […]. Thus, some manuscripts of the Rule of St. BENEDICT changed the verb “*tolerare*” in RB 72:5 into the verb “t*ollere*” – which means “to lift up, raise up”, “to take away, remove”! This was exactly the advise of the wise hermit to ZARATHUSTRA: “Give them nothing. Take rather part of their load, and carry it along with them — that will be most agreeable unto them [...]!”

(Slide 23)
Conclusion
People who visit Benedictine monasteries or study at Benedictine schools experience a sense of rootedness and openness, of stability on the one hand and generous hospitality on the other. This is the genuine Benedictine offering to countless people on their life’s journey in the past as well as today. Inner and outer stability enable us to welcome others without fear, just as they are, being fully present for them, turning to them unconditionally and ready to listen genuinely. Through such sincere and loving attention, Benedictine monastics and their guests as well as Benedictine educators and their students get the chance to see and understand themselves through the eyes of the others and to learn a lot through this change of perspective.

A shared journey, however, also at Benedictine schools, is not always easy. There are ups and downs, tensions, and misunderstandings as well as conflicts. This is where Benedictine stability comes into play again: this inner and outer rootedness, this steadfastness that does not shy away from difficulties,
that does not run away when the other person becomes a burden or a strain with their habits, problems or demands. Benedictine stability does not shake off the other’s burden. Rather, it empowers people to take on the other’s burden, to bear it together with the other, and in doing so to seek ways to lift these burdens, to remove them, and to open up paths to freedom for the other.

Benedictine hospitality, practised faithfully, and life together over a period of several months or even years change both the guest and the host. Ultimately, what matters in living together – *convivere* - is not what guest and host have learnt about themselves and one another, but what they mean to one another at the end of this time spent together.

(Slide 24)
The Latin verb “*convivere*” has a dual meaning: “to live with” and “to feast with”. It reminds us that Benedictine stability and hospitality, as practised and experienced in many places around the world, are an invitation that is underpinned by the biblical promise and invitation to the convivium at the end of time, the great banquet that God will prepare for all nations on Mount Zion– as stated by the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 25:6–10) and proclaimed again in the first reading at Holy Mass next Sunday.

In the Sunday-Gospel, Jesus speaks of the Kingdom of Heaven in the image of an invitation to a wedding banquet (Mt 22:1–14).

Let us accept God's invitation to be guests at his table, so that we may be strengthened for our ministry of authentic Benedictine stability and hospitality which is contributing to peace and understanding in a divided and unstable world, shaken by crises, wars, and calamities.

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