

Answering with thanks

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*Deo gratias.* That's what the sign in my office says. It's not fancy, just two words laser-printed on office paper and tacked up over the computer monitor so I can read it dozens of times a day.

The phrase—which means “Thanks be to God”—is the traditional Benedictine greeting that monks offer visitors. I was inspired to post it over my computer after reading *In This House of Brede*, Rumer Godden's novel about an English Benedictine monastery. As Abbess Catherine of Brede goes about administering the abbey's business, she is continually interrupted. Each time a knock sounds at her office door and she must lay down her pen or put a thought on hold, Catherine suppresses a sigh of impatience and calls out “Deo gratias” as the visitor's signal to enter.

I'm not the abbess of a busy monastery, but my downtown office receives its share of visitors: passers-by seeking financial assistance, prayer or both; former members returning to visit a burial spot; a colleague wanting to talk through a concern or share good news. As I read about the fictional Brede Abbey, I realized that I had started to see these visitors as interruptions who got in the way of my “real” work of writing sermons, making phone calls, planning committee meetings.

But Benedict and his descendants remind me that my visitors aren't interruptions. Their knocks at my door are gifts: opportunities to practice hospitality and prayer, to share tears and thanksgivings. Each is another reason to offer that simple prayer, “Thanks be to God,” and the sign over my computer reminds me of that.

When Jesus' disciples asked, "Lord, teach us to pray," he gave them what we call the Lord's Prayer. Then he exhorted them to be persistent. Ask, he urged them; seek; knock; and God will give you the gifts you need.

I wonder if that persistence might be a two-way street. I persist in praying daily for my own needs and in interceding for others. And God persists in sending me visitors who help to shape me more fully into the likeness of Christ. Visitors who knock and keep knocking, who ask me not for a fish or an egg but for rent money, groceries or prayer—and always for a listening ear.

Who has been interrupting you lately, knocking persistently at your door? What gift they might offer, if you opened up?