

# The Story of Benedict

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## STORY OF FIFTEEN CENTURIES

The story of Benedict might more properly be called the story of Benedictines; this is true for several reasons. First of all, since Benedict of Nursia lived fifteen centuries ago (ca. 480-547), few biographical details of his life have survived. Only two sixth century sources are known: Benedict's own Rule for monasteries, and the Dialogues of Saint Gregory the Great, written about fifty years after Benedict's death.

Second, the Rule of Benedict was the seed of a Benedictine family tree that has given rise to numerous branches for nearly three-quarters of Christian history. In these fifteen centuries, Benedictine monastic life has taken on many different external expressions, in a variety of historical and cultural settings. But a fundamental spiritual vision has remained at the heart of Benedictine life; monastic men and women engage in a life-long journey of seeking God, preferring nothing whatever to Christ. Every outward expression intends to embody this essential, interior desire.

## THE ERA OF BENEDICT

Benedict of Nursia in central Italy was born at the turning of an age. In the Roman empire, the glorious day of Western classical culture and the early Christian era had turned into nightfall of the Dark Ages. Invading warrior tribes hastened the decline of an already disintegrating empire, and a century before Benedict's birth, Christianity had become the state religion, with disastrous effects. By Benedict's time, tens of thousands with little understanding of, or commitment to, Christian life had entered the church.



In this age of warped classical society and diluted Christian culture, the young aristocrat Benedict was sent to Rome for education in the liberal arts.

Gregory's Dialogues tell us that Benedict, observing the spiritual fall of many students, wished to avoid a similar fate. Abandoning his classical education, he sought the learning he most desired, experiential knowledge of God.

## BENEDICT THE MONK

Benedict turned from study in Rome toward a way of life that had already existed for several centuries, Christian monasticism. Both in the East and in the West, men and women had withdrawn into a solitary life or gathered in communities under the guidance of a spiritual father or mother to pursue a single, all-embracing goal: to seek God above all else.

Gregory writes that Benedict first retired to the desert as a solitary monk, residing in a cave at Subiaco for about three years. A number of monks sought him out, pressing him to be their spiritual father (abbot). But when they proved to be "unteachable monks" who even tried to poison him because they found him too demanding, Benedict returned to the wilderness. Others then came to him, more willing to embrace the way of life he taught. Leaving his hermit's cave, in the following years he formed twelve communities of twelve monks each. Members of Benedict's monasteries ranged from Roman nobles to unlettered peasants to converted invaders. (Both forms of monastic life, solitary or eremitical and communal or cenobitic, exist to this day.)

## A RULE FOR MONASTERIES

Gregory's Dialogues describe Benedict as a wise spiritual guide, well known for holiness and teaching, who eventually wrote a monastic Rule "outstanding in good judgement and clear expression." Gregory also includes an instructive story of how Benedict's twin sister, Scholastica, once reminded her brother that love of God and the things of God come before all else—"sometimes even before monastic regulations! The Dialogues thus reveal that from Benedict's own time, both men and women followed his Rule for monasteries, and that this Rule is deservedly renowned for its flexibility.

Gregory advises anyone wishing further understanding of Benedict's life and character to read his Rule, for "that saint was incapable of teaching a way of life that he did not practice." The Dialogues here capture an accurate sense of the Regula Benedicti, or Rule of Benedict. The English translation "rule" cannot adequately convey the meaning of the Latin term regula. Benedict's composition is not simply a collection of laws and regulations; it is better understood as a guide or teaching for a way of life.

## BENEDICT'S RULE AS A WAY OF LIFE

Benedict's regula represented little that was new or revolutionary in sixth century monasteries. Instead, the genius of Benedict lay in his masterful synthesis of the best and most essential elements of earlier monastic life and teaching. Long experience combined with broad and deep reading of scripture, theology, and monastic sources led Benedict to compose what he called a "little rule for beginners" addressed to "the strong kind (of monks), the cenobites." These are monastic men and women who choose a celibate communal life, guided by a particular regula and a spiritual leader chosen by the community.

What characterizes this way of life that Benedict offers? In closing the prologue to his Rule, Benedict clearly indicates its purpose: "we intend to establish a school for the Lord's service." From its earliest days, monasticism proposed to educate; it intended to form and transform the attitudes, habits, and culture of those who chose this way of life. One secular historian has written that Regula Benedicti is designed to create nothing less than an "alternative society."

## BENEDICT'S "ALTERNATIVE SOCIETY"

In an era in many ways much like our own, an age of massive shifts in Western society and Christian culture, Benedict offered a guide for life itself as a "school for the Lord's service." Since the monastic way of life shapes the very personhood of Benedictines, and therefore permeates Benedictine ministries, it is important to note major hallmarks of Benedict's "alternative society." First of all, Benedict has fundamental convictions about divine and human reality. "The divine presence is everywhere," he says repeatedly, and the proper human attitude and response to this divine presence he summarizes in a single word: LISTEN.

In Benedict's view, God is always and everywhere present, in one's inner depths and in the persons, things, and events of ordinary, daily life. Anyone who listens attentively can perceive this divine presence, even in the most mundane or unlikely circumstances. Given these foundational, complementary convictions, all aspects of life can educate and transform the receptive learner: one's own daily experience; any and all members of the human community; the physical, mental, and emotional environment.

## LISTENING

But to be truly transformed, one must truly listen. Benedict uses this word in its biblical sense, to mean both hear and obey, attend and respond. Hearing can yield new insight; that insight needs a partner, action, to transform persons, communities and culture.

Based on these twin beliefs about the ever-present God and ever-listening human persons, Benedict regulates the concrete rhythm of daily life in the monastery. This alternative way of life has offered wise guidance adaptable not only in various monasteries, but in diverse human organizations and institutions, including schools, hospitals, parishes and families, for fifteen centuries.

## GUIDELINES FOR A WAY OF LIFE

The shape of Benedict's way of life emerges both in broad strokes and, at times, in fine detail. General guidelines of the Rule begin to sketch a way of life: Days, weeks, and seasons are arranged in a regular rhythm of prayer, mental and physical labor, and rest. All persons are equally loved by God; therefore every person is worthy of equal reverence. On the other hand, people have varying and unequal spiritual, physical, intellectual, and emotional gifts. Hence, matters ranging from diet to health care to workload are arranged not in equal measure, but according to the circumstances of each person. The best teacher is example, and no one should teach by word what he or she is unwilling to do. In making important decisions, the community leader consults all members. No one is ranked higher than another based solely on age, position, or occupation. Guests who present themselves, especially the poor, the sick, and pilgrims, are to be treated as Christ himself. Each community member is to seek what is better for another, rather than for oneself, and accept with greatest patience another's weaknesses of body or behavior.

Frequently, Benedict applies his own general guidelines to daily life: in consultation about decisions, even the youngest and newest members are invited to state their views, since God often speaks through the young. While the sick are to be treated as Christ himself, they in turn are to accept service in the same spirit, and not make excessive demands. Visitors who express criticism ought to be listened to, for God may have sent them to offer helpful insights. After each use, farm and garden tools are to be returned, clean, to their proper places; even kitchen pots and pans are to be handled as "sacred vessels of the altar." All members are to serve the common table by turns, for even this mundane task can "foster love." Items crafted for sale should be offered at lower prices than those of the secular marketplace, so that avarice will not grow and, above all, "that in all things God may be glorified."

## BENEDICTINE WORK AND WORKS

Always, Benedict returns to his central, guiding vision. In his alternative society, the fundamental, most important "work" is to seek God; out of this primary work flow the labor of daily life as a school for the Lord's service and the "works" of various ministries. In other words, those who live according to Benedict's guidance do not choose a particular ministry or apostolate in order to seek God. Rather, because they are seeking God, they minister to the needs of people in their time and place.

Through fifteen centuries, Benedictine men and women have ministered to a vast variety of needs. They have established schools, hospitals, and orphanages, given spiritual counsel, taught agricultural methods, copied sacred and secular texts, carried the Gospel to mission lands. Among Benedictine men and women of past and present, one can find musicians and artists, preachers and liturgists, farmers and bakers, doctors and lawyers, scholars and writers. But in all these works, those who follow Benedict's regula express its essential work: seeking God as a way of life, preferring nothing whatever to Christ. Closing his 1981 book *After Virtue, A Study in Moral Theory*, Alasdair MacIntyre observes that our culture, in its "new dark ages," awaits another Benedict. But for fifteen centuries, the wisdom of the first Benedict has transformed the lives and work of countless men and women, in monastery and marketplace. To this day, Benedict of Nursia offers guidance for an alternative society, a "school for the Lord's service."