

St. Benedict

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Part I. Overview of Benedictine Spirituality

Catholics, Protestants, Buddhists, and all people are welcomed as Christ according to Benedictine hospitality under the Rule of St. Benedict.

The Rule of St. Benedict is a set of rules and principles for monks living together in monasteries, but it can apply to all those who are not monks who feel the need to seek God and to become closer to the sovereign God of the universe. A safe harbor.

Benedictine spirituality is what first attracts many to the Rule of St. Benedict even as they 'keep their day job.' The reason people from all backgrounds including non-Catholic ones find deep spirituality in the Divine Office and the other Benedictine practices in the Rule such as the emphasis on work and *lectio divina* (slow prayerful reading), is difficult to state briefly. However, it may involve the following characteristics:

Antiquity of 3,000 and 1,500 years. Benedictine practices of daily singing of the psalms (songs) are based on ancient traditions dating back nearly 3,000 years to King Solomon and the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. Benedict wrote and compiled the Rule in the year 530. For the 1,500 years since, monks have been conducting the Divine Office several times a day, each day. This makes the Benedictine Divine Office one of the oldest, daily observances of any kind anywhere in the world.

Before the Divisions. The use of the Psalms has continued in an unbroken chain of tradition from the days of antiquity before any division between Jews and Christians. Protestants can quickly feel an affinity with St. Benedict and an era which is about a 1,000 years prior to Martin Luther's publication of his *Ninety-five Theses* in 1517 which led to the Reformation and a split in Christianity. For major parts of the Divine Office, the texts are taken from times when those who acknowledged God's sovereignty were in greatest unity.

From the Human Ancestors of Jesus. The personal accounts of the struggles and unbending faith of those in the human lineage of Jesus (the Jewish authors of the Psalms) makes it easier for us to feel a kinship with these most ancient songs to God.

Presence of the Holy Spirit. There are no unique elements in the Benedictine Divine Office. Most everyone has sung a hymn and read the Psalms. But in some way, the balance of the Divine Office or the filling of those elements by the Holy Spirit makes participation in the Divine Office either with monks or privately something different in kind from just the sum of its parts.

Purity of Message. In the Divine Office the participants sing or recite the psalms and meditate upon them. There is no sermon; it is God that interprets the message within you. Silence and quiet reflection are important parts of this form of worship.

Structure and Completeness. The Benedictine lifestyle instills a strong sense of fullness and participation in practices that return to the earliest days of a life-filling Christianity.

Under the Rule of St. Benedict, between 4 and 7 times a day monks sing a hymn, sing and read several psalms responsively (two alternating choirs), read from the Bible and early church fathers, and pray. These sessions are called the Divine Office, or Liturgy of the Hours, or the Work of God (*Opus Dei*). Those who are not monks read and pray the Divine Office individually or in small groups as often as their lifestyle permits.

Not an Advanced Theological Degree. The Benedictine Way is not an intellectual education. Perhaps because of its extensive reliance on Biblical texts, Benedictine practices might be seen best as a pathway, well traveled by the ancient feet of spiritual pilgrims and by those who are still on the pathway today.

Part II Biography of St. Benedict

Summary. St. Benedict of Nursia, Italy. Born at Nursia, c. 480 AD; died at Monte Cassino, Italy, 543 AD. Benedict was author/compiler of a Rule for monks. Benedict's Rule became the foundation of western monasticism.

If you have a mental image from history class of ancient monks copying books by hand, teaching the local population to read, spreading the Gospel among pagan tribes across Europe, and preserving the light of civilization through the Dark Ages, you have a fairly accurate picture. And you can put a name to most of those monks, they were Benedictines.

Fall of Rome, Foundations of a New Civilization. Flavius Romulus Augustus, the last Roman emperor was removed in 476 AD by the barbarian chief Odoacer. This date is used as the official end of the 1,000-year existence of the Roman Empire. With the decay of the Roman Empire, Europe saw the collapse of civilization. It was also into this world that Benedict was born.

Wealthy Family and Good Education. Benedict and his sister, St. Scholastica, came from a wealthy family in the beautiful mountainous region of Nursia, 75 miles northeast of Rome. Perhaps to put the great antiquity of Benedict's work in perspective with the other great religious orders, St. Francis of Assisi was born in the same region about 700 years after St. Benedict.

Benedict was well-educated in Rome where, after a religious experience probably in his late teens or early 20s, he withdrew from the fast-paced and deteriorating remnants of the Roman world around him.

At Enfide. "Benedict does not seem to have left Rome for the purpose of becoming a hermit, but only to find some place away from the life of the great city; moreover, he took his old nurse with him as a servant and they settled down to live in Enfide, near a church dedicated to St. Peter, in some kind of association with "a company of virtuous men" who were in sympathy with his feelings and his views of life." At Enfide, St. Benedict became well known and because of his many visitors he left Enfide seeking even greater separation from the world. From *Catholic Encyclopedia — St. Benedict*.

At Subiaco. Benedict went to Subiaco (about 35 miles east of Rome) where he lived as a hermit for three years in a cave. He was aided by monk Romanus whose monastery was nearby. Romanus gave Benedict monk's clothing and brought Benedict food at scheduled times.

As a New Abbot. At Subiaco, Benedict also became well-respected among the local religious communities and when the abbot of a nearby

monastery died, the monks sought Benedict to become their abbot. Benedict knew that he and the group of monks did not agree on how monks should live, but Benedict reluctantly agreed to be their abbot. The monks did become dissatisfied and perhaps jealous of Benedict. The monks who had begged him to become their abbot now tried to poison him.

Poisoned Wine. "So when the glass which contained the empoisoned drink was, according to the custom of the Monastery, presented at table to be blessed by the Abbot, Benedict putting forth his hand and making the sign of the Cross, the glass which was held far off broke in pieces, as if instead of blessing the vase of death, he had thrown a stone against it. By this the man of God perceived that the glass had in it the drink of death which could not endure the sign of life. So presently rising up with a mild countenance and tranquil mind, having called the Brethren together, he thus spake unto them: "Almighty God of His mercy forgive you, Brethren, why have you dealt thus with me? Did not I foretell you that my manner of life and yours would not agree? Go, and seek a Superior to your liking; for you can have me no longer with you." From *The Life of Our Most Holy Father Saint Benedict* by Pope Saint Gregory the Great.

Twelve Monasteries. Benedict returned to Subiaco. There Benedict, accompanied by some faithful men, established 12 monasteries near Subiaco. Each monastery had 12 monks. Benedict appointed deans over these small groups of men. Whether these monasteries followed the pattern of life that is found in Benedict's Rule is not known, but certainly all of Benedict's experiences helped shape the rest of Benedict's life.

At Monte Cassino, the Abbey. After the monasteries near Subiaco were self-sufficient, Benedict made his final major move — to the hill above the town of Cassino (70 miles southeast of Rome).

In 529 AD Benedict established the abbey of Monte Cassino which is recognized as the heart and founding center of Benedictine monasticism.

"Once established at Monte Cassino, St. Benedict never left it." From *New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia* — Abbey of Monte Cassino.

Monte Cassino Abbey has been destroyed three times by armies, including the 1944 bombing by the Allies during the World War II Battle of Monte Cassino. [The decision of the allies to bomb Monte

Cassino is controversial to this day.] The Abbey was rebuilt by the Italian government and consecrated by Pope Paul VI in 1964.

While at Monte Cassino Abbey, in about 530 Benedict wrote and compiled the Rule. Its influence spread over all Western monasticism.

Vision of the Single Ray of Light. It seems clear that Benedict was used by God in a way to help build a new civilization after the fall of the Roman Empire.

St. Benedict's contribution was his famous Rule by which monks could live together successfully in prayer and work in the Lord's service. His ability to create a balance in living the full Christian life has not been surpassed. His insight into the weakness of people as well as their longing to grow closer to God came from a man who had, himself, been close to the Glory of God. For example:

One night "when it was time to go to rest, venerable Benedict went up to the top of the tower While as yet the Monks were at rest, the man of God, Benedict, being diligent in watching, rose up before the night office and stood at the window making his prayer to Almighty God about midnight, when suddenly, looking forth, there was a light glancing from above, so bright and resplendent that it not only dispersed the darkness of the night, but shined more clear than the day itself. Upon this sight a marvellous strange thing followed, for, as he afterwards related, the whole world, compacted as it were together, was represented to his eyes in one ray of light." *The Life of Our Most Holy Father Saint Benedict* by Pope Saint Gregory the Great.

The Greater Power of Love. Always close to her brother, Scholastica founded a religious community for women at Plombariola which is about five miles from Monte Cassino. Scholastica, "who was consecrated to God from her very childhood," would visit her brother once a year at small cottage located not far from the entrance of Monte Cassino Abbey. On her last visit to see her brother at his abbey she said to Benedict "I beseech you, leave me not this night, that we may talk until morning of the joys of the heavenly life." To whom he answered: "What is this you say, sister? By no means can I stay out of my Monastery."

"But Scholastica prayed that it might rain and a storm of great intensity kept Benedict from returning to the monastery.

"Benedict said to his sister 'God Almighty forgive you, sister, what is this you have done?' She replied, 'I prayed you to stay and you would not hear me; I prayed to Almighty God and he heard me! Now, therefore, if you can, go forth to the Monastery and leave me.' But he could not leave.

"Thus it fell out that they spent the night in watching, and received full content in spiritual discourse of heavenly matters. he found a miracle worked by the courage of a woman in the strength of Almighty God. And no wonder if at that time a woman were more powerful than he, considering she had long desired to see her brother. For according to the saying of Saint John:

"God is charity," and with good reason she was more powerful who loved more." From *The Life of Our Most Holy Father Saint Benedict* by Pope Saint Gregory the Great.

After returning to the monastery, a few days later on February 6, 543, Benedict knew that his sister Scholastica had died when in a vision he saw her soul ascending to heaven in the form of a dove. He understood then why she had wanted a little more time with him.

Death of Benedict 543. Not too long thereafter, on March 21, 543 at 3 o'clock in the morning, standing in the chapel of his Monastery of Mount Cassino, Benedict died at the age of 63 (From Haften's Disgnis. Monast.) From <http://www.catholic-forum.com/saints/stg02003.htm>

Both St. Benedict and St. Scholastica are buried at Monte Cassino Abbey.

Rule of Choice for Western Monastic Life. In the following years and centuries, Benedict's Rule was adopted by greater numbers of monks as the Rule under which they wanted to live. Later the Rule was championed by Charlemagne (747 -818) and his son Louis (778-840), and the Rule became the most common rule across Europe.

Stability, Fidelity to the Monastic Life, and Obedience. Today Monks around the world continue to sing and pray the Divine Office several times a day. But monks have always had an impact on the wider world.

In 1309 "three busy officials of the King of England, Edward I had been sent to the last remaining fragments of the King's regions in France, and specifically to the island of Jersey, to enquire into the state of Royal property. [The officials heard about] two monks, by birth loyal to the King of France, by monastic vow attached to a Norman monastery and by chance of appointment abandoned on a remote outcrop of rock between Jersey and the Cherbourg peninsula. Their rock was truly tiny - at high tide little more than a break in the waves — but the King of England was nevertheless interested in who owned it, and, more particularly, in what its only two residents did. Their answer [provided a good insight into Benedictine life]:

'He who is called Prior and his companion ... dwelling in the chapel throughout the whole year maintain a light burning in that chapel so that the sailors crossing the sea by that light may avoid the peril of the reef ... where the greatest danger exists of being wrecked. These two always perform the divine office.'" From *The Benedictine Handbook* by Anthony Maret-Crosby, Editor.

It has been said that other than the Bible, the Rule for monks has been the most influential book in the development of western civilization. And sometimes its light is for just one sailor upon the sea.