

Benedict of Nursia

By James M. Stanton

Introduction

Benedict of Nursia made perhaps the single greatest contribution to monasticism in the Western Church, and to the shaping of western Christianity in general. He was not the most original or deepest thinker in the world of theology at the time, and he was by no means the first to set out to follow Christ in the monastic setting. And yet, as a colleague said to me, he is like Grand Central Station – all the tracks lead into him and after him all the tracks that get somewhere lead out from him.

Benedict did not occur in a vacuum. Here I want to give an all too brief account of the history of Monasticism so we can place him appropriately.

(Note: In the text following, citations from the Rule are set out in parentheses. E.g., (ch 7) refers to “chapter 7.” (Pro) refers to the “Prologue”.)

The Monasticizing of the Church

From earliest times, individuals have felt the call of God through Christ in unique and intensive ways. Jesus had challenged people in different ways to follow him, and as we have seen, the whole notion of being a disciple meant to be apprenticed, to be conformed, to the life of Christ. Paul had used the word “bodily training” (γυμνασια) in relation to the development of the Christian life. (1 Ti 4.8) Many people have felt this call to be like Christ, to be a faithful disciple, to develop spiritual strength through rigorous exercise in radically intense ways. And one has only to think of the quest for superior knowledge and experience of the divine in, e.g., the Church at Corinth, or the Montanists, or the Shepherd of Hermas, to see how powerful such a call can be.

For many, this has meant living a solitary life, a life utterly dedicated to serving God through prayer, or contemplation, or even practical service. The word “monk” derives from the examples of persons so dedicated, described by the Greek word monachos (μοναχος). These were, however, not commonly what we would think of as “monks” today, that is, persons living in a special place, sharing a common life, dressing in a distinctive way and professing a certain rule of life. For the most part, the earliest examples of monks – notably including both males and females – were people who lived alone (thus the name), tended to live in ordinary houses increasingly on the outskirts of a village or city, lived a simple life, and demonstrated their piety in various but intensive ways. They might be looked upon as in some sense “odd.” They tended to undertake special acts of prayer, or study, or self-denial. To describe these acts, they or others around them would borrow a word from the athletic arena – askesis (ασκησις), meaning “exercise,” from which we get “ascetic,” and “asceticism.” These solitaries could live entirely alone or be loosely connected with other solitaries. (Think of the modern phenomenon of “home schooling.”) And

though for the most part they did not *intend* to draw attention to themselves, they nevertheless did so precisely because of the odd-ness of their lives.

The fascination of such solitary and dedicated lives seems to have grown with the rise of Christianity more generally. As Christian churches grew, and as the Christian religion as a phenomenon became more accepted in society leading eventually to Constantine (272-337) and the official recognition of its status early in the 4th century (Edict of Milan 313), so, too, did the movement of solitaries. But it is important to note that this “movement” was in no sense organized. It was quite informal. Here and there, individuals would hear something, usually from the Gospels, or feel in some way God’s call to live a more rigorous commitment. How they interpreted this and what they did in response was entirely personal, idiosyncratic.



Figure 1 Antony of Egypt

Antony of Egypt

Something new happened in the life of one such solitary that would have profound consequences for the history of Christianity. His name was Antony. Born in Coma in Lower (Northern) Egypt in 251, he was brought up in a well-to-do home. His father was a wealthy landowner. His parents died when he was about 18 years of age, leaving him to care for his younger sister. At the age of 34 (285), he heard the Gospel story of the Rich Young Ruler read in Church. He was struck by the Lord’s words to the young man, “Go, sell all you possess, give it to the poor and follow me.” (Mt 19.21) Immediately he resolved to do just that, leaving a bit of the proceeds from his sale of the land to care for his sister. Then Antony, like so many before him, took up residence in a simple house on the fringes of the town and lived an ascetic life.

Once set on this course, he tended to look for more challenges to strengthen himself spiritually. Eventually, he withdrew from normal life entirely and moved out to the desert. This act of withdrawal brought a new word into the Christian vocabulary – anchoreis, (αυχορεισις) meaning, simply withdrawal. The word “anchorite” then came to denote monks (solitaries) who lived in withdrawal from the world, completely dedicated to and utterly dependent on God. For more than thirty years, Antony lived this life of withdrawal: in the desert, in a tomb, on a mountain.

Despite his efforts to withdraw, however, Antony only seemed to draw more people to him. He became quite famous, and his example and teachings inspired more and more people to follow his example. Throughout the 4th century in Egypt, the phenomenon of anchorite monks grew enormously. And the fact is that, in spite of their efforts at withdrawal, they became a very powerful political as well as spiritual force.

The story of Antony was made famous by one of the great theologians and bishops of this era, Athanasius.¹ Antony died in 356 (at the ripe old age of 105!). At this time, Athanasius was in exile. Athanasius wrote what would come to be the first “biography of a saint,” though his work is more an homage than a biography in the strict sense. And because of Athanasius’ own story, in many ways heroic, his veneration of Antony was commended to a very wide audience outside of Egypt. Eventually this book and the collected sayings of Antony would together come to the attention and in turn inspire the monastic movement in both the East and the West.

Pachomius

Not everyone could endure the kind of asceticism characteristic of an Antony. A monk who had come to learn from and imitate Antony, Pachomius (292-348) noted that one of Antony’s disciples, Macarius (of Alexandria) had organized some anchorite monks into cells centered in a loose community. Pachomius set out to form a more organized community where the monks would live and work together, share all things in common, and be ordered under a superior, which would be called “Abbas” (father), the term from which we get the word Abbot. This would come to be called the cenobitic form of monasticism (from the joining of two Greek words: *koinos* [κοινος] meaning “common”; and *bios* [βιος] meaning “life”). The monks in his system did not yet inhabit a single building, and the structure of the community was not as tight as monasteries would become. But the beginnings were there.



Figure 2 - St. Pachomius

Pachomius established his first monastery between 318 and 323. It eventually grew to have a hundred or more monks. He went on to found another 8 monasteries and by his death, in 348, it is estimated that there were 3000 monasteries scattered across Egypt!

The fame of both Antony and Pachomius and of the movements they had shaped spread far and wide. Two men who would in their own way shape monasticism came down into Egypt to learn from the “masters” of this way of life: the first was Basil of Caesarea (330-379), and the second was John Cassian (360-435). Both of these men were well educated, of substantial backgrounds, and both were in holy orders. Basil became the Bishop of Caesarea and while drawn to the monastic life, had many reservations about the extremes to which ascetics would go. Cassian actually lived in a community in Egypt for 3 years, but the conflicts over doctrines and power caused him (and his friend and fellow monk

Germanus, and about 300 others) to flee Egypt. Cassian would come to Rome where he received the invitation to oversee two monasteries near Marseilles, in France – one for men and one for women. Both men would construct “Rules” or instructions for the ordering of monastic life. Basil’s Asceticism and Cassian’s Institutes and Conferences would become, in turn, the foundational documents of monasticism in the East and the West respectively. (Basil is often called the “Father of Eastern Monasticism,” and John Cassian the “Father of Western Monasticism.”) And both of these models had a deep influence on Benedict, who actually mentions them in his Rule. (ch 73)

¹ Athanasius was the Archbishop of Alexandria from 328-373.

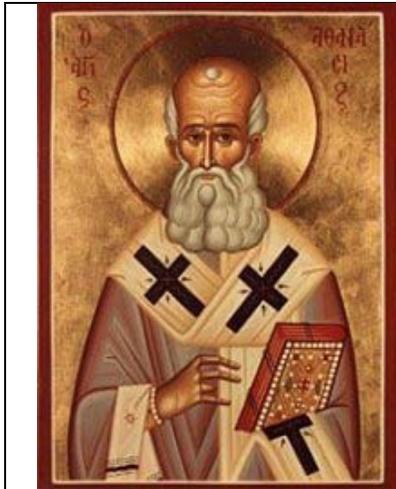


Figure 3 - St Athanasius

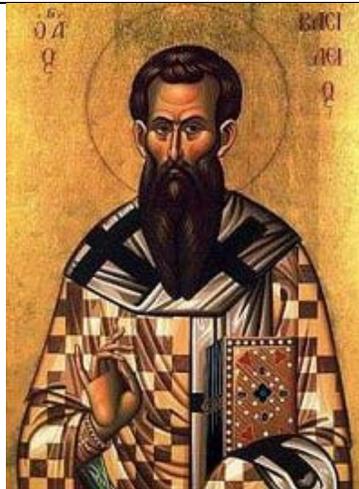


Figure 4 - St Basil

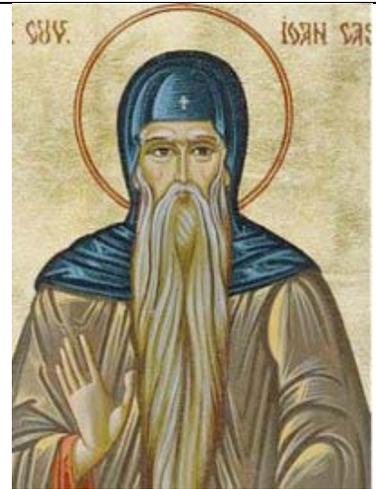


Figure 5 - John Cassian

At the time Benedict wrote his rule, the “monasticising” of the Church had already progressed very far. Monks at first were solitaries who sought a deeper more perfect expression of Christian commitment. This drove many to ascetic practices of increasingly intense, sometimes bizarre, forms, and eventually led to eremitic (from the Greek for “desert”) and anchorite forms of life. At the same time, rough forms of common life began to develop as, in part at least, a pull-back from the more extreme expressions of the ascetics.

Pachomius’ “rule” is rather sparse on the theological underpinnings of the common life, and is really more a set of instructions on how to handle various practical issues. Both Basil and Cassian demonstrate far more depth theologically, and deal more pastorally with issues of common life. Both, however, also represent a rigorist or demanding approach to community.

Monasticism would be changed by these writers and the movements which borrowed from or lived under their guidance. Their influence was felt as far away as Ireland and Western Europe, as well as in Asia Minor, Syria and Palestine during their lifetimes. In many ways, monasticism was a challenge to the ordinary structures of the Church, to the hierarchy of bishops in particular. There was almost a centrifugal force at work in these units, whether made up of individuals or houses.

It is in this context that we find Benedict of Nursia.

Benedict of Nursia

Born in 480 AD, at about the age of twenty Benedict struck out on his own to seek the quiet and space in which to contemplate life. He was born in Nursia (about 70 miles northeast of Rome) to a father who was a Roman noble. He was well educated. But he came to abandon his life of study and public service in order, as Gregory the Great tells us, to “serve God.” This meant, in Gregory’s famous words, to leave behind “learned ignorance” and find “unlearned wisdom.”² Gregory goes on to say, “he was in the

² Dialogues, II

world and was free to enjoy the advantages which the world offers, but drew back his foot which he had, as it were, already set forth in the world.” It does not appear that he specifically set out to be a monk. He settled in a place near Subiaco, some 32 miles East of Rome. This served him well for a short time, but soon he retired further in the direction of solitude, taking up residence in a cave some two miles away.³ He received some support from a monk, a hermit, but determined to live this ascetic life by his own work. “For God’s sake he deliberately chose the hardships of life and the weariness of labor.”⁴

This way of life went on for three years.



Figure 6 - Benedict's Italy

Soon, his piety became known to other monks in the area. They came to him and invited him to be their abbot. He had some misgivings about this, but after a time consented. The intensity with which Benedict took his call to serve God and the laxity and varied interests of the monks were soon in conflict. An attempt was made to poison Benedict. He returned to his cave. But his fame spread far and wide, and soon he had numerous people coming to him for his counsel and wisdom.

Eventually, Benedict established 13 monasteries in the region. He chose one to live in and give extended direction to those few “such as he thought would more profit and be better instructed by his own presence.” Benedict served as the abbot over all the monasteries he established, though each one was largely self-governing.

The work in Subiaco was popular and drew large numbers of people to learn from Benedict. But it eventually aroused suspicion and jealousy, especially from a certain priest who, according to Gregory, even went so far as to employ several naked dancing women to put on a display in Benedict’s monastery, in an obvious attempt to disrupt the discipline and compromise the monks, and to bring discredit to the work. Benedict left Subiaco and came to a mountain top near Cassino. Here he found an old temple dedicated to Apollo. He torn down the altars and built oratories dedicated to St. Martin and St. John, and began preaching and teaching the Gospel to the local inhabitants. Here he established another monastery. This was the famous Monte Cassino. Here he abandoned his previous model of several small monasteries and brought all the monks to live in a single place.

Monte Cassino was a different world from that of Subiaco. It sat near a major highway that led from Rome to the south. It was in a populated area, unlike the relative backwater of Subiaco, and it was surrounded by several dioceses and other monasteries. It was a busy place, and would become more so

³ It is said that Benedict performed a miracle – the restoration of a ceramic sieve broken by his elderly nurse who had accompanied him. This brought instant notoriety in the village.

⁴ Ibid.

as Benedict's fame spread around. Eventually, Benedict would count as friends numerous bishops and abbots, and men and women of the noble classes. It was at Monte Cassino that he wrote his Rule.

Characteristics: Benedict was a man of immense interest to all those who came into contact with him. Indeed, many possessed this interest before they ever knew him. As Gregory the Great describes him, it was his ability to empathize with others, his basic humanity, coupled with his devotion to God that made him so attractive. He is everywhere a "quiet, gentle, dignified, strong, peace-loving man".⁵

With this background in mind, let us explore the "pattern of life in the Spirit" that we find in Benedict.

Again, we ask our familiar three questions:

- What is the goal of life in Christ?
- What is the basis of life in Christ?
- What is the character of life in Christ?

What is the *goal* of life in Christ?

The goal is nothing less than the Kingdom of God. We learn what this means in the Prologue. It means, according to Benedict, to have "true and everlasting life." And there are, clearly, two prongs to Benedict's conception of what is entailed in the Kingdom: the first is "true life" by which he means a truly productive, deeply lived, free and expansive life; and the second is "everlasting life," life with God in eternity, life that transcends death, life that is filled with God's goodness and beauty. It is clear that Benedict relied heavily on the Gospel according to Matthew, and his concept of the goal of life in Christ is drawn from that source.

With regard to the first prong, "true life," Benedict holds that God has invited us by His loving-kindness to know "the way of life."⁶ We are intended to live in his "tent" (Ps 15.1), which means both to live fully in the here and now, and to live in the full assurance of heaven afterward. The one who dwell in this "tent" is the one "who walks without stain and practices justice; who speaks truth from his heart; who has not used his tongue for deceit; who has done no evil to his neighbor; who has given no place to slander against his neighbor."⁷ In other words, those who live *wholesome* – emphasis on whole – lives. This wholeness comes, of course, from God Himself. We are sinners, it is true. But God does not desire the death of sinners, as Scripture says, but that they may turn from their evil ways. God's grace is intended to be known and lived for this very purpose. Of course, the tension between sin and the good that God intends will lead to a life of struggle. It is a struggle which, if engaged fully, however, leads to stronger, healthier, holier persons. "The Lord is waiting every day for us to respond by our deeds to His holy admonitions." We must, therefore, prepare our "hearts and bodies" to engage this struggle. That is the purpose of the Rule. It contains "nothing harsh or burdensome." The way is "narrow" at first, and will be thought to be demanding. But "as we advance in the religious life and in faith," says Benedict,

⁵ Catholic Encyclopedia

⁶ In this section, all references are drawn from the Prologue, unless otherwise indicated.

⁷ Ps 15.2-3

“our hearts expand and we run the way of God’s commandments with unspeakable love.” So one aspect of the goal is an expansive, freer, more humane and loving existence filled with both God’s grace and personal confidence.

With regard to second prong, heaven, Benedict constantly reminds his readers of the watching eye of God, of the necessity to live in the “fear of God,” and of the accounting we must one day give to the Judge of all. Yet, it is clear that it is more a sense of “awe” that he counsels rather than fear as we normally understand it. Benedict knows the goodness, kindness, grace, mercy and love of God. God has prepared us for unimaginable joy and fullness of life. This sense of heaven is in the background of virtually everything he writes. It is the “assurance” of such fulfillment in eternity that Benedict finds in the Scriptures. And this assurance undergirds the way of life he commends, giving it not only its foundation but its motive power as well. This is brought out when he writes “No longer will his motive be the fear of hell, but rather the love of Christ.” (ch 7)

What is the *basis* for life in Christ?

The basis for life in Christ in a word is “community.” There are four kinds of monks, Benedict says. There are the anchorites, who live solitary lives devoted to God. This is especially demanding and arduous, and reserved for the few who are mature in the faith, who are strong and accomplished at combat with evil. The second type are the sarabaites,⁸ who may live either alone or in small groups. They are largely undisciplined, doing whatever gratifies their own sense of religion. They define their own spirituality and do not pursue anything demanding. The third type are even worse, the gyrovagues.⁹ They “wander in circles” (the meaning of the word), going “from province to province,” again without discipline. They seem to live off others, indulge their every whim, and even take part in activities Benedict says should not be mentioned. The fourth type differ from all of these: they are the cenobites, those who live in community, who live under a rule and an Abbot.¹⁰ Although there are different kinds of cenobitic communities, Benedict clearly prefers this sort of living and his Rule is meant to address this form of life.

The value of living in community can, in light of this brief description, be clearly seen.

First, it provides stability. This is a very important word to Benedict. It means a continuing community very much like a family. Indeed, Benedict describes the particular community he has in mind in terms of the family. And like a family, it presupposes relationships that are long-lasting, deep, mutually responsible and personality forming. Only such long-term relationships can, in fact, produce the kind of deeper life, “true life,” that we saw above. He can also refer to it as a military training school. (Pro) Such training presupposes uniform practice and standards, expectations of fitness, a cadre of discipline that shapes and hardens the trainees for combat. Such training can be done effectively only where the foundation is deep and unchanging. As Euthymius the Great once said, “A tree which is transplanted often does not bear fruit.”¹¹ Whether or not Benedict was familiar with the saying, it is surely the case

⁸ Derivation of the word is unknown.

⁹ Augustine describes similar monks, calling them “circumcelliones”.

¹⁰ Benedict actually placed the cenobites first in his list.

¹¹ Euthymius was a Palestinian monk (377-473)

that he would agree with its point. (Benedict also refers to this kind of stable community a “workshop.” (ch 4) It is clear that while the workshop may have many tools, the product it turns out is persons.)

Second, community calls forth fidelity. (ch 58) Precisely because all the monks depend on each other for their growth in the Christian life, they must show themselves faithful in their work and prayer and in all aspects of their common life. The stability of community permits commitments and determination and the faithful performance of them to form mature Christians. This fidelity is shown above all in the “humility of obedience.” (ch 5) This means the readiness and commitment to act on the directions of the Abbot or the elders, or, indeed, on the requests of other members of the community. Although “humility” is a concern overall of Benedict, as we shall see, this particular form of humility has to do with action and with one’s obligations to one’s brothers. It is less the psychological concept we usually think of with respect to humility – how one sees oneself. Rather, it has to do with the way one lives one’s life precisely in community. One is reliable, honorable, committed in spite of the needs of the moment or the desires one has in himself. The object of fidelity and its attendant humility of obedience is arriving at the place where the monks develop “good habit[s] and delight in the virtues which the Lord will deign to show forth” in their lives. (ch 7)

Third, community provides the context for the most famous “tripod” of Benedictine life – prayer, work and study. As this tripod seeks to integrate life – to make it whole, and to make the whole of it conform to Christ, so community is seen as the foundation on which the tripod is erected. It is commonly said of the Benedictine orders that they are “contemplative.” But this is shown by the Rule to be false. If anything, Benedict wanted his monasteries to embrace the whole of life, not provide an escape from its demands, and “contemplation” or reflective thought had to be placed in a larger plan that involved labor and prayer. The motto of Benedictine communities is “*ora et labora*,” meaning prayer and work. This by no means denigrates the virtue of study and thought, but clearly demonstrates that there is more to the ordered Christian life than pondering the mysteries of God. Indeed, it is the “God of the universe” which one serves in prayer (ch 20), but who is also to be served in one’s daily labors and reflection and who has so arranged the world that He is to be found in all of it.

It is important to note that Benedict requires new monks admitted to the community to take the vows of “stability, conversion of morals, and obedience.” (ch 58) This sets the Benedictine vows apart from other forms of monastic vows.

We will move on to the consideration of the character of life in Christ.

What is the *character* of life in Christ?

Benedict cites Ps 33.14-15: “If you will have true and everlasting life, keep your tongue from evil and your lips that they speak no guile. Turn away from evil and do good; seek after peace and pursue it.”

The character of the Christian life can best be summed up in the image drawn from Genesis of Jacob’s ladder: This is drawn out in some detail in ch 7. It is the joining of both the spiritual dimension and the

physical, embodied life of the individual. Benedict sees these two aspects as forming the two sides of the ladder. It is in this joining of the two sides that we have steps on which either to ascend to God or to descend. And, in fact, the two movements are interrelated: as we descend in humility, Benedict says, we ascend in spiritual strength. The movement toward “true and everlasting life” takes place precisely in this human life seen in its totality.

Biblically Centered. The first thing that must be said about Benedict’s construal of the Christian life is that it must be grounded upon and nourished by Scripture. Benedict is his own best witness in this regard: he bases his work at every turn on passages of Scripture: some 126 of them. Of these, 55 come from the New Testament, and 71 from the Old. These citations are absolutely essential to his work as we will see. (I refer you to the Appendix: Cassian and Benedict compared.)

Good Works. Benedict saw his school as a “workshop” for the fashioning of mature Christians. And like any good workshop, there were tools to be used. In chapter 4, Benedict lists these tools. There are 73 injunctions – commandments that set out what the monk should not do, or do to move toward “true and everlasting life.” This comprises a sort of checklist on the characteristics of life in Christ, and all of the matters addressed in them are expanded on in the later text. Thirty-three (33) of these injections are negative in nature, and forty (40) are positive in nature. The negatives include the Ten Commandments, and “behavioral” injunctions: e.g., do not drink much wine, do not engage in gluttony, do not give way to anger, do not love much speech (or jokes!). On the positive side, Benedict begins with love of God first, and love of neighbor second. Then follows a host of positive actions, feeding the hungry, relieving the poor, visiting the sick, burying the dead, helping those in trouble, and so forth. One is to study (#56), to pray (#57), and to carry out God’s commandments by work (#63). Among the most important are those having to do with “attitudes”: One is to see all good as a gift of God, as originating in God; one is to see the evil in one’s life as deriving from the self; one is to keep constant watch over his life, to be aware of God in all things, to love chastity, to love confession, to pray for one’s enemies, to make peace with one’s enemies. One is to seek “eternal life with all spiritual longing” (#46). One is to put one’s trust in God (#41), and never to despair of God’s mercy (#73)!

The Social Character. We have already said a great deal about Benedict’s concept of community and its central role in developing Christian character.

It must be said right at the beginning that the Rule is written for lay folk, not for clergy. Although Benedict clearly is concerned with the monastic or “religious” life, he is writing for ordinary men (and as it would happen, women) who wanted to pursue “true and everlasting life.” Benedict does not conceive of his audience as those interested in a “professional” form of Christianity. Clergy would eventually be included in his communities, but they were to be treated like any other members of it. (ch 60) In fact, Benedict directs that clergy not be admitted too easily! If they are persistent, however, they may be admitted but only on condition that they observe the whole Rule, and that they exercise their priesthood only under and at the direction of the Abbot.

What Benedict was interested in was forming a school of what we might call intentional Christianity, where those who came to be part of the community could work together toward the fullest life in Christ

possible. (Pro) And, not coincidentally, the community would be made up of men from all walks and stations of life.

Furthermore, while the words “ruthless” and “rigorous” come to mind when discussing the rules of other movements, Benedict’s Rule is far from this kind of characterization. It is practical, sensible, doable.

Labor. Labor was essential. Benedict had learned this in his own life. “Idleness,” he writes, “is the enemy of the soul.” (ch 48) The norm at the time was that labor was characteristic only of slaves or the poor – of the ordinary man – but certainly not something to be aimed at. Benedict, on the other hand, believed productive labor was essential to healthy growth in the Christian life. Idleness leads to ruin. If anything, work comes before other disciplines in order of importance, if not of time. He even describes worship and prayer as doing the “work of God.” (*opus Dei*)

Labor was to take many forms. Working in the fields was one form of labor. But Benedict also assigns various responsibilities within the monastery – the appointment of a “cellarer” (the monastery’s manager and steward), the “porter” (gate-keeper), and the kitchen staff, to name a few. In the case of the kitchen staff, all the monks were to rotate through the preparation and serving of meals.

Prayer. The importance of prayer is demonstrated in that Benedict devotes 11 out of his 73 chapters to it. Prayer is addressed primarily as corporate in nature. It is spread over the day and thus enwraps all of life. It sanctifies time. It consists in recognizing and practicing what we might call the presence of God, namely “that a person keep the fear of God before his eyes and beware of ever forgetting it.” (ch 7)

While Benedict gives most of his attention to corporate prayer, private prayer is also encouraged. Prayer of all types must be simple. “It is not in saying a great deal that we shall be heard,” he writes, citing Matt 6.7. Rather, prayer must proceed from a pure heart, with deep repentance and devotion. (ch 20) Even so, there may be times when a monk is drawn to extended prayer by “an inspiration of divine grace,” and the oratory – the place of prayer – must be kept open, orderly and quiet at all times to permit individual prayer. (ch 52) It is telling that Benedict himself was known to engage in private prayer often.

Study. Benedict, no doubt due to his own experience, does not give great attention to the importance of study. He is not founding a community of scholars. And yet, consistent with his attention to the whole person, he makes a place – in fact several places – for this aspect of the common life. He says that no meal should pass without reading. (ch 38; this procedure is often called the *lectio divina*) And this reading requires orderly attention: it is not to be haphazard, but characterized by prayer and attended with a short “rite” as it begins. While the brothers should rotate in carrying out this work, the readers should be able to do their job intelligently and with understanding in order to “edify their hearers.”

In the evening, Benedict directed that the monks have more time for reading. He specifically suggests readings from John Cassian’s *Conferences*, or from a collection of the teachings, known as *Lives of the Fathers*, based on the desert monks. (ch 42) He also indicates that Scripture is a good source for this reading, though he cautions against the heavy history of the “Heptateuch” or the “Kings” at this hour.

At the end of the Rule, Benedict suggests that there will be those who “hasten on to perfection” in the spiritual life. And here he directs them to the reading of the “Old and New Testaments,” to the writings of the “Catholic Fathers,” and again to *the Conferences* and *the Institutes* of Cassian, *the Rule* of Basil the Great and to the Desert Fathers.

Simplicity. Benedict requires that the “family” live together without distinctions and without possessing property individually. Yet, he did not see any particular virtue in poverty for its own sake. (Benedictines do not take a vow of poverty!) This had two consequences: first, every monk was to have the necessities of life; and second, the community as a whole could possess (or come to possess) property. They would not, as a community, rely on charity, but on self-sufficiency. Great care was to be taken in the administration and preservation of that which belonged to the community as a whole, and property thus acquired would be used to the benefit of those in need. Individual monks would be poor, but the community was to be enabled to give alms, not compelled to seek them.¹²

Another aspect of simplicity is found in the general tenor of Benedict’s Rule: he is wary of arduous and austere practices. In chapter 64, which has to do with how the Abbot is “constituted” (or brought into office), he gives important advice on the work the Abbot is supposed to do. He must be “discreet” and “moderate.” He must not over burden the brothers. Benedict cites the story of Jacob who said, “If I cause my flocks to be overdriven, they will all die in one day.”¹³ The Abbot should “study rather to be loved than to be feared.” He is to remember his own frailties and to deal with others with prudence: “let him so temper all things that the strong may have something to strive after, and the weak may not fall back in dismay.” It is a humane simplicity that Benedict pursues.

Locality. The Rule is not intended to govern an Order as a whole, but a local community. The abbot is to be elected by the local community by a free election involving all the monks. The abbot is the superior and bears certain powerful responsibilities. But his power is subject to accountability to God, must take account of the counsel of the community as a whole, is to be guided by a concern for wisdom, and is grounded in the example of Christ whose representative the abbot is. The abbot was supposed to embody the principles of the Sermon on the Mount.

An illustration of this notion of locality has to do with prayer. Benedict’s directions concerning prayer are not set out as mandatory, but out of concern for good order. He specifically permits the Abbot to construct his own arrangements in such a way as to meet the needs of the local community. (ch 18)

Humility. “Whether slaves or free, we are all one in Christ,” is the watchword of Benedict.¹⁴ Humility is a large subject for Benedict. It is a dynamic quality that pervades the life of the community. The essence of humility is to put God, not the self, at the center of the monk’s life.

Benedict often speaks of “humility in obedience.” The humility he looks for and that is to be modeled in his community is thus not a primarily psychological trait or virtue, but a practice. This comes to

¹² Catholic Encyclopedia

¹³ The passage is found in Gen 33.13.

¹⁴ He cites Gal 3.28.

expression in, e.g., the way one carries out even distasteful or distracting requests; or the way one treats the younger members of the community, or the sick. The sick, indeed, are to be “served as if they were Christ in person.” (ch 36)

Hospitality. We also see the same emphasis when it comes to dealing with visitors to the monastery. Benedict cites the words of Christ in Matt 25.35: “I came as guest and you received me.” The Abbot should suspend his normal duties to receive guest and to treat them with respect and reverence. This was especially true in the case of the poor and pilgrims. A separate kitchen should be set up so that the feeding and attention to the guests might not distract the monks.

Love and Obedience. It is interesting to note that while Benedict knew and was manifestly influenced by the rules of Basil and Augustine, whereas love plays a significant and foundational role in those writers, the same is not true for Benedict. This is not to say that love is absent. Indeed, in ch 4, Benedict begins his long list of the characteristic of the Christian life on the dominical commands to love God and love one’s neighbor. And his vision of the mature Christian – the true life – is one where the individual comes to know and live in the expansive, freeing, fulfilling gift of God’s love. But whereas for Basil or for Augustine, love for God was the motivating factor that leads one to deeper obedience and perfection, in Benedict it is the reverse: it is obedience that leads one from or out of the self and that brings about a capacity, under God’s grace, to love God and one’s neighbor completely.

Conclusion

Benedict’s *Rule* helped to shape Christianity in the West in many ways. The monastic life, under the impact of Benedict’s *Rule*, “came to play an integral, even dominant part in the European society of the Middle Ages.”¹⁵ This is so because the monasteries organized under his *Rule* became centers both of scholarship and of productivity. Even though Benedict in a sense “played down” the importance of scholarship *per se*, his emphasis on study exerted its own influence. His communities came to play an immense role in acquiring books (libraries) and disseminating knowledge (schools). Then, too, the monasteries became centers of labor production: because they could own and hold property, and were so efficient in the management of property, they rapidly became centers of economic prosperity.¹⁶ And this latter development had another consequence: even though Benedict did not emphasize the notion of mission, as his communities expanded they pushed steadily into frontier territories and were instruments of the evangelization of much of northern Europe.¹⁷ By way of illustration, we have only to mention the mission inaugurated by Gregory the Great (597) to England under the leadership of Augustine of Canterbury, both of whom were Benedictines. The first bishops of Rochester, London and York were Benedictines. The mission work of Boniface (Winfrid), an English Benedictine, to northern Europe in 716 had a profound and long-lasting effect on European culture, as did the works of Ansgar, Wilfrid, and Willibrord. In addition to establishing abbeys and monasteries and converting persons to

¹⁵ (White, 2008)

¹⁶ (Johnson, 1976)

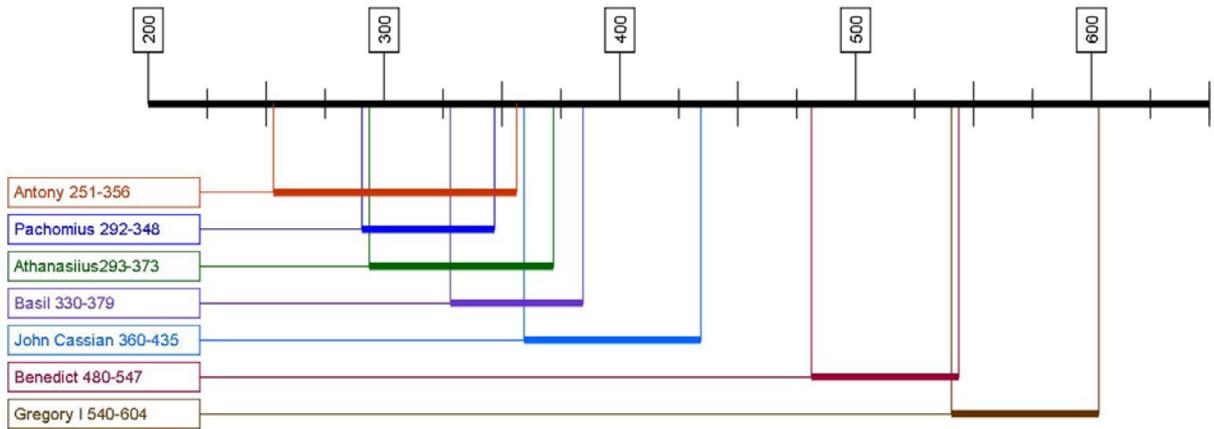
¹⁷ (Tredget D. O., 2005)

the Christian faith, it was the Benedictines who also established cities, schools and universities, some of which still exist and are centers of culture.

But perhaps the most important contribution Benedict made was at the spiritual level. He opened the door to a vital and engaging Christian faith to the simplest, the youngest, and the most common of people. His vision of a whole and wholesome life was easily communicated and profoundly influential. His tripod of work, study and prayer translated into everyday life and in turn ennobled everyday life in a remarkable way.

For English Christianity, including our own Episcopalian expression here in North America, Benedictine spirituality came to complete expression in *the Book of Common Prayer*. It is so central and significant that it frames our spiritual outlook without ever drawing attention to itself: the Rule of Benedict becomes in many ways the lens through which we look at the Christian life and which enables us to see and live it with clear sight.

MONASTICISM TIMELINE



RESOURCES:

[The Rule of St. Benedict](#)

[The Life of Antony \(Athanasius\)](#)

[The Rule of Pachomius](#)

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