

The Man Behind Modern Monasticism

We're going to go back about 1500 years here from Belmont Abbey to South Central Italy and St. Benedict. Sources for St. Benedict are basically two. One is his Rule which, although it's an anonymous document, that is, it doesn't have a signature on it, is universally attributed to St. Benedict who was born in Norcia in South-Central Italy. The other is A Life of St. Benedict attributed to Pope Gregory the Great who was Pope about 60 years after St. Benedict's death and tells the story of his life.

So let's take his life first a little bit. He was born, as I said, in the Roman city of Norcia around the year 480. He was sent by his parents to Rome to study and was somewhat turned off by the lifestyle of his fellow students and left there initially with his servant. He had a nurse with him that he'd grown up with and ended up in a cave at Subiaco about 40 miles Northeast of Rome. There, living as a hermit for a period of time, sort of growing in prayer and seeking God. Eventually, he founded a series of monasteries there at Subiaco, with himself sort of as the leader. And from Subiaco, he then went about 60 miles, probably, South of Rome to his final monastery at Monte Cassino, which perhaps many of you have heard about from World War II fame, right on the main road from Naples to Rome. There he built his monastery, and it was there, likewise, that he finished his Rule. So the trajectory of the life of St. Benedict from Norcia to Rome to Subiaco to Monte Cassino gives us the sort of itinerary of his life.

The Life itself is not a biography in any modern sense. It's not trying to give us a day-to-day life of St. Benedict or his achievements. And so it's really presenting Benedict as the man of God. In other words, St. Gregory the Great wrote it at a difficult time in the history of the Italian Peninsula, wars, famines, people actually thinking maybe the end of the world was approaching. And he wanted to show that just as in the Bible, God's Providence was shown through the prophets and the apostles. So he has particularly one instance in the life of St. Benedict, a series of miracles, all based on stories from the Old Testament and the New Testament, to show that God's Providence is working through St. Benedict the same as it has in the stories in the Bible. That God hasn't somehow left after the Bible was finished. So that gives us a little bit of the life of Benedict and his history.

More important for us, of course, is his Rule, which is a relatively short book of 73 chapters plus a prologue. Much of it is taken from an earlier source as what Benedict was concerned with was passing on a tradition that he had received. Monastic life emerges in Christianity, in about the mid-second century into the third century, so the 150s-200s or so and to the 300s, in the early years of the church. We're not quite sure why monasticism evolved in Christianity, what the impetus was, but it was probably as Christianity grew more prevalent, as it became socially acceptable and, in fact, advantageous to be Christian; the emperors became Christian, that the sort of level of religious commitment tended to decline. And you had groups of men and women who were a little bit more focused on a more rigorous life of Christianity and living that out according to the gospel and separating themselves out from the larger Christian community to some extent, either living singly as an eremitical or hermit life or in the type of life St Benedict's going to follow, which is that of groups of men or women living together in community. So he's drawing on an earlier tradition of those who went before him to set up one way of living the gospel in this monastic way of life.



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For St. Benedict, as for all of the early monastic founders, the real rule of life is the Bible. And at the very end of his Rule, chapter 73, where he calls his Rule just a “little rule for beginners,” he invites us to consider the early Christian doctors and teachers, and particularly to consider them as pointing to what he calls the truest norm for life, which is the writings of the Old and New Testament.

So he sets up this rule of trying to establish a culture, a way of life that's supportive of seeking God. His criterion for people who wish to enter the monastery are very simple. He says, “does the man truly seek God?” That is the only real reason for entering a monastery or for staying in one. And he says the way you determine that is whether the person is eager for the community prayer, which he calls the work of God and the monastic life, for obedience, and for the trials that come from community living and trying to grow in charity. With that in place, he gives a structured and ordered life which opens space in the life of those who follow that lifestyle.

One space is the Liturgy of the Hours, where the community meets several times a day at set times, morning through the evening, to pray. Basically, it's a Bible-based prayer service of the Psalms: readings, hymns, and listening. Listening to the scriptures as they are recited in the community prayer. In addition to that community prayer, there's also each day, particularly today, the celebration of the Eucharist each day. But also for the individual monks, what St. Benedict calls *Lectio Divina*, that is a prayerful, meditative, reflective reading every day on the Bible. And he expects us to take a decent-sized chunk of time to do that. The idea being that again, we're to listen. His Rule begins, "Listen, my son, to the precepts of the master and incline the ear of your heart." So this process of *Lectio Divina* is by going continually back to what in faith we accept as the divinely inspired scriptures and seeing how God has acted with God's people through history. It sensitizes us or tunes us as it were to recognizing that same providential care in our lives and the life of our community, and in the life of the world as it unfolds so that we can distinguish between the promptings of the Holy Spirit and promptings of perhaps other spirits not so holy masquerading as the Holy Spirit, and thus trying to lead us astray. And so that constant meditative reading, to read, to reflect what does this passage mean for me personally, what am I going to do about it? And then simply to rest a bit in confidence in God's care, God's love, and that God will care for me. That's really the essentials of a monastic life.

He also realizes that we have to work and earn our living. And so he sets times for this community prayer for *Lectio Divina*, for this meditative reading of the Bible, and for the monks to be engaged in some type of meaningful labor. As talents free given, or talents given by God, and using them brings a certain sense of fulfillment that accomplishes good things. That's a good thing in itself.

The other way he tries to open space in the life of the monastics is that we give up personal ownerships. So we're not owned by what we own. He has two chapters in his Rule that are important, one on the giving up of personal ownership of things so that we are detached from things that we oftentimes used either to enhance our own self-esteem or to provide an illusion of control or security. The other one is then the distribution of the goods of the monastery, according to needs. Not according to the wants, but to needs. And he recognizes that



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individuals, the individual monks, will have different levels of needs. So it's not sort of a one size fits everyone but is to discern what are the legitimate needs of each individual and to supply for those. But the fact that we share our work and our labor in the monastery also opens space for us for that prayer during the day. We profess celibate chastity; we don't marry, have a family. That opens space then in our lives for essentially the work of the monks is to pray. So these ways of living in a community, in a space, also opens interior space for us to accomplish but ultimately, in Christian faith, we think is the goal of human life that is to come to union with God in heaven. If that is the goal of life, then it gives the right ordering for all the other good things in life, allows us to use them properly and well and enjoy them as they need to be enjoyed without ever making them ultimate or becoming perhaps temptations, as I said for power and control or status as such.

So it's an ordered life focused on prayer and work and as has endured 1500 years. St. Benedict was born, as I said, around 480, died around the year 545-547. And since that time, there hasn't been a day actually, when there haven't been communities of Benedictine men and women using St. Benedict's rule as a fundamental charter or constitution for our daily life, an ordered life devoted to prayer and work. That's a pretty healthy track record down to the present.

So every day today at Belmont Abbey, we read an excerpt from the Rule right before our supper is when we do it here. So we can listen to that and see how a document which was written in the sixth century and has endured through a variety of political, religious, economic, and social conditions as a living document every day, needs to be adapted and lived authentically in the conditions of North America in the 21st century. And to continue that process so we can pass it on to the next generation that comes after us. And somehow, if the rule has lasted that long, there's something good there. There's something that St. Benedict realized about community life.

There are two things that St. Gregory the Great perhaps highlights when he's talking about the Rule St. Benedict wrote. One is that it's fairly moderate. It doesn't take enormous and heroic feats of asceticism to live this. It's at a level where any ordinary person who is serious about leading a good life and is willing to take the normal discipline that anyone needs to lead a good life in any walk of life and is willing to develop that can live this. He also gives a lot of discretion to the individual abbot. He realized that this rule would be lived in different places and perhaps even different times, although we don't know if he ever foresaw 1500 years into the future. But he realized it would be lived in different circumstances and he allows the abbot to adapt it as is needed. And so it has been adapted in all those varying circumstances through 1500 years to be still a life-giving way of life today. It's what, obviously, St. Benedict's Rule is the foundation of our life here in the monastery at Belmont Abbey.

It also really impacts Belmont Abbey College, and the education offered there. And through that, then the students who go out into living a good life, because ultimately, education, if it's in a Benedictine school, can't just be what do I need to know for a good professional career? That's important because remember St. Benedict values work and using the talents that we have in a



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good way for our fulfillment, to provide for our needs, but he also adds in there to have something over to share with others.

So the professional development's important. More importantly, is how do I live a good human life? And what does that mean? Because we only get one shot at it. And so a Benedictine school is going to say that we are really built to know what's true, and that there is a truth to be found about life, much of it we find from our investigation or the world around us in all the different aspects of study. They all have some portion of truth to teach us about life, and it's important that we know those. But ultimately, the other way that we know about life is from a commitment of faith. That's the only way we know the really important things of life, that is, is there a real meaning to this? Is there any purpose to it, or is it some random accident? Ways that faith comes out is how do I know this is the right person to marry? We can all have our criteria for Mr. Right, or Miss Right or whatever, but ultimately that commitment is a leap of faith that this person is the right person and that person will never intentionally do anything to harm me, and so I can entrust my life to that person. That's an act of faith, a powerful one.

And so we think that truths that we can get through our study through the development of our mind, through our reason, are an important part of the picture. The other is, remember, Benedictine monasticism is a Christian way of living. The gospel that God has created us in his image and likeness to live with him, ultimately, to live with God. Therefore there is a purpose of life, and there are real goods and bads in life that come from the order of things and the way they actually exist. It doesn't mean the order is always easy to discern, that can be very difficult to know what is the truth, but we think one it's worth the effort, and it can be known. And from that, then gives us the directions and the indications of what is good. And what is true is good and real and beautiful and desirable. And those are the things that ultimately lead to a happy life.

And so St. Benedict's Rule has a structured way of life that's based on really betting your life that the gospel is true, and that gives you then a trajectory and a direction through life. It also, St. Benedict realizes that we need discipline. Left to ourselves, we tend to sort of get off track or easily distracted. So it's a disciplined life. I mentioned the disciplines of giving up ownership, of simplicity of life, of work, of a discipline for prayer, of a discipline for chastity. All these things are necessary for a structured, happy, and ordered life. It's an ordered and structured existence. The idea being that we use our talents best when it's not simply random chaos but when there is a certain structure and order to our life. The real motto of St. Benedict in life is the Latin word pax or peace.

One of our students here, when we were talking about life according to the Rule of St. Benedict, asked a good question. She said, "Why would anybody live this life?" And the answer I gave was because it brings peace. And that's what I think everyone is looking for. It brings peace. It encourages us to listen, not just with our ears. Remember, St. Benedict said, "Incline the ear of your heart." What's truly important in life? What do the various challenges and events of life tell us? What do we need to take out from them that's true? How do we guide our life consistently towards the goal? All of these things are important today, and if... St. Augustine talked about



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peace as a tranquility of order. That if things are ordered in their right priority, according to that ultimate goal of eternal life, then as I said, we can enjoy them, we can appreciate them, and we never put more value on them than they can bear. And therefore, that gives us a sense of peace and stability in one's life to continue on this path towards heaven ultimately or towards, if you want to put it in earthly terms, a good and productive, and worthwhile human life.

So that's where I think the value and the witness of Benedictine monastic life is important today. The monastery, by its very presence at least, raises the question, are these men simply sort of quaint and harmless and nice to have around? Or why would they choose to do this with their lives? Are they onto something that's important for everybody, each in his or her own way, to discover and to live in the many in different callings and walks of human life. So that's a brief sort of St. Benedict and his life, the Rule and what it tries to do. And the fact that it's been lived without a break since the sixth century, down to the 21st century.

You may have heard too about the medal of St. Benedict, the Jubilee medal. It's called the Jubilee medal because it was struck to honor the 1400th anniversary of St. Benedict's birth in 1880 at the Abbey of... St. Benedict's Abbey in Monte Cassino, in Italy. It's probably the most popular, iconic representation of St. Benedict.

On the one side, it has St. Benedict in the center with the various letters around the side, which are Latin phrases actually. Then on the other side, a cross with various letters there, each having a meaning. On the cross, it simply has the words for the Latin, "Cross of our Holy Father Benedict." Around the edge, it's really an exorcism in a sense drawing back to episodes in the life of St. Benedict. When it says, "Get behind me, Satan, never persuade me to evil things. The cup you prefer is evil. Drink yourself your own poison." And that goes back to an episode in St. Benedict's life, where early on, when he was still a hermit, monks had asked him at a monastery to be their abbot. And he demurred on that; he said, "I would be too strict for you, the way of life I think we ought to live you don't want to live." But they insisted, so he came to be their Abbot, and indeed he was too harsh for them. So what does one do? Well, they decided they would poison him. So they offered him a cup of poisoned wine, according to the story. And when he returned thanks for it and may the blessing over it the cup shattered, and he realized that it was poisoned and he left that community prudently. But also, St. Gregory remarks that he didn't give way to anger and rage, but more to disappointment and sadness. And this was the last sort of challenge in his life to become a virtuous person who has the powers of his life, and life forces integrated so that he can follow the course of life he believes he ought to follow and doesn't get pulled off course by disorderly desires, the dragging us here and there. So the St. Benedict's medal has been seen to have, with its proper blessing, a certain value for exorcism or keeping away the forces and the powers of evil.

You will see also it has the word pax across the top of it, which is said, is the real motto of Benedictine life. It's a life which gives a peace, a serenity, a serenity which comes from that contemplation of God's provident care and a trust in that. A peace that comes from simplifying one's life so that you're really focused on the essentials. A peace that comes from St. Benedict's advice to us, he says, "keep death daily before your eyes," not as something terrifying, not as



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something that's sad but something that gives... as I said, the right value and understanding to life, because it's ultimately the reality that we're going to die, that calls into question the meaning of our life. As a Christian faith tradition way of living, we believe that life, doesn't end with death, but that that reality is something that always helps us to stay focused on the eternal life which is to come, which is, I've said already a couple of times then gives the real value and purpose and direction to this life.

So having endured for 1500 years, I would think that St. Benedict's Rule, the life according to that Rule and the persons and the institutions that it has developed over this time and continues to do, has a pretty good track record of continuing to be a certain leaven in the communities where Benedictine monasteries are found as both a reminder of there's a purpose and meaning to our life which extends beyond the boundaries of this world. That there's something bigger than us, and the value of an ordered life is directed towards knowing and living what's true.

