

PART ONE

# St. Benedict and Benedictine Spirituality



## What is Benedictine Spirituality?

A WOMAN WHO ONCE INQUIRED ABOUT BECOMING AN OBLATE WAS TOLD THAT THIS MEANT THE OFFERING OF ONE'S SELF. "I'd rather offer myself to Christ," she told me, "than to St. Benedict." She was right. Benedict admonishes all of us who follow his rule to offer ourselves to Christ. In the Prologue, we are encouraged "to do battle for the true King, Christ the Lord" (Pro.:3). At the end of the Rule, he says, "Let [us] prefer nothing whatever to Christ, and may he bring us all together to everlasting life" (72:11-12).

The entire Rule of St. Benedict is centered on Christ and the Christian life. That's why everyone—not just monks and nuns—can benefit from following it. Benedict added nothing new to Christian doctrine. He preached gospel values applied in an orderly fashion to everyday life. His way of living is similar to that of the early Christians who are described in the Acts of the Apostles. They devoted themselves to holding all things in common, breaking bread together, and praising the Lord. Benedict is focused on Christ in prayer, work, and in familial relationships. Seek Christ, Benedict insists, but he realizes that you don't have to go very far to find Him. His image is reflected in ourselves and in everyone else.

St. Gregory the Great tells of a hermit named Martin whose foot was bound by a chain fastened to a rock. When Benedict heard of this, he sent one of his monks to tell Martin that he should be bound to Christ instead of a chain of iron.

Christ is the chain that binds us, and we are all bound to one another. We live our common calling in community, in family. Benedictine spirituality is not just “Jesus and me.” It's the two of us and everybody else in whom Jesus is present—the people with whom I live and work, the people to whom I'm related by blood, and those for whom I have a responsibility.

The stranger, the newcomer—welcome them also as Christ, Benedict says. Benedict teaches all of us how to live

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together, how to get along with each other regardless of our differences. Benedict calls his community a school of the Lord's service. He wants us to learn from one another. He also refers to his community as a workshop where we use the tools of good works. These are the Ten Commandments and the teachings of Jesus. The asceticism under which we live is "nothing harsh, nothing burdensome" (Pro.:46). Although burdens may enter our lives, we aren't to go looking for them, or to create them for ourselves. Moderation and balance, even in the saving of our souls, constitute the ascetical life prescribed by Benedict. But if we do find this life difficult in the beginning, he guarantees this in the Prologue of the Rule: "as we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God's commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love" (Pro.:49). The Rule helps us to avoid certain things we might stumble over while on our way through life.

Some ascetics before Benedict's time appear to us now as having been rather extreme in their practices. Martin, the hermit whom Benedict corrected, was clinging to an outdated and excessive form of eremitical asceticism. He was following in the tradition of chain wearers like St. Sabinas who was so weighted down that he had to walk on all fours. Martin, of course, couldn't walk far from the rock to which his foot was attached. Another desert monk, instead of wearing chains, bound himself with the root of an

oak tree. Alcoholics Anonymous would call that “looking for an easier, softer way.” There were also browsers who went around the desert searching for patches of grass to eat, and statics who stood perfectly still for days at a time, and even slept while upright. The stylites perched in trees or built towers on which to sit—far removed from society. Perhaps the most famous of them was Symeon, who remained on top of his thirty-foot column near Antioch for more than three decades. Benedict lived as a hermit for three years, but he abandoned this life style for the communal living. However, he did not embrace any established rule that had been written specifically for monks who lived in community.

Scholars now believe that Benedict, in writing his famous rule, adapted an earlier text called *The Rule of the Master*, written near Rome at the end of the fifth century. The Master portrays himself as a grouch. He is everything Benedict says an abbot should not be. The Master’s Rule is indeed harsh and burdensome. The crotchety old abbot does not have much confidence in his monks, and is constantly suspicious of them. If the brothers say they are sick and unable to get out of bed and work, the Master advises that they be given “only liquids and eggs or warm water, which the really sick can hardly get down, so that if they are pretending hunger, at least this will force them to get up” (RM 69:2-3). In contrast, Benedict says the sick are to be treated as Christ would be treated. Although monks should

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not make unnecessary demands on their caregivers, Benedict does not presume that any monk will fake poor health. The Rule of the Master makes the monk who has aches and pains, but no fever, go to church at the scheduled times. “And if he cannot stand, let him chant the psalms lying on a mat. . . . But let the brother standing next to him keep an eye of him so he does not go to sleep” (RM 69:10-11).

Benedict cut out large sections of the Master’s Rule and eliminated other parts all together. He tempered his monastic rule with more moderate and compassionate admonitions. His monks obeyed out of love rather than for fear of a wrathful master. Benedict is obviously more understanding and forgiving of his monks’ imperfections than the Master is of his. Benedict clearly states in the last chapter of his rule that it has been written to show that we have achieved “some degree of virtue.” It is a rule for “beginners” (73:1), he says.

Benedict’s abbot listens to the community and says even the junior monks must attend community or chapter meetings because “the Lord often reveals what is better to the younger.” Benedict wants to hear from everyone. He is no doubt willing also to listen to the voices of those who disagree with him. The Master will hear only from those whom he designates to speak.

Because the Rule of St. Benedict is a sixth-century document, some of its legislation is no longer applicable. Benedict himself realized that not everything from the past

could be applied in his time. The matter of drinking wine is often offered as an example. “We read that monks should not drink wine at all, but since the monks of our day cannot be convinced of this, let us at least agree to drink moderately, and not to the point of excess” (40:6). Benedict says it’s all right to bend rules. He bent the Master’s Rule all out of shape, and allowed for making exceptions to his own rules.

I remind the oblates that it’s much easier being a disciple of Benedict than being guided by the Rule of the Master. “Wouldn’t you rather be an oblate of St. Benedict instead of an oblate of the Master?” I ask them. Benedict has designed his rule for Christian living so that both the strong and the weak may live side by side. Following the Rule of Benedict is not like taking on a religion separate from the one to which a person already belongs. Oblates aren’t re-baptized. Benedict, in his Prologue, refers to us as having been counted as children of God now, and he speaks, of “his good gifts which are [already] in us” (Pro.:6).

Following the Rule as an Oblate of St. Benedict is a method of seeking God through what is familiar and by rather ordinary means. John McQuiston II, a lawyer and lay leader in his Episcopal parish, has paraphrased the Rule of St. Benedict in a little book called *Always We Begin Again*. In his introduction, he writes: “The Rule teaches that if we take control of our lives, if we are intentional and careful in how we spend the hours of each irreplaceable day, if we discipline ourselves to live in a balanced and thankful way,



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we will create from our experiences, whatever they may be, the best possible life. Surely this knowledge is as invaluable now as it was in the sixth century.”

The Benedictine manner is ordinary. Some people are disappointed when they discover monks and nuns are common, ordinary people. This is why it is easy to identify with us and with what St. Benedict teaches us. We all belong to a family of one sort or another. We’re taught how to live in this family, loving and supporting one another, even those of us who are most difficult to love and support. We learn patience from St. Benedict. We benefit from the patience of a saint.

### A Life of Prayer

Benedict encourages good zeal but advises against becoming zealots. Moderation should be our aim in everything—from the amount of food and drink we consume to the number of psalms we pray. “Prayer should therefore be short and pure, unless perhaps it is prolonged under the inspiration of divine grace.” He is speaking of private prayer here. “In community, however, prayer should always be brief; and when the superior gives the signal, all should rise together” (20:4-5).

Again Benedict considers the times in which he is living. After providing a structure for communal prayer, he says that a community that is dissatisfied with this arrangement may do it some other way, providing that the whole Psalter

is prayed each week. Tradition informs us that earlier monks used to pray all 150 psalms in a single day. Benedict says, “Let us hope that we, lukewarm as we are, can achieve it in a whole week” (18:25).

Indeed, nothing should come before the Work of God, Benedict insists. The Work of God (*Opus Dei*) is Benedictine prayer. It has its origins in primitive Christianity. Paul urged the Colossians to encourage each other by singing psalms, hymns, and canticles. The first Christians, converts from Judaism, retained the prayers of their ancestors. Before the construction of public churches was allowed, Christians gathered during the night and day in private places to pray the psalms. The urban Christians prayed the psalms. So did the ascetics in the desert and in the early cenobitical monastics. Benedict considered the psalms so necessary that he encouraged his followers to memorize them in their free time. Monks traveling or working in the fields, when the hour for prayer arrived, had to stop and attend to the psalms. Although an oblate usually prays the psalms privately, he or she is united in spirit when the monastic community of one’s affiliation is praying.

An elderly woman whom I’d just invested in the oblates told me that she wasn’t going to say those prayers in the little book I’d given her. Instead she was going to pray several rosaries throughout the day. I told her the little book contained morning and evening prayer from the Divine Office. I tried selling her on the book because it

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featured the psalms. I emphasized, “These are the prayers Jesus said. He learned them in His childhood and prayed them in the temple and at home.” That didn’t matter to her, and I didn’t argue the point. After all, she was the abbot’s mother. Of course I could have told her St. Benedict never prayed the rosary. It had not come into use during his lifetime.

But do the psalms really have any relevance for Christians? Sister Irene Nowell answers that question in *Work of God: Benedictine Prayer*, a breviary and devotional book especially for oblates. “The fact that they are still kept by Jews and Christians alike is testimony to our common belief that God still speaks to us through these prayers. In the psalms there is a powerful joining of God’s words to us and our words to God. We read them as God’s word to us; we take the gift of that word, fill it with our own life’s experience, and return it to God.”

Not all the psalms are nice. Instead of praising God, some are expressions of anger. It seems difficult to pray when surrounded by so much violence and vindictiveness. How can a Christian be comfortable asking God to “blot out” someone? Shouldn’t we concentrate on prayers of thanksgiving and make intercessions that are not so vituperative? Sister Irene suggests praying these psalms as “an acknowledgment that, left to ourselves, we would lash out against those who hurt us. Therefore we bring our anger and our frustration to God. We trust God to restore goodness to our

lives because we know that we cannot.” It’s also been suggested that we direct the cursing psalms towards the devil and his works. Once when we revised our Divine Office, the cursing psalms were removed. Abbot Alan made the liturgical committee put them back in. All of human experience is expressed in the psalms. On some days it is likely that even the cursing psalms can be prayed with a certain amount of satisfaction.

Father Meinrad, who taught the Psalms to my novitiate class forty-five years ago, told us, “Make them your own.” A recently invested oblate expressed to me her appreciation for the psalms. “One of the neatest things is praying,” she said. “I’ve never disciplined myself to pray regularly before, and the first few weeks I was really rigid about praying the psalms. I started singing them, reading them out loud, standing, sitting, kneeling—just trying different ways. The best is sitting and slowly reading out loud, trying to feel the ideas and images with all my senses.”

The Divine Office, the primary work of Benedictines, was developed over the centuries, but has been modified in more recent years. Besides the psalms, each of the offices has a short Scripture reading. Vigils or the office of readings has a longer selection from Scripture and a non-Scriptural reading. Monastic men and women once prayed eight offices daily, beginning very early in the morning with vigils or matins. Some monasteries still follow this schedule. Many other houses depend on morning prayer, noon

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prayer, vespers, and compline only. The Canticle of Zechariah is sung or recited at morning prayer and the Canticle of Mary at evening prayer. Here in my community, we have an office of readings instead of compline.

Oblates are encouraged (but not morally bound) to pray morning and evening prayer. Some oblates, though, pray more than these two offices of the Liturgy of the Hours.

One time I was the guest of a retired oblate couple who had the custom of eating supper in their pajamas and bathrobes. After the meal, they watched television until bedtime. But before turning on the TV, we prayed evening prayer. “Wouldn’t you like to get into your pajamas?” the wife asked me. I presumed she was joking. Although when I was a student in a Benedictine college for men, we prayed compline, the night prayer, in the dormitory corridor, and some of the guys came in their pajamas, I told the oblates I’d rather not put on my pajamas.

## Holy Reading

Besides praying the Divine Office, oblates are encouraged to follow the monastic practice of holy reading (*lectio divina*). Reading was so important for St. Benedict that he had one or two seniors go through the monastery at the scheduled times during the week to make sure the monks were doing their reading. “On Sundays all are to be engaged in reading except those who have been assigned various duties” (48:22). I wonder what he’d say about

monks watching the Sunday afternoon basketball games as they do nowadays in my monastery.

In the last chapter of the Rule, Benedict asks, “What page, what passage of the inspired books of the Old and New Testaments is not the truest of guides for human life?” (73:3). In the Prologue he says we will make our journey through life guided by the gospel.

We read the Bible for spiritual enrichment. The monastic method has been likened to a cow chewing the cud. The reader is expected to ruminate, chew over what has appeared in the text, and then find meaning or application for oneself. In Benedict’s day, the monk devoted three hours to reading the Bible. Of the monks sent to check on the brethren during the times of *lectio divina*, Benedict says, “Their duty is to see that no brother is so apathetic as to waste time or engage in idle talk to the neglect of his reading, and so not only harm himself but also distract others” (48:18). Such a monk should be corrected twice and then punished if he doesn’t reform. We had an old monk who was given an overstuffed chair for his room. “It’s so comfortable,” he told me, “that I have no trouble falling asleep during *lectio*.”

Most modern Benedictine monks and nuns, because of the kinds of work to which their communities are committed, cannot afford to sit down with their Bibles for the long stretches of time provided by the Rule. Nor are there many oblates who spend three hours every day reading the Bible.

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*Lectio divina*, nevertheless, is a custom that should be cherished, even if it means taking a Bible break of a few minutes during the day. Wanda, who used to run the donut shop in the little town near our monastery, could often be found reading her Bible when business was slack. She was doing *lectio*.

Reading the Bible and praying the psalms remain important aspects of Benedictine spirituality. Christians of various traditions can appreciate this. Although we may differ in other ways, the Bible and psalms are basic for all of us.

### A Life of Work

St. Benedict, in his time, realized that monks could not spend the greater part of the day in the church praying the psalms. Nor could they reflect upon Scripture all day. They had to work sometime. There had to be balance in their lives. In chapter 48 on work he says, “Therefore, the brothers should have specified periods for manual labor as well as for prayerful reading” (48:1).

I met someone who was thinking of returning to the religious order to which he’d once belonged, but his age was against him. He was a social worker who felt overburdened with work. I inquired if the job required him to do everything that he was doing. No, it didn’t, he said, but he thought he had become a workaholic. I suggested that he strive for balance in his life, something that St. Benedict insists upon. Since he was now too old to return to the

religious community of his youth, he might want to become an oblate of St. Benedict. It was obvious that he needed some order in his life and work—a rule by which to live.

Work for the first Benedictines was mostly the routine kinds of jobs people have in maintaining a household. The monks' work was confined to the monastery. Chapter 66 of the Rule indicates, "The monastery should, if possible, be so constructed that within it all necessities, such as water, mill and garden are contained, and the various crafts are practiced. Then there will be no need for the monks to roam outside, because this is not at all good for their souls" (66:6-7). Benedict says they should stay home and work.

Cooking, cleaning, repairing, gardening, and farming—this is the ordinary kind of work that is done in monasteries. Benedict calls our involvement with such work an expression of love. Whenever one of the monks tells me that I've prepared an especially good breakfast on a particular Tuesday, I reply that I did it out of love. Work should be done without grumbling, without sadness, and without being overburdened. Help should be given to all who need it. These are indeed fair employment practices!

Followers of Benedict's Rule, perhaps more than any other religious, place a high value on manual labor. A visitor once asked a confrere of mine the difference between this monastery and another that is better known than ours. "They're the scholars and we're the workers," replied the brother. However, once when I visited that other monastery,



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I found the retired abbot mowing the grass in the cemetery. Kathleen Norris says, “I have seen well-known Benedictine scholars scrubbing the pots and pans, abbots wiping tables.” Almost everyone does manual labor in a monastery.

Benedict and other monastic legislators believed that sufficient work was necessary in order to keep their subjects out of trouble. “Idleness is the enemy of the soul” (48:1), Benedict said. So even the infirm are given something to do that isn’t very taxing. Everyone who is able has a work assignment. On Sunday, Benedict stipulates that monks who can’t read or won’t read should be given some work to do. Yes, on a Sunday.

There were no slaves in the monastery. Nor were there any monastic serfs in Benedict’s time. His monks did not live off the labor of others. If they had to harvest their own crops, Benedict reminded them that they were really monks when they lived by the labor of their own hands. The artisans sold the work of their hands but were instructed not to become proud because of the income they were earning for the monastery.

Oblates cannot come away from the Rule of Benedict without having learned some lessons about work. Work for them has the same meaning that it has for men and women who live in monasteries. We are all encouraged to go about our work faithfully, cheerfully, and carefully. The tools and equipment used in our work should be treated with as much reverence as the sacred vessels used at the altar. An oblate

who is a college professor told me that St. Benedict pricked his conscience one day. He was sitting in his office when it occurred to him that he should clean up the mess. The words of chapter 32, “The Tools and Goods of the Monastery,” spoke to him: “Whoever fails to keep the things belonging to the monastery clean or treats them carelessly, should be reproved” (32:4).

Another oblate asked me what exactly he should be doing in order to be a really good Benedictine. My reply was that he needed to tend to his work and the saying of his prayers. That seemed too simple a reply, too ordinary. “All right, in Benedict’s terms what does this mean?” I told him it had a lot to do with attitude. “How do you look upon your work? Are you lazy? Do you put off doing things? Do you do the best you can? Do you look for ways to improve your work?

“Are you faithful to prayer? Or do you neglect it? Do you put aside your work when it’s time to pray? Are you praying when you should be working and working when you should be praying?” Ours is a balanced life of prayer and work.

## A Life of Relationships

St. Benedict teaches respect for every individual. There are no favorites. A monk may be advanced if he proves worthy, but never out of favoritism. Everyone is equal in the eyes of God. There is respect for diversity in personalities, for different people’s needs and weaknesses. Solitude is shown for the young, the elderly, the sick, and even the

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difficult. We should look after one another. Wouldn't it be grand if these values or practices could be effective in every family, every congregation, and every workplace? At both your day job and at home?

Bishop Creighton Robertson of the Episcopal Diocese of South Dakota, and an oblate of Blue Cloud Abbey, summed up Benedictine spirituality in his diocesan magazine:

The spiritual life for Benedict is not an errant idea. It is not something we do without thought, without concentration, without direction, without help.

Monastic spirituality is a spirituality of love. It is a way of life, not a series of ascetical exercises. It takes persistence. It takes dedication. It takes a listening commitment to the human community. It asks a great deal more of us than a series of pious formulas. It asks for an attitude of mind and a style of life and way of relating that takes me out of myself into the mind of God for humanity.

Benedict's way of life is designed for ordinary people. No heroics are required. Just balance, moderation, and a lot of humanity. The Rule is written for community, but it works only when the individuals within the community put it into practice. So much of the Rule concerns the individual's relationships. St. Benedict teaches us how to get along with one another. We go to God not in isolation from other people but with a community, a family. So much of the

HOW TO BE A MONASTIC *and Not Leave Your Day Job*

Rule is taken up with social relations. We learn by the good examples of others, and also from their bad examples. We see how far we have to go and how far we have come.