

An integrated life of work, study, prayer, and service with total dependence on God

Benedict's genius was the integration of work (both the worship of the community and daily work within and outside of the community), worship, study, personal prayer (usually *lectio divina*), and care of neighbor. This balance may be called "Ecology of the soul" and is lived within a rule of life (voluntarily chosen). Benedict's goal was that each monk and the community as a whole should make Christ's life tangible.

This goal is not only for monks who live in community. It is the manifestation of the life of every follower of Jesus. When monastic life is not romanticized or abused, it (like the life of Jesus) demonstrates what authentic human life is all about. A high school student once asked a monk of St. John's Abbey "As a monk where do you find Christ?" The monk replied, "We find the presence of Christ as we learn to live, pray, and work together. It is not always easy. It is not unlike your life. Where do you find Christ?"

A Russia Orthodox lay theologian, Paul Evdokimov, uses the phrase "interiorized monasticism" to refer to the discipline of the vocation of every Christian to incarnate the heart of monastic life in her or his life. This is why many men and women establish a relationship with traditional monastic communities. They become *oblates* and formally vow (after a period of formation) to make their lives as lay persons an *offering* by living a personal rule of life that is congruent with the intent of the sponsoring monastic community's rule of life. The best book Emily and I have seen to encourage lay persons to live an interiorized monastic life is Ronald Rolheiser's new book *Domestic Monastery*. (Brewster, Mass., Paraclete Press, 2019). It is a short and very down-to-earth invitation to discern ways our lives as individuals and families can be formed and manifest the fundamental values of monastic life, for the life of the world.

We can learn about practicing monastic values from Benedict, himself, in his chapter on the vocation of an abbot in a monastic community. The abbot is chosen because his life of prayer in the community makes Christ's presence tangible. His authority and teaching have their source in the life of Christ. Here is a reflection on the life and leadership of an abbot in a monastery.

The Leaven of Divine Justice

Saint Benedict affirms in the Rule of Benedict (RB 2:2) that the abbot is to hold the place of Christ in the monastic community. By example of life and wise teaching (RB 2:11-12) he is not to deviate in his teaching or leadership from the Lord's instructions (RB 2:4). The abbot's life and teaching is to manifest "the leaven of divine justice" and "be kneaded into the minds of the disciples" (RB 2:5).

The place of the abbot in the monastic community may be seen, in a liturgical context, as the presence of Christ in the Assembly during the Eucharist. In the same way that the bread and wine are transformed by grace and become Christ for us, so we and the persons around us become Christ, as abbots and abbesses, present within our human community.

The effect of the abbot's example (active presence) and teaching (knowledge and wisdom) is to become "the leaven of justice" and be "kneaded into" the lives of the members of the monastic community. Just as yeast gives life to the loaf, the abbot is to give life to the monastic community. The sign of this life is "justice", the life-giving goodness of God present in the human relationships

which form the monastic community. The authority of the abbot lies in the congruity of his life and teaching with “the leaven of divine justice”.

In the same way, the members of the Assembly receive Christ and become Christ, once again, at the Eucharist and are transformed into “the leaven of divine justice”. They are sent with divine authority to become “the leaven of divine justice” in the world and knead God’s active presence and transforming wisdom into society.

In the election of an abbot, Benedict emphasizes that **any** member of the monastic community, “even if he is the last in community rank” (RB 64:2) may be chosen. The fundamental characteristics of the person chosen must be example of life, wisdom (RB:2:11-12) and the desire to be “a worthy steward in charge of God’s house” (RB 64:5).

In the same manner, every member of the Eucharistic Assembly is worthy and chosen to become Christ for each other and the world. Each person in her or his way of life is challenged to assume responsibility to become Christ’s living presence in family, work place and society. Each person can become, in an appropriate and real sense, an abbot or abbess of his or her immediate community, not in a juridical sense, but with authority to be a steward of the mysteries of God in a complex world. Each person who becomes Christ is called to act, speak and care for the world in a manner congruent with God’s will. In other words, to be “a leaven of divine justice”.

(David G. R. Keller. March 2000)

What will help us become the presence of Christ in our daily lives?

Ecology of Soul: A Rationale for Living with a Rule of Life

The challenge

Twenty-first-century society makes it very difficult to experience anything but the surface of life. It has become so loud and fast moving that we are on the verge of missing life, itself. Our focus is on creating life and in the process it is easy to lose touch with who we are at the heart of our being. Modern life is not only secularized, it has become compartmentalized. We tend to live in one sector of life at a time. Competence and results often overshadow our passion for living. The noise, activities, and demands of modern life, even when they are worthwhile, can stifle the solitude and silence we need to listen to God and experience the dimension of life that lies deep within us. How can our lives become congruent with what God desires for human life? Jesus called this “the reign of God.” What will help us manifest God’s presence and compassionate power in the lives of other people and the world?

Jesus and the Torah

Jesus, as a devout First-Century Jew, lived according to the Torah. Yes, he interpreted it differently in certain ways than some of the Scribes and Pharisees, but he never intended to replace it. For all Jews, the Torah is a path that guides each person in their life with God. The Torah is not Law, it is “teaching.” It is a way to focus on what God desires for human life and to discover the sacredness and integrity of our lives. Torah shows us what living in the realm of God looks like.

A Rule of Life

Torah is a daily reminder of who we are and challenges us to live in a way that is congruent with that vision. A rule of life helps us align our daily living with the Torah. It enables a person to orient her or his life to the manifestation of the realm or reign of God. For Christians, a rule of life is a path that helps us make Christ tangible through the way we live.

Single-minded attention and devotion to God

There is a myriad of voices and activities competing for our attention every hour of every day. Modern technology is a great gift, but the growing pressure to be constantly available and connected to other persons and tasks can devour our time and attention. It is possible to live on the surface of life in such a way that we lose touch with the deep-structure of life. A rule of life will help us be good stewards of our life with God.

Living in the fullness of human being

We live in an age of information and constant stimulation. We are prompted by a materialistic culture to focus on things that bring enjoyment, leading to “happiness.” But information, entertainment, and mental activity hide the depth of what it means to be a human being. Our minds can kidnap our creativity. The desire for “progress”, even in spiritual formation, can place the rest of our life in solitary confinement. It will disappear as if it never existed. Yet, we will sense a longing for what our soul knows is real. Jesus said, “I have come that you may have life, and have life in abundance.”

Balanced living

The development of “balanced living” refers to a lifestyle in which there is integration and harmony between all dimensions of a person’s life: body, mind, and spirit. Contemporary lifestyles tend to be seriously out-of-balance. This causes a lack of integration and congruity between the physical, social, and psychological dynamics of human life and an almost total neglect of the spiritual dimensions of life. The development of balanced living examines all these relationships and supports a restoration of congruency. Spiritual transformation refers to transformation of the *whole* person and the ministries of every parish should support this process. This brings better health to both individuals and to the systems they influence within the church, family, society, and nature.

Ecology of soul

The example of Jesus:

The four canonical gospels reveal a four-fold pattern in Jesus’ life that was the source of his life with God: quiet listening, faithful discernment, commitment to the Hebrew scriptures and liturgical life of his faith community, and compassionate response. Jesus always found time to listen to God, the world around him and his inner self. This listening heart was the source of the guidance and will which, along with direct experience of God’s love, led and sometimes drove him into compassionate involvement in the lives of others. All this took place in the context and in fulfillment of his own religious community. Jesus’ life of prayer opened him to the vitality of God’s energy and vision. He became what he sought. He loved what he saw. He transformed what he touched. He lived what he spoke.

Monastic asceticism (a single-minded discipline for our life with God and other people.):

The Greek word *askeo* means “to take care of something.” An *ascetic* person is one who cares for something. *Asceticism* is a pattern or discipline of caring for something we value deeply. Throughout our Christian tradition the “ascetic life” (in a variety of forms) has been valued as a discipline that guides our life with God and reveals God’s desires for us and the world. Asceticism is not only for monks; it is an essential part of each Christian’s life. It is the way we care for our whole being, that wonderful gift of God. It is caring for and being a steward of: thoughts, words, body, mind and spirit, actions, our neighbor, and the earth.

“When you come to see Jesus more and more as the compassionate God, you will begin increasingly to see your own life as one in which you yourself want to express that divine compassion. What can happen then is that you feel a deep longing grow within you to make your own life a life for others.” (Henri Nouwen: *Letters to Mark About Jesus*)

What is your pattern of work, study, and worship? How would you like to experience further growth and transformation? What is the role of community in this process? How would you describe your stewardship of time?

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus, the Lord,
continue to live your lives in him,
rooted and built up in him, and established in the faith,
just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

Colossians 2:6-7