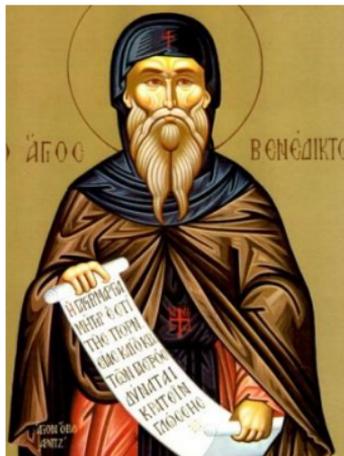


# Seeking God The Practical Wisdom of the Rule of Saint Benedict



“...what we mean to establish is a school for the Lord’s service...But as we progress in this monastic way of life and in faith, our hearts will warm to its vision and with eager love and delight that defies expression we shall go forward on the way to God’s commandments.”

## Introduction

This booklet is designed as a resource for reflection on some aspects of the Rule of St. Benedict that will guide readers in their life with God. The primary focus is on the wisdom and challenge expressed in the Prologue to the Rule, although other disciplines described in the Rule will be presented. The Rule of Benedict is not a collection of “tools” that a person can apply to certain aspects of her or his personal life. The Rule is a guide for persons who have chosen to live every aspect of their lives, in community, discerning and living “the way of God’s commandments.”

For some readers this will be a first experience of the Rule of St. Benedict. It begins with a translation of the Prologue by Patrick Barry, OSB. Read the Prologue several times, reflecting on parts that attract your attention. Keep in mind that Benedict was writing for men who were entering life in a

monastery, yet these words speak equally well to persons who are not called to traditional forms of the monastic manner of life. When it is not romanticized or abused, monastic life mentors us in what it means to be truly human. All of us are called to practice an interiorized monasticism. In the twenty-first century, in addition to traditional monastic communities, new and renewed forms of monastic life are forming. They all share a single-minded devotion to love of God and neighbor and provide commitment to disciplines and community, similar to Benedict's, that support each person's desire to follow the way of Christ.

Following the Prologue are seventeen reflections on parts of the Rule. Read one a day and carry it with you throughout the day. At the end of this booklet is a contemplative reflection on the Prologue to the Rule. When you have finished the booklet, write a reflection of your own.

## A Translation of the Prologue to the Rule of Saint Benedict.<sup>1</sup>

Listen, child of God, to the guidance of your teacher. Attend to the message you hear and make sure that it pierces to your heart, so that you may accept with willing freedom and fulfill by the way you live the directions that come from your loving Father. It is not easy to accept and persevere in obedience but it is the way to return to Christ, when you have strayed through the laxity and carelessness of disobedience. My words are addressed to you especially, whoever you may be, whatever your circumstances, who turn from the pursuit of your own self-will and ask to enlist under Christ, who is Lord of all, by following him

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by Patrick Barry, OSB from the version of the Rule written in Latin by Saint Benedict. Abbot Barry is the former abbot of Ampleforth Abbey in York, England. This is not a paraphrase. It is a translation from the Latin, using a modern and dynamic style of speech. See: *Saint Benedict's Rule: A new Translation for Today*. Patrick Barry, OSB. York: Ampleforth Abbey Press, 1997 ISBN 0-85244-435-4

through taking to yourself of that strong and blessed armour of obedience which he made his own on coming into our world.

This, then, is the beginning of my advice: make prayer the first step in anything worthwhile that you attempt. Persevere and do not weaken in that prayer. Pray with confidence, because God, in his love and forgiveness, has counted us as his sons and daughters. Surely we should not by our evil acts heartlessly reject that love. At every moment of our lives, as we use the good things he has given us, we can respond to his love only by seeking to obey his will for us. If we should refuse, what wonder to find ourselves disinherited! What wonder if he, confronted and repelled by the evil in us, should abandon us like malicious and rebellious subjects to the never-ending pain of separation since we refused to follow him to glory.

However late, then, it may seem, let us rouse ourselves from lethargy. That is what scripture urges on us when it says: the time has come for us to rouse ourselves from sleep (Romans 13:11). Let us open our eyes to the light that shows us the way to God. Let our ears be alert

to the stirring call of his voice crying to us every day: today, if you would hear his voice, do not harden your hearts (Ps 94/95:8). And again: let anyone with ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches (Rev. 2:7). And this is what the Spirit says: Come my children, hear me, and I shall teach you the fear of the Lord (Ps 33/34:12). Run, while you have the light of life, before the darkness of death overtakes you (Jn 12:35).

It is to find workers in his cause that God calls out like that to all peoples. He calls to us in another way in the psalm when he says: Who is there with a love of true life and a longing for days of real fulfillment? (Ps 33/34:13) If you should hear that call and answer: “I”, this is the answer you will receive from God: If you wish to have that true life that lasts for ever, then keep your tongue from evil; let your lips speak no deceit; turn away from wrongdoing; seek peace and pursue it (Ps 33/34:14-15). If you do that, he says, I shall look on you with such love and my ears will be so alert to your prayer that, before you so much as call on me, I shall say to you, “Here I am” (Isaiah 58:9). What greater encouragement could we have, my

dear brothers and sisters, than that word from the Lord calling us to himself in such a way! We can see with what loving concern the Lord points out to us the path of life.

And so to prepare ourselves for the journey before us let us renew our faith and set ourselves high standards by which to lead our lives. The gospel should be our guide in following the way of Christ to prepare ourselves for his presence in the kingdom to which he has called us. If we want to make our lasting home in his holy kingdom, the only way is to set aright the course of our lives in doing what is good. We should make our own the psalmist's question: "Lord, who will dwell in your holy kingdom or who will find rest on your holy mountain?" (Ps 14/15:1) In reply we may hear from the same psalmist the Lord's answer to show us the way that leads to his kingdom: "Anyone who leads a life without guile, who does what is right, who speaks truth from the heart, on whose tongue there is no deceit, who never harms a neighbor or believes evil reports about another (Ps 14/15:2-3), who at once rejects outright from the heart the devil's temptations to sin, destroying

them utterly at the first onset by casting them before Christ himself. Such a follower of Christ lives in reverence of him and does not take the credit for a good life but, believing that all the good that we do comes from the Lord, gives him the credit and thanksgiving for what his gift brings about in our hearts. In that spirit our prayer from the psalm should be: “Not to us, O Lord, not to us give the glory but unto your own name.” (Ps 14/15:4) That is St. Paul’s example, for he took no credit to himself for his preaching when he said: “It is by God’s grace that I am what I am.” (1 Cor 15:10) And again he says: “Let anyone who wants to boast, boast in the Lord.” (2 Cor 10:17)

The Lord himself in the gospel teaches us the same when he says: “I shall liken anyone who hears my words and carries them out in deeds to one who is wise enough to build on a rock; then the floods came<sup>3</sup> and the winds blew and struck that house, but it did not fall because it was built on a rock.” (Matt 7:24-25) It is in the light of that teaching that the Lord waits for us every day to see if we will respond by our deeds, as we should, to his holy guidance. For that very reason also, so that

we may mend our evil ways, the days of our mortal lives are allowed us as a sort of truce for improvement. So St. Paul says: “Do you not know that God is patient with us so as to lead us to repentance?” (Romans 2:4) The Lord himself says in his gentle care for us: “I do not want the death of a sinner; let all sinners rather turn away from sin and live.” (Ezek 33:11)

Well then, brothers and sisters, we have questioned the Lord about who can dwell with him in his holy place and we have heard the demands he makes on such a one; we can be united with him there, only if we fulfill those demands. We must, therefore, prepare our hearts and bodies to serve him under the guidance of holy obedience. Conscious in this undertaking of our own weakness let us ask the Lord to give us through his grace the help we need. If we want to avoid the pain of self-destruction in hell and come to eternal life, then, while we still have the time in this mortal life and the opportunity to fulfil what God asks of us through a life guided by his light, we must hurry forward and act in a way that will bring us blessings in eternal life.

With all this in mind what we mean to establish is a school for the Lord's service. In the guidance we lay down to achieve this we hope to impose nothing harsh or burdensome. If, however, you find in it anything which seems rather strict, but which is demanded reasonably for the correction of vice or the preservation of love, do not let that frighten you into fleeing away from the way of salvation; it is a way which is bound to seem narrow to start with. But, as we progress in this monastic way of life and in faith, our hearts will warm to its vision and with eager love and delight that defies expression we shall go forward on the way of God's commandments. Then we shall never think of deserting his guidance; we shall persevere in fidelity to his teaching in the monastery until death so that through our patience we may be granted some part in Christ's own passion and thus in the end receive a share in his kingdom. Amen.

# Reflections on the Rule of Saint Benedict<sup>2</sup>



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<sup>2</sup> These reflections are adapted by the author from: David G. R. Keller. *Desert Banquet: A Year of Wisdom from the Desert Mothers and Fathers*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011, passim.

## Welcome the implanted word

*“Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures. You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act – they will be blessed in their doing. If any think they*

*are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep one's self unstained by the world. (James 1:17-27)*

In developing his Rule, Benedict relied on what he had learned and taken to heart from the Bible.

### **The priority of hospitality**

*“Abba Cassian related the following: ‘The holy Germanus and I went to Egypt, to visit an old man. Because he offered us hospitality we asked him, ‘Why do you not keep the rule of fasting, when you receive visiting brothers, as we have received it in Palestine?’ He replied, ‘Fasting is always at hand but you I cannot have with me always. Furthermore, fasting is certainly a useful and necessary thing, but it depends on our choice while the law of God lays it upon us to do the works of charity. Thus receiving Christ in you, I*

*ought to serve you with all diligence, but when I have taken leave of you, I can resume the rule of fasting again. For 'Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them, but when the bridegroom is taken from them, then they will fast in that day.'*"(Mark 2:19-20)<sup>3</sup>

Here “the old man” declares that receiving guests is not only polite; it is receiving Christ in the guest. He is also clear that a rule is not an end in itself. The law of charity must prevail. After he left Egypt, Cassian founded two monasteries near Marseilles in 415. He wrote *Institutes* to describe the life of the desert monks and guide the formation of new monasteries. The *Institutes* influenced Benedict of Nursia and in

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<sup>3</sup> Benedicta Ward, SLG. Trans. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1975. Cassian 1, 113.

his Rule he declares that “All guests who arrive should be received as Christ...”

### **A rich legacy**

In the sixth century Benedict of Nursia developed a rule of life for his newly formed monastic community. The Rule of Benedict has influenced the formation and life of most Christian monastic communities ever since and has become a fundamental part of Christian spirituality. In Chapter 73 of his Rule, Benedict cites the wisdom and lives of the desert elders as a crucial source of wisdom and example for the lives of Benedictine monks.

*“But for someone who is in a hurry to reach the fullness of monastic life, there are the teachings of the Holy Fathers. Anyone who carries them out will arrive at the pinnacle of perfection. For what page or even what word of the divinely inspired Old and New*

*Testaments is not a completely reliable guidepost for human life? Or what book of the holy Catholic Fathers does not teach us how to reach our Creator by the direct route? And then there are the Conferences of the Fathers and their Institutes and Lives, along with the Rule of our Father Basil. What else are they for monks who live upright and obedient lives but tools of virtue?”<sup>4</sup>*

In his Rule Benedict included some of the most fundamental aspects of the lives of the desert mothers and fathers: transformation of life through the Holy Spirit, centrality of meditation on and study of the Bible, an emphasis on recitation of the psalms, the need for humility, a balance of work and prayer, love of neighbor, the need for solitude and community, and obedience (listening) to mentors.

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<sup>4</sup> Terrence G. Kardong. *Benedict's Rule: A Translation and Commentary*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996. 603.

## A four-fold path to transformation

*Listen, O my son, to the teachings of your master, and turn to them with the ear of your heart. Willingly accept the advice of a devoted father and put it into action. Thus you will return by the labor of obedience to the one from whom you drifted through the inertia of disobedience. Now then I address my words to you: whoever is willing to renounce self-will, and take up the powerful and shining weapons of obedience to fight for the Lord Christ, the true king.”<sup>5</sup>*

In the Prologue to his Rule for monks, Benedict of Nursia describes a four-fold path to holiness that mirrors the teachings of the desert mothers and fathers. Everything begins with *listening* and not simply to words, but with “*the ears of your heart.*” Then he advises *turning*

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<sup>5</sup> Terrence G. Kardong. *Benedict’s Rule: A Translation and Commentary*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1996. *Prologue, 1-3*, page 3.

toward the teachings of a master, a father or abba. The turning is a desire to reorient the focus of your life to a person whose life and wisdom authentically incarnate the presence of Christ. But turning is not enough. This is not an academic experience. Along with the turning comes a genuine desire to “*willingly accept*” a mentor’s advice and, finally, *put it into action.*” This is a whole-hearted decision.

### **The path begins with listening**

*Listen, O my son, to the teachings of your master, and turn to them with the ear of your heart...<sup>6</sup>*

The path to the gift of union with God begins with listening. The Rule of St. Benedict, influenced by the teaching of the desert elders, is filled with both references to

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. page 3.

and direct quotations from the Bible. In Deuteronomy 6:4 the Hebrew scriptures exhort: “Hear, O Israel...” and when God’s unique presence in Jesus is manifested to Peter, James, and John on the mountain of Transfiguration, a voice declares “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” (Mark 9:7) Jesus’ ministry was filled with listening; “In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went to a deserted place, and there he prayed.” (Mark 1:35) Jesus, himself, declared, “...anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life...” (John 5:24) Like the desert elders, Benedict invites his monks to listen “*to the teachings of your master.*” The role of a master, abba, or amma is to transmit the experience and wisdom of God in their lives, not to call attention to themselves. But their role is crucial in a person’s vocation of listening. God speaks both in the silence of our hearts and in the life and teaching of our mentors.

## The courage to change our lives

*“Listen, O my son, to the teachings of your master, and turn to them with the ear of your heart...”*<sup>7</sup>

Turning “*to the teachings of your master*” carries a double meaning for Benedict and echoes words of Abba John Cassian.<sup>8</sup> In the Prologue to his Rule, Benedict’s monks are urged to renounce sins and self-will and return to the graced-filled life given at baptism. The “*teachings of your master*” may refer both to Jesus and to a monastic teacher or mentor. As we have seen in the lives of the desert elders, the integrity of an abba’s or amma’s teaching is that it manifests the presence of Jesus.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. page 3.

<sup>8</sup> John Cassian. *The Conferences*. Translated by Boniface Ramsey, OP. New York: Paulist Press, 1997. Third Conference: On Renunciation, VI. 1, 2, &3.

Ultimately we are called to listen to the teachings of Jesus. But there is more. We are to “**turn to them** *with the ear of your heart*”. The teachings will reorient our lives only if we embrace them. A choice must be made. It seems possible that Benedict, like Cassian, has Psalm 45:10-11 in mind. The psalm describes a bride leaving her father’s house to marry a king: *‘Hear, O daughter, consider and incline your ear; forget your people and your father’s house, and the king will desire your beauty.’*”

Reorienting one’s life is never easy.

## The grace of obedience

*“Willingly accept the advice of a devoted father and put it into action. Thus you will return by the labor of obedience to the one from whom you drifted through the inertia of disobedience.”*<sup>9</sup>

The desert elders and Benedict place great stock in “obedience” because it enables us to listen and follow someone besides ourselves. Fullness of life is not possible if we are the center of our lives. But Benedict emphasizes that obedience is “willingly” accepted. Both he and the desert elders value obedience because it was the hallmark of Jesus’ life who, in St. Paul’s words, “...*humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death...*” (Phil. 2:8) Amma Syncletica said, “*It is dangerous for someone not ‘formed’ by experience of the ascetic life to try to teach...*” and Abba Dorotheos said, “*We*

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<sup>9</sup> Kardong, *Benedict’s Rule*, page 3.

*need assistance, we need guidance in addition to God's grace."* The value of "*the labor of obedience*" is that it directs us away from "*the inertia of disobedience*" of self-will. Later in the Prologue Benedict's says, "*And so, brothers, we have queried the Lord about what is required of a dweller in his tent, and we have received the teaching about dwelling there... Therefore we must prepare our hearts and bodies to wage the battle of holy obedience to his precepts.*" Obedience is freedom.

### **Words without action are useless**

St. Benedict writes, "*Willingly accept the advice of a devoted father and put it into action.*"<sup>10</sup>

Amma Syncletica said, "*Because humility is good and salutary, the Lord clothed himself in it... For he says, 'Learn from me, for I am gentle and*

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. page 3.

*humble of heart' (Matt 11:9). Notice who it is who is speaking; learn his lesson perfectly. Let humility become for you the beginning and end of virtues. He means a humble heart; he refers not to appearance alone, but to the inner person, for the outer person will also follow after the inner.*"<sup>11</sup>

Jesus' life was his message. He exhorted those around him to listen to his words, but he made it clear that the vocation of a disciple is to *follow him*. He invited those who wanted to follow him to *share his life, including his actions*, regardless of the outcomes. An emphasis on personal example, embodied in humble charity, is the greatest legacy of the desert elders and appears as the core of the Rule of Benedict. "*An old man said, 'Every evening and every morning a monk ought to render an*

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<sup>11</sup> Pseudo-Athanasius. *The Life of Blessed Syncletica*. Translated by Elizabeth Bryson. Toronto: Peregrina, 1999. Pp. 39-40

*account of himself and say to himself, "What have we done of what God does not want, and what have we done of that which God wills."'"*

## **Solitude and Community**

Benedict's genius was to integrate the wisdom and praxis of two great forms of monastic life from the desert elders: the life of individual *solitude* and life in a *community*. Like Antony and Pachmius had done in the East, Benedict had a formative influence on monastic life and spirituality as Christianity developed in the west.

*"When (a novice) is to be received, he comes before the whole community in the oratory and promises stability (commitment to a specific community), fidelity to monastic life (the manner of life in the community), and obedience (to Christ, through the abbot, and the community.) This is done in*

*the presence of God and his saints to impress on the novice that if he ever acts otherwise, he will surely be condemned by the one he mocks.”* (RB, Chap. 58:17-18)

Within this community life Benedict also provides for the solitude and personal prayer of each monk. *“Monks should diligently cultivate silence at all times, but especially at night.”* Like the desert elders, he associates solitude as a means of *“...refusing to indulge evil habits and by devoting ourselves to prayer with tears, to reading, to compunction of heart and self-denial.”* In what ways do you combine life in a faith community and personal silence and prayer?

## Work, study, and prayer

Benedict's Rule is a pattern of monastic life that integrates body, mind, heart, soul, and spirit. Notice how he wove virtues and activities into the life of his communities that mirror the lives of the desert mothers and fathers.

*"Idleness is the enemy of the soul. Therefore, the brothers should have specified periods for manual labor as well as for prayerful reading." (Rule of Benedict, Chapter 48:1) ... "Let us consider then, how we ought to behave in the presence of God and his angels, and let us stand to sing the psalms in such a way that our minds are in harmony with our voices." (RB, Chapter 19:6-7)*

*"Abba Poemen said, 'Life in the monastery demands three things: the first is humility, the next is obedience, and the third which sets them in motion and is like a goad is the work of the monastery.'"*

*“Then, after having eaten, (the desert hesychasts) sit and listen to the father’s teaching on all the commandments until the first watch of the night. At this point some of them go out into the desert and recite the Scriptures by heart throughout the night. The rest remain where they are and worship God with ceaseless hymnody until daybreak.”*

What is your pattern of work, study, and worship?

### **The primacy of love**

As we have seen, the desert elders gave first priority to what they called the Great Commandment. Jesus summed it up as loving God and loving your neighbor. Benedict agrees. In Chapter 4 of his Rule he says:

*“First of all, love the Lord God with all your heart, your whole soul and all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.” Then the following: You are*

*not to kill, not to commit adultery; you are not to steal nor to covet; you are not to bear false witness You must honor everyone, and never do to another what you do not want done to yourself Renounce yourself in order to follow Christ discipline your body; do not pamper yourself, but love fasting. You must relieve the lot of the poor, clothe the naked, visit the sick, and bury the dead. Go to help the troubled and console the sorrowing. Your way of acting should be different from the world's way; the love of Christ must come before all else.” (RB, Chapter 4:1-21)*

*“Abba John the Dwarf said, ‘A house is not built by beginning at the top and working down. You must begin with the foundations in order to reach the top.’ They said to him, ‘What does this mean?’ He said, ‘The foundation is our neighbor, whom we must win, and that is the place to begin. For all the commandments of Christ begin with this one.” (Ward, Sayings, John 39)*

## Total dependence on God

*“We must, then, prepare our hearts and bodies for the battle of holy obedience to (the Lord’s) instructions. What is not possible for us by nature, let us ask the Lord to supply by the help of his grace.”*  
(RB, Prologue: 40-41.)

Benedict reminds us that our exterior obedience to the Lord’s teaching will flow from our interior life with God. *“We must, then, prepare our hearts and bodies...”* echoes the words of Abba Arsenius: *“A brother questioned Abba Arsenius to hear a word of him and the old man said to him, ‘Strive with all your might to bring your interior activity into accord with God, and you will overcome exterior passions.’”* The desert elders were firm in their dependence on God’s grace because they knew their own weaknesses very well. *“Once the spirit of fornication attacked (Amma Sarah) more insistently, reminding her of the vanities of the world. But she gave herself up to the fear of God*

*and to asceticism and went up onto her little terrace to pray. Then the spirit of fornication appeared corporally to her and said, 'Sarah, you have overcome me.' But she said, 'It is not I who have overcome you, but my master, Christ.'"*

Benedict learned that the preparation of “*our hearts and bodies*“ is knowing our weaknesses and depending on God to do what we cannot do ourselves.

### **Praise unites our voices and minds with God's presence**

In his vision for community life Benedict continues the desert elders' emphasis on reciting and chanting the psalms: *We must always remember, therefore, what the prophet says, 'Service the Lord with fear' (Ps 2:11), and again, 'Sing praises wisely' (PS 46/47:8), and, 'In the presence of the angels I will sing to you.'* (Ps 137/138:1) *Let us consider, then, how we ought to*

*behave in the presence of God and his angels, and let us stand to sing the psalms in such a way that our minds are in harmony with our voices.”* (RB, Chapter 19:3-7)

Benedict devotes three chapters in his Rule to protocols for reciting and chanting the psalms in community worship. He provides a method for including all 150 psalms in one week while commenting, *“We read, after all, that our holy Fathers, energetic as they were, did all this in a single day. Let us hope that we, lukewarm as we are, can achieve it in a week.”* Behind his “lukewarm” schedule is his understanding that experiencing the wide range of human experience, emotions, and prayers expressed in the psalter is essential for the spiritual health of his monastic community. The recitation is not an end in itself. It is an opportunity to listen with and be guided by an interior consciousness.

## A spacious heart

*“Do not be daunted immediately by fear and run away from the road that leads to salvation. It is bound to be narrow at the outset. But 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.”* (RB, Prologue: 48-49)

The “*battle of holy obedience to (the Lord’s) instructions*” can be a daunting prospect, especially for younger monks. Benedict, like the desert elders, encourages his monks not to “*fear and run away from the road that leads to salvation.*” At the same time it is “*bound to be narrow at the outset.*” But progress will be made because of the common life and support of the monastic community. Benedict is saying, “We are in this together.” His intent is similar to that of Abba Pachomius’ foundations: “*They lived a coenobitic. So (Pachomius) established for them in a rule an irreproachable lifestyle and traditions*

*profitable for their souls.*” The lifestyles of both Pachomius and Benedict are designed to develop a spacious and flexible heart in each monk. Like abbas Evagrius and Cassian, Benedict knows that “*hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love*” are hearts that do not seek their own will, but are open and desire only what God desires. Rather than limiting a person’s life, it brings forth joy and freedom that are the offspring of love.

### **A more accessible and less austere monastic life**

*“Therefore we intend to establish a school for the Lord’s service. In drawing up its regulations, we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome. The good of all concerned, however, may prompt us to a little strictness in order to amend faults and to safeguard love.”*(RB, Prologue: 45-47)

Benedict establishes “*a school for the Lord’s service*” to provide a community whose goal is profitable for souls. He seems familiar with a pattern of life in the communities of Abba Pachomius. The Greek *Life* of Pachomius describes a pattern of teaching called “conferences” at the end of each day’s work, following a light meal. After the teaching there was common prayer, discussion, and reflection. The genius of Pachomius is that each monk is given opportunities to be “formed” by the wisdom and experience of an elder and, at the same time, contributes his wisdom, experiences, and concerns to the whole community. Benedict’s innovation is that he moderates some of the austerity of the desert elders, yet retains the need for formation in a context of basic rules and strictness. Modern congregations would profit from this kind of formation.

Where does your formation takes place?

## The beginning and end of all virtues

*“Accordingly, brothers, if we want to reach the highest summit of humility, if we desire to obtain speedily that exaltation in heaven to which we climb by the humility of this present life, then by our ascending actions we must set up that ladder on which Jacob in a dream saw ‘angels descending and ascending’ Without doubt, this descent and ascent can signify only that we descend by exaltation and ascent by humility. Now the ladder erected is our life on earth, and if we humble our hearts the Lord will raise it to heaven. We may call our body and soul the sides of the ladder, into which our divine vocation has fitted the various steps of humility and discipline as we ascend.” (RB, Chapter 7:5-9)*

Like the desert elders, Benedict knows that a humble heart is the key to human transformation. Abba Poemen said, *As the breath which comes out of his nostrils, so does a man need humility and the fear of God.*” Benedict

spends the rest of Chapter Seven describing twelve steps of humility. He warns that attitudes that place us ahead of God and our neighbor will destroy the harmony between our inner prayer and our actions. The desert elders were adamant about this. Abba Moses said, *“When someone is occupied with his own thoughts, he does not see those of his neighbor. If a man’s deeds are not in harmony with his prayer, he labors in vain.”*

### **Finding God in each other**

About forty-five years after Benedict’s death in 547, Pope Gregory the Great commends Benedict’s example of holy living in a way that reflects the insistence of the desert elders on personal example: *“If anyone wishes to know his character and life more precisely, he may find in the ordinances of (Benedict’s) Rule a complete*

*account of the abbot's practice; for the holy man cannot have taught otherwise than how he lived.*"<sup>12</sup>

One way of “listening” to others is to discern God’s presence in them. Abba Pachomius said, *“For I have truly seen the treasure of God hidden in human vessels.”* Yet a person’s “speech” enables God’s presence to be “heard”. Abba Isidore of Pelusia said, *“To live without speaking is better than to speak without living. For the former who lives rightly does good even by his silence...When words and life correspond to one another they are together the whole of philosophy.”* Most of the chapters in Benedict’s Rule demonstrate that it is in the variety of relationships, labor, worship, tensions, and responsibilities of community life that each monk will discover God’s presence. As Abba

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted in *The Rule of St. Benedict in English*. Ed. Timothy Fry, OSB. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1982. Preface, page 11.

Macarius said, “...*I have not yet become a monk, but I have seen monks.*”

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## **A Lectio Divina Reflection on the Prologue to the Rule of Saint Benedict<sup>13</sup>**

Listen, child...

Listen carefully with the ear of your heart. The one who speaks loves you. But to hear this message you must let go of what you desire and your control of yourself. To begin, you must accept your dependence on God. This will make it possible to become aware of

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<sup>13</sup> This is not a paraphrase of the Prologue. It is a personal response to the Prologue, using the discipline of lectio divina, to listen with care to Benedict's words and discern a personal response.

the good gifts already within you. Use these gifts to avoid evil and to seek what God desires for you and for others.

You must wake up and open your eyes in order to see the path of light which God is calling you to follow. If you choose this path you must accept what God requires. Your guides on this path are the Gospel and the teaching of Jesus. The path requires both faith and good works. Following the path requires, also, that you put the words of Jesus into action every day.

Walking this path is truly a matter of life and death.

Following this path will require hard work, yet can be accomplished through the gift of the light of life.

This path can be learned and lived only in a community of faith and is made possible by following a commonly accepted discipline, to safeguard mutual respect and love. This community of faith is where you will discover the faithful presence of God and be empowered to serve God and other people.

Walking the path of God's desires in this way will result in the development of a spacious heart within you, radiating the delight of love. This love is the most fundamental reality of life. It requires great patience and openness to suffering. Yet the risk of loving in this way will bring forth the realm of God on earth.

David Keller, July 11, 2002 'The Feast of Benedict



The monastic community of Saint John's  
Benedictine Abbey  
Collegeville, MN at Evening Prayer.



## Three exhortations from St. Paul to live according to a rule of life:

“I appeal to you, therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

Saint Paul in Romans 12:1-2

“Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

Saint Paul in Philippians 2:12-13

“Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.”

Saint Paul in Second Timothy 1:14

## Recommended reading:

Cyprian Smith, OSB. *The Path of Life: Benedictine Spirituality for Monks and Lay People*. Ampleforth Abbey Press. Distributed by Gracewing: 1995. ISBN 0-85244-302-1

If you have time for only one book on Benedictine spirituality from the point of view of a monk who has lived according to the Rule in community, **this is the book**. It is well written, authentic, and intended for both monastic formation and lay persons who are not called to monastic life.

Joan Chittister, OSB. *Wisdom Distilled From The Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, Second edition, 2009 ISBN 978-00606113990

Joan Chittister takes the primary disciplines of the Rule and relates them to being a disciple of Jesus for persons whose lives are not in a monastery. This is not a Benedictine “fad” book. It is a serious and very streetwise presentation of the primary disciplines of the Rule. A great companion to Cyprian Smith’s book.

Columba Stewart. *Prayer and Community: The Benedictine Tradition*. New York: Orbis Books, 1998. ISBN 1-570075-219-2

Columba Stewart is one of the most respected historians and teachers of the Benedictine way of life. He lives and shares the richness of the Rule as a monk of St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, MN. This short book presents the integrity of living the Rule from historical and cultural perspectives. He is an expert on Christian desert spirituality and its influence on the Rule. As the title suggests, he demonstrates the necessity for balance between personal spirituality and life in community.

Esther De Waal. *Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, Second edition, 2001. This book is a classic and has been in print twenty years. Esther De Waal is an Anglican historian and one of the most successful interpreters of Benedictine spirituality for both monks and lay persons. She presents the major disciplines of the Rule and shows how they form a path for Christian living. ISBN 978-0814613881

This booklet was compiled and edited by David Keller for the St. Macarius Contemplative Community, Asheville, NC, during an eight-week series of reflections on the practical wisdom of the Rule of Saint Benedict.

Printed by St. Macarius Contemplative Community: January 2014



### St. Macarius Contemplative Community

... is a small community dedicated to patterns of quiet listening to God that lead us to deepening love of God and our neighbor.

#### **Our Shared Life**

We are a community of persons who gather regularly for contemplative prayer, study, worship, and fellowship. Contemplative experience of God's

love is the source of compassionate engagement in the life of the world and its people. Although we are rooted in the Episcopal tradition, we welcome persons from other traditions and every walk of life to share and contribute to our life.

All members of our community share responsibility for the leadership and ongoing life of the community. Some members are called to follow the St. Macarius Community Rule of Life, but it is not necessary to accept this Rule to be a regular part of the community. The Rule provides a manner of life and stability that helps form and nurture the soul of every person who shares our life.

### **Our Rule of Life**

Some members of our community are called to live by a Rule of Life that, relying on God's grace, includes commitment to:

- become a person of prayer, through personal experience of and intimacy with God through contemplative prayer and meditation...
- be committed to spiritual growth and transformation...

- be compassionate in her or his actions, relationships, and use of the earth...
- be a faithful and active member of St. Macarius Contemplative Community...
- participate in the weekly Eucharist at a local Episcopal congregation or weekly worship in another faith tradition if the person is not Episcopalian...

We meet every Wednesday from 6:45-8:30 PM at Servanthood House, 156 Chestnut St., Asheville, NC We celebrate a contemplative Eucharist on the first Wednesday of the month and present quarterly "Desert Day" Saturday retreats each year.

For information contact: [Emily@oasisofwisdom.net](mailto:Emily@oasisofwisdom.net)