



THE
RULE
OF

ST. BENEDICT
IN ENGLISH

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THE RULE OF ST. BENEDICT
IN ENGLISH

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Preface

Pope John Paul II addressed two documents in 1981 to the entire Catholic Church and to "all men and women of good will." Inspired by a most urgent desire to help people improve their basic human relations, he wrote the encyclical "On Human Work" and the apostolic exhortation "The Role of the Family in Modern Society." St. Benedict's times were as turbulent as our own, though for very different reasons. He wrote his Rule primarily for monks, but its sound principles for working together and living together have proved relevant to people of all classes of society through fifteen hundred years.

Benedict (c. 480–547) lived in sixth-century Italy when the great Roman Empire was disintegrating. Rome had fallen to the barbarians in 410 and was sacked again in 455. Romulus Augustulus, the last emperor, was deposed in 476. Theodoric of the Ostrogoths maintained peace during a long reign (493–526), but upon his death the Eastern emperor Justinian tried to regain Rome, and through the remaining years of the century there was constant war as other barbarian tribes invaded the Italian peninsula.

Sometime during the reign of Theodoric, Benedict as a young man left his native Nursia in Umbria to attend school in Rome, but became disgusted with the paganism he saw and renounced the world to live in solitude in a cave at Subiaco, some thirty miles east of Rome. Evidently he had undergone a deep religious experience. In time he came to the notice of people in the neighborhood, and some monks asked him to be their abbot. He consented with reluctance, and after some time the recalcitrant monks sought to poison him. Later another group of monks joined him, and he established twelve monasteries of twelve monks each.

Experience with the envy of the local clergy led Benedict to abandon this settlement, and with some disciples he founded a monastery on the mountain above Cassino, about eighty miles south of Rome. His fame as a holy person spread throughout the area; even the king of the Goths, Totila, came to see him. About the year 547 he died. Pope St. Gregory the Great (pope 590–604), whose second book of *The Dialogues* is the only source for information on St. Benedict, notes that St. Scholastica was his sister (traditionally known as his twin sister).

Apart from these meager facts, nothing more is known of the life of St. Benedict. But most of the information from St. Gregory can be corroborated by other historical events of the time. Gregory did not set out to write a biography; his purpose was to show that there were holy people in Italy, not just in the East, and that St. Benedict was a great miracle-worker. He

mentions the Rule of St. Benedict and commends it for its discretion and lucidity of style. "If anyone wishes to know his character and life more precisely, he may find in the ordinances of that Rule a complete account of the abbot's practice; for the holy man cannot have taught otherwise than as he lived."

Writers after St. Gregory have noted the same discretion in St. Benedict's Rule, and this quality more than any other accounts in great part for its longevity. The fact that many men and women throughout the world live it today is supporting evidence.

In the unsettled, strife-torn Italy of the sixth century, Benedict's Rule offered definitive direction and established an ordered way of life that gave security and stability. He sought to lay down "nothing harsh, nothing burdensome," but was intent on encouraging the person coming to the monastery: "Do not be daunted immediately by fear and run away from the road that leads to salvation."

Benedict calls his Rule "a little rule for beginners." It contains directions for all aspects of the monastic life, from establishing the abbot as superior, the arrangement of psalms for prayers, measures for correction of faults, to details of clothing and the amount of food and drink. The reader will note that some customs are outmoded today, and monks have accordingly modified some of these.

St. Benedict taught that if the monk seeks to answer the call of God—"If you hear his voice today, do not

harden your heart"—then he must put all else aside and follow the teaching of Christ in obedience. To this end St. Benedict established a "school for the Lord's service," a place where monks learn to serve the Lord in obedience to their abbot, who "is believed to hold the place of Christ." His spirituality is Christocentric: "the love of Christ must come before all else." After a year of trial, the novice promises stability, fidelity to monastic life, and obedience. St. Benedict expected his monks to advance on the "path of God's commandments, [their] hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love."

Benedict was a keen observer of human nature and realized that people often fail (the abbot must "distrust his own frailty"). He was concerned to help the weak, and consequently he enjoined that the abbot "so regulate and arrange all matters that souls may be saved and the brothers may go about their activities without justifiable grumbling." Benedict looked to the heart; he sought a spirit of willingness ("First and foremost, there must be no word or sign of the evil grumbling, no manifestation of it for any reason at all") and sincerity ("Never give a hollow greeting of peace"; "Let us stand to sing the psalms in such a way that our minds are in harmony with our voices").

The so-called penal code (chs. 23–30, 43–46) is more accurately seen as correctional measures designed for the reformation and healing of the person, not a rigid, brutal structure imposed legalistically.

St. Benedict stressed the importance of the person and the relationship of persons living together. He respected the freedom of the person (the novice is free to leave at any time; the monk who leaves may be received back even a third time). If there is strictness, the purpose is to "amend faults and safeguard love." He directed the abbot to "arrange everything that the strong have something to yearn for and the weak nothing to run from." It is a humane approach to personal relationships. But it is an approach based on the supernatural: "that in all things God may be glorified." Benedict was a God-oriented man leading like-minded people on the way of the Gospel. In St. Gregory's words, he was a man of God (*vir Dei*).

REV. TIMOTHY FRY, OSB

St. Benedict's Abbey
Atchison, Kansas

Feast of St. Benedict
21 March 1982

The Rule of Saint Benedict

PROLOGUE

¹Listen carefully, my son, to the master's instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart. This is advice from a father who loves you; welcome it, and faithfully put it into practice. ²The labor of obedience will bring you back to him from whom you had drifted through the sloth of disobedience. ³This message of mine is for you, then, if you are ready to give up your own will, once and for all, and armed with the strong and noble weapons of obedience to do battle for the true King, Christ the Lord.

⁴First of all, every time you begin a good work, you must pray to him most earnestly to bring it to perfection. ⁵In his goodness, he has already counted us as his sons, and therefore we should never grieve him by our evil actions. ⁶With his good gifts which are in us, we must obey him at all times that he may never become the angry father who disinherits his sons, ⁷nor the dread lord, enraged by our sins, who punishes us forever as worthless servants for refusing to follow him to glory.

⁸Let us get up then, at long last, for the Scriptures rouse us when they say: *It is high time for us to arise from sleep* (Rom 13:11). ⁹Let us open our eyes to the light that comes from God, and our ears to the voice from heaven that every day calls out this charge: ¹⁰*If you hear his voice today, do not harden your hearts* (Ps 94[95]:8). ¹¹And again: *You that have ears to hear, listen to what the Spirit says to the churches* (Rev 2:7). ¹²And what does he say? *Come and listen to me, sons; I will teach you the fear of the Lord* (Ps 33[34]:12). ¹³*Run while you have the light of life, that the darkness of death may not overtake you* (John 12:35).

¹⁴Seeking his workman in a multitude of people, the Lord calls out to him and lifts his voice again: ¹⁵*Is there anyone here who yearns for life and desires to see good days?* (Ps 33[34]:13). ¹⁶If you hear this and your answer is "I do," God then directs these words to you: ¹⁷*If you desire true and eternal life, keep your tongue free from vicious talk and your lips from all deceit; turn away from evil and do good; let peace be your quest and aim* (Ps 33[34]:14-15). ¹⁸Once you have done this, *my eyes will be upon you and my ears will listen for your prayers; and even before you ask me, I will say to you: Here I am* (Isa 58:9). ¹⁹What, dear brothers, is more delightful than this voice of the Lord calling to us? ²⁰See how the Lord in his love shows us the way of life. ²¹Clothed then with faith and the performance of good works, let us set out on this way, with the Gospel for our guide, that we may

deserve to see him *who has called us to his kingdom* (1 Thess 2:12).

²²If we wish to dwell in the tent of this kingdom, we will never arrive unless we run there by doing good deeds. ²³But let us ask the Lord with the Prophet: *Who will dwell in your tent, Lord; who will find rest upon your holy mountain?* (Ps 14[15]:1). ²⁴After this question, brothers, let us listen well to what the Lord says in reply, for he shows us the way to his tent. ²⁵*One who walks without blemish*, he says, *and is just in all his dealings;* ²⁶*who speaks the truth from his heart and has not practiced deceit with his tongue;* ²⁷*who has not wronged a fellowman in any way, nor listened to slanders against his neighbor* (Ps 14[15]:2-3). ²⁸He has foiled the evil one, the devil, at every turn, flinging both him and his promptings far from the sight of his heart. While these temptations were still young, he caught hold of them and dashed them against Christ (Ps 14[15]:4; 136[137]:9). ²⁹These people fear the Lord, and do not become elated over their good deeds; they judge it is the Lord's power, not their own, that brings about the good in them. ³⁰*They praise* (Ps 14[15]:4) the Lord working in them, and say with the Prophet: *Not to us, Lord, not to us give the glory, but to your name alone* (Ps 113[115:1]:9). ³¹In just this way Paul the Apostle refused to take credit for the power of his preaching. He declared: *By God's grace I am what I am* (1 Cor 15:10). ³²And again he said: *He who boasts should make his boast in the Lord* (2 Cor 10:17). ³³That