



### **Prayer Before Studying Theology:**

O God, who resists the proud and gives grace to the humble;  
grant us the virtue of true humility,  
    of which your only-begotten Son himself gave us the perfect example;  
that we may never offend you by our pride  
    nor be rejected on account of our self-assertion;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

--Leonine Sacramentary

(For private prayer, see further, "Benedict's Pledge" in Woodeene Koenig-Bricker, *Praying with the Saints: Making Their Prayers Our Own*, Chicago: Loyola Press, 2001, pp. 25-27)

### **Week #4a: Benedict of Nursia and the Rise of Western Monasticism**

#### What is Asceticism and Why Do We Need It?

The Greek word *askesis* simply means "practice" (e.g. the practice of a certain mode of life) and it was sometimes used in the narrower sense of a life that was ordered toward some higher goal.

- For the Roman Stoic philosophers, the term *askesis* is used to refer to a life
  - ordered by reason toward virtue and
  - free of the disturbance caused by assent to irrational beliefs.
- For early Christians, the term *askesis* is used to refer to a pattern of life that emphasizes
  - study and meditation (esp. of/on Scripture),
  - prayer and worship (whether corporate and/or communal) and
  - whatever forms of self-restraint or self-denial are strictly necessary to promote or maximize study, prayer and worship,
    - simplifying and limiting
      - one's material goods (e.g. possessions, food and sleep) and
      - ones relationships (solitude/quiet/silence; living a single, chaste life)
    - allowing time for careful self examination
      - to detect areas of weakness in which one readily gives in to temptation;
      - to understand how temptation works and why, when and how it gains power over us;
      - what repentance involves and how repentance functions in relation to other aspects of the spiritual life;
      - to discern what Christ's life teaches us about humility and the service of God;

- through dependence upon God, to gain greater spiritual discernment;
- learning, by the grace of God, to deal with suffering and affliction in a more God-centered way.

The origins of such practice have roots within the Gospel itself; see e.g. Mt. 9:9 (pp. Lk. 5:27-28\*); 10:37-39; 16:24; 19:21,27-29 (cf. Lk. 5:11 pp Mk.10:28 as the background to 19:27; compare also Lk. 12:33; 14:33); Phil. 3:7-9a.

- For the athletic metaphor of strenuous training, see 1 Cor. 9:25-27 (cf. 1 Tim. 4:7-8 and perhaps presupposed in Gal. 4:24-25).
  - For this as necessary to the life of prayer, see 1 Pet. 4:7.
- For the need for the Gospel to transcend all other relationships and commitments, see Lk. 14:25-27.
- For the virtue of singleness, see 1 Cor. 7.
- For the superiority of heavenly things to the things of this world, see Col. 3:1-5 (cf. 1 Pet. 4:2).
- For the virtue of careful self-examination, see 2 Cor. 13:5; James 1:23-25; 1 Cor. 11:28-29
- For the need to pray continually and unceasingly, see 1 Thess. 5:17; 2 Thess. 1:11.

The Character and Content of Early Monastic Rules: In the early development of the ascetic tradition in the late third and early fourth century, we find three forms of life:

- a) people retiring to a solitary life of prayer and spiritual disciplines on the outskirts of a village, supporting themselves by the keeping of a small garden and perhaps by making some simple crafts (e.g. weaving baskets);
- b) people living together in a house in a city, engaging in a common business (e.g. buying and reselling textiles or basic household goods) and spending time in prayer and mutual encouragement in the Christian life;
- c) persons who had no fixed place or property but moved about (were itinerant) and lived by begging from those they encountered in the cities and villages they passed through;

By the end of the fourth century/beginning of the fifth century, there was a tendency to repudiate these three earlier forms of the ascetic life and prefer for ascetics to be

- grouped together in an enclosed community
- under the direction of a leader (abbot),
- following a common rule of life.

There were a variety of reasons why this trend emerged and reshaped the Western ascetical tradition:

(1) Earlier models of ascetical life lacked quality control and permanence.

- For example, in regard to (c), if a person claims to be a Christian ascetic, how do you that that is actually what they are? If they live alone and are inclined to wander around, how do you know that they are not simply a beggar, a con man, or even a criminal seeking to evade the law?

- In regard to both (a) and (c), is there any guarantee that simply by living alone one can learn how to pray or better practice the spiritual disciplines?
  - Perhaps living alone is just a sign of an anti-social character (stubbornness and unwillingness to learn from others, be corrected by others or serve others).
  - Perhaps in living alone one will simply become lazy and lukewarm in their devotion and there will be no structure or incentives in place that can challenge them and help them overcome these limitations.
    - In the East, this led to the practice of "spiritual fatherhood," i.e. apprenticeship/mentoring in the ascetic life by a well respected, older ascetic.
    - In the West, it led to the requirement that persons live together under a rule under the direction of an abbot. (This also happened in the East but generally with less emphasis on uniform structure and less fear of solitary asceticism.)
- In regard to (b), there is something odd about being an ascetic and yet owning a house and running a small business in the midst of a big, bustling, noisy city. Shouldn't renunciation of the world and one's possession mean precisely that?
- Finally, in regard to (a), (b) and (c), won't such unregulated, independent, self-made ascetics end up clashing with the local clergy, competing with the latter or usurping their authority? If there are two unrelated types of spiritual authority in a parish--one institutional and one charismatic/non-institutional--there is bound to be trouble.

If the ascetic community is to function well and persist over time, it was argued, all persons desiring to take up a life of ascetic discipline must

- renounce their claims (e.g. to individual possessions and to control over their individual lives) and
- follow a single set of standardized, relatively impersonal norms (the monastic rule),
- which the community leader (abbot) is to implement and maintain.
  - Those who wish to join the community must agree to abide by the rule, not contesting the abbot's interpretation of it (lest self-will and stubbornness should create division within the community).
  - Note that vows are for life, after an appropriate process of instruction and probation (ch. 58).

Benedict's Life: Our principal source for information on Benedict's life is Book II of Gregory the Great's *Dialogues Concerning the Life and Miracles of the Italian Fathers* (written 593-594). Since Gregory is primarily interested in Benedict's miracles rather than his life, what we know about Benedict's family, upbringing and entrance into the monastic life is quite limited.

Benedict was born c. 480 into a noble family in Nursia (in Umbria in Italy) and was later sent to Rome to complete his higher education. Disturbed by the low morals of his fellow students, he abandoned his studies and retired to live a solitary life of prayer in a cave in

the Anio valley (in the Sabine Hills near Subiaco), depending for his food upon the charity of neighbors.

As others sought him out and asked to join him, he founded twelve monasteries, each with twelve monks and an abbot (overseer). Power struggles within the new monastic communities led to Benedict leaving and founding in 525 his own monastery farther south in Campania at Monte Cassino, which became the center of the Benedictine order and a well known center for the copying and preservation of manuscripts. Benedict died at Monte Cassino at some time in the mid-sixth century.

Benedict's Rule: Gregory the Great (*Dialogi* II, 36) refers to a monastic rule (*regula*) produced by Benedict to order the life of the monastic community under his care. The *Rule* is a compilation of materials from earlier Eastern and Western ascetic and monastic authors.

- Eastern writings known directly or indirectly to Benedict include
  - Athanasius' *Life of Antony*,
  - works of Pachomius and
  - the *Rule* of Basil of Caesarea (which was the principal monastic rule observed in the Greek East).
- Western writings known to Benedict include works by
  - Martin of Tours (who had lived a solitary life of prayer and been the abbot of monastery, as well as being a bishop),
  - John Cassian (who had studied ascetic and monastic life in the Greek Egypt, esp. Egypt) and
  - Augustine (who had lived in small monastic communities with friends both before and while he was a bishop);

#### Compilation and Structure of the Rule:

- Benedict's *Rule* appears to have been compiled piecemeal and to have originally been composed of independent units.
  - Thus, for example, it appears that the sections on faults (chs. XXI-XXX) and the divine Office (=pattern of worship; chs. VIII-XX) originally existed independently.
  - Much of the other material was written later and combined with the other pre-existing materials in a somewhat haphazard manner.
  - The *Rule* originally ended with ch. LXVI; as one can see from the end of LXVI, the seven additional chapters at the end were an appendix added in the second draft.

#### Early Revisions of the Rule:

- Benedict's original text of the *Rule*, known through three manuscripts, fluctuates between the later, vulgar Latin of his own day and the classical Latin of an earlier period (a literary ideal he could not consistently attain).
- A version of the *Rule* edited and revised to agree more nearly with classical Latin appeared in Gaul (modern France) by the seventh century and virtually supplanted the original form of the *Rule*.

### The Relation Between the *Rule* of Benedict and the *Rule of the Master*:

- There is an anonymous early Western monastic rule of uncertain date, written in later Latin, called the *Rule of the Master* (*Regula magistri*), which has a great deal of material in common with Benedict's *Rule*.
  - The *Rule of the Master* is about three times as long as Benedict's *Rule*, but includes virtually all the material contained in Benedict's rule, either verbatim or by allusion, except the last seven chapters, which as we have said were an appendix added to the second draft.)
- It was traditionally thought that the *Rule of the Master* was a rather crude paraphrase of Benedict's *Rule*. In 1938 A. Genestout argued that the relation between these two texts should be reversed; Benedict drew upon an earlier rule, the *Rule of the Master* (early sixth century, written near Rome?), in formulating his own rule but added an appendix to the second draft which was based upon another source or sources.
- Although Genestout's proposal is not universally accepted, it does make a certain amount of sense. Furthermore, if it is true, then **we can appreciate Benedict's own thought only when we identify material peculiar to his *Rule*** (not found in the *Rule of the Master*), assuming this peculiar material to be Benedict's own personal addition and representative of his own interests.
  - An easy way to do this is to use Luke Dysinger, O.S.B., *The Rule of Saint Benedict. Latin and English*, Trabuco Canyon, CA: Source Books, 1996 (pb. 1997; ISBN 0-940147-27-0; available from Source Books, Box 794 Trabuco Canyon, CA 92678), which gives the Latin text and English translation on facing pages, in both placing the material peculiar to Benedict in **bold type**.

The Later History of Benedict's *Rule*: The *Rule* aims only to be an orientation guide for beginners (cf. ch. 73) entering the monastery under Benedict's direction. In later centuries, however, it became *the* rule for monks in the West and was often seen as not just a guide for beginners entering a monastery but a sufficient basis for one's whole Christian life

- Meditation upon and strict and uniform observance of the rule was seen as the way to rightness of life and ultimately Heaven;
- Other forms of ascetic/monastic observance were seen as dangerous and to be avoided and Benedictine monasticism seen as best and purest expression of the Christian life.

The danger of this was that it could create a certain low-grace (anti-Augustinian) concern with linking proper procedure to spiritual progress (or even salvation), together with an intolerance of alternative forms of Christian spiritual practice.

## Summary of the *Rule of Benedict*

(Citations are from the English translation of Dysinger)

### **Prolog. 1: The importance of listening to an authoritative voice**

- "Listen, O my son, to the precepts of the master and incline the ear of your heart"; compare Prolog.12,19 (drawn from the *Rule of the Master*): "And what does he say? *Come my sons, listen to me, I will teach you the fear of the Lord* (Psalm 34:12) ...What can be sweeter than the this voice of the Lord inviting us, dearest brothers?"
- In other words, if one cannot accept an authority outside oneself, one
  - will not be able to listen to God's voice (since God is also an external authority) and
  - will not develop a serious (non-trivial) interest in finding or pursuing God's will.

We need to develop habits of dependent listening with an openness to obey.

Prolog. 2-3: **A pattern of life is necessary for us** to pursue sanctification (i.e. progressive growth in holiness and obedience to the will of God)

- "return by *the labor of obedience* to him from whom you had departed through the laziness of disobedience"
- "*renouncing your own will* you may fight for the Lord Christ, the true King, by taking up the strong and bright weapons of obedience"; compare Prolog.22,25-29 (drawn from the *Rule of the Master*).

### **Prolog. 4: Spiritual progress is impossible without prayerful dependence upon God**

- "Whenever you begin any good work, beg of him with most earnest prayer to perfect it"; compare Prolog.29-32,40-41 (drawn from the *Rule of the Master*) and note the Augustinian background.

Prolog. 24-28: The custody of the senses--A life that aims to draw near to God must involve keeping a watch over

- what thoughts we hold on to,
- what we choose to look at,
- what we choose to listen to and
- what we choose to say.

Sometimes the most powerful choices we make are by unformed assent, i.e. by

- wanting to keep looking at something or
- finding it pleasing or gratifying to hold on to it,

even though we claim that no official decision has been made yet.

Prol.45-50 +*Incipit textus regulae* (mostly original to Benedict):

**The rule of life adopted must have sufficient structure to encourage the amendment of vices and preserve justice and charity. At the same time, it must not be harsh or oppressive, so as not to discourage beginners.**

**Justice**<----->**Charity**

**The need to be severe with ourselves, so that we do not deceive ourselves and end up doing the Devil's work (RB Prol. 28, 42).**

**Love that values others and respects them in their present weakness, not abusing them or manipulating them, but helping them to grow and flourish (RB Prol. 49).**

**Discernment and moderation as the mean (middle ground) that is needed to build up the community (RB Prol. 46-47; 2.8.12,24-25,31-32).**

**\*Ch. 1** (mostly drawn from the *Rule of the Master*): The rule of life may be pursued in different kinds of life but for monks there are four basic patterns

- (a) living in community;
- (b) living as a solitary;
- (c) living in a semi-formal community;
- (d) living as an itinerant,

with (a) being the best; (b) being suitable for people who have proved themselves over time in (a); and (c) and (d) being unsuitable.

**\*Chs. 2-3: If the community is to remain a place of prayer and a context where spiritual progress can occur, great care should be taken in who is chosen to lead the community and how this leading is actually to be done.** If the community is to maintain a healthy unity of purpose, one must regard the leader (abbot) as standing *in persona Christi* (as Christ's representative) to the community (2.2; compare ch. 21 on the deans [*decani*] of the monastery). **This both gives authority and sharply limits this authority within certain definite limits.** (The material carefully qualifying the nature of the leader's authority is mostly original to Benedict.)

The leader must therefore

- (a) "never teach or enact or command anything contrary to the precepts of the Lord" (2.4) and
- (b) teach and lead by the example of his character and his actions (=integrity), following the example of Christ (2.12-13; compare 65);
- (c) never show partiality or favoritism (subverting justice/equity by distinguishing between persons on any basis other than that of the Gospel) (2.16-22; compare 34.2);

(d) provide pastoral care (teaching, encouraging, rebuking) that is patient and takes appropriate account of others' individual circumstances, temperaments, weaknesses/besetting sins, and relative degree of spiritual progress (2.23-29; cf. 64)

(e) welcome the input of members of the community (including its younger members), even when the final decision and final responsibility remain his own (3.1-13)

**\*Ch.4:** The duties of the Christian life (adapted to take account of monastic community; cf. ch. 4.50,61,70-71,78)-->goal to arrive at **stability of life** (*stabilitas*), where obedience toward others (giving what is owed them) is matched by charity (a real, better love from God) and one is no longer blown around by rapidly shifting views and feelings that invite one to sin (cf. 4.7-71,78).

**\*Ch.5:** Obedience as the necessary expression of **humility** within the monastic community (The discipline of living not according to one's own will/desires, but rather the will of Christ [with one's superior being seen as Christ's representative] and with the right attitude; compare 33.4 and 68)

**\*Chs. 6-7:** Frictions created within the community by talk that is imprudent/disrespectful (ch. 6) or proud (ch. 7) or aims to conceal or justify evil (cf. 7.44).

- **The dangers of easy and excessive speaking** are emphasized in 7.56; 43.8; 48.18.

**Instead one must, through different forms of humility, ascend to a perfect (habitual) love of God and Christ** which

- casts out fear and
- naturally shows the love of God and Christ in one's actions.

This portion of Benedict's rule derived from John Cassian's 10 criteria for humility, as edited and formed into a hierarchical temporal sequence by the *Rule of the Master*.

- Reviewing ch. 7 of the *Rule*, does this hierarchical temporal sequence actually make sense?
  - Distinction and hierarchical ordering of different types/grades of virtue is endemic in ascetic literature, primarily as a teaching device.
  - Sometimes this involves the idea that there will be a discernible exterior sign of past inner progress; compare the "marks of a true Christian" idea in Pietism.
- Which of these steps actually require sequence in time? Can't most of these simply coincide?

**\*Chs. 8-19 (cf. 47 and 52):** Description of worship within the community and how it should be ordered and where flexibility may be exercised.

**\*Ch. 20:** The proper attitude in prayer (brevity, reverence/purity of heart, and unity of heart in communal worship)

**\*Chs. 21-30 (cf. 43-44 and 48.20):** Discipline within the community: propriety, correction and excommunication.

- **Care of souls** (cf. 46.5-6) may involve
  - private admonition,
  - public rebuke/deprivation of table fellowship, and
  - corporal punishment/excommunication, with provision made for amendment of life and readmission to the community.



- **Gentleness in handling the weak and erring** is necessary:
  - Ch. 27.5: "For he should know that he has undertaken to care for weak souls, not to exercise tyranny over the strong."
- \***Chs. 31-35 (cf. 55 and 57):** Possessions and common life
  - All **possessions are to be held in common**, with no personal property retained after entrance into the community; see ch. 48 on the role of **manual labor** within the common life).
  - Against envy/being fussy/murmuring (esp. due to presumptions of favoritism or inequity). Note the role played by pride, jealousy and envy in ch. 65 and the emphasis upon the avoidance of quarrels in 69-72)
- \***Chs. 36-37:** Dealing with the weak, the aged and the young
- \***Ch. 38 (cf. 42 and 48):** Reading at table and at other times (the importance of reading in monastic spirituality: see ch. 48 on *lectio divina*)
- \***Chs. 39-41:** Food and drink (compare 49 on Lenten observance)
- \***Chs. 50-51 (cf. 67):** Travel (incl. meals and worship while away from the community)
- \***Chs. 53-54 (cf. 61 and 66-67)** Dealing with outsiders (guests, etc.)
  - 53.6-7: "And in this very salutation all humility is to be shown to all arriving or departing guests: by bowing the head or prostrating the whole body on the ground Christ is to be adored in them just as he is received in them."
- \***Chs. 58-66:** Entrance into monastic life: the receiving and ordering of monks
- \***Chs. 67-72:** How brothers in the monastery should handle delegated responsibilities and interpersonal relationships/conflicts.
- \***Ch. 73:** Conclusion—the whole of just observance not contained in the rule; it must be supplemented by the spiritual counsels of approved writers of the past (Cassian, Basil, etc.).