

2

Benedictine Spirituality

Christian Monastic Origins

NO ONE CAN SPEAK of monasticism as a school of spirituality without directly linking it to the figure of St. Benedict of Nursia. Our use of the phrase “schools of spirituality” originated with Benedict who viewed the monastery as a school for spiritual development. The milieu in which he lived and crafted the monastic life was one that was filled with chaos in Western Europe. The school of spirituality that his genius created has become the cornerstone for the majority of monastic communities worldwide within Christianity. Monasticism in the West took its decided shape from the phenomenal leadership of Benedict of Nursia.

The Milieu

As mentioned in the introduction to monasticism, for all its staid characteristics, monasticism was not always so structured and stable. Some scholars would situate the origins of monasticism in the Egyptian deserts of the fourth century, when devout laymen and women escaped the socio-political conventions and mediocrity of a Christianity that had emerged from hiding with its acceptance as a state religion. In an attempt to recapture the radicalism of the martyrs, desert abbas and ammas adopted

Part I: Monastic Spirituality

austere lives of solitude and asceticism. Gradually, these individuals gathered into clusters and attempted to live communally.

The monastic lifestyle that Benedict came into in the late 400s was filled with roaming monks without supervision or spiritual guidance. True order and discipline was missing from their lives. Benedict's contribution to monasticism was providing for the monks assembled with him a stable and balanced approach to a prayerful life in common. The legislative genius of the Benedictine way was so profound that the way of life he proffered was embraced by monastics throughout Europe within decades after Benedict's death.

The Founder

St. Benedict of Nursia (480–547 CE), known as “the Father of Europe,” was born of an affluent family in Italy and studied in Rome. At a young age, Benedict became appalled by the paganism he witnessed. He saw a Christianity that was crumbling in the city and he felt he must retreat into the life of a hermit near Subiaco in order to live a genuine faithful life. He fled society to live a solitary life in a cave. It appears he underwent a deep religious conversion and news spread that here was a holy man. He was sought out by monks to become their leader. Initially friendly with him, these followers later turned against him and tried to poison him. Leaving that group, he later was found by another and he accepted leadership there. These disciples, who gathered around him, helped him found the monastery of Monte Cassino along with numerous others.

The era in which Benedict lived was fraught with political instability with the sacking of Rome and the wars between rivaling barbarian tribes. Perhaps Benedict's talent for order was a gift of the Holy Spirit to the disorder of the times. The severe austerity that he had practiced as a hermit softened into a more balanced form. From his personal experience as a spiritual searcher and leader, St. Benedict wrote for his monks *The Rule* that applied some structure, moderation, and depth in a meaningful way to the communal life at the monastery. Through the practices assembled in *The Rule*, individuals could attain virtue and sanctify all of their life to God.

The stability that Benedict introduced to monastic life produced an atmosphere conducive for a life focused on personal sanctification and

the sacred. No mention of an apostolate can be found in *The Rule*. Benedict knew the nature of humanity and recognized that the habitual application in daily life of ritual, prayer, and charity would be difficult for many. Yet, he issued the challenge to his monks to empty themselves of self-will and selfishness and dwell in love with their brothers. In the routine of living together, God would be found.

To curb the restlessness so prevalent in his day, Benedict required the monks to take a vow of stability, promising to remain in the same enclosure the duration of their monastic life. The monastery then became a self-supporting, self-contained community with no outside authority. The abbot was comparable to the bishop in status and was the primary governing figure.

Fixed times of prayer in common and in private were primary. Four hours daily were devoted to liturgical worship, another four hours to private reading and six hours to work with the hands. Silence permeated the atmosphere. This structure provided the necessary foundation for earnest souls seeking God to flourish. It also was the stabilizing environment for unruly aspirants to tame their hearts so that God could work in them.

Spiritual Legacy for Today: Guidance for an Ordering of Life

When we inquire about the legacy that Benedict left us, we may balk at the highly structured lifestyle that is involved in the routine of a monastic community. Yet, in Benedict's day as in our own, such structure had value in the midst of great chaos and brokenness.

An ordered life cannot be assumed. Even the most intelligent of persons may find areas of disorder and ambiguity. Benedict's guidelines for living a holy life involved the combination of community, moderation, humble obedience, and vocal prayer. This emphasis in Western monasticism was in contrast to the individualistic, angelic, and competitive asceticism of monasteries in the Byzantine East. It grounded the monks of the West practically in a balanced life of work and study. We shall examine each of these elements that are part of the vast legacy left behind by Benedict of Nursia.

Part I: Monastic Spirituality

Community

Today many young people who come from broken homes and a fractured society crave the stability and tranquility of an ordered life. They long for a stable community through which they can touch the sacred. Such was the case in many of the wandering souls in Benedict's day who sought out a place in which they could feel God's presence.

While cloistered monasticism may be limited in its appeal, the lessons offered from it greatly benefitted the seeker who sincerely wanted to incorporate prayer, meditation, and a contemplative rhythm into their life. The habit of regular prayer, study, and labor within a community of peers, elders, and aspirants was a great support to those attempting to develop in the spiritual life. The community itself became a laboratory, a petri dish if you will, through which the experiment in spiritual maturation occurred. This environment proved an essential element for monks and nuns in the fostering of a contemplative focus. An individual respectful of leadership and the larger need of the community was both stretched and stabilized by the living ambiance that the community offered.

Moderation

Benedict's simple dictums in *The Rule* provided a regular daily schedule that balanced the life of work, reading, and worship under a common roof. It supplied guidance through simple methods. These methods required diligence and humility. Through faith, good works, and the guidance of the Gospel, Benedict encouraged his monks to reach for the goal of obedience, "to merit to see him who has called us into his kingdom."

Moderation governed the monastery. Benedict knew the hazards of excessive asceticism, isolation, activity, and laxity. His recommendation was for a moderate integration of the different facets of life. Work was necessary in order to eat. Study broadened the mind and heart. Prayer maintained the focus and contact with God and the inner self. All of these elements in moderation provided a proper balance and fostered holiness of life.

Obedience

Obedience to the abbot was essential. But the abbot's obedience to the Spirit was a very serious matter, as well. Given the feudal context of Benedict's era, a hierarchical approach was to be expected. But obedience implied a listening to the spirit and trusting that God was using the abbot to further the monk's movement into sanctity.

Surprising to us may be Benedict's invitation to see God in the least likely, the humblest of guests, the youngest of novices, the poorest wayfarer. All carried the richness of God. Special attention was given to each of these persons for through these one was often surprised by God and reminded of the unassuming ways in which God reveals God's self.

Vocal Prayer

The regular recitation aloud of the Psalms accompanied by a life of obedience in listening to the Holy Spirit had a formative influence in its regularity and focus. Verbal prayer spoken in common steeped the community in reminders for living an upright life of care and compassion. The Psalms were a vehicle for catechetical instruction. Gradually through repetition, the verses became memorized and integrated into the heart of the person praying. The Scripture was encountered in the liturgical life of the entire body of the community and reinforced in private devotion and prayer. Simple scripturally-based vocal prayer provided a discipline that enriched and grounded a person's life.

Contemporary Spiritual and Pastoral Contributions

When we examine the many spiritual gifts passed on to us through the tradition of St. Benedict, three obvious contributions come to mind. Guidance for a daily time of private, personal prayer and study is found in the transmission of the practice of *Lectio Divina*. A scripturally-based order of communal prayer for the hours of the day is seen in the *Liturgy of the Hours*. A structured lifestyle that maximizes the development of the interior life in common with others in an enclosed environment is the gift of monasticism.

Part I: Monastic Spirituality

Monasticism

Monasticism is a vocation not suited to everyone. But even today in the industrializing society in which we live, monasticism offers us an alternative to chaotic existence. An enclosed life, focused on a balanced rhythm of prayer, work, and study, monasticism is a way of life valued in many other religious traditions. It holds a privileged place in Christianity.

Benedict's gift was to standardize the daily regimen and offer guidance for living a life dedicated to God and contemplation. Benedict's *Rule* gave consistency and order to a rather freestyle existence for monks in his age. It provides the same for us and it has been time-tested over centuries of practice. Monasticism is one form of spiritual life that continues to invite people to depth and single-mindedness. Whether time in a monastery is a lifetime or a short time, monasticism has a viability that reminds us concretely that there is another way to live our lives, one that is specifically and unequivocally focused on God and the small community. This is a gift which has incomparable benefit, whether we frequent the space or not.

Lectio Divina

Lectio Divina is a classical monastic practice of prayerful reading of the Bible and reflecting contemplatively upon its meaning and instruction. While Lectio is not Bible study, it involves the reading of a Bible text in such a way as to open the reader to the Holy Spirit. It is practice that can be integrated outside the walls of a monastery as well as within.

In the monastic form of Lectio Divina, the individual prays with a text of Scripture and notices when there is movement within, prompted by a specific phrase in the text. This felt movement or quiver inside invites the reader to return to the phrase and dwell with it, repeating it slowly over and over again, letting it penetrate to the interior of the person of prayer. Lingering with the text opens the one who prays to new depth in the text. This prolonged listening to the word is not to analyze the text or understand it logically as much as to remain with it. New insights and meanings may also emerge for the person at prayer to integrate. Decidedly contemplative, Lectio Divina fosters a more receptive way of attending and learning from the Word.

Liturgy of the Hours

The Liturgy of the Hours is known also as “The Divine Office” or “The Breviary.” In monasticism, the entire day is consecrated through vocal prayer. The community stops working at fixed times of the day and pauses for the Word of God. This practice draws the attention of the person at prayer to God through the recitation of Scripture and Psalms at regulated time periods during the day.

The recitation of the Liturgy of the Hours several times a day (monks do it five or six times) familiarizes a person with the many Psalms, instructions, and stories of Scripture, as well as the writings of the early Church. This recitation done habitually allows the words and ideas to sink in deeply and eventually erupt in the heart of the reader. Phrases rise up that comfort the person in times of suffering, provide inspiration in times of despair, and proclaim joy in times of celebration. The practice of prayer with the Bible, structured for us in the breviary-cycle, reinforces our knowledge of the texts and they gradually become an echo of our own interiors.

In Summary

Throughout the world Benedictine monasteries exist in great number for those attracted to contemplative stillness. Ministries of prayer, retreat, research, and writing have developed from within the Benedictine tradition. Universities, houses of prayer, and centers devoted to spiritual healing have moved contemporary Benedictine men and women into a greater apostolic thrust in the last century. Many laypeople associate with and affiliate themselves with specific communities to support their own practice of moderation. Some join the Benedictine family as oblates and further devote themselves to the Benedictine values and lifestyle as they continue to live their lives outside the walls of the monastery.

The principles generated within Benedict’s communities serve many outside the monastic walls. The balance of prayer, communal life, work, and study is a model for anyone who wants to be healthy and mature spiritually. As places of prayer and worship, Benedictine houses continue to remind us of a transcendent reality and encourage a faithfulness that is as solid as the sixteen centuries that Benedictine spirituality has been in existence.

Part I: Monastic Spirituality

Questions for Reflection:

- Have you ever found yourself attracted to the monastery?
- What attracted you?
- Would you characterize your life as “an ordered life”?

Resources for Ongoing Study:

- Fry, Timothy, editor. *The Rule of St. Benedict In English*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1982.
- Gannon, Thomas M., and George W. Traub. *The Desert And The City: An Interpretation of the History of Christian Spirituality*. London: Macmillan, 1969.

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