

Topic 8: The Monastic Journey, Part 3

Overview: St. Benedict of Nursia is the “Father of Monasticism” in the West. The Rule of St. Benedict is a classic text that had a profound impact on religious life in the Church and the Western world in general. It was this text and the living of the Rule in the monasteries that preserved the culture of Western civilization. The wisdom of St. Benedict can be seen in the balance of his Rule and the rhythm of the way of life that it proposes.

St. Benedict and Benedictine Spirituality: St. Benedict and his sister, St. Scholastica, founded a monastery and a convent. When writing a Rule for his community, St. Benedict tapped into basic human experience and dynamics to create a container for spiritual life that transcended his particular monastery and began a movement that would prevail for centuries.

- The ultimate purpose of the Rule was to come closer to God.
 - 1) He built upon Pachomius, John Cassian, and other sources.
 - 2) Most, if not all human beings need a sense of structure in order to reach their goals.
 - 3) St. Benedict did not make a God out of structure. The structure was to be a path to God.
 - 4) St. Benedict avoided excessive practices. His purpose was to establish a school for the Lord’s service.
- The first word of the Rule is *obsculta*, to listen. St. Benedict invites us to listen deeply with the ear of the heart.
- Certain aspects of the Rule can apply to all of us.
 - 1) There is a rhythm to life that keeps a clear focus on seeking God.
 - 2) Benedict emphasizes practical needs.
 - 3) His Rule is based on the *ora et labora*, prayer and work. These are the pillars upon which Benedictine spirituality is based.

The Life of St. Benedict: The spirituality of the Rule, as opposed to Eastern spirituality, is conditioned by the simpler, less sophisticated culture of the West. We can get a sense of Benedict’s personality and way of thinking by reading this text.

- St. Benedict was born in Nursia, Italy, around 480. As a young man, he studied in Rome, but eventually left the disorder and corruption of the city to become a hermit.
- After his hermetical period, a number of monks gathered around Benedict. His attempt to compel his fellow monks to live a more fervent monastic life failed. His first experience of coenobitic life ended when some of the other monks tried to poison him.
- At the time, Benedict was familiar with the disorderly varieties of monastic life in the East and West. He began to establish new communities at Subiaco. Finally, he went to Monte Cassino, where he wrote the Rule in the last years of his life.

The Original Form of Benedictine Life

- For Benedict, community was essential. The living out of charity is the primary ministry of the monk.
- The monastery should be self-sufficient. In a sense, the monastery would become a symbol of paradise on Earth.
- Benedict wanted to bring a sense of stability to life in the monastery. He encouraged community living rather than individuality.
- The abbot was the symbol of Christ around which the monks would gather, forming an apostolic community.
- All of the monks were originally laymen. The monastic movement was a lay movement. As monasticism became institutionalized, it became clericalized.
- Humility is at the heart of the Rule of St. Benedict.
- Daily life in the monastery consisted of a rhythmic balance of three elements:
 - 1) Liturgical prayer/chanting of the Divine Office
 - 2) Manual labor
 - 3) Lectio Divina

Over the years, various developments and changes occurred, and various forms of Benedictine monasticism emerged.

Review Questions

1. Humility is the foundation of the Rule of St. Benedict. Humility leads us on the path to finding the true self, dying to the ego and rising as a new person in Christ. Humility comes from the Latin word humus, meaning “from the earth.” Meditate

on who you are in the light of who God is, and see where this leads you on the path of humility.

2. Conversion of heart is an important theme in the Rule of St. Benedict. Think about the ways you need to change and spend some time praying for conversion of heart.