

# A Blessed Life

Benedictine Guidelines for Those Who Long  
for Good Days

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Translated by Martin Kessler



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For

*Anne*, fellow founder of our little community,  
*Godelieve*, with whom I enjoy praying in the crypt of the  
house that Anselm helped to build,  
*Andrea*, the prioress who corrects me as a sister,  
and *Gibert*, the cellarer who tackles everything.





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# Introduction

Who does not long for good days, for a life on which blessing rests? In the Prologue of his Rule for monks, St. Benedict invites his readers and potential followers to join him and in that invitation he cites John's gospel and Psalm 34: "And what does He say: 'Come, my sons, listen to me: I will teach you the fear of the Lord. Hasten, as long as you have life, so that the darkness of death may not overcome you.' While the Lord, in the midst of all those people whom he calls, seeks for laborers, he repeats: 'Who is the man, who longs for life and wishes to see good days?' When you hear this and answer: 'I,' then God says to you . . . ." (RB Prol. 112-16).<sup>1</sup>

While this language may sound rather archaic, two things are clear at once. Benedict's program is fully dynamic: we need to hurry to give a good turn to our life. For the rest, it will subsequently appear that we, having made that choice, still have a long and patient way to go. The second element is that Benedict offers a way of life which grants joy and contentment, a life on which blessing rests. Who does not long for "good days"? The Benedictine perspective wants to be attractive, as we will read further on in the Prologue. That does not mean that this way is easy, but that is true of everything worthwhile. How much practice is needed before anyone can play the cello concert of Edward Elgar superbly? Anyone who begins this way is often

attracted by something or more often, by someone: an experience of a concert, or the film about the cellist Jacqueline du Pré, or a teacher. It costs a lot of effort and much guidance by experienced musicians to develop into a cellist who in turn knows how to touch the souls of others. But what gratification and joy when the music really succeeds! At that point, the patient drudgery and persistent practice is forgotten.

Benedict presents to his candidates a comparable road:

We will therefore establish a training school for the service of the Lord. In its plan we hope to prescribe nothing that is too difficult, or that is too heavy. If something should occur in it which seems quite severe, but is required on reasonable grounds for the improvement of mistakes and maintaining love, do not be frightened instantly and do not flee from the way of salvation, which is always narrow at the outset. (RB Prol. 45-48)

The (excellent) translator is here a bit “severe”; the Latin text is milder: “Too,” which is used twice in the translation, “too difficult,” “too heavy” does not occur in the Latin text, but perhaps the translator, Father Frans Vromen, wished to make a small correction of Benedict on the basis of his ample monastic experience. It would be unrealistic that in the monastic way of life (as in all other ways of life), the difficult and hard parts would be lacking. An experienced monk, who apparently experienced a difficult period in his life in the monastic community, once said about the vow of *stabilitas* (the persistent “sticking with it”): “For me, *stabilitas* means that I say to myself in the morning while I am shaving: I am not yet leaving today.”

But we are dealing here with an inviting Prologue, sketching an attractive picture. That also is suggested by the expression “rather hard”—the Latin text has *paululum restrictius*. The dictionary has for *paululus* “rather minor,” “a little,” “a touch,” meanings that do not inspire fear but do indicate that discipline and perseverance will be needed. A monastery is not a spiritual massage parlor. But the practicing of the right attitudes is worthwhile and the road becomes

easier and more joyful because of the progress one makes: "As one makes progress in the monastic life and in faith, however, the heart is enlarged as one rushes along the way of God's commandments with unspeakable joyous love" (RB Prol. 49-50).

Monastic life, according to the Trappist Michael Casey, is the absolute opposite of an aimless life. It has a goal and it has developed a tested and well-regulated network of means by which that goal may be realized.<sup>2</sup>

The rhythm and the progress of monastic life are directed toward optimally setting people on the road toward joy for which they are destined.

With those who are presently the eldest in the abbey to which I am attached, I note in all sorts of little things that they are such vital people internally. Sometimes we jokingly (but also lovingly) call these two brothers, who are approaching ninety "our stick brigade." They are mild, ripe, tolerant, and humorous men, not ascetic, dried-out sourpusses. One can hear that in their voices when they read or explain the Scriptures, which they still do regularly. Both have and cultivate their own interests, are faithful participants in the Holy Office and know, through reading, study and the internet, what is going on in our culture. For those in their thirties and forties which we have had among us, and also for us oblates, this is a hopeful sign: Benedictine life, by which one can keep growing, is possible, verse 50 of the Prologue is more than a commercial. To cite a recent book title, spirituality is a *slow-release miracle*.<sup>3</sup>

The lengthy chapter 7, about humility, is at first sight difficult to accept for modern readers, but it closes with a joyful perspective:

As soon as the monk has climbed all these steps of humility, he will reach the love of God, which is perfect and excludes fear. Through this love he will accomplish everything which he formerly completed with a certain anxiety, as if he did it habitually or out of a natural impulse. He no longer acts out of anxiety of hell but out of the love of Christ and is driven by the habit itself to do good and by the joy he finds in virtue. (RB 7.67-69)

Benedict here joins the classical thought that virtue is not decency but *excellence*, a gradually trained and acquired habit—directed to the good—to offer “quality,” an activity that brings joy with it, as when an excellent cellist brings her public and herself an unforgettable evening.

The Benedictine program is indeed directed toward “good days” and toward joy. A monastic community is not intended to be a sour and joyless prison.

I am therefore always disturbed when someone, for example, a well-meaning Dutch television personality such as Leo Fijen, though an admirable champion of monastic life, in an (otherwise inspiring) documentary on *Le Grande Chartreuse* keeps talking about the “severest monastery in the world,” as if a group of masochists were living there together. As in a discussion of the film *Into Great Silence* by one of our better columnists, Marjoleine de Vos, in which a certain affinity for the monastic life is conveyed, I also read sentences with phrases like “they must there . . . ;” “they are not allowed to . . .” and “they would never . . . ,” which almost make one forget that the brothers *enjoy* being there. Certainly, the followers of Saint Bruno have a rougher lifestyle than the daughters and sons of Saint Benedict, but this is about a personally chosen roughness, which moreover can be accommodated (it seems that the superior often wants to accommodate, but the community does not, or only hesitatingly) and that it moreover may be arranged differently on the local level. The Carthusians of Parkminster near London—but that is a *British* Carthusian monastery—have arranged their house more tastefully and in all austerity have appointed things somewhat “more pleasant” than their more rugged fellow brothers in the mountains near Grenoble (France).

No matter how it is arranged, monastic life is not intended to be an ascetic prison where people may be kept small and curtailed, but a place to grow, as a person and as a community. It is remarkable that this lifestyle has remained vital for about 1500 years, though, of course, there have been historically and locally worrisome periods and they will also occur in the future. Also,

the monastic life keeps attracting people, in many forms and in varying ways of bonding. More and more people who do not wish to be or cannot be religious, find nurturing ideals and attitudes which they can allow to be fruitful in their own context of life.

In a previous book, which aimed at an introductory “translation” of the Benedictine spirituality toward non-monastic contexts, I discussed a few central Benedictine ideals and attitudes.<sup>4</sup> Some of the central themes are: the cultivation of the art of attentive listening (*auscultare*) and answering from the heart, the vows of stability, the change of the organization of life and obedience, the lessons of Benedict about providing fruitful leadership and bearing responsibility, the Benedictine dealing with time. The book drew, and still draws, many readers and it is understandable that relatively soon my friendly publisher carefully asked whether a sequel was forthcoming. That was not my original plan. The Rule of Benedict is only a thin book without a sequel. I thought I might follow the same pattern.

Benedict himself calls his Rule a “rule for beginners.” He did not write a “rule for the advanced,” though he does give some advice on reading that might take people further. Also, experts have observed that his Rule, as it has come to us, may have been augmented by himself of a second, additional part. The first part closes with the little chapter on porters of the monastery. At the gate we reach the boundary of the monastery. That is where the reach of the Rule really ends. Since the monastery is supposed to be self-supporting, we read in the penultimate verse, monks do not need to go past the gate, for “that is definitely not good for their souls.” Then follows the closing verse: “We desire that this Rule will often be read to the congregation, so that not a single brother can pretend ignorance as an excuse” (RB 66.8). This suggests that Benedict is finished. However, in the final version another seven chapters follow, about matters which he had not thought about (chapter 67 is about “the brothers who have been sent on a journey”), about nuancing the previous, and about matters that in their community apparently caused problems, followed by some advices for further reading.

That I yet wrote a sequel to my previous book has, I realize, related causes. I have also kept reading texts of contemporary (and earlier) mothers and fathers who have provided commentary for the Benedictine tradition, and have thought it through, such as Joan Chittister, Michaela Puzicha, Aquinata Böckman, Anselm Grün, Aelred of Rievaulx, Michael Casey, Leo Fijen, Christopher Jamison, Benet Tvedten, and certainly many others. Where possible, in future chapters I shall mention my sources somewhat more precisely, but often this is about gradual reading, which trickled into my mind and became more or less appropriated thoughts, than about the fruit of systematic, scholarly study.

Additionally, after the publication of the book I had the opportunity to discuss it with many people. This meant that I needed to supplement and nuance subjects on which I had written and that I could augment certain themes with interesting new possibilities for application. I am most grateful that I was able to learn from so many at this time. This process also led to some essays and chapters in books, which have received a place in adapted and expanded form in what follows. Some overlapping and repetition may have taken place, but that is also the case in the Rule—and Benedict probably knew the ancient saying *repetitio est mater studiorum*.

Because I cannot assume that everyone who will read this book has read the previous book, the opening chapter offers a summarizing first introduction of the important aspects of Benedictine spirituality.

Thereafter follow some additional Benedictine attitudes that may also be fruitful in non-monastic contexts. When I put them together, I noted that it is always about attitudes and virtues that both contrast with traits of character of contemporary culture and yet are painfully missed in our culture.

1. The cultivation of a climate of silence and rest. In a culture of continuous and often loud background noise and an abundance of external stimuli it might be sensible to develop and maintain structural situations of “back-

ground silence” in which we might be attentive to that which merits our attention.

2. The serious (but relaxed) dedication to daily work and to daily study. In a culture where the pressure of work is considerable for many and work is at the same time (partly) seen as a necessary evil—we live toward weekends, vacations, and retirement—Benedict teaches us that daily work is a “necessary good,” in which and to which we can grow spiritually, may be creative and contribute to the flourishing of person and community. In a culture of rapid, but only superficial streams of information, a daily portion of solid reading (in a monastic community it is obligatory for everyone, not only for intellectuals) might contribute to one’s own soul and the soul of others remaining fresh, open, and alive.
3. The appropriation of the virtue of humility—etymologically “the courage to serve.” In a culture of exaggeration, window-dressing behavior, ambition, priority lists, gaudy things, and unjustified bonuses, Benedict teaches us the realistic human image that all of us are but fragile, limited little beings, but with the capacity to grow. Such growth is done optimally by “service,” in which we highly esteem others and other things.
4. The mutually related virtues of hospitality, care, good and fruitful stewardship, respect, gentleness, quiet patience, intelligent capacity to discern, and “generativity” (by which one generation helps another grow toward fruitful independence), which contrasts strongly with a culture of isolation, laxity, sloppy waste, cynicism, coarseness, and the quick gleaning of “competences” in instrumental contexts of learning.
5. Benedict stresses the importance of discipline, correction of what is wrong, and frugality—but also the importance of festive and joyful celebration: contrasting anew with

a culture of indifferent tolerance, overconsumption, and unlimited superficial pleasure. He suggests positive ways to arrive at “durable” joy.

6. For a good personal and social life, Benedict stresses repeatedly the crucial importance of listening attentively and from the heart, and of speaking of “good words,” said and used in the right manner. In a culture of rapid worldwide communication, “speaking evil” (*maledicere*) sometimes leads to quickly branching out cascades of evil and violence. However, the opposite (*benedicere*) leads many to a blessed life and good days.

All these attitudes may be cultivated outside of the monastery walls—they may be practiced also outside of the “school for the Lord.” They are realistic guidelines for a personally and socially blessed and fruitful life. Andrew Nugent claims that the Benedictine movement possesses a strong restorative potential, which may bring health, intelligence, and wisdom in a culture of fragmentation and aimlessness.

In a summarizing conversation at the end of a seminar on these themes, the participants remarked many times that what Benedict teaches is so commonsensical and concretely doable: “I can just start with this tomorrow.” Such a beginning is not so difficult—as always, persistence is something else again. This is of course regularly and with good reason pointed out to the author of these lines by those most near to him. To these beloved ones this little book is dedicated.



# I

## Benedictine Life: Vital and Attractive

One of my students in religious studies told me enthusiastically in a break between classes about a fine vacation she had spent in a pleasant hotel on the shore near the Benedictine abbey of Maria Laach. She was surprised to hear that I had written my Nijmegen University oration there in 2002. She was still more surprised when I told her that I am associated as an oblate with the Saint Willibrord's Abbey in Doetinchem.<sup>5</sup> "Are there then abbeys in the Netherlands also?" she asked in amazement. I pointed out to her the website [www.monasteria.org](http://www.monasteria.org), on which are presented the more than forty monasteries of the Benedictine family (male and female Benedictines, Cistercians, male and female Trappists) in the Low Countries.

I often get such a reaction, as do my fellow oblates (more than sixty) and fellow brothers (eight presently live in our abbey). Monastic life is seen as a museological affair and a rapidly disappearing heritage, if it has not already disappeared.

But monastic life remains stubbornly vital. The fifteen-hundred-year-old Rule of Benedict is used worldwide by tens of thousands

## 2 *A Blessed Life*

of monks and nuns as a guide for their life together. Almost as many and an increasing number of men and women who live outside the monastery have associated themselves as oblate or associate members, with the Rule playing a role in their own conduct of life. This is not about copying the monastic life but about appropriating it for themselves in a suitable form.

There is, of course, talk about increasing attention for monastic spirituality and life. It attracts people, sometimes quite literally. On the open Monastery Day 2006, our little abbey had more than 2,500 people visiting. Maria Laach, a monastic magnet on a beautiful lake in the German Eifel, draws annually more than a million visitors. Some come only for the delicious natural products in the monastery store and the beautiful art gallery, but almost all at least briefly walk into the well maintained medieval church. At the Divine Offices there are always a lot of people.

That even a brief contact with monastic spirituality may touch people, I saw happen in a group of twenty-four students with whom I stayed for a weekend in Saint Willibrord's Abbey. That visit was part of an academic course on religious experience, with lectures by a brain specialist, a psychologist of religion, an expert on spirituality, and an eminent mathematician who also teaches Buddhist meditation. I was giving an introduction to Benedictine spirituality and I accompanied the group with a few other teachers into the abbey. Because it was about "experience," the students were invited to experience the entire monastic rhythm: the five daily Divine Offices (the first at 6:15 a.m.), (Zen) meditation, celebration of the Eucharist, close reading of a mystical text by Ruysbroeck, led by the then eighty-five-year-old Father Gerard Helwig, common meals, recreation, study sessions, and to bed on time. Of the twenty-four students, four were "active" in church (choir member, lector, assistant at Mass); the others were rather "something-sometime" believers in that they now and then attended church at family events.

Their "just going along" had an impact on all of them. At the first celebration, the Vespers on Friday afternoon, some students sang along. More than ten celebrations later, on Sunday afternoon,

all of them sang and jumped up at each penultimate psalm verse so they could bow at the "Glory to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit . . ." Outside and in the corridors of the guest rooms, I heard much humming. With all of them something happened. In an evaluating conversation a few weeks later, all the students, without exception, found this the high point of their study year. They decided to write letters to the brothers about their experiences; I put copies in the monastic library. One of the students wrote that when she came home, she immediately straightened out her very cluttered room. She had lived for a few days in a beautiful, orderly environment and saw the contrast with what she encountered at home. Monastic cleanliness, according to Dom Denis Huerre, who was abbot of the beautiful abbey *La Pierre-qui-vire*, is not a luxury but a necessity, which is the more respected as people see a divine task in this.

Another student found it to be a tiring weekend, with a full daily order, but she was very grateful for it, for she had rediscovered that she could sing and so she had signed up with a chamber chorus. Thus, no monastic entries, but a response to the experience that one can live (a little) differently. The monastic life offers room and hospitality for many. The "search after God," which is cultivated there, is open and in a sense "supra-confessional."

People appear to become increasingly sensitive to this. The cloister series that Leo Fijen produced for KRO/RKK (Dutch Catholic Radio and Television) drew many viewers. More than three million in Great Britain viewed the series *The Monastery* and *The Convent*, about men and women who lived with Benedictines and Poor Clares. The books by Anselm Grün and other monastic authors are read worldwide by a comparable number of people.

Moreover, more and more people choose to continue beyond the nurture of an uncommitted longing and join as an oblate, after a preparatory year, or (in the monasteries of the Cistercian family) as an associated member. Our own group of oblates, for example, has doubled in numbers in a decade. The left-liberal weekly *Vrij Nederland* in January 2006 dedicated a detailed

and serious report on this “Benedictine life beyond the monastic walls.”

But, of course, it would not work without living communities of monks and nuns where we and other guests can regularly “log in.” However, I am not overly concerned about that. Some communities merge or move to a home for the elderly; others invest in new and large guest houses and experience growth. And even at a great age, one may still be vital, as I wrote about our two elderly folk in the introduction of this book.

The actual situation of monastic life does not look moribund worldwide. More than one thousand three hundred communities with approximately thirty-five thousand monks and nuns, as well as tens of thousands of oblates related to these communities, live according to the almost fifteen-hundred-year-old Rule of Benedict. Apparently the Rule has sufficient suppleness and flexibility to also “regulate” living and working together of religious in the twenty-first century.

This worldwide network of monastic life moves daily, as it were, a wave of songs of praise across the earth. When in our own area the monks and nuns close the day with the singing of the so-called Compline, they sing in Saint John’s Abbey in Minnesota approximately Sext (the sung afternoon prayer); and in Vietnam (with seven priories), the monks and nuns begin their day with Lauds.

This worldwide monastic network is quite easy to visit at present. Via [www.osb.org](http://www.osb.org), a general Benedictine website based in Saint John’s Abbey, many websites may be found of communities of male and female Benedictines, male and female Cistercians, male and female Trappists, who offer virtual hospitality via the internet. These websites are visited by many people. There are daily tens of thousands of hits of visitors worldwide who are led by an abbey, download the last sermon of the abbot, listen to the sung prayer of the Divine Office, order spiritual literature, and ask information concerning the possibility of lodging in the guesthouse. Those guesthouses, also those in the Netherlands and Flanders, should better be booked long in advance.

Thus, not a moribund rest and a collection of cultural-historically valuable ruins, but a living and growing network of monastic life.

The purely “being there” of the monastic life, the fact that it is there and is alive, is already a sign with meaning for our time. It is a spirituality of the presence. The actor Alec Guinness writes about his stay in an English Trappist abbey where he had the feeling that he might look inside one of the “spiritual turbines” that keep this world going. It is, of course, important to know what monastic life offers in content. It appeals to the spiritual longing in our time (and at any time) and offers to that longing tested, non-esoteric models of response and growth.

This concept of “spirituality” appears not only somewhat fashionable—“Please do something in your lecture with spirituality”; this is how I was once invited by telephone—but also vague and free-floating. While it is about a longing to keep alive as a human, spirituality has to do with the zest of life, life orientation, lifestyle, and change of life. In many religions and cults, cadres have been developed to give a foundation to this human longing for spiritual life. Benedictine spirituality is one among many, but with ancient testimonials and a remarkable vitality.

### Order with Flexibility

Benedict wrote his Rule for the third community he led, that of Monte Cassino, and possibly also for some neighboring communities. By then, he had already some thirty years of monastic experience, with probably quite a few ups and downs. Monastic rules already existed before, for example, those of Augustine—also such a vital document, as the members of the Augustinian family and the Norbertines can testify. Benedict has borrowed much from an unknown master, whose Rule is called the *Regula Magistri*. Some sections he has copied literally. But where he deviates from the text, he is milder in his changes and additions; he is more nuanced and more realistic when the subject is the tasks entrusted to the brothers when they may be doable or

when they may be impossible for them to accomplish. Perhaps he had been too severe and too demanding in his earlier periods as spiritual leader with responsibility. This severity is not lacking in his Rule, but it is a milder severity or sometimes rather a severe mildness. Particularly in his “own” chapters he shows himself to be sensitive to the differences between people and to the concern to have respect for such differences. The prudent moderation that characterizes his Rule applies also to the giving of rules itself and to the maintenance of such rules.

Two of many examples of this attitude are the little chapter on the measure of the wine and the chapters on the division of the psalms among the daily prayer Offices.

How much wine may a (South Italian) monk use, as far as Benedict is concerned? First, he remarks that he determines the portions for others with some hesitation, because people do differ. He also claims that the weakness of the less strong needs to be taken into account. Additionally, he proposes a measure of (what has been estimated) a quarter or perhaps half of a liter per person per day. But he nuances his proposal immediately for “when the local circumstances of the work or the summer heat require a greater quantity, then the superior must judge,” with, of course, a warning against excess. Rules and their application must be seen in their contexts, as also appears from the conclusion of this little chapter: “Where by local circumstances the above named quantity is not available, but much less or nothing at all, the residents praise God without complaint.”

There is a second example of this joining of order with flexibility. The Rule contains a series of chapters in which Benedict divides the one hundred fifty psalms in great detail among the prayer Offices, with directions for their sequence, the nature of the readings, deviations with Sundays or feast days, etc. This continues for many pages, but at the end of this detailed summation there appears an almost humorous note: “We wish to underscore particularly that whoever finds this division of psalms less successful, let him invent another order if he knows a better one.” Provided this occurs in an orderly fashion and all psalms receive a turn.

With the concrete translation of these and other proposals of Benedict, the concern is to reckon in an intelligent way with the context in which a monastic congregation is founded, with the nature and composition of that community, and with the living nature of the basic traits that must be maintained and the lines of force of Benedictine spirituality. That explains the multi-formity in which Benedictine life shows itself. At Monte Cassino, some wine is on the table in the afternoon; in Saint Willibrord's Abbey there is water (unless it is an important feast day). In the abbey of Saint Benedictusberg at Vaals, to which no school or other activity is related, and that would demand the daily care of a goodly number of monks, six prayer Offices are sung; at Saint John's Abbey, three. But that surely does not mean that in Minnesota there are only watered-down Benedictines: it is a true, powerful center of well-cared-for liturgy, prayer, and study, of which the fruits radiate worldwide through their publishing house, Liturgical Press.

The Rule of Benedict is not a boarded-up canon, says the Trappist Michael Casey. After all, a canon is fixed and static, while the Rule offers structure, but particularly movement and dynamic direction. The Rule is not "complete," neither is the tested monastic life. In the "Council of the Brothers" (RB 3), the younger ones expressly play a role, even an important one. The Spirit "often" offers, Benedict says, a fresh contribution through them. For Michael Casey RB 61.4 is the favorite verse about being open to refreshing influences from an unexpected source. When a visiting monk from "distant places" is a guest, he needs first to accept what he finds. "But if he disapproves something in a reasonable manner and with humble love, or makes a comment, the abbot needs to examine wisely whether the Lord has not sent him precisely with this goal."

Precisely this coming together of order with flexibility makes Benedictine spirituality a living tradition. With the concept of "tradition" we often think of something being static. But the Latin *tradere* indicates a dynamic activity, as we still recognize in the English word *trade*. A living tradition is like a river. Just like a

river, a tradition has sources: people, Scripture texts, handed-on rituals. Sources are mostly plural. That is also true of Benedictine life.

To remain fresh and lively, a tradition must remain in contact with its sources, otherwise it dries up. In the Benedictine family, precisely in the past half century, a great deal of work has been done to renew contact with these sources and subsequently to cultivate our Rule and its sources, with early church fathers and pre-Benedictine monastic life in Egypt and Syria, with Celtic monastic culture, together with the reforming contribution of Bernard, with the enriching and fertile treasures of Hildegard of Bingen (Germany), and with the mystic monks. The river of a tradition also knows auxiliary streams: a mental legacy and cultic elements from other cultures. In quite a few monasteries monks and nuns open themselves to God's Word by Zen exercises and silent meditation. With the spiritual guidance in monasteries, grateful use is made from insights of modern human psychology. In African abbeys, for example, dance and rhythm play a more important role in the liturgy than in Sweden.

Just like a river, a tradition has a bed—its form and shape. These are not static, however. A bed can replace itself and change its form. The abbey that I am associated with used to provide its own support, among other things, by maintaining a large, cattle-breeding business. For logistic and personal reasons, it has closed. Presently, a monastic silence and conference center have been established there, with one of the younger monks in charge. It is directed to groups who wish to meet together in the orderly context of monastic life. Again we see here a joining of flexibility concerning the filling in of the work of the monks with order: the continuity of the Benedictine lifestyle, which may also be for non-monastic people a source of *élan*, orientation, and direction for life.

### **A Few Characteristic Features of Benedictine Spirituality**

Benedict was well trained in rhetoric and thus had learned to mind his words. The first word of his Rule is also the most impor-

tant word. The first sentence is thus the most importance sentence; it contains in a nutshell all the Benedictine life program:

*Listen, my son, to the guidance of your master, and incline the ear of your heart: accept willingly the admonitions of your loving father and execute them actively.*

Listen! In Latin: *Ausculata*. The verb is a very attentive kind of listening, directed to a fitting reaction. A physician “listens” to his patient with a stethoscope. Not out of curiosity or as a pastime but to listen purposefully to what is going on inside the patient and indeed, that he may judge based on what he has heard to take action or not: to prescribe medication, to consult a specialist, or to organize further clinical study. The goal of Benedictine listening is to learn what a situation demands of you and then to give an appropriate and adequate response. And indeed, as the first sentence says, inclined from the heart to such action. That “inclining” (*inclina*, the imperative of *inclinare*) is to associate with someone, bowing to someone, who is asking something from you: a superior, a brother, a guest, a patient, a colleague, a pupil, a situation, an entire class or division. This is not so much about a question of information, but because an appeal has been made to you, a plea. That first sentence is about saying “yes” from the heart when you have been appealed to. An experienced abbot told me once that it was his habit, when he noted only a slight internal resistance when he laid a demanding task on someone (“Do you wish to be trained to become our new cantor?”), he would say to that person: “Better not do it yet.” If someone should begin such a project while his heart is not in it, he is not yet ready for it. If he is genuinely ready for it, the first sentence of the Benedictine Rule executes the movement as it were in one smooth action: be ready to listen and prick up your ears to say “yes” from the heart to what is asked of you, to give an adequate and active response.

Of course, this attitude may also be cultivated outside the monastery. A fellow oblate, who was appointed a school director, withdrew to the abbey before the new school year to prepare

himself for his new task. He wished to translate his bond with Benedictine spirituality into the context of his work. Quickly, he concentrated on the first word of the Rule: he earnestly decided to be a “listening” leader in his school, to give leadership with a “stethoscope” on.

That is a beautiful goal, but how do you carry it out? In his case, among other things, by simply being one of the first people to be in school, and during the tea and coffee hour for new colleagues, to prick up his ears to listen to what was going on and what was brought up. Not as a self-appointed spy, but to be alert to small signals to which he might respond heartily and actively. To continue the stethoscope metaphor: when a little beep is heard, it might perhaps be prudent to meet separately with the teacher in the next period, to see whether something might be done about this small problem together. Because if you do not react promptly the little “beep” will become a dry cough. If you wait even longer, the colleague will be home for a few months.

The “listening” coffee hour, however, is not only targeted on small signals of worries, problems, and strife but also on small longings and signals of opportunities for growth. Here also one needs to be alert and to genuinely look for a concrete response: to see whether the budget permits a new DVD player, pointing to a course, stimulating a teacher who very much enjoys studying to tackle a new subject. In the Rule of Benedict the *ausculta* (as does everything in that Rule, however), pertains also to the abbot. One of the Rule’s pieces of advice for wholesome “abbot’s management” is therefore that he needs to regulate everything with much sense of rhythm and discretion so that “the weak brothers do not flinch from what is too difficult for them,” but also “that something remains for the strong to reach toward.”

### **The Three Monastic Vows: Stability, Change of Lifestyle, Obedience**

As in every living and fruitful spirituality, in the first sentence of the Rule of Benedict the vertical and the horizontal come

together. The alert openness to the word that comes “from on high,”—which might very well come out of the mouth of another person, but in any case from another person whom you want to look up to—must be related to the giving of a response, concretely and actively.

In the three monastic vows, the vertical and the horizontal come together: to *seek for* God in a community and to *follow* Christ (the words “seeking” and “following” are italicized to underscore the dynamics of monastic life. This is different from what an outsider perhaps might think about living in an abbey, that no persons had definitely *found* God and Christ). To live with such a perspective, persistence is needed, with improvement and alert listening in everyday life. That is what the three vows of *stabilitas*, *conversio morum*, and *obedientia* aim at.

*Stabilitas* refers to saying yes persistently, even when it becomes somewhat more difficult. Negatively put, *stabilitas* is the art of not walking away from those vows and from what you say you have committed yourself to. There are indeed many subtler ways of walking away than only physically leaving a place. *Stabilitas* is persevering in the intention to bloom where you have been planted, and nowhere else, which the dynamics of life does not exclude by any means. Formulated positively, *stabilitas* is persevering in the intention “to stick with it,” genuinely to stand ready for what is asked of you here and now. Stability is not an arid immovability to keep standing while you are fully in motion, as a trained surfer.

*Conversio morum* (in different manuscripts we read the related *conversatio*) may be translated as “change of lifestyle,” or gradual growth into the monastic lifestyle. With *conversio* as repentance we quickly think of the radical experiences that may turn life upside down, but that is not intended in *conversio morum*. Rather, it refers to the persistent, daily search for possibilities that might be labeled a “micro-turnabout”: answering the telephone a little less grimly, being a bit more courteous and understanding toward your fellow brother who keeps making mistakes in his singing, reading two beautiful poems before going to sleep instead of surfing all

the television channels once more. A brother who had worked in the United States for a long time once described *conversio morum* as the daily cleaning up of some *trash* in your life and at the same time concerning yourself with what your *treasures* are.

*Obedientia*, or obedience, has to do with the *auscultata* of the first sentence of the Rule. The word is derived from *ob-audire*, which means “listening very carefully.” This is related to a wider field than obedience in a narrower sense, the following of what your “superior” asks of you, unless you take the concept of “superior” in a wider sense: a professor may view his student as his “superior,” or a mother her daughter. Obedience has to do with hearing one another, alert and affectionate listening to what is being asked of you. If one reviews the day from this perspective before going to sleep and asks: was I obedient today?—he will not ask whether he followed the instructions of his superior, but rather: Did I truly listen to the hidden question of that student? Did I put my heart into my reaction? Did I truly respond?

It will be clear that the three perspectives of the quality of *stabilitas*, *conversio morum*, and *obedientia* are profoundly related and presuppose one another. In the following chapters this triplet of basic attitudes will return regularly and be explored in depth. Hopefully, it will be clear that these attitudes also may be fruitful in other contexts of life than the monastic.

### **Benedictine Spirituality: No Frills but a Leaven in *Everything***

The same is true of another basic characteristic of Benedictine spirituality: “that God may be glorified in everything”—*ut in omnibus glorificetur Deus*. The monk does not need to ask which areas are eligible for the praise of God (for example, the prayer of the liturgical Hours) and which are not (for example, peeling potatoes in the kitchen). No choice needs to be made at all: *all* areas offer opportunities to glorify God, and *always*. It is a task that is as simple as it is difficult. It may be noted that this Benedictine motto is found in a very mundane context (quoted from

the First Letter of Peter), namely when it relates to the price of the products of work of a monastery: “With the determining of the price the vice of greed may not steal in, but one needs to offer everything a bit cheaper than others can do it ‘in the world,’ “that God may be glorified in everything.” The context of buying and selling is one that may be sanctified—or desecrated. To use modern management jargon, Benedict pleads for *total quality management*, whereby quality is seen in connection with our task to be fellow creator with the Source and the Goal of everything. “He saw that everything was very good.”

That the most common, everyday contexts may be served by this Benedictine approach is emphasized by Benedict in the chapter about the one who bears the delegated responsibility for the material management of the monastery, the cellarer (*cellarius*) or steward: “He must view all of the utensils and possessions of the monastery as vessels dedicated to the altar service. He may not neglect anything.” Or, if we may put it a bit less dignified way, dishwashing brushes deserve as much respect as do chalices. Everything may be of sacramental value, just as the most common things may be desacralized. Sloppy potato peels with much junk and loss is *zund*, as the people of Brabant say (like the Dutch *zonde*, [sin]).

With this attitude belongs also a careful organization of space and time. Monasteries and their environment often breathe a kind of beauty that is not showy, things are tidied up and in order. Anyone who spends a little time there often longs to straighten out one’s own place when returning home, as happened to one of my students. Further, the day is divided in an orderly manner: an order of the day that keeps in mind the hours of the day and our longing to breathe in and out, for relaxation and rest, being alone and in each other’s company. The monastic bell that regulates these hours might also chime elsewhere, so that we are stimulated to exercise more in the art of truly beginning, the art of truly quitting, and the art of cultivating both a worthy and a relaxed attitude in our dedication to the task that is acquitted between beginning and ending and that here and now lies before us.

Thus, there are more aspects of Benedictine life that may be fruitfully translated to non-monastic contexts and that may be inspiring for a well-regulated living and working together. In this summarizing sketch, two more points may suffice: Benedictine leadership and dealing with the most serious sin in a monastery, namely, grumbling.

The chapters on the abbot and the cellarer (the steward, or the “head of housekeeping”) deserve to be thoroughly considered by anyone who bears extra responsibility. The abbot must be an example of both order and flexibility. Contrary to what the saying “same monks, same hoods” implies, he needs to treat all his fellow brothers differently: “One he must treat with mild goodness, another with reprimands, yet another with the power of persuasion, and thereby accommodate himself according to everyone’s nature and capacity of understanding, and thus adapt himself to him, that he not hurt the flock entrusted to him, but rather may rejoice in the growth of a good flock.” In other words, lack of flexibility and adaptation is harmful; it is the one who leads who can best adapt himself (and therefore not the inferior), and giving leadership needs to be directed to growth and quality. As in the opening sentence of the Rule, he who bears the greatest responsibility needs to give the best concrete response and needs to have the greatest talent of listening and the greatest talent to incline the ear of the heart—a flexibility that, however, does not at all exclude firmness.

In Benedict’s judgment, grumbling is the most serious sin in the monastery. Twelve times he emphatically warns against *murmuratio*; he refers particularly to creating the occasion for grumbling, often by leaders. This does not mean that one may never speak up frankly and openly. Benedict is against the really poisonous grumbling and griping. Such grumbling works like a slow poison that penetrates the community. Grumblers look for one another and strengthen each another. Griping is like an undesirable “spiritual cell division” that sickens the community. However, there is an antidote: good words spoken well and cheerfully work like balm for the soul. For cheerfulness, courage is

needed and it stimulates positive “spiritual cell division.” Cheerfulness works infectiously and can help to tackle a difficult task or even a task that seems impossible. It would be easy to recall examples of cheerful people who even in a very difficult situation stimulate others to get busy in a good mood and with good courage—as grumblers succeed in sickening even a good situation or message and so sour it.

The listening spirituality of Benedict also teaches us in this respect how important it is to watch or mind one’s words. We can speak bad words, *maledicere*, which sicken, insult, kill. We can speak good words, *benedicere*, which heal, make whole, bring life, bless. I shall return to this theme.

Thus, inside and outside the monastic world, Benedictine spirituality is not a beautiful but dead museum piece; it is a blessing. In a vital and attractive manner it invites one to live differently.