

Day by Day with Saint Benedict

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Preface

When I was asked by the Liturgical Press to write daily meditations on the Rule of St. Benedict, I was not too enthusiastic. My first thought was a coffee-table book, and that seemed beneath my dignity as a scholar. But then I reflected that such a book need not be superficial. It would be entirely up to me whether it would be shallow or substantial. Another thought that nagged at the back of my mind was the brute fact that there are 365 or 366 days in the year. Do I have that much to say?

Well, of course, I do have a lot to say or at least I can say a lot. That was shown by the large (641 pp.) commentary I had recently put out on the same Rule of St. Benedict.¹ Since this was also published by the Liturgical Press, no doubt they wanted me to transform my scholarly thoughts into something a bit more manageable for the ordinary person. Such a prospect is not always attractive to the scholar, but it does have the useful function of making him come down to earth. I don't think my commentary is particularly inaccessible, but I recognize that it needs to be applied to daily life. I have tried to do that in these meditations.

Now there are many ways of accomplishing the hermeneutical task of translating exegesis into practical commentary. One of the best ways is through story, and I have told a few in these pages. They are all "true" stories that come from my long experience of Benedictine community life. The names are changed, but they really happened. I know a lot more stories, but most

¹Terrence G. Kardong, O.S.B., *Benedict's Rule: A Translation and Commentary* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996).

of them would take too long to tell in the format allotted to this book. Nevertheless, I recognize that many readers would probably prefer more concrete narrative and less generalization.

But the bulk of the book is given over to more abstract attempts to apply the ancient monastic wisdom to the conditions of modern monasteries. That implies that I know two things: (1) What the original text really means; (2) What modern monastic life is like. As to the first question, I tried to answer it in a systematic way in my commentary entitled *Benedict's Rule*. But regarding the second, I can only say that I have been a Benedictine since 1956 and I have lived in monasteries throughout the world. So I have a fair idea of "life on the ground." I also have my own ideas of what modern monastic life *should* be like. If I did not, it would be a waste of time writing books like this one.

Since these commentaries are all based on the text of Benedict, it is no surprise that they are also based on my previous exegetical studies. I am primarily a literary scholar, and so I always tend to approach texts in that manner. In this particular writing project, my habitual method was to consult my own commentary to "find out what I know." Then only would I venture to say "what it means." That being the case, I really can make little claim for originality in these pages. Anybody who cares to plow through my big book will find all my ideas there; yet here they are distilled into a more concentrated, and perhaps more palatable, form.

Was writing this book a good experience? Better than I hoped. Of course, the format itself guaranteed a certain amount of tedium. I found out existentially what I had previously only known vaguely, namely, that there are very many days in a year. In practical terms, that meant I simply had to mine that many *feverinos* out of the ancient Rule. Since meditations are supposed to be inspiring, this seems to imply that the writer will feel deeply enough about the subject to inspire the audience. In an ideal world, that might suggest that the author would brood long over a given passage, eventually erupting in a volcano of fervor. As a matter of fact, I often sat at the

computer grinding out unit after unit. As someone once said, inspiration is often a matter of perspiration.

Yet I would still claim that some of these little meditations *are* deeply felt. I am not just a student of Benedict; I am his disciple! His Rule is what I live by, not just what I dissect. But besides my religious profession, I like to think my “objective,” “neutral” research feeds my passion. To study a classic text year after year, indeed for a lifetime, is to become so familiar with it that at least parts of it become indistinguishable from one’s own mind and heart. And so when I come to those passages, such as RB 72, I think I “wax eloquent.” But there are other tracts of the text where all I can do is to trudge along, hoping to find a scrap of inspiration here and there. A glance at the index will show that I don’t have much to say about the liturgical chapters (RB 9–18) and the ones on penalties (RB 23–30).

What about the random arrangement of the texts? I do not simply march through the Rule, beginning with Prologue 1 on January 1. Why not? Perhaps because I thought it would give the book the appearance of another commentary, which it is not. Well, then why not key the passages to the particular dates of the calendar? What text of RB would you suggest for Christmas? For the Fourth of July? Finally, I decided to simply scatter the units all over the calendar. Of course, one disadvantage with this is that one loses whatever context there would be with a consecutive approach. But at least there is the element of surprise—you never know what you will run into on the next page. And I hope the units are sufficiently self-contained to be intelligible to the general reader.

And so the job is done. In fact, I am grateful I was able to complete it. Since I began it last year I have contracted a serious illness which made me wonder if I would ever finish. Thanks be to God, the doctors have provided me with medication that makes life interesting and work possible (which are pretty much the same thing for me). Any regrets? Oh yes, I would have liked to polish each little unit into a perfect gem. But life is not long enough for that. I am no Pascal. Besides,

sometimes the “best is the enemy of the good.” If I can make life a bit more hopeful for a few people through these words, they are not wasted.

To close with a word about issues of translation and gender. Wherever possible I have used recognized modern translations of the Bible. But when I am translating Benedict’s Latin I do not, because he is *not* using any standard translation. To conform his translation to modern criteria often distorts his argument. I have followed the translation I did in *St. Benedict’s Holy Rule for Public Reading. Male and Female Versions* (Richardton, N.D.: Assumption Abbey, 2003). In regard to gender, I have tried to be even handed. But since the Rule is written in the masculine form this is not always easy or even possible. It is hard to satisfy everybody: someone pointed out that my use of the masculine pronoun for Satan is not exactly fair.

T.G.K.

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- Veilleux. Pachomian Koinonia, vol. 2. Cistercian Studies Series, vol. 46. Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1982.
- BR See Kardong, above.
- ProL Prologue (in Benedict or Pachomius).
- RA The Rule of St. Augustine. In Augustine, *Letters*. Trans. Sr. Wilfrid Parsons. Writings of Saint Augustine, vol. 13; Fathers of the Church, 32. New York: Fathers of the Church; [Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press] 1956. Other translations are also readily available.
- RB Rule of Benedict
- RM *The Rule of the Master*. Trans. Luke Eberle. Cistercian Studies Series, vol. 6. Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1977.
- Thema Pater*. Commentary on the Our Father and part of the Prologue of the Rule of the Master.

January 1

We said that all are to be summoned to counsel because the Lord often reveals what is best to the younger. (RB 3.3)

The sixth century was not a time of youth culture. Young people were meant to be seen and not heard. Consequently, it was quite natural that they be ignored at community meetings. Before my first chapter meeting, an old monk said to me, half-jokingly: “We usually don’t speak in here for the first ten years.” But Benedict will not hear of this. For him, it violates the biblical principle that the Holy Spirit can speak to whom-ever she pleases. In Matthew 11:25 we read: “I give praise to you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for although you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned you have revealed them to the childlike” (NAB). This, of course, does not mean that the young should thrust themselves forward in any brassy way. Monasteries where only the elders have the floor tend to become bastions of conservatism and stagnation. As one monk said about his ancient European monastery: “The trouble with this place is that the archives are a thousand years old and everybody knows what is in them.”

January 2

Since we read that our holy fathers performed the whole psalter with great labor in one day, let us, despite our lukewarmness, at least do so in a whole week! (RB 18.25)

In this verse, Benedict is trying to shame his disciples into reciting the whole psalter every week. And he does it by means of a kind of “golden age” argument: since the ancients did such

and such, we should at least do such and such. Now there is nothing wrong with such thinking, but one should recognize it for what it is—and it is not history! In other words, the earliest monks certainly did *not* recite the whole psalter in a day. If they had, it would have taken all day and they would have starved to death. The writings of Cassian (*Inst.* 2.5) include a vision by an angel in which Pachomius is instructed not to recite more than twelve psalms at the night Office. In a similar passage, Benedict claims that the old monks never drank wine (RB 40.6) but the Desert literature of Egypt indicates that they did. We should take this rhetoric for what it is worth, not for cold cash.

January 3

Let (the cellarer) take good care of all the abbot entrusts to him, but not meddle in what is withheld from him. (RB 31.15)

Here we see one of Benedict's typical themes come into play: an official is warned not to usurp more power than is rightly his. In Benedict's usual language, this is "presumption," the arrogation of power that is not one's own. In the case of the cellarer, the limits are clearly spelled out. He is to care for all that is entrusted to him but not intrude into what is not so entrusted. So it is a question of boundaries and their observance. Certainly, Benedict does not want his cellarer gradually extending his "territory" until he has his finger in everything. When that happens, "fingers need to be slapped." It would seem that this office demands a special kind of humility, to play such a role properly. The cellarer must carry a good deal of responsibility, but he can never claim absolute control over the system in which he works. Many people in the world cannot work with those restrictions; they should not become cenobites—members of a monastic community.

January 4

Monks ought to strive for silence at all times, but especially during the night hours . . . when they leave Compline, no one has permission to say anything more to anybody . . . Exceptions to this rule occur when the guests need something or the abbot commands someone to do something. (RB 42.1, 8, 10)

We live in a deafening society, and even though nature itself quiets down for the night, we do not. We turn up the volume. Benedict wants to hear a pin drop in the hours between Compline and Matins (roughly 7 p.m. to 6 a.m.). Certainly he sees this as prime time for recollection and he wants to create the conditions that promote it. Yet there are exceptions. For example, charity comes before silence. Our guests have needs that must be met, and we should not fail to meet these needs on the grounds of silence. Further, obedience may have to be elevated over silence when the case demands. In one of his books, Thomas Merton tells of the time that a dead brother was allowed to lie untended all night in the dormitory, presumably to protect the night silence. It is doubtful Benedict would sanction that kind of behavior.

January 5

When [the prioress] corrects someone, she should act prudently and not overreact. If she scours the rust too hard, she may break the vessel. Let her always be wary of her own fragility and remember not "to break the bent reed" [Isa 42:3]. (RB 64.12-14)

We probably have never scoured rust off a bronze ewer or worked with papyrus reeds. Still, the teaching is clear enough:

monastic authority should not function in a violent manner. That is good advice for any authority that wishes to maintain the respect of its subjects, but there may be even more at stake here. The quote of Isaiah 42.3 is from the First Servant Song and refers to the mysterious figure of the Servant of YHWH. Isaiah presents the Servant as a non-violent messiah who refrains from accomplishing his mission brutally. Indeed, he chooses to be killed rather than to kill to save the people. In the New Testament, the church invokes this verse as a type of Jesus himself (Matt 12:20). So monastic authority has a high ideal to attain.

January 6

If you have a quarrel with someone, make peace before sundown.
(RB 4.73)

Father Jerome was standing at the bulletin board one day when a voice just behind him said: "I resign from your committee!" Turning around, he saw the back of Father Ernest retreating down the hall. Since he had no idea why his confrere was angry, he decided to follow him and find out. But when he knocked on the door, Ernest would not let him into his room. Determined to pursue the issue and not let it fester, Jerome forced his way into the room and declared he was not leaving without an explanation. But Ernest was not forthcoming. Indeed, he upped the ante, declaring that he would henceforth have nothing whatsoever to do with Jerome, even though they were next-door neighbors. And so it was for the next twenty-five years. Ernest was sent on mission to a chaplaincy, and no word passed between the two. Jerome assumed things would stay like that until death, but they did not.

One day during retreat when Jerome was sitting alone in the common room, a voice close behind him said: "Let's bury the hatchet!" And when he turned around, he saw only the back of Ernest retreating across the room.

January 7

[The prioress] should strive more to be loved than to be feared.
(RB 64.15)

In our time, fear has a bad name; therefore we probably accept this dictum of Benedict (quoted from Augustine) at face value. As a general principle, it is true that love is a higher emotion than fear. At the close of his chapter on humility, Benedict quotes with approval the text of 1 John 4:18: "perfect love drives out fear" (NAB). Nevertheless, it is quite possible to misunderstand this kind of maxim and thereby undermine it. In fact, the full quote of Augustine (RA 7.3) reads: "Although both things are necessary, one should prefer to be loved rather than feared." Augustine may mean that different people need to be approached differently, but it could also mean something else: Some people have an inordinate need to be loved. This can prove to be a crippling fault in a superior, who sometimes must act in a manner that she knows will not be accepted by those she is trying to help. In fact, it can almost be taken as axiomatic that a superior will be hated by some of her subjects; anyone who cannot bear that prospect should not take on this role.