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—Abbot Jerome Kodell, OSB  
Subiaco Abbey  
Subiaco, Arkansas

**The Life of Saint Benedict**  
**by Gregory the Great**

TRANSLATION AND COMMENTARY

*Terrence G. Kardong, OSB*

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To Sister Ruth M. Fox, Prioress,  
and the Sisters of Sacred Heart Monastery,  
Richardton, North Dakota



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## Preface

The genesis of this book lies in a remark made by a friend of mine who happens to be prioress of a Benedictine community of women. She said that when she is asked by her sisters for a good book to read on the *Dialogues* of St. Gregory, she does not know what to recommend. She added that I might be the one to remedy that sad situation.

As for me, I cringed at the thought of writing a commentary on this material. Anyone who has used my technical commentary on the Rule of Benedict<sup>1</sup> knows that I studiously avoided all cross-references to Gregory's *Dialogue II* in that study. I kept the two things apart because I think they are "apples and oranges," things of a different nature that are not to be mixed. Benedict's Rule is a *regula* and Gregory's *Dialogue* is hagiography.

Another thing that stood in the way of my undertaking this project is the simple fact that a good, popular commentary already exists for this material. The French savant Adalbert de Vogüé published a short, lively commentary in 1982 that could serve as a good tool for modern meditation.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the same scholar produced a major technical commentary on the *Dialogues* that underlies his popular summary.<sup>3</sup> Still, it could be that our own place and time could use a fresh take on the *Dialogues*. And so I set to work.

I might add that anyone who spends his life doing Benedictine studies probably ought to tackle *Dialogue II* sooner or later. After all, it is one of the most beloved texts for the whole Benedictine family, perhaps even more popular than the Rule itself. I even experienced a slight twinge of guilt for keeping this material out of my Rule commentary. So perhaps the present work can atone for that peccadillo.

How did I proceed? Like a typical exegete, I felt I should make a new translation. There really is no substitute for the commentator to work through the original language inch by inch. Since this is a popular work, I did not do this in order to create a philological commentary. Frankly, Gregory's Latin is so straightforward that it does not present any particular problems in this regard. I will admit that I did glance occasionally at Vogüé's French version in the *Sources Chrétiennes*. And I sometimes compared my work with that of the two Trappists, Hilary Costello and Eoin de Bhaldraithe, in *The Life of Benedict*. My general tendency is to render the text into shorter English sentences that suit the current American sensibility.

After creating a new translation, I was then ready to indulge in some interpretation. But in order to do that right, I felt I had to work through Vogüé's commentary in *The Life of Benedict*. I needed to do that because there was really no better way I could study the text as literature. The great contribution of Vogüé to the study of the *Dialogues* is his presentation of the literary sources and parallels to Gregory's work. Almost all the stories that Gregory presents have close analogues in the earlier and contemporary literature of that time. And no one knows that body literature like Vogüé. I do not always agree with his interpretation of these parallels, but one absolutely needs to take them into account.

Therefore, I have to admit that my work is heavily dependent on that of Father Vogüé. The casual reader may not pick that up from the main text of my commentary, but one who

follows the footnotes will immediately notice my frequent references to his scholarship. Of course, I could have done a broader study of other commentators, but I have not found most of them particularly helpful. Granted, this diminishes the scholarly quality of my work, but it is not meant for specialists.

One of the by-products of doing a comparative study of the *Dialogues* is that one comes away suspicious that perhaps Gregory has simply borrowed some of these stories from here and there to apply to his hero, Benedict. Of course, some of the episodes are very distinctive and bear the mark of authenticity, even eye-witness veracity. But we should also remember that ancient hagiography was not meant to convey a completely accurate biography. The purpose was to edify.

This can still create problems for the modern mentality, especially if it is of a critical cast of mind. The chief problem for us skeptics is the plethora of miracles. What are we to make of them? Many years ago I was privileged to take a class on *Dialogue II* from the master himself, Adalbert de Vogüé. One day I registered my acute discomfort with the endless string of miracles, serious and trivial. The French monk looked at me sadly and said in his deep voice: “Yes, the ancient monks loved miracles—but we hate them!”

I don’t know if I hate miracles, but when they reach a critical mass, they do make me nervous. And since I have specialized in study of the Rule of Benedict, which mentions no miracles whatsoever, I really wonder whether Benedict thought they were so important. Of course, Gregory also is careful to instruct his interlocutor, Peter, that progress in the moral and the mystical life is of greater significance than physical miracles. But it is also quite clear that Gregory himself dearly loved miracles.

Or did he? There have always been scholars who wondered whether the *Dialogues* really were written by the great pope of

the sixth century. The most vigorous recent investigator of the question is Francis Clark, who thinks that the work was actually crafted in the seventh or eighth centuries. Clark suggests that it was done in the papal archives, sometimes from materials left there by Pope Gregory. Clark's argument is largely based on the fact that the *Dialogues* were not mentioned by any other writer for some decades after AD 600. But that gap is now being gradually closed by historians. And they also point out that Gregory's *Letters* contain plenty of interest in miracles.<sup>4</sup>

But even though these questions of historicity ("did it really happen?") are important for scholarly work, they are mostly out of place in a popular work such as this one. Therefore, I largely ignore them. I may register a certain amount of discomfort at certain stories, but so does Vogüé. Nonetheless, I try to keep firmly in mind that the purpose of this *Life of Benedict* is to build up the spiritual life of the reader and especially to make her love St. Benedict. And so I strive to uncover the spiritual message of each story. If I do that well, then the work was worthwhile.

Finally, a word about the numbering employed in this translation. The Roman numerals found within the text are taken from the traditional Latin text. I have followed the numeration in the critical Latin text of Vogüé that I translated.<sup>5</sup> These Roman numerals are followed by subdivisions indicated by Arabic numbers. But the translation and commentary is also divided into sections.<sup>6</sup> I have labeled these as section 1, section 2, and so on, precisely in order to avoid confusion with the internal numbers in the text.

Assumption Abbey,  
Richardton, ND  
March 19, 2007





3 Post lacrymas, post amplexus, post, crebra parentum  
Oscula Nursinus carpit Crebris iter,  
Nursia quem genuit Benedictum Roma docendum;  
Aurea Romuleæ dogmata pubis alit.

The young Benedict leaves his home in Norcia to pursue his liberal education in Rome. [Int-1]

## Section 1

# Conversion and First Miracle

### INTRODUCTION

**1** There was a man of venerable life, who was Blessed (Benedictus) in both grace and name. From the time he was a boy, he had the heart of an elder. In his way of life he surpassed his age level in that he did not give himself over to sensual pleasure. While he was on this earth he could have indulged himself freely, but he despised the glory of the world as a faded bloom.

Born of free parents in the region of Nursia, he was sent to Rome for a liberal education. But when he saw that some of his classmates were plunging into vice, he withdrew his foot that he had just placed on the threshold of the world. He was afraid that worldly knowledge might cause him to fall into the depth of hell. So, abandoning his literary studies, and leaving his family home and inheritance, he sought to please God alone. He went looking for a monastic habit so that he could lead a holy life. Thus he left Rome learnedly ignorant and wisely uninstructed.

**2** I don't know all his deeds, but I will recount a few things I learned from four of his disciples. They are Constantine,

a very respected man who succeeded him as superior of the monastery (Monte Cassino); Valentinian, who was head of the Lateran monastery for many years; Simplicius, who ruled as third abbot over his community; and also Honoratus, who is still superior of the monastery where Benedict began his monastic life (Subiaco).

**I-1** When Benedict left school and decided to seek a remote place, his housekeeper, who loved him very tenderly, was the only one to follow him. When they came to a place called Effide, so many fine men welcomed them in charity that they stayed at the Church of St. Peter. Now the above-mentioned housekeeper asked the neighbor women for a sieve to clean some grain. She placed it carelessly on the table so it fell and broke in two. As soon as the housekeeper came back and saw it she began to weep bitterly, for the borrowed vessel was broken.

**2** Since Benedict was a good and pious boy, he had pity on his housekeeper's sorrow when he saw her weeping. Taking the two halves of the broken sieve with him, he gave himself over to tearful prayer. When he rose from prayer, he found the sieve intact, so much so that he could see no trace of a break. He soon consoled his housekeeper, giving her the broken sieve in one piece. Everyone in town became aware of what had happened, and they were so impressed that they hung the sieve over the church door. Thus they and their descendants were reminded how perfect the boy Benedict was, even at the beginning of his religious life. It was there in plain sight over the church door for many years, right up to the Lombard invasion.

**3** But Benedict wished to suffer the world's wrongs rather than its praises, and to be worn out by labors for God rather than flattered by worldly praise. So he quietly slipped away from his housekeeper.



## COMMENTARY

The Life of Saint Benedict as told by Saint Gregory the Great (Pope 590–603) is part of a larger work called the *Dialogues*. It is the second of four *Dialogues*, and it is unique in that it focuses on only one saint whereas the other three *Dialogues* tell of many saints. These works of hagiography (lives of the saints) are called *Dialogues* because they are cast in the form of conversations between Pope Gregory and his deacon, Peter. Peter will speak first in *Dialogue II.II.4*.

*Dialogue II* begins rather abruptly with Benedict leaving father and family “to please God alone.”<sup>7</sup> Very little is said about his parental home, although to judge from the fact that his sister, Scholastica, was a nun all her life (XXXIII.2), it must have been a pious family. But Gregory does not want to emphasize pedigrees, he wants to stress conversion.

That is why he tends to portray the young Benedict in a rather harsh manner. We learn that as a boy he “had the heart of an elder.” This does not necessarily endear him to the modern mind, but it means that he had the wisdom to choose God alone. Benedict’s sudden departure from the familiar world reminds us of certain biblical figures, especially the disciples of Jesus abandoning nets and father at his invitation (Mark 1:16-20). Indeed, the whole tone of this introduction has a distinctly biblical sound.

In addition to the biblical theme, there may be autobiographical elements in Gregory’s portrayal of Benedict.<sup>8</sup> Adalbert de Vogüé points out that the phrase “he went looking for the monastic habit” could well be a wry reference to Gregory’s own regret that he himself had been too slow to take the habit. In his commentary called *Moralia in Job*, he says that he hesitated for about twenty years to actually enter the monastery. In contrast to himself, he shows Benedict acting decisively.

Vogüé also thinks that Benedict's desire for "the habit" is a sign that he knew that monasteries existed and wanted to join one. The obvious question then would seem to be: then why didn't he? As we will soon see, Benedict began monastic life as a hermit, a thing that he insists in his Rule that one should not do (RB 1). Still, Vogüé thinks that "the young seeker after God is not a freelancer."<sup>9</sup> I would suggest that what follows proves quite the opposite.

Furthermore we might be allowed some doubts about his flight from Rome. At least in Gregory's telling, Benedict turned his back rather abruptly on his education. Of course, he was disgusted at the decadence he found in the city, but his flight also cut him off at an early age from a complete education. Did he actually know what he was missing? There are some signs in what follows that Benedict had a somewhat narrow and rigid mentality. Indeed, Gregory indicates that Scholastica had to complete Benedict's education in his final years (*Dial. II.XXXVIII*).<sup>10</sup>

When describing his flight from Rome, Gregory introduces the memorable phrase "learnedly ignorant and wisely uninstructed." This tells us that a worldly education is not everything. Sometimes the simple and unlearned have profound understanding of the things of God. This is in fact a common theme in early monastic literature. Thus Athanasius tells us that Antony was a simple peasant, but wiser than the philosophers. Yet recent research suggests that Antony was in fact anything but uneducated.<sup>11</sup> And later on Gregory will claim that the Rule Benedict wrote is "remarkable for its discretion and limpid in its language" (*Dial. II.XXXVI*). Surely he must have had a decent education to do that.

The episode at Effide also shows Benedict as a rather decisive person. As soon as his miracle creates a sensation among the townspeople, he immediately slips out of town. Unfortunately, this involves abandoning his faithful housekeeper, who

we may feel deserved better. Perhaps this scene is somewhat like the miracle of Jesus at Cana (John 2:1-11).<sup>12</sup> In both cases the saint seems to treat a beloved woman rather harshly, but the reader is made to understand that the demands of the Gospel must override hurt feelings. Eventually, the scene with Scholastica (*Dial. II.XXXIII*) will serve as a corrective to some of this harshness.