

THE RULE OF ST. BENEDICT  
IN ENGLISH





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## *Preface*

Pope John Paul II addressed two documents in 1981 to the entire Catholic Church and to “all men and women of good will.” Inspired by a most urgent desire to help people improve their basic human relations, he wrote the encyclical “On Human Work” and the apostolic exhortation “The Role of the Family in Modern Society.” St. Benedict’s times were as turbulent as our own, though for very different reasons. He wrote his Rule primarily for monks, but its sound principles for working together and living together have proved relevant to people of all classes of society through fifteen hundred years.

Benedict (c. 480–547) lived in sixth-century Italy when the great Roman Empire was disintegrating. Rome had fallen to the barbarians in 410 and was sacked again in 455. Romulus Augustulus, the last emperor, was deposed in 476. Theodoric of the Ostrogoths maintained peace during a long reign (493–526), but upon his death the Eastern emperor Justinian tried to regain Rome, and through the remaining years

of the century there was constant war as other barbarian tribes invaded the Italian peninsula.

Sometime during the reign of Theodoric, Benedict as a young man left his native Nursia in Umbria to attend school in Rome, but became disgusted with the paganism he saw and renounced the world to live in solitude in a cave at Subiaco, some thirty miles east of Rome. Evidently he had undergone a deep religious experience. In time he came to the notice of people in the neighborhood, and some monks asked him to be their abbot. He consented with reluctance, and after some time the recalcitrant monks sought to poison him. Later another group of monks joined him, and he established twelve monasteries of twelve monks each.

Experience with the envy of the local clergy led Benedict to abandon this settlement, and with some disciples he founded a monastery on the mountain above Cassino, about eighty miles south of Rome. His fame as a holy person spread throughout the area; even the king of the Goths, Totila, came to see him. About the year 547 he died. Pope St. Gregory the Great (pope 590–604), whose second book of *The Dialogues* is the only source for information on St. Benedict, notes that St. Scholastica was his sister (traditionally known as his twin sister).

Apart from these meager facts, nothing more is known of the life of St. Benedict. But most of the information from St. Gregory can be corroborated by other historical events of the time. Gregory did not set out to write a biography; his purpose was to show that there were holy people in Italy, not just in the East, and that St. Benedict was a great miracle-worker. He mentions the Rule of St. Benedict and commends it for its discretion and lucidity of style. "If anyone wishes to know his character and life more precisely, he may find in the ordinances of that Rule a complete account of the abbot's practice; for the holy man cannot have taught otherwise than as he lived."

Writers after St. Gregory have noted the same discretion in St. Benedict's Rule, and this quality more than any other accounts in great part for its longevity. The fact that many men and women throughout the world live it today is supporting evidence.

In the unsettled, strife-torn Italy of the sixth century, Benedict's Rule offered definitive direction and established an ordered way of life that gave security and stability. He sought to lay down "nothing harsh, nothing burdensome," but was intent on encouraging the person coming to the monastery: "Do not be daunted

immediately by fear and run away from the road that leads to salvation.”

Benedict calls his Rule “a little rule for beginners.” It contains directions for all aspects of the monastic life, from establishing the abbot as superior, the arrangement of psalms for prayers, measures for correction of faults, to details of clothing and the amount of food and drink. The reader will note that some customs are outmoded today, and monks have accordingly modified some of these.

St. Benedict taught that if the monk seeks to answer the call of God—“If you hear his voice today, do not harden your heart”—then he must put all else aside and follow the teaching of Christ in obedience. To this end St. Benedict established a “school for the Lord’s service,” a place where monks learn to serve the Lord in obedience to their abbot, who “is believed to hold the place of Christ.” His spirituality is Christocentric: “the love of Christ must come before all else.” After a year of trial, the novice promises stability, fidelity to monastic life, and obedience. St. Benedict expected his monks to advance on the “path of God’s commandments, [their] hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love.”

Benedict was a keen observer of human nature and realized that people often fail (the

abbot must “distrust his own frailty”). He was concerned to help the weak, and consequently he enjoined that the abbot “so regulate and arrange all matters that souls may be saved and the brothers may go about their activities without justifiable grumbling.” Benedict looked to the heart; he sought a spirit of willingness (“First and foremost, there must be no word or sign of the evil grumbling, no manifestation of it for any reason at all”) and sincerity (“Never give a hollow greeting of peace”; “Let us stand to sing the psalms in such a way that our minds are in harmony with our voices”).

The so-called penal code (chs. 23–30, 43–46) is more accurately seen as correctional measures designed for the reformation and healing of the person, not a rigid, brutal structure imposed legalistically. St. Benedict stressed the importance of the person and the relationship of persons living together. He respected the freedom of the person (the novice is free to leave at any time; the monk who leaves may be received back even a third time). If there is strictness, the purpose is to “amend faults and safeguard love.” He directed the abbot to “arrange everything that the strong have something to yearn for and the weak nothing to run from.” It is a humane approach to personal

relationships. But it is an approach based on the supernatural: “that in all things God may be glorified.” Benedict was a God-oriented man leading like-minded people on the way of the Gospel. In St. Gregory’s words, he was a man of God (*vir Dei*).

REV. TIMOTHY FRY, OSB

St. Benedict’s Abbey  
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*Feast of St. Benedict*  
*21 March 1982*

# *The Rule of Saint Benedict*

## PROLOGUE

<sup>1</sup>Listen carefully, my son, to the master's instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart. This is advice from a father who loves you; welcome it, and faithfully put it into practice. <sup>2</sup>The labor of obedience will bring you back to him from whom you had drifted through the sloth of disobedience. <sup>3</sup>This message of mine is for you, then, if you are ready to give up your own will, once and for all, and armed with the strong and noble weapons of obedience to do battle for the true King, Christ the Lord.

<sup>4</sup>First of all, every time you begin a good work, you must pray to him most earnestly to bring it to perfection. <sup>5</sup>In his goodness, he has already counted us as his sons, and therefore we should never grieve him by our evil actions. <sup>6</sup>With his good gifts which are in us, we must obey him at all times that he may never become the angry

father who disinherits his sons,<sup>7</sup> nor the dread lord, enraged by our sins, who punishes us forever as worthless servants for refusing to follow him to glory.

<sup>8</sup>Let us get up then, at long last, for the Scriptures rouse us when they say: *It is high time for us to arise from sleep* (Rom 13:11). <sup>9</sup>Let us open our eyes to the light that comes from God, and our ears to the voice from heaven that every day calls out this charge: <sup>10</sup>*If you hear his voice today, do not harden your hearts* (Ps 94[95]:8). <sup>11</sup>And again: *You that have ears to hear, listen to what the Spirit says to the churches* (Rev 2:7). <sup>12</sup>And what does he say? *Come and listen to me, sons; I will teach you the fear of the Lord* (Ps 33[34]:12). <sup>13</sup>*Run while you have the light of life, that the darkness of death may not overtake you* (John 12:35).

<sup>14</sup>Seeking his workman in a multitude of people, the Lord calls out to him and lifts his voice again: <sup>15</sup>*Is there anyone here who yearns for life and desires to see good days?* (Ps 33[34]:13). <sup>16</sup>If you hear this and your answer is "I do," God then directs these words to you: <sup>17</sup>*If you desire true and eternal life, keep your tongue free from vicious talk and your lips from all deceit; turn away from evil and do good; let peace be your quest and aim* (Ps 33[34]:14-15). <sup>18</sup>Once you have done this, *my eyes will be upon you and*



*my ears will listen for your prayers; and even before you ask me, I will say to you: Here I am* (Isa 58:9). <sup>19</sup>What, dear brothers, is more delightful than this voice of the Lord calling to us? <sup>20</sup>See how the Lord in his love shows us the way of life. <sup>21</sup>Clothed then with faith and the performance of good works, let us set out on this way, with the Gospel for our guide, that we may deserve to see him *who has called us to his kingdom* (1 Thess 2:12).

<sup>22</sup>If we wish to dwell in the tent of this kingdom, we will never arrive unless we run there by doing good deeds. <sup>23</sup>But let us ask the Lord with the Prophet: *Who will dwell in your tent, Lord; who will find rest upon your holy mountain?* (Ps 14[15]:1). <sup>24</sup>After this question, brothers, let us listen well to what the Lord says in reply, for he shows us the way to his tent. <sup>25</sup>*One who walks without blemish, he says, and is just in all his dealings; <sup>26</sup>who speaks the truth from his heart and has not practiced deceit with his tongue; <sup>27</sup>who has not wronged a fellowman in any way, nor listened to slanders against his neighbor* (Ps 14[15]:2-3). <sup>28</sup>He has foiled the evil one, the devil, at every turn, flinging both him and his promptings far from the sight of his heart. While these temptations were still young, he caught hold of them and dashed them against Christ

(Ps 14[15]:4; 136[137]:9). <sup>29</sup>These people *fear the Lord*, and do not become elated over their good deeds; they judge it is the Lord's power, not their own, that brings about the good in them. <sup>30</sup>*They praise* (Ps 14[15]:4) the Lord working in them, and say with the Prophet: *Not to us, Lord, not to us give the glory, but to your name alone* (Ps 113[115:1]:9). <sup>31</sup>In just this way Paul the Apostle refused to take credit for the power of his preaching. He declared: *By God's grace I am what I am* (1 Cor 15:10). <sup>32</sup>And again he said: *He who boasts should make his boast in the Lord* (2 Cor 10:17). <sup>33</sup>That is why the Lord says in the Gospel: *Whoever hears these words of mine and does them is like a wise man who built his house upon rock; <sup>34</sup>the floods came and the winds blew and beat against the house, but it did not fall: it was founded on rock* (Matt 7:24-25).

<sup>35</sup>With this conclusion, the Lord waits for us daily to translate into action, as we should, his holy teachings. <sup>36</sup>Therefore our life span has been lengthened by way of a truce, that we may amend our misdeeds. <sup>37</sup>As the Apostle says: *Do you not know that the patience of God is leading you to repent* (Rom 2:4)? <sup>38</sup>And indeed the Lord assures us in his love: *I do not wish the death of the sinner, but that he turn back to me and live* (Ezek 33:11).

<sup>39</sup>Brothers, now that we have asked the Lord who will dwell in his tent, we have heard the instruction for dwelling in it, but only if we fulfill the obligations of those who live there. <sup>40</sup>We must, then, prepare our hearts and bodies for the battle of holy obedience to his instructions. <sup>41</sup>What is not possible to us by nature, let us ask the Lord to supply by the help of his grace. <sup>42</sup>If we wish to reach eternal life, even as we avoid the torments of hell, <sup>43</sup>then— while there is still time, while we are in this body and have time to accomplish all these things by the light of life—<sup>44</sup>we must run and do now what will profit us forever.

<sup>45</sup>Therefore we intend to establish a school for the Lord's service. <sup>46</sup>In drawing up its regulations, we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome. <sup>47</sup>The good of all concerned, however, may prompt us to a little strictness in order to amend faults and to safeguard love. <sup>48</sup>Do not be daunted immediately by fear and run away from the road that leads to salvation. It is bound to be narrow at the outset. <sup>49</sup>But as we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God's commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love. <sup>50</sup>Never swerving from his instructions, then, but faithfully observing

his teaching in the monastery until death, we shall through patience share in the sufferings of Christ that we may deserve also to share in his kingdom. Amen.

[HERE BEGINS THE TEXT OF THE RULE]

*[It is called a rule because it regulates the lives of those who obey it]*

## CHAPTER 1: THE KINDS OF MONKS

<sup>1</sup>There are clearly four kinds of monks. <sup>2</sup>First, there are the cenobites, that is to say, those who belong to a monastery, where they serve under a rule and an abbot.

<sup>3</sup>Second, there are the anchorites or hermits, who have come through the test of living in a monastery for a long time, and have passed beyond the first fervor of monastic life. <sup>4</sup>Thanks to the help and guidance of many, they are now trained to fight against the devil. <sup>5</sup>They have built up their strength and go from the battle line in the ranks of their brothers to the single combat of the desert. Self-reliant now, without the support of another, they are ready with God's help to grapple single-handed with the vices of body and mind.

<sup>6</sup>Third, there are the sarabaites, the most detestable kind of monks, who with no experience

to guide them, no rule to try them *as gold is tried in a furnace* (Prov 27:21), have a character as soft as lead. <sup>7</sup>Still loyal to the world by their actions, they clearly lie to God by their tonsure. <sup>8</sup>Two or three together, or even alone, without a shepherd, they pen themselves up in their own sheepfolds, not the Lord's. Their law is what they like to do, whatever strikes their fancy. <sup>9</sup>Anything they believe in and choose, they call holy; anything they dislike, they consider forbidden.

<sup>10</sup>Fourth and finally, there are the monks called gyrovagues, who spend their entire lives drifting from region to region, staying as guests for three or four days in different monasteries. <sup>11</sup>Always on the move, they never settle down, and are slaves to their own wills and gross appetites. In every way they are worse than sarabaites.

<sup>12</sup>It is better to keep silent than to speak of all these and their disgraceful way of life. <sup>13</sup>Let us pass them by, then, and with the help of the Lord, proceed to draw up a plan for the strong kind, the cenobites.

## CHAPTER 2: QUALITIES OF THE ABBOT

<sup>1</sup>To be worthy of the task of governing a monastery, the abbot must always remember what his title signifies and act as a superior should.

<sup>2</sup>He is believed to hold the place of Christ in the monastery, since he is addressed by a title of Christ, <sup>3</sup>as the Apostle indicates: *You have received the spirit of adoption of sons by which we exclaim, abba, father* (Rom 8:15). <sup>4</sup>Therefore, the abbot must never teach or decree or command anything that would deviate from the Lord's instructions. <sup>5</sup>On the contrary, everything he teaches and commands should, like the leaven of divine justice, permeate the minds of his disciples. <sup>6</sup>Let the abbot always remember that at the fearful judgment of God, not only his teaching but also his disciples' obedience will come under scrutiny. <sup>7</sup>The abbot must, therefore, be aware that the shepherd will bear the blame wherever the father of the household finds that the sheep have yielded no profit. <sup>8</sup>Still, if he has faithfully shepherded a restive and disobedient flock, always striving to cure their unhealthy ways, it will be otherwise: <sup>9</sup>the shepherd will be acquitted at the Lord's judgment. Then, like the Prophet, he may say to the Lord: *I have not hidden your justice in my heart; I have proclaimed your truth and your salvation* (Ps 39[40]:11), *but they spurned and rejected me* (Isa 1:2; Ezek 20:27). <sup>10</sup>Then at last the sheep that have rebelled against his care will be punished by the overwhelming power of death.

<sup>11</sup>Furthermore, anyone who receives the name of abbot is to lead his disciples by a twofold teaching: <sup>12</sup>he must point out to them all that is good and holy more by example than by words, proposing the commandments of the Lord to receptive disciples with words, but demonstrating God's instructions to the stubborn and the dull by a living example. <sup>13</sup>Again, if he teaches his disciples that something is not to be done, then neither must he do it, *lest after preaching to others, he himself be found reprobate* (1 Cor 9:27) <sup>14</sup>and God some day call to him in his sin: *How is it that you repeat my just commands and mouth my covenant when you hate discipline and toss my words behind you* (Ps 49[50]:16-17)? <sup>15</sup>And also this: *How is it that you can see a splinter in your brother's eye, and never notice the plank in your own* (Matt 7:3)?

<sup>16</sup>The abbot should avoid all favoritism in the monastery. <sup>17</sup>He is not to love one more than another unless he finds someone better in good actions and obedience. <sup>18</sup>A man born free is not to be given higher rank than a slave who becomes a monk, except for some other good reason. <sup>19</sup>But the abbot is free, if he sees fit, to change anyone's rank as justice demands. Ordinarily, everyone is to keep to his regular place, <sup>20</sup>because *whether slave or free, we are all one*



in Christ (Gal 3:28; Eph 6:8) and share alike in bearing arms in the service of the one Lord, for *God shows no partiality among persons* (Rom 2:11). <sup>21</sup>Only in this are we distinguished in his sight: if we are found better than others in good works and in humility. <sup>22</sup>Therefore, the abbot is to show equal love to everyone and apply the same discipline to all according to their merits.

<sup>23</sup>In his teaching, the abbot should always observe the Apostle's recommendation, in which he says: *Use argument, appeal, reproof* (2 Tim 4:2). <sup>24</sup>This means that he must vary with circumstances, threatening and coaxing by turns, stern as a taskmaster, devoted and tender as only a father can be. <sup>25</sup>With the undisciplined and restless, he will use firm argument; with the obedient and docile and patient, he will appeal for greater virtue; but as for the negligent and disdainful, we charge him to use reproof and rebuke. <sup>26</sup>He should not gloss over the sins of those who err, but cut them out while he can, as soon as they begin to sprout, remembering the fate of Eli, priest of Shiloh (1 Sam 2:11–4:18). <sup>27</sup>For upright and perceptive men, his first and second warnings should be verbal; <sup>28</sup>but those who are evil or stubborn, arrogant or disobedient, he can curb only by blows or some other physical punishment at the first offense. It is written, *The fool cannot*

*be corrected with words* (Prov 29:19); <sup>29</sup>and again, *Strike your son with a rod and you will free his soul from death* (Prov 23:14).

<sup>30</sup>The abbot must always remember what he is and remember what he is called, aware that more will be expected of a man to whom more has been entrusted. <sup>31</sup>He must know what a difficult and demanding burden he has undertaken: directing souls and serving a variety of temperaments, coaxing, reproofing and encouraging them as appropriate. <sup>32</sup>He must so accommodate and adapt himself to each one's character and intelligence that he will not only keep the flock entrusted to his care from dwindling, but will rejoice in the increase of a good flock. <sup>33</sup>Above all, he must not show too great concern for the fleeting and temporal things of this world, neglecting or treating lightly the welfare of those entrusted to him. <sup>34</sup>Rather, he should keep in mind that he has undertaken the care of souls for whom he must give an account. <sup>35</sup>That he may not plead lack of resources as an excuse, he is to remember what is written: *Seek first the kingdom of God and his justice, and all these things will be given you as well* (Matt 6:33), <sup>36</sup>and again, *Those who fear him lack nothing* (Ps 33[34]:10).

<sup>37</sup>The abbot must know that anyone undertaking the charge of souls must be ready to