

“Sutera’s translation will introduce Benedict to readers who could not imagine an ancient monastic document might speak to their contemporary lives. For people who have read the Rule many times, Benedict will be heard with fresh clarity. And through the commentary and prayerful questions that apply Benedict’s wisdom to daily life, all of us together will find God’s voice addressing us today.”

—The Very Revd Mark Strobel, OblSB, Dean of Gethsemane
Episcopal Cathedral, Fargo, North Dakota

“What makes this book so special, and so useful to the reader, is that every word is informed by Judith Sutera’s lived experience. Her insights have been gleaned from years of monastic formation and living in the rock tumbler of a Benedictine community. The Rule may be Wisdom literature, but it’s also a way of life, and Sister Judith illuminates it in down-to-earth and accessible language.”

—Kathleen Norris, author of *The Cloister Walk* and *Acedia & Me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer’s Life*

“Sister Judith has given us a great gift—an inclusive translation of the Rule that is accurate, well-written, and illuminated by her perceptive commentary. The questions after each day’s reading help the reader make the Rule the form of daily life. The perennial wisdom of our Holy Father Benedict, thanks to Sister Judith, is now more accessible and inviting to all.”

—Christine Fletcher, author of *Benedict for Boomers* and *24/7 Christian*

“With this new commentary, Sister Judith Sutera offers fresh insights into the timeless wisdom of the Rule capable of guiding those of us seeking to live the Benedictine values of listening, community, hospitality, humility, prayer, and work in the twenty-first century.”

—Judith Valente, former religion correspondent for PBS-TV,
author of *How to Live: What The Rule of St. Benedict Teaches Us About Happiness, Meaning and Community*

“Judith Sutera’s translation of the Rule reads like most modern English texts, it’s inclusivity feels natural. I imagine if Benedict had written his Rule today it would have sounded a lot like this.”

—Jason Paul Engel, OblSB

“Sutera’s commentary emphasizes the central elements of the Rule which have made it such a reliable and faithful guide to Gospel life for over 1500 years, not only for monastics but also for the many laity today who depend upon it. Her three questions posed to readers at the end of each segment help make this book a valuable resource for personal meditation.”

—Norvene Vest, oblate of Benedictine Sisters of Virginia, author of
What is Your Practice? Lifelong Growth in the Spirit

“Sr. Judith Sutera has done a masterful job of making a spiritual classic accessible to everyone who sincerely seeks God. She has provided a gender-neutral translation of the Rule, with a commentary, and something every teacher of the Rule will appreciate, several questions for reflection and discussion after each day’s reading of the Rule.”

—Abbot Brendan Freeman, Mellifont Abbey, Ireland

“Sr. Judith’s commentary sheds light on the text, weaving themes together to show connections throughout the Rule. The reflection questions can take one deeper into the text and into relationship with God, self, and others. Highly recommended for oblates and all who love and live the monastic way of life.”

—Antoinette Purcell, OSB, Director of Oblates
Our Lady of Grace Monastery, Beech Grove, Indiana

“Without neglecting the experience of those who have long lived it, this is a wonderful introduction to the Rule for those who are new to it. Sr. Judith’s lucid, down-to-earth prose reveals the mysterious profundity of Benedict’s very practical vision of life together.”

—Bonnie B. Thurston, author of *Shaped by the End You Live For:*
Thomas Merton’s Monastic Spirituality

St. Benedict's Rule

*An Inclusive Translation and
Daily Commentary*

Judith Sutera, OSB



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Contents

Introduction 1

The Rule of Our Holy Father St. Benedict

Prologue 11

Chapter 1: The Kinds of Monastics 25

Chapter 2: Qualities of the Superior 28

Chapter 3: Calling the Community for Counsel 42

Chapter 4: The Tools for Good Works 46

Chapter 5: Obedience 56

Chapter 6: Restraint of Speech 61

Chapter 7: Humility 64

Chapter 8: The Divine Office during the Night 95

Chapter 9: The Number of Psalms at the Night Office 98

Chapter 10: How the Office Is to Be Said in Summer 101

Chapter 11: The Night Office on Sundays 104

Chapter 12: The Solemnity of Lauds 107

Chapter 13: Lauds on Ordinary Days 110

<i>Chapter 14: The Night Office on the Feasts of Saints</i>	113
<i>Chapter 15: When Alleluia Is to Be Said</i>	115
<i>Chapter 16: The Work of God during the Day</i>	118
<i>Chapter 17: The Number of Psalms to Be Sung at These Hours</i>	120
<i>Chapter 18: The Order of the Psalmody</i>	123
<i>Chapter 19: The Discipline of the Psalmody</i>	131
<i>Chapter 20: Reverence at Prayer</i>	133
<i>Chapter 21: The Deans of the Monastery</i>	135
<i>Chapter 22: The Sleeping Arrangements</i>	138
<i>Chapter 23: Excommunication for Faults</i>	141
<i>Chapter 24: The Manner of Excommunication</i>	143
<i>Chapter 25: Serious Faults</i>	145
<i>Chapter 26: Unauthorized Association with the Excommunicated</i>	148
<i>Chapter 27: The Superior's Concern for the Excommunicated</i>	150
<i>Chapter 28: Those Who Do Not Amend after Frequent Corrections</i>	153
<i>Chapter 29: Readmission of Those Who Leave the Monastery</i>	156
<i>Chapter 30: Correction of the Young</i>	158
<i>Chapter 31: Qualifications of the Cellarer</i>	161
<i>Chapter 32: The Tools and Goods of the Monastery</i>	165
<i>Chapter 33: Private Ownership</i>	168

<i>Chapter 34: Distribution According to Need</i>	170
<i>Chapter 35: Weekly Kitchen Servers</i>	173
<i>Chapter 36: The Sick Members</i>	177
<i>Chapter 37: The Elderly and Children</i>	180
<i>Chapter 38: The Weekly Reader</i>	182
<i>Chapter 39: The Quantity of Food</i>	185
<i>Chapter 40: The Quantity of Drink</i>	188
<i>Chapter 41: The Times for Community Meals</i>	191
<i>Chapter 42: Silence after Compline</i>	194
<i>Chapter 43: Tardiness at the Work of God or at Table</i>	197
<i>Chapter 44: Satisfaction by the Excommunicated</i>	201
<i>Chapter 45: Mistakes in the Oratory</i>	204
<i>Chapter 46: Faults in Other Matters</i>	206
<i>Chapter 47: The Signal for the Work of God</i>	208
<i>Chapter 48: The Daily Manual Labor</i>	210
<i>Chapter 49: The Observance of Lent</i>	217
<i>Chapter 50: Those Working at a Distance or Traveling</i>	220
<i>Chapter 51: Those on a Short Journey</i>	223
<i>Chapter 52: The Oratory of the Monastery</i>	225
<i>Chapter 53: The Reception of Guests</i>	228
<i>Chapter 54: Letters or Gifts for Monastics</i>	233
<i>Chapter 55: The Clothing and Footgear of the Community</i>	236
<i>Chapter 56: The Superior's Table</i>	241

<i>Chapter 57: The Artisans of the Monastery</i>	243
<i>Chapter 58: The Procedure for Receiving Members</i>	246
<i>Chapter 59: The Offering of Children by Nobles or the Poor</i>	251
<i>Chapter 60: Admission of Priests to the Monastery</i>	254
<i>Chapter 61: The Reception of Visiting Monastics</i>	257
<i>Chapter 62: The Priests of the Monastery</i>	261
<i>Chapter 63: Community Rank</i>	264
<i>Chapter 64: The Election of a Superior</i>	269
<i>Chapter 65: The Prior of the Monastery</i>	274
<i>Chapter 66: The Porter of the Monastery</i>	279
<i>Chapter 67: Those Sent on a Journey</i>	282
<i>Chapter 68: Assignment of Impossible Tasks</i>	285
<i>Chapter 69: The Presumption of Defending Another</i>	288
<i>Chapter 70: The Presumption of Striking Another</i>	290
<i>Chapter 71: Mutual Obedience</i>	292
<i>Chapter 72: Good Zeal</i>	294
<i>Chapter 73: This Rule Only a Beginning</i>	297

Introduction

This version of *The Rule of St. Benedict* is not a paraphrase or a popularized adaptation. It contains the full text, but it is written in gender-neutral language. Since the rule is a historical document written for a community of male monastics, many would prefer to read it in its original masculine form. Some versions have also accommodated female communities by inserting optional language in the text, such as “abbot/prioress/abbess/prior” followed by “he/she.” The translation presented here offers another alternative to avoid the problems of reading in mixed assemblies, in situations where a public reader tries to de-gender the language on the fly (and ends up with awkward wordings), or for people who prefer not to use gendered language. In today’s inclusive world, there is a place for a neutral version of the rule that welcomes all people to personally identify with its wisdom. The recent acceptance of the, actually, centuries-old practice of using “they” language with singulars and other socially changing conventions (such as using the word “monastics” for Benedictines of both genders) have made such a version more possible and acceptable.

The Translation

I consulted the Latin text as best as I could, but I do not pretend to be a Latin scholar. Primarily, I depended on the most authoritative twentieth-century English translations, those of *RB 1980*, Terrence Kardong, Leonard Doyle, and Boniface Verheyen, as well as my personal notes on translation issues from my time in the 1980s as a rule student of Abbot Jerome Theissen, one of the *RB 1980* translators. The extensive line-by-line analysis in Father Terrence Kardong's *Benedict's Rule: A Translation and Commentary* was especially helpful, as he also brought in linguistic elucidation from commentators such as Holzherr, Lentini, and de Vogue (some of their work now available in English and also consulted).

“The Abbot”

Probably the most challenging single word to work with was “abbot.” It must be admitted at the start that this is a key word because it is clearly intended to reflect the image of God as father (Abba) and the man at the head of the monastery to be as a father. There is no word in our language that has anywhere near the degree of association as the abbot/Abba connection. Moreover, since there is no equivalent word for mother (God as Amma), this has always been a problem as the English words “abbess” or “prioress” completely lack the resonance. The word “superior”

has been chosen as at least an attempt to make the role gender neutral. Unfortunately, the image of parenthood gets lost, but it is a term with which most people are familiar, and it does contain the Benedictine value of one who is over (*super*) others, as in “those who live under an abbot.”

“The Lord”

St. Benedict chooses not to refer to Jesus by his given name and only rarely uses the word “Christ.” Throughout the rule, references to Jesus, especially when citing gospel quotations, are almost always as “the Lord.” This may be attributed to the controversy between the Church and the Arian heretics in Benedict’s time. Since the Arians saw Jesus as the created son of God and not from eternity like the Creator, Benedict was careful to confirm that his rule’s foundation was in the divine and all-powerful “Lord” and not merely Jesus the man. There are, however, places in which the rule also uses this word to refer to the first person of the Trinity. Thus, in this translation, I have changed those instances to the genderless “God” where appropriate, while leaving “the Lord” as the most accurate appellation for Jesus with its accompanying male pronouns. This may not be the desired choice for some readers who find any language that suggests domination objectionable, but it is a choice that leaves intact Benedict’s sense of the subjection of all people to the “Lord of all” and for which any word that compromised that image did not seem to work.

"The Monk"

While romance languages have male and female equivalents for a member of a monastic community because of the gendered noun endings, English has no such option. Therefore, in common usage, the word "monk" has generally been identified with males. The female word "nun" has no linguistic connection that suggests a member of a specifically monastic religious community. While using one part of speech as another has always been less than desirable, monastic writers several decades ago decided that they would rather turn the adjective "monastic" into a noun than have females excluded from the common English identification with "monkhood." Therefore, they began to refer to both males and females as "monastics," a usage common enough today to warrant replacing the word "monk" throughout this version. "Member of the community" has also been used in some places.

"The Priest"

More than in any other chapter, some might be comfortable with leaving intact the masculine language in chapters on priests in the monastery. I have chosen to make them gender neutral as well. While it is not the Roman Catholic practice to have female priests at this time, there are ecumenical Benedictine communities already today that contain female members ordained in the Anglican Communion or Protestant clergy.

St. Benedict's Place in History

Christians do not have a monopoly on monasticism, nor did they invent it. We do not have a different word to identify a Hindu monk or a Buddhist nun than a Christian one. All of these faith traditions have the practice of communal life for the purpose of finding inner peace and connectedness to the transcendent through good example, simple living, reverence for creation, study of sacred writings, and sharing of common prayer and life. What sets each apart from the others is not what they do but why they do it and their differing theological systems. Hindu and Buddhist monasticism were well established in areas of early Christianity and could have been one of the inspirational sources of Christian monasticism.

Men and women living communally in urban areas or in a particularly austere desert environment were well established by the time St. Benedict and his sister St. Scholastica were born in approximately AD 480. Benedict is not honored as the father of Western monasticism because of anything extraordinarily new but because of the genius with which he gathered various elements of the tradition and edited them into a system that could adapt and endure for the next fifteen hundred years and that still speaks to people across the globe today.

Sources

The rule is deeply rooted in Scripture. Benedict quotes directly or indirectly from the Old and New Testaments,

especially the psalms and gospels, more than three hundred times. Although the Latin Vulgate would have been his source, he is probably writing from memory, and he also sometimes accommodates the text to the point he is trying to make. The parenthetical Scripture citations throughout the text are additions by later editors. He also cites principles from earlier theologians and monastic founders. He gets much of his basic concept of monastic life from the work of John Cassian, who summarized the desert tradition for Western monastics. The most important source is the rule of a mysterious Italian predecessor of a generation or so before, known only as “the Master.” Since much of the material in Benedict’s rule is taken, often verbatim, from this source, one might wonder why Benedict is so venerated. It is because of his ability to use this previously existing rule as a foundation, synthesize other relevant sources, and create something quite different from the *Rule of the Master*. It is, in fact, only by reading the two rules side by side that the unique personality of Benedict may be seen. He takes something that is long, harsh, and negative, editing it and adding to it in ways that change the thrust dramatically.

Benedict’s Message

St. Benedict did not set out to write a theological treatise but to lay down the basics of how monastic life was to be lived according to his values and practice. From what he mandates, however, a clear theology emerges. If the rule

were to be distilled into a single word, it would be its first word: “Listen!” The reason for this attentiveness to the way God is speaking in every moment and in every action is that we are responsible and accountable for every moment leading up to the final accounting at death. We are to “keep death daily before our eyes” because that is the moment at which we return to God what God has given. The road to this final fulfillment is comprised of the choices we make, the self-awareness we develop, and the prayer we offer to God through the course of daily life. Benedict’s is a theology of the ordinary. We do the same things over and over, but each time we can learn something that will assist us in the days that follow.

The Commentary Tradition

For centuries, writers have produced commentaries on the rule. They differ from more general works in that they comment on each chapter of the rule, often line by line, usually along with some kind of exploration of that chapter’s meaning linguistically and historically, as well as its relevance to the life of the reader. The best of them are done by the great scholars of the monastic tradition, using their vast knowledge of the original language and historical background. This book might be considered “commentary lite.” It attempts to give some insights into Benedict’s context and to address what this might have to do with real life, but it weighs in (literally and figuratively) at far less than the more

scholarly and detailed books in the genre. It is an educational commentary for someone who is encountering the rule for the first time or an inspirational commentary for someone who has read it many times.

Since the rule is read daily in monasteries, there is a traditional division of the rule into reading segments that carry the date on which that section is read. This commentary follows the customary dating system. That system provides for the rule to be read from beginning to end three times in the course of a year. To assist the reader in personal meditation (*lectio*), this book provides three optional reflection questions at the end of each day's reading.

The Rule of Our Holy Father St. Benedict

Prologue

Jan. 1 – May 2 – Sept. 1

Listen carefully, my child, to the instructions of your master, and incline the ear of your heart. Cheerfully receive and faithfully put into practice the advice of a loving parent, that by the toil of obedience you may return to God, from whom you have drifted by the sloth of disobedience. To you, therefore, my message is now directed, who, giving up your own will, take up the strong and most excellent arms of obedience to do battle for Christ the Lord, the true King.

In the first place, whenever you begin a good work, pray most earnestly that it may be brought to perfection in order that the one who has been pleased to count us in the number of God's children need never be grieved at our evil deeds. With the good things which have been given us, we must obey at all times so that God may not, like an angry parent, disinherit the children nor, like a dread ruler, enraged at our evil deeds, hand us over to everlasting punishment as most wicked servants who would not follow to glory.

“Listen!” The first thing that St. Benedict wants to tell us is that if we are not attentive, we can receive no wisdom; but if we are paying attention, we will hear God’s voice everywhere. Each part of the rule meshes with the others to form a plan for becoming more aware of how God’s voice is there all the time, in everything and everyone, if we are just listening. When we think about a “rule,” we frequently associate the word with “rules,” a list of things to do and not do. We should actually be thinking “ruler,” a measure against which we place ourselves to see how we measure up. St. Benedict is not providing a legal document but wisdom literature. The opening lines place it clearly in the literary tradition of the wisdom books of the Old Testament where a parent tells a child what to do to be happy and navigate life well.

The whole rule can be summed up as a call to mindfulness. Wherever we are, whatever we do, we are always to be attentive to the all-pervading divine. There is a definite difference between ear-listening and heart-hearing. Anyone who has ever had a child say, “Yes, I heard you” and then continue to ignore what was said knows this. So Benedict, that wise parent, knows that the full attention of the heart will be necessary to sustain the listener in the desire to know and do God’s will. There has to be a complete pathway for the Word to get from the air around us to the very center of our being.

What is some of the best advice I've ever received and how did it change me?

Can I pray to be more attentive to where God might be speaking today . . . and then listen?

Can I thank God each time I do the right thing today and ask for strength any time I realize I am resisting God's will?

Jan. 2 – May 3 – Sept. 2
(Prologue, continued)

Let us then rise at long last, since the Scripture arouses us, saying: "It is now the hour for us to rise from sleep" (Rom 13:11); and having opened our eyes to the divine light, let us hear with attentive ears what the divine voice cries out to us daily, saying: "Today, if you hear God's voice, harden not your hearts" (Ps 94[95]:8). And again: "Those who have ears to hear let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Rev 2:7). And what does God say? "Come, children, listen to me, I will teach you the fear of the Lord" (Ps 33[34]:12). "Run while you have the light of life, that the darkness of death not overtake you" (John 12:35).

The prologue of the rule is packed with action verbs. Almost every sentence demands some kind of response based on an actual physical activity. It is full of movement: waking, listening, answering, doing, arming, battling, and

especially running. Benedict's call is urgent. It's urgent because, as he reminds us, we only have so much time to get going and do what we need to do.

Every day is a new opportunity to spring into action. We are told that the voice of God cries out *daily*, and this idea is critical to Benedict's approach. We wake up daily to what needs to happen today to bring us closer to God. Most of the time, we are going to do very mundane daily things that add up to an ordinary life. For Benedict, we are always in a race to stay ahead of the darkness of sin and death. They follow us everywhere we go, so we can't waste any opportunity to put space between us and them. If our call from God is just to live this ordinary daily life, then we need to do it as best we can.

How can I make my ears and eyes more attentive?

Am I running toward the light, ambling, strolling, still warming up; what's my action verb today?

If I am alert, where might I hear God's voice, right now, today?

Jan. 3 – May 4 – Sept. 3
(Prologue, continued)

Seeking laborers in the multitude of people, God calls out again: “Who is the one who desires life and longs to see

good days?” (Ps 33[34]:13). If you hear this and answer, “I am the one,” God directs these words to you: “If you will have true and everlasting life, keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from deceit; turn away from evil and do good; seek after peace and pursue it” (Ps 33[34]:14-15). When you have done these things, “My eyes shall be upon you and my ears open to your prayers, and even before you call upon me, I will say ‘Here I am.’” (Isa 58:9).

What, dearest ones, can be sweeter to us than this voice of God inviting us? See, in loving kindness, God shows us the way of life.

Now that the initial groundwork has been laid, the prologue becomes much more personal. It is cast as a dialogue between the listener and God. Note that God makes the first overture, not waiting for each of us to seek God but seeking the loved one from amid the crowd. God calls; one does not have to go looking for God in hidden places but only to listen for the call. Then we have to answer “Here I am,” so God knows we’re interested in the offer of a relationship.

The question is enticing. Of course, the sensible answer is yes. Who wouldn’t want a long, happy life full of good things? But there’s a catch. This happiness has a price. Once one steps out of the crowd, the seeker is asked to do a few things in order to continue the conversation: evil tendencies must be replaced with good, and peace must

be pursued (not just observed but *chased*—another strong action verb!). Now that the listener has shown desire, God offers a challenge. The one who has answered has to make some investment of time and effort. The prologue invites us to make a covenant with God, but it doesn't stop there. The demands that God makes in this conversation show most clearly that salvation is found in relationship to others. I can't say I'm here and then just stand there. If the inviting voice has sounded sweet, then I have to follow. After hearing about the conditions, I must be ready to act justly. After stepping out and saying I am here, there has to be some passion in the relationship, some desire to do what is asked. If we say yes to an invitation, we have to show up and participate.

How can I do something to pursue peace in my life and in my world?

How can I be more attentive to my words and try to make them honest and positive?

Am I willing to say to God regularly "Here I am" and listen for God's next instruction?

Jan. 4 – May 5 – Sept. 4
(Prologue, continued)

Therefore, having our loins girt with faith and the performance of good works, let us set out on the way under

the guidance of the Gospel, that we may be found worthy of seeing the one who has called us to the kingdom (cf. 1 Thess 2:12).

If we desire to dwell in the tent of this kingdom, we cannot reach it unless we run there by doing good works. But let us ask with the Prophet: “Who shall dwell in Your tent, or who shall rest on Your holy mountain?” (Ps 14[15]:1).

After this question, let us listen well to the reply of God who shows us the way to this tent, saying: “the ones who walk without blemish and do justice; who speak truth in their hearts; who have not used their tongues for deceit nor wronged anyone nor listened to slander against a neighbor” (Ps. 14[15]:2-3). They have fought the devil, casting the demon’s temptations far from the sight of their hearts and have taken evil thoughts while they were still young and dashed them against Christ (cf. Ps 14[15]:4; Ps 136[137]:9). Fearing God, they are not elated by their good deeds, knowing that it is God’s power and not their own that brings about the good in them. They praise God working in them (cf. Ps 14[15]:4), saying with the Prophet: “Not to us, O God, not to us; but to Your name give glory” (Ps 113[115:1]:9). Thus also the Apostle Paul refused to take any credit for his preaching, saying: “By the grace of God, I am what I am” (1 Cor 15:10). And again, he says: “Those who boast, let them boast in the Lord” (2 Cor 10:17).

There is more running here. The girt loins signify someone who has hitched up their clothing in order to move

quickly. As for the tent, we can't rest there until we've run there, and it's no easy stroll. I'm reminded of video games where someone is going along a path and various obstacles and adversaries keep popping up at every turn and at unexpected moments. We may not personify the devil the way Benedict does, but Benedict provides us with a good piece of advice: stop the bad thoughts before they get too big. Psalm 14[15], quoted here, is one of the problematic cursing psalms that many people find too troubling to even pray. It's filled with all the hateful things that the psalmist hopes will happen to enemies. Benedict Christianizes it by indicating that if we're going to have hateful thoughts about someone, it should be the devil. The devil's children, our evil inclinations, need to be killed before they grow up and do more damage. If we can pray the cursing psalms with the image of the enemy being not a person but the evil temptations around and in us, these psalms will energize us for what Benedict sees as a battle.

What is one of my recurring temptations that I should dash every time it enters my mind?

What are some good techniques or counter-thoughts that I can use to dash a particular temptation?

Can I pray this or another cursing psalm today with the insight that it is evil that is the enemy?

Jan. 5 – May 6 – Sept. 5
(Prologue, continued)

That is why the Lord also says in the Gospel: “They who hear my words and do them shall be like a wise person who built a house upon a rock; the floods came, the winds blew, and they beat upon that house, and it did not fall, for it was founded on a rock” (Matt 7:24-25). The Lord waits for us daily to translate these holy teachings into action. Therefore, our days are lengthened as a truce that we may amend our misdeeds. As the Apostle says: “Do you not know that the patience of God leads you to repent?” (Rom 2:4). Our loving God assures us: “I do not desire the death of sinners, but that they turn back to me and live” (Ezek 33:11).

For most of us, patience is one of those things that we often find is in short supply, especially when we need it most. Rarely, however, do we think about patience as a virtue that God has to practice constantly in dealing with us. Fortunately, God is all-loving and perfect in virtue, but it's a shame God has to demonstrate it so much. With all the action verbs about how we should be running and pursuing, in actuality, God still has to do a lot of waiting. Throughout the rule, Benedict walks a fine line between his perception of God as a strict judge and God as lovingly patient.

Though he sounds harsh at times, Benedict wants his followers to love more than to fear God. He knows that human nature can be a problem in our submission to the will of God. We might not prefer the word “truce” here, as if we are going to be conquered by some power if we don’t negotiate. The truce here is not to be seen as the resolution of a battle between us and God. A truce involves agreement by two parties, each giving some concessions to achieve peace. God the just judge will extend more patience if feeling some assurance that we sincerely will try harder tomorrow. That dailiness is an oft-repeated theme for Benedict. Every day there is something that challenges us to turn the teachings into action. Every day we have a chance to keep the truce by remembering the patient God who has given us another chance.

How can I make today a new day and seize the opportunities to do good?

What is God waiting patiently for me to do?

How can I turn a holy teaching I hear today into action?

Jan. 6 – May 7 – Sept. 6
(Prologue, continued)

Now that we have asked who it is that shall dwell in God’s tent, we have heard the conditions for dwelling there, but

only if we fulfill the obligations of those who would live there. Then we must prepare our hearts and bodies for the battle of holy obedience to these instructions. Let us ask God to supply by the help of grace what is impossible to us by nature. If we want to reach life everlasting, even as we flee the torments of hell, then while there is still time, while we are still in this body and are able to do these things by the light of life, we must run now and do what will profit us forever.

Here we go with still more running. We are to flee the torments of hell—not just sidestep them but run vigorously in the opposite direction. The opposite direction is running home—to the place where we dwell safely with God. The lines about God’s tent or holy mountain are a bit unclear because we are at the same time heading there and living there. This notion of both arriving and being on the way has a theological name, “eschatology,” meaning already present but not completely fulfilled. Even though we are not in the fullness of the kingdom, we have Jesus’ assurance that the kingdom is here and now.

Some early Christians in Egypt fled to the desert to avoid persecution and a corrupt society. They had the promise of Jesus that the kingdom is here and now, but it certainly didn’t look or feel like it. Paul said that Jesus was the new Adam, restoring the harmony of Eden, but their desolate place hardly resembled a paradise. Furthermore,

Jesus had not returned to bring the fullness of the kingdom as he had promised. Some of them were baffled by the contradiction but faithful to the promise. They concluded that, if the kingdom is here and now, then we should act like it. This was the beginning of monasticism—when people intentionally tried to make their earthly dwelling the dwelling place of God. Do you usually wake up thinking, “Oh, this is paradise?” Perhaps not, but Benedict would have us try to model it a little more each day so that we actually do our part to make the kingdom come.

Can I imagine what dwelling in the tent of God might look like?

How can I think and act in some way today that would reflect life as it would be in God's dwelling tent?

What grace do I need to pray for today to supplement what feels impossible in my nature?

Jan. 7 – May 8 – Sept. 7
(Prologue, continued)

Therefore, we intend to establish a school for the Lord's service. In doing so, we hope to introduce nothing harsh or burdensome. The good of all concerned, however, may prompt us to a little strictness to correct faults or safeguard

love. Do not be daunted immediately and flee from the way of salvation, which is bound to be narrow at its beginning. But as we advance in this way of life and in faith, we shall run the way of God's commandments with expanded hearts overflowing with the inexpressible sweetness of love. Never departing from these instructions, but faithfully observing them and persevering in the monastery until death, we shall by patience share in the sufferings of Christ that we may be found worthy to share in His kingdom.

The Latin word that is translated as “school” is far more than a place where the uneducated sit passively and receive information. In classical usage it could refer to any environment that provided discipline for a particular practice, as for military or athletic training. It was also about the support and additional incentive created by the others with whom it was shared. In English, we refer to a “school of fish” or a “school of thought” in which the individuals have actually blended into a distinct entity. Throughout the rest of the rule, we will often see Benedict return to the balance and paradox of hard work and great reward. Those who persevere will be those who stay in school: learning, training, mastering. Once more, there is the image of the runner. One doesn't one day decide to run a marathon after years as a couch potato, but rather one must begin with small disciplines. Over time, not

only do the muscles of the limbs get stronger, but so does that most important muscle, the heart.

We may not be fond of the militaristic language that Benedict often uses, but he believes that there is always a war between good and evil in our lives and in the world. The more disciplined we are, the more ready we will be to take it on. The Latin root is the same for “discipline” and “disciple,” and the root meaning is “way.” Like the soldier or the athlete, the monastic takes up a whole way of life and then works at it every day by discipline.

What is something that I thought at first I could never do but mastered by practice, and how did that make me feel?

How do I feel about the discipline it takes to achieve a goal?

What disciplines might help keep me on track with a current goal?

Chapter 1

The Kinds of Monastics

Jan. 8 – May 9 – Sept. 8

It is well known that there are four kinds of monastics. The first kind is cenobites, that is, those in monasteries who live under a rule and a superior.

The second kind is anchorites or hermits, that is, those who, no longer in the first fervor of their conversion, but tested by long monastic practice and the help of many others, have already learned to fight against the devil. Trained within community for single combat in the desert, they are able, with the help of God, to fight single-handedly without the help of others against the vices of the flesh and thoughts.

The third kind is the sarabaites, the most detestable monastics, who have been tested by no rule under the hand of a master “as gold is tried in the fire” (cf. Prov 27:21) but have a nature soft as lead. Still keeping faith with the world by their works, they lie to God by their tonsure. Living in twos and threes or even singly, without a shepherd, they are enclosed not in God’s sheepfold but in their own. Their

law is the gratification of their desires because whatever they believe and choose to do they call holy, but what they dislike they consider forbidden.

The fourth kind is called gyrovagues, who spend their whole lives drifting from one region to another, staying as guests for three or four days at a time in different monasteries. Always roving and never settled, they are slaves of their own wills and gross appetites and are in every way worse than the sarabaites. It is better to be silent than to speak of their most disgraceful way of life.

Therefore, passing these over, let us go on with the help of God to lay down a rule for the strongest kind of monastics, the cenobites.

Benedict calls the kinds of monks “well known” because he is repeating the classifications used by predecessors Cassian and the Master. Hermits are held up as the ideal, but there is little evidence in the rule that Benedict had members who qualified. Managing a spiritual life without regular support from a community is extremely difficult. Most of us would like to be hermits for all the wrong reasons: to ignore the needs of others, to do things on our own schedule, to have our failings be private and our efforts self-regulated. Sarabaites find a different solution. They band with others for the prestige of being monastics, but only those who support rather than challenge their easy path. There is no good English translation for

the gyrovagues. They are simply roaming freeloaders taking advantage of others' hospitality. Benedict says to pass over them as a direct reference to the corresponding chapter in the *Rule of the Master* (RM 1). The Master includes an extremely long and overwrought rant about every detail of their lifestyle and Benedict apparently thinks that the angry attention detracts from his focus on the cenobites.

The name cenobite comes from the Greek “koinonia,” a word that signifies not just a group of people but a community. We find it in the Scripture passage “Our blessing cup is a *koinonia* with the blood of Christ.” More than just general community, it is rather a communion, a mingling that is greater than the parts and thereafter inseparable.

How am I a hermit sometimes for the good of being alone and focused on God, but sometimes for ill, wanting to avoid or be free of human responsibility?

How am I a sarabaite sometimes, rationalizing my way of life and seeking to sustain my own way without challenge?

How am I a gyrovague sometimes, undisciplined and wandering, taking advantage of kindness shown?
