

“With joy we dive into this book and finish it being convinced about the value not only of the book but of the life it shows.”

—Sr. Aquinata Böckmann, OSB

“Judith Sutera has produced a translation of the Rule that seeks to maintain its meaning and challenge but has replaced gendered vocabulary with more neutral terms. She has produced a flowing translation that will serve the purpose of community reading well.”

—Michael Casey, OCSO

“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

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Nashotah House Theological Seminary

“Whether the reader is meeting the Rule of Benedict for the first time, or has lived by its wisdom for decades, Sister Judith’s work offers an abundance of tools to listen for God’s voice everywhere. The gender-neutral language is fluid, elegant, and timely. This is a treasure I look forward to returning to for years of prayerful rumination.”

—Kate Ritger, author of *Benedictine Living: Reflections for Prayer and Meditation*

# St. Benedict's Rule

*An Inclusive Translation*

Judith Sutera, OSB



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## ***Introduction***

**T**his 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 Since the rule is a historical document written for a community of male monastics, many would prefer to read it in its original masculine form.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 is 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 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 Rule of Our Holy Father St. Benedict**

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## *Prologue*

Jan. 1 – May 2 – Sept. 1

**L**isten 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.

**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).

**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.

**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).

**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).

**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.

**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.

## *Chapter 1*

### ***The Kinds of Monastics***

Jan. 8 – May 9 – Sept. 8

**I**t 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.

## *Chapter 2*

### *Qualities of the Superior*

Jan. 9 – May 10 – Sept. 9

**T**hose who are worthy to be over a monastery ought always to be mindful of what they are called and act as a superior should. For they are believed to hold the place of Christ in the monastery when called by that name, according to the saying of the Apostle: “You have received the spirit of adoption of children, whereby we cry Abba [Father]” (Rom 8:15). Therefore, the superior should never teach, prescribe, or command anything contrary to God’s precepts, but their commands and teaching should, like the leaven of divine justice, permeate the minds of the disciples.