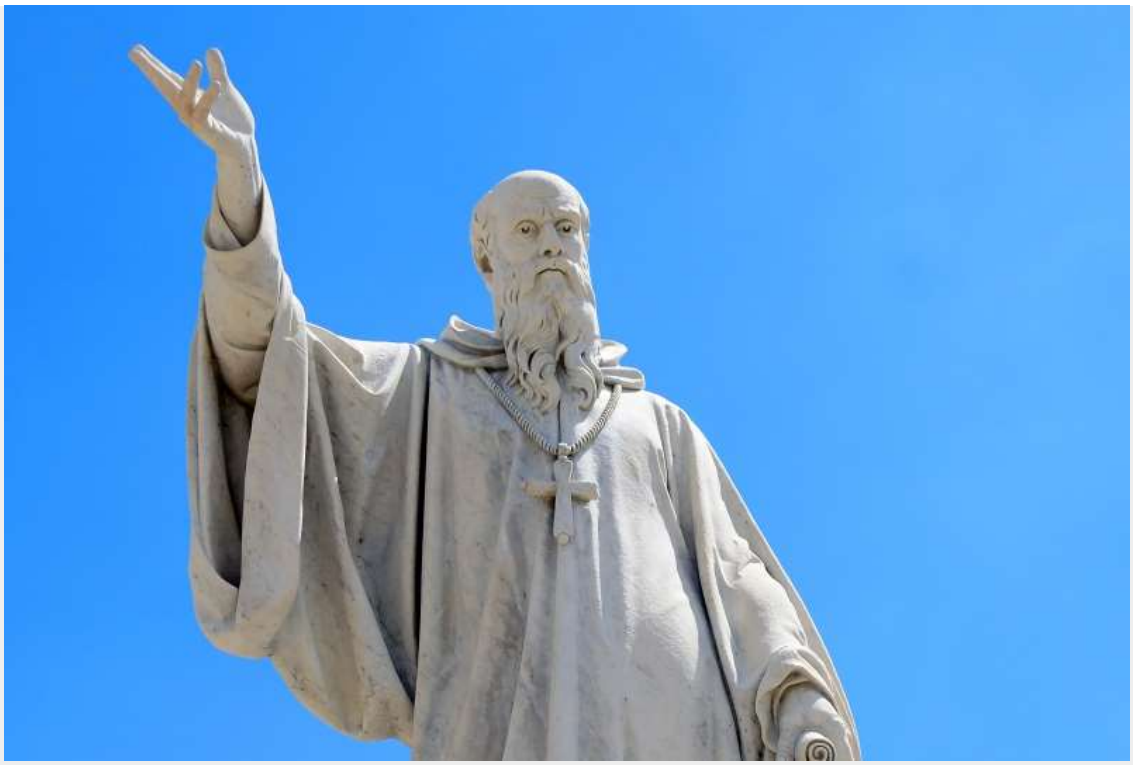

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Letter 42: Benedict

Can the pursuit of a spiritual path lead to the very egocentricity it is trying to escape? Not infrequently. The Desert monks were acutely aware of this danger especially in solitude and relied above all upon the abba-disciple relationship to avoid it. It was however Benedict of Nursia (480-550) who devised a masterly, sapiential formula of training for the mystical life based on community rather than a personal master. His *Rule*, though, is masterly especially in its modesty - and despite lacking any direct mystical doctrine.

Even his name is anonymous, meaning the 'blessed one' as the Buddha was often called by his followers. The story of his life is known to us through legendary miracle stories collected as theological illustrations by Pope Gregory, a former monk under the Rule. These inspired innumerable works of art, most beautifully in the frescoes by Signorelli and Sodoma at Monte Oliveto Maggiore, worth a week's retreat in themselves. Benedict began his monastic journey in an archetypal desert mode. He dropped out of school in Rome, ('wisely ignorant'), curiously so for the founder of the system that saved learning in the Dark Ages. He took the habit from a nearby hermit and then spent years in a cave (Sacro Speco) in Subiaco, near Rome and still one of the most presence-filled and holy places in the world. He taught the Gospel to the pagan peasants around him anticipating the

missionary branch of his spiritual progeny in future centuries. When some leaderless monks in the vicinity begged him to come and be their abbot, he kindly but unwisely accepted. He was too strict for them and, not for the last time in monastic history, the community tried to murder their abbot. He left them, but stayed in the coenobitic (community) form of monastic life rather than returning to solitude. He formed twelve monasteries each with twelve monks. Modern sociologists reading the rule note the emphasis on smallness for healthy group dynamics . Even in the big community he organises the members in 'deaneries' of ten. Yet in Chapter One of his Rule on 'The Kinds of Monks' he sees solitude as the goal. After an unspecified 'long' period of time in the monastery those who have *'built up their strength .. go from the battle line in the ranks of their brothers to the single-handed combat of the desert.'*

The military imagery might seem better suited for men playing at soldiers. Yet women, including Benedict's own sister, Scholastica, whom one story shows praying better and more wisely than her brother, respond as much as men, with certain adaptations, to the psychological wisdom of the Rule. The point of the military symbol is not the use of force but solidarity, obedience and good management on a collective mission. The short *Rule* was probably composed over many years and seems to have a second ending attached. Most of the material is lifted directly from the *Rule of the Master* one of the many other contemporary monastic rules. Pope Gregory, with Roman centralising efficiency, selected Benedict's for use throughout the western church. Benedict's genius is seen in what he left out of his original and in the Prologue which is his own. He was aware that he was forming a softer rule than that of the golden era. *'We read that monks should not drink wine at all but since monks of our day cannot be convinced of this, let us at least agree to drink moderately.'* This via media and common sense backed up by a firm but flexible structure of life and perennially valid principles of time management made the Rule, after the Bible the most influential text in European civilisation for a millennium. Abbots and business leaders still join and turn to it for light on contemporary social issues. And interestingly the best commentaries on the Rule may not be written, as is often claimed, in hotel rooms, but certainly are often composed today by women and no doubt one day by Oblates.

The Rule is a masterpiece of rationality, modesty and self-transcendence. In the last, and usually least commented upon, chapter Benedict calls it a *little Rule for beginners*. Those who want to move on to high school or even graduate school should consult Cassian and the fathers. So in what ways does this little Rule train those who seek God and hunger for the contemplative experience of seeing God and listening to God's Word? Firstly by identifying the call itself: *'is there anyone here who yearns for life and desires to see God?'*. Quoting psalms and the Wisdom literature as he often does, Benedict identifies seeking God with the goal of human life. That life does not cease to be human and variable once the goal is being pursued. When the 'first fervour of conversion' wears off your brethren no longer seem saints or even best friends. Stability then is one of the vows Benedict defines and requires both physical and mental perseverance. He would have enjoyed the rabbinical saying *'you are not obliged to succeed, but you are not allowed to give up.'* But being Benedict, he knows that people will, and so gives the monk three strikes before he is out and not allowed to return.

To balance stability which otherwise becomes static, his second vow stresses commitment to an ongoing conversion of life and manners, a form of the endless pursuit of God in the mystical life described by Gregory of Nyssa. And obedience – ideally or eventually practiced without delay, spontaneously and from love not out of fear – completes the triad. Obedience must be practiced vertically to the abbot and horizontally to each other and thus becomes Christ like. Unlike later religious orders who saw the will of God in the superior's commands, Benedict allows the monk an appeal if he is commanded to do what he finds impossible. If it fails, he has to do his best to obey and trust in God.

The monastery is the laboratory in which the vows and the 'tools of good works' train the monk for the higher slopes. If it works well it becomes such a loving and freeing place that it feels like the summit but this depends on good management. Firstly time-management, getting the balance right between physical work, *lectio* (spiritual reading) and prayer, which correspond to the human person's composition as body, mind and spirit. The kind of prayer Benedict describes is communal psalmody and reading – a collective *lectio* which serves as preparation for true contemplative prayer. Stress is the disruption of natural human harmony. Peace is their working well together. Murmuring (gossip and moaning) is picked out especially for its corrosive attack on peace. Organisational management in the Rule shows the Roman virtues of *paternitas* and *gravitas* with not much left (at least officially) for *hilaritas*. Overall, the abbot has an impossible task. He must be able to keep the list of the tools given out for work each day and constantly adapt himself to each different temperament. He has the final word but is himself subject to the Rule and must consult.

It is a wonderful, brief, vivid and humane description of the Christian lifestyle in which *'all the members will be at peace'*. Exceptions prove any rule and Benedict makes many of them, especially for the old, sick and children, the most vulnerable members of any society. Weaknesses of body and character are treated with patience– a rare feature in most spiritual doctrines. Yet there is a single-mindedness (*'prefer nothing whatever to the love of Christ'*) that never turns moderation to compromise. Focusing on the mundane as he does, Benedict achieves something astounding. We see God reflected in the ordinary – Christ dancing in a thousand places. And yet this, he insists, is still the spiritual kindergarten, just the beginning.

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