

ST BENEDICT OF NURSIA: THE BIRTH OF WESTERN MONASTICISM

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St Benedict of Nursia was the founder of western monasticism and an important figure in the early medieval church. Eschewing the dissolute lifestyle of Rome, he became an ascetic hermit, and then as others began to flock to him, he set up a series of monasteries in Northern Italy. To manage these monasteries and to guide the lives of those within, he wrote the Rule, a collection of practical regulations for a holy and orderly life. The Rule emphasized obedience, moderation and community over individualism. It became the blueprint for monastic life in the West and remained unchallenged for centuries.

Benedict was born c. 480 CE in Nursia near Spoleto in central Italy. His wealthy parents soon moved to Rome where he was educated in the Humanities¹. However, as a young man he rejected higher learning after seeing “many by reason of such learning to fall to dissolute and lewd life”.² He left Rome and, settled in Enside, a community of likeminded men. However, after performing his first miracle, the resultant commotion forced him to move on. He decided to reject the company of men completely and withdraw into the wilderness, choosing a cave in a district near Enside called Subiaco.³ According to St Gregory, he remained in isolation for three years, until his secret revealed, people began to visit him to receive “spiritual food for their souls” from this holy man.⁴ In this period, Benedict, still in his early twenties, rejected the temptations of the flesh by throwing himself naked into the midst of nettle and briar bushes. Now considered a “master of virtue” he began to attract disciples who also cast aside

the world.⁵ Soon after, he accepted the abbacy of a monastery near Subacio, and began a series of reforms. This angered the dissolute monks there, who attempted to murder the holy man with poisoned wine. However, by a miracle, he knew it for poison, smashed the glass, and left the monastery to return to Subacio.⁶

Benedict continued to gather those around him looking for a religious life, and founded twelve Abbeys, each with twelve monks and a superior. He remained in a thirteenth foundation and kept with him those “he thought would more profit [...] by his own presence”.⁷ According to Gregory, during this time, Benedict performed many miracles including raising a child from the dead⁸, causing a monk to walk on water⁹, and reforming a monk plagued by a demon.¹⁰ Clearly, Gregory included tales of these miracles to increase further Benedict’s reputation. However, some, such as Benedict’s foresight and his knowledge of what sins the other monks had done, could have been an attempt by Gregory to suggest a similar faculty in other abbots. More important than the miracles, though, was the practical experience Benedict gained in Subiaco, from which he formulated his Rule.

In the early years of the Church, monastics based their lives on the example of St Anthony and St Pachomius. This involved extreme austerity and isolation; monks would attempt to outdo each other in the severity of their lives.¹¹ Although Benedict was aware of this model and had lived as a hermit, he believed that this would not a workable model for most people seeking a spiritual life. St

¹ Hugh E. Ford, “St Benedict of Nursia”, *The New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia*

(<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02467b.htm>), para 2.

² Gregory I Dialogos, *The Book of Dialogues*, trans. P.W. and ed. Edmund G. Gardner, reproduced in Halsall, Paul, ed. *The Internet Medieval Sourcebook*, Fordham University, February 2001

(<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/sbook.html>), prologue.

³ Ford, “St Benedict”, para 3.

⁴ Gregory I, *Dialogues*, chapter 1, para 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, chapter 2, para 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, chapter 3, para 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, chapter 3, para. 13.

⁸ *Ibid.*, chapter 11.

⁹ *Ibid.*, chapter 7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, chapter 4.

¹¹ G. Cyprian Aston, “The Rule of St. Benedict,” *The New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia* (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02436a.htm>), para. 8.

Basil, the organizer of Greek monasticism, had rejected extreme austerity and introduced ideas of communal life of work and prayer.¹² Benedict took these ideas and adapted them to his needs. In place of austerity and solitude, Benedict emphasized obedience, work and prayer in organized and stable communities. The monks of Subiaco fetched water, tended gardens, taught children and saw to the spiritual needs of locals in addition to performing regular acts of worship and prayer together.¹³

The Rule of Benedict reflects the ideas and experience Benedict gained with the monks of Subiaco. Within the Rule, the most important tenet is obedience to superiors. In the Prologue, Benedict orders potential monks to “renouncing your own will, you will take up the bright weapons of obedience to fight for the Lord Christ.”¹⁴ Obedience was felt to be an integral part of humility, one of the most important attributes in any monk.¹⁵ This already shows a difference from the Antonian and Pachomian models of monasticism, with their focus on individualism. Yet Benedict goes further from these models by hoping to order “nothing harsh or nothing rigorous” in the lives of the monks¹⁶. The Rule replaced austerity with peaceful yet busy lives of contemplation and work. Benedict sets forth strict rules for when and how the monks should perform religious services, prayers and singing and included both nighttime and early morning services.¹⁷ Monks under the Benedictine rule were also expected to work both on daily tasks in the monastery and in pastoral duties in the greater community. The Rule orders monks to “relieve the poor [...] clothe the naked [...] visit the sick [and] bury the dead.”¹⁸ Benedict believed that “Idleness is the enemy of the soul” and clearly tried to

ensure that monks were kept from sloth.¹⁹ When considered with the detailed rules on how monks should sleep, what they should eat and how much they could drink, the lives of these monks was closely constrained.²⁰ Benedict underlined the community focus and need for humility by insisting that private property was “More than anything else [a] special vice to be cut off root and branch from the monastery.”²¹ The monastery owned everything, and although the Rule mandated the provision of clothes, food and drink, all other items were within the control of the Abbot.

Benedict lived with the monks of Subiaco while developing his Rule for many years. However, friction grew with a local priest who attempted first to poison Benedict and then to tempt the monks under his rule. This priest sent seven naked young women to dance in the yard of the Abbey in front of the monks to “inflame their minds with sinful lust”. Benedict did not want to bring his monks into the path of temptation, so left the monasteries in the care of their Abbots, and departed the area with a few of his followers.²²

Benedict and his followers went to the town of Monte Cassino where the “foolish and simple country people” still worshipped Apollo in a temple on the hilltop. Benedict cast down the temple and built a new monastery in its place.²³ From there, he converted the local people and continued his work. Cassino was less isolated than Subiaco, and so attracted more interest from the outside world. Visitors included King Totilas of the Goths²⁴, bishops and other abbots, as well as nobles and the poor. Benedict expanded the mission of the monastery to tend to a wider flock as well as founding other monasteries in the area.²⁵ Gregory’s account of this time includes many of these visits as well as a host of new miracles. At Monte Cassino, Benedict faced down the devil himself, raised another child from the dead, knew when his monks were

¹² Ibid., para. 8.

¹³ Ford, “St Benedict”, para 17 and Gregory I, *Dialogues*, chapters 4–8.

¹⁴ St Benedict, “The Rule”, reproduced in Halsall, Paul, ed. *The Internet Medieval Sourcebook*, Fordham University, February 2001 (<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/sbook.html>), prologue.

¹⁵ Ibid., chapter 7.

¹⁶ Ibid., prologue.

¹⁷ Ibid., chapters 11–16 *et al.*.

¹⁸ St Benedict, “The Rule” in *Medieval Europe: A Short Sourcebook, 4th Edition*, eds C. Warren Hollister *et al.* (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2002), 57.

¹⁹ St Benedict, “The Rule”, in IMS, chapter 48.

²⁰ Ibid.,

²¹ Ibid., chapter 33.

²² Gregory I, *Dialogues*, chapter 8, para 3.

²³ Ibid., chapter 8, para 8.

²⁴ Ibid., chapter 15–16.

²⁵ Ford, “St Benedict”, para 18.

disobedient and finally, foretold his own death.²⁶ He died in Monte Cassino in 543 CE after a short illness and was buried in the same tomb as his sister, the Nun St Scholastica.²⁷

St Benedict and his Rule had a profound impact upon the medieval church. He created a Rule of moderation, community and pastoral care that became the standard for western monasticism. After his death, the growth of Benedictine monasteries continued and proved the dominant form until the reforms of the twelfth century. They became integral parts of the social and political structures of the nascent western nations.²⁸ Many monasteries owned vast lands and their abbots became powerful temporal lords and they gradually became utterly entwined with the secular world.²⁹ In addition, Benedict insisted on study as part of a monk's life, and Benedictines were amongst those who saved and reignited scholarship in the 10th and 11th centuries.³⁰

Benedict probably did not predict the changes in interpretation and environment for his Rule and it came under increasing criticism through the period. By the beginning of the 12th century, the Order was beginning to show signs of decline, described by Richard Southern as both a spiritual and economic "malaise"³¹ Members of the church both within and without the Order, complained of spiritual laxity and corruption, and this paved the way for the reforms and the new Orders of the 12th Century. However, many of these new Orders still used the Rule of Benedict at the core of their own Rules; for their own part, many Benedictine monasteries did attempt reform. While changed and adapted, St Benedict's Rule remained a force in the church and the legacy of St Benedict continued to be a powerful part of the medieval experience.

²⁶ Gregory I, *Dialogues*, paras 12–13, 16, 37.

²⁷ Ford, "St Benedict", para 21.

²⁸ Richard Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 161.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 155.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 188.

³¹ Richard Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*, *The Penguin History of the Church*, ed. Owen Chadwick (London: Penguin, 1970), 231.

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