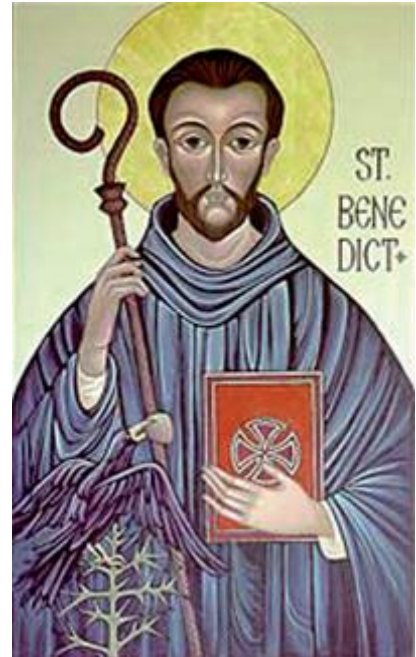


Benedictine Way of Life

The following reflection on the rule of St Benedict offers us countless opportunities for reflections of our own. It challenges us to remain faithful to our stated Benedictine values by translating those values into our everyday lives at Stella Maris. The Rule may have been written 1500 years ago with a very different audience in mind but even, or perhaps especially, reading in and between the lines, it offers us wise counsel for today.



The Rule of Saint Benedict

By Sr. JM McClure, OSB

The entire document is less than a hundred pages. The author, with characteristic self-effacement, called it "a little rule for beginners." Written in the sixth century for a collection of serfs, scholars, shepherds, and wealthy scions of nobility – a motley group of would-be monastics, the Rule of St Benedict survives today as a masterpiece of spiritual wisdom. The roots of Benedictine spirituality are contained in this slim volume, as are [guidelines for happiness and holiness](#) (arguably identical states in the Christian tradition) which are as meaningful today as they were over 1500 years ago.

In the Rule's prologue, Benedict said he intended to prescribe "nothing harsh, nothing burdensome" for his followers. His approach to seeking God was both sensible and humane. For Benedict, a spiritual pathway was not one to be littered with weird and unusual practices; rather, all that is needed is to be faithful to finding God in the ordinary circumstances of daily life. How to prepare oneself for this simple – but not necessarily easy – way of life is the substance of the Rule.

Benedict envisioned a [balanced life](#) of prayer and work as the ideal. Monastics would spend time in prayer so as to discover why they're working, and would spend time in work so that good order and harmony would prevail in the monastery. Benedictines should not be consumed by work, nor should they spend so much time in prayer that responsibilities are neglected. According to Benedict, all things – eating, drinking, sleeping, reading, working, and praying – should be done in moderation. In *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily*, Sister Joan Chittister writes that in Benedict's Rule, "All must be given its due, but *only* its due. There should be something of everything and not too much of anything."

Benedict stressed the importance of work as the great equalizer. Everyone from the youngest to the oldest, from the least educated to the most educated, was to engage in manual labour – a revolutionary idea for sixth-century Roman culture. **Prayer**, in a Benedictine monastery, was to consist of the *opus Dei* (the work of God – Psalms recited in common) and *lectio* (the reflective reading of Scripture whereby God's word becomes the centre of the monastic's life). Prayer was marked by regularity and fidelity, not mood or convenience. In Benedict's supremely realistic way, the spiritual life was something to be worked at, not merely hoped for.

The importance of **community** life is another great theme of Benedict's Rule. Prior to Benedict, religious life was the life of the hermit, who went to the desert and lived alone in order to seek God. Benedict's genius was to understand that each person's rough edges – all the defences and pretensions and blind spots that keep the monastic from growing spiritually – are best confronted by living side by side with other flawed human beings whose faults and failings are only too obvious. St Benedict teaches that growth comes from **accepting people as they are**, not as we would like them to be. His references to the stubborn and the dull, the undisciplined and the restless, the careless and the scatterbrained have the ring of reality. Though Benedict was no idealist with respect to human nature, he understood that the key to spiritual progress lies in constantly making the effort to **see Christ in each person** – no matter how irritating or tiresome.

Benedictines make three vows: stability, fidelity to the monastic way of life, and obedience. Though promises of poverty and chastity are implied in the Benedictine way, stability, fidelity, and obedience receive primary attention in the Rule – perhaps because of their close relationship with community life.

Stability means that the monastic pledges lifelong commitment to a particular community. To limit oneself voluntarily to one place with one group of people for the rest of one's life makes a powerful statement. Contentment and fulfilment do not exist in constant change; true happiness cannot necessarily be found anywhere other than in this place and this time. For Benedictines, the vow of stability proclaims rootedness, 'at-homeness', that this place and this monastic family will endure.

Likewise, by the vow of **fidelity** to the monastic way, Benedictines promise to allow themselves to be shaped and moulded by the community – to pray at the sound of the bell when it would be so much more convenient to continue working, to forswear pet projects for the sake of community needs, to be open to change, to listen to others, and not to run away when things seem frustrating or boring or hopeless.

Obedience also holds a special place in Benedict's community. Monastics owe "unfeigned and humble love" to their abbots and prioresses, not because they are infallible or omniscient, but because they take the place of Christ. St Benedict carefully outlines the qualities the leaders should possess: wisdom, prudence, discretion, and sensitivity to individual differences. The exercise of authority in the Rule points more to **mercy** than justice, more to understanding of human weakness than strict accountability, more to love than zeal. What defines the leader of a Benedictine community is not being head of an institution but being in relationship with all the members.

"**Let everyone that comes be received as Christ**" is one of the most familiar and oft-quoted phrases of the Rule. It emphasizes the preeminent position which hospitality occupies in every Benedictine monastery. Benedictine **hospitality** goes beyond the exercise of the expected social graces – the superficial smile or the warm reception of expected guests. Hospitality for Benedict meant that everyone who comes – the poor, the traveller, the curious, those not of our religion or social standing or education – should be received with genuine acceptance. With characteristic moderation, though, he cautions against "lingering with guests," realizing that the peace and silence of the monastery must be protected. "Too great a merging of monastics and guests will benefit neither," says Esther de Waal in *Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict*.

Stewardship is another value which, like hospitality, captures the essence of Benedictine life. On a most basic level, Benedict prescribed care and reverence of material things ("treat all goods as if they were vessels of the altar"). For Benedictines, the idea that gardening tools were just as important as chalices has come to mean a total way of life which emphasizes wholeness and wholesomeness and connectedness; the body, the mind, the spirit, material things, the earth – all are one and all are to receive proper attention. All created things are God-given, and a common-sense approach to resources should prevail. Thus, Benedictine communities are ready to accept the most recent technology but will use the same bucket for thirty years. "Taking care of things" has been elevated to a virtue of surpassing value in Benedictine monasteries.

The wisdom of Benedict's Rule lies in its flexibility, its tolerance for individual differences, and its openness to change. For over 1500 years, it has remained a powerful and relevant guide for those who would seek God in the ordinary circumstances of life.

When Benedict wrote his Rule, society seemed to be falling apart. Though materially prosperous, the Roman Empire was in a state of decline. After Benedict's death, barbarian hordes would overrun Europe and the very survival of Western civilization would be called into question. Benedictine monasteries – with their message of balance and moderation, stability, hospitality, and

stewardship – were credited with the preservation of Western culture, and Benedict himself was named patron of Europe.

Benedictine values are as necessary today as they were in the sixth century. Who could look at the "greed is good" legacy of the 1980s and not desire change? In an era of countless personal and societal sins – materialism and racism and the destruction of the earth through waste and carelessness – Benedict's Rule remains a powerful alternative, another way of viewing life and people and things that finds meaning in the ordinary and makes each day a **revelation** of the divine.

*Let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ,
and may he bring us all together to everlasting life.
Rule of Benedict 72:11-12*

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