

BENEDICT OF NURSIA

Benedict of Nursia

His Message for Today

Anselm Grün, O.S.B.

Translated by Linda M. Maloney



LITURGICAL PRESS
Collegeville, Minnesota

www.litpress.org

Cover design by •••

Originally published as *Benedikt von Nursia. Seine Botschaft heute*, no. 7 in the series Münsterschwarzacher Kleinschriften, edited by the monks of the Abbey of Münsterschwarzach. © Vier-Türme GmbH, Verlag Münsterschwarzach. Translated from the seventh revised and updated edition of 2004.

© 2005 by the Order of Saint Benedict, Collegeville, Minnesota. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form, by print, microfilm, microfiche, mechanical recording, photocopying, translation, or by any other means, known or yet unknown, for any purpose except brief quotations in reviews, without the previous written permission of the Liturgical Press, Saint John's Abbey, P.O. Box 7500, Collegeville, Minnesota 56321-7500. Printed in the United States of America.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

Library of Congress Catalog-in Publication Data

CONTENTS

Introduction	7
I. Benedict Himself	11
II. Benedict's Message	
Living in the Presence of God	21
<i>Ora et labora</i> —Prayer and Work	30
<i>Discretio</i> —The Gift of Discernment	35
<i>Pax benedictina</i> —Benedictine Peace	42
<i>Stabilitas</i> and Order	49
Benedict's Understanding of Community	55
Conclusion.	62

INTRODUCTION

When guests come to us in the monastery for a few days they are often fascinated by the clear structure of the days, and they sense something of the benevolent spirit of Benedict that shapes our lives. But when they are at home again they do not know how to rescue something of this spirit of Benedict in their daily lives. They are in search of forms for their life that fit, and that let them breathe freely. They suffer from the collapse of the tradition, something they experience in their parishes. Although for the most part they are not conservative, they still miss, in their congregations, the connection to the roots out of which we Christians live. In the monastery they saw that one can live from Benedict's roots without simply clinging to what is old. They sense that tradition is also a blessing. And when our faith neglects its roots it quickly becomes superficial and banal.

Benedict does not have an answer to all the questions that haunt us today. But when we consider Benedict against the background of his chaotic times, his advice acquires a new immediacy for us. The era of globalization resembles Benedict's time, the era of the great tribal migrations, in many respects. Our times are characterized by continuous flexibility, but often the soul is not engaged. It reacts with depression, showing that it lacks security and clarity. Benedict responded to the continual changes of his own time with the demand for *stabilitas*, stability. He accepted people from various tribes and nations into his community, and so contributed to the integration of strangers. He responded to the restless curiosity of his time, the constant search for "events," for panem et circenses, bread and games, with a retreat into silence. So I hope that readers will

find in Benedict's message an answer to some of their questions and their longings.

I. Benedict Himself

BENEDICT HIMSELF

When we are still talking about someone 1500 years after his lifetime, when we even refer to him with titles like “Father of the West” or “Patron of Europe,” he must have been a remarkable person. But when we look back into history and try to present a picture of Benedict we are quickly disappointed. The historical data about Benedict’s life and work are uncertain and do not yield enough information to allow us a clear picture of this man. The person of Benedict constantly escapes our grasp. We cannot produce as clear a depiction as we can of, for example, St. Francis of Assisi. What stands in the foreground is not the person of Benedict, but his work. Benedict himself disappears behind the work; his life continues in his rule for monasteries, the *Regula Benedicti* (RB). Through it he continues his effectiveness, and even today he shapes the lives of thousands of male and female monastics throughout the world. Benedict has shaped a model of life that has been accepted over and over again through the centuries with gratitude and is seen as a way for human beings to mature as disciples of Christ.

What kind of person was this, that his advice should continue to be valid throughout 1500 years and go on forming people even today? It is true that we know few details of Benedict’s life that have secure historical attestation. But we know his essence. For through the instructions in his *Rule* shines the essence of the one who could give such instruction. We can see from the words of the *Rule* that Benedict must have been a man of experience, one who knew the weaknesses and strengths of human beings from his own observation, who was at one with himself, balanced, able to lead others, to heal

the sick and the weak, to bestow on them courage and hope, a man at peace within himself who knew how to reconcile others and to create around himself an atmosphere of peace. And he must have been a man filled with faith, for in the midst of a world collapsing in on itself he was able to undertake, confidently and without complaining about the terrible times in which he lived, to build up a community of monks.

The life of Benedict can be quickly told. Around the year 480 he was born in Nursia, present-day Norcia, in the Sabine hills of central Italy. As a young man he went to Rome to study, at a time when Rome had lost its significance as the capital of the empire and was in a shabby state. Disgusted at the moral decline of the city, Benedict interrupted his studies and withdrew into solitude. First he joined an ascetic community in Affile, but after a short time he left the community and concealed himself for three years in a cave near Subiaco.

The cave was like a womb in which Benedict experienced rebirth. But like every birth, this one was also painful. First he had to face the truth about himself, his shadow side, his fears, his mortality. He lived through the spiritual steps of experience known to Eastern monasticism. The first Christian monks, who retreated in the fourth century into the desert regions of Egypt, confronted themselves in radical fashion with their own reality. In doing so, they found themselves attacked by demons. These demons were, for them, images of all the passions and emotions that threaten to overwhelm us all. Slowly and painfully they learned how to deal rightly with passions. Benedict, in the cave of Subiaco, experienced peril to his humanity and at the same time underwent a new birth.

“While the saint was alone, the tempter came.” Thus Pope Gregory, in the second book of his *Dialogues*, a biography of the father of monastics, summarized this epoch in Benedict’s life. In his cave Benedict confronted the storms of passion and fought against them. He emerged the victor, finding his way to peace and harmony with himself. From now on he exuded peace and calm. He emerged from his cave like one newly born.

Benedict's victory over the attacks launched against human existence enabled him to become a teacher for others. Now people found their way to him, first of all shepherds from the neighborhood. They wanted to hear the message of Christ from him. A nearby monastery heard of his reputation and elected him its leader. But apparently Benedict was too strict for these monks. After a while they tried to poison him in order to get rid of him and go on living their bourgeois lives with religious trimming. Benedict left that monastery and went "back to the wilderness he loved, to live alone with himself in the presence of his heavenly Father."¹ "He lived alone," "he returned to himself," "he was alone with himself"—with these words Gregory indicates an essential attitude of the saints. Benedict was alone, that is, with himself; he did not scatter himself around through actions. In his deeds also he remained within himself; he was entirely in his doing without thereby allowing himself to be drawn out of his center. He was in touch with his inner core, his true self. He was in touch with the inner world of his soul. It was from that center that his activity arose.

Benedict's breakthrough to become a person who was entirely self-contained and in harmony with himself was not without effect on his surroundings. Now students began to gather around him, not called by him, but, as Gregory says, brought together by God. For them he founded twelve small monasteries, to each of which he gave an Abbas, an experienced monk and "father," as its leader. He himself supervised all of them. The monastic colony bloomed. More and more of the Roman nobility brought their sons to Benedict to be educated. But this aroused the envy of a neighboring priest. He sent young girls to dance in front of the monks' cells to tempt them. Benedict withdrew from the priest's pestering and

¹ Gregory the Great, *Life and Miracles of Saint Benedict* (Book 2 of the Dialogues), trans. Odo J. Zimmermann, O.S.B., and Benedict R. Avery, O.S.B. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, n.d.) 11.

moved to Monte Cassino. Tradition says that Monte Cassino was founded in the year 529, the same year in which the pagan school of philosophy in Athens closed its doors. A new school arose, a “school of the Lord,” as the *Rule of Benedict* calls it in its Prologue. On the mountain at Cassino, Benedict built a new monastic community and wrote a rule for it. The *Rule* is the most precious thing Benedict has left us. From it emerges who he was at his deepest depth and how he himself lived. Gregory speaks of the unity of rule and life in his biography of Benedict, the Dialogues:

He wrote a Rule for Monks that is remarkable for its discretion and its clarity of language. Anyone who wishes to know more about his life and character can discover in his Rule exactly what he was like as an abbot, for his life could not have differed from his teaching.²

For a long time it was believed that the *Rule* was Benedict’s own invention. But newer studies have shown that Benedict relied very much on models for his *Rule*, especially the so-called *Regula Magistri*, the monastic rule of an anonymous “Master.” Still, it is precisely in comparison to the model that the originality and the true greatness of Benedict can be seen. In contrast to a pessimistic, suspicious, and often rigorous view of humanity in the model, Benedict shows a trustful attitude toward his monks. Trusting in the good core of human beings was anything but a matter of course in a time when hostile parties vied in committing horrors against each other, in which the moral strength of Roman culture was being extinguished and no new initiative toward a peaceful common life for human beings was on the horizon. In this unreliable age, when people lived in fear and mistrust of one another, Benedict ventured to believe in the goodness in human beings and did not lead his monks with suspicious harshness, but in trust, kindness, and brotherly love.

² Ibid. 74.

A comparison of the *Rule* with its models allows us to draw a picture of its author something like this: Benedict was a balanced person. All his instructions indicate a wise moderation. Benedict does not want to overburden anyone. He knows human weakness; he knows that monastics are still human beings who have to struggle with normal human problems like rivalry, dissatisfaction, bad moods, idleness, strife, and dislike of one another. Benedict looks these weaknesses in the eye; he does not get annoyed that he, as abbot, has to reckon with human deficiencies, but instead tries to confront them and to heal the people who suffer from them. It emerges from Benedict's words that he was not merely a realist, but also an optimist who did not let himself be driven to resignation or cynicism by human weakness, but was able to live calmly and confidently, with a profound sense of humor and a powerful trust in God's grace, in the midst of human confusion. Benedict did not see himself as a spiritual leader who would accomplish proud deeds with his group of monks, but as a doctor whose task it was to heal weak, sick people and enable them to serve in the school of the Lord.

Anyone so balanced and wise had to have fought hard with himself. The wisdom that speaks from the *Rule* gives us an idea of the experiences Benedict had endured with himself. Benedict did not avoid the attacks and perils of evil; in his struggle for inner purity he had looked into the depths of human nature, so that nothing human was foreign to him. But he had also experienced the power of grace, which is able to heal us. And so he became a wise physician who knew how to deal with human beings, not frightening them away by demands that were too high, but accepting them in their weakness and thus being able to heal them.

Benedict's influence in his own lifetime was small. He built up his community and led it until his death, which can probably be dated to the year 547. It is true that Gregory reports Benedict's preaching to the pagan population and tells of his meeting with King Totila of the Goths, who—deeply impressed

by the saint—was less merciless thereafter. But we would seek in vain in his biography for an influence like that indicated by titles such as “Father of the West” or “Patron of Europe.” His entire influence flows from the *Regula Benedicti*, and through it he lives on. In it we can still sense Benedict’s spirit today—a spirit that still conveys freedom and broadmindedness, mildness and mercy, strength and clarity.

Benedict does not preach himself and his personal originality; in his *Rule* he points a way, one that thousands of female and male monastics have followed through the centuries and found helpful. The *Rule* has never been understood as purely a way for religious to live. In the Middle Ages it was, rather, used as a textbook for the education of the sons of the nobility and as a “mirror for princes,” a handbook for wise rule. Apparently it gives voice to experiences that are fruitful for the education and leadership of human beings. But we can only understand the spirit of the *Rule* rightly today if we see it not as a rulebook or set of laws intended to regulate everything precisely, but as the concretization of our faith in daily life. It is not a question of following the *Rule* literally, but of understanding the spirit it breathes, so that in this spirit we can take charge of our lives today.

The story of Benedict’s influence encourages us to ask what Benedict would like to say to us now, what his message is for today—not simply for monastics, but for all who are in search of God. We can only select a few characteristic features of his message that seem important for our situation at this moment. Every age has a different focus in its consideration of Benedict. At some times the value he set on manual labor was emphasized, at others the creative cultural power of his *Rule*, at still others his love for liturgy, his sense of order, his wise moderation. Every age expresses its own needs in its view of Benedict and its longing to overcome those needs. Thus what emerges is always a subjective image. That is entirely legitimate. But the image must always be measured against the figure and the words of Benedict himself, so that Benedict is

not compelled to represent things and ideas that have nothing to do with him. Thus in what follows we will let Benedict speak for himself, against the background of the questions that are vital in this present moment as we search for a more profound spiritual life.