

Exploring Benedictine Rule for a Balanced Life

Session 1

Monday 9th July, 16.30

Introduction

Who was Saint Benedict? Much of what we know about him can be found in the writings of Pope Saint Gregory the Great, who wrote a “Life” of Benedict in his *Dialogues*. Gregory writes a good deal about the miracles worked by Saint Benedict and his life is not a biography as we would understand it. However, Gregory does provide us with a number of key genuine facts about Benedict’s life.

Benedict was born in Nursia, to the northeast of Rome, in around 480. He was sent to Rome for his education and it was there that he experienced something of a conversion that led him to renounce the world and leave Rome. He began his monastic life living with a small group of ascetics in Enfide, east of Rome, before taking off to Subiaco, where he lived in solitude for a period of three years. He was persuaded to leave there to lead a group of monks who proved to be very difficult and with no real desire to live a true monastic life. He therefore left them and returned to Subiaco where he was joined by a number of disciples and founded twelve monasteries, each of twelve monks.

When these foundations were well established, he set off to Monte Casino, accompanied by a small group of disciples. It was there that he remained for the rest of his days, acquiring notoriety as a man of great holiness. He died there in the middle of the sixth century.

The great legacy of St. Benedict is his *Rule for Monks*, a Rule that has been a cornerstone of monastic life for over 1500 years. The life of monks following the Rule has had a profound impact on Western society, leading Benedict to be named a Patron of Europe, and we can see the influence of his monastic rule in our own country down the centuries, in the Benedictine and Cistercian houses that were so much a feature of life before the Reformation, and in the foundations subsequent to the Reformation, with their schools, farms and contemplative life.

The Rule

Although consisting of a Prologue and 73 chapters, the Rule is not a long work. The structure of chapters is almost certainly a post-Benedict construct, enabling scholars and readers to access the text more easily. Some editions divide the Rule under subject headings: Constitution; Spiritual Principles; Worship; Discipline; The Household; Daily Observance; Penances; Work and contact with outsiders; Admission and Appointments; Community Spirit.

In the monastic community itself, the Rule is usually read over, out loud, three times each year. Oblates – those who make a formal attachment to the house, may read the Rule in the same way. Some parts of it are very legislative – such as which Psalms are to be prayed at which hours – but the Rule is far more than a piece of legislation. It is based very deeply in the Scriptures and Benedict makes references to the Fathers of the Church and their writings.

Benedict makes no claim that his Rule is better than anyone else’s. He describes it as a “rule for beginners”¹ and has no problem with people making changes to the Rule, if they think they can come up with something better, notably in his treatment of the layout for the Divine Office, the *Opus Dei*, the Work of God, which – together with the celebration of the Eucharist – forms the centre of the monastic day.²

¹ RB 73:8

² RB 18:22

Call in the Rule

When Pope Benedict came to this country in 2010, when much of his visit was centred on the life of Blessed John Henry Newman, he reminded us of Newman's prayer concerning the service to which we are called:

God has created me to do Him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission. I may never know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next. I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. He has not created me for naught. I shall do good; I shall do His work. I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place, while not intending it if I do but keep His commandments. Therefore, I will trust Him, whatever I am, I can never be thrown away. If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve Him, in perplexity, my perplexity may serve Him. If I am in sorrow, my sorrow may serve Him. He does nothing in vain. He knows what He is about. He may take away my friends. He may throw me among strangers. He may make me feel desolate, make my spirits sink, hide my future from me. Still, He knows what He is about.³

Perhaps this prayer mirrors something of your experience in Mental Health Chaplaincy. I know it mirrors my own experience as Priest and Bishop. Clinging on to the fact of that "definite service" is not always easy. Indeed, it is often very difficult indeed. Yet that theme of "call" – vocation – in the life of the Christian is central to who we are and what we are about.

In the scriptures, for example, we find the call of the prophet Jeremiah:

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you;
before you came to birth I consecrated you;
I have appointed you as prophet to the nations."⁴

In the Gospels, we find the call of the disciples:

"As he was walking along by the Sea of Galilee he saw two brothers, Simon, who was called Peter, and his brother Andrew; they were making a cast in the lake with their net for they were fishermen. And he said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.' And they left their nets at once and followed him."⁵

Indeed, the task of the Church is to call people into relationship with the person of Christ. Jesus' command to his followers at the end of Matthew's Gospel to "go, make disciples of all the nations"⁶ is fulfilled on Pentecost Day when, through the strength of the Spirit's gifts, the Apostles begin the task of preaching the risen Christ.⁷

St. Benedict has a rather wonderful way of describing the way in which we are called, in the midst of our busy lives, to follow the way of the Gospel:

"Seeking his workman in a multitude of people, the Lord calls out to him and lifts his voice again: *Is there anyone here who yearns for life and desires to see good days?* If

³ BLESSED JOHN HENRY NEWMAN, "Meditations on Christian Doctrine," March 7, 1848.

⁴ Jer. 1:4.

⁵ Mt. 4:18-19.

⁶ Mt. 28:19.

⁷ Acts 2.

you hear this and your answer is “I do”, God then directs these words to you....
What, dear brothers, is more delightful than this voice of the Lord calling to us? See
how the Lord in his love shows us the way of life.”⁸

That image of God seeking us out in the marketplace of life is a very powerful image. It is good for us to reflect that each of us has been called, from the busy world, to a particular task for the Lord.

When times are difficult, when the burdens of chaplaincy life and the struggles that may be encountered day by day in those to whom we minister, when the weight of constantly changing legislation seems to be back-breaking, the fact that our call to ministry comes from the Lord himself is a source of strength and joy.

It is certainly difficult, as I have said, to cling to this great fact in the midst of struggles and overbearing demands. We do well, therefore, to remind ourselves of this often. In the readings of yesterday’s Mass, St Paul reminds us that when we are weak, we are strong.⁹ How can he say this? In a world where burdens are often great and we become more and more aware of our weaknesses, we reach a point where we realise that we cannot manage on our own resources, but must turn to the person of Christ for help. In that act, we find a strength we would never have known otherwise. It is the Lord who calls us and he will share with us all that we need to respond to his call – a call known from before all time, a call made to us “in the marketplace”, as Benedict puts it.

We would do well to spend a little time on this retreat reflecting on the call the Lord has given to us, seeking his strength in our weakness and marvelling at the fact that the Lord has seen fit to call us to a “definite service” for him.

⁸ RB Prol. 14-19.

⁹ 2 Cor. 12:10.