

Benedictine Prayer and Spirituality

Hilary Thimmesh, OSB

(for Catholic Digest, June 2011)

In the great Hexham Abbey church in northern England a long stone stairway leads straight down from the dormitory the monks slept in to the choir stalls where they gathered for prayer early in the morning. At the heart of their prayer was recitation of the 150 religious poems-some historical, some personal, some jubilant, some sorrowful-that make up the Psalter, one of the books of the Old Testament.

With or without a stairway directly from their sleeping quarters to their places in choir, that is how Benedictines have started the day ever since St. Benedict wrote his Rule in the sixth century. And it must be added that they customarily gather for more of the same kind of prayer two or three or more times before the day is over.

Benedict was a young student in Rome when he left the imperial city to lead a more religious life by himself in the hills east of Rome. His reputation as a holy man gradually attracted others to him and he moved to the mountainous region south of Rome to found a monastery that became famous as Monte Cassino.

Most of the stories about him are legendary, for instance the time Placid, one of his young monks, fell into a fast moving stream and Benedict ordered another monk, Maurus, to save him, which he did by walking on the water. When this fact was pointed out to Maurus once he had Placid high and dry on the shore-he hadn't noticed that he didn't get wet-he attributed the miracle to Benedict, whom he had simply obeyed.

Our best knowledge of Benedict comes from the qualities of moderation, practical wisdom, and good sense displayed in the Rule of Benedict, a modified version of earlier monastic rules that dates from about the year 530.

The Rule combines high ideals and homely practices: "As we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the way of God's commandments" (Prologue) and "On Saturday the brother who is completing his work will do the washing" (35).

It is anchored in Sacred Scripture, more than 300 references in 73 short chapters. It calls for a strong sense of community under the wise and able direction of a spiritual master, the abbot, who is elected by the monks. The monks are to support and honor one another, work to make their monastery as self-sustaining as possible, and "prefer nothing to Christ" (72). The abbot is to love them and deal with them, young or old, as individuals with their own characteristics and needs.

Thus Benedictine communities came to be built on enduring human relationships and religious ideals while leaving lots of leeway for adaptation to different times and places. It is entirely characteristic of Benedict, for example, to spell out in detail which Psalms should be said at each hour of prayer throughout the week and then wrap it all up by saying that somebody else may arrange them differently if that seems better.

In Benedict's time the ancient political structures of the Roman empire had crumbled. Pope Gregory the Great writing about the life and miracles of St. Benedict in his *Dialogues*, tells

about a visit to Monte Cassino by King Totila, one of the Goths who overran Italy in the sixth century. In the midst of a disintegrating society Benedict provided a place where strangers, pilgrims, the poor were welcome and, he cautioned, were "to be received like Christ" (53).

Monastic communities like Monte Cassino responded to the needs of the following centuries as they became centers of spiritual vitality and learning throughout western Europe, preserving the memory of the past and creating a new world of Christian art and culture.

The way of life envisioned in the Rule proved to be as suitable for women as for men. Benedict's sister, Scholastica, headed a monastery of religious women. In the centuries to come women like Hilda of Whitby, Hildegard of Bingen, and many others played roles of historic importance.

How does the vitality of those medieval Benedictines translate into a spirituality for our times and for the marketplace as well as the cloister? We think at once of schools, of community-building among people as far distant as El Salvador or Tanzania or Japan. We think of ecumenical initiatives that come naturally to Benedictine communities guided by the injunction to receive visitors as Christ, particularly those of the faith, and shaped by Benedict's insistence that members of his communities relate to one another on a basis of equality, not position or rank.

But how the vitality of Benedictine spirituality continues for our times and inspires activities like those above depends first of all on the place of prayer in our life. And the first question is, does prayer have a place in our life? It seems a simple question until we take stock of the electronic environment that envelopes us constantly. Like it or not thanks to TV and cell phones and the social media we are geared into an endless stream of events local and global.

Nobody has the number of hours for *lectio divina*--think of it as contemplative sacred reading--that Benedict called for in a vastly different culture from ours. Deliberately setting aside some time for prayer daily may take real effort. If we make the effort how would Benedict have us use it?

The Rule of Benedict calls for devoting a generous portion of every day to reading. This is the meditative, contemplative prayer that the Rule calls *lectio divina*, a particular blend of reading and reflection that takes its time and focuses first of all on Sacred Scripture. For example, reading and pondering the psalms a few verses at a time can gradually shape the way we think about God and about our own life and experience. A striking thing about the Rule is the weight Benedict attaches to literacy and reading. Besides Sacred Scripture there is a universe of other literature to draw on in prayer.

The Rule itself recognizes that sometimes individuals will be away from the community. Then they are to pray as well as they can at the appointed hours (50). In modern times the institution of Benedictine Oblates, lay people who associate themselves with a monastery while continuing to lead their life in the world, implicitly builds on this principle.

In the monastery or on the road, prayer should result in the deepened awareness of God that the Rule describes under the heading of humility. For Benedict humility is not simply one of the moral virtues. It is how someone thinks and acts when more or less constantly aware of the presence of God.

Brother Charles, the beekeeper, for example, at 80 still hopping on his bike to make a quick trip from the candle shop to the aviary at the edge of the woods beyond the cemetery, unfailingly good humored, alert to confreres, kind. Or Abbot Timothy—someone called him a contemplative extrovert—told that newly diagnosed symptoms indicated only months to live after a lifetime of major responsibilities, calmly finishing up his work while confiding privately that he could not have imagined how joyous the thought of imminent death would make him once the idea sank in.

Chapter 7 outlines both the stages of progress in humility and the way it is all supposed to turn out. "The steps of humility are also steps of prayer," says Michael Casey, O.C.S., in his *A Guide to Living in the Truth*, 184. Again and again in looking at Benedict's spirituality we get the feeling of a movement paced for a lifetime. Casey calls it "the tidal movement of the monk's fundamental assent to the call of God" (65).

The Benedictine vows of stability, fidelity to a monastic way of life, and obedience embody this movement. They require ongoing conversion, reformation, *metanoia* in the gospel sense of that term. Different forms of contemporary prayer lend themselves to this goal. Centering prayer is an example. So are some Zen practices and others that are linked to the rich mystical tradition of the late medieval period or the spirituality of more recent religious orders.

We can be sure that Benedict would be open to all of them as ways to "advance in the religious life and in faith, our hearts overflowing with love." This phrase from the Prologue to the Rule is a good way to summarize the goal of Benedictine spirituality and prayer.

Recommended titles: Michael Casey, *A Guide to Living in the Truth*, 2001; Anselm Grün, *Benedict of Nursia: His Message for Today*, 2006.

SUGGESTED BOX ON PRAYER

The psalms eloquently express how we feel and how we think about life and time and God. "With the Lord at my right I shall never be shaken; therefore my heart is glad, my soul rejoices" (16). "Teach me, Lord, your way that I may walk in your truth" (86). "Lord, you have probed me, you know me: you know when I sit and stand; you understand my thoughts from afar" (139). "I will bless the Lord at all times; praise shall be always in my mouth. . . I sought the Lord, who answered me, delivered me from all my fears" (34). (NAB)