



Saint Benedict for Busy Parents

Father Dwight Longenecker

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Saint Benedict for Busy Parents

by
FATHER DWIGHT LONGENECKER

General Editor
Father Juan-Diego Brunetta, O.P.
Director of the Catholic Information Service
Knights of Columbus Supreme Council

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Catholic Information Service
Knights of Columbus Supreme Council
PO Box 1971
New Haven CT 06521-1971

www.kofc.org/cis
cis@kofc.org
203-752-4267
203-752-4018 fax

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INTRODUCTION

The first follower of Saint Benedict I ever encountered was not a monk, but a little old lady. June was a retired botany professor who lived in a cabin in the woods. As a college student I had been hired for the day to help her with some gardening tasks. There was something attractive about this old lady that I hadn't encountered before. She had a depth and beauty of character that I could not quite define. She was educated, but wasn't one to flaunt her knowledge. She was a woman of prayer, but she wasn't pious. She had a good sense of humor, but she was never vulgar or common, sarcastic or mean. In time I came to realize that June's unique qualities were due to her commitment as a Benedictine oblate.

An oblate is a Catholic layperson who follows the ancient way of Saint Benedict in the secular world. June followed the principles of the Benedictine life, and these principles gave the calm and beautiful depth to her life. While the principles of the Benedictine life were first formulated for men and women who were members of religious communities, the same principles provide a basic framework of practical spirituality for all Christians in every age.

Eventually June and I became friends, and I returned each Saturday to work in the wooded garden surrounding her cabin. After I graduated from college and went to study theology in England, June stayed in touch and suggested that I might like to visit a Benedictine monastery. I had been brought up in a strict Evangelical Protestant home, so the idea of visiting a Catholic monastery was at once exotic and attractive. I took June's advice, wrote to the guest master of the nearest monastery, and he invited me to pay a visit during Lent.

MEETING SAINT BENEDICT

My first visit to a monastery was suitably austere. The weather was cold. The stone church was damp and drafty, but the welcome was warm, and I was attracted to the monastic way of life. The monks seemed contented in a profound way. They were very religious, but they also had a good sense of humor and didn't take themselves too seriously. During my student years I went back to the monastery often, and after I was ordained as an Anglican priest, I kept visiting Catholic Benedictine monasteries. One summer, when I had three months free before taking

up a new job, I took a pilgrimage from England to Jerusalem—hitchhiking all the way and staying in Benedictine monasteries.

My pilgrimage to Jerusalem was the experience of a lifetime. As I traveled East, I also seemed to be traveling back in time. As I visited the great medieval monasteries of France, I was taken back to an age where spirituality and ordinary life were just two sides of the same coin. After crossing the Alps into Italy, I stepped back to the early ages of the Benedictine tradition. I visited the places where Saint Benedict himself had lived and worked. As I visited the monasteries of Subiaco and Monte Cassino, I could visualize the life of Saint Benedict and his monks as it must have been so many centuries before.

After ten years as an Anglican priest I and my family were received into full communion with the Catholic Church. As I looked back over the years, I could see that Saint Benedict and his monks had a large part to play in my journey from Evangelicalism to Catholicism. Saint Benedict loomed large in my own spiritual journey, but he has also been a monumental figure in the history of the Church. Our present pope has chosen the name “Benedict” and his very good reasons for this choice point to the example of Saint Benedict, whose life and work can illuminate our own spiritual pilgrimage today. The practical principles that Saint Benedict outlined for his monks in the sixth century provide a framework for busy modern people who wish to learn a practical way to integrate spirituality and ordinary life.

THE LIFE OF SAINT BENEDICT

Saint Benedict was born in Nursia in central Italy around the year 480. He was born to a noble family, and after being homeschooled, he was sent to Rome to complete his education. The teenaged Benedict was already turning toward the Lord, and when he went to Rome he was disappointed and dismayed by the lazy, profligate ways of the other young students.

Benedict was born into a time of immense social upheaval. The once grand Roman Empire was on its last legs. The ancient city of Rome was crumbling due to decadence from within and attacks from without. Seventy years before Benedict’s birth the city fell to the invasions of the barbarians. The civil authority was in tatters, the city had been stripped

of its grandeur, and the Church herself was beset with corruption and theological arguments. Benedict left the chaos of the city, and sought a quiet place to study in the mountains north of Rome. Near the town of Subiaco he found a community of holy men, and settled near them to pursue a life of prayer.

Eventually Benedict was asked to be the leader of the community. When that went wrong he left to start his own monastic community. One community soon grew to twelve, and to establish these new communities on a sound foundation Benedict, wrote his simple *Rule*. We mustn't think of Benedict's communities as the great monasteries that existed in the Middle Ages. In the sixth century, Benedict's small communities consisted of perhaps twenty people. They scratched their living from the land just like the other peasants with whom they lived. The only difference is that Benedict's monks observed celibacy, lived together and followed a disciplined life of prayer, work and study. This simple, serious life was to prove a powerful antidote to the decadent chaos of the crumbling Roman Empire.

Saint Benedict died on March 21, 547. After receiving Communion he died with his arms outstretched, surrounded by his brothers. He left behind a legacy that would change the world. The monasteries became centers of learning, agriculture, art, and every useful craft. In this way, without directly intending it, the monasteries deeply affected the social, economic, and political life of the emergent Christian Europe. The monastic schools formed the pattern for the later urban cathedral schools, which in turn led to the founding of universities. In this way, monasticism preserved and handed on the wisdom of both Athens and Jerusalem, the foundations of Western civilization. It is for this reason that Saint Benedict is named the patron of Europe.

Benedict is a great figure in the history of Western Europe, but his life and writings also give us a sure guide for a practical spiritual life today. His practical *Rule* for monks in the sixth century provides principles for Christian living that are as relevant and applicable today as they have been for the last 1,500 years.

THE RULE OF SAINT BENEDICT

The earliest Christian monks started their lives of prayer in the Egyptian desert in the middle of the fourth century, and their monastic traditions grew for the next two hundred years. Various authors had written instructions on how to live the monastic life. Like other monastic leaders, Benedict also wrote a rule of life. Although it draws from the earlier rules, *The Rule of Saint Benedict* is very different from other monastic rules.

Benedict was a genius at understanding human nature. While he calls the monks to an austere life of work, prayer and study, he also realizes that people need affection, understanding and love. One of the most famous of Benedict's lines is that nothing in the monastic life should be "harsh or burdensome." The monastic life is meant to be possible, and for it to be possible, Benedict calls for the strict expectations to be balanced with forgiveness, understanding and compassion. Benedict's model abbot (the superior of a monastic community) is a wise, compassionate and forgiving father to his sons. As such he is a perfect model for Christian fathers.

The Rule of Saint Benedict is a classic of Catholic literature. Although it is written as an instruction for monastic life no one should assume that it is a lofty spiritual treatise. There is nothing there of the "mystical stages of prayer." Those searching for a new spiritual method or a breathtaking experience in prayer will be disappointed. Benedict's *Rule* is a simple outline for the way monks in sixth century Italy should live together. He orders the way the monks should sing psalms in church, how the monastery should be governed and how to handle difficult characters. The *Rule* is practical and down to earth. He tells the monks how much wine they should drink, how to behave when outside the monastery and not to wear knives to bed lest they roll over and cut themselves.

The beauty of Saint Benedict's *Rule* is that the principles of a powerful life are woven into the very fabric of his prescriptions for the monastic life. For Benedict, the monastic life entails separation from the "world" insofar as the "world" opposes Christ and his kingdom; but this degree of separation does not remove monks from the common humanity that they share with the rest of humanity beyond the bounds of the monastery. Benedict does not take his monks away from the nitty-gritty

of the human condition but rather helps them to see God's grace at work in their daily lives.

A SCHOOL FOR THE LORD'S SERVICE

What is it that makes a monk or nun holy? Is it that they pray more than other people do? Is it simply that they have studied the faith and know more? Is it true that a monk or nun is necessarily more holy than other Christians are? They would be the first ones to say "No." Living in a monastery does not guarantee that a person is always closer to God. Rather, one grows closer to God as one's whole life becomes more and more conformed to the image of Christ. How that process takes place is different for each person, and Benedict realized this when he established his famous *Rule*.

In setting down the guidelines for a religious community, Saint Benedict was clear that he was not forcing anyone to be holy. He knew that was impossible. He understood that living in a monastery and praying seven times a day does not inevitably make someone holy. He knew that one does not become closer to God simply by observing rules and regulations.

As a result, Benedict doesn't lay down a ten step plan for holiness or a foolproof guide to God. Instead, he establishes principles for a spiritual life lived in community, a family-like atmosphere. Benedict said that the monastery was to be a "school for the Lord's service." In other words, it was a boot camp, a training college or a greenhouse in which to grow beautiful and useful plants. The monastery was not to be an end in itself, but the means to an end. Benedict's *Rule* simply lays down the way to develop an environment in which holiness can flourish, so that the monastery becomes a place where the monk can grow into the likeness of God.

Benedict's *Rule* gives us a foundation for the Christian home as well. The discipline in the home is established to form all who live there into more Christ-like people. The home, like the monastery, should be a school for the Lord's service. It is the place where together, we learn how to come closer to God. Our relationships with one another, our schedules, the shape of our busy lives should all contribute to this one aim: that our home may be a place where we learn how to love God, and therefore become more like Him.

TWO HOLY TRINITIES

Every good game plan requires a strategy, and every strategy requires form and structure. The form and structure have to be built on some solid principles. As it is in sports, so it is in the spiritual life. Benedict's monasteries are places of discipline, self control and reasoned purpose. Benedict wrote out of long experience and he understood the essential building blocks for making a "school for the Lord's service."

Benedict builds his life around two sets of principles which I call "holy trinities." These two sets of principles are the building blocks for a positive and fruitful spiritual life for us as individuals, but they are also the building blocks for successful Christian communities at every level. If we put these principles in place in our parishes, our councils, our schools and our families, then each of these communities will become more like schools for the Lord's service, and all of the members will live together in peace, prosperity and grow spiritually.

The first set of principles is the three vows which Benedictine monks and nuns take as they enter the monastery. Franciscans famously vow to embrace poverty, chastity and obedience. Benedictines have different vows. They promise obedience, stability and conversion of life. While Benedictines do not make explicit vows of chastity and poverty, Benedict makes it clear that the monks are not to own any kind of personal property and of course, the monastic life assumes the virtue of chastity.

The essential Benedictine commitment is to stability, obedience and conversion of life, and as we shall see, these three are interwoven in a beautiful symmetry to provide the basic structure for a solid, fruitful and abundant spiritual life.

The first "holy trinity" is complemented by the second, which refers to the daily life of the monks. The monks' day is taken up with three basic pursuits: prayer, work and study. These three categories of occupation give the monks their purpose, and like the first "holy trinity" the three are interwoven and interdependent. Together they build up the individual's own 'holy trinity' of body, mind and spirit.

I once commented to a monk about the fact that the Benedictine life has survived persecution and poverty, hardship, war and attempts to eliminate monasticism forever. He smiled and said, "We're like weeds.

We keep coming back.” It is true that Benedict’s wisdom has stood the test of time. Following Benedict has led individuals and communities into peace, prosperity and a positive spiritual growth. Learning from him today will help us to grow into the likeness of Christ. It will bring peace to our homes, guidance for us as parents and principles for Christian leadership in our schools, our councils, our homes and our country.

OBEDIENCE

“What!” the modern individualist will cry, “Did you say ‘obedience’? That’s too old fashioned. Are you calling us to put our minds on one side and fall in with blind obedience like members of some sort of cult?” Saint Benedict does indeed call for obedience. Furthermore, in the early chapters of his *Rule*, Saint Benedict calls for a military kind of obedience. The monk should respond instantly to the commands of his superior. Benedict uses military language throughout the early chapters of the *Rule*, saying that the monk needs to be a good soldier of Jesus Christ.

Anyone who has been a member of a sports team or been part of the military knows that instant obedience is part of the training. Sometimes the command is deliberately absurd in order to condition the recruit to obey without question. While Benedict doesn’t call for such strict obedience, he does expect instant obedience from his monks until it becomes part of their regular and habitual response. Likewise, in our homes, it is good for our children to learn to obey simply because their rightful authorities have asked them to do something.

For Benedictines, however, instant and blind obedience is not enough. The monastery cannot really be a school for the Lord’s service if the free will of the monks is not engaged. One cannot become a saint simply by becoming a rule-obeying robot. The demand for obedience has a deeper and more eternal purpose. The word “obedience” comes from the Latin root which means “to listen.” To truly obey, not only with the body, but with the heart, requires a deeper kind of listening. The monk needs to listen not only to the command of the superior, but he also needs to seek to understand why the command was made, and the final purpose of the superior’s expectation.

This means the monk must engage not only his will in obeying the superior, but also his curiosity and intellect. The right kind of obedience sets the monk on a quest to understand the deeper ways of God. He takes a vow to instantly obey for a deeper reason. He really learns to obey so that he can learn to obey the call of God when it comes. Obeying the superior when he gives a command which goes against the monk's will, or which seems absurd or pointless, prepares the monk to obey God's will even when he cannot see immediately what God is trying to accomplish.

In the same way, we should train our children in instant obedience. We must remember, however, that Benedict portrays the Abbot (the superior in the monastery) as a virtuous, wise and patient man, who never demands anything of his sons that is not for their best. He understands the weaknesses of human nature, and while he expects obedience, he never demands anything harsh or burdensome. In addition to this, he always wants the monks to engage with their obedience in the deepest, most curious and adventuresome way. The command of the abbot (and therefore the commands of parents) should be there to help the monk (and the child) to be intrigued by their spiritual path, and to obey with a sense of adventure and discovery rather than with blind and dull obedience alone.

STABILITY

A famous writer on the Benedictine way has summed up the vow of stability. He says: "God is not elsewhere." In literal terms the vow of stability means the monk makes a vow to remain part of one particular religious community for life. By taking a vow of stability, the monk is deciding that the path to heaven will begin exactly where he is and nowhere else. His love of neighbor must become incarnate in charity toward the members of the community, rather than allowed to become a vague benevolence toward no one in particular.

Benedict contrasts the monk who takes the vow of stability with another kind of monk called a "gyrovague." The gyrovague is a vagrant monk. He wanders from monastery to monastery always looking for a better community, a nicer home, a more holy abbot or a religious house more suitable to his tastes and his aspirations. Benedict condemns such

monks roundly and calls for his monks to take the vow of stability which keeps them planted in one place.

As obedience grates against the modern, individualistic person, so the vow of stability is increasingly difficult. How can we vow to remain in one place? Is such a vow even possible for laymen who often have to switch jobs and therefore move a family? In a society where action is valued, mobility is seen as a wonderful virtue and everyone is on the go all the time, how can we contemplate the virtue of stability?

When a society cannot accept a particular virtue, it is in all the more need of that virtue. What we all desperately need in our fast-paced, action-packed world is the quiet virtue of stability. Our society is built on the assumption that the latest new gadget or idea is the best. We believe that happiness is just around the corner, and if we can only get more and better material goods, a better job, a better body, better friends or more money, we will be happy. Our society is built on a kind of restlessness and search for more, more, more. Stability says, "Stop. Look. Listen. Salvation is at hand. Find happiness here or find it nowhere."

Perhaps the greatest gift we can give our children is the gift of stability. This does not mean that we never go anywhere, never move and never have ambition. What it does mean is that they learn that contentment is possible. Stability means that they can find happiness right where they are.

How do we cultivate stability in our lives, our families and our communities? There are several practical steps. First of all, we can limit our desire for material well-being. Do we have too much consumer debt? Are we greedy and ambitious? These faults show that we are not content, and that we are always searching for happiness somewhere else. Most importantly, do we cultivate our own lives of prayer, and do we make it clear to our families that the only true happiness is found in the love of God?

This kind of stability will work itself out in one very practical way. What is our habit regarding Sunday Mass? Do we go from one church to another looking for the 'right' church? That is not the way of stability. Do we habitually criticize the church we attend or find fault with the pastor? Such behavior assumes that there is a better parish or pastor elsewhere; and this mentality is not the way of stability in community

life. Do we miss Mass or holy days of obligation? That shows that we have other priorities and we are looking elsewhere for our satisfaction and happiness. Do we tithe and regularly support the Church and her needs? Doing so shows stability because we are investing in our faith right here and right now. If we do not, then it shows that we are looking elsewhere for our happiness.

CONVERSION OF LIFE

The third vow of Father Benedict's first "holy trinity" is the vow of conversion of life. This means that the monk vows constantly, in every way, and through every activity to seek the conversion of his soul. It also means that he is seeking not only to convert his own life, but to convert the whole of Life. Every thought, every word, every action is to be part of God's great plan of conversion for the world.

Conversion means changing one thing to another, and conversion of life means that the monk's life is changed from the old order to the new order. He is being converted out of himself into the image of Christ. The vow to conversion of life is no less than the vow to become a saint, for a saint is one who has been totally transformed into a unique icon of Christ.

Conversion of life is the third vow because it is the aim and the goal of the other two. Obedience on its own is simply a dull way of life that follows the rules. Stability on its own is a life that never goes anywhere or does anything new. Conversion of life gives a positive purpose and meaning to the other two vows. Why should one obey? So that one's whole life may finally be converted into the image of Christ. Why should one seek happiness here and now? So that one may be entirely conformed to the image of Christ.

If conversion of life is the whole point of the monk's life, then it is also the whole point of our lives. Through our commitments to family, friends, parish, school and our council we seek not just obedience, not just stability, not just a good life, not just a prosperous life, not just a respectable life, but the total conversion of life. The vow to conversion of life gives meaning and purpose to everything that we do.

These three vows, like the Blessed Trinity, are three in one. Obedience builds stability and both give the impetus for conversion of life. Conversion of life inspires and motivates obedience and stability.

This little “holy trinity” of vows is a solid foundation for our own spiritual lives. If we learn to obey we will make good parents and will become successful members of the Body of Christ. If we learn stability we will be rock solid. We will be secure and confident in our faith and in our purpose in life. If we keep conversion of life as our goal, then everything we do will be charged with the grandeur and glory of God.

Someone has said the best things we can give our children are roots and wings. The three Benedictine vows of stability, obedience and conversion of life give children both roots and wings. In a world ruled by selfish pleasure and immature individualists, what a noble gift it is for our children to learn how to be obedient in the right way. How splendid it is for them to be engaged with life—obeying their superiors, yet all the time embarking on the quest to truly listen and learn.

In a world that promotes ephemeral entertainment and is built on a restless search for more, what a solid gift it is to teach our children to embrace stability! If our children learn that happiness is not elsewhere, they will have a depth to their lives that will take them through all the silly and vapid seductions of the world.

Obedience and stability will give our children roots, but if our children learn that the whole purpose of life is the conversion of life, then we will also have given them wings. This understanding will give their lives purpose, direction and meaning when all around them are swallowed up in decadence, pointlessness and despair.

ANOTHER LITTLE TRINITY

When I visited Benedictine monasteries, I was intrigued by the layout of the buildings. Everything necessary for a simple life was designed for good order, which showed the priorities of the monks. The chapel and library were the dominant features. They, in turn, were surrounded by the domestic buildings and the whole was surrounded by the fields and smaller buildings of the great estate.

After studying the Benedictine way it was clear the buildings were laid out in this manner for a practical purpose. If the first little “holy trinity” is the threefold vow of obedience, stability and conversion of life, then the second one is the threefold occupation of time for the monks. The chapel, the fields and the library indicate the three aspects of

Benedictine life: prayer, work and study. Benedictine tradition teaches that the monks spend their days in these three pursuits, and each one builds up one aspect of the human person.

Prayer builds up the spirit. Work builds the body, and study builds the mind. Just as we are little “trinities” of body, mind and spirit, so the Benedictine life nourishes all three parts together, so that a person can grow in a well-rounded and complete way. Furthermore, for the Benedictine work, prayer and study are not separate pursuits. The Benedictine ideal is that all three, like a perfect trinity, should be intertwined and interdependent.

There is a famous saying, “Prayer is work and work is prayer.” This is a misquotation of Benedict’s Latin phrase translated “prayer and work,” but there is a truth to it nonetheless. If work is a kind of prayer and prayer is a kind of work, then the same can be said of study. For the monk, study is prayer and prayer is study. Likewise, study is work and work is study. To understand how these three fit together it is worth taking a moment to look at each one separately, for each area of monastic life is more than it seems.

PRAYER

For Saint Benedict prayer refers first and foremost to liturgical prayer. In the strictest orders the monks go to chapel to recite the daily offices of prayer seven times a day. The Divine Office consists of Psalms, canticles of praise, Scripture readings and prayers. The two great offices of Lauds (Morning Prayer) and Vespers (Evening Prayer) are the two hinges on which the rest of the day turns. The other, shorter offices fit in at set times throughout the day. None of the offices are very long. Instead of a single great service each day the monks punctuate the day with prayer.

The monastic day is punctuated by prayer so that the monk learns to refer to God many times throughout the day—and that prayer is not just for when he is in the chapel or praying the Divine Office. While Benedict gives detailed instructions for how the monks should recite the offices, he also says that prayer should be brief and from the heart. He encourages the monks to go to the chapel at any time to be with the Lord, and to pour out their hearts in love and compassion before Him.

Prayer, for Benedict, is not a way to get God to do what we want, nor is it a way for the person praying to have mystical experiences. For Benedict prayer is work. Prayer aligns the human soul to God's will and therefore helps to accomplish God's will in the world. For Benedict, prayer works with God for the larger redemption of the world. When the monk prays he is providing a channel for God's grace in the world.

Because he believes prayer actually accomplishes spiritual benefits, Benedict understands that prayer is work. The word "liturgy" actually means "the work of the people" but the term as it is applied to the Church is understood as a spiritual work done on behalf of the people of God for the worship of God and unto salvation. Some people regard the cloistered life of the monastery as being "so heavenly minded that it's no earthly good." Benedict would never agree. What the monks accomplish is far greater than any earthly accomplishment, for their prayers are part of the way in which God's grace and goodness flow through this world.

WORK

If prayer is work, then work is also prayer. Benedictine monks punctuate their day with prayer in order to sanctify everything else they do. Benedict puts his monks to work in gainful labor for a practical reason: they have to eat. However, Benedict is keen for his monks to be engaged in physical labor for other important reasons too.

Father Benedict understands that man is dignified through his work. Through work, we create things, and when we create things we are co-operating with God the Creator. When we co-create with God, we are exercising part of the God-like image in which we were made. Work, however, benefits man not only physically and materially. It benefits man because through positive work, he co-operates with God in the redemption of the world.

Work helps to incarnate the spiritual realities of the praying monk. When he works in the kitchen or in the fields; when he teaches in school or works in a hospital; when he works in a factory or shop, the monk applies the graces obtained through prayer to the real, physical world. In his *Rule*, Benedict instructs the monks in small ceremonies and prayers which they are to observe in their everyday work. For instance, when they set about their work in the kitchen, they preface their work with the

words “O God, come to my assistance. O Lord, make haste to help me.” This call for God’s help and grace in their work is the same prayer with which they begin the Divine Office in chapel. So their prayer life and their working life are intertwined.

In this way, all things become sacred for the Benedictine. The Benedictine life is not an otherworldly, totally spiritual existence. Instead, every aspect of the Benedictine life is constructed to bring the spiritual world and the everyday ordinary world together in a dynamic harmony.

STUDY

The third aspect of the Benedictine life is study. When Saint Benedict established “reading” as one of the three aspects of Benedictine life he meant *lectio divina* which is the prayerful and meditative study of sacred Scripture. *Lectio divina* or “devout reading” is still a great Benedictine tradition, but in addition to *lectio divina* Benedictine monks have developed a tradition of scholarly research and study. Benedict’s desire for them to read along with praying and working meant reading books: lots of them. Benedictines are famous for their scholarship and for their libraries. To be learned is part of the Benedictine life, and it is integrated with the first two aspects of prayer and work.

When the Benedictine monk engages in *lectio divina* his reading really is a form of prayer, and the way he prays and reads in *lectio divina* affects all the rest of his scholarship and study. What he learns requires hard work, and it is all gathered up into his prayer life. He prays as he studies, and his study illuminates his prayers and gives him food for thought as he works. His working relationships in the world help to ground his scholarship and make it real, while his prayer life lifts up his scholarship and allows God’s grace to flow through all he studies and learns.

Neither are books the only source of study. Learning is done in many ways and through the ages, monks have been in the forefront of scientific studies and artistic endeavors. They have been engaged not only in the study of theology, but in all the other forms of learning—both practical and theoretical.

PULLING IT ALL TOGETHER

One may well ask, “Well, all this about the Middle Ages is very interesting, but what does it have to do with me and my family and friends in the 21st century?” It has everything to do with life today. Let me explain how:

The point is that Benedict is convinced that becoming perfect in Christ has to happen within community. Christians are members of the mystical Body of Christ, the Church, and it is a given that we cannot grow in God’s love on our own. It is through the everyday experience of living together with others that we learn the difficult lessons of love, and for most of us that means living in a family. Benedict constantly proposes that life in community is where we learn to treat others as Christ himself, and as the gospel says, “What we have done for the least of these (a sick child, a tired wife, a tiresome mother-in-law) we have done to Christ himself.” The family is called “the domestic church.” It might also be called “the domestic monastery” because the practical demands of the monastic life are also present within the community of the Christian home.

The demands of living in community can bring us to Christian perfection, and the three Benedictine vows of obedience, stability and conversion of life give us a solid framework for this to happen. Whom shall we obey? First of all, we learn obedience to the Scriptures and the teaching of the Church. As we learn to value obedience we immediately put ourselves into a right relationship with God by looking to Him and to the teachings of the Church as our guide and direction in life. Obedience breaks our dependence on our own worldly wisdom and makes us look to a higher guide.

As we value stability of life we learn to face the tasks and responsibilities at hand. Stability helps us to avoid the tendency to rush about looking for the latest entertainment, the latest teacher or the latest fad or fashion. Stability gives us an anchor in a stormy world and helps us to focus on getting the job done.

As we value conversion of life we come to understand its purpose. We are here to be converted into the image of Christ. The *Rule*, the discipline, the prayer and the study are there to train our souls and

prepare us for heaven. We are here to become saints. Like all the best things, it's simple, but it's not easy.

WORK, PRAYER AND STUDY IN THE MODERN WORLD

The second little trinity applies to our lives in an even more practical way. Of course we can not all lead monastic lives with seven prayer times a day, and a life spent in the fields or in the library. However, we can learn from these three aspects of the monastic life to order our own lives.

From the monks' life of prayer we can learn to punctuate our lives with prayer. We may not be able to say the Divine Office, but we can find set times through the day when we turn to the Lord in prayer. Here are seven natural times to pray: 1.) when we get up in the morning 2.) at breakfast 3.) mid morning break 4.) lunch 5.) mid afternoon break 6.) supper 7.) when we go to bed. The prayers we offer at these times might consist of a Psalm or Scripture or a short memorized prayer or they might simply be a little 'arrow' prayer like, "O God make haste to help me," or "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner." Learning to punctuate our day with prayer brings our mind and heart back to the Lord often, so that we may become holy in all things for God.

The monks' emphasis on work reminds us that the work we do does not have to be drudgery. Work can dignify our lives and make what we do worthwhile. When our work is bathed in prayer, even the most mundane job becomes a way for us to work out our salvation in the world. The emphasis on work ought to be a reminder to our children that their own lives need to be focused on hard work and accomplishment. The hard work is not just to make money or to achieve great things and win praise. The hard work is a way to stay close to God, to work with him and to create a better world for his sake. When our life is imbued with a thoughtful, prayerful approach, then work will be kept in perspective. We will avoid the frenetic, overly ambitious, temptations to become workaholics if we balance work with study and prayer.

Finally, the monastic emphasis on learning is something that can enrich all our lives. Our society is driven by a lust for entertainment, and Saint Benedict's insistence on learning as an important part of life

reminds us that entertainment should aid learning. By remembering the need for learning, we have a guide to help us decide what sort of entertainment we are going to allow for ourselves and for our families.

All the different forms of screen entertainment can be educational, but many of them are merely entertainment and some are positively harmful. While some purely entertaining material is part of a balanced life, the choice of films, computer software and screen games can be guided by asking whether it is at all educational. There is no harm in turning off the screens and turning to books, music, hobbies, exercise and concerts and live theater. All of these pursuits are educational and involve the whole person in positive ways that screen entertainment never can. When we are not working, our free time is a precious gift from God, and it should be used to broaden our minds and hearts with all that is best, most pure and lovely in God's wonderful world. A creative emphasis on study in this way balances our busy work life and enlivens and enlightens our prayer life.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the *Rule of Saint Benedict* is not the letter of his law, but the spirit. Benedict's work is imbued with a grace, wisdom, dignity and charity that has shed a benevolent light on the whole of our Western culture. Benedict's instructions for a godly abbot make good reading for every Christian father. The word "abbot" comes from "abba" which is the very word Jesus used for God the father. Benedict's abbot is always to prefer mercy to judgment. He always does what is best for his sons and never wishes to lay anything on them which is harsh or burdensome. Benedict's *Rule* is a *Rule* of tough love. It is firm, but it also allows for human weakness and it propels us forward with the greater law of love and mercy, always urging us to obey God out of love, not merely out of fear.

AN ORDINARY ROAD TO HEAVEN

The wisdom of Saint Benedict has endured because Benedict understood both the ways of God and the ways of man. At the heart of Benedict's vision is the understanding that God is at work in the world. In Jesus Christ, God himself took the form of a human being so that the whole world might be redeemed. This means that the physical, ordinary world matters. God is not forever isolated from our ordinary lives.

Instead, He is active in and through all the joys and sorrows of our ordinary existence.

Benedict's three vows of obedience, stability and conversion of life help us to remember that it is through submission to our own circumstances, our own gifts and our own relationships that we can find God and follow the ordinary road to Heaven. The best way to do this is to see everything in our life as being either work, prayer or learning. Every aspect of our life can be filled with God's glory.

What is required is not so much a change in our lives, but a change in our awareness which will then lead to a change in the way we live. The Benedictine way gives us a new perspective. Seen through the lens of Benedict's teaching, our ordinary lives can have a new dimension. As this new perspective grows in our lives, we will soon be aware that God is at work in and through us in far deeper and more wonderful ways than we have ever seen before. We will become aware that through every ordinary circumstance He is at work to bring us to the abundant and full life that He promises to each of his sons and daughters.

FOR FURTHER READING

- Barry, Patrick. *Saint Benedict's Rule* (NY: HiddenSpring, 2004).
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- Derske Wil and Martin Kessler, *The Rule of Benedict for Beginners: Spirituality for Daily Life*, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2003).
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- Waal, Esther de and Kathleen Norris, *Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict*. 2nd Edition (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2001).

INTERNET RESOURCES

- The Order of Saint Benedict: www.osb.org
- American-Cassinese Congregation: www.osb.org/amcass
- English Benedictine Congregation: www.benedictines.org.uk
- Swiss American Congregation: www.osg.org/swissam

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Father Dwight Longenecker is the author of *St. Benedict and St. Thérèse: The Little Rule and the Little Way* and *Listen My Son: St. Benedict for Fathers*. He is also the author of seven other books on Catholic faith and culture. Ordained under the pastoral provision for married former Anglican clergy, Father Longenecker is a priest of the Diocese of Charleston, South Carolina, and is married to Alison. Father Longenecker and Alison have four children. He serves as chaplain to Saint Joseph's Catholic School in Greenville, South Carolina and is on the staff of Saint Mary's Church, Greenville. Connect with him at: www.dwightlongenecker.com.