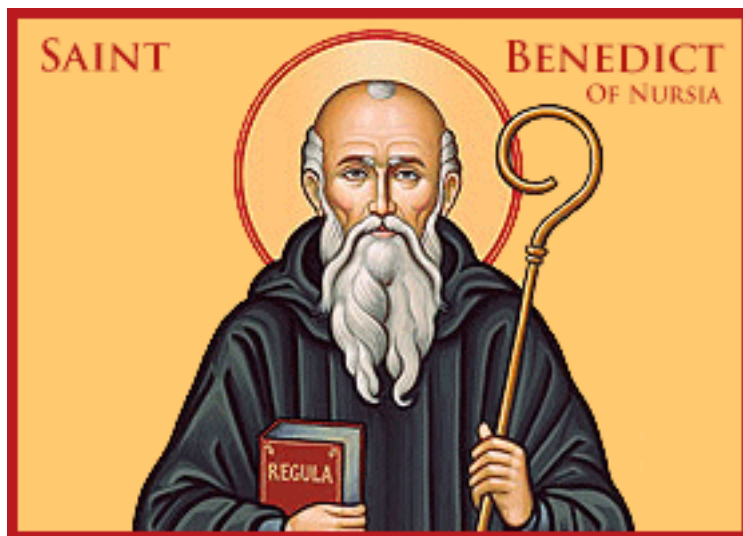


General Meditations on
The Rule of St. Benedict
for
the Members of
The Fellowship of Saint Benedict



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Meditations on the Rule of Saint Benedict: An Introduction and Overview

Preface:

The word rule can be confusing to the modern ear. It conjures images of unsmiling scribal rabbis with black hats and side curls dictating what we can eat, how to wash, when we must work, etc., laying down the law and reeling off commandment after commandment. But the Rule of St. Benedict is not a set of laws, rather a guideline, a “how to” guide. The Rule of St. Benedict is, therefore, not a Pharisaical list of do’s and don’ts. The Rule of St. Benedict is a template for how to live a spiritual life in fidelity to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is a practical outline designed to help the follower of Jesus bring order to his or her life lived in this disorderly world. It is a practical discipline designed to open the believer to God’s transforming grace. The Rule is a means to set us free in Christ Jesus.

At first blush the Rule of St. Benedict may seem outdated and not applicable to modern life. But the same accusation is often laid against Holy Scripture. Neither is true. Though written 1500 years ago, the Rule embodies values and instruction that transcend dates and circumstances. For example, in the Prologue of the Rule, St. Benedict uses action verbs to describe how the follower is to engage Christ and live the spiritual life. He says we are to: “listen...put into practice...do battle...labor...rise up...run...do good...seek...pursue...set out...respond...amend...etc.” And in chapter 4 of the Rule he describes the “Tools of Good Works”. In that chapter he lists no less than 74 implements utilized for service in God’s Kingdom. The Rule of St. Benedict is a very practical guide for the faithful believer of any era.

What we will seek to do in these meditations is to look beyond the ancient words of the Rule of St. Benedict and recognize the intent behind those words. It is my hope that we can discern God’s direction for our personal lives and the life of the modern Church in the midst of our disorderly world. And ultimately, I hope to stir dialogue on how we can apply the principles of the Rule to our life and work within the Fellowship of Saint Benedict.

The Roots of the Rule:

The brevity of the Rule of St. Benedict is one of its glories. It was not the first such rule for a monastic community. It is based on the *Rule of the Master*, a much longer and more complicated compendium of precepts and principles for community life. In addition we can also find the influences of the rules of St. Basil and John Cassian, and the early Desert Fathers. Benedict simplified the order of life set forth in these earlier rules, making his rule more accessible to a wider range of those seeking Christ. Benedict does not try to cover the minutiae of community life as does the *Rule of the Master*. His focus is, rather, on the overall concept of living in community, leaving the smaller details to the Abbot and those in leadership in the individual houses. The Rule, nevertheless, codifies a succinct treatment of all the essentials required for community life, both spiritual and practical. By omitting the innumerable details of observance and any unnecessary rationalistic treatment of the precepts, Benedict was able to give a clear vision of what is truly important for common life. Clearly stating the principles involved he left the details for local consideration.

An Outline of the Rule:

Generally, the organization of the Rule can be described as threefold. The Prologue sets the stage for the Rule, offering an overview of community life, and describing what those who follow the rule can expect. Chapters one through seven set the regulations for the general spiritual life of the community, giving brief descriptions of the communal worship, as well as the place and purpose of spiritual authority. The remaining chapters, and the vast bulk of the rule, then follow with the practical application of communal life precepts, providing the necessary corollary regulations.

Here is the general outline of the Rule of Saint Benedict:

1. Prologue: an overview of Communal Life
2. The Spiritual Life of the Community:
 - The Four Types of Monks (chapter 1)
 - The Abbot and His Advisers (chapters 2-3)
 - The Inventory of Tools for Community Living (chapter 4)
 - The Capital Virtues for Life in Community: Obedience, Silence, Humility (chapters 5-7)
3. The Elements of Discipline in Community:
 - The Divine Office: the liturgical order for the day (chapters 8-20)
 - Living arrangements within the community (chapters 21-22)
 - Discipline in the community (chapters 23-30)
 - Material goods and who cares for them (chapters 31-34)
 - Health and care for the body: how to deal with sickness, food, and sleep (chapters 35-42)
 - Dealing with wrongs and mistakes (chapters 43-46)
 - Work and travel (chapters 47-52)
 - Community living: guests, new members, rank within community, personal belongings (chapters 53-63)
 - Selection of the Abbot, Prior, and Porter (chapters 64-66)
 - Dealing with difficult tasks and interpersonal tensions and behaviors (chapters 67-72)
 - Postscript and epilogue: “A Little Rule for Beginners” (chapter 73)

In the meditations that follow I will try to cover each of these topics in a separate meditation/essay. The purpose of these meditations is not academic, rather invitational. I hope that these writings will be springboards for discussion within the fellowship and spur greater inquiry into the application of the Rule of St. Benedict in our individual and corporate lives as members of the Fellowship of Saint Benedict.

(All quotations of the Rule of St. Benedict in these meditations are from the *RB 1980, the Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes*. Copyright © 1981, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota)

The Prologue

The heart of the Prologue is a description of communal life as a “School for the Lord’s Service” (v. 45). This school is a call to an active life of acquiring virtue. The goal of our study in this school is to learn obedience to Christ, the Gospel, and the community (v. 2). It is a place to learn how to work and pray (v. 4) in order that the Lord in His love may show us His way of life (v. 20). In this active life, Benedict assures us, we will often fail. These failures are not fatal, rather they are opportunities to learn more and more how to rely on the help of God, accepting His grace rather than expecting to be able to reach these desired virtues through self-improvement (v. 29). And in that battle for holy obedience to Christ’s instruction (v. 40) we will grow in love (v. 47).

Benedict reminds us that this work we do in community is not a Pelagian works righteousness. Every good action must be accompanied by prayer (v. 4). In that way, our work becomes a response to God’s daily call to conversion, and to Godly living. Every theme in the Rule is highlighted in the Prologue, and placed in the context of the School for the Lord’s Service. It is here, Benedict instructs, that we learn new tools and trades in spiritual living. We also relearn that which we have lost in secular living, or sadly, that which we may have incorrectly learned previously (v. 36). It is in community that we place ourselves in position to allow God to do what He needs to do in our lives to perfect us and make us ready for the Kingdom (v. 41).

There are demands made in the Rule! But Benedict wants to assure us that these demands are not “harsh” or “burdensome” (v. 46). But they are demands, designed to steadily move us toward the goal that none may be lost. Discipline brings us onto the path that provides sure direction in the midst of troubling times and sordid temptations. It is a lifelong process of learning, and in that learning, becoming a better disciple of Christ. The true disciple embraces the Gospel as his or her guide (v. 21) and diligently follows Christ our Lord who is the perfect example of the humble servant of God. Sharing in Christ’s life, sufferings, death, and resurrection, and in the discipline of the community, we will be made ready to become heirs of the Kingdom of Heaven (v. 50).

In the last line of the Prologue, St. Benedict says, “Never swerving from his instructions, then, but faithfully observing his teaching *in the monastery* [italics added] until death, we shall through patience share in the suffering of Christ that we may deserve also to share in his kingdom. Amen.” How then does this Rule apply to those of us in the Fellowship of Saint Benedict? As members of this Fellowship we do not share a cenobitic life within the walls of a monastic community. Rather, we find ourselves living, working, and praying in the context of the secular world with all of its distractions, temptations, and trials. So, how then do we apply this Rule to our life outside the walls of the monastery?

It’s not about enclosure and removal of temptations nor about living in close physical proximity. Even the cenobites have temptations within the walls of their enclosure; and the close quarters of the monastic enclosure produce their own set of trials. These difficulties may be of a different form and nature than we have in the secular world, but the monastic life does not shield the cenobite from the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil. A disciplined spiritual life is not guaranteed by the monastic enclosure, nor is it impossible for those dwelling in the outside world to seek and acquire such discipline. The key is not the outward circumstances of our living arrangement, rather it is relationship. The heart of a strong and healthy spiritual discipline is relationship: relationship with God, and relationship with our brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus. This is what the Prologue is pointing us toward. As members of the Fellowship of Saint Benedict, we are being encouraged by the Rule to learn

to love not only our brothers and sisters in Christ, but to love the unlovable we meet every day. The Prologue points us toward learning in the School for the Lord's Service to reach out to the unsaved, unchurched, and unloved in the world, and to share the Love of Christ and the Good News of the Gospel with them.

The Prologue calls us to this virtuous and godly living. It sets the stage for the lessons to follow which will facilitate acquiring that goal.

The Spiritual Life of the Community The Four Types of Monks (chapter 1)

It is safe to say that most of us know people who wander from church to church, seeking some unspecified spiritual experience. They flit in and out of parishes, never settling down, seeking personal fulfillment according to their own will and pleasure. There are also the more deadly, disloyal, unrestrained, and rebellious churchmen who seem to enjoy making a mockery of Church discipline and sowing seeds of discord in parishes. There are, on the other hand, the ruggedly faithful. These saints are desirous to be obedient to authority, and they contribute liberally to the work of the Church. Many of these, through lives of perseverance, have been tested by trial and have become valiant spiritual warriors, fully equipped with the armor of God. And there are gradations of commitment and behavior between each of these types.

St. Benedict recognized that these various levels of commitment and behavior would not only be found in the Church at large but in monastic communities as well. He would need to deal with the various types of men who would be attracted to the cenobitic life, so he addresses this issue in the opening chapter of His Rule. Here Benedict gives a brief description of what he considers to be the four kinds of monk. They are:

1. The cenobite (v.2): those who belong to a monastery, where they serve under the rule and under the spiritual authority of an abbot. For Benedict this is the highest form of monastic life.
2. Anchorites or hermits (v.3): these are monks who “have come through the test of living in a monastery for a long time” and are now living in seclusion as recluses. What separates them from the cenobites is that they have left the enclosure and fellowship of the community. They have been tested, and “are now trained to fight against the devil.” (v.4) But these men have set out on their own, and are doing single-handed combat with the devil and his temptations.
3. Sarabites (v.6): these are worldly monks, “the most detestable kind.” Benedict describes them as “still loyal to the world by their actions.” (v. 7) Sarabites, in direct contrast to cenobites, have “no experience...no rule”. Cenobites have both.
4. Gyrovagues (v.10): the term literally translated means to “wander in circles”. These are drifters, “they never settle down, and are slaves to their own wills.” (v. 11) They wander from monastery to monastery. They are at best visitors to community but never committed to any one monastic fellowship and unwilling to submit to local authority.

Let us look at the four types of monk in more detail.

1. The Cenobites:

The word “cenobite” comes from the Greek words *koinos* (common) and *bios* (life). Those who are cenobites live a common life, a communal experience. This is a truly Biblical concept and strongly encouraged in the New Testament. For example, in Acts 2:44, St Luke tells us that “all who believed were together and had all things in common.” St. Paul tells us to “bear one another’s burdens.” (Gal. 6:2) The Greek word *koinos*, and its cognates, are found 64 times in the New Testament. It is variously translated into English with words like: fellowship, partnership, communion, participation, having in common, share.

A cenobite agrees to live not only with other members of the community, but also under the rule and authority of a holy father, an abbot. The term abbot is derived from the Greek word “abba”, father. In vs. 2 of chapter one of the Rule, Benedict says that the cenobites are those “who belong to a monastery, where they serve under a rule and an abbot.” The Latin version of this verse hints at military discipline. The wording in Latin is: *militans sub regula vel abbate*. The term he uses for “serves” is *militans* from whence we get “military” and “militant”. The sense is that in community the brothers serve together in a spiritual battle under the leadership of the abbot.

The three remaining kinds of monks are given in direct contrast to the three promises that a Benedictine makes: stability, fidelity, and obedience.

2. **Anchorites or hermits:**

The anchorites, from the Latin “those who live apart”, may sound like men for whom Benedict expresses admiration. And he did admire the Desert Fathers. He refers to them from time to time in his explication of the rule. However, having tried their way of life in his original fervor to leave the worldly existence he found in Rome, he came to recognize that the temptations of solo living and single-handed combat were dangerous places to be. St. Gregory the Great describes how Benedict, while living alone in the cave, was tempted in the flesh.

“The remembrance of a woman which some time he had seen, was so lively represented to his fancy by the wicked spirit, and so vehemently did her image inflame his breast with lustful desires, that almost overcome by pleasure, he was determining to leave the wilderness. But suddenly, assisted with divine grace he came to himself, and, seeing near him a thicket full of nettles and briars, he threw off his garments and cast himself naked into the midst of those sharp thorns and nettles, where he rolled himself so long, that, when he rose up, all his body was pitifully rent; thus by the wounds of his flesh he cured those of his soul, by turning pleasure into pain... —*The Life of Our Most Holy Father S. Benedict*, by Gregory the Great (chapter 2)

Having tried the eremitic way, he came to realize the value of the cenobitic life. For Benedict, living apart in separation from the community of faith, was separation from the very Body of Christ. This type of living lacked *conversatione morum*, or “fidelity to monastic life” (RB 58:17). Benedict declares that the monk must “prefer absolutely nothing to the love of Christ” (RB 72:11), and that love is found in community. Thus, the anchorites and hermits have neglected the call to fidelity and have launched themselves into “self-reliance, without the support of another” (RB 1:5).

It is important for us living in the Fellowship to be careful “not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought” (Rom. 12:2-8), but to practice humility and maintain our place in the community of faith to which we have professed fidelity. We may not run away to the physical wilderness, but we must also guard our hearts and spirits from fleeing to “self-reliance, without the support of another.”

3. **Sarabites:**

“The most detestable kind of monks.” (RB 1:6) They are the most detestable because they defy the most important of the promises: obedience. These detestable ones follow the way of self-will. Later in the Rule, Benedict declares that “Your way of acting should be different from the world’s way.” (4:20) But the sarabites are “still loyal to the world by their actions, they clearly lie to God by their tonsure.” (1:7) The sarabitic way shuns counsel and rule. They are their own authority and declare their way as THE way.

The way of the sarabite, though, is not foreign to the modern Christian. We can all be tempted to choose our own way and decide what is good or bad according to our own rational thinking, our tastes, our selfish desires. When we stray too far down that path we can find ourselves in the place where anything we believe in, or selfishly choose to do, we declare to be God's will, a holy desire.

As members of the Fellowship, we need to foster the healthy relationships which call each of us to accountability. We need spiritual brothers and sisters, with whom we may be completely open and transparent, who will be firm, but not harsh, challenging without being judgmental. Proverbs 11:14 reminds us that "Where there is no guidance, a people falls; but in an abundance of counselors there is safety." Obedience to the Gospel, to the Rule of St. Benedict, and to the godly fellowship given to us in the Fellowship of Saint Benedict, is paramount in combatting the sarabitic way.

4. Gyrovagues:

Gyrovagues lack stability. The last half of the word comes from the same root as vagrant, and that might be an apt description of the monks Benedict is describing. They have no home, and as a result, they have no fruitful relationships. They are unstable, unrooted, and unrestrained by discipline. These monks are easily distracted by the lure of what is just over the hill. The grass is always greener on the other side. If the gyrovague doesn't wander he might miss the next grassy pasture.

But the common life is stable, settled. The cenobite settles down and seeks the quiet and peace that come from stable relationships and the beauty found in a deeper longing for the heart of God. The gyrovague is right: there is more over the hill. But the hill is not in the landscape outside the monastic wall, but rather the hill of Calvary.

As members of the Fellowship, the stability we seek is the quiet assurance of relationship with God and our brothers and sisters in Christ. We must combat the distractions which can lure our minds into wandering in vague circles, the distractions of the modern life (e.g. the 24 hour news cycle, social media). It is important for us to live in community, but not at the cost of shunning solitude and quiet contemplation. Continuing to develop the love for, and practice of quiet meditation, and prayerfully maintaining our concern for the other members of the Fellowship and our local parish, must be a goal of our stable relationship in Christ.

The remainder of the Rule of St. Benedict is focused on how the true monks, the cenobites, are to live and serve, so Benedict does not spend any more time on this topic in this chapter. He says that "It is better to keep silent than to speak of all these and their disgraceful ways...and with the help of the Lord, [we will] proceed to draw up a plan for...the cenobites." (1:13) For Benedict, the discovery of who we are is found in Christ, the Good Shepherd. When we allow Him to lead us into fresh, green pastures, we will find that we are always at home in Him and with the other members of the flock.

The Abbot and His Advisers (chapters 2-3)

There is a story of a small village in Judea that was struggling to survive. There was infighting between villagers, vile talk, and no visitor to the village ever wanted to stay. One day a man came to the city gates and asked if he might stay the night. One of the elders invited him into his home. When he came in and saw the man's wife, who was ill, he touched her and she was instantly healed. The wife told her husband what had happened and he conferred with the other elders. They requested that the visitor come to the city gates to meet with them. There they asked him if he could heal their village. The man said that he knew no cure, but that he was certain that one of the members of the community was the Messiah. The elders asked him to identify the Messiah, but he declared that the Lord had not revealed his identity. The next day they sent to the elder's home to call the man again, but he was not there. A quick search of the home showed no trace that the man had ever been there. Word spread quickly among the villagers that the Messiah was in their midst. The people of the village began to question, "Who is it? Which one of us?" Their attitude began to change toward one another. "Be nice to him, he might be the Messiah. She might be the Messiah's mother, or daughter." Soon the people began to work well together, treating each other with respect, and visitors to the village began to stay.

In the Rule of St. Benedict, chapter 2, Benedict says of the abbot that, "He is believed to hold the place of Christ in the monastery..." (v. 2) The abbot is to model how we are all to act toward one another. Just as the villagers, in the story above, began to adjust their behavior, so we are asked to treat one another, friends and strangers alike, as if the other were Christ Himself. And when we take this practice one step further, if we think of ourselves as an *imago Christi* we will begin to change our behavior to match that image, sincerely loving our neighbors as Christ would love them. Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me." (Matthew 25:40) The abbot is the model, the example of this Christlike behavior. But it is a responsibility for all of us to bear the image and treat one another as if we were ministering to Christ Himself.

The Rule indicates that the abbot will be held to a high state of accountability. Benedict says, "Let the abbot always remember that at the fearful judgment of God, not only his teaching but also his disciples' obedience will come under scrutiny." (2:6) In this verse I am reminded of the practice in the liturgical church of a priest's funeral. The casket of a layman is brought into the church feet first, so that at the second coming the deceased might rise up to face the Lord in the last judgment. But a priest is brought into the church head first, so that he might rise up and be judged first by those committed to his care. The abbot, the parish priest, and all who hold authority are accountable not only for themselves but for those committed to their care.

But what does that have to say to those under authority, those not in an abbatial role? If our responsibility is to bear the image of Christ and to treat others with the respect due to Christ Himself, we must be held accountable for our actions. One of the benefits of keeping the Liturgy of the Hours is that we are called to conclude each day with the office of Compline. This service offers us a daily opportunity to examine our lives and behavior during the day past before retiring for the night. The office offers us the occasion for self-examination in the light of the Psalms and other Scriptures appointed, and ask, "How have I manifested Christ toward those with whom I have interacted today?" We can also ask, "How have I failed to be Christ to others?" and to turn our shortcomings over to the Lord in repentance. In the same way, we may seek to reflect on "How have I experienced Christ in the ones I met today?" relishing and rejoicing in those encounters.

Not all of us are called to positions of authority in community. But we are all called to take our part in the government of God. The abbot is responsible for every decision that is made in a monastery (3:5), but he makes few decisions alone. (3:1-2) In the same way, we in the Fellowship of Saint Benedict, following the rules of government by consensus practiced in the CEC, seek the will of God as revealed in consensus of the members of the community. In the *RB 1980 in Latin and English with Notes*, the footnote on chapter three gives a description of the decision making process in the monastery that could be a working guideline for the CEC concept of government by consensus. The footnote says:

It is clear that the role of the community or council is purely consultative—the decision remains with the abbot. The purpose of the consultation is not to ascertain the majority view, but to try to discern the will of God. If the abbot ordinarily does this through the Scriptures and the Rule and by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he is not the exclusive mediator of wisdom and must recognize that the Spirit may choose to speak to him through other channels. The monks, too, or perhaps only one of them—it may be the youngest of all—may receive an authentic inspiration. The abbot must be open to this possibility. His consultation, then, is not a matter of assembling human opinions, but of listening to all the sources through which the divine will may manifest itself, and then discerning which of these has made known an authentic communication of the Spirit. On the part of both monks and abbot, this process demands, not political techniques designed to ensure the acceptance of one's own view, but a genuine humility and self-effacement, and an opening of one's mind and heart to the mysterious action of God. It does not remove from the abbot the burden of decision, but assists him in discovering "the divine precepts" in regard to a particular decision. (pp. 178-179)

Benedict ends his discussion of the interaction of the abbot and his advisors by warning against the type of rebellious attitude exhibited by the sarabites. He says, "Accordingly in every instance, all are to follow the teaching of the rule, and no one shall rashly deviate from it. In the monastery no one is to follow his own heart's desire, nor shall anyone presume to contend with his abbot defiantly..." (3:7-9) And this is not only for the monks, but also for the abbot himself, for he "must fear God and keep the rule in everything he does; he can be sure beyond any doubt that he will have to give an account of all his judgments to God, the most just of judges." (3:11)

It is clear from these chapters in the Rule that if we who are members of the Fellowship of Saint Benedict seek Christ in all persons, and practice humility in our relationships one with another, God will use us to build His community around us. Though we have no abbot in the monastic sense, we do have men in authority over us—bishops and priests—and we are called to be humbly submitted to them. It is about relationship. If we manifest Christ in our life and ministry, and actively experience Christ in others, we will fulfill the heart and intent of the Rule in these two chapters.

The Inventory of Tools for Community Living (chapter 4)

The title Benedict gives to this chapter is *Quae Sunt Instrumenta Bonorum Operum*, literally translated: “which being tools of good works” or “these are tools for good works”. He uses the word *instrumenta* for “tools”. This word is also used for musical instruments, and as such begs a metaphor. Just as there are a large number of tools available to be used for the work of living in community, so there are a large number of musical instruments available to be used in the composition and performance of a symphony.

Each musical instrument has a specific role in the composition of a symphony, and must be played at the specifically appointed time, in the right tempo, and at the appropriate volume. There is a logic and flow to a symphony, with each instrument playing its crucial part. Out of context the notes played by any one instrument might seem odd, even dissonant. But in the context of the whole composition, each instrument adds its unique part to the complete work of art. There is a beauty to the crafted whole, and when each piece has played its part well the work holds together and paints an auditory picture for the audience. So it is with the spiritual tools of the monastic life. When we employ each available tool, and use it properly, our lives become a complete work, a masterpiece—beautifully framed and forged, proclaiming a glorious message.

This chapter is in essence a string of Scripture verses, strongly reflecting Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. Benedict is addressing how we are to live our lives in Christ Jesus. He is pointing us toward the foundation found in Christ (v. 21) and His Holy Word (v. 63). Each tool is utilized in bringing us into greater intimacy in relationship with God and with the others in community. It is a lifetime occupation. Each time we return to the list, a new tool will grab our attention, or God will unveil a new revelation about a tool we have consistently used. We must practice using these tools just as a musician must constantly practice playing his or her instrument in order to perfect performance.

It is obvious that we cannot fully discuss Benedict’s list of nearly four score of tools in a single essay. But we can point to some of the key concepts that he emphasizes. His goal in listing these tools is to lay the foundation for the spiritual principles of monastic living. He is not advocating a legalistic code of behavior; rather he is pointing the monks toward stability in community (v. 78), and pursuing the love of Christ before all else (v. 21). We are to place our hope in God alone (v. 41), and adjust our behavior so that our actions will be readily recognized as different from those of the world (v. 20).

Some of these “tools” seem less relevant to our vocation as members of the Fellowship of Saint Benedict, and some seem outright onerous or outdated. For example, in his exhortation to practice “moderation in speech” (v. 52), he demands that the monks “speak no foolish chatter, nothing just to provoke laughter” (v. 53). And he adds, “do not love immoderate or boisterous laughter” (v. 54). Why these prohibitions against laughter? Is this a prohibition against humor in general, or merely an exhortation not to engage in bawdy jokes? Or maybe it is simply a guideline to appropriate employment of humor in natural conversation. He had previously instructed that we are to dash wrongful thoughts and disclose them to our spiritual fathers (v. 50), thus reflecting St. Paul’s admonition to “take every thought captive” (2 Cor. 10:5). This may be a follow-on to that prescription. We ought not to ignore or reject these tools for lack of understanding of his intent, rather ask God for His illumination. But his strongest and clearest admonitions are to “be holy” (v. 62; cf. Lev. 11:44; Matt. 5:48), to “love Christ before all else” (v. 21; 2 Cor. 5:14), and to “live by God’s commandments every day” (v. 63; John 14:15). If we

can use these tools effectively then we shall “never lose hope in God’s mercy” (v. 74; Rom. 9:16). As Benedict summarizes, “These, then, are the tools of the spiritual craft. When we have used them without ceasing day and night...our wages will be the reward the Lord has promised.” (vv. 75-76)

As members of the Fellowship of Saint Benedict, how can we employ these “instruments” to play our part in the composition of a symphonic masterpiece? The key appears to be found, as stated above, in verse 21: “the love of Christ must come before all else.” Benedict points us toward the truth that transformation begins within, in our relationship with Christ. Once the inside—our spirit—has been transformed by Christ’s love, then we can begin to reach out to others and live in right relationship with the brothers and sisters we have in community. This type of renewal is not confined to those who live in the cloister. Each one of us, regardless of our place of residence, must live in right relationship with God and others with whom we interact daily.

The tools of good works are instruments for harmonizing our life with Christ and the whole of the Christian community. When we work together, each playing our assigned part and rightly using the tools available to us, a symphonic masterpiece can be created which will proclaim a salvific message to the world.

The Capital Virtues for Life in Community: Obedience, Silence, Humility (chapters 5-7)

Obedience, silence, and humility work closely hand-in-hand to bring the monk into right relationship with God and with the other members of the community. As we study these three chapters we see that our father Benedict emphasized that the obedient monks practice humility and silence; the humble monks are obedient and silent partners in the life of the community; and silence engenders in each one humility and obedience. Let's look at the virtues as presented in these three chapters and in the context of the Rule as a whole.

True obedience is always immediate (5:1-9), complete (5:9), and joyful (5:14-16). Anything less than this is at best compliance (5:14). Obedience, however, is not an onerous duty, rather an act of love. According to Benedict, "it is love that impels us" to be obedient (5:10), but it is also a battle to maintain this lifestyle (Prol. 40). And though we will inevitably struggle to maintain a life of obedience, obedience is a blessing that leads to a deeper and more profound relationship with God (71:1-2).

Regarding humility, Benedict makes what are seemingly contradictory statements in chapters 5 and 7. He opens the chapter on obedience by stating categorically that "The first step of humility is unhesitating obedience..." (5:1), but then two chapters later he claims that "The first step of humility, then, is that a man keeps the *fear of God always before his eyes* (Ps 35[36]:2)..." (7:10). If we take these two verses out of the context of the overall teaching of the Rule then these are seemingly contradictory statements—they can't both be "the first step". However, kept within the whole of the Rule we see what St. Benedict is proclaiming. If you practice humility toward one another, and especially those in authority over you, and you humbly obey "as promptly as if the command came from God himself" (5:4), then humble obedience is done in "the fear of God" (7:10). We must, Benedict says, never tire of these spiritual virtues, but work closely with the other members of the community "earnestly competing in obedience to one another," in "the fear of God" (72:6). But that is just the first step. There are twelve steps presented in chapter 7.

Pressing forward toward humility we are "truly...forbidden to do our own will" (7:19). And "the second step of humility is that a man loves not his own will nor takes pleasure in the satisfaction of his desires..." (7:31). After we have thus crucified our self-will, Benedict directs that we must turn outward, thinking more highly of others than of ourselves (7:49-54). The truly humble will be careful about the words he speaks, and the thoughts he thinks (7:44, 56, 59, 60-61), and he will practice obedience in all matters of life (7:34, 35, 55). But the beginning and end of true humility is "the fear of God". Benedict makes this principle the bookends of his catalogue of steps to humility, stating as noted above that "The first step of humility, then, is that a man keeps the *fear of God always before his eyes* (Ps 35[36]:2)..." (7:10), and that "after ascending all these steps of humility, the monk will quickly arrive at that *perfect love* of God" (7:67).

Whereas obedience is one of the three promises of the professed, and is commended (or even commanded) in no less than nine chapters of the rule, and humility is exhorted in 15 chapters, it is silence that Benedict upholds as the key to unlocking the other virtues in the monk. "Indeed, so important is silence that permission to speak should seldom be granted even to mature disciples, no matter how good or holy or constructive their talk." (6:3)

In our modern world, the discipline of silence is a lost art. It is often even scorned as wasteful, an unprofitable use of our time. Any void created by silence must be immediately filled with noise—music, conversation, commentary, even conflict. Most modern Christians, when asked to sit in silence will quickly become fidgety. They will grab their phone, or lacking that, begin to doodle or pace the floor in open agitation. And to sit quietly with another person, without conversation, can be, and often is, considered rude. Silence is not only a lost art, it is a lost blessing. And yet, our father Benedict exhorts us all to “cultivate silence at all times...” (42:1). Why is that?

True obedience is always immediate (5:1-9), complete (5:9), and joyful (5:14-16). Anything less than this is at best compliance (5:14). Obedience, however, is not an onerous duty, rather an act of love. According to Benedict, “it is love that impels us” to be obedient (5:10), but it is also a battle to maintain this lifestyle (Prol. 40). And though we will inevitably struggle to maintain a life of obedience, obedience is a blessing that leads to a deeper and more profound relationship with God (71:1-2).

Silence also frees us from the burdens of inane conversation, idle chatter, and evil speech. There are, as Benedict says, “times when [even] good words are to be left unsaid out of esteem for silence.” (6:2) Let me give you an example. Many years ago, as an oblate of the Society of St. John the Evangelist, I was visiting a new SSJE house. I knew none of the brothers or guests, save one, in that house. I arrived just in time for the evening meal, which was taken in silence in the refectory. We all gathered around a single large table in a narrow room. It was very close quarters. The meal was leisurely and there was a relaxed atmosphere around the table. But not a word was spoken. Afterward, reflecting on the experience, I realized how comfortable that silence was for me. I recognized that though I didn’t know anyone else, except my traveling companion, I didn’t sense the need to fish for a topic of conversation or make explanation for why I was there. The silence freed me from what could potentially have been an uncomfortable exchange with strangers. But the silence also made those strangers less formidable to me, thus making our eventual greeting and future conversations less stilted.

As members of the Fellowship of Saint Benedict dwelling in the world, these chapters remind us that though we are in the world we should not be of the world. It is important for us to allow the discipline of these chapters to challenge to us to live humbly, obediently, and silently in “the fear of God.” We need to begin to cultivate a healthy practice of silence, even in a group. It is better to listen than to be heard. And when we have spent time in silence with the Lord, then we will, by God’s grace, find the peace to be able to quickly, completely, and joyfully obey the commands given to us. Overall, in putting these virtues to practice, we will find that what we are doing with our lives, in humble submission to God’s will, is truly not about us at all, it is about the Kingdom, and we are doing it “out of love for Christ, good habit and delight in virtue.” (7:69)

The Elements of Discipline in Community **The Divine Office: the liturgical order for the day (chapters 8-20)**

In the United States we have a power grid that stretches across the 48 contiguous states. The grid produces and transmits power continuously. That power is always available, but in order for us to have access to it we must turn on a switch or insert a plug into an electrical socket. We must, as it were, tap into that power grid in order to receive its benefits. The same is true of the power grid of the Holy Spirit. He is always present, but we must “tap into” the Spirit in order to receive the benefits of His power. The divine office, the work of God, the liturgy of the hours is the means for us to continually tap into the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. St. Paul exhorts us to “Pray constantly” (1 Thess. 5:17). The divine office as presented in chapters 8-20 of the Rule of St. Benedict is one of the disciplined ways that the faithful can begin to pray constantly, and thus, continually tap into the power grid of the Holy Spirit. When we practice the discipline of observing the holy hours we open ourselves to His presence and realize the benefits of our relationship with the Holy Spirit. St. Benedict says, “We believe that the divine presence is everywhere and *that in every place the eyes of the Lord are watching the good and the wicked* (Prov. 15:3). But beyond the least doubt we should believe this to be especially true when we celebrate the divine office.” (19:1-2) “The divine presence is everywhere”, and the discipline of the hours is a blessing to the disciple because it allows us, throughout the day, wherever we are, to access His presence. This is not a rigorous or onerous duty, rather a rich benefit to the faithful—an opportunity to receive moments of grace and mercy from the hand of God throughout our hectic lives. By faithful observance of the divine office we can fulfill the imperative given by St. Paul in his letter to Thessalonica, not as an obligation, rather as an opportunity for on-going intimate communion with God.

Having dealt with the spiritual life of community in the first seven chapters of the Rule, Benedict begins his teaching on the practical aspects of living life in community by addressing the discipline of communal prayer. The clear message in this transition is that everything done in community must flow from the common prayer of the divine office. We begin and end each day in prayer and praise, and pause throughout the hours of our workday to offer to God our selves in prayerful unity with our brothers and sisters in Christ. This discipline of prayer is essential to sustaining our communal life. We tap into the Divine as a community, and thus we work more closely together with Him and with one another. Whether we are physically present with one another, as are the cenobites, or separated by miles, as in the Fellowship of Saint Benedict, we say the same prayers at the same hours, read the same Psalms, and have a common experience. This becomes our common identity and the tie that binds us in unity.

When describing the divine office, Benedict used the term *opus Dei*, or the “Work of God” more than a dozen times (e.g. 7:63; 22:6,8; etc.). But this term does not appear in chapters 8-20. In these chapters other phrases are employed. He uses the term *officium divinum*, or “divine office”, *divina opera*, “divine work”, and *servitutis officia*, “obligations of service”. Nevertheless, the essence of these chapters points to the fact that the “work” of the community is birthed and carried out in the divine office — the *opus Dei*. Thus, we are exhorted to understand that everything done in community must be bathed in prayer in order to be effective, and that our physical labor must begin with the divine labor—the work of God done in the divine office.

In reading this section of the Rule it is somewhat difficult to piece together the order and flow of the divine office. St. Benedict does not give us a chart of services. His description of the services jumps around a bit between the chapters and requires some careful study to discern what is expected at each of the hours. For those who want more information on the details of the daily liturgy, I have appended two documents to the end of this meditation which present a chart of the hours and the order for recitation of the Psalms according to the Rule. But, for now, let us take a quick look at the heart—the intent—of each of the hours.

In chapter 16, Benedict reminds us that the Psalmist (he uses the title “Prophet”) says, “Seven times a day have I praised You” (Ps. 119:164); and, “At midnight I arose to give You praise” (Ps. 119:62). “We will fulfill,” Benedict states, “this sacred number of seven if we satisfy our obligations of service at Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers and Compline...” (v. 2). And Vigils (also commonly called “Matins”) is our response to the call to praise in the middle of the night. So Vigils is the watch hour—the hour of praise—and includes the recitation of no less than 12 Psalms, readings from Holy Scripture, the Fathers, and appropriate monastic readings, with ample time for reflection and *lectio divina*. Lauds and Vespers are the major offices—the hinges of the monastic day. Here there is time for recitation of the Psalms, readings from Scripture, the singing of hymns and canticles, and intercessory and petitionary prayers. The little hours of Prime, Terce, Sext, and None, are the pauses in the day to recite Psalms, hear a brief reading of Scripture, offer brief prayer, and call on the mercy of God for our work in His Name. Compline represents our opportunity to examine our conscience before sleep, and to lay the work of the day in His hands. We pray the Psalms of protection through the night, dedicate ourselves and our labors to the Lord, and thus consecrate the day past to Him.

As we look at these chapters describing the liturgical worship of the Benedictine community, it gives me pause to recognize that, though there are 13 chapters describing the divine office, the word *eucharistia* is not found anywhere in them. As a matter of fact, the word *eucharistia* is not used by Benedict anywhere in his Rule. If we are talking about the “common unity” of the monastic community, where is Holy Communion? It may be that the Eucharist was such a central part of the life of the community that Benedict did not see the need to give specific directions for its celebration or reception. Though he didn’t use the word, there are hints of the celebration of Holy Eucharist throughout the Rule. For example, in chapter 59, discussing the reception of a young boy into the community, Benedict directs that the documents of oblation and the boy’s hand are to be wrapped “in the altar cloth” (v. 2). The description leads one to believe that this cloth is most likely the fair linen of the altar, and this would likely be done at the offertory of the Eucharist. In chapter 63, describing the rank of the monks, Benedict instructs that “when the monks come for the kiss of peace and for Communion...they do so in the order decided by the abbot...” (v. 4) And in his directives regarding meals, Benedict says that “After Mass and Communion, let the incoming reader ask all to pray for him...” (38:2) Since the main meal of the day is taken at Noon or in the early afternoon, it would appear that Mass was said just before the midday meal. Was this a daily celebration? Quite likely.

Benedict concludes this section of the Rule with his exhortation for reverence in prayer found in chapter 20. He says:

¹Whenever we want to ask some favor of a powerful man, we do it humbly and respectfully, for fear of presumption. ²How much more important, then, to lay our petitions before the Lord God of all things with the utmost humility and sincere devotion. ³We must know that God regards our

purity of heart and tears of compunction, not our many words. ⁴Prayer should therefore be short and pure, unless perhaps it is prolonged under the inspiration of divine grace. ⁵In community, however, prayer should always be brief; and when the superior gives the signal, all should rise together.

So we see St. Benedict's emphasis on humble and respectful worship as the heart of the practice of living together in community. But what does all of this mean for us as members of the Fellowship of Saint Benedict? We cannot all pray together in one place at each of the hours described in these chapters. And because of work schedules it is often hard for us even to regularly pray the little hours during the work day. What relevance do these chapters then have for us? It is important for us to not become discouraged when we don't meet the standard set in the Rule, nor be obsessive in slavishly fulfilling the letter of the Rule. Rather we need to seek the heart of the Rule, and strive to grow into its fulness. It is, therefore, important that we encourage one another in our devotion to the Lord, to the Rule of St. Benedict, and to our Fellowship. And let us, in humility and respect for God, earnestly pray for each other every day as we attend the school for the Lord's service.

The Divine Office as Presented in Chapters 8-20 of the Rule of St. Benedict

VIGILS: (also known as Matins)

Begins at the eighth hour in winter (8:1)

From Easter to November it is later, just before Lauds (8:4)

The Service Order:

Begins with “Lord open my lips and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.” Said three times. (9:1)

Psalm 3 with *Gloria Patri* (9:2)

Psalm 95 with refrain (antiphon) (9:3)

Ambrosian hymn (9:4)

Six appointed Psalms with refrain (antiphon) (9:4)

A versicle and abbatial blessing (9:5)

Three lessons, with responsory. *Gloria Patri* is sung after third reading.

These readings are from the Old Testament, New Testament, and the Fathers. (9:5-8)

In the summer only one reading from the Old Testament with responsory. (10:2)

Six Psalms with “alleluia” refrain. (9:9)

Reading from “the Apostle recited by heart”. (9:10)

Kyrie eleison. (9:10)

“And so Vigils are concluded. (9:11)

On Sundays and Feast Days: (note chapter 14 re. Feast Days)

There are four readings with responsory and *Gloria Patri* after the fourth reading. (11:2-3)

Four readings after the second set of six psalms. (11:4-5)

Three canticles with “alleluia” refrain. (11:6)

After versicle and abbot’s blessing, four New Testament readings with responsories. (11:7)

Hymn: “We praise you, God” — the *te Deum.* (11:8)

Abbot reads from Gospels and all reply “Amen.” (11:9-10)

Abbatial blessing. (11:10)

Lauds begins. (11:10)

LAUDS:

On Sundays:

Opening versicle: “God, come to my assistance; Lord, make haste to help me” and *Gloria Patri* (18:1)

Psalm 67 without refrain. (12:1)

Psalm 51 with “alleluia” refrain. (12:2)

Psalms 118 and 63. (12:3)

Canticle of the Three Young Men. (12:4)

Psalms 148-150 and a reading from the Apocalypse recited by heart with responsory. (12:4)

Ambrosian hymn. (12:4)

Versicle. (12:4)

Gospel Canticle (Song of Zechariah). (12:4)

Litany. (12:4)

Conclusion. (12:4)

Lord’s Prayer recited by the superior. (13:12)

LAUDS on Ordinary Days:

Opening versicle: “God, come to my assistance; Lord, make haste to help me” and *Gloria Patri* (18:1)
Psalm 67 without refrain (13:2), and Psalm 51 with refrain. (13:2)
Two designated psalms on Monday through Friday. (13:3-8)
Saturday, Psalm 142 and Canticle from Deuteronomy (Song of Moses) with *Gloria Patri*. (13:9)
Psalms 148-150 and a reading from the Apocalypse recited by heart with responsory. (13:11)
Ambrosian hymn. (13:11)
Versicle. (13:11)
Gospel Canticle (Song of Zechariah). (13:11)
Litany. (13:11)
Conclusion (13:11)
Lord’s Prayer recited by the superior. (13:12)

PRIME, TERCE, SEXT, NONE:

Opening versicle: “God, come to my assistance; Lord, make haste to help me” and *Gloria Patri* (18:1)
Hymn for the hour. (17:3, 5)
On Sunday:
Four sections of Psalm 119 are said at Prime. (18:2)
Three sections of Psalm 119 are said at each of the other hours. (18:3)
On Monday:
Psalms 1, 2, and 6 are said at Prime. (18:4)
At Terce, Sext, and None, the remaining 9 sections of Psalm 119, 3 sections at each hour. (18:7)
On Tuesday through Saturday:
At each hour, three appointed psalms with *Gloria Patri* after each. (17:2, 5)
One reading. (17:4-5) followed by *Kyrie eleison*. (17:4-5)
Dismissal. (17:4-5)

VESPERS:

Opening versicle: “God, come to my assistance; Lord, make haste to help me” and *Gloria Patri* (18:1)
Hymn for the hour. (18:1)
Four appointed psalms with refrain. (17:7)
One reading and responsory. (17:8)
Ambrosian hymn. (17:8)
Versicle. (17:8)
Gospel canticle (*Magnificat*). (17:8)
Litany (17:8)
Lord’s Prayer recited by the superior. (13:12; 17:8)
Dismissal. (17:8)

COMPLINE:

Opening versicle: “God, come to my assistance; Lord, make haste to help me” and *Gloria Patri* (18:1)
Three appointed psalms without refrain. (17:9)
Hymn for the hour. (17:10)
One reading. (17:10)
Versicle. (17:10) followed by *Kyrie eleison*. (17:10)
Blessing and Dismissal. (17:10)

The Order of Psalmody in the Rule of St. Benedict

Numbering is according to the Masoretic Text

Sunday:

Vigils: 3, 95, 21-26 // 27-32
Lauds: 67, 51, 118, 63, 148-150
Prime: 119:1-32
Terce: 119:33-56
Sext: 119:57-80
None: 119:81-104
Vespers: 110-113
Compline: 4, 91, 134

Monday:

Vigils: 3, 95, 33-35, 37a,b, 38 // 39-45
Lauds: 67, 51, 5, 36, 148-150
Prime: 1, 2, 6
Terce: 119:105-128
Sext: 119:129-152
None: 119:153-176
Vespers: 114/115, 116a, 116b/117, 129
Compline: 4, 91, 134

Tuesday:

Vigils: 3, 95, 46-50, 52 // 53-56, 58-59
Lauds: 67, 51, 43, 57, 148-150
Prime: 7, 8, 9
Terce: 120, 121, 122
Sext: 123, 124, 125
None: 126, 127, 128
Vespers: 130-133
Compline: 4, 91, 134

Wednesday:

Vigils: 3, 95, 60-62, 66, 68a,b // 69a,b-73
Lauds: 67, 51, 64, 65, 148-150
Prime: 10, 11, 12
Terce: 120, 121, 122
Sext: 123, 124, 125
None: 126, 127, 128
Vespers: 135-138
Compline: 4, 91, 134

Thursday:

Vigils: 3, 95, 74, 75, 77-79 // 80-85
Lauds: 67, 51, 88, 90, 148-150
Prime: 13, 14, 15
Terce: 120, 121, 122
Sext: 123, 124, 125
None: 126, 127, 128
Vespers: 139-141
Compline: 4, 91, 134

Friday:

Vigils: 3, 95, 86, 87, 89a,b, 93, 94 // 96-101
Lauds: 67, 51, 76, 92, 148-150
Prime: 16, 17, 18a
Terce: 120, 121, 122
Sext: 123, 124, 125
None: 126, 127, 128
Vespers: 142, 144a,b, 145a
Compline: 4, 91, 134

Saturday:

Vigils: 3, 95, 102-105 // 106-109
Lauds: 67, 51, 143, canticle, 148-150
Prime: 18b, 19, 20
Terce: 120, 121, 122
Sext: 123, 124, 125
None: 126, 127, 128
Vespers: 145b, 146, 147a,b
Compline: 4, 91, 134

Living arrangements within the community (chapters 21-22)

In the early 1980s, I was serving as a curate in an Episcopal parish in Garland, Texas. It was a difficult assignment and stressful for both my wife, Miranda, and me. I suggested to Miranda that she might like to talk to my spiritual director and Suffragan Bishop, Robert Terwilliger. She made the appointment and they met. He suggested to her that she pack a bag and put it in the hall closet near the front door of our home. That way, he said, she would be ready at any moment to answer the call of Christ to go where He directs. It was a tangible sign of preparedness, and a symbol of hope that the situation was not permanent. A decade and a half later, Bishop John Holloway gave a similar exhortation to the clergy of the Southeast. He said that we should all have a valid, up-to-date, passport. That way we would be ready to answer the call of Christ to go anywhere He directs and whenever He chooses to call. It would be a tangible sign of our preparedness, and our confidence in Christ's sovereignty over our lives. We would then be ready to move when and where He directs.

St. Benedict gives a similar directive. He instructs his monks to "sleep clothed, and girded with belts or cords...thus the monks will always be ready to arise without delay when the signal is given..." (22:5-6) It is a tangible sign of the monk's readiness to embrace the Work of God. Benedict has, in the earlier chapters, given instruction on submission to spiritual authority and the centrality of prayer in the community. And now he turns to delegated authority and the practice of living a disciplined life in that setting. Both chapters 21 and 22 explain the importance of an elder's mentorship through delegated responsibility. The deans manage "all affairs according to the commandments of God and the order of their abbot." (21:2) And the monks are to sleep under "the watchful care of seniors." (22:3) And all of the monks, young and old, when the signal is given, "will hasten to arrive at the Work of God..." (22:6)

In describing this mentorship, Benedict uses the Latin term, *decanus*, which means, chief of ten. In chapter 21, verse 2, he instructs that the deans are to "take care of their groups of ten". This is reflective of the Biblical precedent found in the Torah. Moses was instructed by God, through his father-in-law Jethro, to "choose able men from all the people, such as fear God, men who are trustworthy and who hate a bribe; and place such men over the people as rulers of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens." (Exodus 18:21) And in Deuteronomy 1:15, Moses tells the people that, "I took the heads of your tribes, wise and experienced men, and set them as heads over you, commanders of thousands, commanders of hundreds, commanders of fifties, commanders of tens, and officers, throughout your tribes." The character of these men is important. These are men who fear God, are trustworthy, who are wise and experienced. As Benedict instructs in verse 1, the deans are to be similarly "chosen for their good repute and holy life." And this principle of delegated authority given to trustworthy men of good repute is carried over into the New Testament. In Acts chapter 6 the Apostles gave their disciples instructions to choose deacons to serve the tables thereby freeing the apostles to preach and lead the fledgling Church. They said, "Therefore, brethren, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this duty." (6:3) Delegation is a sound Biblical principle.

It is important to recognize that the role of the deans, like that of the deacons in Acts 6, is one of servanthood. "They are to be chosen for virtuous living and wise teaching, not for their rank." (21:4) Benedict adds that, "If perhaps one of these deans is found to be puffed up with any pride...he is to be reproved..." (v. 5) As St. John describes in the Book of the Revelation, these men should be ones who

are “called and chosen and faithful.” (7:14) This is the goal for which we all need strive. Our service is not one of seeking recognition or honor, rather faithful service to the least, lost, and lonely.

And though chapter 22 addresses the sleeping arrangements of the monks, there are lessons for us to glean from Benedict’s instruction. He recognized that the night hours are a breeding ground for temptations, particularly of the flesh. There is a continual need to guard against these temptations. To help battle the night phantoms, Benedict commands that “A lamp must be kept burning in the room until morning.” And that “The younger brothers should not have their beds next to each other, but interspersed among those of the seniors.” (v. 7) Thereby, the junior monks may be kept “under the watchful care of the seniors.” (v. 3)

All of us need to be prepared, ready to respond, watchful, and accountable to the seniors in our community. Though we, the members of the Fellowship of Saint Benedict, do not live in an enclosed community, and thus do not need to be concerned with sleeping arrangement instructions, we do need to be alert to the temptations that come with the dark. We need to practice spiritual accountability, and practice respect for those in authority over us. And if entrusted with such authority, we need also recognize Benedict’s admonishment to practice virtuous living, and to avoid becoming “puffed up with any pride.”

Ultimately, if God so chooses to bless the ministry of the Fellowship of Saint Benedict, we will grow in number and there will be a need to subdivide the Fellowship into smaller groups for the purposes of oversight during the novitiate, continuing care and concern of the professed, and for the monthly on-line gatherings. With these chapters from the Rule we have the template for how to choose deans to oversee groups of ten and to lead by practicing virtuous living. Benedict could not have foreseen the need for on-line groups, but by God’s grace and through his wisdom and insight, his obedience to the Word and Holy Spirit, he has given us clear direction on how to move forward as we grow in this Fellowship.

Let me conclude with one last note of some joy and a glimpse of Benedict’s sense of humor. Though he directs that the monks speak “nothing just to provoke laughter” (4:53), he makes a couple of asides in chapter 22 which hint at monastic humor. In verse 6, he speaks of the monks’ readiness to arise and hasten to chapel. The image given is of a footrace, maybe with a little jostling and one-upmanship. Benedict says that they are to “hasten to arrive at the Work of God *before the others*” (italics added). Then he adds that they are to do this “with all dignity and decorum.” And in the last verse of this chapter, Benedict says, “On arising for the Work of God, they will quietly encourage each other, *for the sleepy like to make excuses*” (italics added). Benedict obviously has a good handle on human nature, and human weakness. But, as he says in the Prologue, he hopes “to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome.” (vs. 46) And so here is a brief glimpse of how he handles the frailty of the human condition in community; and it is fun to recognize that he can do so making humorous asides.

Discipline in the community (chapters 23-30)

“This job would be so easy if it weren’t for the people.” This is a common refrain around our house. As a priest I must deal with people — it’s the nature of my job. My wife is a librarian. She has an even more difficult job; she must deal with the public — it’s the nature of her job. And for both of us, as introverts, dealing with people is a difficult task. Our jobs would be so much easier if we didn’t have to deal with people. But as my wife is quick to remind me, “you wouldn’t have a job if it weren’t for the people.” SIGH! She is right. Regardless of where they live or what role they have in society, people will be people. And some people are more difficult than others. But all people, whether Christian, non-Christian, monastic, or secular, are simply that: people!

Many in society, even the Church, have a distorted view of monastic life. They are of the opinion that those who are the “professional religious” are somehow other than “regular” people. Monks living together in tranquil settings, separated from all of the problems of secular society, and enjoying the fruits of their peaceful coexistence as brothers in Christ is idyllic, but not realistic. Monks are people, too. And I feel quite certain that many monks and nuns would join me in my agonized cry, “This job would be so easy if it weren’t for the people.” Living together in close proximity with a dozen or more men (or women), taking all meals together, daily working with one another, and practicing obedience to Rule and abbot, can be taxing on these close relationships over time. Interpersonal problems will occur. There need to be rules for dealing with these problems. Chapters 23-30 are the beginning of Benedict’s rules for communal discipline.

The heart and purpose of these disciplinary rules is to protect the community from division. Jesus prayed that we “all may be one.” (John 17:21) The aim of the disciplines is not to dole out punishment, rather that those who have strayed may be won back to the fold, thus holding together the sometimes fragile fabric of the monastic community. Benedict emphasizes that his goal is conversion of the wayward. However, he also recognizes that if the wayward are stubborn and unwilling to repent, they need to be excised from the body. He says, “For the Apostle says: *Banish the evil one from your midst (1 Cor 5:13)*...lest one diseased sheep infect the whole flock.” (28:6-8)

These disciplinary rules are Benedict’s practical application of Jesus’ teaching found in Matthew 18:15-17. Jesus instructed that there is a progression of discipline which must be followed in order to win back the lost. We may want to jump immediately into bringing the matter before the whole body, or quickly ridding the community of a difficult individual, but that is not what our Lord commanded. As indicated in chapter 24 of the Rule, verse 1, “There ought to be due proportion between the seriousness of a fault and the measure of excommunication or discipline.” Benedict’s desire is to see the wayward brother come home, and the unity of the community be preserved. All discipline is to be pursued in love, for “the love of Christ must come before all else.” (4:21) Even the harshest of punishments, excommunication from the community, is carried out with the express purpose that the offender’s “spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord.” (25:4)

Some of these rules may seem harsh to the modern ear, and we may ask why would anyone enter a community where one would willingly submit to such strictness, even corporal punishment? And why should anyone trust decisions regarding discipline to a single man, the abbot? The simple answer is given in chapter 27. “The abbot must exercise the utmost care and concern for the wayward brothers...

Therefore, he ought to use every skill of a wise physician and send in *senpectae*..." (vv. 1-2) The word, *senpectae*, appears nowhere else in Christian literature. (*RB 1980*, footnote, p. 222) The meaning of the word is somewhat obscure. However, in context, the word is used in the medical sense, as it is in early secular Latin documents. A *senpectae* is a poultice which may be applied as a healing remedy. Benedict sees the discipline administered as a balm applied to a serious wound. As moderns we may not understand harsh treatment in a Christian community, but at the same time we do not hesitate to pursue harsh medical treatment if it is perceived as the only option for physical healing. For example, my son was born with a severely twisted lower leg. The doctors recommended that they surgically break both the tibia and fibula in his right leg and reset them. That's harsh! And who would willingly undergo open heart surgery? Most of us would if it were the only avenue open to us for restoration of a healthy heart. If an individual has a communicable disease, isolation is called for. That separation may seem harsh, but it does preserve the community from widespread sickness, and gives the diseased individual the space and time to heal completely. This is the reason for Benedict's directives in chapter 26 of the Rule. It is harsh, but a very important spiritual principle.

Following Matthew 18:15f, Benedict says that the abbot is to address the offending individual alone. Then, if that produces no satisfaction, then the *senpectae* "that is, mature and wise brothers" (v. 2) are to be sent in. If the offender does not respond well to two or three brothers, then he is to be brought to the whole of the community. If he continues without repentance, only then is excommunication called for. Benedict, though, does recognize that some men may not be able to comprehend the punishment being administered, and so he offers the following alternative. "If however he lacks understanding, let him undergo corporal punishment." (23:5) In any body of believers there is a spectrum of maturity, intelligence, and social skill. This allowance for physical punishment keeps the offender who "lacks understanding" in the community while helping him grow in understanding.

Any sinful act is an offense against God and the community of believers. It is a breaking of covenant with the whole body, and so restoration of the lost must be an act of the full community. There cannot be room left for lingering resentments. We all must participate in the forgiveness offered to the penitent offender. That is the nature and purpose of the Peace in our Eucharistic celebrations. We cannot approach the altar, nor receive the Body and Blood of our Lord, if we are separated from any other member of that Body. We all, therefore, must participate in the act of forgiveness.

What Benedict has presented in these eight chapters may, at first blush, seem formidable; however, it is in reality lovingly remedial. How does all of this apply to us in the Fellowship of Saint Benedict? We are a community. Though we are not cenobitic, we are brothers and sisters in Christ and everything that we do affects not only ourselves, it has implications for the body as a whole. Corrective discipline, as described in these chapters, is only necessary when members of the body stray from the way. The more desirable discipline is the preventative one. The disciple who practices accountability, makes regular confession of sin, and seeks spiritual direction, strives for the narrow way. As brothers and sisters in the Fellowship we need to encourage one another in that way less traveled. If preventive discipline fails, then we have, in these chapters of the Rule, Benedict's directives for applying the healing balm of corrective discipline.

Material goods and who cares for them (chapters 31-34)

The county in which I currently live, Buncombe County, North Carolina, is in a bit of an uproar at this time. The county treasurer, Wanda Greene, has been charged with a 32 count indictment for fraud and embezzlement. She has been accused of pillaging the county of millions of dollars, charging the county credit card with hundreds of thousands of dollars for personal gifts, taking personal trips on government money, going to the spa and expensive hotels on vacations at the taxpayers' expense. She and her son, a county employee, each bought a \$2.3 million whole life insurance policy with taxpayer money in order to redeem them for cash. But lest we think this type of behavior is limited to the secular world, let me tell you about Ellen Cooke. She was the national treasurer for the Episcopal Church USA from February 1990 to January 1995. She was convicted of embezzling \$2.2 million from the church! All of this is very saddening. We should be able to expect that someone entrusted with the goods of the community will care for those goods with integrity and accountability. And that is what St. Benedict is addressing in the current chapters of the Rule.

Misuse of goods does not have to be felonious abuse as in the examples above. It can simply be a carelessness with things entrusted to us, or a sense of personal entitlement and possessive attitude toward those things. It could also be wasteful treatment or abuse of the goods, and neglect in the care of them. That is why Benedict says that the person entrusted with the care of the goods in a community must be someone "whom the abbot appoints and in whose manner of life he has confidence." (32:1) He should be "wise, mature in conduct, temperate, not an excessive eater, not proud, excitable, offensive, dilatory or wasteful." (31:1) Benedict recognizes that, though these "things" are temporal goods, they are to be used in and for the life of the Body of Christ. The one entrusted with their care must "regard all utensils and goods of the monastery as sacred vessels of the altar, aware that nothing is to be neglected." (31:10-11)

What we are being presented in chapters 31-34 is an incarnational theology. As we see in the first chapter of Genesis, God created everything that is, and all things were created good. And as God Himself chose to become incarnate for us, thus sanctifying the things of this temporal world for spiritual use, so we must treat with respect the created things entrusted to us, "aware that nothing is to be neglected." (31:11) Jesus chose water as the vehicle for impartation of the Holy Spirit and incorporation into His Body through baptism. He took ordinary bread and wine and made them the chosen channel for reception of His Sacred Body and Blood. In His earthly ministry, Jesus used mud and spittle (John 9:6) to heal. He did not make distinctions between clean and unclean, declaring all foods clean. (Mark 7:19) And He recognized that there is a need in this earthly realm for accountability with secular currency. (Matt. 22:21, John 13:29)

Material goods are not evil. Our attitude toward them and how we use them will determine the sanctity that we bestow upon them. St. Paul says, "For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving; for then it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer." (1 Tim. 4:4-5) Benedict's prohibition against personal ownership of property is not motivated by gnostic heretical rationale. He is not condemning physical items as evil, thus to be avoided; rather he is promoting respect for the goods of the community and common ownership as the Biblical ideal. As noted above, he regards "all utensils and goods of the monastery as sacred vessels." (31:10)

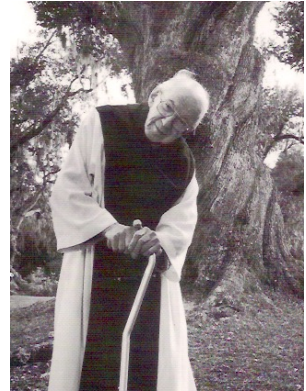
So how can we apply these principles to our lives as we seek to live out the Rule of St. Benedict in this Fellowship? Each of us has need to possess goods, hold jobs for which we receive remuneration, and maintain bank accounts, in order to live in the world. The ideal of Acts 4:32, “no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own,” can still be realized without living in an enclosed community. It is a question of attitude toward the material goods of this world. Do we possess those things, or do those things possess us? C.S. Lewis suggested that as Christians we ought to strive to live more simply than our neighbors. Benedict says, “Whoever needs less should thank God and not be distressed.” (34:3) By possessing only what we need rather than indulging our wants, we become freed from those possessions. Living according to that principle also gives us greater leeway to be more generous in our discretionary income and savings, thus being freed to help others who may be less fortunate. “In this way all the members will be at peace.” (34:5)

St. James reminds us of the power material goods can have over us. He says, “What causes wars, and what causes fightings among you? Is it not your passions that are at war in your members? You desire and do not have; so you kill. And you covet and cannot obtain; so you fight and wage war.” (James 4:1) Sometimes that war is simply within our own minds and hearts. Envy and covetousness can create battles within us if we do not call them into check. And if left unchecked then grumblings begin, and Benedict warns us against this evil. He says, “there must be no word or sign of the evil of grumbling, no manifestation of it for any reason at all.” (34:6) If we allow our desire for things which we covet to take root, and grumble when we cannot have them, then we create division within the Body, separating ourselves from others in community. We then quickly find that we are no longer living together in the love of Christ.

God has entrusted each of us with material goods. How are you using those goods? Is it for the Lord? For the building up of the Body? Or for selfish consumption? Do you treat those material things with respect, “as sacred vessels”? Or do you treat anything in your possession wastefully, abusively? Do you possess these goods, or do these goods possess you? These chapters of the Rule are a challenge to us all. Let us allow Benedict to call us to account for the care we give to the goods we have been given.

Health and care for the body: how to deal with sickness, food, and sleep (chapters 35-42)

They say a picture is worth a thousand words. Here is a picture of Brother Boniface. He was a Trappist monk at Mepkin Abbey. Being part of the second wave of monks who moved to the banks of the Cooper River in the South Carolina low country, he helped found and build the monastery in Monck's Corner. He was born in Germany, but made his way to New York where he became a barber. In 1952 he moved to the Abbey where he made his profession as a Trappist. There he spent the next fifty or more years of his long life serving the Lord and the community of Mepkin. If you asked him how it was that he came to be here, his face would crack with a wry smile and he would tell you, "I came by boat." As you can tell from the photo, he was wracked by arthritis and could not straighten his back. He was undoubtedly in great pain a good deal of the time, but in the years I knew him he never once complained. He had an infectious smile, a delightful demeanor, and always took his part in the life and work of the community serving as baker and barber.



Brother Boniface epitomized many of the principles found in chapters 35-42 of the Rule of St. Benedict. As an elder of the community he was treated with respect, but never asked for special consideration. Fr. Francis, the Abbot, often sought out Boniface for his wisdom and insight. Boniface never lost his German accent, and so he was not often asked to read — it was hard to understand him. And though he was, according to the Rule, eligible for special consideration regarding the infirm, he never sought that privilege. One of my fondest memories of Brother Boniface is from one morning when I delayed in the refectory to write in my journal after eating breakfast. Having completed his morning service in the kitchen, Boniface came quietly into the room, set down his simple meal—a bowl of oatmeal and a glass of orange juice—turned toward the Icon of Christ and blew a kiss toward it. Then he crossed himself, sat down and very slowly ate his breakfast in complete silence. When he was through eating, he rose, turned to the Icon, smiled, and clapped his hands. Then he departed. What a perfect image of the ideals set forth in these chapters. His attitude, his joy, his restraint, his appreciation for quiet, and his recognition from whence he had received all of these good gifts was manifest in that precious encounter.

The essence of these chapters is that every person is an *imago Christi*. How we treat others, and how we care for our bodies is indicative of the love that we are showing for Christ Himself. We are each called to serve Christ in the other, whether our task be serving at table, treating and caring for the sick, the young, or the elderly, and giving space to the other with our silence. If we take only what we need, we honor Christ in others by not consuming something they might need. And if we always consider the other as Christ we will treat them with respect. I am reminded of a primary teaching in the Shaker community. They were incredibly gifted and skilled craftsmen. As they worked on furniture or hat boxes or whatever item they were handcrafting, they always imagined Christ using that item and made it for Him. Would that we could all approach life with that image constant in our minds and hearts.

In the Fellowship of Saint Benedict we don't have kitchen servers, an infirmary, readers at meals, or limitations on when we can take those meals. So how do these chapters apply to our community? The key for us is found in the first verse of chapter 35: "The brothers should serve one another." And at the end of the paragraph, Benedict reiterates: "Let all the rest serve one another in love." (vs. 6) Whether it is the other members of the Fellowship, or our brothers and sisters in Christ in the parish, or the perfect

stranger on the street, if we maintain an attitude of reverence for Christ in the other, and serve them as we would serve Christ Jesus Himself, we will fulfill the heart of this Rule.

Though we seldom have opportunity to take meditative time at meals, listening to someone read from sacred texts, we can make those meals eucharistic by acknowledging the others with whom we are dining by turning off electronic devices and focusing our attention on the family and friends present with us. We can then begin to see the others as Christ and our time together as a sacred opportunity, a divine encounter. And if there are periods of silence, do not try to fill those gaps in conversation, rather embrace the silence, communing with the other in that sacred, silent space.

Bishop Robert Terwilliger helped me understand the importance of those moments of silence. On one occasion when he was serving as director of Trinity Institute in New York City he told me about having met the Metropolitan of Constantinople when the latter came to the Institute as a guest speaker. The bishop met the Metropolitan at Kennedy airport and the two rode into the city together in a taxi. Neither spoke to the other during the entire 35 minute ride. Upon arrival at the hotel, the Metropolitan turned to Bishop Terwilliger and said, "Thank you for that time of intimate spiritual communion." The bishop told me that he felt he knew his companion better from that experience than if he had heard his entire life history. Far too often we feel a need to fill the vacuum in conversation with inane and unnecessary verbiage. Silence can be quite the blessing.

Taking only the proper amount of food and drink, and not indulging our cravings is a key component in caring for the temple of the Holy Spirit. St. Paul also reminds us to "...eat what is set before you..." (1 Cor. 10:27) There are medical reasons for refusing certain foods, and Benedict accounts for that. He says that with two kinds of food offered at the meals, "the person who may not be able to eat one kind of food may partake of the other." (39:2) But let us not be rude and demanding; rather accommodating and polite, accepting what is set before us. And as the rule stipulates, "above all else...refrain from grumbling." (39:9)

And finally, we may not be in a position to exercise the grand silence from Compline to the morning office, but we can take to heart Benedict's admonition to be careful what we put into our minds before retiring for the night. What is the last things that you do before retiring for the night? Do you watch the news? Play computer games? Listen to the radio? Read? Benedict says that we should retire with words that "will benefit the hearers." (42:3) He cautions against reading from the Heptateuch or the Book of Kings. These contain violent scenes and thus, "it will no be good for those of weak understanding to hear these writings at that hour." (42:4) How much more should we avoid images from the news or internet. The night hours are a time for our subconscious and spirit to sort through the events of the day. If our spirit has been troubled by what we heard before sleep, then it will affect our sleep and temper the start of the new day. Billy Graham once said that the best sleep aid available is the Bible. "It puts me to sleep every night," he said. I personally find that reciting a Psalm or two helps me quiet my soul and turn to rest. Create your own grand silence, and retire for sleep in peace.

Brother Boniface had every reason to avoid strenuous service and take advantage of extras offered to the infirm and elderly, but he didn't. He smiled, spoke a gentle and joyful word to any and all. He applauded and blew kisses to Jesus, and embraced the silence of the community. He has been a model for me, exhibiting an attitude and behavior for which I would like to continue to strive. Boniface lived the principles of chapters 35 to 42 of the Rule. The essence of these chapters, living for Christ Jesus, enjoins us to embrace the *imago Christi*.

Dealing with wrongs and mistakes (chapters 43-46)

A good friend of mine, and fellow priest, has a very difficult time being anywhere on time. He is habitually late for appointments, clerical functions, and even for Mass. Bishop Woodall used to refer to him as “the Late John Doe” (name changed to protect the guilty). There are many reasons people run late: time management issues, simple selfishness, or the pride of deeming oneself and one’s time more important than others’. But this habit inevitably creates problems for others, and even for the effectiveness of the Body of Christ. Fr. John Doe and I used to work together in prison ministry, but his tardiness became an issue for the local prison. They cannot change the prison routine to accommodate neglect on the part of outside visitors. I was approached by the prison authorities. They told me that John’s tardiness was unacceptable and if it continued our visiting privileges would be suspended. John did not change his ways and our joint ministry at that camp came to an end. Needless to say, this affected not only the two of us, but a large group of men who had counted on us to be there for them.

John Michael Talbot, in his book *Blessings of St. Benedict*, says,

Tardiness, procrastination, or unnecessary absence are ultimately expressions of selfishness. It means that we place ourselves over the community functions that others must attend. If we all came only when we liked, nothing would work well in a monastery. It is not an individual experience. It is communal. It teaches us to sacrifice self for the sake of God and others. In so doing we find ourselves made new into a better person. Some are conditioned for tardiness by their upbringing and past cultural experiences. The Rule is a way to heal that defect.

The discipline laid out in chapters 43-46 of the Rule is a discipline that may sound harsh to our modern ear. However, the goal of such discipline is the maintenance of unity in the community, and conversion and redemption of the individual. These disciplines are not punitive by nature, rather restorative.

This battle against selfishness, though, is not limited to waywardness in regards to time management. When one has failed, erred, or made a mistake in oratory or broken something belonging to the community, the monk is instructed to prostrate himself before the Abbot and community. (44:1) This humbling act is designed to accentuate the penitent’s submission to God, to those in authority, and to the community as a whole. The restorative aspect of this discipline is the act of the entire community granting forgiveness and pledging their support to the process of restoration and conversion.

We all make mistakes, and it is common human nature to want to hide those mistakes. But Benedict demands that the one having made the mistake “must at once come before the abbot and community and of his own accord admit his fault and make satisfaction.” (46:3) Then Benedict goes on to say that if the monk tries to hide his wrongdoing, “he is to be subjected to a more severe correction.” (v. 4) The hiding of the fault is the greater sin. “When the cause of the sin lies hidden in his conscience,” Benedict explains, “he is to reveal it only to the abbot or to one of the spiritual elders, who know how to heal their own wounds as well as those of others, without exposing them and making them public.” (vv. 5-6) This practice is commonly called “the revelation of thoughts” and has been a common practice in the monastic tradition of both the eastern and western Church.

An article on the eCatholic website explains that:

The disciple was to make a revealing “confession” of, not only sins as in sacrament of penance, but of all temptations and general thoughts as well, to the spiritual father. Only then can the master really

know what is going on in the disciple's spiritual life. This is radical. But this was not a long counseling session, an attempt to manipulate the disciple by the teacher, or an opportunity to try and justify oneself before the master. It was an exercise of radical letting go of self on the part of the disciple before the elder monk. It took place in a rather short exchange between the disciple and spiritual father that sometimes concluded with a fatherly tap on the monk's forehead, as if to say, "get your thoughts straight." This was also seen in the Christian west culminating with the Rule of St. Benedict. While the emphasis in Benedict's Rule is moderation, the presence of the traditional lay spiritual father is clear. A "revelation of thoughts" to the Abbot that was similar to the practice of the monks of the east was lovingly practiced in his community.

We all need someone to tap us on the forehead and remind us to "get our thoughts straight." As members of the Fellowship of Saint Benedict we do not have the ready access to an abbot or other spiritual father. Nevertheless, we can establish fellowship with a brother or sister in Christ, whom we trust, and can develop a relationship of accountability with that individual. This person must be mature and secure enough in his or her relationship with the Lord and with you to be willing to ask the hard questions and hold you accountable. And it should be a mutual accountability. You must be willing to do the same in return. If we can maintain that accountability before another, it will aid us in our relationship with the Lord. Thus, not just our outward behavior is being cleansed and righted before God, but our inner thoughts, our heart, and our spirit will come into right alignment with His Word, His heart, His Spirit.

Benedict begins this section of his Rule with the words, "Indeed, nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God." (43:3) And in chapter 45 he addresses mistakes made in the Divine Office. Again, the matter comes back to the inner life of the monk. If a mistake is made, Benedict prescribes that "he must make satisfaction there before all." (v. 1) This directive is designed to keep the members of the community humble before one another, to keep their heart right before God and each other. The admission of error should be a simple apology, nothing that will draw undue attention to the reader. The sense of Benedict's word is that when a mistake is made in reading, the reader should pause, apologize, and move on. Not acknowledging the mistake reveals a prideful heart. A simple apology is a humble gesture.

The point of all of these disciplines is straightforward: the Work of God is to be preferred above all. Discipline is designed to be restorative, not punitive, nor to bring attention to the mistakes or those who make them. It is to facilitate good liturgy, and that it may be well led. The ultimate goal being that all in community may have a right heart and a right spirit and draw closer to God through the healthiness of the community and her worship together.

Work and travel (chapters 47-52)

During the Summer of the year prior to the beginning of my seminary career, I spent 12 weeks visiting various kinds of churches in order to get a sense of the breadth of worship styles in the modern Church. It was eye-opening! One of the churches I visited was a rather large, non-denominational congregation. They had recently built a new, multi-use “worship space”. I was seated on a riser across from the pulpit. The band was on the floor behind the pulpit; and on the risers behind the band a choir was seated. On the hardwood flooring of the “worship space” was the outline of a basketball court, and directly over my head was a basketball backboard and hoop raised on a folding frame. It didn’t feel, to me, like “worship space” at all. I felt like the worship team and congregation had invaded the space dedicated to a sports arena.

St. Benedict was adamant that we all need sacred space for worship, private prayer, and silent contemplation. Chapters 47-52 of the Rule of St. Benedict cover time spent away from the monastery, the balance between work and prayer, and the centrality of the Work of God in each of these endeavors. Benedict expresses the need for balance between labor and *lectio*. This is clearly stated in the first verse of chapter 48: “Idleness is the enemy of the soul. Therefore, the brothers should have specified periods for manual labor as well as for prayerful reading.” Then Benedict presses forward with specific guidelines for the allocation of time for each. These chapters address how to pray in various situations—at work, on the road, and in the monastic enclosure—and how to set aside sacred time and sacred space in your day. And when you find yourself in unusual surroundings you must not neglect the Work of God, but make sacred time and space for the Divine Office wherever you are. Benedict concludes this section with an admonition regarding the oratory. So, let us begin our examination of these chapters there.

St. Benedict would have been appalled by the “worship space” I described above. He declares that “The oratory ought to be what it is called, and nothing else is to be done or stored there.” (52:1) The oratory is to be sacred space, designated for silent contemplation, corporate and private prayer, and communal worship. The Latin word *oratio* means prayer. In the monastery of Benedict’s day, private space for quiet personal prayer was hard to come by. The monks did not have private rooms, taking their sleep in dormitory settings. Their days were regimented, so wandering off to sit by a quiet stream, or hiking a mountain to pray was not usually an option either. The oratory was the place of prayer. The norm in that period was to situate the oratory at the center of the monastic enclosure. It then became the focal point of the community. This pattern was carried over into the medieval construction of European cities. The cathedrals were placed on the highest point and near the center of most European cities. And even here in the United States, the Washington National Cathedral site was chosen because it is the highest point of land in the nation’s capital.

The Work of God is to be not only the structure on which our daily routine is built, but the underpinning of everything we do. Benedict arranges the hours of work based on the hours of the Divine Office, and that arrangement varies with the seasons (ch. 48). If, as we saw in chapter 43, that nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God, then even when schedules are disrupted by travel, sickness, or other unforeseen impingement on the individual’s time and routine, the monks are to “perform the Work of God where they are, and kneel out of reverence for God.” (50:3) The act of kneeling temporarily makes whatever space we have available for prayer into sacred space. But Benedict recognized that there are

going to be those times when outside forces can negatively impact the monk's efforts to keep the holy hours. He says that "those who have been sent on a journey are not to omit the prescribed hours but to observe them *as best they can*, not neglecting their measure of service." (50:4 *emphasis added*)

For those of us in the Fellowship of Saint Benedict, we do not have a central oratory, nor can we always organize our work around the hours of the Divine Office. So how is any of this relevant to our life as followers of the Rule? There are two keys to applying these instructions from the Rule to our lives. The first is to allow the Work of God to form the structure for our day, making adjustments to the times of the hours, or combining various hours "as best we can" so as to "not neglect our measure of service". For example, if you are in a workplace where taking time for Terce and None would be difficult or impossible, combine those little hours with Sext and do the Psalms appointed for all three hours as part of Noonday Prayer on your lunch break. Maybe your morning routine does not allow time for Vigils, Lauds, and Prime. You can do Vigils upon arising, then combine Lauds and Prime either at home before work, or combine Vigils and Lauds then say Prime at work when you arrive. At the very least, we should be conscientious to do Morning and Evening Prayer every day. The second key is to recognize our need to make sacred time and sacred space within the context of each work day. Silence is a gift that we too often neglect. Making sacred time, and setting aside sacred space for quiet contemplation and *lectio* is very important. Even just setting aside five minutes in a quiet corner of home or office, or finding a park bench near your office, or pausing in the car (while parked) before entering the office, or whatever space you can designate, is an opportunity for a Divine encounter. If the space allows for the opportunity to kneel as Benedict suggests, and your body will cooperate with the practice, that is so much the better. But make the time and space regardless. These are moments of grace that we should not let pass. And having a permanently specified space in your home designated as "sacred space" is important, too. That can be your "go to" space for prayer and encounter with God—your personal oratory.

Guests, new members, rank within community, personal belongings (chapters 53-63)

In his painting, “The Inspiration of St. Matthew,” the 17th c. painter, Caravaggio, depicts an angel dictating the gospel to St. Matthew. It is a beautiful painting and an interesting take on how the evangelist came to write his copy of the gospel. However, as is evidenced by the epistles, we know that the New Testament was a work compiled over decades, inspired by the Holy Spirit, and often in response to the needs of the nascent Christian community. In the same way, the Rule of St. Benedict is an inspired document. The Holy Spirit obviously had His hand in its composition. At the same time the Rule’s organization and many of its chapters are characterized by a response to issues facing a growing cenobitic Christian community. Thus it is that the chapters we peruse in this meditation, though at first blush appear disparate, are bound together by the inspired theme which permeates the entire Rule: the *Imago Christi*. Seeing Christ in the monastic guest, practicing humility before Abbot and brothers, and denying all for the sake of Christ, all point to the desire to be recreated in the image of Christ. This theme resonates throughout the Rule (cf. RB 72:11; RB 4:21; and meditations on chs. 2-3; chs. 35-42), and it underlies each of the eleven chapters we have before us. So let us examine those chapters.

Though this section begins with chapter 53, the message of chapter 58 may give us a clearer look into the mind of St. Benedict regarding the elements of discipline in these chapters. The English title given to this chapter is “The Procedure for Receiving Brothers”, but the Latin title uses the word *disciplina*, or discipline. It is in this chapter that Benedict gives us the promises that the newly professed makes: stability, fidelity, and obedience. (v. 17; see also <https://www.cotres.org/fsb-teachings>) But before a prospective brother is admitted to the novitiate a senior member of the monastery is given the challenge of discerning whether this new admission “truly seeks God and whether he shows eagerness for the Work of God, for obedience and for trials.” (v. 7) This is a significant challenge. The Latin word translated “eagerness”, is *sollicitus* which is often translated into English as “zeal”. The senior must discern if the man has the discipline and is zealous for the Work of God, for organizing his day around prayer in community. Secondly, is he zealous, and not simply compliant, for obedience to those in authority, to the Rule, and to the Word of God? And most significantly, is he zealous for “trials”? The Latin word used here for trial is *opprobrium*. This word is commonly translated into English as harsh criticism or censure. St. Basil in his rule says that the monk is not called to endure harsh insults or injuries, rather humble tasks, “laborious jobs that people in the world consider humiliating.” (Basil *reg. 6*) The trials that the new novice, and later professed brother will undergo will often be demeaning as he is asked to do tasks that are unpleasant and occasionally disgusting. But Benedict does not shy away from detailing the harsh reality of life in community. The next verse puts the emphasis behind this word: “The novice should be clearly told all the hardships and difficulties that will lead him to God.” (v. 8)

“That will lead him to God.” This is the heart of living for Christ. In a later chapter Benedict says that we are to “prefer nothing whatever to Christ.” (72:11) And in chapter 4 he says, “the love of Christ must come before all else.” (v. 21) Christ knew the hardships that He would endure. He foretold His Passion three times before His arrival in Jerusalem. If we are in the image of Christ, we will willingly endure the *opprobrium* of this life that we may be remade in the image of Christ. If it is God’s will that we undergo trials for His sake, then as Abbot Basil Pennington said, “We embrace God’s will because of our love for Jesus Christ.” (*Listen With Your Heart*, p. 183) Those of us in the Fellowship may never be asked to clean a latrine, slop the hogs, or change the bed pan of a sick brother, but we have various trials of our own each day that will test our zeal for His calling. Are we willing to show eagerness in the less joy-

filled challenges of our daily living? Will we be zealous in obedience to the Rule and to those in authority over us? And will we make the sacrifices necessary to maintain the discipline of the Work of God? Let us press on to examine the other chapters in this section of the Rule.

The Reception of Guests (ch. 53): Smoky Joe was a homeless man who lived under a lean-to behind the convenience store a half block from our church. He would come to our services and sit on the steps to the parish hall at the back of the nave. He was seldom washed and often reeked of alcohol. One Sunday Janine's infant daughter, Sarah, could not be consoled, so Janine paced back and forth behind the last pews. Smoky Joe commented how beautiful the baby was. Janine asked if he would like to hold her. Joe was flabbergasted and protested, but Janine held Sarah out toward him and he took her in his arms as tears began to run down his cheeks. The next Sunday Smoky Joe showed up for church washed and in clean clothes. He said to me, "I wasn't sure you were serious that you welcomed me. Now I know." Benedict says, "Proper honor must be shown to all." (53:2) Not just the clean and polished, but to all. "Christ is to be adored because he is indeed welcomed in them." (53:7) When we look at the guests who come in through the door of the church do we see the *Imago Christi*? How do we greet them? And Benedict adds, "Great care and concern are to be shown in receiving the poor people and pilgrims, because in them more particularly Christ is received..." (53:15)

Letters or Gifts for Monks (ch. 54): When we begin to see the whole Body of Christ as the Family of God then our sense of possessing things becomes less problematic. We can begin to live the principle of Acts 2:44, "all who believed were together and had all things in common". One of the problems that we face though, is renouncing "things" and then as time progresses of allowing those things renounced back into our lives. Letting go means giving up these gifts to the *Imago Christi*, the members of the Body of Christ. It is a discipline, an act of the will. St. Luke states again in Acts 4:32, "Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common." This is a goal for all to work toward.

Clothing and Footwear of the Brothers (ch. 55): William Shakespeare, in his play *Hamlet*, said, "the apparel oft proclaims the man." If we all wore the same garments then the man himself might have to speak and act for himself. This is the concept behind the uniform clothing of the monastic tradition. And interestingly enough, it is the same concept behind the use of vestments in the worship of the Church. Vestments cover the man. Whereas a televangelist may wear a \$3,000 suit and a Rolex watch, if a priest were to do so (I'd, first, ask where the money came from) it would not be obvious, for the vestments cover the man. The cowl, tunic, sandals, and scapular of the monks was not an uncommon garment of the day, and thus the old, worn clothing "should be returned at once and stored in a wardrobe for the poor." (55:9) Our clothing should not become a matter of pride, rather simple, functional, and common enough to not draw attention. We all belong to one Body. Our presence in the world should not "proclaim the man", as Shakespeare said, but proclaim the *Imago Christi*.

The Abbot's Table (ch. 56): An initial reading of this short chapter sounds as if the Abbot is being accorded special privilege, however, the import of this discipline is the protection of the monks. "The abbot's table must always be with guests and travelers." (56:1) By having the guests sit with him, the abbot protects the monks from uncomfortable conversation, intrusive questions, and possibly even demonic assignments upon those from the outside. In protecting the monks under him the abbot is manifesting the *Imago Christi*, for Jesus Himself sought to protect His disciples in the Garden when He

told those who came to arrest Him, “I told you that I am he; so, if you seek me, let these men go.” (John 18:8) Are there loved ones whom you are called to shield? How best can you do that while maintaining the *Imago Christi*?

Artisans of the Monastery (ch. 57): “Every good and perfect gift is from above...” (James 1:17) Monks do not “possess” their talents. Artisans “are to practice their craft with all humility...If one of them becomes puffed up by his skillfulness in his craft...he is to be removed...” (57:1-3) If an artisan is to project the *Imago Christi*, he must see that the gift that he has been given by God is “for the common good”. (1 Cor. 12:7) What good gifts has God given to you? Are you using them selfishly, or for the common good?

The Offering of Sons by Nobles or by the Poor (ch. 59): There are many and various reasons that nobles and the poor would offer their sons to the monastery. Regardless of the reason, every child may be seen as an *Imago Christi*. We must remember that Jesus Himself was offered by His Father on behalf of all of us. We must honor the child, and learn from them, becoming more like them in our faith and exuberance for life and love. Jesus said, “Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God.” (Mark 10:14)

The final four chapters of this section, Admission of Priest to the Monastery (ch. 60), Reception of Visiting Monks (ch. 61), Priests of the Monastery (ch. 62), Community Rank (ch. 63) all resonate with a common theme of humility. It is sadly common for those in Holy Orders to demand respect rather than to earn it by humble service. But Jesus set the model saying, “For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45) For the priest to be an *Imago Christi* he must be as the Pope’s honorary title suggests, the “servant of the servants of God.” When the clergy take the lowest seat, they give honor to God by honoring the members of the Body of Christ. As our Lord commended, “Whoever would be first among you must be servant of all.” (Mark 10:44) Whether clergy or laity, we who are in the Fellowship, must practice such humility and thus permit “the love of Christ to come before all else” (RB 4:21) in our lives and ministry.

Seeing Christ in the other, practicing humility before our brothers and sisters in Christ, and denying all for the sake of Christ all point to the desire to be recreated in the image of Christ. These chapters were probably born out of issues that St. Benedict faced as the community grew and new houses were added. By inspiration of the Holy Spirit these chapters help the members of the community to break through what could be stressful conflicts in the relationships between brothers. And for us in the Fellowship, they point toward the discipline of seeking Christ in our neighbor, in the stranger, and in the members of the Body. We are reminded, too, in practicing the discipline of the Rule that we are daily being recreated in His image. In that we are called to be and to live as the *Imago Christi*.

Selection of the Abbot, Prior, and Porter (chapters 64-66)

As stated in the last meditation, the Rule of St. Benedict was most likely compiled over a period of time in answer to various questions and situations which arose in the growing community. As the movement spread and new houses formed, there were situations which arose that required attention. For example, chapter 2 deals with the role of the abbot, but what happens if the abbot becomes disabled, or dies, or for unknown reason leaves the community? What would be the process for replacing him? And with the abbot away on community business, who is in charge? When the community was small and tight-knit these questions had not arisen. But as the movement grew and spread, issues that faced other houses were brought back to the mother house and additions to the Rule became necessary. Chapters 64-66 address some of these considerations.

There is much that can be said about the abbot. And much has been said. For example, appendix 2 in the *RB 1980 in Latin and English with Notes* is a 57 page description of the role of the abbot. It would be beyond the calling of this meditation to attempt to delve further into the nature his role. Rather, let me summarize what the rule and commentaries have to say about the abbot: “He’s in charge.” This chapter, as well as chapter 2, enumerate certain qualities that an abbot should possess. Again summarizing: he should not pursue preeminence but the welfare of the monastery alone, seeking to “be loved rather than feared”. (64:15) For those of us in the Fellowship of Saint Benedict, verses 19-22 should be instructive of our work together. We do not have an abbot, and so the consensus of the group, following the precepts of the government by consensus as practiced in the CEC, takes precedence. We should therefore encourage one another, exhorting each other without harshness or judgment. And we “must so arrange everything that the strong have something to yearn for and the weak nothing to run from.” (v. 19) And together we must strive to “keep this rule in every particular” (v. 20) as the abbot would. Are we currently at that precipice of perfection? None of us has likely mastered life according to the Rule. But keeping the Rule is the goal to which we should be yearning, and the target for which we should be encouraging each other.

The heart of these three chapters is actually found most clearly stated in chapter 65, “The Prior of the Monastery”. The overriding theme in this chapter is humble service. It is interesting to note that only one of the four paragraphs in this chapter is actually about the “how to” of selecting a prior. The first two paragraphs and the last address potential problems and warnings about having a prior in the community. As Benedict cautions in the opening verse, “Too often in the past, the appointment of a prior has been the source of serious contention in monasteries.” Why? Because of the potential for pride to rear its ugly head. “Some priors, puffed up by the evil spirit of pride and thinking of themselves as second abbots, usurp tyrannical power and foster contention and discord in their communities.” (v. 2) So, what is the answer? “For the preservation of peace and love we have, therefore, judged it best for the abbot to make all decisions in the conduct of his monastery.” (v. 11) But Benedict suggests that rather than appoint a prior, “the whole operation of the monastery should be managed through deans under the abbot’s direction.” (v. 12) The reason given in entrusting the work to a group of deans rather than a single prior is that “so long as it is entrusted to more than one, no individual will yield to pride.” (v. 13) But if the abbot “judges it best”, and in consultation with “God-fearing brothers”, he may choose to appoint a prior.

Both the abbot and the prior must guard their hearts and always act in submissive humility before God in the service of the community. And everything must be done in accordance with the Rule. Which brings us to the last chapter of this section. The porter of the monastery is the official watchman of the gate. He welcomes visitors to the monastery with a prayerful greeting (v. 3), and keeps watch over the door that nothing unseemly may enter the enclosure, or that monks from within might want to wander outside the cloister.

We have no enclosure in the Fellowship, therefore no need for a porter. So what relevance does this chapter have for us? I believe the key is in the last verse: “We wish this rule to be read often in the community, so that none of the brothers can offer the excuse of ignorance.” Again, humility is the clarion call. None of us has mastered life in community according to the Rule and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In humility, we need to recognize that there is always more in Christ. There is more that we need to learn. There is more discipline that we can exercise in order to become fully yielded to the love of Christ. As part of our discipline in the Fellowship we covenant to read the Rule of St. Benedict through three times a year. (See the Handbook: <https://www.cotres.org/fsb-inquirer-downloads/11-handbook/file>) This practice will, over time, reap benefits for us individually, for the Fellowship, and for the wider Church.

These chapters about Abbot, Prior, and Porter do not immediately seem relevant to our life together in the Fellowship, however, as with all things in the Rule, our father Benedict has provided us with food for thought and direction in discipline. Let us continue to delve more and more deeply into the disciplines of the Rule and encourage one another to intimately follow Christ.

Dealing with difficult tasks and interpersonal tensions and behaviors (chapters 67-72)

“Let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ, and may He bring us all together to everlasting life.” (72:11-12) As we began our journey, according to the Rule, we were exhorted by St. Benedict to “progress in this way of life and in faith, [and] run on the path of God’s commandments, . . . never swerving from His instructions, then, but faithfully observing His teaching in the monastery until death, we shall through patience share in the suffering of Christ that we may deserve also to share in His kingdom.” (Prol. 49-50) These are the bookends of promise in the Rule. By practicing stability, fidelity, and obedience we will grow to prefer nothing to Christ, to follow in His Way, and to become the *Imago Christi*, sharing in His suffering and ultimately in His Kingdom.

These six chapters (67-72) form the final instruction in the Rule of St. Benedict. There is an epilogue which will follow, a summary statement of Benedict’s “Little Rule for Beginners”, but these chapters conclude the practical directives of the Rule. And if we are honest, we will readily admit that we are all beginners. If we ever believe that we have graduated in the faith, then we have failed. G.K. Chesterton said, “Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried.” It is difficult to live according to the Gospel of Jesus, but that is why we have tools like the Rule of St. Benedict to help us. These final chapters deal with some of the thorny issues that we seek to avoid in our walk with Jesus: interpersonal tensions, seemingly impossible tasks, and mutual respect and obedience. That’s hard stuff, and it is essential stuff for a life lived in the image of Christ. John Michael Talbot has said that one of the reasons for the persecution of Christians and the rejection of the Gospel, particularly here in the West, is that “when the world looks to Christians sometimes they do not see Christ. This jeopardizes the integrity of our witness for Christ.” (Blessings of St. Benedict, ch. 72) And so the directives contained in chapters 67-72 are important not only for our life together in Christ, but for our witness to the world around us.

During the recitation of the Divine Office it is the practice of Benedictine communities to include the petition, “Let us pray for our brothers who are away.” Benedict recognized the necessity from time to time for brothers to journey beyond the enclosure and have interaction with the wider community of the world. He also recognized that such interaction was fraught with temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil. As members of the Fellowship of Saint Benedict we are constantly exposed to these temptations. How can we, then, apply the teachings of chapter 67 of the Rule to our situation?

Prayer. Benedict instructs that “Brothers sent on a journey will ask the abbot and community to pray for them.” (vs. 1) We must constantly lift one another up in prayer, that we may fight the good fight of faith, that we may deal with the world without becoming worldly ourselves. We are often exposed to unwholesome images, harsh words and actions, and so Benedict’s directive that “No one should presume to relate to anyone else what he saw or heard outside the monastery, because that causes the greatest harm,” (vs. 5) is applicable to our situation as well. Retailing in worldly matters does not build up the community, nor does it encourage the faithful. We must recognize that we are not all at the same point in our growth as Christ’s followers, and to retell an experience, a story, or even an off-color joke may not be productive, and could be destructive for our brother or sister. And we must prayerfully guard against participating in such activity in the world as we are bearers of the *Imago Christi* through the intercession of the community and our own careful practice of the Rule. It is our witness to the world.

Chapters 68-71 press further to deal with personal interactions within the community itself, encouraging us to recognize our unique gifts and place within the larger body. When we don't carry out the work that God has gifted us to do in the Body, the burden often falls on another who may not have those gifts. As the one on whom this burden falls, even though it is not in our gift set, we need do as Benedict directs and "with complete gentleness and obedience, accept the order..." (68:1) But neither should we take on responsibility that is not given to us, or defend one who we may think is being unfairly burdened or treated. That is the sin of presumption. Benedict says, that "Every precaution must be taken that one monk does not presume in any circumstance to defend another in the monastery or to be his champion..." (69:1) John Michael Talbot notes that when we champion the cause of another, "We think we are doing well, but we may be doing harm instead." (Blessings of St. Benedict, ch. 69) And this sin of presumption encompasses issues of corrective discipline as well. Benedict says that "no one has the authority to excommunicate or strike any of his brothers unless he has been given this power by the abbot." (70:2) Ultimately, the watchword of these chapters is that we show deference and respect for one another. "Obedience is a blessing to be shown by all, not only to the abbot but also to one another as brothers, since we know that it is by this way of obedience that we go to God." (71:1-2)

As members of the Fellowship, we can apply these teachings to our lives in communion with one another and in the larger community of the Church and the world by showing mutual respect. The keys that Benedict points to are deference and charity. If we listen deeply when another is talking, disagree with charity and gentleness, letting go of ego, self-will, and entrenched opinion, we will be able to hear the other—his or her heart as well as voice. We need to learn to respect another's new ideas, new insights, and practice an objective perception. All of this will eventually help us toward the goal of chapter 72, the exercise of "good zeal". Benedict assures us that "good zeal...separates from evil and leads to God and everlasting life. This, then, is the good zeal which monks must foster with fervent love: *They should each try to be the first to show respect to the other...*" (72:2-4)

Let us strive to live together in mutual obedience and respect. For the world is dying to see Christ manifested in those who are called by His Name.

Epilogue: “A Little Rule for Beginners” (chapter 73)

Recently I took a retreat at Mepkin Abbey with a group from my parish. Two of the women who made this retreat with us reported very different experiences regarding prayer. One explained that, though she has faithfully used the liturgical offices for her daily prayers for many years, she felt that God was telling her to spend more time in silence and singing praise songs. The other woman said that God was exhorting her to do more “rote” prayers, and specifically to use the Rosary as a tool to assist her in her daily prayers. Very different experiences, very different ways of praying, and very different messages from God. Can this be possible? Would God really tell two people on the same retreat to use seemingly opposite prayer practices?

Benedict says that “The reason we have written this rule is that, by observing it...we can show that we have some degree of virtue and the *beginnings* of monastic life.” (vs. 1, *emphasis added*) Then he goes on to tout the virtues of the Old and New Testaments, other teachings, and various monastic rules, “the observance of which will lead him to the very heights of perfection...[and] are nothing less than tools for the cultivation of virtues...” (vv. 2,6) There are many ways to observe the Work of God, and God knows our individual needs. He knows perfectly what we need to do in order to encounter Him. “Are you hastening toward your heavenly home?” Benedict asks. “Then with Christ’s help, keep this little rule that we have written for beginners.” (vs. 8) This Rule is a beginning. There is no single perfect way to pray, to encounter God, to practice spiritual discipline. Benedict knew this and thus well describes his Rule as a “Little Rule for Beginners”.

This “Little Rule” though, has become the basis for every rule in western monasticism. It’s richness is found in its simplicity. Most likely based on the Rule of the Master, and borrowing from the widely varied resources of earlier monastic rules and traditions, Benedict has created an inspired preliminary discipline for anyone seeking to draw closer to God. He has not sought to answer every question, nor address every eventuality we may encounter in our pilgrimage as we “hasten toward our heavenly home.” (vs. 8) He has set us at the starting gate, and encourages us to press forward and to “keep this little rule...for beginners.” (vs. 8)

Keeping the Rule is the heart of the process. “After that, you can set out for the loftier summits of the teaching and virtues we mentioned above, and under God’s protection you will reach them.” (vs. 9) In the same way that the two women I mentioned in the first paragraph have grown and matured to the point that they need to make some changes and try some new disciplines, so we will, by God’s grace, continue to grow and mature. With that maturity we will adapt, change some disciplines, add new spiritual practices, and grow in our relationship with our Lord. But all of that will be based on “keeping the Little Rule for Beginners”.

Just as later monastic communities looked to the Rule of St. Benedict for inspiration and the basis for establishing their practices and rules, so we look to the Rule as the constant, the inspired basis for our ever-developing personal spiritual disciplines. God has given us a great tool in this Little Rule, but He also knows us each by name, and knows our needs better than we do ourselves. So, trust Him to open new opportunities for encounter with Him. And take to heart Benedict’s admonition: “Then with Christ’s help, keep this little rule that we have written for beginners.” (vs. 8)