

Recitation of the Psalms

According to the Rule of St. Benedict

The numbering of the Psalms as they are found in the Rule of St. Benedict reflects the numbering in the Septuagint (Greek Old Testament) and the Vulgate (Latin Bible). This differs from the numbering found in most modern English translations. During the Reformation, the reformers relied on the Masoretic text (the Hebrew Scriptures) for their translations, and the numbering of the Psalms thus followed this Jewish tradition. Here is a comparison of the psalm numbering between these two texts.

Numbering of the Psalms in the Septuagint and Vulgate

1–8
9 (*9 & 10*)*
10–112 (*11-113*)
113 (*114 & 115*)
114–115 (*116*)
116–145 (*117-146*)
146–147 (*147*)
148–150

*Italics indicate Masoretic text numbering and that commonly used in English translations

Thus, when reading the Rule of St. Benedict, remember that the numbering will not reflect what is in your Bible. For example, in Chapter 18 of the RSB, when Benedict gives direction on reading sections of Psalm 118, this would be Psalm 119 in your copy of the Holy Scriptures. Throughout the remainder of this essay I will use the numbering from the Masoretic text.

Recitation of the Psalter:

The daily recitation or chanting of the entire Book of Psalms was an early monastic custom, especially among the Desert Fathers. By the time of Saint Benedict many communities had settled on the weekly praying of the Psalter, as is clear in Benedict's outline, though several of the psalms were to be repeated daily (namely, Psalms 3 and 95 at Vigils, Psalms 67 and 51 at Lauds, and Psalms 4, 91, and 134 at Compline). Some psalms would be repeated several days during the week at some of the little hours once the chanting of the longest psalm, Psalm 119, was completed early in the week. Saint Benedict refers to desert monks praying the entire Psalter within a given day, and he commends them, stating "our holy Fathers, energetic as they were, did all this in a single day" (RSB chapter 18). According to Benedict's instruction, however, the recitation extended over an entire week, declaring that "the full complement of one hundred and fifty psalms is by all means carefully maintained every week" (chapter 18). To read less than the full Psalter in a week, according to Benedict, betrays "extreme indolence and lack of devotion."

Why so much reading of the Psalms?

The Psalms are, so to speak, the fulcrum of the Holy Scriptures. They reflect and recite the historical acts of God in the Old Testament, and His continuing care and covenant with His people. The Psalter is also the most often quoted of the Books of the Old Testament in the New Testament writings. Even in His last breaths, while nailed to the Cross, Jesus quoted the Psalms (e.g. Mark 15:34). The Psalms express the full gamut of human emotion and the range of spiritual devotion of the people of God. Reciting the Psalms, therefore, puts us in the rich history of God's people in their devotion and reliance upon God, and keeps us wedded to a genuine relationship, expressing our own full range of emotion and devotion.

We have to acknowledge that there is no set number of psalms to be recited that is automatically pleasing to God. However, the practice of the saints in ages past can be a useful compass for us in our devotions. The fact that 2000 years of practice by the monastic community has yielded little change in the practice of the recitation of the Psalms as an essential ingredient in their devotions should give us direction in our own worship of the Divine.

Saint Benedict devised a fairly strict pattern of psalm distribution, which was already a tradition before him, and a break from another tradition which favored what has been called a "running Psalter," that is, simply praying the Psalms in their numerical order, one after another. Benedict's tradition was to assign specific psalms to specific hours of the day or night. Both traditions were used in early monastic offices, but the Benedictine one became more widely accepted as time went on, and that is still so today. Nevertheless, Benedict says, "we urge that if anyone finds this distribution of the Psalms unsatisfactory, he should arrange whatever he judges better..." (chapter 18).

A very brief Benedictine History

And there have been various arrangements within the Benedictine community over the centuries. At times this approval for change has opened the door to corruptions. By the early tenth century the Benedictine movement was in disarray and reform was greatly needed to preserve the monastic tradition in Western Christendom. In A.D. 910, a group of reformers in Cluny, France sought to return the Church to a greater devotion by insisting on a strict observance of the Rule of St. Benedict. These reforms took hold and the result was a huge rise in monastic devotions and widespread establishment of monasteries. By the late eleventh century though, "extreme indolence and lack of devotion," as Benedict would say, took hold once again and monastic devotion and commitment waned. A group in Citeaux, France set out to reclaim strict obedience to the Rule and formed a monastery based on unwavering adherence to the Rule of St. Benedict. They became known as the Cistercians. This reform held for nearly 600 years. And by the mid-1600s another group desiring even greater devotion and adherence to the Rule formed in La Trappe. They are the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance, or the Trappists.

What is interesting about all of these groups is that, though they are committed to strict observance of the Rule of St. Benedict, the recitation of the Psalms varies greatly from one Benedictine Order to the other. Even the Trappists, though their official name indicates strict obedience to the Rule, follow a two week rotation of Psalm recitation. What we can derive from this is the fact that the number of Psalms is less important than the devotion to prayerful and devout relationship with God through the practice of worship using the Holy Psalter.

The history of monasticism saw other practices, many of them going to the extremes. Today there is a variety from a one week to a four-week distribution of the Psalter, all of them approved by Rome for use by laity and religious. And in the Anglican tradition, the lectionary calls for a six week rotation of psalm recitation, and the within the prayer book Psalter there is a one month rotation denoted.

It is important for us, in the Fellowship of St. Benedict, that we not become Pharisaical in our personal piety, but find what works best for each of us in our personal devotions. It is important that we encourage one another in our devotion to the Lord, to the Rule of St. Benedict, and to our community and Fellowship. The recitation of the Psalms is an integral part of Benedictine devotion and worship. Let us exhort one another to be faithful in praying the Psalms, regardless of how many any one of us chooses to pray on any given day. As is stated above, the number of Psalms is less important than the devotion to prayerful and devout relationship with God.