

St. Benedict of Nursia

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FELLOWSHIP OF ST JOHN THE BAPTIST STUDY WEEKEND

February 2000, The Cherwell Centre, Oxford

Part 1

As we begin this second day of our weekend study, I would like us to remember a person who died four years ago, on the feast of St Benedict according to the Eastern usage. I refer of course to Archimandrite Barnabas (Burton), whom some of you will have known from visits to his small monastery in his native Wales. He was, I believe, the last monk professed according to the *Rule* of St Benedict in the Orthodox Church.

MONASTICISM - A SCHOOL FOR THE LORD'S SERVICE

Sit down! Stop talking! Face the front! Pay attention! Listen to what I have to say to you!

Are these the sort of phrases that spring to mind when we think of school? Or do we have a more relaxed memory of our own school days? Or when we hear the word 'school' do we think of the great congregations of fish all going together in a unity of purpose and direction - a great mass that seem in some ways to act not as individuals but as a huge corporate entity?

Before I tell you about the historical setting of St Benedict and Benedictinism it seems important that you know something of my own history - why I am here to lead these sessions. After leaving school and going to university to read theology and philosophy, I had a brief period teaching and then entered an Anglican Benedictine community as a postulant. I lived there for six years following a way of life that closely mirrored the usage of Solèsmes, with an emphasis on enclosure and the full observance of the Divine Office. During my years in the monastery - in a 'school for the Lord's service' - I heard the Rule read in its entirety over forty times, and it was read to me specifically four times during my time as a postulant, novice and junior. Above all I am here today not only because I have had such close acquaintance with the Rule through hearing it, but because of the time I spent living it.

Monasticism is an institution based on the Christian ideal of perfection. It has its roots in the New Testament, amongst a community in which the baptized were designated as the 'perfect ones', called to be complete human beings: remade by Baptism in the image of God. In the early Church, monasticism equated perfection with world-denying asceticism, along with the view that perfect Christianity centred its way of life on the maximum love of God and neighbour and perpetual prayer.

A reading of Acts gives us a view of a close-knit community of believers who held all things in common and met for common prayer (Acts 5ff: Ananias and Sapphira).

In the course of time, monastic discipline became an external means for the attainment of this ideal of perfect love of God and neighbour. Only a few especially disciplined persons, however, have been able to live according to the path that leads to the ideal of perfection. The masses, on the other hand, are inwardly and outwardly incapable of exercising ascetic discipline. Therefore, the monastic rules of life

were not generally binding commands but rather counsels directed to those called to lead an ascetic life. The essential distinction between command and counsel is found in the words of Jesus: He did not command men to 'make themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven', but rather He recommended this condition only to those who were 'able to receive this' (Matthew 19:12). Unmarried ascetics were recognized as a special class in the early Church, forming the core of many congregations. Later, with its distinction between counsel (*suasum*) and command (*iussum*), as in the writings of Tertullian in the late second century, the Church found itself in full accord with the oldest Christian view. During the latter part of the second and the beginning of the third century, the combination of asceticism and mysticism, which was to become the spiritual basis of later monastic life in the East, and in part also in the West, was emphasized by Clement of Alexandria and Origen.

Certain writings that captured the spirit of monasticism further enhanced the development of this way of life in the Church. Athanasius of Alexandria, the fourth century's most significant bishop spiritually and in terms of ecclesiastical politics, wrote the *Life of St Anthony*, which described the eremitic life in the desert and the awesome struggle of ascetics with the demons as the model of the life of Christian perfection. This work indicates that the Church sanctioned and propagated monasticism.

A former Roman soldier of the fourth century, Pachomius (290-346) created the first monastery in the modern sense. He united the monks under one roof in a community living under the leadership of an abbot. In 323 he founded the first true monastic cloister in Tabennisi, north of Thebes, in Egypt, and joined together houses of thirty to forty monks, each with its own superior. Pachomius also created a monastic rule that served more as a regulation of external monastic life than spiritual guidance.

During the remainder of the fourth century, the monastic life soon developed in areas outside Egypt. Athanasius brought the monastic rule of Pachomius to the West during his banishment (340-346) to Trèves in Germany - as a result of his opposition to the heretical doctrines of Arianism sanctioned by the emperor.

Mar Awgin, a Syrian monk, introduced the monastic rule into Mesopotamia, and Jerome established a monastic cloister in Bethlehem.

Next, Basil the Great (330-379), one of the three famous Cappadocian Fathers of the fourth century, definitively shaped monastic community life in the Byzantine Church. His ascetic writings furnished the theological and instructional foundation for the 'common life' (coenobitism) of monks. He became the creator of a Rule that through constant variations and modifications became seen as an authority for the later development of the monastic life within the Orthodox tradition. The Rule of St Basil has preserved the Orthodox combination of asceticism and mysticism into the 20th century.

In the West, monasticism, essentially founded by Benedict of Nursia (480-547) in the sixth century, has gone through a double form of special development vis-à-vis early Church monasticism.

The first consists of its clericalization. In modern Western cloisters, monks are mainly ordained priests and are thereby drawn in a direct way into the ecclesiastical tasks of the Church. Originally, however, monks were laymen. Pachomius had explicitly forbidden monks to become priests on the ground that 'it is good not to covet power and glory'.

Basil the Great, however, by means of a monastic vow and a special ceremony, enabled monks to cease being just laymen and to attain a position between that of the clergy and the laity, though still essentially lay. Even in the twentieth century, monks of the Orthodox Church are, for the most part, lay monks; only a few fathers of each cloister are ordained priests, who are there to administer the

sacraments. (And all monks whether ordained or lay are, referred to as 'Father' in the Greek usage in particular, but this also in other non-Greek communities.)

Benedict was born in about 480, in Nursia, in the Kingdom of the Lombards, and died almost seventy years later in about 547. His principal feast is now kept by the Latin calendars on 11 July (it was formerly on 21 March) and by the Orthodox on 14 March). Known as the founder of the Benedictine monastery at Monte Cassino and the father of Western monasticism; the Rule that he established became the norm for monastic living throughout Western - Latin - Europe.

(It was perhaps in recognition of the importance for Christians western and northern Europe and its institutions that in 1964 Pope Paul VI nominated St Benedict as patron of Europe. And in 1980 Pope John Paul II named St Cyril & St Methodius as co-patrons with Benedict.)

The only recognized authority for the facts of Benedict's life is Book Two of the Dialogues of St Gregory the Great, Gregory Dialogus, who said that he had obtained his information from four of Benedict's disciples. Though Gregory's work includes many signs and wonders, his outline of Benedict's life may be accepted as historical. However, he gives no dates. The only certain date in Benedict's life is given by a visit to him sometime in 542 from Totila, king of the Goths.

Benedict was born of a good family and was sent by his parents to Roman schools. His life spanned the years in which the decayed imperial city became the Rome of the medieval papacy. In Benedict's youth, Rome under Theodoric still retained the vestiges of the old administrative and governmental system, with a Senate and consuls. In 546 Rome was sacked and emptied of inhabitants by King Totila, and when the attempt of the emperor Justinian I to reconquer and hold Italy failed, the papacy filled the administrative vacuum and shortly thereafter became the sovereign power of a small Italian dominion virtually independent of the Eastern Empire.

Benedict thus served as a link between the monasticism of the East and the new age that was dawning. Shocked by the licentiousness of Rome, he retired as a young man to Enfide - modern Affile, about thirty-five miles from Rome (in the Simbruinian hills), and later to a cave in the rocks beside the lake then existing near the ruins of Nero's palace above Subiaco, forty miles east of Rome in the foothills of the Abruzzi.

There he lived alone for three years, furnished with food and clothing by Romanus, a monk of one of the numerous monasteries nearby. Later accounts tell us that his rolling naked in nettles, or brambles, to assuage temptations of the flesh, took place there.

As the fame of his sanctity spread, he was persuaded to become abbot of one of the nearby monasteries. His reforming zeal was resisted, however, and an attempt was made to poison him. He returned to his cave; but again disciples flocked to him, and he founded twelve monasteries, each with twelve monks, with himself in general control of all. Patricians and senators of Rome offered their sons to become monks under his care, and from these novices came two of his best-known disciples, Maurus and Placid. Later, disturbed by the intrigues of a neighbouring priest, he left the area, while the twelve monasteries continued in existence.

A few disciples followed him south, where he settled on the summit of a hill rising steeply above Cassino, halfway between Rome and Naples. The district was still largely pagan, but the people were converted by his preaching.

Benedict's character, as Gregory points out, must be discovered from his Rule, and the impression given there is of a wise and mature sanctity, authoritative but fatherly, and firm but loving. It is that of

a spiritual master, fitted and accustomed to rule and guide others, having found his peace in the acceptance of Christ as Lord and Master.

The Rule of St Benedict

The Rule had long been considered the personal achievement of St Benedict, though it has always been recognized that he freely used the writings of the Desert Fathers, of St Basil the Great, of Augustine of Hippo, and of John Cassian. However, recent opinion suggests that an anonymous document, the Rule of the Master (Regula Magistri) - previously assumed to have itself plagiarized part of the Rule - was in fact one of the sources used by St Benedict. This change of view has provoked a lively debate.

Though absolute certainty has not been reached, competent scholars favour the view that the Rule of the Master was composed earlier than that of Benedict. If this opinion is accepted, about one-third of Benedict's Rule (excluding the formal liturgical chapters) is derived from that of the Master. St Benedict's portion contains the prologue and the chapters on humility, obedience, and the abbot, which are among the most familiar and admired sections of the Rule.

Even allowing for its derivation, it was the Rule of Benedict that imposed itself all over Europe by virtue of its excellence alone, and not the long, rambling, and often idiosyncratic Rule of the Master. Gregory, in his only reference to the Rule, described it as clear in language and outstanding in its discretion. So it is the Rule of St Benedict, derived from various and disparate sources, that provided an instruction book for the monastic way of life a directory, a directory at once practical and spiritual, that continues to be in force after over 1,500 years.

St Benedict wrote his Rule, the so-called 'Benedictine Rule' (c. 535-540), with his own abbey of Monte Cassino in mind. However, observance of the Rule spread slowly through Italy and Gaul, and Benedict's supreme achievement was that it provided a succinct and complete directory for the government and spiritual and material well-being of many monasteries; it carefully integrated prayer, manual labour, and study into a well-rounded daily routine.

By the seventh century the rule had been applied to women, as nuns, whose patroness was deemed St Scholastica, sister of Benedict. When he was at Monte Cassino she had come to live nearby as the head of a 'nunnery', and died shortly before her brother.

Benedict had begun his monastic life as a hermit, but he had come to see the difficulties and spiritual dangers of a solitary life, even though he continued to regard it as the crown of the monastic life for a mature and experienced spirit. His Rule is concerned with a life spent wholly in community, and among his contributions to the practices of the monastic life none is more important than his establishment of there being at least a full year's probation, followed by a solemn vow of obedience to the Rule as mediated by the abbot of the monastery in which the monk vowed a lifelong residence.

Benedict's Rule provides for both the spiritual and material well-being of a monastery. The Abbot, elected for life by his monks, maintains supreme power and in all normal circumstances is accountable to no one. He should seek counsel of the seniors or of the whole body but is not bound by their advice. He is bound only by the law of God and the Rule, but he is continually advised that he must answer for his monks, as well as for himself, at the judgment seat of God.

The Abbot appoints his own officials - prior, cellarer, novice master, guest master, and the rest - and controls all the activities of individuals and the organization of the common life. Ownership, even of the smallest thing, is forbidden. The ordering of the Offices, and for the canonical Hours (the daily

services) is laid down with precision. Novices, guests, the sick, readers, cooks, servers, and porters: all receive attention, and punishments for faults are set out in detail.

Remarkable as is this careful and comprehensive arrangement, the spiritual and human counsel given generously throughout the Rule is uniquely noteworthy among all the monastic and religious rules of the Middle Ages. Benedict's advice to the Abbot and to the cellarer, and his instructions on humility, silence, and obedience have become part of the spiritual treasury of the Church, from which not only monastic bodies but also legislators of various institutions have drawn inspiration.

(Even today the Rule inspires people to follow some of its precepts in secular life, as is shown in an article in a November 1999 edition of the Daily Telegraph about a business study based on the Rule.)

St Benedict also displayed a spirit of moderation. His monks are allowed clothes suited to the climate, sufficient food (with no specified fasting apart from the times observed by the Church), and sufficient sleep (seven-eight hours). The working day is divided into three roughly equal portions: five to six hours of liturgical and other prayer; five hours of manual work - whether domestic work, craft work, garden work, or field work, and four hours reading of the Scriptures and spiritual writings. This balance of prayer, work, and study is another of Benedict's legacies.

All work was directed to making the monastery self-sufficient and self-contained; intellectual, literary, and artistic pursuits were not envisaged. However, the monastery's needs for service books, Bibles, and the writings of the Church Fathers implied much time would be spent in copying manuscripts. Time would also be spent in teaching, as it was expected that boys would be present in the monastery for their education.

Benedict's discretion is manifest in his repeated allowances for differences of treatment according to age, capabilities, dispositions, needs, and spiritual stature. But beyond this is the striking humanity of his frank allowance for weaknesses and failure, of his compassion for the physically weak, and of his mingling of spiritual with purely practical counsel.

In the course of time this discretion has occasionally been abused in the defence of comfort and self-indulgence, but readers of the Rule can hardly fail to note the call to a full and exact observance of the counsels of Christian perfection (see Chapter Four).

By the time of Charlemagne at the beginning of the ninth century, the Benedictine Rule had supplanted most other observances in northern and western Europe. During the five centuries following the death of Benedict, the monasteries multiplied both in size and in wealth. They were the chief repositories of learning and literature in western Europe and were also the principal educators.

One of the most celebrated of Benedictine monasteries was the Burgundian Abbey of Cluny, founded as a reform house by William of Aquitaine in 910. The Cluniac reform was often imitated by other monasteries, and a succession of able abbots gradually built up. Throughout western Europe a great network of monasteries grew, which followed the strict Cluniac customs and were under the direct jurisdiction of Cluny.

The great age of Benedictine predominance ended about the middle of the twelfth century, and the history of the main line of Benedictine monasticism for the next three centuries was to be one of decline and decadence.

But in the fifteenth century we see the rise of a new Benedictine institution: the congregation. In 1424 the congregation of Santa Giustina of Padua instituted reforms that breathed new life into Benedictine

monasticism. Superiors were elected for three years; the monks no longer took vows to a particular house but to the congregation; and ruling authority was concentrated in the annual general chapter, or legislative meeting.

Within a century this radical reform spread to all the Benedictines of Italy and became known as the Cassinese Congregation, and there were similar reforms throughout Europe.

But these reforms were confronted by the turmoil of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, and within a few years (1525-60) the monasteries and nunneries disappeared almost entirely from northern Europe and, for almost a century, they suffered greatly in France and central Europe.

However Benedictinism revived in France and Germany during the seventeenth century, and several congregations were founded, notably some of those in France: the monks of St Maur and the nuns of the Perpetual Adoration in Paris (1653) and of Our Lady of Calvary (1617).

Although the eighteenth century witnessed a new decline, from the middle of the nineteenth century Benedictine monasteries and nunneries again began to flourish. Foundations, including Solesmes, with its emphasis on the celebration of the Liturgy, arose throughout Europe. Monks and nuns returned to England; congregations were established in North and South America; and monasteries scattered all over the world.

In the face of this revival, Pope Leo XIII desired to bring about some sort of unity among the traditionally independent Benedictines. In 1893 he created the office of Abbot Primate as head of the federation of autonomous congregations; and gradually this office, though unwelcomed because of the Benedictine desire for autonomy, has developed in influence.

It is today an ecumenical organisation, with the Abbots of Lutheran and Anglican Benedictine communities taking their place alongside the Abbots of Roman Catholic communities, all with equal standing in the gathering.

Those of you who were listening carefully will have noticed that I mentioned a double development, but in fact only went on to speak about the clericalisation of the monks.

The other path was the establishment of external oblates. (The 'external' is often dropped from their name.) Oblates were originally the oblatus - those given to the monastery when very young, as was St Bede. For their upbringing and education many of these oblates, when they came of age, did become monks, but others returned to secular occupations. Often they were so formed by the Divine Office that they continued to say a modified version of it for the remainder of their life. They would probably seek spiritual guidance, and possibly a rule of life, from one of the Fathers of the monastery in which they had been an oblatus. Over time, these ex-oblates developed into fraternities of men and women who sought to lead a dedicated life while continuing in secular occupation and marrying and having families.

Today most Benedictine houses, whether of monks or nuns, have these external oblates - often they are very many more in number than the monks of the community. In general terms the Benedictine oblates have a spiritual father or mother within the motherhouse and develop together with them a personal rule of life, and take a modified vow of obedience to that rule, and also undertake to pray for and contribute to the well-being of the motherhouse. The introduction to oblateship is through a carefully directed 'novitiate', which leads in time to the periodic commitment to the prepared rule of life and Christian virtue.

St Benedict and prayer

Before we finish this session I would like to say a few words about St Benedict and prayer. The starting point for any discussion of prayer in a monastic context is always the Pauline precept 'to pray without ceasing' found in I Thessalonians 5:17; and the dominical words in Mark 13:33 'Watch and pray for you do not know the time...', and Luke 22:46 'Watch and pray lest you enter into temptation'.

It was the avowed purpose of the first desert monks that they wished to be free from the cares of this life so that they could enter into this state of ceaseless prayer. Often this had led to a sort of spiritual pride - as we hear from the sayings of the Fathers of the Desert.

There was once a monk who visited a desert skete and spoke to the Abba on the lines that he could not take part in the manual work of the community, as he was dedicated to ceaseless prayer. The Abba showed the monk to a cell and left him there to pray. As the day progressed the monk went to the door of the cell to look out and see if any food was being served. Towards evening the Abba was going by the cell and the monk called out to him asking when food was served in the skete. The Abba said that they had eaten already but did not call the monk as he was 'dedicated to ceaseless prayer', and they did not want to interrupt him with such a worldly thing as food. The monk, seeing the folly of his ways, fell to the ground asking forgiveness from the Abba.

Again, in the life of Abba Lucius there is the story of his being visited by a Euchite, one dedicated to ceaseless prayer. Abba Lucius asked the Euchite whether he worked and got the response that manual work interrupted ceaseless prayer so he did not do it. 'Do you eat?', asked Abba Lucius. 'Yes, of course', replied the monk. 'Do you sleep?' 'Yes, of course.' 'Who prays, then, when you eat and sleep?'

The Euchite had no answer to this so Abba Lucius said to him 'When I get ready to work I place myself in the presence of God, and when I pick up each palm frond for my weaving, I say 'Have mercy on me, O God, after Thy great goodness'. Is this prayer?' The Euchite replied, 'Yes, of course.' Abba Lucius continued: 'I then sell my work for 16 pence in the market and give two pence to a man at the gate to pray for me as I eat and sleep and the rest I spend on food. In this way I strive to fulfil the precept of the apostle.'

Abba Lucius had come to a partial answer to the problem of praying without ceasing, but for years there were other attempts at ceaseless prayer. In the 'Monasteries of the Unsleeping Ones', which had three, four, or even more choirs, of up to a thousand monks in each, it was the object that these communities always had one of the choirs in the church of the monastery so that the community kept up unceasing prayer to God.

We need look no further than the Victorian Hymnographers with their view of the English Church in the Empire where the sun never set, to realize that they understood that there was always a community singing God's praise somewhere: 'Let all the world in every corner sing'. And a verse of an evening hymn develops the theme:

As o'er each continent and island,
The dawn leads on another day,
The voice of prayer is never silent,
Nor dies the strain of praise away.

(J. Ellerton, 'The day Thou gavest...')

But neither of these ways was for St Benedict's his response to the call to pray without ceasing.

For Benedict the answer begins in his chapter on Humility (VII) which concludes; 'When all these degrees of humility have been climbed (cf John of the Ladder), the monk will presently come to that perfect love of God which casts out all fear; whereby he will begin to observe without labour, as though naturally and by habit, all these precepts which formerly he did not observe without fear: no longer for fear of hell, but for love of Christ and through delight in virtue...'

Then, straight away, Benedict enters into the thirteen chapters of detail about the recitation of the Divine Office.

For Benedict the life of the coenobitic monk is the Divine Office. Each activity of the monastery centres on the Divine Office. The weekly obediences of leading the choirs, cooking, serving in refectory, reading at meals, going on, or returning from, a journey are all blessed during the Divine Office.

The self-denial expected in the recitation of the Divine Office, the public acknowledgement of errors at the Divine Office, build up the humility of the monk. The humble monk is the one who was always mindful of the presence of God. He is the one who 'prays without ceasing', for what is prayer but being mindful of the presence of God?

Above all, for Benedict, this monastic prayer was public. It was open for pious non-monks to attend the Divine Office. This same Divine Office was adapted and used by non-monastics who would say all or part of the Divine Office with their families and servants. Thus the Divine Office introduced not only monks but also the whole Church into the practice of the presence of God.

The monastic concept of doing all things in the presence of God is acknowledged in a prayer well-known: to many lay people: 'Lord, I will be busy over many things this day and so may forget Thee, do not Thou forget me.'

This is the state of mind of the person who prays without ceasing, this is the state of mind expected by St Benedict of his monks. This is what we can learn to imitate in our daily lives to bring us closer to that apostolic precept to pray without ceasing.

We have in St Augustine's Discourse on Psalm 37 the following passage:

The reason why the Psalmist says 'I cried aloud with the groaning of my heart', is that when men hear another man groaning, what they hear is often the groaning of the flesh; they do not hear the groaning of the heart.

Now who has understood why he cried aloud? The Psalmist goes on: 'And all my desire is before you.' Not indeed before men, who cannot see into the heart: but 'before You is all my desire'. Set your desire on Him, and the Father who sees in secret will repay you. This very desire of yours is your prayer. If your desire is continual, your prayer is continual too. It was not for nothing that the Apostle said: 'Pray without ceasing.' Was it so that we should be continuously on our knees, or prostrating our bodies, or raising our hands that he says: 'Pray without ceasing'? If that is how we say our prayers, then my opinion is that we cannot do that without ceasing.

But there is another and interior way of praying without ceasing, and that is the way of desire. Whatever else you are doing, if you long for that Sabbath, you are not ceasing to pray. If you do not want to cease praying, do not cease longing. Your unceasing desire is your unceasing voice. You will lapse into silence if you lose your longing.

In the second part of my talk I will be looking at some particular chapters of Benedict's Rule - about the Divine Office and the way of life it both brings about and supports. Written for Benedict's monastic communities in the sixth century, they have a relevance for us all today, which some may find surprising.

Part 2

At Monte Cassino Benedict set down his *Rule* for monks. In section seven of the preface he states his aim in setting down his instructions for them '...and so we are going to establish a school for the service of the Lord'. And he goes on in the first chapter to distinguish four types of monk:

1. The *Cenobite*; one of those who gathers round a table - who lives life in common;
2. The *Anchorite* or *Hermit*; one who retires from, an eremite - one who goes into the desert;
3. *Sarabaites*; pseudo-monks who live in twos or threes or even alone and seek only self gratification; whatever enters their minds or appeals to them they regard as holy and what they do not like they regard as unholy;
4. *Gyrovagues*; who spend all their life wandering from province to province spending two days in one monastery and three in another, always on the move, without stability they indulge their own will.. Benedict is dismissive of the two latter kinds of monk, and writes that it is for cenobites that he lays down his rule, for those who live in monasteries and serve under a *Rule* and an Abbot.

Later this morning you are going to be given some Chapters of the *Rule* to study for yourselves, but before I introduce them, I would like to say some more about St Benedict and the Divine Office. For Benedict the life of the cenobitic monk is, as I said earlier, the Divine Office - centred on it are all the activities of the monastery, all are blessed during the Divine Office.

'Seven times a day will I praise you,' and 'In the night will I rise to give thanks to you'; these verses from the Psalms are used by St Benedict to authorise his plan of the Divine Office. St Benedict's scheme of Night Office (Matins), Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, the Evening Office (Vespers), and Compline; is a system that spreads the prayer of the monk through the hours of the early morning until nightfall.

Each Hour of prayer consists of fixed portions that are said every day, and of changeable parts that depend on the day of the week or the time of the year.

The Psalms are distributed through the week so that each week the whole Psalter is said in totality, with some of the Psalms also repeated as part of the fixed portion of the Offices.

This recitation of the whole of the Psalter in a definite period has always been an essential part of monastic prayer. The Desert Fathers would recite the whole Psalter each day and some would even recite it more than once. What St Benedict did was take over from St Basil the regulation of when the Psalms were to be said, and to reduce the daily number of Psalms, but it was always his plan that the whole Psalter should be recited every week.

St Benedict introduced a regular pattern of readings at the Night Office in winter; these readings were to be taken from both the Old and New Testament, and alongside the Scriptural passages were 'explanations of them which have been made by well-known and orthodox catholic Fathers' (Chapter Nine).

This introduction of the readings from the Fathers was new to the monasticism of the West. It introduced the monks of St Benedict to theological learning. For St Benedict, the men of prayer who daily recited and listened to the Divine Office were formed into theologians. Theologians not just because they were men of prayer, but also because at the Night Office they had been introduced to the teaching of the Fathers.

The Office of Lauds, or the Morning Office as St Benedict calls it, was appointed to be said so that it corresponded to the break of day. It is one of the three Offices that always has a Gospel Canticle, the other two being Vespers, and Compline.

The Office of Prime, or the First Hour, became distinguished from the other Hours by becoming the time when the daily portion of the *Rule* was read to the brethren, and also the daily portion of the Martyrology [the Latin equivalent of the *Synaxarion*]. It was further distinguished from the other Offices by being that which heralded the end of the greater silence which the community had observed since the end of Compline the previous day.

The other Day Hours are far more simple. The sections of Psalm 118 which were unsaid on Sunday are used to form the nine 'Psalms' of the Day Hours on Monday, and on the remaining weekdays, nine short Psalms - 119 to 127, the same each day - are divided between the Third, Sixth and Ninth Hours. And the hymns, lessons and verses said on each of these days are the same.

This simplified arrangement of the Day Hours made them easy to learn by heart. When St Benedict advises that monks working far from the monastery should, at the hour of prayer, kneel where they were and recite the Office, there would be no need for the monks to have taken books with them.

As to the manner in which St Benedict wishes the Divine Office to be said, I cannot do better than read to you Chapters Nineteen and Twenty of the *Rule*.

Chapter 19

ON THE MANNER OF SAYING THE DIVINE OFFICE

24 (25) February, 26 June, 26 October

We believe that the divine presence is everywhere and that the 'eyes of the Lord are looking on the good and the evil in every place.' But we should believe this especially without any doubt when we are assisting at the Work of God. To that end, let us be mindful always of the prophet's words, 'Serve the Lord in fear', and again, 'Sing praises wisely', and 'In the sight of the angels I will sing praise to You.' Let us therefore consider how we ought to conduct ourselves in the sight of the Godhead and of His angels, and let us take part in the psalmody in such a way that our mind may be in harmony with our voice.

On the matter of the angels attending the Divine Office, there is an incident in the life of St Bede that illustrates the reality to him of the heavenly beings' presence there. Once, when Bede was tired and ill, he was urged to stay in his cell and rest when the bell sounded for the Divine Office. To this advice the saint replied, 'That I cannot do for the angels will observe it, and say one to the other: "Where is Bede? Why is he not in his place?"'

For Bede, and for countless other monks through the ages, the presence of the angels and their participation in the Divine Office is an unquestionable reality. To the monk, the angels are as real as the brethren of the community; for us also there must be a realisation that when we are at prayer, particularly the prayer of the Church, the angels are present, joining our praise with theirs. This idea is made explicit in the Cherubic Hymn at the Liturgy, and the prayer at the Great Entrance, said in a low voice by the celebrant.

Chapter 20

ON REVERENCE IN PRAYER

25 (26) February, 27 June, 27 October - *i.e.*, the following day

When we wish to suggest our wants to men of high station, we do not presume to do so except with humility and reverence. How much the more, then, are complete humility and pure devotion necessary in supplication of the Lord who is God of the universe! And let us be assured that it is not in saying a great deal that we shall be heard, but in purity of heart and in tears of compunction. Our prayer, therefore, ought to be short and pure, unless it happens to be prolonged by an inspiration of divine grace. In community, however, let prayer be very short, and when the Superior gives the signal let all rise together.

In this Chapter Benedict seems concerned to instruct his monks that prayer should not be eccentric; no one should take up postures or so prolong their prayer that they make a show to others, or distract them when their attention should be on the designated prayer of the community.

There will be three Chapters for you to look at after this session: Chapter One, 'On the Kinds of Monks' (about which I spoke earlier), Chapters Four, 'The Instruments of Good Works', and Chapter Fifty-Eight, 'The Manner of The Reception of Brethren'.

In Chapter Four St Benedict gives us *Seventy-Two Instruments of Good Works*:

1-9 talk about *following the commandments*

10-13 and 20-21 are about *ascetic matters* such as fasting

14-19 set out *the virtues* - the corporal works of mercy: helping those in trouble, visiting the sick, burying the dead,

22-34 *self control* - over the emotions, over anger, and pride

35-40 *self control* - in practical matters - laziness, grumbling, drunkenness

41-72 *spiritual virtues* - efforts to cultivate love, devotion to prayer, peace-making

And in Chapter Fifty-Eight St Benedict deals with the monastic profession.

For St Benedict there are three monastic vows: not the 'Poverty, Chastity and Obedience' all too often misquoted in popular terminology, but

Stabilitatis in loco Stability

Conversatio morum Conversion of (my way of) life

Obedientia Obedience.

What do these three vows mean? Are they only possible for monks - or nuns - following the Benedictine *Rule*? Do they fit into our own modern life/values?

What is *Stabilitatis in loco*? Is it remaining forever in the same place? St Bede would not have referred or even thought of himself as a 'Benedictine' monk but as *monachus apud Jarrowensis*, a monk living in the Monastery of Jarrow; and at that monastery they followed the *Rule* of St Benedict.

For some, this vow does indeed mean that they remain in one place. But for most it is something more spiritual - and that does not mean their *stabilitatis in loco* is any less real. The spiritual interpretation is 'stability in a way of life': persistence in the circumstances of one's life and seeing them as a gift from God. The essence of stability is consistency not inertia. It is striving to find God where one is and not being Benedict's detestable gyrovague.

And what is *Conversatio morum meorum*, as the form is when the vow is actually made? Usually it is translated as *the conversion of my life or the change of my way of life*.

This is not a particularly monastic virtue as the constant turning back to Christ is the foundation of all spiritual life. Conversion is not a once for all activity but a continuing act.

And lastly *Obedientia*, 'obedience', this seeing the Abbot as if he were the Lord himself - what is that for us?

A lot of fuss is made every time we have a royal or 'public' wedding about whether the bride is going to promise to obey her husband. Each of us who was received as an adult by Chrismation into Orthodoxy from another confession, has promised to obey our diocesan bishop and the theological canons of the Ecumenical Councils. And when I was tonsured as a reader and asked what was expected of me I was told 'obedience'.

Now let us look at what Benedict expected of his monks when they took their vows. For Benedict the stability was very definitely within a community.

The first Chapter, *On the Kinds of Monks*, which comes after the long prologue to the *Rule*, sets this out. Here Benedict determines to 'lay down a rule for the strongest kind of monks, the cenobites, who live in community under a rule and an Abbot'. In his chapter on the *Instruments of Good Works* he says that: 'now the workshop in which we shall diligently execute all these tasks is the enclosure of the monastery and stability in the community'.

What does Benedict see as the advantages of the cenobitic life? Firstly and above all else, it is lived in community. For Benedict, the human being is a communal animal. Despite all his rules about silence and the cutting out of all unnecessary talking, he holds fast to the ideal, to the profound truth, that individual salvation is won only through one's interaction with other human beings.

In Chapter Four, of Benedict's *Seventy-Two Instruments of Good Works* at least forty need other people to enable them to be put into practice. Of the rest, thirteen are concerned with the monk's relationship with God. The cenobitic life is also seen as necessary to maintain the proper round of

prayer as set out in the *Rule*. Even though St Benedict requires the monk when absent or on a journey to maintain, as best he can, the recitation of the Office, the Offices are seen as essentially communal.

The *Opus Dei*, the Work of God, is seen as the first and foremost duty of the cenobitic monk. For this to come about, there is, to Benedict's mind, the need for stability - not just a stability of place, but also a stability of structure. The structure of the Divine Office is set out in great detail and its content fixed.

(In the *Rule*, the humility of Benedict moved him to say that if his distribution of the Psalms is displeasing, then feel free to consider a better way, but taking care that all 150 Psalms are said every week.)

The Psalter has always been the prayer book for lay Christians, and all reformers of the Divine Office have kept the Psalter as the basis for lay daily prayer. The monk is particularly a layman: Benedict never envisaged the late medieval and modern move for all Benedictine Choir Monks to be ordained.

Conversion of life is a *process* not a one-off moment. Benedict would have agreed with Wesley that once conversion has been experienced then one has to continue in that *enthusiasm*. The Christian cannot give a simple 'Yes' or 'No' answer to the question 'Are you saved?'

In Chapter Four's *The Instruments of Good Works*, ten sections deal with the *repetitive* nature of this conversion. The description of the performance of this or that instrument of good works is emphatic about this: 'to *daily*... to *often*... to *frequently*, to *constantly*, at *all times*. And as it was for Benedict's monks, so also for us.

From time to time those of us sitting here now may refer to ourselves as 'converts': perhaps we are closer to the truth than we realise. For we are called to a constant conversion, that same conversion made as a monastic vow as a Benedictine. At Baptism we are told to take up our cross daily and, in the same way as is recommended to a priest or bishop putting on a pectoral cross, we need to remind ourselves of the words of Christ, 'If anyone would be my disciple, let him take up his cross and follow me'.

There is much that needs to be said about *Obedience*, for this is the monastic virtue, the vow that is most difficult for modern man. Perhaps it has always been the most difficult monastic vow. In the *Rule* Benedict devotes a whole chapter to *What Kind of Man the Abbot Must Be*.

The person of the Abbot is essential in the understanding of the meaning of obedience for the monk. Much of what is said about the Abbot ought to be able to be applied to the bishop of the diocese. The Abbot is seen as a 'figure' of Christ in the monastery. Compare this with the writings of Ignatius of Antioch on the bishop as the focus of the unity of the Church. In his letter to the church at Ephesus Ignatius writes:

I am only a beginner in discipleship and I am speaking to you as fellow-scholars with myself. In fact, it is you who really ought to have given me lessons - lessons in faith and admonishment and patience and toleration. All the same, where you are concerned love will not suffer me to hold my peace; and that is why I venture to recommend an action that reflects the mind of God. For we can have no life apart from Jesus Christ; and as he represents the mind of the Father, so our bishops, even those who are stationed in the remotest parts of the world, represent the mind of Jesus Christ.

That is why it is proper for your conduct and your practices to correspond closely to the mind of the bishop.... A completely united front will help to keep you in constant communion with God.

For the Christian in the world, the Bishop of the diocese is the *Abbot* of their *Eucharistic Community*.

Often in the sayings of the Desert Fathers obedience is seen as something that is total and almost automatic. We are told that Abba Moses, when he was a novice, heard the call to prayer when he was writing a copy of a manuscript and left the scriptorium with the letter **O** he was penning incomplete.

Such obedience is seen as the reflection of a spiritual state where there is a complete dedication of the self to the work of God. This obedience is God-centred; it is not directed to boosting the ego of either the Abbot or the Bishop, or indeed of the person giving the obedience, but seeing in the office of Abbot or Bishop (if not in their person), the presence of Christ.

This gives an added and particular responsibility to those placed in such positions and so Benedict lays down the need for all members of the coenobium to pray for the Abbot. So we too must pray for our bishops.

The monastic life is seen as a life of love. In *The Instruments of Good Works* in Chapter Four, the monk is told to love fasting, to prefer nothing to the work of God. The life of the monk is the life of love, the life of Christ's love spilled out for others. The monk is not to be a dour ascetic without humour or joy, neither should he be a buffoon or given to loud laughter.

As we read in the *Longer Rule* of St Basil the Great: (*Resp 2,1*):

Love towards God cannot be taught. For neither have we learned from another to rejoice in the light and to cling to life, nor did anyone teach us to love our parents or those who brought us up. In the same way, or much more so, the learning of the divine love does not come from outside; but when the creature was made (I mean mankind) a certain Word was disseminated among humans, having within itself the tendency towards an adaptation to love. The pupils in the school of God's commandments having received this Word are by God's grace enabled to exercise it with care, to nourish it with knowledge, and to bring it to perfection.

Wherefore we also, welcoming your zeal as necessary for attaining our end, by God's gift and your assistance of us in your prayers will strive to stir up the spark of divine love hidden within you according to the power given us by the Spirit.

The life of the monk, as that of any Christian, should be an example of the joy that passes all understanding, the joy that shines out despite the troubles and pains of life. The Christian is essentially a joyful person and so is the monk.

The *Rule* is concerned with the practicalities of everyday monastic life, sometimes in minute detail. But Benedict has only one aim in mind: 'That we may come by straight course to our Creator!' And Benedict's *Rule*, like the writings of the Fathers and of St Basil, is only the 'tool of virtue for right-living and obedient monks, those whose daily lives are spent in a 'school in the Lord's service'.