

## **Module 201: Benedict**

*The Rule of St Benedict* Trans. Rev. Boniface Verheyen, OSB. Abridged, modernized and introduced by Stephen Tomkins. Edited and prepared for the web by Dan Graves.

**“Keeping every rule for the love of Christ.”**

### **Module Introduction**

**This rulebook for the monastic life was written by Benedict around 530. This actually makes it earlier, as a document, than some of the ones in the Early Church volume; but it belongs in the Middle Ages because it was lived out day by day by countless monks and nuns across the whole of Europe throughout every century of that period. Benedict was a devout Italian Christian who became a monk at the age of 20, wishing to withdraw from the world after he visited Rome and was shocked by how immoral life in the Holy City had become. He founded his own monastery in 529.**

**The Benedictine Rule is strict— its main theme being absolute obedience to the Abbot. Most people used to the freedoms and luxuries of life in the modern West would find it too demanding but in its historical context, it would not have been seen that way. Life in medieval Europe was incomparably poorer and more restricted than it is today: the life Benedict describes would be a step up for the poorest people and not much of a step down for the rest. Secondly, since St Antony’s time monks had subjected themselves to increasingly incredible ordeals in their attempts to subdue the flesh. Benedict’s emphasis on obedience to a supervisor is intended on the one hand to stop monks from excesses, and on the other to spur on the less enthusiastic. And lastly, the monastery was envisaged not as a prison camp to punish offenders, but as a loving community where people come together to help each other in their chosen path, to submit their entire lives to the will of God.**

**Benedict created the rule at a time when the Roman Empire had collapsed in the West, and Europe was being overrun by barbarian tribes, most of them pagans. It looked like Christianity in Europe was finished. Benedictine monasteries, more than anything else, kept the faith alive, and their short, simple but comprehensive rulebook allowed them to clone themselves**

**unstoppably. Later, the monasteries were encouraged by Charlemagne, and spread like wildfire. And since Benedict required monks to spend time in reading, they kept theology and culture alive through centuries when almost the entire continent was illiterate.**

## **5. Obedience**

The first step of humility is to obey without delay. This is proper for those who - because they have promised holy subjection, or because of the fear of hell, or the glory of life everlasting - hold nothing more precious than Christ. The moment the Abbot commands anything they obey instantly as if commanded by God Himself. As the Lord says, "At the hearing of the ear he has obeyed me" [Ps 17:45]. This obedience, though, will be acceptable to God and men, only if it is done without hesitation, delay, lukewarmness, grumbling or complaint, because the obedience which is given to Abbots is given to God. For he himself says to the teachers, "Anyone who hears you hears me" [Lk. 10:16]. Disciples must obey with good will, "for the Lord loves a cheerful giver" [2 Cor. 9:7]. If they obey with ill will, and murmur with their lips and in their hearts, even if they fulfill the command, it is not acceptable to God, who sees the heart of the murmurer. Such action deserves punishment rather than reward.

## **6. Silence**

Let us do what the prophet says: "I will take heed of my ways, so that I do not sin not with my tongue. I have watched my mouth, dumb and humbled, and kept silent even from good things" (Ps 38:2-3). If we ought sometimes to refrain from useful speech for the sake of silence, how much more should we to abstain from evil words because of the punishment due to sin? So, considering the importance of silence, permission to speak should be seldom given to perfect disciples, even for good and holy conversation, for it is written: "If you talk a lot you shall not escape sin", [Prov.

10:19] and “Death and life are in the power of the tongue” [Prov. 18:21]. The master may speak and teach, the disciple should be silent listen. So if you have to ask the Abbot a question, you should do it with all humility and respectful submission. Coarse jokes, idle words and anything that provokes laughter, we condemn to eternal exclusion and we do not permit the disciple to open his lips for such speech.

## **7. Humility**

Brothers, the Holy Scripture cries to us, “Every one that exalts himself shall be humbled; and he that humbles himself shall be exalted.” [Lk. 14:11] The steps of humility:

**1. Always to have the fear of God before one’s eyes, shunning all forgetfulness and always remembering all of God’s commands, always thinking about how those who despise God will burn in hell for their sins, and about the everlasting life of those who fear God. 2. Not to love one’s own will or wish to fulfill one’s own desires, rather obeying the word of the Lord: “I came not to do My own will but the will of Him that sent Me” [Jn 6:38]. 3. To subject oneself, for the love of God, to a Superior, in all obedience, imitating the Lord of whom the Apostle says: “He became obedient unto death” (Phil 2:8). 4. If hard and distasteful things are commanded and even if injuries are inflicted, to accept them with patience and equanimity, never wearying or giving up, knowing, as Scripture says, “He that shall persevere unto the end shall be saved” [Mt 10:22]. 5. To hide no evil thoughts or secret sins from one’s Abbot, but to confess them humbly. Concerning this, Scripture tells us, “Reveal your way to the Lord and trust in Him”, [Ps 36:5] and “Confess to the Lord, for he is good, for his mercy endures forever.” [Ps 10:1] 6. To be content with the meanest and worst of everything, always considering oneself a bad and worthless workman. 7. To declare with the tongue and believe in the inmost soul that one is the lowest and vilest of men, humbling himself and saying with the prophet, “I am a worm and not a man, the reproach of men and the outcast of the people”. [Ps 21:7]**

**8. To do nothing but what is sanctioned by the rule of the monastery and the example of one's elders. 9. To refrain from speaking, staying silent until one is asked. As Scripture says, "A man full of words is not established in the earth". [Ps 140:11] 10. To be slow to laugh, for it is written: "The fool raises his voice in laughter" [Wisdom 21:23]. 11. To speak gently and without laughter, humbly and with gravity, with a few sensible words, and not loudly, as it is written: "The wise man is known by the fewness of his words." 12. To let one's humility appear outwardly to all around. At the work of God, in the garden, on a journey, in the field, wherever you may be, sitting, walking or standing, always bow your head. Fix your eyes on the ground, thinking of your sinfulness, imagining that you already stand before the fearful judgment seat of God, and always saying in your heart what the publican in the Gospel said: "Lord, I am a sinner and not worthy to lift up my eyes up to heaven" [Lk. 18:13].**

Once he has climbed all these steps of humility, the monk will arrive at the love of God, which being perfect casts out fear. Thanks to this love, every rule that he previously kept out of fear, he will now begin to keep without any effort, naturally, by force of habit, no longer from the fear of hell but for the love of Christ, from the habit of good and the pleasure of virtue. May the Lord be pleased to manifest all this by his Holy Spirit in his laborer now cleansed from vice and sin.

## **16. Performing the Divine Office Throughout the Day**

The Prophet says, "Seven times a day I praise you" [Ps 119:164], and we will fulfill this sacred number of seven if we perform the duties of our daytime service at the time of Lauds, Prime, Tierce, Sext, Nones, Vespers, and Compline. [These services were every two or three hours throughout the day.] The same Prophet also says of the night watches, "At midnight, I arise to praise you" [Ps 119:62]. So, let us offer praise to our Creator "for his righteous ordinances", at

Lauds, Prime, Tierce, Sext, Nones, Vespers, and Compline, and let us rise at night to praise him. [The nighttime service was called Matins.]

## **20. Reverent Prayer**

If we would approach men who are in power with humility and reverence, when we want to ask a favor, how much more must we beseech the Lord God of all things with all humility and pure devotion? Remember that it is not for many words, but for the purity of our heart and tears of remorse that we are heard. For this reason, prayers ought to be short and pure, unless they are lengthened by the inspiration of divine grace. At the community exercises, however, let the prayer always be short, and the sign having been given by the Abbot, let all rise together.

## **33. Possessions**

The vice of personal ownership must by all means be cut out in the monastery by the very root, so that no one may presume to give or receive anything without the command of the Abbot; or to have anything whatever as his own, neither a book, nor a writing tablet, nor a pen, nor anything else whatsoever, since monks are allowed to have neither their bodies nor their wills in their own power. They must look for all necessities from the Abbot, and have nothing without his permission. Let everyone have all things in common, as it is written, no one kept anything as his own [Acts 4:32].

## **48. Daily Work**

Idleness is the enemy of the soul, and therefore the brethren ought to divide their time between manual labor and devout reading. In the summer then, they should go out at dawn for four hours, to do the necessary work, and then spend two hours reading. Then, after lunch, let them rest in bed in complete silence - or if anyone wants to read for himself, let him read quietly enough not to disturb others. [Reading silently to oneself was almost unheard of.] If,

however, the needs of the place, or poverty should require them to do the work of gathering the harvest themselves, let them not be downcast, for then they will be true monks, living by the work of their hands as our forefathers and the Apostles did. However, on account of the faint-hearted let all things be done with moderation. Above all, let one or two of the senior monks be appointed to go about the monastery during the reading time, and look out for any lazy brother giving himself over to idleness or vain talk, being unprofitable to himself and disturbing others. If - God forbid - such a monk is found, let him be punished on the first and second occasions. If he does not change, let him come under the correction of the Rule in such a way that others may fear.

### **53. Receiving Guests**

All guests who arrive should be received as Christ, so that he will say, "I was a stranger and you took me in" [Mt 25:35]. Show honor to them all, especially to fellow Christians and to wayfarers. When a guest is announced, let him be met with all charity. Pray with him, and then associate with one another in peace. (Do not give anyone the kiss of peace before a prayer has been said, in case of satanic deception.) Greet guests with all humility, with the head bowed down or the whole body prostrate on the ground, adoring Christ in them, as you are also receiving him. When the guests have been received, let them be accompanied to prayers. Then let the Abbot, or some he chooses, sit down with them. The divine law be read to the guest for his edification, and then you should show him every kindness. The Abbot should break his fast in deference to the guest, unless it is a day of solemn fast, which cannot be broken. The other brothers however should keep the fast as usual. The Abbot should pour the water on the guest's hands, and the whole brotherhood should join him in washing the feet of all the guests. When they have been washed, let them say, "We have received your mercy, O God, in the midst of your temple" [Ps 48:10]. Let the

greatest care be taken, especially when receiving the poor and travelers, because Christ is received more specially in them.

#### **54. Receiving Letters**

Let it not be allowed at all for a monk to give or to receive letters, tokens, or gifts of any kind, either from parents or any other person, nor from each other, without the permission of the Abbot.

#### **55. Clothes**

The Abbot should give clothes to the brothers according to the climate in which they live. I believe, however, that for a temperate climate a cowl and a tunic are enough for each monk - a woolen cowl for winter and a thin or worn one for summer - along with a cloak for work, and socks and shoes. Monks should not worry about the color or the texture of these clothes: they should be whatever you can get most cheaply. The Abbot, however, should look to the size, too make sure that they are not too small, but fitted for those who are to wear them. As for bedding, a straw mattress, a blanket, a bedspread and a pillow are enough. Beds must be frequently examined by the Abbot, to prevent personal goods from being stored. If anyone is found hiding something that he did not receive from the Abbot, let him fall under the severest discipline. To overcome this vice of private ownership, the Abbot should provide everything necessary - cowl, tunic, socks, shoes, girdle, knife, pen, needle, towel, writing tablet. Thus any claim to be in need is removed. But the Abbot must remember, "Distribution was made to everyone according to his need." [Acts 4:35]. In the same way, he should bear in mind for the infirmities of the needy, and not the bad will of the envious. And in all his decisions, let the Abbot remember God's retribution.

#### **Discussion starters:**

1. The Rule demands absolute obedience from monks to their Abbot. What do you think the reason for this is? How

would you cope in such circumstances yourself? Do you think it is a good discipline for those who can manage it, or completely unhealthy, or what? What are the advantages and disadvantages of a community of sworn obedience? What happens if the man in power is not godly, or given to fads? Or if he orders something which you can see will be harmful? How important is taking personal initiative when we stand before Christ? Does Benedict offer incentives to encourage people to perform at their best?

2. Is Benedict right to be suspicious of talk and laughter? Do you think we need more silence in our lives? Is all mirth wrong, or only certain kinds of mirth?

3. How does Benedict instruct his followers to achieve humility?

4. "To declare with the tongue and believe in the inmost soul that one is the lowest and vilest of men." Do you agree that this is a healthy opinion to have of yourself? Does the Bible teach this viewpoint? Is self-esteem an over-rated modern concern, or something Christians should pursue?

5. What are Benedict's instructions about prayer? Do you think the kind of regularity he talks about would be regimented, or merely a good discipline? Do you think that such a system would make you personally more worshipful or more ready to say a few words and go back to bed or whatever else you were doing?

6. How do you think Benedict's attitude toward possessions compares to what was done and taught in the New Testament? Does the New Testament, taken as a whole, forbid possessions? Are things more likely to be cared for if everyone owns them or if one person owns them? Do we ever really own anything, even when it "belongs" to us, or are we, at best, stewards of what God has made? What can we learn from Benedict's attitude toward possessions for our

own lives?

7. Over all, do think it would be good to be a member of a Benedictine monastery? How would your life be different if you belonged to such a community? What would it do for your spiritual life? If you were going to create a religious community yourself, how would it be different, and how would it be similar to Benedict's?

**Bible verses:**

**Acts 4:32-35**

**James 3:1-12**

**Proverbs 1:8-19**

**Proverbs 10:19-21**

**Psalms 119:164-168**

**Matthew 6:1-8**