



## SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



### **Saint Benedict and the Transcendent Beauty of God**

by Abbot Patrick Barry, OSB

*[Abbot Patrick was Abbot of Ampleforth, our motherhouse, from 1984 to 1997. He is still a monk of Ampleforth, but he has been living with us since 1997 and has helped us in the teaching of our monks in formation. It seemed appropriate to ask him if he would like to write for this publication, and he graciously agreed. Saint John (1 Jn 3.2) writes, "We shall be like him (God) because we shall see him as he really is." In discussing various ways in which the Rule can be read, he illuminates Saint Benedict's call to us to long for eternal life with great spiritual intensity. Ed.]*

In Chapter four of the Rule Saint Benedict urges us to 'cultivate a longing for eternal life with a desire of great spiritual intensity.'<sup>1</sup> These words are very strong. They form one of six references to eternal life, two of which occur in Chapter seventy-two, on the generous spirit or zeal a monk should have, and two are in Chapter five on obedience. Evidently it was a matter of importance to Saint Benedict to consider how we should relate to the idea of eternal life. What he expects of monks is not that they should simply accept the idea in a general way without thinking much about it. Rather than that, it should be a matter of prime motivation in the life a monk lives. In Chapter five he uses it to explain the ultimate motivation which overcomes any reluctance they may experience in facing the difficult demands of obedience:

Those who are possessed by a real desire to find their way to eternal life do not hesitate to choose the narrow way to which Our Lord referred when he said 'narrow is the way that leads to eternal life.'

What exactly, then, does Saint Benedict mean by this strong language of desire or longing for what lies beyond death? In an age when man seems to be in love with himself and this temporary life on earth, when very human desires and pleasures are treated as if they were the measure of all things, this language is not easily understood, and yet it points to something which is very much at the heart of Saint Benedict's vision. To get a better idea of what he means we must link it to another treasured idea of the Rule. Again it comes both in Chapter four with the phrase: 'count nothing more important than the love you should cherish for Christ' and in Chapter seventy-two, where it is explicitly linked to eternal life: 'they should value nothing whatever above Christ himself, and may he bring us all together to eternal life.' Those passages from the Rule give us the clue we need. For Saint Benedict there is a vital link between our love of Christ and the love we should have for eternal life. The link is that eternal life is the supreme and final gift Christ won for us through his passion, death and resurrection. How far we appreciate this may well depend on how we read and interpret the Rule itself.

There are many different ways of reading Saint Benedict's Rule, just as there are many different ways of reading Scripture. Here I would like to consider only two approaches, both of which have been present throughout Benedictine history and both of which are still current today. Although they are both generally accepted as valid, they lead imperceptibly to different understandings of the meaning of the Rule as a guide to life. The truth is that the Rule itself is so subtle and full of reflections of scripture that,



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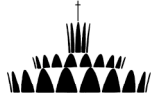
like scripture, it opens doors leading to many different possibilities that await the developments of time for their fulfillment.

The first way of reading the Rule is concerned with the nature and status of the text itself. It is possible to see the Rule as primarily and predominantly a set of regulations for the control and ordering of monastic community life. For those who hold to this view it is perhaps ‘control’ which is the most important element. For them, observance of the regulations of the Rule and exact conformity to the smallest details become the primary considerations and the most genuine test of how faithful Saint Benedict’s disciples are to what he proposed for monastic life. Following the Rule, according to this way of understanding, is a simple matter. All that is necessary is exact and literal fidelity to all the Rule’s practical regulations for living in community. That, of itself, will be enough to bring us to perfection. Even Saint Benedict’s own suggestions that variations in the ordering of the psalms for the Office, for instance, or in the clothing regulations, are set aside. Everything depends on the exact observance of the exact regime of Monte Cassino in Saint Benedict’s lifetime.

Those who through the ages have adopted this view, whether as a deliberate policy or in unthinking fidelity to the written letter, will of course have recognized and respected other elements in the text. In the Prologue, in Chapter seventy-two and in many other passages of the text they will have recognized with appreciation helpful examples of how Saint Benedict values an attitude of piety and fervor in his recommendations for living the gospel. However, these are not for them what is meant by observance of the Rule. Such examples of piety and devotion are useful, but subordinate to the real purpose of the Rule, which is to establish exact observance of regulations under the absolute control of the superior. The essence of this way of life is, for them, defined by exact conformity to what the Rule actually prescribes.

In contrast to this there is another approach to the Rule. While it gives due recognition to the regulations for monastic life in community and accepts their general guidelines as necessary or helpful to community living, it does not regard them as absolute. It is ready to acknowledge some regulations to be fundamental while others, as the Rule itself recognizes, are adaptable according to the circumstances of time and place and culture. This view diverts our attention from the details of monastic life as it was lived in sixth century Italy and opens the way to something larger, which is universal in its application. It claims that the text itself introduces a more profound perspective of the meaning of monastic life than can be expressed in day-to-day regulations. It points to a universal meaning and a radical appeal about the relations between the way we lead our lives on earth and the vision Christ opened to us beyond the grave. To preserve this is more important than anything else because it is a meaning and an appeal which transcend the detailed prescriptions for conducting monastic life.

Here are just two examples out of many that point to this broader perspective of the Rule: first, in the prologue Saint Benedict urges us ‘to open our eyes to the light that can change us into the likeness of God<sup>ii</sup> (or as some prefer to translate it: ‘to open our eyes to the light that comes from God’). Either translation suggests, with more or less emphasis, the way to a whole theology of Christ-following. It is a theology which brings to mind and is ultimately inspired by Christ’s own words in John 8, 25ff “I am the light



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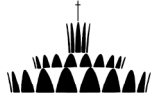
of the world.” Christ himself is the light to which we must ‘open our eyes’ and that may be seen as the keynote of that whole passage in the Prologue.

The second example is from the end of Chapter seven on humility. Saint Benedict has given plenty of detail about the exact practice of humility in monastic life. Now, however, he lifts the whole subject beyond the range of moralistic or ascetical practice with the comment that anyone ‘who has climbed all these steps of humility will come quickly to that love of God which in its fullness casts out all fear.’ Since in the first step of humility the Rule had called us to fear God, this final comment provides a new perspective on the meaning of that fear and what it leads to. It is a perspective which is the exclusive gift of the risen Christ. The whole chapter, then is really about a profound personal transformation, to which monks are called. It is a transformation which may start with fear but must end in love. Saint Benedict here spells out the nature of that love: ‘A new motive will have taken over, not fear of hell but the love of Christ.’ The fear, if we open our eyes to reality, we can manage on our own. The love ‘which in its fullness casts out all fear’ is inaccessible except through the gift of Christ himself. It is called transcendent, because it rises above the limits of unaided human nature.

From these examples, and many others which could be quoted, it follows that, if we seek such profound truths about spiritual growth, the exact literal observance of sixth century regulations cannot of themselves be the primary test of fidelity to the spirit of Saint Benedict. The key to the light that can change us into the likeness of God and to the fullness of love that casts out all fear must go deeper than that. Our reflections on these issues may lead us to think about Christ’s teaching among the cornfields in Mark 2, 23ff. On that occasion he challenged the regulations for the Sabbath, which were so sacred to the Jews and which, for them, came from God himself. He with supreme authority as himself ‘Lord of the Sabbath’ tried to lift their gaze to a higher truth which had not been compromised by the disciples’ infringement of regulations. However, they stuck to their position. There is danger in tying the following of Christ too closely to exact observance of regulations.

It follows from this that, if in reading the Rule we are on the look out for a way to mould our lives by fidelity to the external regulations it lays down, we will come away with one set of impressions. If we are on the look out for profound perceptions of the Christ-centered meaning of human life and its ultimate destiny, then we will come away from reading the same text with quite different perspectives.

These two ways of reading the Rule have been found in various degrees and interpretations among different groups at different times throughout the fourteen centuries during which Saint Benedict’s way has been actively followed in monastic life. Usually they are mixed together, although still distinct. The variations from the original started early on. When Monte Cassino was sacked by the Lombards, the very monks Saint Benedict had trained brought the Rule with them to Rome. How did they feel about it when soon afterwards the Pope, Saint Gregory, who was himself a monk, sent Augustine with forty monks to convert the Anglo Saxons in England? Did some of the group point scrupulously to Chapter 66 of the Rule, where Saint Benedict demands that everything needed should be confined within the enclosure of the monastery, “Then there will be no need for monks and nuns to wander outside, which is far from good for their



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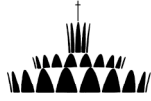
monastic development?” Well, Saint Gregory got his way with consequences of great significance, and that went far to keep the Rule and monasticism alive.

The problem did not stop there. In due course the Anglo Saxon monks, like the Celtic monks of Columbanus who preceded them in the early apostolate of Europe, sent Willibrord and Boniface to convert the Frisians and the Germans. As monasticism spread and became strong, other problems emerged. It can hardly be doubted, for instance, that in the tradition of Cluny exact external observance of a relentless round of liturgy was the predominant consideration, leaving no room for other prescriptions of the Rule, like manual labor or study. This was a form of good observance, which itself went far beyond the letter of the Rule. Yet as a result Cluny was able to make a vital contribution to the development of the liturgy in the Church.

Nevertheless the liturgical vision of Cluny was not universally accepted. The young Anselm, in search for a vocation, turned away from Cluny, because the monks of that monastery could find no time for anything but liturgy. Bec and the Norman abbeys rejected such single-mindedness and opened the way to Benedictine education and scholarship. The Cistercian Benedictines reacted differently, but still against the Cluniac idea. Their preoccupation was with simplicity and austerity and manual labor and a new community version of the flight from the world in remote unwanted corners of Europe. These unwanted tracts of land they converted to productivity by hard and relentless physical labor. In this way they claimed to follow the Rule more exactly than either Cluny or the scholarly Bec. And yet all three interpretations were genuinely Benedictine and inspired by different aspects of the Rule.

These preoccupations with liturgy or evangelization or education or scholarship or manual labor did not exhaust the possibilities of interpretations of the Rule. Another way of reading it is seen among another group of Benedictines who emphasized contemplation as a priority in monastic life. It is to be found among the hermits of the Camaldolese monks. According to Saint Peter Damian the hope of Saint Romuald, their founder, was “to convert the whole world to the ideals of the desert and make all the laity monastic through their association with his monks.” Thus even in the world of contemplation the Rule was seen as dynamic and set to change the world—but in a different way from the apostolate of Augustine of Canterbury and Boniface.

When it came to the counter-reformation and the revival and reform of Benedictine life another way of interpreting the Rule is to be found in the writings of Father Baker and notably in a pamphlet which interprets the whole Rule as ordered to contemplative prayer—to the detriment not only of manual labor but even of liturgy in the choir. This Bakerite view, in a more moderate version which gave its due place to liturgy, inspired wonderfully the contemplative nuns of the renewed English Congregation. But it did not win the day with the whole Congregation. The leaders who inspired the new life of the English monks on the continent looked back to Saint Augustine of Canterbury and Saint Boniface and committed the monks to a heroic apostolate, which was also a hidden and solitary one, among the persecuted Catholics of those troubled times in England. So committed were they to this way of life that, when the persecution was over in the nineteenth century, they pursued their apostolate among the poor so tenaciously that it took the intervention of Pope Leo XIII to restore the values of Benedictine conventual life and to encourage them towards education and scholarship.



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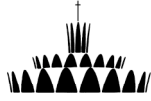
All these tensions and variations of interpretations arise from the Rule itself and the richness of its teaching. But there is more than that to consider. There is another set of variants affecting the understanding of the Rule. These arise, not from the Rule itself, but from the changing cultures of changing times. Because of such changes there are different assumptions and attitudes of mind about both the nature of human life and the interpretation of the gospel which over the ages have been brought to the reading of the Rule. For the desert Fathers, who inspired Saint Benedict especially in his eremitical period, flight from the world was absolute and left no room for qualification. In the Middle Ages, on the other hand, monasticism was integrated into a new form of society which it had partly formed. That meant that feudalism was inescapable as a framework of life—even monastic life—and it led to many corrosive distortions of the monastic ideal, which for a time dominated monastic practice during those centuries of the later Middle Ages.

Then again, readers of Saint Benedict's Rule at that time approached it with assumptions about the nature of the world, and of mankind in the world, and of the meaning of our life and destiny which are untenable today. It is true that these assumptions, however imperfect, left them spiritually open to communication with God as their creator and Christ as their redeemer and as 'the way the truth and the life.' Today things are very different. We like to think that our concept of human nature is sounder. We are no longer held in the shackles of feudalism nor of the absolutism of kings and dictators, nor need we allow our minds, unless we choose it, to be shaped by any of the diverse ideologies which are on offer in the world of secularism. We cannot help, however, being affected by them. The media alone will see to that.

It would take a long time to catalogue—even in outline—the wild variety of assumptions about the meaning, or lack of meaning, of our human lives and the programs attempting to make sense of them, which may be found among potential readers of the Rule today. Whatever they are in particular cases these assumptions will certainly affect the understanding of the Rule. They will color the interpretation and possibly limit the understanding of what Saint Benedict really meant. There is no effective escape from this by attempting to withdraw into a re-creation of the worlds of the monastic past—the desert, the dark ages, the Middle Ages, the Counter Reformation or the nineteenth century.

We should rather follow Saint Benedict in the quiet realism with which he faced the appalling world of Italy during the Gothic war. Perhaps we may think we are faced with a more difficult task in the spiritually chaotic world of today. Whether or not this is true, we shall do well to see the Rule as a vital instrument which can help us, and the help will come, not from an attempt to recreate the sixth century, but through a search for a timeless spiritual message. It is a message to be found in those words of Saint Benedict which lifted his contemporaries above the turmoil of the time by directing their gaze to the 'light that can change us into the likeness of God' and to 'that love of God, which in its fullness casts out all fear.' We may be inspired by his own summary of what he would like his monks to achieve:

They will begin to observe without effort as though naturally from good habit all those precepts which in earlier days were kept at least partly through fear. A new motive



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will have taken over, not fear of hell but the love of Christ. Good habit and delight in virtue will carry them along. This happy state the Lord will bring about through the Holy Spirit in his servant whom he has cleansed of vice and sin and taught to be a true and faithful worker in the kingdom.<sup>iii</sup>

It will be noted that Benedict, when he lifts his eyes to the ideals which formed him and which he wishes to pass on, has no use for fear as a motive and desires above all that his disciples should substitute for fear ‘the love of Christ’, since here and elsewhere in the Rule he insists on love as the key to our relationship with Christ. Christ must mean everything for us and stand for all that is of ultimate value, all that is transcendent in truth and goodness and beauty. We must see Christ as:

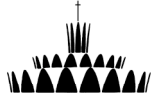
The image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.<sup>iv</sup>

Saint Benedict does not quote Colossians directly. However he lived under the Arian Goths in Italy and he is uncompromising in his adherence to the Catholic belief in Christ’s divinity. His belief in Christ must have been close to that text from Colossians, and it led him to place the whole focus of a monk’s life securely in the love of Christ. Most important of all, he sees that what will bring this about is not the observance of rules, important and helpful as these are. What achieves ‘the happy state’ for which he yearns is ‘The Lord himself...through the Holy Spirit.’ The love to which monks are called is a gift. It can never be the result of their own efforts.

In this way the Rule again and again points beyond itself to something which transcends all regulations and all human efforts, that is to the pure action of grace. It is the Holy Spirit himself who will bring about ‘the happy state.’ That is the lodestar of the whole Rule—the message which inspires it all, to which Benedict returns at the end in these words: “They should value nothing whatever above Christ himself, and may he bring us all together to eternal life.” It is in such passages as these, which point to the attainability of the transcendent through the grace of Christ, that Benedict’s vision rises above the limitations of time and place. It is such passages, rather than the detailed regulations of community life, that have guaranteed the survival of the Rule through the centuries and they contain the Rule’s most vital message for today.

There is a well-known passage in the Confessions of Saint Augustine which also refers to the love of the transcendent planted in our hearts by grace. It refers specifically, in the Neo-Platonic tradition, to the beauty of God:

Late have I loved you, O beauty so ancient and so new.  
Late have I loved you. And all the time you were within me



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and I was wandering far afield, where I sought for you in a depraved way by flinging myself into those things of beauty which you yourself had made. You were close to me, but I was not close to you. For a long time I was held back from you by those very things which, if you had not given them being, would not have existed. You called me and cried aloud to me and you broke through my deafness. You shone brightly and showed me your glory and drove away my blindness. Your fragrance burst upon me and made me gasp. It made me hunger and thirst for you. You touched me and I was fired with a longing for your peace.<sup>v</sup>

Saint Benedict does not rise to Saint Augustine's heights of eloquence but, when he urges us to put the love of Christ above everything else and insists that we can achieve that only through the gift of grace, his vision is not far from that of Saint Augustine. His love of Christ and longing for eternal life of which he speaks are focused on the beauty of God revealed to us in Christ. His words are plain and almost down to earth. They have none of the Neo-Platonic overtones of Augustine. That does not diminish their power. The Rule Saint Benedict wrote is not well understood unless its end and purpose are seen to rest in Christ himself, whose gift is eternal life and whose love must be counted as more important than anything else in the life of a monk. It may even be said that those diverse interpretations of the Rule on which we have touched are all valid in so far as they make room for the transforming love of Christ, which Saint Benedict wants his monks to prefer to everything else.

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<sup>i</sup> The Latin is: 'Vitam aeternam omni concupiscentia spiritali desiderare.' The enormous strength of the last four words of this phrase is difficult to render in English. The use of 'concupiscentia,' which is more normally used of lust, is particularly dramatic. The adjective 'spiritali' warns us that what is in question is a pure and spiritual longing. It may be seen as lifting us from the ordinary ambience of human living towards the mystery of Christ's presence among us, while the addition of 'omni' suggests that there should be no limit or restraint in our longing.

<sup>ii</sup> Those who favor this translation see in it an echo of 2 Corinthians 3, 18: "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit."

<sup>iii</sup> Rule chap 7 para 20

<sup>iv</sup> Col. 1, 15-20

<sup>v</sup> St. Augustine, Confessions, Book 10, 27