

# **ALL SAINTS' EPISCOPAL CHURCH**

## **Fall Adult Spiritual Formation Program**

### **ALWAYS WE BEGIN AGAIN: The Way of Benedict**

#### **Overview:**

We are living in an uncertain time as a nation and as a parish as we continue to deal with the impacts of the corona virus, national strife and our own parish community's transition to new leadership. The centuries-old tradition of Benedictine Spirituality, which was born in an era of chaos and unpredictability, may offer a spiritual perspective and practical advice that helps, guides and heals in this unsettled time.

Toward that end, we are offering a Sunday morning formation program fall entitled "Always We Begin Again."

We hope this program will...

- ▶ Draw us closer together as a community, providing opportunities to engage in meaningful conversations with each other
- ▶ Build understanding of the gifts and challenges of this time in the light of the teaching of St. Benedict, a 6th century founder of monasticism
- ▶ Explore the ways specific aspects of Benedict's teaching and spirituality can support and shape our life together as a church community as well as our individual lives
- ▶ Prepare our community for the changed and changing world in which we live, work and are called to serve.

#### **The Program:**

Each week during the fall semester we will explore a different theme of Benedictine spirituality and teaching. We will reflect together on its relevance to our communal and individual lives, discerning inspiration, hope and challenge. We will investigate the scriptural foundations of each theme. Sessions will be led by parishioners and outside guests.

Borrowing from Joan Chittister, a Benedictine lighthouse, we offer this invitation....

It is a gentle, tender invitation,

This call to create within ourselves

A Monastery of the Heart.

It is the call to go down deep into the self

In order to find there

The God who urges us

To come out of ourselves

To do the work of God

To live in union with God

In the world around us<sup>1</sup>

## **Why Are We Drawn to Benedict, His Teaching And Spirituality?**

### Alone or in Community

As Americans, we are deeply entrenched in a philosophy and life-style of individualism, largely unconscious. We seek freedom from the “tyranny” of community demands and societal requirements. Most of us live at a distance from family and our transient life styles may even limit our ability maintain deep friendships—both of which root and sustain us. While we value the freedom to create our own life path, we may also find that we are alone and often lonely. While we may find the strictures spelled out in the 6<sup>th</sup> century Rule of Benedict unappealing, it seems we long to share our life’s journey with others, seeking the see a thread of meaning and to live in ways that bring life to ourselves and others. Small groups, like ours, provide a rich arena for both understanding and experiencing real community.

### A Time of Upheaval

We are living in an age when life as we have known it is changing-in small ways and large. We face economic, health, social, political and environmental upheaval at this time. The current or recent corona-virus pandemic has shown us both how connected we are and how vulnerable we are. While this time is different from Benedicts in which Goths’ were invading, famine was

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<sup>1</sup> Joan Chittister. The Monastery of the Heart: An Invitation to a Meaningful Life, Blueridge, 2011.

prevalent and disease and poverty were the norm, there are enough parallels to find comfort in the stability and wise guidance found with Benedict.

The social philosopher and critic, Alistair MacIntyre, wrote at the end of his pivotal book, After Virtue,

“ What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us. And if the tradition of the virtues was able to survive the horrors of the last dark ages, we are not entirely without grounds for hope. This time, however, the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time. And it is our lack of consciousness of this that constitutes part of our predicament. We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict.”

### Focusing/Deepening our Spiritual Vision

Benedict communicates a deep sense of God’s graciousness and love in his Rule. He sees all of life of the monks and the community as a “spiritual endeavor” in which we draw ever closer to God. The vow of conversion of life, means monks equally seek to be transformed, not to perfection but to their truest selves, which may be understood as the divine spark (Imago dei) within us.

### Search for Simplicity

In his book, Blessed Simplicity, Raimon Panikkar suggests that the “monk” may be understood as “that person who aspires to reach the ultimate goal of life with all his (her) being by renouncing all that is not necessary to it, i.e., by concentrating on this one single and unique goal.” For monks in Christian or religious communities, that single goal is connection with the Divine (however that is understood). We live in a complex time in which everything from gender understanding to family structures to work have grown ever more complex. We may feel pulled in so many directions that we wonder what day it is and where we are or even why we are doing anything. The longing for greater simplicity and unity of life and purpose draws us to Benedict’s path.

### Shaping How We Live Our Lives Each Day

As most commentators on Benedict’s Rule note, he is nothing if not practical. While the guidance is aimed at life in a cloistered community, there is much that is applicable to us regardless of the configuration of our living situation. Those drawn to this writing and path, seek to live in a way that is intentional, respectful of the needs of themselves and others and

leads to deeper connection with all. Many spiritual practices take us out of our everyday life into a more contemplative space. Benedict guides us to see how we might live our so very ordinary lives with compassion and alive to the life-giving presence found there. This approach directs us to be present to the task and its meaning.

### Engaging with “the World”

The ways in which Benedictine communities engage with those beyond their boundaries, be it cloister walls or family ties, can guide us in our understanding of our encounter with the needs, suffering and joys we see and experience in our own lives and in the world around us. Those who visit cloistered communities, like St. Benedict’s in Snowmass, may be surprised at the daily prayers directed to the events and suffering from that day’s news. Cloistered or open, Benedictine communities pray for community members, family and many, many others.

The other way in which Benedict invites us to serve others is through the practice of hospitality, opening our doors and hearts to others, especially those who come to us in need.

In addition, non-cloistered communities are actively engaged in teaching, political action, spiritual direction, nursing and a wide variety of other ways of serving beyond their own walls. In the early days of monasteries, Benedictine communities served those in the village in which they were located, sometimes at peril to themselves. (The 2010 movie, Of Gods and Men depicted the community work, common life, decision-making and finally death in 1996 of an order of Trappist monks in Algeria.)

## The Life of St. Benedict

- 480 Benedict was born into a Roman (probably wealthy) family in Nursia (Norcia today) in Central Italy (at that time within the Roman walls). Initially educated at home with family.
- 496 He was sent to Rome for education as was common for wealthy families. His “nanny” (Cirilla) went with him. Here he was disillusioned about 40 miles outside Rome the life style and frivolity he saw all around him.
- 505 Left his university at about age 20 to join a group of men trying to live a devout Christian life. Performed a miracle of repairing a broken tray for his nanny which brought him more notoriety than wanted.
- 507 Left and hid in a cave in Subito about 40 miles outside of Rome where he could lead a solitary and devout life. He was supported by a monk in the area (Romanus) with monk’s clothing, food and books. People found and sought Benedict for his spiritual example.
- 510 Some students found Benedict who had developed a reputation as a holy, wise man and was sought after for spiritual guidance and asked him to become their leader (Abbot) at their monastery in Vicovaro. He argued with them, saying they would like his leadership but they convinced him to take the role anyway. Cirilla (his nurse) also went with him.
- 511 This initial group of followers did indeed not like Benedict and reportedly tried to poison him. Again a miracle occurred in which the jug of poisoned wine was mysteriously broken. After this Benedict returned to his solitary life.
- 513 Benedict once again was invited to lead an existing monastery in Subiaco, which he did. Benedict founded 12 monasteries while at Subiaco—most in the area between there and Rome. Left there after conflict with a local priest who thought people should come to the priest for spiritual guidance rather than Benedict.
- 529 Benedict left the area of his previous monasteries and established a new monastery outside the town of Cassino, 75 miles south of Rome. The monastery was established in part of what had been a fortress and there founded Monte Cassino monastery outside the town of Cassino. This monastery was focused on novices and those desiring an education.



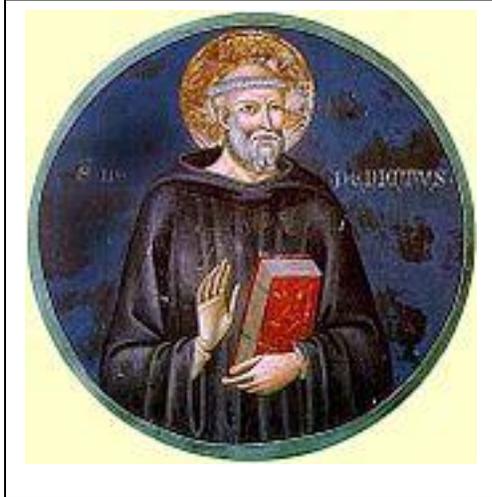
- 540 At Monte Cassino Benedict wrote the Rule in Latin drawing on previous, and more stringent rules available at that time (especially).
  - 547 Death of Benedict (Mar. 21). Both Benedict and his sister (St. Scholastica) were buried at Monte Cassino.
  - 581 Monastery at Monte Cassino was destroyed, and monks spread out, including to the British Isles.
  - 596 Gregory the Great (reputed author) recounts the life of Benedict and the miracles associated with him in a book entitled Dialogues. So popular at the time that it was translated into Greek.
- By 9<sup>th</sup> C. Benedictine monks (including Augustine) had spread that form of spirituality all over western Europe including to the British Isles
- 1220 Benedict venerated as a saint. His feast day is celebrated on July 11 (Anglican) and March 23 (Roman Catholic)

Currently over 100 Benedictine (Catholic) Congregations in the US.

**Note:** Most dates listed are rough estimates. Life and death dates and writing of the Rule well accepted.



This drawing is a very rough graphic depiction of the key milestones in the life of Benedict.



## The Rule of St. Benedict

The Rule written by St. Benedict for his community, probably drew on earlier writings including those of the Desert Fathers/Mothers, Cassian and an anonymous Rule of greater length. Benedict's Rule includes a Prologue and 73 short chapters.

Written as an invitation to those interested in joining with others to seek a life devoted to faithfully seeking God and living out a model of Christ. St. Benedict intended his Rule to be a practical guide to Christian monastic life. Based on the key precepts of humility, obedience and love, its aim is to create a harmonious

and efficient religious community in which individuals can make progress in the Christian virtues and gain eternal life.

Benedict describes the monastery lived around the Rule as a "school for the Lord's service. Intended to be simple, practical and doable. Much less rigorous than other rules of the period. The purpose of the Rule is to build awareness of God's continuous presence. Benedictine monks are committed to three (3) vows:

- Stability
- Obedience
- Conversion of life (Conversatio morum) Commitment to the monastic way of life, including celibacy, continual seeking spiritual path, etc.

A good portion of the Rule is direct quotation of scripture from both Old and New Testament.

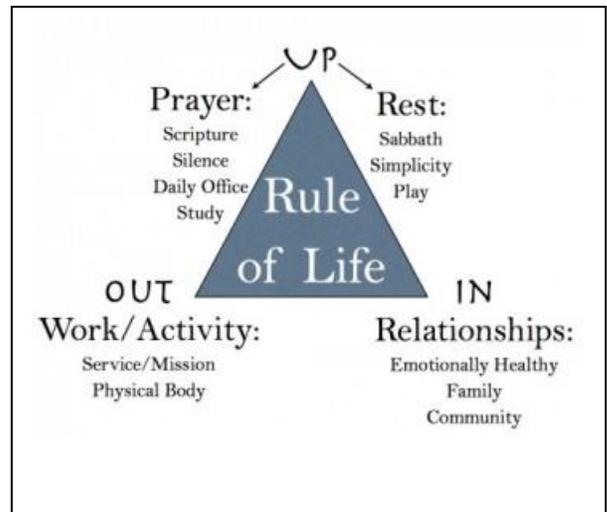
Here, Benedict sets out ideal monastery hierarchies, routines and regulations providing a structure for a life together in Christian community. It is anticipated that after a year's probation, a person who takes vows to become a monk will remain in that monastery for the rest of his/her life.

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 discretion is manifested in his repeated allowances for differences of treatment according to age, capabilities, dispositions, needs, and spiritual stature; 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.

Hierarchy and Roles: Abbot, Prior, Deans, Porter, Cellarer (steward), novice master, guest master, etc.. The Abbot is elected by the monks for life and is the authority seen as the shepherd of the community and therefore to be obeyed. Describes characteristics desired in each role.

Structure of the Day: Day divided into roughly 4 periods of roughly equal length—prayer, work, rest and study. Periods of prayer 7 times during a 24-hour period. Varies depending on time of year. Periods of work, especially manual labor (~6 hours per day). Gathering for meals. Period of study. Communal gatherings for decision making or discussion. Periods of rest.



Worship (The Divine Office): Initially every 3 hours during the day. Includes a schedule of Psalm reading, covering all 150 Psalms in one week. Seen as the most important “work” of the community. Includes prayers, scripture reading, preaching and chanting or singing.

Life in Community: Marked by simplicity, including no ownership of goods, silence or mostly silence, consideration of others, respect for those in authority, care of younger monks (included children) and shared input on decisions. Included common worship, private prayer and sacred study, work to ensure the community was self-sufficient and education.

Work: Designed to sustain the community and was not to dominate the common life. Included field work, crafts, manual labor, garden work, domestic work, service in support of hospitality and those who were ill, meal preparation, teaching, writing or copying manuscripts.

### Prologue of the Rule (Excerpts)

*Listen my child. I want you to place the ear of your heart on the solid ground of the Master’s wisdom. What I received, I’m passing on to you. This advice is from a spiritual parent who loves you and gives you the sort of counsel that will shape your whole life. Listening is hard work, but it’s the essential work. It opens you up to the God that you’ve rejected when you have only listened to yourselves. If you’re ready to give up your addiction to yourself, this message is for you: to listen is to equip yourself with the best resources available to serve the real Master, Christ the Lord.”*

*So, Let’s go! The scriptures are stirring us, like fire in our bones... let’s open our eyes wide to the light that shines out from God and open our ears to the voice from heaven that shouts every day: O that today you would hearken to his voice”. Run while you have the light of life....*

**From The Rule of Saint Benedict. Prologue. Rendering by Jonathan Wilson-Hargrove**

### Key Themes:

- *Simplicity*—removes much of the cultural expectations to create a life marked by simple practices designed to sustain a faithful community. Other hierarchical titles and levels are abandoned when entering the monastery.
- *Stability*—expected to remain at the monastery for life. The structure and practices area Iso designed to provide stability.
- *Humility*—lays out 12 steps on a ladder of humility. One of the most foundational principles of Benedictine life and spirituality.
- *Hospitality*—always open to guest who are treated with honor and respect. Bedrock of Benedictine community.
- *Obedience*—first to the God, then the Abbot (God’s representative) under all conditions, then to those in other roles of authority and always to the Rule.
- *Balance and moderation*—rest, work, prayer and study so that nothing becomes to great a burden on a community member. Tempers ascetical practices. This balance of prayer, work, and study is another of Benedict’s legacies.
- *Ascetical practices*—sets some limits on food, drink, clothing, possessions, periods of fasting, sexual relations and all aspects of life believing these practices will lead to greater freedom and unity with God and others. The ascetical practices however are never designed to be a burden and are more modest than other rules from this period.
- *Discipline*—lays out guidelines for correction of failures up to expulsion from the community. While some may seem harsh by our standards, clearly seeks the restoration of the individual to the community.
- *Spiritual development* (life as a pilgrimage)—a life-long process of seeking to live more fully out of love of God and the community. Includes examination and confession and renewal. Says, Path will be hard at times, but "as we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God’s commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love”

Benedict's legacy is still strong - his Rule remains a source of inspiration and a key work in the history of the Christian church. 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.

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