

# Benedict

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*After living as a hermit and failing as an abbot at a monastery, Benedict founded a Christian community for lay people. The pragmatic and compassionate Rule, or guide, he wrote for it became very popular. It was adopted widely, leading to a great flowering of monastic life in Europe. This was providential: Benedictine monasteries had a central role in preserving Western civilization in the Middle Ages.*

Benedict of Nursia (c.480-547) was born in Italy and studied in Rome. Distressed by the licentiousness of the city, he lived for a time as a hermit. He was so admired that local monks asked him to be their abbot. But they rebelled against his strictness and tried to poison him. He withdrew, learned from his mistakes and tried again – with great success.

Benedict envisioned flexible communities of lay people, structured as families with an elected abbot serving as father and spiritual leader. He focused on balancing prayer and work (monasteries previously shunned manual labor), developing a deep spirit of community and helping each individual finding God in everyday life.

“Nothing [is] more important ... than to stop at regular times, in regular ways to remember what life is really about, where it came from, why we have it, what we are to do with it and for whom we are to live it,” writes Benedictine Joan Chittister. “No matter how tired we are or how busy we are or how impossible we think it is to do it, Benedictine spirituality says stop. Now. A spiritual life without a regular prayer life and an integrated community consciousness is pure illusion.” The Benedictine approach to spirituality can still guide anyone wanting to live a Christian life.



**“Never lose hope in God’s mercy.”**

“[Benedict] tackles the question of loving at the point at which most of us experience it, that is to say, in the day to day encounter with those amongst whom we have to live. ... It means seeing each single person as a unique creation of God. It means recognizing the worth of each individual. Far too often in the history of Christianity theologians and teachers have given us another message, have dwelt on the unworthiness of men and women, their proneness to sin, their worthlessness. Yet there is none of this in Christ’s teaching, nor the Rule of St. Benedict.”

*Esther de Waal, Reflections on the Rule of St. Benedict*

**“No one should follow what he considers to be good for himself, but rather what seems good for another.”**

“It is the single-minded search for God that defines Benedictine spirituality. That is what the monastic pursues behind every other pursuit. That is what gives the monastic life meaning. That is what frees the monastic heart. The monastic does not exist for work. Creative and productive work are simply meant to enhance the Garden and sustain us while we grow into God. In today’s culture in which people are identified more by what they do than what they are, this is a lesson of profound importance.”

*Joan Chittister, OSB*

**“He who labors as he prays lifts his heart to God with his hands.”**

**Benedict was canonized in 1220. His feast day is July 11.**

# Establishing a ‘School for the Lord’s Service’

“We must ... prepare our hearts and bodies for the battle of holy obedience to [the Lord’s] instructions. What is not possible to us by nature, let us ask [him] to supply by the help of his grace. If we wish to reach eternal life, even as we avoid the torments of hell, then – while there is still time, while we are in this body and have time to accomplish all these things by the light of life – we must run and do now what will profit us for ever.

Therefore, we intend to establish a school for the Lord’s service. In drawing up its regulations, we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome. The good of all concerned, however, may prompt us to a little strictness in order to amend faults and to safeguard love. Do not be daunted immediately by fear and run away from the road that leads to salvation. It is bound to be narrow at the outset. 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. ... We shall through patience share in the sufferings of Christ that we may deserve also to share in his kingdom.”

Prologue to the Rule of St. Benedict



“Benedict’s Rule calls people to follow the deepest longing of their hearts for God while recognizing and accommodating their deepest weaknesses. Benedict did not write a Rule for a community of saints but a Rule for a community of sinners, a group of people who come together willing to stumble, fall and rise again and again in the common quest to know God and God’s love ever more deeply.”

Benedictine Sisters, Monastery of St. Gertrude, Idaho

**“The lord waits for us daily to translate into action,  
as we should, his holy teachings.”**

“In Chapter 64 of the Rule, Saint Benedict offers counsel to the abbot in dealing with his monks. Three words tell it all. Indeed, the three are a summary of the Benedictine way: ‘ne quid nimis,’ – nothing to excess. The abbot must avoid extremes in his words and deeds. ... The lesson is general, not just for abbots and their monks. ‘Ne quid nimis:’ Avoid extremes. Go gently. It’s a good policy. Though it looks weak, it actually demands strength. It’s easy to get tough and violent in word or deed. [That] is not Christian, and certainly not Benedictine. The gentle style is something anyone can practice. And should.”

Matthew Kelty, OCSO

**“Whether we be slaves or freemen, we are all one in Christ and  
bear an equal rank in the service of Our Lord.”**

“What can a monastic rule offer to an audience of people who are not monks, who do not ‘leave the world’ for a monastery, but are instead ‘in the world,’ involved in our families and our jobs? It may point us directly to the very things our style of life tends to make us forget. A ‘rule’ is a structure, an order, and our lives are too often ‘out of hand,’ ‘out of control,’ ‘unruly.’ It can help us toward achieving a balance. ... If the Rule reminds us to make space specifically for God in the midst of the scramble of our unruly lives, it also reminds us similarly to make space for others, and it tells us that doing this is another way of making space for God.”

William Collinge, “St. Benedict: Rule for the Unruly”

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## Questions for contemplation

1. Benedict’s Rule is fundamentally a guide to living a spiritual life. What are some of the principles that have guided your spiritual life? What type of guidance do you need to progress further?
2. While living as a hermit, Benedict was befriended by a monk who looked after him and drew him out of his isolation. Who are your spiritual mentors? Have you mentored others?

## **M**ore information

Order of St. Benedict: [www.osb.org](http://www.osb.org)

The Rule of St. Benedict (text and guides): [www.osb.org/rb](http://www.osb.org/rb)