

I speak to you in the name of God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Please be seated.

Yesterday, July 11, was the date in the Anglican calendar of saints that we celebrate the life and work of St. Benedict who is credited with creating a rule of life known as, “The Rule of Benedict”, or “The Benedictine Rule”. Rather than being a single rule, Benedict’s work is essentially a series of encouragements to live a life that is grounded in the love of Christ, that is focused on simplicity, humility, gratitude, prayer and study, and a strong work ethic. While he originally wrote this series of thoughts around how monks should live their lives as holy examples to themselves and to others, the influence of his work expanded to include all Christian people. Benedict called monks to have an intentional, orderly life of prayer balanced by spiritual reading and physical work. This was at a time when many of those who were supposed to be living religious lives had essentially lost their Gospel compass and overindulged in eating and drinking beer to such an extent that they became quite a disgrace to their communities. While people outside of the monasteries were struggling for basic survival, many monks were engaging in real excess. The Benedictine Rule allowed them to restructure their approach to life and to work so as to reconnect their daily lives with the Gospels and Christian values. It allowed them to rediscover a purpose in their lives.

If we want to better understand St. Benedict, we need to look a little more closely at his back story. Benedict and his twin sister, Scholastica, were born into a family of nobility in Nursia, Italy in the year 480. Interestingly, both siblings became sainted. As a young man, Benedict was sent to Rome to study but this turned out to be a disappointing experience for him. Troubled by what he saw as the excesses of the privileged – including those whose lives were supposed to be devoted to God – Benedict left Rome and travelled to a valleyed area where he met a monk who was living in a cave-like monastery in the area. Following this chance meeting and the deep discussions that followed, Benedict took the advice of the monk who advised him to live alone in a neighbouring cave for about 3 years. It was during this time of prayer and contemplation that he developed his thinking about how to live a good life that was consistent with the Gospels. The focus of his thinking was

on prayer, work, simplicity, and hospitality. He sought out a balance between action and contemplation. This was to become the foundation for his rule of living. Eventually others who were interested in the religious life sought Benedict out and began to listen to his ideas. He proposed a structure for monastic life and established a monastery near Naples, Italy. His ideas then spread to other monasteries throughout Europe.

But Benedict's ideas were not universally embraced by all people in religious life; particularly by those who were more inclined to eat and drink to excess while doing little or no work. At one point, a group of monks who resisted his leadership tried to assassinate Benedict with poisoned wine. According to legend, Benedict blessed the wine and made the sign of the cross at which point the cup shattered and the wine was lost. To this day, he is known as the saint who provides protection against poisoning as well as being the patron saint for protection from temptation and evil.

Benedict is reported to have died in 547AD, making him 67 years of age. In 593 AD, Pope Gregory the Great published a 4-volume series of books about Benedict, having spearheaded an intensive research project to capture the stories of his life from those who had known and worked with him. In 1964, he was sainted by Pope Paul VI.

So what does all of this mean for those of us living in these modern times? Theologian and author, Joan Chittister, speaks to the relevance of the Benedictine Rule for all Christian people living in this century: *Benedict reminds us, too, that physical control and spiritual perspective are linked: pride and gluttony and laziness are of a piece. We expect too much, we consume too much, and we contribute too little. We give ourselves over to ourselves. We become engorged with ourselves and, as a result, there is no room left for the stripped-down, stark, and simple furniture of the soul...Grace and goodness come from God, the Rule insists. We are not the sole author of our story. What does come from us, though, are the decisions we make in the face of the graces we receive. We can either respond to each life grace and become what we might be in every situation, whatever the effort, or we can reject the impulses that the magnet in us called goodness brings in favour of being less than we ought to be. It is those decisions that we must bend our lives to better.*

I recognize that some people spend years studying Benedict and his rule for living. But if we want to take away the highlights of his work, we need to remember that the love of Christ is at the centre of Benedict's thinking and his rule of living. If we borrow the words of the Benedictine Centre in the United States, we can further summarize Benedict's rule in this way:

- 1. Be attentive to God's presence in the ordinary moments of life.*
- 2. Be shaped by Scripture and prayer.*
- 3. Listen with your heart and respond with generosity.*
- 4. Practice moderation in what you do and the choices you make.*

While this might be an oversimplification of Benedict's rule for living, it does give us some food for thought for our own lives. In what ways might we be more attentive to God's presence in our own lives? What roles do Scripture and prayer play in our daily living? How well do we do in listening with our hearts and in responding with generosity? In what ways might we live simpler, more moderate lives? How might we make better and more intentional choices?

St. Benedict also left us with a prayer for deepening our faith, and I will close with that because I think it gives us a lot to consider. Let us pray: *Gracious and holy Father, give us the wisdom to discover you, the intelligence to understand you, the diligence to seek after you, the patience to wait for you, eyes to behold you, a heart to meditate upon you, and a life to proclaim you. Through the power of the spirit of Jesus, our Lord. Amen.*