

ST. BENEDICT'S ENDURING RULE

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In 580 AD a group of coenobitic monks living at the monastery at Monte Cassino, Italy, were routed by the Lombards, the fiercest of the Teutonic peoples. The Lombards attacked by night and the monastery and everything in it was plundered. However as St. Gregory reports, "They had not the power to lay hand on any man. But Almighty God fulfilled what he had promised to His faithful servant, Benedict, that although he gave their goods into the hands of the Paynims, yet he preserved their lives."¹ The monks scattered eventually retreating to Rome some eighty miles south of the mount. In the chaos and in their haste they nevertheless were able to secure a few items of importance. Paul the Deacon writes that they took with them, "the book of the holy Rule which the aforesaid father had written, some other books, the weight for bread and the measure for wine, and what furniture they could get away."² No doubt Paul the Deacon lists the items in order of importance. Their most valued item was the original autograph of their *Rule* for communal life written by Monte Cassino's founder and first abbot. While a few copies of the Rule of St. Benedict were already in circulation the survival of this original manuscript penned by Benedict some 50 years earlier was a token of inspiration as the monks re-established themselves in Rome.

Today, on every continent, thousands of monks, nuns, sisters and lay persons live a spiritual lifestyle laid down by this reluctant and humble monk. Whether we know it or not, whether we acknowledge it or not, we, specifically we in the west, have all in some way been influenced by a simple, honest, unobtrusive little book known as the Rule of St. Benedict. The fact that the Rule, written 1500 years ago, is not only read and studied today but followed by communities of religious as well as a growing number of lay people may be interesting enough. But when we consider the modest origins of St.

¹ St. Gregory the Great, *The Life of Our Most Holy Father Saint Benedict: The Second Book of the Dialogues*, p. 61.

² Taken from IV. 17 *Historia Langobardorum* by Paul the Deacon, also called Paul Warnefrid, himself a Lombard (AD 725-799), as cited in *St. Benedict: The Story of the Man and His Work* by Abbot Justin McCann.

Benedict's Rule in light of its endurance through the time of the Gothic wars, the collapse of Rome and the ushering in of the so called Dark Ages its survival takes on a more remarkable status.

St. Benedict's Rule does have several literary antecedents. Pachomius' Rule, Basil's Rule, Cassian's Institutes, the Rule of the Master, the Rule of St. Columbanus and St Augustine's Rule, although not all relics are more often consigned to the deliberations of a few historians. Benedict's Rule has not merely survived; it has subsumed and eclipsed all others. Paradoxically Benedict's Rule is, in a word, archaic and by our contemporary sensibilities, authoritarian. Yet it is enjoying a resurgence of interest and its popularity, through thoughtful and creative interpreters, is growing. The question has been made obvious enough. Why has it endured? Was it through the accidents of history or is the Rule's endurance due to the unpretentious wisdom of St. Benedict and the intrinsic value of his short work?

In order to begin to understand Benedict's Rule it's important we understand St. Benedict's culture and monastic climate. Towards the close of the fifth century, Rome, the Eternal City, as Virgil coined it, was in the final stages of collapse. Successive barbarian invasions beginning with Alaric the Visigoth, through Attila and his Huns, the Vandals and the Ostrogoths broke the back and spirit of Rome and the Western Empire. Real power shifted progressively to the barbarian invaders and the See of Rome was ostensibly at the mercy of this power. Since Constantine the church was closely tied with the state and one might have expected that the ruination of the Rome would be the ruination of the Church. But the Church's pre-eminence, while at times reduced to puppet status, survived. This was due to the monastic movement and to a lesser extent the political intentions of the barbarian leaders. The invading tribes "did not so much want to destroy Rome as to succeed to its splendour".³ In this desire to succession of Rome, the Church was necessarily interlinked. But it was monasticism that contained the

³ J. G. Davies, *The Early Christian Church: A History of Its First Five Centuries*, (Grand Rapids, 1965), p. 230. Davies here quotes Ataulf the Visigoth, cited from Orosius, vii. 42. "At first I longed to obliterate the Roman name and to convert all Roman soil into an empire of the Goths... But I have been taught by much experience that the unbridled licence of the Goths will never admit of their obeying laws, and without laws a republic is not a republic. I have therefore chosen the safer course of aspiring to the glory of restoring and increasing the Roman name by Gothic vigour; and I hope to be handed down to posterity as the initiator of Roman restoration."

vitality and strength that the Church desperately needed during this time. J. G. Davies concludes that, “Amidst the external tumults of the barbarian invasions and the internal struggles of doctrinal dispute the Church managed to preserve its identity thanks not a little to the fostering of its spiritual life by the developing monastic movement.”⁴ The corollary to this was that monasteries began to supply the Church with most of her clergy.

Monasticism, as its name implies, was first an individual pursuit and search for God. The seeds of Christian monasticism are found in the silent years and the desert experience of Jesus and in the life of John the Baptist. From here the desert Fathers come easily enough to mind, particularly the more famous St. Anthony. However as a distinct and ordered movement monasticism emerges first in the fourth century. This was no coincidence as it was precisely in the period after Constantine’s conversion.⁵ When the persecutions of Christians stopped and the legitimization of Christianity came about not through its own intrinsic *spirit* and worth but through political proclamation and cultural adaptation, then the church was never in more danger. A significant number of Christian men and women understood this and retreated to communities dedicated to prayer and purity of heart. “Martyrs inwardly in heart and conscience, the monks kept alive the spirit of self-sacrifice at a time when martyrdom of blood had ceased. They acted as a counterbalance to an established Christianity, reminding the church at large that God’s kingdom is not to be identified with any earthly realm.”⁶

With St. Pachomius the face of Western monasticism began to change from a strict individualism and spiritual athleticism to the communal and the less heroic. The monastic hallmarks of asceticism and piety were retained but they began to be reinterpreted in more ordinary and humane ways. Pachomius was the first to write a *Rule* setting down directives for communal monastic life.⁷ From here we find a loose progression of *rules* through to St. Benedict. While St. Pachomius and others started the moderating of monastic life it is St. Benedict that stands as Western monasticism’s chief

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

⁵ Kallistos Ware, “Eastern Christendom”, *The Oxford History of Christianity*, ed. John McManners, (New York, 1990), p. 139.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

⁷ Helen Waddell, *The Desert Fathers*, (New York, 1998), p. xxviii.

unifier and moderator of communal life. “With the Rule of St. Benedict supremely, the monastic community was launched on the road of catering for ordinary people rather than a spiritual elite.”⁸ During Benedict’s time Christian monasticism had reached a critical mass. Monasticism, due considerably to the chaotic and uncertain times, was growing but there was little convergence. That is to say every monastery was essentially an entity in and of itself and subsequently followed whatever mix of available rules seemed suitable. The influence of Benedict’s Rule and his communal model balancing work and prayer changed this. The result was that from the seventh century onward the Benedictines brought Christianity and civilization to most of Europe. It was, as the tag ran, through, *cruse, libro et atro*, with cross book and plough. “Before long the whole of western Christendom was carrying a scattering of monasteries like a mantle.”⁹

In every country of Europe the Benedictine’s or the black monks, as they became known, established themselves as landowners, administrators, bishops, writers and artists. In England half of the cathedrals were under Benedictine rule.¹⁰ However according to A. G. Dickens it is easy to overestimate the scale of monasticism in the Middle Ages particularly in England because of their notorious tendency to overbuild. “The huge and romantic piles of masonry left on such sights as Fountain and Rievaulx... can prove highly misleading.”¹¹ He goes on to explain that by the time of the English Reformation many of the monasteries were severely under populated. As few as 20 monks and clerics were waited on by three times as many servants. Dickens believes this shows that the influence of monasticism on the church and on society is overrated. While this was true of seventeenth century English Benedictines and while over the centuries the Benedictine movement was in occasional need of external and internal reformation this doesn’t disprove the overall phenomenal influence of monasticism and specifically the influence of St. Benedict. Historian Esther de Waal is convinced that to write a history of the Benedictines in the Middle Ages would not only be to write a history of the

⁸ See Robert Markus, “From Rome to the Barbarian Kingdoms”, ed. John McManners, *The Oxford History of Christianity*, (New York, 1990), p. 76.

⁹ Esther de Waal, *Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict*, (Collegeville, 1984), p. 20.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹¹ A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation*, (London, 1986), p. 80.

church, it would be to write a history of medieval society.¹² Ironically the early Benedictine monks never intended to influence the church; and neither did they intend to effect social change. Benedict never intended to be anything more than a monk seeking God while living in community with other brothers. And there is no evidence that he ever intended his *Rule* to be anything other than a guide for practical and spiritual conduct.

This lack of intention regarding any form of personal notoriety no less regarding things beyond his cloister makes St Benedict historically elusive. Benedict, unlike many spiritual notables, never wrote his memoirs, never kept a journal, never composed essays or as far as we know never sent letters. Benedict “is almost an enigma for the historian, or, at all events, one of those brilliant figures whose very radiance prevents his individual features from showing through very clearly.”¹³ This featurelessness is a problem since to try to grasp the essence and perennial persistence of St. Benedict’s Rule we are compelled to ask about the person Benedict. Oddly, adding confusion to this historical quest is his only biographer, St Gregory. To say that Gregory was Benedict’s biographer however is misleading. St. Gregory the Great, born a few years before the death of Benedict, and who wrote his *Dialogues* fifty years later, never set out to write a straight forward historical account of Benedict. As Gregory’s favourite endearment for Benedict, *man of God*, indicates, he was concerned instead with showing his readers what God could do in a holy and virtuous person. His *Life of Our Most Holy Father Saint Benedict* contained in *The Second Book of the Dialogues* is a highly mythical account showing Benedict as a miracle worker, prophet and holy man. Although the *Dialogues* have a tendency to obscure the person of Benedict they nevertheless do give us names and places. However the only example that can be fully substantiated is the storied visit of Totila, King of the Goths, who received a reproach and prophecy from St. Benedict. The visit has been verified to have taken place in 543 AD.¹⁴ This visit has also helped historians establish the Saint’s death in 547 AD.

¹² Esther De Waal, *Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict*, (Collegeville, 1984), p. 21.

¹³ Henri Daniel-Rops, *The Church in the Dark Ages*, Volume I, (Garden City, 1962), p. 348.

¹⁴ See Hugh Edmund Ford, *The Catholic Encyclopedia, Volume II*, Copyright © 1907 by Robert Appleton Company, Online Edition Copyright © 1999 by Kevin Knight, *Imprimatur*. +John M. Farley, Archbishop of New York, http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/St_Benedict_of_Nursia.htm

Benedict, and a twin sister Scholastica, “was born in the province of Nursia of honourable parentage and sent to Rome to study the liberal sciences.”¹⁵ Sickened by the depravity he found in Rome he abandoned his schooling, as Gregory puts it, “skilfully ignorant and wisely unlearned.”¹⁶ Residing first at Affile with a handmaid he soon left everything and secretly came to a mountainous cave at Subiaco some forty miles from Rome. From his cave he could see the ruins of Nero’s palace and the broken arches of a Roman aqueduct further below, symbols of a decaying society.¹⁷ Benedict, with occasional visits from the hermit mentor Romanus, lived as a solitary for three years in his *sacro speco*, or cave. It was during this solitude that he developed the ideas which lie at the heart of the Rule.¹⁸ His isolation was eventually intruded upon and his first visitors, recognizing the sagacity of this man of prayer spread the news of his retreat. Gregory tells us, “By this means his name began to be famous in the country, and many did resort unto him, bringing with them necessaries for his body, while they received from his lips the food of life.”¹⁹ Ultimately many desired to stay and in time twelve small cloisters or monasteries were formed close by on the side of the mountain. Each cloister had twelve or more disciples. We are not told why Benedict, now fifty years of age, went from here to Monte Cassino however there is a cryptic reference by Mark, the monk-poet of Monte Cassino, which is dated from the eighth century.

But holy Benedict, by God called from the desert lone,
Made pure this port, the statues broke, threw down the sculptur’d stone.
A temple for the living God this idol fane is now:
Let not the faithful soul delay to pay his pious vow,²⁰

¹⁵ St. Gregory the Great, *The Life of Our Most Holy Father Saint Benedict: The Second Book of the Dialogues*, p. 10.

¹⁶ *ibid*, p. 10.

¹⁷ Esther de Waal, *Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict*, (Collegeville, 1984), p. 16.

¹⁸ Lavinia Byrne, *The Life and Wisdom of Benedict*, (London, 1998), p.8.

¹⁹ St. Gregory the Great, *The Life of Our Most Holy Father Saint Benedict: The Second Book of the Dialogues*, p. 15.

²⁰ See Mark a monk, Disciple of the Holy Father Benedict. P.31 *The Life of Our most Holy Father S. Benedict* Gregory I, St. (c. 540-604) Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library 2000-07-09

We may speculate from this that Benedict, having begun as a solitary and having become a social monk through God's progressive guidance, felt called to continue to Christianize his region through developing Christian communes in places of pagan worship. Or perhaps his move was simply the practical necessity of space and the fact that the razed temple at Monte Cassino, a temple which was used for the worship of Jupiter, Apollo and Venus, would provide building material for a new complex. Whatever Benedict's reasons for moving, Monte Cassino became his principal establishment. It is here most of St. Gregory's stories of the Saint took place and it is here we find the mature Benedict, it is here where he writes his Rule.

St. Gregory's accounting of the life of St. Benedict does leave us with more questions than answers. Strictly speaking, to go any further than these few gleanings from the *Dialogues* would be to pass from history to legend. No doubt, "Contemporary historians are embarrassed by these legends as they do not carry the force of accurate historical information."²¹ But to dismiss them out of hand would be to miss a dimension of Benedict's life that finds some parallel within the Rule of St. Benedict. There is a playfulness about Gregory's legends that asks for a special kind of attention and gives us a special kind of information. St. Gregory's illustrated and illuminated journey of St. Benedict operates much like biblical stories and his intimate acquaintance with the Rule finds expression within his biography. The *Dialogues* show Benedict's journey from Rome to Monte Cassino, from the narrow way of obedient labour and suffering, to delight and intimacy with God and his kingdom. The journey culminates in Benedict's vision of the whole world in one ray of light.²² Benedict's Rule is also the invitation to journey towards God by throwing off the sloth of disobedience and running towards God through obedience, labour and prayer. "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."²³ This

²¹ Lavinia Byrne, *The Life and Wisdom of Benedict*, (London, 1998), p.6.

²² St. Gregory the Great, *The Life of Our Most Holy Father Saint Benedict: The Second Book of the Dialogues*, p. 99.

²³ St. Benedict, *The Rule of St. Benedict in English*, ed., Timothy Fry, (Collegeville, 1981), p. 19.

was, as Gregory portrays it, Benedict's journey; and it is this journey, offered in the Rule, that gripped St. Gregory.

St. Gregory's admiration and devotion of St. Benedict is genuine. But as Pope, Gregory also understood the importance of a Saint like Benedict to sixth century Italy, a country now devastated and seemingly without hope. St. Gregory's overarching motive is made clear in chapter one of the *Dialogues*, "that the life of Benedict should be manifest to the world for an example to all men, that the candle wet upon a candlestick might shine and give light to the whole Church of God". Although Gregory leaves us with a featureless Benedict allowing only a few personal facts he bestows on succeeding generations a model pilgrim, a man of God, a heroic figure worthy to be followed. As we shall see St. Benedict's importance to Gregory is only eclipsed by St. Gregory's importance to the Benedictine movement and the Rule of St. Benedict. It is to the Rule that St. Gregory directs his readers. "Only this I would not have you to be ignorant of, that the man of God, among so many miracles wherewith he shined to the world, was also eminent for his doctrine, for he wrote a Rule for Monks both excellent for discretion and eloquent in style."²⁴ He also points to the Rule for any who wish to learn more of St. Benedict the man. Towards the end of the *Dialogues* Gregory, enjoins, "Of whose life and conversation if any wish to know further, he may in the institution of that Rule understand all his manner of life and discipline, for the holy man could not possibly teach otherwise than he lived."²⁵

If St. Benedict's life and teaching are in fact one document, that is, if Benedict could not possibly teach otherwise than he lived, his Rule becomes a compelling resource for any Christian intent on a quest for holiness. On one level this alone guarantees the Rule's agelessness. And in some sense this desire for God, this holy longing, found in the Rule, mirrors something of Holy Scripture. It's not surprising then that even a cursory reading through the Rule of St. Benedict will find one steeped in scripture. Therefore on another but related level, an obvious reason that the Rule has endured over the centuries is because it takes its cue from scripture. While the Rule can be categorized

²⁴ St. Gregory the Great, *The Life of Our Most Holy Father Saint Benedict: The Second Book of the Dialogues*, p. 103.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

into four major sections, the call and spiritual foundation, the structure of liturgical prayer, the structure and practices of common life, and the basic theology of monastic life, the Rule is replete with biblical references throughout.²⁶ Its breath and its life blood is scripture. It is especially close to the gospels and the Psalms. In seventy-three short chapters there are one hundred twenty-six biblical citations in the Rule. Fifty-five are from books of the New Testament, and seventy-one from the Old Testament. Of these seventy-one, fifty are taken directly from the Psalms. To see Benedict's use of scripture in the Rule as mere proof texts however would be a mistake. Columba Stewart has observed that often, especially in the early chapters, "biblical quotations carry the narrative line".²⁷ One example will be appropriate. In the prologue, as part of St. Benedict's challenging invitation he says: *run while you have the light of life, that the darkness of death may not overtake you.*²⁸ Benedict weaves the Bible into the Rule. As he does the Rule itself becomes *lectio divina*, sacred and meditative reading. This narrative use of scripture is one of St. Benedict's favourite techniques. In this example he takes John 12:35 changes the word walk to run and adds the word life and the word death. Scripture is adapted to Benedict's purpose of activation while retaining its message.

Benedict wasn't a systematic theologian; he was an interpreter and practitioner of scripture. And it was his belief that religious would be steeped in scripture. Beyond the Rule's own saturation in scripture is St. Benedict's prescription of liturgical prayer, in Benedict's term, the *Opus Dei*.²⁹ From Chapters eight through to twenty he outlines the number and arrangement for the choral recitation of the Psalms as well as the reading of other biblical passages. And in his last chapter entitled, *This Rule is Only a Beginning of Perfection*, he asks, "What page, what passage of the inspired books of the Old and New Testaments is not the truest guides for human life?"³⁰ St. Benedict never intended for the

²⁶ Columba Stewart, *Prayer and Community*, (Maryknoll, 1998), p. 20.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

²⁸ St. Benedict, *The Rule of St. Benedict in English*, ed. Timothy Fry OSB. (Collegeville, 1981), p. 16.

²⁹ Lit., Work of God. This designation indicates St. Benedict's high regard and centrality of prayer in monastic life.

³⁰ St. Benedict, *The Rule of St. Benedict in English*, ed. Timothy Fry, (Collegeville, 1981), p. 95.

Rule to be an end in itself, his design was that it would always point beyond itself. The Rule's pattern of external referencing is not confined to scripture. He also asks his monks to reflect upon the writings of other *holy catholic Fathers*. In the last chapter of the Rule Benedict makes explicit reference to St. Basil's rule and to Cassian's *Conferences* and *Institutes*.

St. Benedict was not the first writer of rules. He was however the first to stand in the privileged position that saw a significant culmination and accumulation of much monastic wisdom literature. This literature was in the forms of written rules, biography, autobiography as well as sayings and anecdotes. St. Benedict seems to have prepared himself for the Rule's composition by an intensive study of all previous monastic literature, from St. Anthony to his own day. He chose and altered, rejected or rewrote what Jerome and Augustine and Pachomius and Rufinus and what many others laid down.³¹ One finds Benedict quoting St. Augustine, St. Jerome, St. Cyprian and St. Leo while also displaying a conversance with St. Basil, St. Pachomius, St. Macarius of Alexandria, St. Orsiesius and other anonymous rules.³² Notably, his training in pagan classics such as Virgil and Sallust, can also be traced.³³ In writing his Rule Benedict has ostensibly taken from the best of monastic tradition and masterfully summed up all that was durable and efficacious from over 200 years of monastic life and experience. While Benedict's sources were eclectic he was clearly indebted to the ideals of Cassian.³⁴ However regarding the text of the Rule he was even more indebted to an anonymous monk who wrote the idiosyncratic Rule of the Master.³⁵

³¹ John Chapman, *St. Benedict and the Sixth Century*, (Westport, 1971) p. 196.

³² Justin McCann, *St. Benedict: The Story of the Man and His Work*, (Garden City, 1958), p. 102.

³³ Eleanor Shipley Duckett, *The Gateway to the Middle Ages: Monasticism*, (New York, 1990), p. 172.

³⁴ In turn, because of Benedict's referral, Cassian was not only saved from obscurity he became an important *spiritual guide* of Western monasticism. See Owen Chadwick's Introduction to John Cassian's *Conferences*. p. 29.

³⁵ The Rule of the Master, which is at least three times as long as Benedict's Rule, was thought to be a later rule, part copy and part paraphrase of the Rule of St. Benedict. The issue was still contested as late as 1958 where Justin McCann argues in his book for Benedict being the source for the Master. The matter is settled in current scholarship. Benedict used the Rule of the Master as a primary source (Kardong et al.).

Many examples could be given of Benedict's use of the Master. From the outset Benedict expropriated the commentary on Psalms 15 and 34 from the *Master's* introduction. These forty verses from the Master's rule make up the bulk of Benedict's prologue.³⁶ Benedict however edits and frames this co-opted commentary with his own thoughts giving it its own distinctive flavour. Much of the Rule, excepting the last few chapters, is more traditional than original. But in this construction lays Benedict's wisdom, discretion and inspiration. Benedict's Rule is a harmony of his allegiance to the wisdom and learning of the past, his existential understanding of humanity and his own vision of communal monastic life. Compiling and editing was Benedict's forte but he was not without creativity, originality and foresight. This becomes obvious in some of the differences between the Master and Benedict. In the Rule of the Master the monk's expectation of spiritual reward is ever and only heavenly. All that the "imperfect" monk can hope for is a heavenly reward.³⁷ Benedict however is forthright in his expectation of spiritual reward here in this world. In his last chapter he chronicles a high hope with "heights of perfection" for those having begun with his "little rule for beginners".

But there is more that sets Benedict's Rule apart not only from the Master's Rule but from all other rules and that is his pervasive refrain of encouraging Christian altruism. There are instances of Benedict exhorting monks to empathy throughout the rule however Chapter 72 is solely dedicated to the Pauline ethic of altruism. In this chapter Benedict continues in the vein of Romans 12:10 saying that the good zeal of monks is about, "...supporting with the greatest patience one another's weaknesses of body or behaviour, and earnestly competing in obedience to one another. No one is to pursue what he judges better for himself, but instead, what he judges better for someone else."³⁸ It is astonishing that this ideal and ethic of altruism is either limited or absent in other *rules*. Benedict seems to be the first not simply to adopt it but to esteem it and make it something of a hallmark of monastic communal life. The French Benedictine scholar, Andre Borias, in his full-length study of Chapter 72, had surveyed all rules and wonders

³⁶ Terrence G. Kardong, *Benedict's Rule: A Translation and Commentary*, (Collegeville, 1996), p. 26.

³⁷ *Ibid.* p. 618.

³⁸ St. Benedict, *The Rule of St. Benedict in English*, ed. Timothy Fry OSB. (Collegeville, 1981), pp. 94-95.

why only Benedict picked up on the idea.³⁹ One might be tempted to think that because Benedict's is the first thoroughly communal rule that this ethic is introduced because of the Abbot's expeditious desire for a smooth running monastery. But knowing Benedict's humility and loyalty to scripture not to mention his stand on mutual obedience that includes the abbot, this must be false. It is true that most other rules are oriented toward the individual and are concerned about the individual monk's ascetic growth and behaviour. Yet one would presume that selfless consideration of other monks within a cloister would be important enough to mention. Even St. Augustine's substantially communal rule lacks the attention that St. Benedict gives this moral precept.

In Benedict's hands one sees a shift within monasticism. He wrote his Rule over several years and more importantly lived it before it was ever codified. Consequently Benedict shows an awareness and overarching concern for the individual monk within the monastic family. His aim was for an achievable ascetic. As a result the Rule is an antidote to the harsh asceticism of the desert fathers and to the other rules that were then circulating. "...when set against the other rules such as that of St. Columbanus, that of St. Benedict was so infinitely more humane, more moderate, and less excessive, that favourable comparisons swiftly resulted, and it attracted large numbers of postulants."⁴⁰ In fact the Rule's radical shift towards humanizing ascetic life has made it an instrument of general Christian appeal.

Another important aspect of Benedict's Rule is that when one examines it from the inside one finds nothing of the *celebrity* of Benedict. Benedict doesn't include personal experience or anything like an idiosyncratic theology. St. Benedict's spirit is not found in a religious family which formed around him so that his personality became the starting point of its growth. Instead Benedict's personality is sufficiently diffused throughout the document.⁴¹ Therefore there was and is no real chance of the formation of a cult of St. Benedict. This is important because *rules* for community life that contain

³⁹ See Kardong, *Benedict's Rule*, pp. 600-602 As far as this has been ascertainable Borias' work remains untranslated from the French

⁴⁰ Henri Daniel-Rops, *The Church in the Dark Ages*, Volume I, Trans. Audrey Bulter. (Garden City, 1962) p. 354.

⁴¹ Daniel Rees, *Consider Your Call: A Theology of Monastic Life Today*, (Kalamazoo, 1980), p. 46.

too much of the author's personality are subsequently bound to the person and in some sense bound to time and place. Although rules like these may always serve as references they eventually become obsolete and irrelevant for monastic life. In part at least this is what happened with the Rule of the Master, the Rule of St. Columbanus and others. When the "spiritual Father" departs, the followers wander and the community eventually dissolves.

More importantly, because of St. Benedict's diffident presence within the rule, the rule becomes essentially open to development. The Latin *regula* means model or framework. Benedict saw the importance of structure and stability balanced by context and exception. One clear example of this is Benedict's concern for the elderly and children. He reasons,

"Since their lack of strength must always be taken into account, they should certainly not be required to follow the strictness of the rule with regard to food, but should be treated with kindly consideration and allowed to eat before the regular hours."⁴²

If Benedictine monasteries frequently diverge from the Rule it is because there is a freedom and fluidity built within the rule but always there is conformity to the spirit of St. Benedict. It is also worth mentioning that the Rule was rewritten at least five times from a feminine point of view. There are extant copies of these *feminine* Rules dating to the thirteenth century.⁴³

It is important nevertheless not to overemphasize St. Benedict's consolations by neglecting to point out some of the more stringent aspects of the Rule. While Benedict calls his rule "a small rule for beginners", and while at the end of the Prologue he assures his monks that he is setting down, "nothing harsh, nothing burdensome" it is, after all, a Rule that in many cases seems all too unedifying and authoritarian. The so-called penal

⁴² St. Benedict, *The Rule of St. Benedict in English*, ed., Timothy Fry, (Collegeville, 1981), p. 60.

⁴³ See (<http://www.osb.org/aba/rb/feminine/index.htm#latin>) Winteneys Latin Version (early 13th c.; Latin), Northern Prose Version (early 15th c.; Middle English), Northern Metrical Version (mid 15th c.; Middle English), Caxton Version (ca. 1491; Middle English), Foxe Version (1516; Early Modern English), Altenburg Version (1505; Middle High German), Friedenspring Version (15th c.; Early Modern German), Dijon Version (13th c.; Old French)

codes that take up a full eleven chapters of the Rule are difficult to abide or in some cases take seriously. In places throughout the Rule Benedict will often end a chapter with a threat of punishment. In Chapter 65 where Benedict discusses the Abbot's authority in the monastery Kardong concedes, "...it should be admitted candidly that Benedict can become quite furious in the face of what he perceives to be a challenge to monastic authority."⁴⁴ Nevertheless Benedict ends this chapter with an entreaty to the Abbot to reflect that he himself must give an accounting to God. As we have come to expect, St. Benedict is progressive and conciliatory compared to other rules. Where the Master is concerned with retribution, Benedict is concerned with reconciliation.⁴⁵ Where Cassian uses expulsion from the community as punishment, Benedict begins with internal expulsion, for example, exclusion from the communal meal. This is to say nothing of Rules such as that of St. Colomanus who made frequent use of the birch-rod; six strokes for the monk who had forgotten to say Amen or who had sung out of tune, and so on up to two hundred for serious offences.⁴⁶ Furthermore, Benedict's code is far more orderly; procedurally it is based on Matthew 18:15. What one is left with after taking into account the ascetic ethos, the monastic climate, the Roman legalisms, the cultural anarchy is that the rule is a forward thinking piece of creative writing that has few peers with respect to simplicity and economy of style and in part because of this it has shaped all of Western monasticism.

Taking a broad view, the other body of material within the Rule, beyond the detailed prescriptions for monastic life is spiritual teaching. At the heart of this teaching and arguably at the heart of the Rule is prayer. Benedict imposes a daily and seasonal rhythm and pattern for prayer. His monks were to pray without ceasing and in this show and develop an unassailable devotion to Christ. It is clear to Benedict that in this way of prayer not only is there personal transformation, one's place and standing, one's culture, is reconstituted and made over in Christ. A salient example of this is Benedict's Christianizing of Roman allegiance to civil rule, order and devotion to emperors. Joan

⁴⁴ Terrence G. Kardong, *Benedict's Rule: A Translation and Commentary*, (Collegeville, 1996), p. 377.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

⁴⁶ Henri Daniel-Rops, *The Church in the Dark Ages*, Volume I, Trans. Audrey Bulter. (Garden City, 1962) p. 373.

Chittister observes in her commentary of the Rule that Benedict scheduled prayer times during the day to coincide with the changing of the Roman imperial guard. So while Rome, indeed, at that time the world, was revering its secular leaders St. Benedict was teaching his community to return that homage to God.⁴⁷

In his Rule Benedict also reforms the role of abbot. Here Benedict seems to have in mind a kind of communal model reflecting Christ's relationship with his disciples. While maintaining and even reaffirming traditional authority for abbots Benedict displays a new sense of respect and empathy for those in the abbot's charge. What is unique to Benedict's Rule is that he makes this a distinctive aspect of leadership a special duty of the abbot.⁴⁸ Furthermore, the abbot, although teacher and interpreter, and although *standing in* for Christ, is not above the Rule.⁴⁹ The crucial development in Benedict's legislative code is that the abbot is now organically linked to the Rule.⁵⁰ This is a movement toward a more integrated form of authority. There is no question that a hierarchy is assumed but Benedict has purposefully created a tension between commander and servant. His method balances the positions of above community, within community and beneath community. There is in this Benedictine model a recognition of the abbots own poverty and fallibility. This recognition, this way of seeing the office of the abbot is distinctive of the Rule and an endearing hallmark of St. Benedict.

The common sense, the spirituality and eloquence of the Rule of St. Benedict has attended to its survival. But if not for other forces of history these qualities alone may have been insufficient for the Rule's insistent presence no less than its eventual sweep of Europe. There is some dispute with respect to the speed and mode of the Rule's dispersal. Dom John Chapman contends that the dissemination of the Rule was rapid. His argument rests on the theory that Abbot Benedict of Monte Cassino was commissioned to write a Rule for the cause of universalising the governance of monasticism. If it had been a commissioned work, specifically commissioned by Pope

⁴⁷ Joan Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict: Insight for the Ages*, (New York, 2000), p. 85.

⁴⁸ Adalbert de Vogue, *The Rule of St. Benedict: A Doctoral and Spiritual Commentary*, (Kalamazoo, 1983), p. 72.

⁴⁹ St. Benedict, *The Rule of St. Benedict in English*, ed., Timothy Fry, (Collegeville, 1981), p. 26.

⁵⁰ Daniel Rees, *Consider Your Call: A Theology of Monastic Life Today*, (Kalamazoo, 1980), p. 90.

St. Hormisdas and meant to be a permanent code of religious law, as is Chapman's theory, then the Rule would have had an unparalleled head start with respect to its endurance.⁵¹ In fact the question of the Rule's survival and longevity might be sufficiently answered by this fact alone. This is due to the weight of import that the papacy and succeeding pontificates would place on such a document.

Part of the theory is based on the structure, symmetry and phraseology of the Rule. Abbot Chapman believes that it finds its parallel in the canons and laws of the era and he cannot believe that Benedict would make such an elaborate study of monastic, ecclesiastical and civil law merely to govern his own monastery.⁵² But Chapman is hypothesizing here. Granted, Benedict was obviously aware of other monasteries particularly those in Rome, however there is no real reason to suppose that he considered a larger audience while writing his Rule and everything we know about Benedict would resist this conclusion. Obviously one can only speculate as to the audience St. Benedict held in his mind as he wrote but it seems safest to assume he was concerned specifically if not exclusively for his own monks. With respect to Benedict's language it is true that the Rule is framed in legislative and legal terminology. It has even been used in the study of law as an example of efficiency and brevity. But that this document is an excellent example of legislative language and therefore proof of Benedict's extra attention due to a papal request, while possible, is far from necessary. Benedict was born and brought up as a citizen of Rome and as such inherited the idea of the Roman civil rule and order. Even in Rome's state of decay the ideal of social and civil order was still a strong influence among its citizens, perhaps even more so in the nostalgic shadow of its former greatness. Benedict's schooling would only have added to his idiomatic proclivity so there is nothing external necessary for his use of legal language.

The other part of Chapman's "papal petition" theory is his speculation that, "The Holy Rule was famous at Constantinople in 530, in Gaul in 534, in Africa at the same date, as well as in Italy."⁵³ For proof of this he points out that Ferrandus, Cassiodorus and Dionysius Exiguus and the Gothic Emperor Justinian all quote and make copious use

⁵¹ John Chapman, *St. Benedict and the Sixth Century*, (Westport, 1971), pp. 194-204

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 203.

⁵³ John Chapman, *St. Benedict and the Sixth Century*, (Westport, 1971), p. 195.

of the Rule. Abbot Chapman's argument rests on the Rule's celebrity. Plainly he needs to show that these men of prominence used the Rule as a direct source for their own publications. He gives the example of Cassiodorus, a contemporary of Benedict, a Roman of noble birth, grandson of a general and son of a diplomat who had accepted service under the Theodoric the Arian Goth and who eventually founded his own monastery and wrote his own rule. Chapman alleges that Cassiodorus knew Benedict's Rule intimately and demonstrates this by marshalling a substantial list of comparisons showing what he believes is an overwhelming resemblance between the two rules.⁵⁴ Even before checking with other Latin scholars the difficulty is immediately obvious when we remember that St. Benedict has himself used all of the available monastic literature in compiling his Rule. McCann reasons that the resemblances are more likely attributable to Cassian and other common monastic sources.⁵⁵

The primary difficulty for Chapman's theory is that later scholarship has shown that the diffusion of St. Benedict's Rule was anything but swift.⁵⁶ It is true that within a generation the Rule of Benedict was gaining some local notoriety. But in the main it remained one among several rules. Much like Benedict himself other abbot's felt free to borrow, combine and adapt the many available rules and as a result Benedict's Rule was initially a source and not a norm within monasteries.⁵⁷ However a generation after St. Benedict's death this began to change. The fire that burned the hottest and spread the furthest in establishing the Rule and the way of St. Benedict was that of the life and work of Gregory the Great. In the emphatic words of Justin McCann, "It may be said with justice that he was the greatest and most powerful influence in the propagation of Benedictinism, and he may even be regarded as its co-founder."⁵⁸

Gregory's schooling was the best available given the degenerated state of education. More importantly, his family contained many examples of Christian piety. His mother Sylvia and two aunts were all later canonized by the church. Additionally, he

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 88-110.

⁵⁵ Justin McCann, *St. Benedict: The Story of the Man and His Work*, (Garden City, 1958), p. 149.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

⁵⁷ Columba Stewart, *Prayer and Community*, (Maryknoll, 1998), p. 21.

⁵⁸ Justin McCann, *St. Benedict: The Story of the Man and His Work*, (Garden City, 1958), p. 8.

was a direct descendant of Pope St. Felix III. Answering an inner calling Gregory became a monk. His desire was to live out a peaceful life as a humble brother, dedicating himself to God through study and prayer. This was not to be. His gifts of leadership, administration and diplomacy were everywhere evident. As a result in this time of momentous upheaval St. Gregory's ascendancy to the papacy was a forgone conclusion. St. Gregory was himself, as St. Benedict had been, a reluctant leader. But in 590 AD, once accepting the mantle he set about his work with unparalleled imagination and vigour. Gregory's pontificate, as appraised by Catholic historian Henri Daniel-Rops, "was certainly the most outstanding in the whole period covering the centuries between the Invasion and the Middle Ages." He goes on to conclude that Gregory's was the pontificate in which the Papacy assumed its leading position, a position it maintained throughout the centuries that followed.⁵⁹

St. Gregory nevertheless remained a monk at heart and his attraction to the Rule and appropriation of the way of St. Benedict was total. He surrounded himself with monks and he used monks in all of his endeavours and enterprises. He was convinced that the monastic system had a very special value for the Church, and so he did everything in his power toward its propagation. Gregory spent his entire and considerable patrimony in founding abbeys and he urged the wealthy to establish or support monasteries.⁶⁰ Here, in these abbeys, this well-stationed disciple of Benedict gave the Rule its foundational bearing. For Gregory there was only one Rule, Benedict's Rule for Monks; he called it the *Regula monachorum*.⁶¹ The influence of an essentially Benedictine pontificate set the stage for the Rule to become, after scripture, the most widely circulated text of the Middle Ages.

St. Gregory was known also for his compassion and humanity. He vigorously defended the right of Jews to maintain and attend their synagogues. He loved and cared deeply for the people in his oppressed country. His compassion extended itself to the occupying barbarians. His great concern was the evangelization of the Lombards and the

⁵⁹ Henri Daniel-Rops, *The Church in the Dark Ages*, Volume I, Trans. Audrey Bulter. (Garden City, 1962) p. 291-292.

⁶⁰ Online Catholic Encyclopaedia (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06780a.htm>)

⁶¹ St. Gregory the Great, *The Life of Our Most Holy Father Saint Benedict: The Second Book of the Dialogues*, p. 103.

Byzantines. His missionary zeal also drew his attention to distant horizons. Of great significance with respect to the circulation of St. Benedict's Rule was Gregory's mission to and *conversion* of England primarily through the monk Augustine. St. Gregory not only planted the Rule into the hearts and minds of subsequent generations of monks, he was the catalyst that established and propelled the Rule well into the Middle Ages.

During the course of the seventh and eighth centuries monasteries outside of Italy began to follow the Rule of St. Benedict. After the death of the Irish monk St. Columban, the large and influential monastery he founded at Luxeuil in France combined the Rules of Benedict and Columban. In the kingdom of the Franks between the years 663 and 675, a council was held at Autun advocating that the Rule of Benedict be followed in all monasteries. Sometime after the Synod of Whitby, in the late seventh century, Wilfrid of York introduced the Rule to England's Northumbria. The oldest surviving copy of the Rule is dated from this period and is an Anglo-Saxon manuscript.⁶² Back in France at the beginning of the eighth century a band of monks from Fluery made an expedition to Monte Cassino and returned with the bones of St. Benedict and those of his sister Scholastica. They renamed their monastery in honour of St. Benedict.⁶³

By the ninth century, the time of Charlemagne, king of the Franks, conqueror of the Lombards and Saxons, the monastic movement had permeated the West but had in some sense, particularly in the European continent, become moribund. Emperor Charlemagne, noted for mingling in the affairs of all areas of church and state, applied himself to this problem. He had what is believed to be the genuine text of Benedict's Rule sent to him from the long re-established Monte Cassino.⁶⁴ He then gave fundamental support to the great Benedictine reformer St Benedict of Aniane. This monk of monumental energy and determination strove for a unity of all monastic observance. Benedict of Aniane catalogued all available rules in the ninth century in an effort to

⁶² See E. A. Lowe, *Codices Antiquiores Latini*, as cited by John J. Contreni, "From Benedict's Rule to Charlemagne's Renaissance: Monastic Education in the Early Middle Ages-and Today", *The American Benedictine Review*, June, 1997, p. 189.

⁶³ John J. Contreni, "From Benedict's Rule to Charlemagne's Renaissance: Monastic Education in the Early Middle Ages-and Today", *The American Benedictine Review*, June 1997, p. 189.

⁶⁴ Henri Daniel-Rops, *The Church in the Dark Ages*, Volume II, Trans. Audrey Bulter. (Garden City, 1962) p. 142.

present and re-establish Benedict's as the Rule of rules. The influence of Benedict of Aniane helped convince the Carolingian religious and political leaders that the Rule provided the blueprint they needed to establish their kingdoms on sound Christian principles.⁶⁵ Historian Henri Daniel-Rops concludes that the decisive triumph of the St. Benedict's Rule dates from this period of Carolingian reform.⁶⁶

The *triumph* of Benedict's Rule was also realized through the reforms of Louis the Pious, Charlemagne's son. Louis, by his father's wishes, received a monastic education and as a result developed a strong affinity to St. Benedict with an attendant allegiance to the Rule. During his reign all monasteries were ordered to adopt Benedict's Rule but more remarkably Louis adopted the Rule as a model for his own Empire. For Louis the best emperor was one who acted like a wise and devout abbot.⁶⁷ In his observance of the Rule Louis recognized possibly even more than his father the value of education for sustaining social and cultural health. Subsequently, to a much greater extent than his father, he went about attracting scholars, artists and poets to monasteries while also consulting them on political issues. Through these Carolingian reforms the Middle Ages saw a sustained monastic influence that was primarily Benedictine. The sum of influence through the educational reforms of Charlemagne and Louis the Pious and later, Charles the Bald, are called by today's historians the Carolingian Renaissance.⁶⁸ Throughout the Middle Ages monastic education revitalised and sustained the intellectual and cultural life of the West. It is not too much to say that at the bottom of this was the pragmatic and spiritual apothegms of St. Benedict's Rule of life.

Through the declining influence of monasticism subsequent to the Reformation, the Enlightenment and through to today's technical revolution the Rule of Benedict remains a half hidden treasure always waiting to be rediscovered and *re-deciphered* by

⁶⁵ John J. Contreni, "From Benedict's Rule to Charlemagne's Renaissance: Monastic Education in the Early Middle Ages-and Today", *The American Benedictine Review*, June 1997, p. 193.

⁶⁶ Henri Daniel-Rops, *The Church in the Dark Ages*, Volume II, Trans. Audrey Bulter. (Garden City, 1962) p. 142.

⁶⁷ John J. Contreni, "From Benedict's Rule to Charlemagne's Renaissance: Monastic Education in the Early Middle Ages-and Today", *The American Benedictine Review*, June 1997, pp. 193-194.

⁶⁸ John J. Contreni, "From Benedict's Rule to Charlemagne's Renaissance: Monastic Education in the Early Middle Ages-and Today", *The American Benedictine Review*, June 1997, p. 193.

seekers. And this rediscovery is going on. The resurgence of interest in Benedict's Rule is now found more often in the lay community. Books continue to be written by lay people who have found the Rule a well-spring of wisdom and spiritual direction. The Rule has been adapted as a model for parents, families, managers and executives. For example, John McQuiston, a lawyer, has adapted the Rule to the circumstances of busy contemporary life; he calls the Benedictine Rule, a way of learning the art of living.⁶⁹ The ancient practice of monastic association and attachment through Oblation is also gaining converts. In her popular and highly acclaimed book, poet Kathleen Norris' describes her own journey as a Benedictine Oblate as a kind of coming home. Through St. Benedict and in his Rule she has discovered a way of living in harmony and balance, and a way, when followed, to live in peace in the circumstances of life and with others.⁷⁰

Knowing St. Benedict's character one should disagree with the thought that Benedict wrote his rule with the view that it become a permanent code of religious law.⁷¹ However we should agree with Abbot Chapman's conjecture that Benedict, "...produced a Rule which was so practical and moderate that it could be enforced as a minimum, and so wise and holy that it could lead saints to perfection."⁷² Writing about this apparent discretion of Benedict Regina Goberna puts these words in the mouth of the Saint:

"If I gather a set of laws, either they will serve to increase the dust of the archives of people who will not even want to look at them, or they will wither up those who want to follow them. No, at the heart of the Rule I shall insert the love of a family. Love is the fundamental rule applicable to everyone. Strong minds will not be disappointed nor weak minds bewildered."⁷³

⁶⁹ John McQuiston II, *Always We Begin Again: The Benedictine Way of Living*, (Harrisburg, 1996), p. 3.

⁷⁰ Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk*, (New York, 1996), pp. 5-9.

⁷¹ John Chapman, *St. Benedict and the Sixth Century*, (Westport, 1971) p. 196-197.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 204.

⁷³ Goberna Regina M., *Our Father St. Benedict*, (New York, 1983), p. 114.

Timothy Fry in fact believes that this manifest discretion, more than any other quality, is the reason for the longevity of the Rule.⁷⁴ Certainly it is discretion that allows for its flexibility and unique malleability. The Rule's discretion opens the door to the unheroic and ordinary monk or lay person. It allows entrance and provides pastoral direction for contemplative and active Christian life.

If one concluded from these and other attestations that the Rule itself argues most persuasively for its record of endurance, one would be mostly right. But as we have seen there were people such as St. Gregory and concomitant events, in the absence of which the Rule might not have had its lasting legacy. Perhaps it may even have been lost. As it stands we could say that the Rule survived because of a conspiracy of accidents and that it endures through its inherent pragmatism and simplicity and its intrinsic spiritual insight.

The Rule of St. Benedict is not a great work in the vein of an Augustine or a St. Teresa and it would be unfair to compare it to such writings. It is instead a subtle and humble little work, easily overlooked, mundane in its prescriptions but bold in its direction. It is arguably a great work in the sense that it sets out a way of life, a balance and moderation, a prayerful focus, and above all a Christ-centric approach to life that speaks to one's deep need for commitment, coherence and community. Writing only a few years ago, Columba Stewart says, "The genius of Benedict was to situate the individual search for God within a communal context that shaped as well as supported the quest."⁷⁵ Perhaps in the end, this is still the riches the Rule offers.

⁷⁴ See the preface to St. Benedict, *The Rule of St. Benedict in English*, ed., Timothy Fry, (Collegeville, 1981), p. 11.

⁷⁵ Columba Stewart, *Prayer and Community*, (Maryknoll, 1998), p. 15.

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