

## *BENEDICT*

### *Monte Cassino*

It was early on a fine summer morning at Monte Cassino and on the top of the mountain the newly risen sun shone brightly. The slopes below the monastery, however, were mist-wrapped so that they looked cool and damp. Yet for the hillside and the plain below there was sure promise of burning heat later in the day. The monks were silently at work after singing Lauds. Benedict sat in the cloister writing. Over a month ago he thought he had finished writing his Rule for monks, but there he was at it again.

It was long ago in Subiaco that the work had started and he had labored on it throughout the time of building up his monastery, sifting out the unsatisfactory parts of his early attempt at a Rule and writing afresh as he learnt from prayer and experience. It had all begun when he first found himself in charge of other men who were intent, as he was, on seeking to form their lives on the Way which is Christ. In those early days he had only just emerged from long years alone with God in solitary prayer and penance. It was quite a shock when suddenly he found himself called upon to guide others in a form of life which he had never yet experienced himself - a monastic life in community - in a community which, as he saw from the start, must be founded on Christ's words in the gospel that they may be one as we also are one. The source of unity was to be not in man but in God.

Of course he had sought help from other more experienced Abbots living near Subiaco and had incorporated many of their ideas with his own so that the document that emerged was a mixture and got longer and longer, The more he tried to live with it the less he liked what had emerged. He knew that he should aim at something more simple and deep. That meant cutting away a lot which in the early days had seemed sound enough but which he now thought trivial or misguided or oppressive.

Monks who had been with him from the first were brought in to advise on this final revision and their opinions seldom coincided exactly with each other or with his, so consultation took a long time. There were always some who had become attached to things he himself now wanted to discard and there were others who always hankered after something new. He knew he must listen to both. After all in Chapter 3 he had himself written *If you act always after hearing the counsel of others, you will avoid the need to repent of your decision afterwards*. Hence it had all taken time but the great revision was now complete - or nearly complete.

There had been a final delay when it was suddenly suggested to him that there was still something more to be written. Benedict had given what he thought was the finished manuscript to his great friend the Bishop of Capua. Germanus had sent it back by the deacon, Servandus, who was also Abbot of a monastery in Campania. Servandus was going to Monte Cassino anyway to ask Benedict's advice about what he should do to protect his monastery in the terrible times that were upon them and threatened the survival of Italy, the West, Christianity. He brought with him Germanus' comments on the Rule. Although they were full of praise and appreciation he had one strong criticism. What he actually said was this:

Your text as a whole is admirable and reflects the wonderful order and balance and moderation which I have always observed in your monastery. However there is one thing to which you do not do justice. I am not surprised because you are always shy of talking about it. You change the subject whenever I try to bring it up, because you think you ought to be a severe old Roman with no room in your heart for feeling and sympathy with others. Your sister Scholastica always used to say that; but she always added that you never succeeded because you had learned to love Christ before everything else and that love kept on bursting through your formidable Roman severity. It is true. What actually matters in your monastery more than all the rules and regulations and punishments is the love that holds

everything together and softens all the hatchet-faced probity of your Roman ancestry. Your Rule will be false to reality, if it does not express convincingly that lynch-pin of pure God-centred fraternal love, which brings to life in your monastery something that will last in spite of the brutal times we live in.

Benedict had asked some of his monks what they thought. They had agreed with the bishop. One of them, who was young and articulate and fearless, had said:

I think the bishop is right. I don't think I could have stayed here, Fr Abbot, if I had not discovered that love is what really matters to you - even though you don't like admitting it and disguise it behind the severe expression of a father who cannot be fooled, when the truth is that you are a father who cannot refuse, forgiveness, affirmation, love. If you don't do a bit more affirming of love in your Rule, then young people won't come or they won't stay.

That is why Benedict still had before him in the cloister on that lovely summer morning the Rule he had written. He was wondering how to respond satisfactorily to Germanus and to the young monk who had agreed with the bishop from a rather different standpoint and had the courage to say so. He had put something in his Rule about listening to the young, who might well be inspired by the Holy Spirit to say what they had to say. Benedict had struggled already for a day or two with various ideas about how to respond, but he had rejected them all. Now at last an idea had come to him which might work. He began to write it as it came into his head. It was the conversation with Servandus that sharpened his perception and clarified the issues.

Germanus had perceived it and his monks sensed it intimately. The monastery of Monte Cassino was different. It was an alternative way of life - alternative to the ambition, hatred, greed, competition for honor and wealth, confrontation at every level that was destroying the fabric of the Church and society; and it was an alternative to the belief that might is right. It embodied a vision that had been driven from the world. It was a vision which would be needed more than ever, and soon.

Campania had just managed to survive the utter horrors of the recent Gothic war in Italy, through which Belisarius had sought to reconquer Italy for the Greeks. It had been a time of slaughter and famine. It had weakened Italy and done worse than that. It had left it defenseless from the rapacious German tribes pressing down from the North and West. The reality would be much worse than they could imagine at that time. Soon after Benedict's death the Lombards would break through and run through an exhausted and defenseless Italy. They would prove to be the most savage of all the invaders with their zest for destroying churches and monasteries and slaughtering the defenseless people. Benedict knew this from a terrible vision in which he had learnt that soon after his death the Lombards would destroy Monte Cassino. It would be the end of the buildings, but his prayer that the monks might escape was granted. They would be driven from the haven of Monte Cassino but they would take the Rule with them to Rome. As with all that is Christian, Benedict's vision of the end was also a vision of a new beginning.

Why all these wars and slaughter and famine and destruction? Why did men act like that? Why could not the peaceable be left in peace? Well, how could men be at peace if they were driven by an evil spirit - if they were out to get things for themselves and never to give, if they were out to dominate others, if all life for them was competition against others, if in pursuit of their ambitions they were ready to rob others, to deprive them, to reduce them to misery, to famine, to exile, to separation from all they loved, if they did not hesitate in the end to kill and kill again just for their own supposed advantage - and of course under the pretence of doing it for the emperor, or the nation, or the state, or mankind, or the future.

That was the spirit that was rampant in the world of the time and getting steadily worse. And what was it that set such behavior alight so that it spread from one to another. It was a burning hidden drive, a spirit in their hearts that beguiled them into thinking that they would conquer, come out on top and get for themselves the money, power, pleasure, possessions of their ambitions—an evil spirit that drives men on the way to the self-destruction of hell.

Once that was clear, it was clear also that all this must be opposed by a very different

spirit. No half-measures would be any good in the end. The evil spirit was too strong. In every age and every society, once it gets the upper hand, it turns itself in to a force for self-destruction as baleful and heart-killing as any addiction man has ever embraced; and it brings about his spiritual and physical death. The evil spirit must be opposed by a good spirit and Benedict began to attempt an expression of what that spirit is and how it should pervade the whole inner spiritual structure of monasticism. Well, it must have all the things that are contemptuously rejected by the perverse ardor of the evil spirit. It must be generous, it must be self-giving, it must be truly tolerant, because without mutual tolerance there can be no harmony, no cohesion, no realistic community. It must inspire them to seek to do what others want and, in order to free themselves for that, it must inspire men to overcome and turn away from the rapacious instincts of self aggrandizement. It must recognize how obedience, not rebellion, lifts us up to a higher state of being. It must learn to follow Christ who *came not to be served but to serve and to give his life for many*. It must therefore be Christ-like. It must be inspired by our love of him which is also the love that comes to us *from* him because without him we can do nothing. *We should not take the credit for a good life but, believing that all the good we do comes from the Lord give him the credit and thanksgiving for what his gift brings about in our hearts.* (RB Prologue).

Benedict thought and prayed and wrote all morning and by the time of the midday prayer of the Work of God he had the chapter ready - the chapter which would breathe his spirit for any who bothered to read it throughout the ages:

It is easy to recognise the bitter spirit of wickedness which creates a barrier to God's grace and opens the way to the evil of hell. But equally there is a good spirit which frees us from evil ways and brings us closer to God and eternal life. It is this latter spirit that all who follow the monastic way of life should strive to cultivate, spurred on by the flame of love. By following this path they try to be first to show respect to one another with the greatest patience in tolerating weaknesses of body or character. They should even be ready to outdo each other in mutual obedience so that no one in the monastery aims at personal advantage but is rather concerned for the good of others. Thus the pure love of one another as of one family should be their ideal. As for God they should have a profound and loving reverence for

him. They should love their Abbot or Abbess with sincere and unassuming affection. They should value nothing whatever above Christ himself and may he bring us all together to eternal life.

### *Nursia & Rome*

As he put down his pen on that lovely morning at Monte Cassino Benedict really thought he had finished with this long task of writing and re-writing. However, although he knew his monks so well, he did not quite know himself. Chapter 72 won everybody's heart so completely that Benedict became concerned and embarrassed at their flattering comments. He became restless also, thinking that he had overplayed himself. It was not long, therefore, before he was at his writing again in the cloister. Chapter 72 had been written with true Roman reticence and brevity. Now he added another chapter, which was different and longer. Benedict came near to letting himself go in the expression of his feelings, and his feelings at that moment were to the modern mind strange and quite incomprehensible; they were feelings of deep, genuine humility. The Rule, which had taken most of his lifetime in its composition, was really, he said in this last chapter, a very modest document, which might possibly be useful for beginners to start with but wouldn't get them very far beyond the beginning. It couldn't compare with Scripture itself, which was all anyone should really need. And then there were the great monastic writers, especially Basil and Cassian, as a source of guidance in monastic life. Anyone who was really serious about monasticism must turn to those other great works which would really be able to guide them to the highest holiness. But as to his own insignificant effort! It was nothing more than a beginners handbook.

Benedict finished Chapter 73 by writing a very general appeal which is indeed focused on monasticism in the cloister but not exclusively so. Somehow it seems to include a wider spectrum of all who genuinely seek God in the baptismal path of the gospel.

Whoever you may be, then, in your eagerness to reach your father's home in heaven, be faithful with Christ's help to this small Rule, which is only a beginning.

*Quisquis ergo ad patriam caelestem festinas.....* Those very words *patriam caelestem* must have recalled to Benedict as he wrote them his own earthly homeland and birthplace in Nursia, which nestles out of the way in a valley of the Appenines north of Rome. It was a

happy recollection of a happy, secure childhood in the slow-moving tempo of a country town during a period of unusual political calm in Italy. *A rural backwater* his clever fellow students at Rome had called it. Nursia had taught him to love what is genuine and to love Christ in his strong uncompromising simplicity; but he was still not much more than a boy when he had to leave Nursia and its open-hearted goodness behind him. He was taken into the restless, frenetic life of a student in the disintegrating city of Rome. Not one but many new worlds began to open to him. The world of study challenged him with a mixture of wisdom, beauty and depravity. He felt the pull of pagan cleverness struggling with the new wisdom of Christianity. The student world outside the schools was seductive, as student worlds always have been. Its various strident voices, which were so far from the peace and goodness of Nursia, would not leave him in peace and had revealed to his horror the potential for evil lurking only half recognized in his own heart.

That was not all. The student world existed within a larger world and was affected by it. It was the world of conflicting traditions and ambitions and machinations of the old Roman families and institutions in a city still dreaming of a greatness that had gone for ever as it struggled for continued existence and relevance in the contemptuous emerging world of barbarian domination. It was a confused world, but it offered to the young disturbing experiences and insubstantial cardboard prospects against the background of the city's decaying monuments from a past, which was gone for ever. While he was still in Nursia Rome had seemed impressive but at close quarters it did not any longer look so great or glorious. It was a defeated city. Alaric's sack of Rome in 410 was still remembered. The Huns had the city at their mercy in mid-century, but the great Pope Leo faced them out and persuaded them to withdraw. He had been less successful with the Vandals three years later, but at least on that occasion he had saved the city from the worst. Rome's secular greatness was over by then, but its half living memory smoldered on ineffectively in the pretensions of the great Roman families and empty ceremonies of the Senate which still appointed consuls as it had done when it ruled the world.

Then there was the Pope and his entourage. After Leo, who had died nearly a hundred years before Benedict was born, no one quite knew what to think of the Papacy. In Leo a power had been manifested that had never been seen before. He taught with authority and in the East as well as in the West. He ruled with calm confidence. He negotiated with consummate skill. He protected the unprotected. He raised up new visions - new hopes and new fears of the Papacy itself. Was the Pope of Rome to be the ruler or the ruled? Was he a welcome counter-balance strengthening the ancient and venerable Rome of the

Senate and its ghosts of the past against the pretensions of Constantinople and the threats of the barbarians, or was he too powerful to be a mere counter-balance in a conflict of authorities? Was he a new incarnation of world power - the head of a sacred empire standing above senates and kings and generals and emperors? Whatever he was he carried a hidden threat.

When Benedict arrived in Rome he could see it. There was a love/hate relationship between secular Rome - in its last gasps - and Christian Rome under the leadership of the Pope. The real secular power at that time belonged to neither; and it did not belong to the so-called 'New Rome' of Byzantium in spite of its pretensions and assumptions of supremacy. The new masters in Italy were Theodoric and his Goths. The Goths in Italy were the occupying force and they were Arians only lately converted to Catholicism. They were doubly suspected by the 'old guard' as barbarians pretending to be civilized and by ardent Catholics as heretics pretending to be Catholics. The cross-currents in this maelstrom were disturbing and shocking for an idealistic young man who had come to Rome to learn and prepare himself for life at what he had thought was a seat of learning and Christianity.

Of course he made friends and learnt from them the cross-currents of rumor and speculation which made a confusing scene more disturbing. Even in Christian circles there were knowing clerics—more knowing, Benedict thought, in the ways of the world than in the ways of God. They tried to 'educate' him in their way of seeing things and only succeeded in repelling him. One thing was clear. This Rome was not a place where young Christian idealism could thrive for long. Benedict listened to the cheerfully destructive comments of the student world about everything and everyone and to the different but equally disedifying views of the family friends from the old Roman core, who of course made him welcome in their homes. At some stage Benedict decided that he had had enough. He wanted to serve God and could not do so here. So he quietly left the city. He wanted to find a place where he could fulfill the holy purpose for which he longed. As he did so he knew well that he was ignorant. And yet he was wise in his decision to turn away from the world of learning. (*Greg. Dialogues 2*)

*Scienter nescius et sapienter indoctus* was Gregory's actual phrase. It has been variously translated but perhaps the meaning is really quite simple. It means that Benedict was well aware that he was depriving himself of knowledge of the world but the world was so dangerous that he showed wisdom in deciding to do without the learning of the Roman schools. When Gregory wrote about it fifty years after Benedict's death he was himself trapped in an agony of desire to follow in exactly the same way. He was trapped by the obligation of serving others as Pope; but in heart his desire was always with Benedict. We

know nothing more than what St Gregory says of his purpose but Benedict summed up the essence of the experience himself in his Prologue to the Rule, which Gregory rightly says is a reflection of his own spiritual life:

Let us rouse ourselves from lethargy. That is what Scripture urges on us when it says: the time has come for us to rouse ourselves from sleep. Let us open our eyes to the light that can change us into the likeness of the Lord. Let our ears be alert every day to his voice calling to us: 'today, if you should hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.' And again: 'let anyone with ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches.' And this is what the Spirit says: 'Come my children, hear me, and I shall teach you the fear of the Lord.' Run, while you have the light of life, before the darkness of death overtakes you.

Benedict's was not the cry of the 'drop out'. The typical drop out's cry is 'I want out of all this. I want to do my own thing'. That was not Benedict's cry. It was not an attempt to escape from decision and commitment into the shapeless sea of self-centred experimentation to see what can be got out of life. Benedict's was a strictly focussed departure; it was a self-denying departure- intent solely on God whose presence had been hid from him in the turmoil of Rome but would be regained in the silence of Subiaco. Today when Christian Churches all over Europe have never been so empty and forsaken it is once again just this search that is needed most urgently. *Listen to his voice. Harden not your hearts. Open your eyes to the light.* The need to do that and to accept all the cost that it takes - that is what was behind Benedict's turning from the glitter and glory of Rome, as his Rule makes abundantly clear. Perhaps he had the blessing or at least the acquiescence of his family. We know that at some time his sister followed the same way and certainly he had a faithful servant with him to start with, but she did not manage to stay with him for long. It is clear that his first intention was quite moderate. He retired with his servant to a hill town called Enfide where some kind of lay Christian community was trying to lead a life of fidelity to Christ: *Coming, therefore, to a place called Enfide and remaining there in the church of St. Peter, in the company of other virtuous men, which for charity lived in that place (Dialogues).* Living among them for a time and sharing their life, something happened against which he reacted very strongly. He acquired a reputation for goodness and was credited with a small miracle. That was too much for Benedict and he fled.

*Subiaco - The Hermit*

He had found that he needed to be alone with God and he climbed up the valley to Subiaco. It was then a little town in the hills just below a magnificent imperial villa and artificial lake built by Nero, the deranged Emperor who was the first monarch to find sport in the torturing, slandering and killing of Christians. That meant that Subiaco was not at that time exactly a hallowed spot, but up in the mountain behind the town and the lake and the imperial villa Benedict found the shelter of a cave high up on the rock face. He met and was encouraged and taught by a monk Romanus who also provided him with the bare essentials of life in that remote and lonely place. Moreover in a little simple ceremony of deep and lasting significance Romanus gave him the monastic habit. It was an ecclesial act. Benedict now had a status. It was the lowest and humblest of all ranks in the Church but it linked his whole enterprise to the prayer of the Church.

He was following Christ into the desert - and for the same purpose - to pray. It is a constant theme in the gospel. The example was given by Christ himself: *But so much the more the report went abroad concerning him; and great multitudes gathered to hear and to be healed of their infirmities. But he was always going off to some lonely place to pray. (Lk. 5,15)*. He was following Antony of Egypt and many other of the desert tradition of Egypt. As with Benedict, so with many others in the centuries to come community monasticism is closely associated with the solitary life of the hermit. Yet, curiously Benedict, in spite of his own early example - or because of it - taught firmly that no one should start on the hermit's way in seeking God but should first learn to be faithful with the support and example of others in a community.

Anchorites, who are also known as hermits, are the second kind (of monk). Their vocation is not the result of the first fervour so often experienced by those who give themselves to a monastic way of life. On the contrary they have learnt well from day-to-day experience with the support of many others in a community how to fight against the devil. Thus they are well trained in the ranks of their brethren before they have the confidence to do without that support and venture into single combat in the desert relying only on their own arms and the help of God in their battle against the evil temptations of body and mind." (*Rule chap 1*).

That was the wisdom of experience, but at Subiaco he had as yet no experience and he gave in to the strong pull of longing to be alone with God.

About his life at Subiaco there is no need for romantic fantasies or pietistic exaggeration.

Benedict lived in a hardier age than ours and the young were hardier than their elders then, as they are often are today. At Subiaco he was living where all the countrymen, women and children around him had a lifestyle which would seem harsh and unbearable to our soft western culture. His hermit's life was harsher still but not impossibly so. He was sheltered from the North and from the worst of the weather by a substantial cave. He had the regular support of Romanus. He was clothed in warm sheepskin, as we learn from the story of the shepherds who, on first catching sight of him (probably from the opposite side of the deep gorge) thought he must be a wild beast. He had a very hard life, but more tolerable for him in his time than it would be for a pampered modern man. We should concentrate not on the physical hardship, which was not so exceptional in his day, but on his spiritual purpose. When we do so we find that his aims and guidelines in the Subiaco cave were just those he later taught his monks in the Rule and left as a legacy - sadly neglected in our age - to Europe and the world after him. Take away the community aspects of the Rule and what is left gives all the spiritual wisdom the hermit needs.

First of all what led him to Subiaco and kept him there was the love of God. St Gregory has a story from a later time in Benedict's life when he had gone south to Monte Cassino. He heard of a hermit who had secured himself to the rock of his hermitage by an iron chain so that he could not desert his vocation. Benedict sent him a message that he should get rid of the chain because, if the love of God did not keep him to his vocation, then the chain would not succeed. In this way he revealed himself. For Benedict commitment came from love. So that was the source and drive behind Benedict's vocation both as a hermit and as a monk in community. And that was what led him in his Rule to insist that monks should put *Nothing whatever before the love of Christ*. That is still the fundamental drive behind the ideal of the Benedictine monastic vocation.

It is safe to say that as a means to the first Benedict's second aim in the cave was to devote himself to prayer and *lectio divina*. The two go inextricably together in any monastic situation and it does not really matter in which order you put them. His advice to others in the Rule reveals his own intent in the cave:

Make prayer the first step in anything worthwhile that you attempt. Persevere and do not weaken in that prayer. Pray with confidence, because God, in his love and forgiveness, has counted us as his own sons and daughters" (RB. Prol).

To this we may add his advice in the Rule chapter 19:

It is our firm belief that God is present everywhere, so that no deed of good or evil in any place on earth escapes his notice. Yet we believe without any doubt that at no time is his presence so strong as when we celebrate the Work of God (that is the common celebration of the Divine Office in the oratory). At such times we should always recall the Psalmist's words: Serve the Lord with deep reverence. And again he says: I shall sing to you in the presence of the angels. We should think carefully, then, about how to behave in the presence of God and his angels. Whenever we come together to sing in the choir, there should be no lack of harmony between what is going on in our minds and what we sing outwardly with our voices. (RB ch.19)

In the third place comes what we should perhaps put first. It is a subject to which Benedict devoted the longest chapter in the Rule and he called it Humility. The word is misleading but there are none others which would do. It may help to approach it by using a homely illustration adopted by another mystic Julian of Norwich. One day she was worrying about good and evil and about what we human beings are to make of them. Our Lord showed her a tiny nut which was so small that it seemed on the point of disappearing. That, she was told, is everything that exists. Not only we ourselves but earth and space and all creation and all of time are in cold reality as fragile and insignificant before the creator as that tiny nut appeared to be to Julian. Then how can any of us imagine it possible to master and understand even ourselves? In spite of all our ambition when we turn to God the creator there is no room in our tiny being for anything but loving worship before our creator and redeemer. How can we attempt universal judgements? There is no room for that but only for loving repentance. Chapter 7 on Humility is an exercise in facing the sheer face of reality - the reality about ourselves - about the root of arrogance and unreality in hearts - our ego. That humility - that acceptance of reality must have been ever present in Benedict's prayer and reflection at Subiaco. That is what happens when we are utterly alone in utter silence. Pretence and every form of unreality are swept away. If we persevere we begin to see ourselves as we really are and it is liberating to face the truth about ourselves. It is what St Theresa of Avila saw when she said: *humility is truth*.

The whole of that long chapter is a commentary on one deep aspect of Benedict's prayer at Subiaco. It is too long to reflect on fully here but this much must be said: Benedict cannot be understood except on the grounds that his spirituality is very close to the gospel and there is nothing so literally based on Christ's words to all of us as Chapter 7 on

humility. One way of understanding it is to see it as a commentary on Christ's words to all who would follow him when he said that none can enter the kingdom of heaven unless they become like little children. Benedict set his teaching on humility in seven steps. In his list the first, second and seventh steps of humility apply without change to everyone without exception who professes to follow Christ. The others are more focussed on monasticism but they also have their resonances in lay life.

One paragraph from the seventh step may be taken as bringing the general truth home to the individual. It cuts right across the bland assumptions of much modern living - especially the assumption that achievement, self-aggrandisement, pleasure and what is called self-fulfilment are and should be the primary aims of human life. On the other hand it reflects exactly one of the commonest experiences of men and women of every age and state from childhood on. It accompanies and grows with the promotion of achievement. It keeps professional and amateur psychologists busy, who seldom recommend the antidote of Christian humility.

The seventh step of humility is that we should be ready to speak of ourselves as of less importance and less worthy than others not as a mere phrase on our lips but we should really believe it in our hearts. Thus in a spirit of humility we make the psalmist's words our own: I am no more than a worm with no claim to be a human person for I am despised by others and cast out by my own people. I was raised up high in honour, but then I was humbled and overwhelmed with confusion. In the end we may learn to say: it was good for me, Lord, that you humbled me so that I might learn your precepts.

It is the very last thing you will find in any handbook about bringing up or educating children, yet it speaks unequivocally to a common experience of the young everywhere today. All the agony they experience so acutely of self-evaluation and self-devaluation is there. All the shattering disillusionment of stark tragedy at any time of life is there. All the self doubts of middle age are there. All the fear of the encroachment of a spiritually empty old age is there. The young suffer from the confusion of which Benedict speaks today - often with an intensity that drives them to desperate conclusions - and not only the young. Many in mid-life suffer from it. Often the elderly from fear of it cling desperately to a life without meaning. Counselling is helpful and medication can bring a blissful cover-up and we must be thankful for both. But they do not completely cure because they do not touch the spiritual centre, where the root of the problem lies.

Close to it must have come as the fourth guideline of Subiaco - obedience - not the obedience of conformity to another's arbitrary will nor to custom, nor to habit, nor to prejudice. The obedience in question is that of the creature to the creator, of the sinner to the redeemer, of the disciple who knows nothing about spirituality to Christ the teacher who is everything. One aspect of this obedience is what St Paul calls *the obedience of faith*. All monastic obedience derives from this obedience. It is based on repentance and love and is the way - the only way - from our present state back towards the state for which we were created and for eternal life.

Benedict's fifth principle of guidance is thus expressed in Chapter 4 of the Rule:

If ever evil thoughts occur to your mind and invade your heart, cast them down at the feet of Christ and talk about them frankly to your spiritual father or mother.

Gregory tells a story of Benedict throwing himself among thorns to counteract the temptation to sensuality. Well, he may have done that and the story may have appealed to some, but it seems likely enough that he himself regarded it as a generous and sincere response but not the wisest way of dealing with temptation. Nothing like it appears in the Rule. Instead St Benedict recommends a wiser way. It is that simple and effective method of throwing such temptations at the feet of Christ. In chapter 7 of the Rule he shows his deep conviction about the meaning and effectiveness of this:

The first step of humility is to cherish at all times the sense of awe with which we should turn to God. It should drive forgetfulness away; it should keep our minds alive to all God's commandments; it should make us reflect in our hearts again and again that those who despise God and reject his love prepare for themselves that irreversible spiritual death which is meant by hell, just as life in eternity is prepared for those who fear God.

One who follows that way finds protection at all times from sin and vice of thought, of tongue, of hand, of foot, of self-will and of disordered sensual desire, so as to lead a life that is completely open before the scrutiny of God and of his angels who watch over us from hour to hour. This is made clear by the psalmist who shows that God is always present to our very thoughts when he says: 'God searches the hearts and thoughts of men and women', and again: 'the Lord knows the thoughts of all', and:

'from afar you know my thoughts, and again: the thoughts of men and women shall give you praise.' Thus it may help one concerned about thoughts that are perverse to repeat the psalmist's heartfelt saying: 'I shall be blameless in his sight only if I guard myself from my own wickedness.

Here is the key to that control of self which is essential on the way to God, which is called for by Christ when he warns us that our thoughts are not a free running world irrelevant to our acts and our personal growth and its direction. For instance he teaches that anyone who lusts after a woman "has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Benedict's way of control is scriptural and particular so in his insistence that only Christ can enable us - by our turning to him in the deep inner reality of our being. "With man it is not possible but all things are possible with God". But we must turn to him and open the depths of our hearts to him by casting our evil thoughts at his feet.

The sixth ideal of Benedict's hermit-life at Subiaco was something which he passed on to his monks at the end of the Prologue in words of great simplicity and great power:

We shall never think of deserting his guidance; we shall persevere in fidelity to his teaching in the monastery until death so that through our patience we may be granted some part in Christ's own passion and thus also in the end receive a share in his kingdom. (RB.Prol).

Our sufferings, frustrations, sorrows and all the complex variations on them which the modern world has increased or created, even in the attempts to escape from them, must be united to Christ's sufferings to be cured by the only cure there is in the end - his Resurrection.

That is the core of Benedict's formation experience in Subiaco, as we can see it in his Rule. The love of Christ which kept him there, his perseverance and suffering there in union with Christ is the timeless spiritual stuff out of which the greatness of his Rule was forged.

### *Subiaco - The Transition*

There was one Lent at Subiaco during which Benedict lost all sense of time. When it came to Easter, he did not know it was Easter, but a local priest received a message from the

Lord to visit him:

At length when almighty God was determined to ease Romanus of his pains, and to have Bennet's life for an example known to the world, that such a candle, set upon a candlestick, might shine and give light to the Church of God, our Lord vouchsafed to appear unto a certain Priest dwelling a good way off, who had made ready his dinner for Easter day, and spake thus unto him: 'Thou hast provided good cheer for thyself, and my servant is afflicted with hunger:' who, hearing this forthwith rose up, and upon Easter day itself, with such meat as he had prepared, went to the place, where he sought for the man of God amongst the steep hills, the low valleys and hollow pits, and at length found him in his cave: where, after they had prayed together, and sitting down had given God thanks, and had much spiritual talk, then the Priest said unto him: "Rise up, brother, and let us dine, because today is the feast of Easter." To whom the man of God answered, and said:

'I know that it is Easter with me and a great feast, having found so much favor at God's hands as this day to enjoy your company" (for by reason of his long absence from men, he knew not that it was the great solemnity of Easter). But the reverent Priest again did assure him, saying: 'Verily, to-day is the feast of our Lord's Resurrection, and therefore meet it is not that you should keep abstinence, and besides I am sent to that end, that we might eat together of such provision as God's goodness hath sent us.' Whereupon they said grace, and fell to their meat, and after they had dined, and bestowed some time in talking, the Priest returned to his church.

About the same time likewise, certain shepherds found him in that same cave: and at the first, when they espied him through the bushes, and saw his apparel made of skins, they verily thought that it had been some beast: but after they were acquainted with the servant of God, many of them were by his means converted from their beastly life to grace, piety, and devotion. And thus his name in the country there about became famous, and many after this went to visit him, and for corporal meat which they brought him, they carried away spiritual food for their souls.

The meaning of Gregory's story is clear. The time of Benedict's life as a hermit had come to an end and his real mission was about to begin. His solitary life and intense prayer had

not been in pursuit of lonely self-regarding perfection; it had been his formation period for life in community, teaching in community, self-giving in community. It was time for the demonstration and renewal of the living links that bound him to the mystical body of Christ. Thus, when the priest arrived there was first of all prayer, then a discussion about spiritual matters (did that include reading of the scriptures, the sacrament of reconciliation and the Eucharist - how very strange if it did not). Only after that did they celebrate Easter together with a meal.

The shepherds were his second contact and he did not send them away so as to preserve the chosen silence of his cave. He made them welcome and succeeded in putting them at their ease. He loved to be alone with God but, when the crude, unlettered, uninstructed shepherds appeared his heart, his mind, his full attention was opened to them. He gave them a Christly welcome and then he evangelized them - he brought them into full possession of the good news of the gospel. Thus it was Benedict the hermit who himself made a beginning in the long tradition of Benedictine apostolate and evangelization. Later in his Rule Benedict was to tell his monks to see Christ in everyone without exception and welcome them as they would Christ himself. For Benedict the practice began with the Easter priest and the shepherds.

It was the beginning of a new phase which seemed to develop rapidly. Once it had begun there was no evading the demands and it was not surprising that he was sought by a neighboring monastery to become its abbot. St Gregory's account is that Benedict at first resisted, not from a desire to cherish his solitary life nor from reluctance to serve but because it was a lax community and he feared they could not accept his own strict following of the gospel. He was right. They resisted him; they even tried to get rid of him by poisoning him. Benedict left them but it is remarkable again that he did not abandon his new availability to others who came to him for spiritual guidance. It is an interesting phase in Benedict's story when first the apostolic, pastoral side of him flowered and he saw the call of Christ in those who sought him out. There was to be more of this when he got to Monte Cassino and the tension between solitary contemplation and the service of the church would never quite leave the Benedictines through the ages.

At Subiaco this new side of Benedict flowered into twelve new monastic communities of twelve monks each and the earliest experiments in Benedictine monasticism. It must have been now that he began to consult other abbots - the hermit without experience of the practicalities of monks in community naturally turned for guidance to the experience of others. It was now that the Rule of the Master probably began to appear and take shape. There was certainly input from Benedict himself and from a very different and more loquacious spirit. It is idle, and quite unnecessary, to attempt to go further. What we do

know is that Benedict was involved in one way or another in the longer version but later cut away all but the Rule of St Benedict as we have it. In doing so he crafted a gem out of a crude outcrop of rock.

Subiaco with its 12 dependent monasteries gathered round an inner community of mature monks over which Benedict himself presided did not last on that pattern. Benedict was driven out by the hostility of a local priest. He took the monks with him. At some time community life began again at Subiaco but on the usual pattern of one abbey, one community, one abbot. Benedict left to start once more away in the South at Monte Cassino.

### *Monte Cassino*

One of the striking differences between pagan Europe and the Christian monasticism that succeeded it is that in pagan times the high mountains and the dark wooded plantations were the haunts of spirits and shunned except for priest-led religious rites which were themselves dark and dubious so that they added an unsavory reputation that persistently hung around the shrines they built. In fact it took a long time to exorcise this sinister reputation. Roman Christianity concentrated on cities. The countryside was left to the *pagani*. Their rites thrived and seemed to belong to the dark woods and spirit-haunted mountains. It was the radiant genius of St Francis of Assisi, as Chesterton has pointed out, that finally broke definitively through the dark associations of paganism so that he could sing of brother Sun and sister Moon and see the whole of nature in a completely new light. He saw it as the reflection of the love of God. He accepted with an open heart the truth of the words of Genesis about every created thing: *God saw that they were good*. The dark gods of paganism had to be exorcised first.

We need to understand that paganism was still in possession in these remote places in Benedict's day (hence the name pagan which means 'of the country'). It was for that reason that Benedict cut down the grove and destroyed the temple of Apollo which he found on the top of Monte Cassino. Again and again his monks followed his example throughout Europe. They weren't afraid of the woods and the hills and that led to the association of Benedictines with the tops of hills. *Benedictus colles amabat*. It was part of a necessary work of evangelization without which the countrymen could never have been won over to the gospel. Here, then, from the start at Monte Cassino was Benedict's second apostolic service and he evidently continued it by preaching the gospel himself to the local people and sending monks out to preach and minister to them. .

The years after Monte Cassino were on the whole years of quiet development. They were the years also when Benedict got down to the final revision of his Rule - the time when he

made it finally and truly his own. Of course it was natural and sensible that when he started at Subiaco he accepted much influence and dictation from one or more neighboring abbots who had long experience of community life. Now at Monte Cassino he worked on his own and all the familiar elements of the Rule fell into place and expressed his own convictions in the way that he would like to express them.

### *Benedict's self portrait*

One of the striking - and perhaps rather revolutionary - decisions of the final version of the Rule was that the Abbot must be elected by the monks themselves. But they must take seriously their responsibility before God. They were not to indulge their own ambitions or yield to the currents of community politics. To give them very clear guidance Benedict took a lot of trouble to describe the high qualities and ideals they must look for in an abbot. In fact he wrote three chapters on the subject - Chapter 2 which is a description of the gifts an abbot should have - Chapter 27 dealing with his compassion and care for those who do wrong - and Chapter 64 which is intended to guide the monk-electors and incidentally includes a lot more about the abbot himself and how he should act. If we take seriously Gregory's comment that the Rule is the clearest reflection of how he lived himself then these chapters may be seen also as an unconscious autobiography. Certainly he presents a moving and timeless ideal of how the father of a monastic community should live. A contemporary summary might go like this:

He thought seriously about the meaning of his office and saw it as a sacred commission to represent Christ in the monastery. He sought to teach only Christ's teaching and to bring the leaven of holiness into all his decisions. He saw himself as a shepherd who will have to give a detailed account of everything to the Good Shepherd.

He was sensitive to the differences of ability and temperament in his community and taught some by example and some by words and he always had to be careful in discerning which was most appropriate to the individual in question. Always he avoided any trace of favoritism in his treatment of the brethren. They came to Monte Cassino from very different backgrounds. Some had been slaves with a very low self-esteem, some came from one of the old Roman families with an exaggerated notion of their standing; many were from a background of countrymen and farming. There were Greeks, Romans Goths and other barbarians among them. Benedict took all this in his stride because he quite simply saw every one of them as children of God and therefore equal *because whether slave or free we are all one in Christ*. His method of teaching was adapted to the needs and abilities of the individual using *now the encouragement of a loving parent and now the threats of a harsh disciplinarian*. He would not tolerate real wrongdoing but sought to root it out at an early stage, but there again discernment and prudence were needed. It was

important to avoid excessive zeal in correcting wrong for fear of breaking the vessel through working too hard to get rid of the rust. Those who understand and are responsive to discipline can be put right by a simple rebuke; but malicious defiance is a very different affair and called for stronger measures.

He himself reflected constantly on his position and on the demand that the role of father of the community made on him personally in understanding and adapting to the needs of so many individuals who were so different in character, all of whom must be considered. His guidance, his encouragement, his correction must be adapted to the character and intelligence of each one. The salvation of their souls must be his paramount concern. Whatever the other demands on him in the governance and administration of the monastery the demands of the gospel came always first with him and he never forgot that he would have to give an account of his stewardship to the Lord in the end.

When Benedict wrote Chapter 27 he faced his own moments of failure and remembered the monks he had been unable to bring back to the right path. That led him, not to fulminate against the depravity of those who would not listen, but on the means which must be used to help them to hear. He concentrated entirely on the need to use every means to help wrongdoers to repentance and forgiveness. He sent other experienced monks in as counselors or spiritual companions for one whom he saw as being *in a state of confusion and uncertainty*. He saw the danger of the delinquent being *overwhelmed by excessive sorrow* and their need for *the reaffirmation of love which everyone in the community must achieve through their prayer*. In dealing with such cases he saw his role as being *more like the care of the sick than the exercise of power over the healthy*. He followed the example of the Good Shepherd who left the 99 healthy sheep in the desert and lifted the one wanderer lovingly on his shoulder to bring him home. If everything else failed *then another remedy must be brought to bear which is still more powerful (than any disciplinary measures) namely the personal prayer of the abbot and of all the community that the Lord, who can do all things, may himself bring healing to the delinquent*. Here was the heart of Benedict's whole vision. Prayer is the most powerful instrument for good; and prayer is at its most powerful when the abbot and all the community are united in that prayer.

In Chapter 64 when dealing with the election of an abbot Benedict arranges the process in a truly orderly and Roman manner. Then he reminds the electors of what they are looking for in the possible candidates. His words are unforgettable and must be given in full because they undoubtedly reflect the principles by which he lived.

The abbot, once established in office, must often think about the demands made on him by the burden he has undertaken and consider also to whom he will have to give an

account of his stewardship. He must understand that the call of his office is not to exercise power over those who are his subjects but to serve and help them in their needs. He must be well-grounded in the law of God so that he may have the resources to bring forth what is new and what is old in his teaching. He must be chaste, sober and compassionate and should always let mercy triumph over judgement in the hope of himself receiving like treatment from the Lord. While he must hate all vice, he must love his brethren. In correcting faults he must act with prudence being conscious of the danger of breaking the vessel itself by attacking the rust too vigorously. He should always bear his own frailty in mind and remember not to crush the bruised reed. Of course I do not mean that he should allow vices to grow wild but rather use prudence and charity in cutting them out, so as to help each one in his individual needs, as I have already said. He should seek to be loved more than he is feared.

He should not be a trouble-maker nor given to excessive anxiety nor should he be too demanding and obstinate, nor yet interfering and inclined to suspicion so as never to be at rest. In making decisions he should use foresight and care in analysing the situation, so that whether he is giving orders about sacred or about secular affairs he should be far-seeing and moderate in his decisions. He might well reflect on the discretion of the holy patriarch Jacob when he said: if I force my flock to struggle further on their feet, they will all die in a single day. He should take to heart these and other examples of discretion, the mother of virtues, and manage everything in the monastery so that the strong may have ideals to inspire them and the weak may not be frightened away by excessive demands. Above all he must remain faithful to this Rule in every detail, so that after fulfilling his ministry well he may hear the words uttered to that good servant who provided bread for his fellow servants at the proper time: I tell you solemnly the Lord sets him over all that he possesses.

### *Benedict's Legacy - The Way of Spiritual achievement*

There is a Chapter in St Benedict's Rule which comes early on and is probably best seen as a set of moral and spiritual guidelines for monks to live by. Its range is wide - from basic morality to high principles of Christ centered dedication. For the unlettered Goth it must have been a revelation of a new world - one which he got by heart and learnt to treasure. The sophisticated senator's son is more likely to have thought, "Well we know all that. I didn't come to the monastery to discover that I must not kill." The Chapter has been variously understood through the ages and is probably one of the most neglected chapters in the Rule, especially as it happened later, as monasticism became established in Europe, that recruits to a monastery were always well-grounded and well taught Catholics. Today, however, in the collapse of Christian education, in the age of free choice and intelligently

cherished ignorance it may once again have more of the sort of impact it had on the Goth of St Benedict's day. The profound ignorance of the gospel which is normal and proudly cherished today by those who claim to be educated may give Chapter 4 of the Rule a new significance. There are many today who can never understand the Rule without first mastering this legacy, because the source of the Rule is the pure gospel of Christ:

The first of all things to aim at is to love the Lord God with your whole heart and soul and strength and then to love your neighbour as much as you do yourself. The other commandments flow from these two: not to kill, not to commit adultery, not to steal, not to indulge our base desires, not to give false evidence against another, to give due honour to all and not to inflict on someone else what you would resent if it were done to yourself.

Renounce your own desires and ambitions so as to be free to follow Christ. Control your body with self-discipline; don't give yourself to unrestrained pleasure; learn to value the self-restraint of fasting. Give help and support to the poor; clothe the naked, visit the sick and bury the dead. Console and counsel those who suffer in time of grief and bring comfort to those in sorrow.

Don't get too involved in purely worldly affairs and count nothing more important than the love you should cherish for Christ. Don't let your actions be governed by anger nor nurse your anger against a future opportunity of indulging it. Don't harbour in your heart any trace of deceit nor pretend to be at peace with another when you are not; don't abandon the true standards of charity. Don't use oaths to make your point for fear of perjury, but speak the truth with integrity of heart and tongue.

If you are harmed by anyone, never repay it by returning the harm. In fact you should never inflict any injury on another but bear patiently whatever you have to suffer. Love your enemies, then; refrain from speaking evil but rather call a blessing on those who speak evil of you; if you are persecuted for favouring a just cause, then bear it patiently.

Avoid all pride and self-importance. Don't drink to excess nor over-eat. Don't be lazy nor give way to excessive sleep. Don't be a murmurer and never in speaking take away the good name of another.

Your hope of fulfilment should be centred in God alone. When you see any good in yourself, then, don't take it to be your very own, but acknowledge it as a gift from God. On the other hand you may be sure that any evil you do is always your own and you may safely acknowledge your responsibility.

You should recognise that there will be a day of reckoning and judgement for all of us, which should make us afraid of how we stand between good and evil. But, while you should have a just fear of the loss of everything in hell, you should above all cultivate a longing for eternal life with a desire of great spiritual intensity. Keep the reality of death always before your eyes, have a care about how you act every hour of your life and be sure that God is present everywhere and that he certainly sees and understands what you are about.

If ever evil thoughts occur to your mind and invade your heart, cast them down at the feet of Christ and talk about them frankly to your spiritual father or mother. Take care to avoid any speech that is evil and degenerate. It is also well to avoid empty talk that has no purpose except to raise a laugh. As for laughter that is unrestrained and raucous, it is not good to be attracted to that sort of thing.

You should take delight in listening to sacred reading and in often turning generously to prayer. You should also in that prayer daily confess to God with real repentance any evil you have done in the past and for the future have the firm purpose to put right any wrong you may have done.

Do not act out the sensuous desires that occur to you naturally and turn away from the pursuit of your own will. Rather you should follow in obedience the directions your Abbot or Abbess gives you, even if they, which God forbid, should contradict their own teaching by the way they live. In such a case just remember the Lord's advice about the example of the Pharisees: accept and follow their teaching but on no account imitate their actions.

No-one should aspire to gain a reputation for holiness. First of all we must actually become holy; then there would be some truth in having a reputation for it. The way to become holy is faithfully to fulfil God's commandments every day by loving chastity, by hating no one, by avoiding envy and hostile rivalry, by not becoming full of self but showing due respect for our elders and love for those who are younger, by praying in the love of Christ for those who are hostile to us, by seeking reconciliation and peace before the sun goes down whenever we have a quarrel with another, and finally by never despairing of the mercy of God.

These, then, are the guidelines to lead us along the way of spiritual achievement. If we follow them day and night and never on any account give up, so that on judgement day we can give an account of our fidelity to them, that reward will be granted us by the Lord which he himself promised in the scriptures: what no eye has seen nor ear heard

God has prepared for those who love him.

The workshop in which we are called to work along these lines with steady perseverance is the enclosure of the monastery and stability in community life."

There are two interesting reasons why this chapter from the Rule has acquired a new status and importance in the post twentieth century age. The first has already been noted. It is because in our multi-cultural, multiracial western world it is a common experience that postulants or enquirers may come to a monastery, who have virtually no knowledge of the gospel and little of Christian morality. In an earlier age they would simply be rejected - however kindly that may have been done. We are beginning, however, to learn that the draw of monasticism is not the consequence and still less the reward of a Christian lifestyle. There are times when it cuts right across such established assumptions. The child of God may be called by the Father in spite of, not because of, his moral or religious performance so far. There may be times then, when the call may come in a life which is only just emerging from the chaotic secularism of today. In such cases the call must be encouraged and strengthened even while the chaos is being gently sorted out. It is what St Benedict had to do in his work of every day, and it is perhaps the reason for Chapter 4.

The other reason for Chapter 4's relevance today is that The Rule has in recent years acquired a new life among men and women of the laity. In St Benedict's day monasticism was not clerical. The monks were normally lay and remained so. Benedict himself may not have been ordained - even as a deacon. Any priests there were in Monte Cassino were either ordained so as to provide the community with a celebrant for the Eucharist or because a diocesan priest had sought admission as a monk. If accepted he would be required to take his place after the lay monks who were professed before him and conform in all matters to the same Rule. Today the laity, both single and married, have re-discovered the Rule as a wonderful source of lay spirituality for today. Chapter 4 has perhaps a special significance for them and will certainly help them to escape spiritually from the emptiness of purely relative morality and the poison of the cardboard spirituality enshrined in the absurdities of political correctness and from other contrivances which attempt to assuage the famine of the spirit induced by aggressive secularism. Chapter 4, of course, is not complete in itself. It is above all a pointer back to the scriptures from which it derives all its power. It was never read by the monks without the scriptures; it should not be read without them today.

#### *The end & the beginning*

There are some vignettes of Benedict's last years at Monte Cassino. They are tantalizingly incomplete but the rays of light they throw are significant. He founded a monastery some

distance away at Terracina. He endured the famines induced by the Greeks under Belisarius and the Goths under Totila. He encountered Totila personally. The story as it stands - Totila full of himself and his blood-stained achievements trying to get the better of the man of spirit, who was not *doing* but *reading* the scriptures quietly at the gate of his monastery - is an archetypal picture of the two ways that in that age confronted Europe and in our age still confront the world.

Then there was his meeting with his sister Scholastica and all that is implied in that. It seems to have been after that meeting that Benedict's mystical self came to the fore. Perhaps it was always there - and this is the most likely. The deep calm of Benedict's persona and the orderly discipline of the true Roman kept it at bay and unobserved, but in the break up of ordered society, in the collapse of the west, his vision became clear and penetrating. He saw that his own life's work, just when it had flowered into something of great beauty was doomed to be trampled down by mindless barbarism just like so much else of beauty and value all over the west. His death, believed to have occurred around 550, came in a lull, not of peace but of political exhaustion after the Greeks of Byzantium had devastated the country defeated the Goths and left Italy naked and defenseless. Within twenty years the Lombards (the Langobardi or long-bearded ones) had crossed the Alps and possessed themselves of Italy in a campaign which was unopposed and marked by great savagery not least against religion. It took them a little time to get to Monte Cassino but they demolished it when they did get there in 589. It was this disaster with all its grim finality that Benedict foresaw - the end of his work. A friend found him one day as his grief broke out in tears. But his vision brought some consolation also. His monks would escape with their lives and bring his Rule to Rome.

When Scholastica died Benedict had a vision of her taken by the Lord and the same for his friend Germanus bishop of Capua. As to himself he was warned of his death and prepared for it in prayer among his brethren. His is a model of a monastic death - not only to live but to die also secure in the spiritual support of the brethren among whom he had followed the way of Christ and whom himself he had inspired to persevere in that way. Perhaps it is a model also of all Christian deaths as they should be.

Neither the end of Benedict nor the end of Monte Cassino at the hands of the savage Lombards were really the end of Benedict's work. The Lombard invasion marks the end of anything which could masquerade as successor of the Roman Empire. It marked the end of Rome and the beginning of the Dark Ages - the centuries of a perilous transition from which Europe emerged. So it was time for the monks to move from Monte Cassino. Their move was the first tiny and unnoticed move in a monastic story which was to help the creation of the Middle Ages and transform Europe. It was a story whose spirit still lives on and develops in ever new ways at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

