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# Benedict of Nursia

## *The Rule*

(ca. 535–540)

**B**enedict of Nursia (ca. 480–547), the patron saint of Europe, played a key role in the foundation of Christian monasteries throughout the continent. Benedict came from a prosperous Italian family and was sent to Rome for his education. He grew up during a period of social and political disorder as the Roman world was fast vanishing. Benedict was shocked by the immorality and corruption that he witnessed in Rome, and in reaction he retreated to a cave outside of the city where he lived as a hermit for three years. During this time his reputation as a holy man spread, and he was persuaded to take charge of a local monastery. His attempts to reform this institution were not altogether successful and Benedict narrowly escaped being poisoned there. He subsequently founded his own monastery at Monte Cassino, which became the model for the Benedictine order.

Benedict's *Rule* was a system of regulations for a monastic order. It is a guide to life in a religious community and enjoins the residents to prayer, hard work, obedience, and hospitality. *The Rule* became the constitution of countless monasteries and nunneries in succeeding centuries.

### What are the Instruments of Good Works.—

1. First Instrument: in the first place to love the Lord God with all one's heart, all one's soul, and all one's strength.
2. Then, one's neighbour as oneself.
3. Then not to kill.
4. Not to commit adultery.
5. Not to steal.
6. Not to covet.
7. Not to bear false witness.
8. To honour all men.
9. Not to do to another what one would not have done to oneself.
10. To deny oneself, in order to follow Christ.
11. To chastise the body.
12. Not to seek after delicate living.
13. To love fasting.
14. To relieve the poor.
15. To clothe the naked.
16. To visit the sick.
17. To bury the dead.
18. To help in affliction.
19. To console the sorrowing.
20. To keep aloof from worldly actions.
21. To prefer nothing to the love of Christ.
22. Not to gratify anger.
23. Not to harbour a desire of revenge.
24. Not to foster guile in one's heart.
25. Not to make a feigned peace.
26. Not to forsake charity.
27. Not to swear, lest perchance, one forswear oneself.

28. To utter truth from heart and mouth.
29. Not to render evil for evil.
30. To do no wrong to anyone, yea, to bear, patiently wrong done to oneself.
31. To love one's enemies.
32. Not to render cursing for cursing, but rather blessing.
33. To bear persecution for justice's sake.
34. Not to be proud.
35. Not given to wine.
36. Not a glutton.
37. Not drowsy.
38. Not slothful.
39. Not a murmurer.
40. Not a detractor.
41. To put one's hope in God.
42. To attribute any good that one sees in oneself to God and not to oneself.
43. But to recognize and always impute to oneself the evil that one does.
44. To fear the Day of Judgement.
45. To be in dread of hell.
46. To desire with all spiritual longing everlasting life.
47. To keep death daily before one's eyes.
48. To keep guard at all times over the actions of one's life.
49. To know for certain that God sees one everywhere.
50. To dash down at the feet of Christ one's evil thoughts, the instant that they come into the heart.
51. And to lay them open to one's spiritual father.
52. To keep one's mouth from evil and wicked words.
53. Not to love much speaking.
54. Not to speak vain words or such as move to laughter.
55. Not to love much or excessive laughter.
56. To listen willingly to holy reading.
57. To apply oneself frequently to prayer.
58. Daily to confess in prayer one's past sins with tears and sighs to God, and to amend them for the time to come.

59. Not to fulfill the desires of the flesh: to hate one's own will.

60. To obey in all things the commands of the Abbot, even though he himself (which God forbid) should act otherwise; being mindful of that precept of the Lord: "What they say, do ye; but what they do, do ye not."

61. Not to wish to be called holy before one is so: but first to be holy, that one may be truly so called.

62. Daily to fulfill by one's deeds the commandments of God.

63. To love chastity.

64. To hate no man.

65. Not to be jealous, nor to give way to envy.

66. Not to love strife.

67. To fly from vainglory.

68. To reverence seniors.

69. To love juniors.

70. To pray for one's enemies in the love of Christ.

71. To make peace with an adversary before the setting of the sun.

72. And never to despair of God's mercy.

Behold, these are the tools of the spiritual craft, which, if they be constantly employed day and night, and duly given back on the Day of Judgement, will gain for us from the Lord that reward which He Himself has promised—"which eye hath not seen, nor ear heard; nor hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive what God hath prepared for them that love him." And the workshop where we are to labour diligently at all these things is the cloister of the monastery, and stability in the community.

## OF OBEDIENCE

The first degree of humility is obedience without delay. This becomes those who hold nothing dearer to them than Christ, and who on account of the holy servitude which they have taken upon

them, and for fear of hell, and for the glory of life everlasting, as soon as anything is ordered by the superior, just as if it had been commanded by God Himself, are unable to bear delay in doing it. It is of these that the Lord says: "At the hearing of the ear he hath obeyed me." And again, to teachers he saith: "He that heareth you heareth me."

### THE SPIRIT OF SILENCE

Let us do as says the prophet: "I said, I will take heed to my ways, that I sin not with my tongue: I have placed a watch over my mouth; I became dumb, and was silent, and held my peace even from good things." Here the prophet shows that if we ought to refrain even from good words for the sake of silence, how much more ought we to abstain from evil words, on account of the punishment due to sin!

Therefore, on account of the importance of silence, let leave to speak be seldom granted even to perfect disciples, although their conversation be good and holy and tending to edification; because it is written: "In much speaking thou shalt not avoid sin;" and elsewhere: "Death and life are in the power of the tongue." For it becomes the master to speak and to teach, but it beseems the disciple to be silent and to listen.

And, therefore, if anything has to be asked of a superior, let it be done with all humility and subjection of reverence, lest he seem to say more than is expedient.

But as for buffoonery or silly words, such as move to laughter, we utterly condemn them in every place, nor do we allow the disciple to open his mouth in such discourse.

### OF HUMILITY

The Holy Scripture cries out to us, brethren, saying: "Everyone that exalteth himself shall be humbled, and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted." In saying this, it teaches us that all exaltation is a kind of pride, against which the

prophet shows himself to be on his guard when he says: "Lord, my heart is not exalted nor mine eyes lifted up: nor have I walked in great things, nor in wonders above me." And why? "If I did not think humbly, but exalted my soul: like a child that is weaned from his mother, so wilt thou requite my soul."

Whence, brethren, if we wish to arrive at the highest point of humility and speedily to reach that heavenly exaltation to which we can only ascend by the humility of this present life, we must by our ever-ascending actions erect such a ladder as that which Jacob beheld his dream, by which the angels appeared to him descending and ascending. This descent and ascent signify nothing else than that we descend by exaltation and ascend by humility. And the ladder thus erected is our life in the world, which, if the heart be humbled, is lifted up by the Lord to heaven. The sides of the same ladder we understand to be our body and soul, in which the call of God has placed various degrees of humility or discipline, which we must ascend.

### HOW THE MONKS ARE TO SLEEP

Let them sleep each one in a separate bed, receiving bedding suitable to their manner of life, as the Abbot shall appoint.

If it be possible, let all sleep in one place; but if the number do not permit of this, let them repose by tens or twenties with the seniors who have charge of them. Let a candle burn constantly in the cell until morning.

Let them sleep clothed, and girded with belts or cords—but not with knives at their sides, lest perchance they wound themselves in their sleep—and thus be always ready, so that when the signal is given they rise without delay, and hasten each to forestall the other in going to the Work of God, yet with all gravity and modesty.

Let not the younger brethren have their beds by themselves, but among those of the seniors. And when they rise for the Work of God, let them gently encourage one another, because of the excuses of the drowsy.

### OF THE DAILY MANUAL LABOUR

Idleness is the enemy of the soul. Therefore should the brethren be occupied at stated times in manual labour, and at other fixed hours in sacred reading.

We think, therefore, that the times for each may be disposed as follow: from Easter to the Calends of October, on coming out in the morning let them labour at whatever is necessary from the first until about the fourth hour. From the fourth hour until close upon the sixth let them apply themselves to reading. After the sixth hour, when they rise from table, let them rest on their beds in all silence; or if anyone chance to wish to read to himself, let him so read as not to disturb anyone else. Let None be said rather soon, at the middle of the eighth hour; and then let them again work at whatever has to be done until Vespers.

If, however, the needs of the place or poverty require them to labour themselves in gathering in the harvest, let them not grieve at that; for

then are they truly monks when they live by the labour of their hands, as our Fathers and the Apostles did. But let all things be done in moderation for the sake of the faint-hearted.

From the Calends of October until the beginning of Lent let the brethren devote themselves to reading till the end of the second hour. At the second hour let Terce be said, after which they shall all labour at their appointed work until None. At the first signal for the hour of None all shall cease from their work, and be ready as soon as the second signal is sounded. After their meal let them occupy themselves in their reading or with the psalms.

### OF THE RECEPTION OF GUESTS

Let all guests that come be received like Christ Himself, for He will say: "I was a stranger and ye took me in." And let fitting honour be shown to all, especially, however, to such as are of the household of the faith and to pilgrims.

1. The creation of the *Rule* is a comment upon Benedict's view of the nature of humanity. What are people like, and what good is the *Rule*?
  2. Benedict has taken great care to order the lives of his monks in great detail. What is their daily life like?
  3. Why does Benedict have such a high regard for silence? Why is talk dangerous?
  4. Monasteries that kept to Benedict's *Rule* could be very useful institutions. How?
  5. Every monastery reflected something about the society of which it was a part. What does the *Rule* tell us about the social and economic structure of the time?
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