St. Benedict

**Benedict of Nursia** (Italian: *San Benedetto da Norcia*) (c. 480 – 543 or 547) is a Christian saint, honoured by the Catholic Church and the Anglican Church\(^1\) as the patron saint of Europe and students.

Benedict founded twelve communities for monks at Subiaco, Italy (about 40 miles (64 km) to the east of Rome), before moving to Monte Cassino in the mountains of southern Italy. The Catholic Order of St Benedict and the Anglican Order of St Benedict are of later origin and, moreover, not an "order" as commonly understood but merely a confederation of autonomous congregations.\(^2\)

Benedict's main achievement is his "Rule of Saint Benedict", containing precepts for his monks. It is heavily influenced by the writings of John Cassian, and shows strong affinity with the Rule of the Master. But it also has a unique spirit of balance, moderation and reasonableness (ἐπιείκεια, *epieikeia*), and this persuaded most religious communities founded throughout the Middle Ages to adopt it. As a result, his Rule became one of the most influential religious rules in Western Christendom. For this reason, Benedict is often called the founder of western monasticism.

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1. Biography

Apart from a short poem attributed to Mark of Monte Cassino, the only ancient account of Benedict is found in the second volume of Pope Gregory I's four-book *Dialogues*, thought to have been written in 593.[3] The authenticity of this work has been hotly disputed, especially by Dr Francis Clarke in his two volume work *The Pseudo-Gregorian Dialogues*. Book Two consists of a prologue and thirty-eight succinct chapters.[4]

Gregory’s account of this saint’s life is not, however, a biography in the modern sense of the word. It provides instead a spiritual portrait of the gentle, disciplined abbot. In a letter to Bishop Maximilian of Syracuse, Gregory states his intention for his *Dialogues*, saying they are a kind of *floretum* (an anthology, literally, ‘flowers’) of the most striking miracles of Italian holy men.[5]

Gregory did not set out to write a chronological, historically anchored story of St. Benedict, but he did base his anecdotes on direct testimony. To establish his authority, Gregory explains that his information came from what he considered the best sources: a handful of Benedict’s disciples who lived with the saint and witnessed his various miracles. These followers, he says, are Constantinus, who succeeded Benedict as Abbot of Monte Cassino; Valentinianus; Simplicius; and Honoratus, who was abbot of Subiaco when St Gregory wrote his *Dialogues*.

In Gregory’s day, history was not recognised as an independent field of study; it was a branch of grammar or rhetoric, and *historia* (defined as ‘story’) summed up the approach of the learned when they wrote what was, at that time, considered ‘history.’[6] Gregory’s *Dialogues* Book Two, then, an authentic medieval hagiography cast as a conversation between the Pope and his deacon Peter, is designed to teach spiritual lessons.[3]

2. Early life

He was the son of a Roman noble of Nursia,[3] the modern Norcia, in Umbria. A tradition which Bede accepts makes him a twin with his sister Scholastica. If we accept the date 480 for his birth, we may fix the date of his abandonment of his studies and leaving home at about 500. St Gregory’s narrative makes it impossible to suppose him younger than 19 or 20 at the time. He was old enough to be in the midst of his literary studies, to understand the real meaning and worth of the dissolute and licentious lives of his companions, and to have been deeply affected himself by the love of a woman. He was at the beginning of life, and he had at his disposal the means to a career as a Roman noble; clearly he was not a child.

Benedict doesn’t seem to have left Rome for the purpose of becoming a hermit, but only to find some place away from the life of the great city. He took his old nurse with him as a servant and they settled down to live in Enfide, near a church to St Peter, in some kind of association with "a company of virtuous men" who were in sympathy with his feelings and his views of life. Enfide, which the tradition of Subiaco identifies with the modern Affile, is in the Simbruini mountains, about forty miles from Rome and two from Subiaco.
valley, penetrating the mountains and leading directly to Subiaco. The path continues to ascend, and the side of the ravine, on which it runs, becomes steeper, until a cave is reached above which the mountain now rises almost perpendicularly; while on the right, it strikes in a rapid descent down to where, in St Benedict's day, 500 feet (150 m) below, lay the blue waters of the lake. The cave has a large triangular-shaped opening and is about ten feet deep. On his way from Enfide, Benedict met a monk, Romanus of Subiaco, whose monastery was on the mountain above the cliff overhanging the cave. Romanus had discussed with Benedict the purpose which had brought him to Subiaco, and had given him the monk's habit. By his advice Benedict became a hermit and for three years, unknown to men, lived in this cave above the lake.

3. Later life

St Gregory tells us little of these years. He now speaks of Benedict no longer as a youth (puer), but as a man (vir) of God. Romanus, he twice tells us, served the saint in every way he could. The monk apparently visited him frequently, and on fixed days brought him meals.

During these three years of solitude, broken only by occasional communications with the outer world and by the visits of Romanus, Benedict matured both in mind and character, in knowledge of himself and of his fellow-man, and at the same time he became not merely known to, but secured the respect of, those about him; so much so that on the death of the abbot of a monastery in the neighbourhood (identified by some with Vicovaro), the community came to him and begged him to become its abbot. Benedict was acquainted with the life and discipline of the monastery, and knew that "their manners were diverse from his and therefore that they would never agree together: yet, at length, overcome with their entreaty, he gave his consent" (ibid., 3). The experiment failed; the monks tried to poison him. The legend goes that they first tried to poison his drink. He prayed a blessing over the cup and the cup shattered. Then they tried to poison him with poisoned bread. When he prayed a blessing over the bread, a raven swept in and took the loaf away. Benedict returned to his cave at Subiaco. From this time his miracles seem to have become frequent, and many people, attracted by his sanctity and character, came to Subiaco to be under his guidance. He founded 12 monasteries in the vicinity of Subiaco, and, eventually, founded the great Benedictine monastery of Monte Cassino, which lies on a hilltop between Rome and Naples.[7]

4. Veneration

He died at Monte Cassino not long after his sister, Saint Scholastica. Benedict died of a high fever on the day God had told him he was to die, and was buried in the same place as his sister. According to tradition, this occurred on 21 March 543 or 547. He was named patron protector of Europe by Pope Paul VI in 1964.[8] In 1980, Pope John Paul II declared him co-patron of Europe, together with Saints Cyril and Methodius.[9]

In the pre-1970 General Roman Calendar, his feast is kept on 21 March, the day of his death according to some manuscripts of the Martyrologium Hieronymianum and that of Bede. Because
on that date his liturgical memorial would always be impeded by the observance of Lent, the 1969 revision of the General Roman Calendar moved his memorial to 11 July, the date that appears in some Gallic liturgical books of the end of the 8th century as the feast commemorating his death (Natalis S. Benedicti). There is some uncertainty about the origin of this feast. Accordingly, on 21 March the Roman Martyrology mentions in a line and a half that it is Benedict's day of death and that his memorial is celebrated on 11 July, while on 11 July it devotes seven lines to speaking of him, and mentions the tradition that he died on 21 March.

The Eastern Orthodox Church commemorates St. Benedict on 14 March.

The Anglican Communion has no single universal calendar, but a provincial calendar of saints is published in each province. In almost all of these, St Benedict is commemorated on 11 July.

5. Rule of St. Benedict

Main article: Rule of St Benedict

Seventy-three short chapters comprise the Rule. Its wisdom is of two kinds: spiritual (how to live a Christocentric life on earth) and administrative (how to run a monastery efficiently). More than half the chapters describe how to be obedient and humble, and what to do when a member of the community is not. About one-fourth regulate the work of God (the Opus Dei). One-tenth outline how, and by whom, the monastery should be managed. And two chapters specifically describe the abbot’s pastoral duties.

6. The Saint Benedict Medal

This medal originally came from a cross in honour of St Benedict. On one side, the medal has an image of St Benedict, holding the Holy Rule in his left hand and a cross in his right. There is a raven on one side of him, with a cup on the other side of him. Around the medal's outer margin are the words "Eius in obitu nostro praesentia muniamur"("May we, at our death, be fortified by His presence"). The other side of the medal has a cross with the initials CSSML on the vertical bar which signify "Crux Sacra Sit Mihi Lux" ("May the Holy Cross be my light") and on the horizontal bar are the initials NDSMD which stand for "Non Draco Sit Mihi Dux" ("Let not the dragon be my overlord"). The initials CSPB stand for "Crux Sancti Patris Benedicti" ("The Cross of the Holy Father Benedict") and are located on the interior angles of the cross. Either the inscription "PAX" (Peace) or the Christogram "IHS" may be found at the top of the cross in most cases. Around the medal's margin on this side are the Vade Retro Satana initials VRSNSMV which stand for "Vade Retro Satana, Nonquam Suade Mihi Vana" ("Begone Satan, do not suggest to me thy vanities") then a space followed by the initials SMQLIVB which signify "Sunt Mala Quae Libas, Ipse Venena Bibas" ("Evil are the things thou profferest, drink thou thy own poison").

This medal was first struck in 1880 to commemorate the fourteenth centenary of St Benedict's birth and is also called the Jubilee Medal; its exact origin, however, is unknown. In 1647, during a
witchcraft trial at Natternberg near Metten Abbey in Bavaria, the accused women testified they had no power over Metten, which was under the protection of the cross. An investigation found a number of painted crosses on the walls of the abbey with the letters now found on St Benedict medals, but their meaning had been forgotten. A manuscript written in 1415 was eventually found that had a picture of Saint Benedict holding a scroll in one hand and a staff which ended in a cross in the other. On the scroll and staff were written the full words of the initials contained on the crosses. Medals then began to be struck in Germany, which then spread throughout Europe. This medal was first approved by Pope Benedict XIV in his briefs of 23 December 1741, and 12 March 1742.\[13\]

Saint Benedict has been also the motive of many collector's coins around the world. The Austria 50 euro 'The Christian Religious Orders', issued on 13 March 2002 is one of them.

7. The influence of St. Benedict

Austria 50 euro 'The Christian Religious Orders' commemorative coin

The early Middle Ages have been called "the Benedictine centuries."[14] In April 2008, Pope Benedict XVI discussed the influence St Benedict had on Western Europe. The pope said that "with his life and work St Benedict exercised a fundamental influence on the development of European civilization and culture" and helped Europe to emerge from the "dark night of history" that followed the fall of the Roman empire.[15]

St. Benedict contributed more than anyone else to the rise of monasticism in the West. His Rule was the foundational document for thousands of religious communities in the Middle Ages.[16] To this day, The Rule of St. Benedict is the most common and influential Rule used by monasteries and monks, more than 1,400 years after its writing. Today the Benedictine family is represented by two branches: the Benedictine Federation and the Cistercians.[17]

The influence of St Benedict produced "a true spiritual ferment" in Europe, and over the coming decades his followers spread across the continent to establish a new cultural unity based on Christian faith.
From www.catholic.org

St. Benedict

Facts

In our modern world, we talk fast, we travel fast, and we even pray fast. Have you ever attended rosaries where people seem to say the words at breakneck speed -- apparently more worried about finishing before Mass starts than savoring each word? Our impatience to get to the end, our focus on completion rather than process is a real danger in reading Scripture when every word is from God and has a power all its own. Benedict knew that power because he took the time to let it work within him.

In the fifth century, the young Benedict was sent to Rome to finish his education with a nurse/housekeeper. The subject that dominated a young man's study then was rhetoric -- the art of persuasive speaking. A successful speaker was not one who had the best argument or conveyed the truth, but one who used rhythm, eloquence and technique to convince.

The power of the voice without foundation in the heart was the goal of the student's education. And that philosophy was reflected in the lives of the students as well. They had everything -- education, wealth, youth -- and they spent all of it in the pursuit of pleasure not truth. Benedict watched in horror as vice unraveled the lives and ethics of his companions.

Afraid for his soul, Benedict fled Rome, gave up his inheritance, and lived in a small village with his nurse. When God called him beyond this quiet life to even deeper solitude, he went to the mountains of Subiaco. There he lived as a hermit under the direction of another hermit, Romanus. After years of prayer, word of his holiness brought nearby monks to ask for his leadership. He warned them he would be too strict for them, but they insisted -- then tried to poison him when his warning proved true.

So Benedict was on his own again -- but not for long. The next set of followers were more sincere and he set up twelve monasteries in Subiaco where monks lived in separate communities of twelve.

He left these monasteries abruptly when the envious attacks of another hermit made it impossible to continue the spiritual leadership he had taken.

But it was in Monte Cassino he founded the monastery that became the roots of the Church's monastic system. Instead of founding small separate communities he gathered his disciples into one whole community. His own sister, Saint Scholastica, settled nearby to live a religious life.

After almost 1500 years of monastic tradition his direction seems obvious to us. But Benedict was an innovator. No one had ever set up communities like his before or directed them with a rule. What is part of history to us now was a bold risky step into the future.

Benedict had the holiness and the ability to take this step. His beliefs and instructions on religious life were collected in what is now known as the Rule of Saint Benedict -- still directing religious life after 15 centuries.
In this tiny but powerful Rule, Benedict put what he had learned about the power of speaking and oratorical rhythms at the service of the Gospel. He did not drop out of school because he didn't understand the subject! Scholars have told us that his Rule reflects an understanding of and skill with the rhetorical rules of the time. Despite his experience at school, he understood rhetoric was as much a tool as a hammer was. A hammer could be used to build a house or hit someone over the head. Rhetoric could be used to promote vice ... or promote God. Benedict did not shun rhetoric because it had been used to seduce people to vice; he reformed it.

Benedict did not want to lose the power of voice to reach up to God simply because others had use it to sink down to the gutter. He reminded us "Let us consider our place in sight of God and of his angels. Let us rise in chanting that our hearts and voices harmonize." There was always a voice reading aloud in his communities at meals, to receive guests, to educate novices. Hearing words one time was not enough -- "We wish this Rule to be read frequently to the community."

Benedict realized the strongest and truest foundation for the power of words was the Word of God itself: "For what page or word of the Bible is not a perfect rule for temporal life?" He had experienced the power of God's word as expressed in Scripture: "For just as from the heavens the rain and snow come down and do not return there till they have watered the earth, making it fertile and fruitful, giving seed to him who sows and bread to him who eats, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; It shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:10-11).

For prayer, Benedict turned to the psalms, the very songs and poems from the Jewish liturgy that Jesus himself had prayed. To join our voices with Jesus in praise of God during the day was so important that Benedict called it the "Work of God." And nothing was to be put before the work of God. "Immediately upon hearing the signal for the Divine Office all work will cease." Benedict believed with Jesus that "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4).

This prayer, called the Divine Office, was to be chanted from the breviary at specific times of the day. If a monk could not make it to chapel, he was to immediately fall to his knees in the place where he in the fields, in the stable, wherever he was and perform the Work of God under the vault of the sky. There was nothing special about praying in a chapel -- or praying outdoors -- but there was something very special about the prayer. "We believe that God is everywhere," but "without doubt, we believe this is so especially when assisting in the Divine Office." The Church still believes Benedict's and considers the Divine Office the prayer of the Church.

But it wasn't enough to just speak the words. Benedict instructed his followers to practice sacred reading -- the study of the very Scriptures they would be praying in the Work of God. In this lectio divina, he and his monks memorized the Scripture, studied it, and contemplated it until it became part of their being. Four to six hours were set aside each day for this sacred reading. If monks had free time it "should be used by the brothers to practice psalms." Lessons from Scripture were to be spoken from memory not read from a book. On Benedict's list of "Instruments of Good Works" is "to enjoy holy readings."

This sacred reading, however, was a study in love, not intellect. Not just an exercise of the mind, it was an exercise of contemplation so that "our voices and hearts harmonize." Each word of God would soak into their minds, their hearts, their very souls, so that the prayers would spring
up from the depths of their being, not just from their memory. "We realize that we will be heard for our pure and sorrowful hearts, not for the numbers of our spoken words." A heart was pure when it was empty of all but God's Word and our desire to remain in God's Word.

First came the lectio, reading the Scripture until a phrase was found that inspired the person to stop. Our natural tendency would be to read the phrase and think about what it means, what it has to do with our lives and then move on. But that was not part of sacred reading.

The next step was to memorize the phrase, repeat it over and over and over from memory without reading it, without thinking about it, just repeating it, until it seemed to be coming from the heart not the voice, until the power of the Word of God could take over.

When the phrase had lost all meaning except that power, the person would fall silent, still not thinking, but letting the inspiration of the Holy Spirit speak about the meaning in the heart. And finally the person would sink into contemplation, going beyond the voice, beyond the intellectual understanding, to sit in the presence of God in the divine Word.

In one story of Benedict's life, a poor man came to the monastery begging for a little oil. Although Benedict commanded that the oil be given, the cellarer refused -- because there was only a tiny bit of oil left. If the cellarer gave any oil as alms there would be none for the monastery. Angry at this distrust of God's providence, Benedict knelt down to pray. As he prayed a bubbling sound came from inside the oil jar. The monks watched in fascination as oil from God filled the vessel so completely that it overflowed, leaked out beneath the lid and finally pushed the cover off, cascading out on to the floor.

In Benedictine prayer, our hearts are the vessel empty of thoughts and intellectual striving. All that remains is the trust in God's providence to fill us. Emptying ourselves this way brings God's abundant goodness bubbling up in our hearts, first with an inspiration or two, and finally overflowing our heart with contemplative love.

Benedict died in 547 while standing in prayer before God.