Praying with Saint Benedict

Reflections on the Rule

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PREFACE

"HAVE YOU EVER ANSWERED GOD'S CALL?" she asked, in her characteristically direct manner. My friend Jo, spiritual director, lay leader, and restless Methodist, had just related her reasons for leaving one job and taking another and was curious to know whether God spoke to me in similar ways. Had I ever answered God's call? I responded that, yes, I think I had.

More than ten years ago, I sat in a Wednesday evening catechesis class, in part to support my partner who wanted to take the class, and in part to probe my interest in taking my faith more seriously. The guest speaker, Elaine Harris, spoke about intentional communities and, in particular, Cornerstone, a Benedictine community of about thirty-five people within Trinity Episcopal Cathedral's congregation in Portland, Oregon. She talked about their practice of the Rule of Benedict and the things they valued, such as restraint of speech, following a rule of life, and prayer. She ended by leading the class in a Compline service from the Book of Common Prayer. As she spoke, I thought about my desire for friends with whom I could pray and talk about my spiritual life. I was so profoundly moved by Elaine's words and my response to them that I rode home in silence, unable to say anything to my partner at the wheel for fear that my voice would break. I thought about it for days afterward.

I had to wait several months before taking the weekly class on Benedictine spirituality that was offered the next fall. During the first class session, I couldn't help but wonder why any monastic group—even a lay monastic group—would want me as a member. I had never had an interest in saints or things monastic. I didn't then have a regular prayer practice. I felt like a spiritual midget. And yet, the following January, I stood in front of my Cornerstone brothers and sisters with a lump in my throat and pledged stability, obedience, and conversion of life.

Rachel Held Evans wrote that what is most annoying and beautiful about the Holy Spirit is that it has this habit of showing up in all the wrong places and among all the wrong people.[1]

So began my life in a Benedictine community. With my Cornerstone brothers and sisters, we study the Rule of Benedict and, in small groups, try to apply it to our day-to-day lives. We read and discuss Benedictine authors

1. Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2015), 197.

such as Thomas Merton, Esther de Waal, Cynthia Bourgeault, Michael Casey, and—of course—Joan Chittister. Being part of this community has been transformational for me.

About two years ago, wanting to spend more time in the Rule, I adopted a Lenten project of writing personal reflections on each of the chapters in the Rule. I had the same challenges every twenty-first-century person has with a guidebook written in the sixth century. It was of a certain time and place, written long before the study of psychology or progressive theology, and in some respects seemed very severe according to today's standards. However, within the Rule, looking past the culturally specific distractions, were appealing guidelines for living in community: the practice of deference to each other, the importance of prayer throughout the day, the value of the Psalms in worship, the necessity for humility and restraint of speech, the gift of hospitality, and always the need to maintain a balance between discipline and charity.

When I was first introduced to the Rule of Benedict, I had one lurking misgiving. In my strict evangelical upbringing, I was taught that scripture was the authoritative source for knowing how to live our faith. Where does the Rule fit in? Shouldn't I be looking to the Bible, rather than to the Rule, for answers regarding how I should live my life?

I was calmed by these two discoveries as I read the Rule: First, Benedict himself makes frequent reference to scripture throughout the text. In nearly every chapter he cites short passages from the Gospels, the Psalms, and the Epistles. Clearly, scripture was his source for knowledge on the practice of faith and living in community, as it has been for other Christian writers. Second, Benedict points, in his final chapter, to Christ and to the "divinely inspired books of the Old and New Testaments." He goes on to recommend other religious texts from leaders of the early church. He modestly describes his Rule as a *minimum* guideline written for beginners.

One of my intentions, then, in writing my personal reflections was to explore the scriptures that Benedict cites in his short chapters in their full context. I discovered that words and phrases were different in Benedict's translation of the Bible from the ones we tend to use today. Sometimes he lifts quotations out of their original context, implying somewhat different meanings than the biblical authors originally intended. In the chapters where he does not quote scripture, I have looked for scripture that I think applies to the principle he is expounding. Each of the chapters in this book, therefore, includes at least one scripture passage that sheds light on Benedict's teaching.

Each chapter begins with a passage from the Rule, using the Doyle translation. The passage from the Rule is followed by a scripture passage, using the New Revised Standard Version.

Lectio divina is an ancient practice of prayerfully reading scripture. It is personal reflection during which, through repeated reading, we try to inwardly digest the substance of the passage, believing God speaks to us through the sacred text.[2] Although there are several recommended formats for engaging in *lectio divina*, Columba Stewart states that it is really a disposition more than a method.[3] It is meant to be a conversation with God about one's life. It is with that intent that I have included three contemplation questions after the two readings to draw you more deeply into the texts.

Then follows the reflection. In keeping with its intended use as devotional reading, I also have ended each chapter with a prayer.

2. Mariano Magrassi, *Praying the Bible* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 18ff.

3. Columba Stewart, *Prayer and Community: The Benedictine Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), 39, 41.

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ELAINE STEWART HARRIS INTRODUCED ME TO the Rule of Benedict, Benedictine practice, and the Cornerstone community at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in Portland, Oregon. She has been my spiritual exemplar and mentor ever since, and I am very grateful for her loving leadership and spiritual encouragement as abbot of our lay community.

I also give thanks for members of the Cornerstone community and particularly to the individuals I meet with weekly who read early portions of this work and gave me encouraging feedback, especially Ron Walker, my brother in Christ, who not only responded with enthusiastic encouragement but gave me the very good idea of including *lectio divina* questions as part of each devotional reflection. Being witness to his spiritual journey has been an inspiration to my own.

I have to thank Amelia De Vaal who, having experience in the world of publishing, offered to read the first draft of the book, gave me valuable feedback, and encouraged me to find a publisher. My friend of many years, Margaret Benefiel, connected me with Church Publishing. Thanks are owed to Nancy Bryan, my editor, for her gracious and positive communication and for suggesting a different structure for the book.

My brother, Jim, has always understood that I needed to take a different spiritual path than his own, and I give thanks for him and his family who have never shown me anything but wholehearted love. I also have had the joy of living with Michael Pickrell, the most loving person I have ever known, for over twenty-five years now. He has encouraged and supported me in every effort I've undertaken.

INTRODUCTION

Benedict and the Rule

Benedict of Nursia was born in 480 CE, the son of nobility. Long before Italy had been united as a country, Nursia (or Norcia) was part of the Umbrian district of Perugia, governed by Rome. As a young man, Benedict was sent by his parents to Rome to study but became disgusted by the decadence that he witnessed there, even among the clergy, and the political influence of the rich and powerful on the papacy. He left his studies, retired to the Simbruinian hills, and later became a hermit, living in a cave beside a lake above the town of Subiaco.

However, in spite of his isolation, he must have had social contact with other individuals, who then sought him out for advice and spiritual guidance as the fame of his sanctity spread. The local bishop asked him to form a community of the various monks in the area and become their abbot. Like many others who have stepped into a leadership position for the first time, his efforts were not completely successful. In fact, legend has it he was so unpopular with the monks in his first monastery that they tried to poison him. The legend also says he was saved by a raven who swooped down and stole a piece of poisoned bread out of Benedict's hand before he could eat it. The raven is now a standard image in many icons of Saint Benedict.

However, Benedict went on to found twelve monasteries, including Monte Cassino, the largest (now a popular pilgrimage destination), where he wrote his Rule for Monasteries (540 CE). There is no evidence that he intended to found a monastic order, but in the early ninth century Louis the Pious declared that the Rule of Benedict would be the blueprint of organization for all monastic communities. The Order of Saint Benedict that evolved is one of the earliest and arguably the most influential. To put his influence in perspective, it is interesting to note that Benedict produced his Rule in the first part of the sixth century, while the Franciscans and Dominicans were established in the thirteenth century, the Jesuits in the sixteenth century, and the Cistercians and Trappists in the seventeenth century.

Benedict's Rule borrowed from other sources, most notably from the writings of John Cassian and an existing rule by an anonymous "Master," which gave a more authoritarian role to the abbot. Among the challenges for modern readers

is the fact that Benedict wrote his rule for monks (that is, males), and today it reads as very male-centric, ignoring the fact that there are thousands of women monastics as well. Translations do exist that have attempted inclusive language, the most successful being Joan Chittister's.[1] The Order of Saint Benedict website uses a version of Leonard Doyle's translation that somewhat awkwardly attempts inclusive language by the use of "Abbot" and male pronouns in one chapter, and "Prioress" and female pronouns in the next, alternating this pattern throughout the text. I have chosen instead to use the original translation by Doyle,[2] while acknowledging that there are thousands of women Benedictines who follow Benedict's Rule. I ask their indulgence, appreciating the context and times in which the Rule was written.

Benedict's more gentle and balanced guidelines for leadership and discipline may, in fact, be due to a feminine influence in his life. He was very close to his twin sister, Scholastica, who consecrated her life to God at an early age. She founded and governed a monastery of nuns, about five miles from Monte Cassino, and Benedict became her superior. They visited each other once a year, spending their time in prayer and conversation on spiritual matters.

Benedict wrote the Rule as a modest "little rule for beginners." Its popularity and its power lie in its practicality, clear and direct text, and balance—between discipline and forgiveness, between authority and mutual support. Its influence has survived the Reformation, dissolution of the English monasteries, and various revolutions. It has strongly informed the Anglican liturgy and the Book of Common Prayer. Today it remains a guide for almost nine thousand Benedictine monastics worldwide as well as countless lay followers who find in it inspired wisdom as they pursue their spiritual journey in the secular world.

1. Joan Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

2. Benedict of Nursia, *St. Benedict's Rule for Monasteries*, trans. Leonard J. Doyle (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1935). Project Gutenberg, 2015. http://www.gutenberg.org/files/50040/50040-h/50040-h.htm.

1

RESPONDING TO GOD'S CALL

Listening

From the Rule

Listen, my son, to your master's precepts, and incline the ear of your heart. Receive willingly and carry out effectively your loving father's advice, that by the labor of obedience you may return to Him from whom you had departed by the sloth of disobedience.

To you, therefore, my words are now addressed, whoever you may be, who are renouncing your own will to do battle under the Lord Christ, the true King, and are taking up the strong, bright weapons of obedience.

And first of all, whatever good work you begin to do, beg of Him with most earnest prayer to perfect it, that He who has now deigned to count us among His sons may not at any time be grieved by our evil deeds. For we must always so serve Him with the good things He has given us, that He will never as an angry Father disinherit His children, nor ever as a dread Lord, provoked by our evil actions, deliver us to everlasting punishment as wicked servants who would not follow Him to glory. (Prologue, Part 1)

Proverbs 4

10 Hear, my child, and accept my words,
that the years of your life may be many.
11 I have taught you the way of wisdom;
I have led you in the paths of uprightness.
12 When you walk, your step will not be hampered;
and if you run, you will not stumble.
13 Keep hold of instruction, do not let go;
guard her, for she is your life . . .
20 My child, be attentive to my words;
incline your ear to my sayings.

21 Let them not escape from your sight;
keep them within your heart.

Contemplation

1. What word, phrase, or image from either of the two passages resonates with you?
2. What connection can you make to your own life?
3. What might God be calling you to do?

Reflection

The Prologue to the Rule of Benedict concisely presents all the key themes that are elaborated upon throughout the rest of the Rule. Many have noted that Benedict starts, in the very first sentence, with the injunction to *listen* and highlights the importance of eager, responsive listening, or listening "with the ear of your heart." So, it is not only important that my ears are open, but that my heart is open as well.

Benedict immediately introduces the subject of obedience (not my favorite spiritual topic). One might question Benedict's theology here, anthropomorphically making God an angry parent who, enraged by our sins, threatens to disinherit us. But Benedict correctly knows that the one who loves us (God) wants to bring us back into right relationship with God, back from our slothful indifference. It is not coincidental that the topics of listening and obedience are linked here. The Latin word for obey, *oboedire*, can also mean "to listen to." And, of course, for those of us who willfully want to control our own lives, obedience will also require a spiritual transformation, a conversion of life.

Prayer

Loving and merciful God, forgive me for the times I disregard your will in my life. Open the ears of my heart to listen to your instruction, open my eyes to see your love all around me, and direct my steps in obedience to your Word. Amen.

Waking Up

From the Rule

Let us arise, then, at last, for the Scripture stirs us up, saying, "Now is the hour for us to rise from sleep" (Rom. 13:11). Let us open our eyes to the deifying light, let us hear with attentive ears the warning which the divine voice cries daily to us, "Today if you hear His voice, harden not your hearts" (Ps. 95:8). And again, "He

who has ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Rev. 2:7). And what does He say? "Come, my children, listen to Me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord." (Ps. 34:11). "Run while you have the light of life, lest the darkness of death overtake you" (John 12:35). (Prologue, Part 2)

Romans 13

[11] Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; [12] the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; [13] let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. [14] Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Contemplation

1. What word, phrase, or image from either of the two passages resonates with you?
2. What connection can you make to your own life?
3. What might God be calling you to do?

Reflection

"Rise and shine, it's quarter to nine!" my dad used to call up the stairs every Sunday morning, signaling it was time to get up, get dressed, and get ready for church. Benedict is saying something similar to us: Get up, wake up, listen, and "run while you have the light of life." His tone is urgent.

Many of us come to a point in our lives when, because of having aged, or suffered through a life-threatening disease, or experienced the death of a loved one, we are keenly aware that we have only a certain number of days to become the person that we want—and God wants us—to be. We may have been sleep-walking through much of our life or coasting along in our faith. It's time to wake up.

Benedict is echoing the Holy Spirit's call: Come, listen, learn to reverence God. Put on the Lord Jesus Christ. There is work for us to do in the kingdom of heaven.

Prayer

Patient and ever-present God, thank you that you call me to a new life in Jesus Christ. Awaken me from a passive half-awake faith, and help me to eagerly respond to your call. Let me listen to your voice and open my eyes to your light. Amen.

Saying "I Do"

From the Rule

And the Lord, seeking His laborer in the multitude to whom He thus cries out, says again, "Who is the man who will have life, and desires to see good days?" (Ps. 34:13). And if, hearing Him, you answer, "I am he," God says to you, "If you will have true and everlasting life, keep your tongue from evil and your lips that they speak no guile. Turn away from evil and do good; seek after peace and pursue it" (Ps. 34:14–15). And when you have done these things, My eyes shall be upon you and My ears open to your prayers; and before you call upon Me, I will say to you, "Behold, here I am" (Isa. 58:9).

What can be sweeter to us, dear brethren, than this voice of the Lord inviting us? Behold, in His loving kindness the Lord shows us the way of life. Having our loins girded, therefore, with faith and the performance of good works, let us walk in His paths by the guidance of the Gospel, that we may deserve to see Him who has called us to His kingdom (1 Thess. 2:12). (Prologue, Part 3)

Psalm 34

11 Come, O children, listen to me;
I will teach you the fear of the Lord.
12 Which of you desires life,
and covets many days to enjoy good?
13 Keep your tongue from evil,
and your lips from speaking deceit.
14 Depart from evil, and do good;
seek peace, and pursue it.
15 The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,
and his ears are open to their cry.

Contemplation

1. What word, phrase, or image from either of the two passages resonates with you?
2. What connection can you make to your own life?
3. What might God be calling you to do?

Reflection

"*And if, hearing Him, you answer, 'I am he' . . .*" Another translation of this text states the answer as "I do," which immediately calls to mind a wedding, where each

partner responds to the other's love and accepts the invitation to a mutual lifelong commitment. We respond in a similar way to God's invitation, having yearned for a life permeated with God's goodness and rejoicing that God has found us and called out to us.

Of course, intimacy with God has its scary side too. In response to God's unconditional love, God is asking us to change how we live and behave. We might have to refrain from vicious talk (gossip), lying, and other forms of mundane evil. We may have to think about service, doing our part to further the kingdom of God, what Benedict refers to as "performance of good works." The gospel will be our guide.

Again, Benedict's theology (at least as it is translated) may be gently questioned here. We do not earn our heavenly reward by our good works; none of us deserves God's grace by anything we have done. But God is calling us to respond to an unconditional love and share in "the way of life."

Prayer

Most loving God, you have called me into relationship with you. Give me a heart that yearns for you. Give me lips that say "I do." Help me each day to respond to your call. Amen.

Testing the Spirits

From the Rule

When anyone is newly come for the reformation of his life, let him not be granted an easy entrance; but, as the Apostle says, "test the spirits to see whether they are from God." If the newcomer, therefore, perseveres in his knocking, and if it is seen after four or five days that he bears patiently the harsh treatment offered him and the difficulty of admission, and that he persists in his petition, then let entrance be granted him, and let him stay in the guest house for a few days.

After that let him live in the novitiate, where the novices study, eat, and sleep. A senior shall be assigned to them who is skilled in winning souls, to watch over them with the utmost care. Let him examine whether the novice is truly seeking God, and whether he is zealous for the Work of God, for obedience and for humiliations. Let the novice be told all the hard and rugged ways by which the journey to God is made.

If he promises stability and perseverance, then at the end of two months let this Rule be read through to him, and let him be addressed thus: "Here is the law under which you wish to fight. If you can observe it, enter; if you cannot, you are free to depart." If he still stands firm, let him be taken to the above-mentioned

novitiate and again tested in all patience. And after the lapse of six months let the Rule be read to him, that he may know on what he is entering. And if he still remains firm, after four months let the same Rule be read to him again.

Then, having deliberated with himself, if he promises to keep it in its entirety and to observe everything that is commanded him, let him be received into the community. But let him understand that, according to the law of the Rule, from that day forward he may not leave the monastery nor withdraw his neck from under the yoke of the Rule which he was free to refuse or to accept during that prolonged deliberation. (Chapter 58, Part 1)

1 John 4

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are
from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. [2] By this you
know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in
the flesh is from God, [3] and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from
God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is
coming; and now it is already in the world. [4] Little children, you are from God,
and have conquered them; for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is
in the world. [5] They are from the world; therefore what they say is from the world,
and the world listens to them. [6] We are from God. Whoever knows God listens
to us, and whoever is not from God does not listen to us. From this we know the
spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

Contemplation

1. What word, phrase, or image from either of the two passages resonates with you?
2. What connection can you make to your own life?
3. What might God be calling you to do?

Reflection

In our day and age, it's hard to imagine young men pounding on the door of a monastery wanting to seek a life there. However, in medieval times many reasons existed to desire life in a monastery. In chaotic and sometimes violent city-states, monasteries were like small fortresses, having high encircling walls meant to keep out all but invited guests.[1] They were safe. As institutions, they were full

1. Mark Cartwright, "Medieval Monastery," *Ancient History Encyclopedia.* Accessed August 9, 2019, https://www.ancient.eu/Medieval_Monastery.

of educators and scholars, and there a poor young man could become literate. Monks looked after orphans, the sick and aged, and daily gave out food, drink, and alms to the poor. Benedict seemed to be concerned about those who sought to enter the monastic life for the wrong reasons—safety, a warm bed, three good meals a day, a chance to learn—and not necessarily because they were "zealous for the work of God." Making inquirers wait, testing their stability and perseverance, was one way of assessing their motives and weighing their stamina for the monastic life.

I recognize my own impatience in wanting to pursue a path that, I think, will lead to personal or spiritual rewards. I want God to give it to me right now. In the eleventh century, Saint Romuald who, influenced by Benedict, founded the Camaldolese order and wrote his own rule, gave us good advice on this: "Empty yourself completely and sit waiting, content with the grace of God, like the chick who tastes nothing and eats nothing but what his mother brings him."

Prayer

Loving God, who opens wide your door to all who desire you, I thank you that the desire to follow you comes from you. Continue to give me the grace and perseverance I need to keep on my spiritual path, the path to you. Amen.

Stability, Conversion, and Obedience

From the Rule

He who is to be received shall make a promise before all in the oratory of his stability and of the reformation of his life and of obedience. This promise he shall make before God and His Saints, so that if he should ever act otherwise, he may know that he will be condemned by Him whom he mocks. Of this promise of his let him draw up a petition in the name of the Saints whose relics are there and of the Abbot who is present. Let him write this petition with his own hand; or if he is illiterate, let another write it at his request, and let the novice put his mark to it. Then let him place it with his own hand upon the altar; and when he has placed it there, let the novice at once intone this verse: "Receive me, O Lord, according to Your word, and I shall live: and let me not be confounded in my hope." Let the whole community answer this verse three times and add the "Glory be to the Father." Then let the novice brother prostrate himself at each one's feet, that they may pray for him. And from that day forward let him be counted as one of the community.

If he has any property, let him either give it beforehand to the poor or by solemn donation bestow it on the monastery, reserving nothing at all for himself, as indeed he knows that from that day forward he will no longer have power even over his own body. At once, therefore, in the oratory, let him be divested of his own clothes which he is wearing and dressed in the clothes of the monastery. But let the clothes of which he was divested be put aside in the wardrobe and kept there. Then if he should ever listen to the persuasions of the devil and decide to leave the monastery (which God forbid), he may be divested of the monastic clothes and cast out. His petition, however, which the Abbot has taken from the altar, shall not be returned to him, but shall be kept in the monastery. (Chapter 58, Part 2)

Psalm 119

113 I hate the double-minded,
but I love your law.
114 You are my hiding place and my shield;
I hope in your word.
115 Go away from me, you evildoers,
that I may keep the commandments of my God.
116 Uphold me according to your promise, that I may live,
and let me not be put to shame in my hope.
117 Hold me up, that I may be safe
and have regard for your statutes continually.

Contemplation

1. What word, phrase, or image from either of the two passages resonates with you?
2. What connection can you make to your own life?
3. What might God be calling you to do?

Reflection

Three promises are made when novices take their vows: stability, obedience, and reformation of life. (Other translations of the Rule transcribe the original phrase *conversio morum*—or *conversatio*—as "conversion of life" or "conversion of morals.") In my Benedictine community, we define these three vows this way:[2]

2. Cornerstone Community, *Cornerstone Customary for the Benedictine Community of Trinity Episcopal Cathedral* (Portland, OR: Trinity Episcopal Cathedral, 2018), 3.

- *Stability* is the promise to remain in community, even though close relationships can create interpersonal tensions, and to stay faithful to our practice.
- *Conversion of Life* is a commitment to practice the ideals of scripture and the Rule to sanctify everyday living, acknowledging spiritual transformation.
- *Obedience* is responding with deference to the abbot and others in the community and accepting the example of Jesus to seek what is best for others.

The three promises are interrelated. Stability is an act of obedience, and reformation of life empowers us to be both more stable and more obedient. In other orders, monastics also take vows of chastity and poverty, but Benedict saw these as outcomes of a conversion of life and obedience. All of the interpretations refer to one's manner of living. This change of life is indicated in the novices' final symbolic act: putting aside their own clothes and taking on the wardrobe of the monastery.

As Michael Casey[3] points out, conversion is a necessary starting point for the spiritual journey as well as a necessary device to bring us back on course when we have drifted away. And it is a gift of grace. We cannot bring it about through our own efforts. God calls out to us, and we respond by reorienting our lives to grow into the kind of person God created us to be. We change because we can do no other.

Prayer

Loving God, thank you for the grace that reached out to me, even when I was far from you. Guide my spiritual path to greater stability and obedience through ongoing conversion of life, that I may grow into the being you created me to be. Amen.

Dedicated to God

From the Rule

If anyone of the nobility offers his son to God in the monastery and the boy is very young, let his parents draw up the document which we mentioned above; and at the oblation let them wrap the document itself and the boy's hand in the altar cloth. That is how they offer him.

As regards their property, they shall promise in the same petition under oath that they will never of themselves, or through an intermediary, or in any way

3. Michael Casey, *The Road to Eternal Life* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 6–7.

whatever, give him anything or provide him with the opportunity of owning anything. Or else, if they are unwilling to do this, and if they want to offer something as an alms to the monastery for their advantage, let them make a donation of the property they wish to give to the monastery, reserving the income to themselves if they wish. And in this way let everything be barred, so that the boy may have no expectations whereby (which God forbid) he might be deceived and ruined, as we have learned by experience.

Let those who are less well-to-do make a similar offering. But those who have nothing at all shall simply draw up the document and offer their son before witnesses at the oblation. (Chapter 59)

1 Samuel 1

[21] The man Elkanah and all his household went up to offer to the LORD the yearly sacrifice, and to pay his vow. [22] But Hannah did not go up, for she said to her husband, "As soon as the child is weaned, I will bring him, that he may appear in the presence of the LORD, and remain there forever; I will offer him as a *nazirite* [one separated and consecrated] for all time." [23] Her husband Elkanah said to her, "Do what seems best to you, wait until you have weaned him; only—may the LORD establish his word." So the woman remained and nursed her son, until she weaned him. [24] When she had weaned him, she took him up with her, along with a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flour, and a skin of wine. She brought him to the house of the LORD at Shiloh; and the child was young. [25] Then they slaughtered the bull, and they brought the child to Eli. [26] And she said, "Oh, my lord! As you live, my lord, I am the woman who was standing here in your presence, praying to the LORD. [27] For this child I prayed; and the LORD has granted me the petition that I made to him. [28] Therefore I have lent him to the LORD; as long as he lives, he is given to the LORD." She left him there for the LORD.

Contemplation

1. What word, phrase, or image from either of the two passages resonates with you?
2. What connection can you make to your own life?
3. What might God be calling you to do?

Reflection

The practice of giving your child to be separated from the family and consecrated to God's service seems to go back to ancient times. The book of 1 Samuel tells the story of Hannah, who gave her child to Eli, the priest, for service in the

temple. The child was Samuel, who later grew to become one of Israel's great prophets, who identified and consecrated young David as the one God had chosen to be king.

In Benedict's day, both rich and poor had reason to leave their children at the monastery. The nobility may have believed that monastic discipline would be good for their spoiled and unruly sons. Poor parents may have hoped that, in the monastery, their children would receive decent food, clothing, and an education.

Receiving young men into the monastery had one condition. Unlike the practice in some orders, parents could not, neither of themselves nor through an intermediary, give gifts or money to their son. Contrary to Benedict's teaching, many medieval monasteries became much like prosperous manors, and some monks had the privileges of large landowners. The wealth of these monasteries made them attractive to the sons of the nobility, and monks generally came from the upper classes of medieval society. From early in the Middle Ages, certain nunneries also were reserved to the nobility, and their lifestyle was relatively luxurious.

However, this was not Benedict's teaching or practice. He knew that money, differences in social class, and private possessions would soon cause pride among some and resentment among others. Benedict knew what he was talking about; he himself was the son of a Roman noble of Nursia. Using the early Christian community described in Acts as his model, Benedict sought to establish a society in which all things were held in common, shared among those who needed them, and no one could assume that anything was his own.

Prayer

Worthy God, let me dedicate myself to your service wholeheartedly, knowing that there is nothing that I will need except the satisfaction of pleasing you. Amen.

What Are You Here For?

From the Rule

If anyone of the priestly order should ask to be received into the monastery, permission shall not be granted him too readily. But if he is quite persistent in his request, let him know that he will have to observe the whole discipline of the Rule and that nothing will be relaxed in his favor, that it may be as it is written: "Friend, for what have you come" (Matt. 26:50)?

It shall be granted him, however, to stand next after the Abbot and to give blessings and to celebrate Mass, but only by order of the Abbot. Without such order let him not presume to do anything, knowing that he is subject to the discipline of the Rule; but rather let him give an example of humility to all.

If there happens to be question of an appointment or of some business in the monastery, let him expect the rank due him according to the date of his entrance into the monastery, and not the place granted him out of reverence for the priesthood.

If any clerics, moved by the same desire, should wish to join the monastery, let them be placed in a middle rank. But they too are to be admitted only if they promise observance of the Rule and their own stability. (Chapter 60)

Matthew 26

47 While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; with him was a large crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. 48 Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him." 49 At once he came up to Jesus and said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" and kissed him. 50 Jesus said to him, "Friend, do what you are here to do." Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and arrested him.

Contemplation

1. What word, phrase, or image from either of the two passages resonates with you?
2. What connection can you make to your own life?
3. What might God be calling you to do?

Reflection

Benedict's use of scripture tips his hand as to what he may have thought of priests. The Matthew text he cites ("Friend, for what have you come?") was originally from the story about Jesus's betrayal by Judas Iscariot. The New Revised Standard Version translates the quote as "Friend, do what you are here to do."

As a young man, Benedict was sent to Rome to study, but was disappointed by the decadent life he found there, even as Rome was becoming the imperial city of medieval papacy. The Roman Empire was disintegrating. Papal affairs were taken over by Germanic rulers and leading Roman families. Popes were often forced to make concessions to temporal authorities in exchange for protection. Kings appointed members of the clergy, and as a result, bishops and archbishops often came from rich families. No doubt, Benedict was familiar with priests who knew

how to exercise their privilege, which would have upset the more egalitarian culture he had established in the monastery.

In Chapter 58 of the Rule, when Benedict addresses receiving new brothers into the monastery, he advises testing the spirits "to see whether they are from God." It is clear in this chapter that he extends that rule to priests as well as anyone else to wants to live in the monastery.

Prayer

Loving God, who cares for us all, watch over our community. Help me know my place in this sacred community and be a faithful servant to all. Amen.