

Introduction to
The Rule of Benedict: A Spirituality for the 21st century (Joan Chittister)
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In the following pages Joan Chittister wisely reminds us that the 1500-year-old book called the Rule of St Benedict is not merely historical literature but wisdom literature. This kind of writing does not transmit merely the limited experience of a particular person in a particular culture – however interesting that may be – but a timeless vision of the meaning of life and a vision of reality that can be verified in every person and in every way of living. It is not only ‘interesting’ it is revelatory.

When Carl Jung was asked to write an introduction to the ancient Chinese wisdom text, the *I Ching*, he consulted it beforehand asking what the text itself thought of the task he was about to perform. In its answer it delivered the hexagram known as the ‘Cauldron’. This symbol or archetype suggests a pot full of nutrition, like a well that serves everyone who is thirsty. It also commented on the need for itself as a source of wisdom to be re-presented to a world that had forgotten, misrepresented or rejected it. Jung was encouraged by this answer and wrote the introduction. In Sr Joan’s case she has ‘consulted’ the Rule by living its spirit each day for fifty years. She has drunk from its wisdom and seen the living connection between what St Benedict wrote, distilling his lived experience of ‘seeking God’ in community, and those constantly flowing moments that make even life in a quiet cloister always full of surprises. When I entered monastic life I was worried its set schedules and evident limitations might become boring but I have not known a day of boredom in my forty years of trying to live it in various forms. Whatever our path through life, marriage or monastery, aren’t we always surprised by how seeking leads to finding God but then re-launches into yet another stage of the endless journey.

Sr Joan has not blocked out the busy market-place of the world and its problems from the peace of her cloister-experience. She is an engaged monastic. And so, her insights into the wisdom of the Rule could be applied to other kinds of life. She goes so far as to claim – and with good reason – that ‘Benedictine spirituality is the spirituality of the 21st century’. Drawing from my experience of the World Community for Christian meditation over four decades I think this is quite true, whether we call it ‘Benedictine’ or not. The principles of this spirituality are essential for humanity and humane values: a healthy rhythm of life obedient to the needs of the whole human person, physical, mental, emotional and spiritual; the need for social order and harmony, authority and equality; compassion for the young, the elderly, the sick and the stranger or refugee; the discipline necessary to restrain violence while using correction (and even punishment) with gentleness, to cure not to crush or take revenge. What couple, family, community, business organisation, national government or international body does not need to discern and respect these principles of life, work and spirituality?

Our century is a complicated one: its meltdown complexity and self-contradictions, its (very un-Benedictine) fundamentalisms and inability to converse, have threatened our health, happiness and even our survival. Humanity has been on a helter-skelter for two centuries through the industrial and into the digital age. It is as if, to change the metaphor, we had been driving for millennia within the speed limit, then suddenly pressed our foot on the

accelerator and became intoxicated with our own speed and power. The optimistic view is to see our transitional era in human history as a dark night which will lead through suffering and confusion to a better and finally peaceful world. This is possible to achieve provided a critical mass with enlightened leadership can find the right 'tools of good work', as Chapter Four of the Rule calls them.

What is the special value of Benedict's wisdom for an age as tumultuous and unstable as ours? How can this wisdom even be transmitted in such times? Maybe because the Rule itself was composed as the world around it, indeed a whole mighty empire, was crumbling in chaos known to historians as the 'Dark Ages'. Born amid social rupture, the Rule described the essential human principles of civilisation in the familiar terms of ordinary, daily life: how to eat, how much alcohol to drink, what to wear, to build sustainable community, deal with disputes, care for the vulnerable, even how to be self-sufficient, by being moderate in everything except moderation.

According to the Christian Desert tradition the monk (one who 'truly seeks God' according to the Rule), has two goals in life. The first is immediate: the purity of heart (steady, focused attention) needed to progress towards the ultimate goal which is the reign or 'kingdom of God' – an experience rather than a place. In our culture 'progress' has become both obsessive and contradictory. Can we say we are really making progress when affluence and techno-science, by which we materialistically measure it, is increasing human unhappiness and division. Is there not another complementary view of progress as conceived in the Rule, which is not linear and materialistic but cyclical and holistic? Both aspects are necessary to understand the meaning of progress. The cycle of progress that we have forgotten and that the Rule reminds us of, is felt in how the rhythms of daily life nurture our health and happiness through the commanding theological vision of death and resurrection. 'May we share in the sufferings of Christ so that we may also share in his resurrection', the Prologue says.

The Rule describes not systematic but lived theology, existential faith and meaning in how we live with others, 'putting up with their faults of character and body' as well as perseverance in our personal seeking of God through all circumstances and moods. For Benedict, life is not systematic. It is as fluid as a flowing river and the hidden theology of the Rule reflects this contemplative immediacy.

At our community in Bonnevaux, the international centre of the WCCM based in France, we live in the spirit of the Rule and read it together daily. It is a new experiment in a new form of Benedictine living. Sr Joan's commentary often helps us to introduce new guests and residents to this source of wisdom. Her wise, honest, feminine insights into its purpose and its challenging parts help people to connect it to their daily situations and encounters.

This commentary also helps us grow in discovering in a new way an ancient form of Benedictine life, the oblate path. This is a way of living in community that is undergoing a radical evolution in our time. The formal distinction between oblate and monk becomes more subtle because of a new integral part of our prayer life: a period of silent meditation as part of each hour of the daily office and after in the Eucharist. This deepens the experience of unity among all those living together regardless of the kind of commitment

they are making. For practical reasons (Benedict was nothing if not practical) this new element of the life has led to a simplification of the common prayer described by Benedict. Most monastic communities have long reduced or stretched the time allocated to it. The clericalisation of monastic life since the middle ages in many ways contradicts Benedict's vision. He himself was not a priest nor were the monks of the community routinely ordained, although priests could be admitted under certain conditions. I wonder if he might recognise his communities better in Benedictine lay communities, including oblates, like the one forming at Bonnevaux or indeed in a womens' monastery like Sr Joan's.

What he would notice as different, however, is the inclusion of communal times of contemplative prayer, *oratio pura* or 'pure prayer as he would have called it into the Opus Dei and Mass. Maybe this is not so new, however, as he strongly protects the right of personal silent prayer in the oratory after the office for those who feel so called.

Who knows what Benedict would think of anything in our world? I feel, however, that he would recognise the signs of his Rule of life when it is successfully allowing daily life in community to distil wisdom and fuel progress in the seeking and finding of God. When he noticed differences from his precise way of doing things, he might shrug his Italian shoulders and raise his eyebrows remembering what he wrote in Chapter 18. There he concludes his detailed instructions for formal common prayer, primarily psalms and readings. Although, like most old people looking backwards in time, he thought the monks of his day were inferior – 'lukewarm' - compared with the real monks of the desert. Making allowances for human weakness and not condemning it, he said the whole 150 psalms should be said over a week rather than each day. But he typically says if anyone can arrange it better, they should do so.

This shows the combination of idealism and pragmatism necessary for healthy living and spiritual progress. It reveals the flexibility of the wise teacher which to the unwise or the fundamentalist may look self-contradictory. Sr Joan is right: Benedictine spirituality has much to teach our confused age. We need the kind of suppleness to be found in the following commentary on this ancient and wondrously fresh text. Then we, so thirsty for what it offers, may drink deep from its spring of wisdom.

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