

## Part Two

### Our Guide for the Journey: Benedict of Nursia

*“Some years ago there lived a man who was revered for the holiness of his life. Blessed Benedict was his name, and he was blessed also with God’s grace.”*

- Life and Miracles of St. Benedict (Book II of the Dialogues)  
by Pope Gregory the Great (written 594 A.D)

In every age there are men and women who know a deep and burning longing for God. Their lives are consumed by this passion and their deepest desire is to know God more deeply, more intimately, without barriers. For these people the fire of their passion may not only consume them but may also provide a light to people centuries beyond their death.

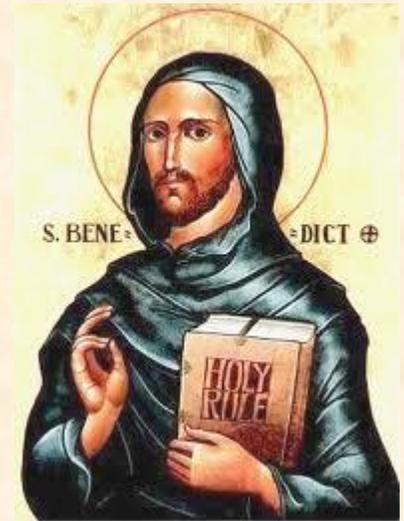
Benedict of Nursia is such a person. St. Benedict was the founder of the religious order that bears his name, the Benedictines. He wrote a monastic “Rule” or guidebook for people who wanted to live together in communities and seek God. Under the influence of his life and “Rule” people began to follow the monastic way he prescribed. The famous monasteries of the Middle Ages followed Benedict’s guidelines for the spiritual life and thousands of women and men around the world still follow his way of living life with God at the center.

### Questions for Reflection:

- Benedict’s Rule has been a guidebook for monastics for over 1500 years. What are some guidelines or principles that have been important for you in your spiritual life?

## ***Who Was Benedict?***

Benedict was born in Nursia, Italy in the year 480. His was a time of war, chaos and social decay. The old social and political structures of the Roman Empire no longer worked and new structures were still being formed. Decadence seemed rampant and the old social structures seemed irrelevant. The Church was under attack from within and without and the people seemed to lack direction.



Benedict's was a time obviously much like our own. Like many people of our day Benedict began searching for answers in a time of chaos. The only source we have for learning about his life is from the 6th century document the "Life and Miracles of St. Benedict" by Saint Gregory the Great. Gregory's account is not a modern biography. He was not interested in the kind of factual account we have come to expect from a biography. His account describes Benedict as a holy man and an example of the kind of people God raises up in every age as models of faith. Gregory's account shows us Benedict's life as a model of someone who listened deeply and responded to God's call with alacrity.

Coming from a well-to-do family Benedict went to Rome to pursue his studies. While at Rome Benedict entered into the first step of his faith journey. He was disgusted by what he perceived as the vices of his fellow students and decided to leave the city and his studies to pursue the spiritual life more deeply.

To do this Benedict embarked on a time of solitude, prayer and asceticism. For three years he lived alone in a cave in Subiaco (about 35 miles from Rome) living a spiritual life and struggling with temptations. While living there Benedict was befriended by a local monk who supplied him with food, support and guidance for his journey.

As is usually the case of people for great spiritual depth, Benedict's fame soon spread in the local area. Soon a group of local monks asked him to come and be the superior of their monastery. Benedict discouraged them and told the monks that his way of life would never harmonize with theirs, but the monks insisted. Benedict finally agreed. However, when he tried to reform their way of life and make them more disciplined, they began to rebel and resent Benedict. The monks finally tried to get rid of Benedict by poisoning his wine. When Benedict blessed the pitcher of poisoned wine it broke in pieces. Benedict calmly pointed out to the monks that he had told them that his life was not compatible with theirs.

At this point Benedict went back to his solitude and presumably the monks returned to their old ways.

But Benedict was not able to continue in his solitude. When we move deeper into the spiritual life, God will always send us back into the world to share what we have learned. Benedict was no exception to this pattern.

Sometime later, in the year 529, Benedict founded his famous monastery, Monte Cassino, southwest of Rome, built on the site of an ancient Roman fortress. Here Benedict lived the monastic life, seeking God with a community of disciples and wrote his famous rule, a guide for living the monastic life.

According to Gregory's account Benedict became widely known for the depth of his wisdom in leading the monastic community which flourished under his leadership. Benedict was able to read the hearts of his monks and convert even the most incorrigible to a greater commitment to the monastic life and holiness.

Like most people of great spiritual depth Benedict also had experiences of the unity of all things in God. According to Gregory, not long before his death Benedict was praying one night when he had the experience of "seeing the whole world gathered up before his eyes in what appeared to be a single ray of light." This account of Benedict's vision is given as evidence of the depth of his relationship with God. "All creation is bound to appear small to a soul that sees the Creator....The light of holy contemplation enlarges and expands the mind in God until it stands above the world." (chap. 35)

### **Questions for Reflection:**

- What is the story of your spiritual journey? What have been the milestones on your faith journey so far? Try writing a spiritual autobiography describing how God has been active in your life.

- Early in his spiritual life Benedict was befriended by a monk who helped supply him with food in his cave. Who are some of the people who have been spiritual mentors in your life? Have you been a spiritual mentor for someone?



## Life in Benedict's Monastery

For Gregory the sanctity of Benedict's life is primarily demonstrated in the many wonders and miracles he attributes to Benedict, as well as examples of his great wisdom and skill in dealing with his monks. But beyond the example of Benedict's life, Gregory's account also gives us a glimpse of the monastic life that Benedict founded and that is reflected in his famous Rule.



Roman society of the 6th century was very stratified. Clear divisions existed between the ancient Roman nobility and the new "barbarians," Gothic invaders who had recently settled in Italy. The account of Benedict's life shows that his monastery is a model of a new sort of society in the midst of the old. Benedict did not distinguish between monks who had been part of the nobility and those who had been slaves. Everyone was treated with equal respect. Every monk was a disciple; status in a previous life made no difference to Benedict. He welcomed everyone, poor and rich, weak and strong, barbarians and nobility, children and adults. People from all backgrounds, temperaments, gifts and faults came together to seek God in the monastic way.

For Benedict the externals of a person's background were irrelevant. What was important was whether his monks came to the monastery to truly seek God. Out of his experience Benedict wrote a guidebook or monastic "Rule" for people who wanted to follow this monastic way of life. Benedict understood that people need guidance and instruction as they set out on the spiritual journey. The Rule Benedict wrote for people seeking God in monastic communities is still followed today. The spiritual depth and common sense practicality of Benedict's Rule make it a guidebook which is as relevant to busy people with families in the 21st century as it was to cloistered monks in the 6th century.

Benedict's Rule is a masterpiece that continues to guide people today. It combines profound spirituality with deep compassion and down to earth pragmatism. Benedict's Rule calls people to follow the deepest longing of their hearts for God while recognizing and accommodating their deepest weaknesses.

Benedict did not write a Rule for a community of saints but a Rule for a community of sinners, a group of people who come together willing to stumble, fall and rise again and again in the common quest to know God and God's love ever more deeply.

Throughout these coming days Benedict and his Rule can also be your guide as you seek to know God more deeply and intimately. May God's blessing be upon you as you "...set out on this way with Gospel for your guide..." (RB Prologue 21)



**Questions for Reflection:**

- What kind of guidance do you need in your spiritual journey? What are you looking for?
- Benedict wrote his Rule for people who wanted a specific way of life to deepen their relationship to Christ. Is this your desire? What might you be willing to change in your life to fulfill this desire?