

Part Three

God Calls Out: An Introduction to Benedictine Spirituality



“What is more delightful than this voice of the Holy One calling to us? See how God’s love shows us the way of life. Clothed then with faith and the performance of good works, let us set out on this way, with the Gospel for our guide...”

- RB Prologue 19-21

“Do not be daunted immediately by fear and run away from the road that leads to salvation. It is bound to be narrow at the outset. But as we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God’s commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love.”

- RB Prologue 48-49

Benedict was a person of deep faith who knew his need for God. The Rule that bears his name also reflects his spiritual depth and personal maturity. Out of his experience in guiding monks and writing a Rule for monastic life, Benedict realized that people need help and guidance along the way in their spiritual journey.

The example of Benedict’s life and Rule show us one of the fundamental truths of our faith: we cannot do it alone; there are no “lone rangers” in the Christian faith. We need each other; we need community; we need guidance and help to grow in faith. Benedict’s “little rule” is designed for those of us who have come to know that we cannot make it on our own. The whole Rule of Benedict is a guide for all of us who want to know God on a deeper level. The principles for the spiritual life that Benedict lays out are as valid for modern men and women with spouses, children, and busy lives as they were for his 6th century monks.

Questions for Reflection:



- Do you tend to be a “Lone Ranger” in your faith life? How so?

- Where do you get support? Where do you need support?



We Begin by Listening:

Benedict starts with simple advice for anyone who wants to follow God more closely. Listen! The first word of the Rule is “listen” and listening is the foundation of our life with God. Unless we become still and listen we will never hear what Benedict calls the “delightful voice of God” calling to us. Benedict assured us that if we listen and are faithful to God’s way, our hearts will “overflow with the inexpressible delight of love.”

But listening isn’t easy in our day and age. We are surrounded by the constant noise of our technological culture, the noise of the incessant demands of our busy lives as well as the constant noise inside our hearts when we try to become still and listen to God. But the necessity of listening and the difficulty of doing so are not unique to our age.

Listening is not something we will learn once and for all. Listening is a life-long process, not an achievement. Throughout our spiritual journey we will continue to learn to listen and respond to the invitation of God’s love in our life.

Questions for reflection:

- How do you listen to God’s voice in your life? What makes it difficult to listen? Are there any practical steps you can take to lessen your distractions?



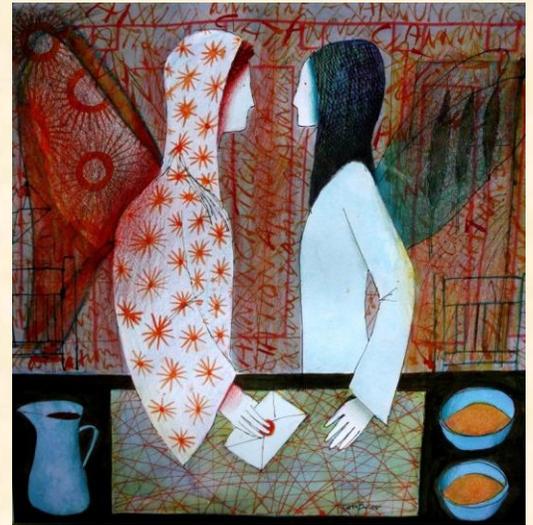
- As you listen to God’s voice today, to what is God calling you? You may want to answer this by entering into a dialogue with God: tell God you are listening and then see what you hear. Try to be both attentive and patient as you listen to God’s voice, it may come at times and in ways you don’t expect.

Are We Ready to Respond?

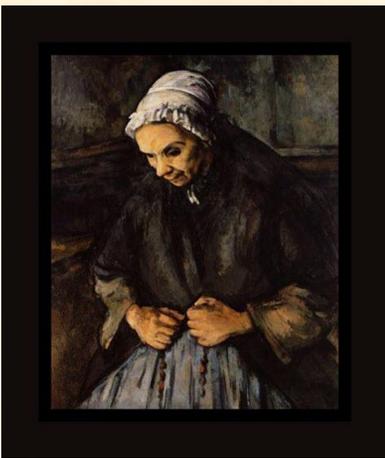
The Prologue to the Rule expresses the depth and strength of God's continuing invitation to us.

Benedict calls us to listen and respond to God's voice in our lives. For Benedict the spiritual journey is not a passive process. As disciples we must make a continual re-commitment to follow God. Benedict observes: "The labor of obedience will bring you back to God from whom you had drifted through the sloth of disobedience." (Prol. 2)

This disobedience does not mean we are fundamentally terrible people. Given our human nature it is easy for even the most devout and sincere of us to "drift" sometimes. We want to love and serve God but often we find it hard to maintain a high level of fervor and commitment in our relationship to God.



Realizing this Benedict becomes a cheerleader for tired disciples. He tries to bring us back to that initial sense of excitement we had in first following God. "Let us get up then, at long last, for the scriptures rouse us..." (Prol. 8) Benedict paints a picture of God calling out like Wisdom in the marketplace: "Is there anyone here who yearns for life and desires to see good days?" (Prol. 14, 15) Benedict exhorts us to respond to this delightful voice of the Holy One and "set out on this way with the Gospel for our guide..." (Prologue 19-20)



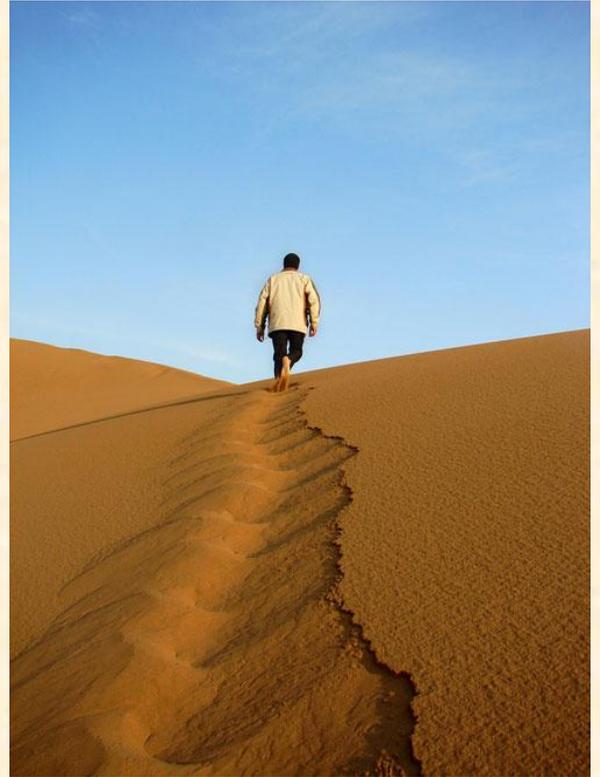
Questions for Reflection:

- Benedict recognizes that it is easy for us to "drift" in our relationship with God. Have you ever had times when you have "drifted" and not been as close to God? What caused that drifting? Are there ways to keep it from happening or to return more quickly to closeness with God?

- For Benedict it is crucial that the disciple have help in the spiritual journey, a Rule, a community, etc. What helps do you have in your spiritual life? Do you need more help than you are receiving? How might you get extra help or call more regularly on the help you already have?

Setting Out On the Journey:

For Benedict the proper response to God's invitation is practical and concrete. We demonstrate our faith by how we live our lives. "God waits for us daily to translate into action, as we should, these holy teachings." (Prol. 35) Good intentions are fine but they are not enough. Our actions, attitudes and behavior all reflect the depth of our relationship with God. But to move beyond good intentions to action we need help. "What is not possible to us by nature let us ask the Holy One to supply by the help of grace." (Prol. 41)



But some of us have trouble even asking God for help in translating our good intentions into the actions of faith. Benedict seems to realize our dilemma. He says that he intends to establish "a school of the Lord's service." We all need the help and guidance of a school, worthy teachers and a holy curriculum to come to know the deep holiness to which God calls us. Benedict also recognizes our reluctance and fear of undergoing any sort of discipline, even when it will satisfy the longing of our hearts. He exhorts his listeners: "Do not be immediately daunted by fear and run away from the road that leads to salvation. It is bound to be narrow at the outset. But as we progress on this way of life and faith, we shall run on the path of God's commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love." (Prol.49)

Then Benedict goes on to lay out the requirement for this "school of the Lord's service." In 72 short chapters he provides a guidebook for a whole way of life centered on God and prayer within the context of a community of faith.

While a few of his provisions are clearly relevant for the 6th century but not our own, most of the Rule is clearly a guide for people in any state of life who want to deepen their commitment to Christ. Benedict's Rule is a font of profound and practical advice for all Christians in any century and any situation.

As we proceed through the Rule and this retreat we will explore the principles of the spiritual journey that will provide us guidance throughout our lives. Benedict will teach us the importance of a life grounded in prayer. We will come to see our need to be shaped, challenged and nurtured by a community of faith. The Rule will challenge us to transform the egocentrism that can enslave us into a life centered on Christ. The practical provisions of the Rule will encourage us to live with balance and moderation. Like Benedict, in this retreat “we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome” but simply provide a way for all of us to listen and respond to the delightful voice of our God. Blessings on your journey throughout this retreat.



Questions for Reflection:

- Benedict is always very practical. Based on your responses to the questions in Part Two you may want to begin to write your own “rule,” practices and guidelines for your own spiritual life. Try being concrete but also realistic in what you can accomplish; after all Benedict was also very realistic about the limitations of human nature! Just as Benedict was with his disciples, be patient and encouraging with yourself.