

## Part Four:

### Staying Focused on Christ: A Life of Structure, Moderation and Balance

“In drawing up [the Rule’s] regulations we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome.”  
- Prologue 46

It is written: *Distribution was made as each one had need (Acts 4:35) ...*  
Whoever needs less should thank God and not be distressed,  
but whoever needs more should feel humble because of his/her  
weakness, not self-important because of the kindness shown him/her.  
- RB 34:1, 3-4

“The community should have specified periods for  
manual labor as well as for prayerful reading.”  
- RB 48:1



We live in an era of labor saving devices and yet we seem to labor all the time. We live in an era of instant communication but we often feel lonely and disconnected. We have as many hours in the day as people in any age and yet often we feel there isn’t enough time in the day. We live in the richest country in the world with one of the highest standards of living and yet

we are constantly exhorted with messages that our lives will be incomplete unless we buy and consume more and more.

Is it any wonder that most of us seem to be searching for deeper meaning in our lives, some sense of peace, fulfillment and deeper relationship to God? Although Benedict’s time obviously did not have the fast-paced frenzy of our own, his was also a time of tremendous change and chaos. In the midst of the vast upheavals and changes of his era Benedict realized that a life of structure, balance and moderation was the necessary framework to create a life focused on God.

In part Benedict was reacting to the excessive asceticism that had marked monastic life up to the 6th century. The early monastics who went to the deserts in the 3rd and 4th centuries often tried to outdo each other in feats of asceticism. They would fast extensively, spend hours in prayer, beg for alms, go for long periods without human contact. While many of these men and women became deeply holy as a result of these practices, Benedict realized that most of us are not called to and cannot sustain an extremely ascetic lifestyle.

Benedict tried to create a life of moderation and balance for ordinary people who want to come to a deeper knowledge and love of God. The structure he created is as applicable to busy, modern men and women as it was for Benedict's monks. Benedict's Rule gives us guidance for living a life of balance and moderation.

### **Questions for Reflection:**

- What is your life like? Is it an example of moderation and balance? As you look at your daily schedule what areas seem out of balance?



## How Do We Create A Balance of Work and Prayer in Our Lives?



It is easy to fall into a trap of believing that prayer is something that we will do “when we have time” and of course we then never quite have the time. We seldom have trouble scheduling our work time or even our television time and then not deviating from that schedule. But it is harder to make our time for prayer as set and inviolable as the time for our favorite TV show. It is easy to

see prayer as one of those “good things” that we should do more, along with exercising, eating right and taking better care of ourselves. It is seldom the center of our lives.

For Benedict though, the whole day revolved around the schedule for prayer. Meals, work, leisure and all other aspects of the monastic life were adapted to the prayer schedule. As far as Benedict was concerned the life of the monastic was centered and grounded in prayer. He adopted the ancient practice of praying seven times a day (RB 16) and established an extensive set of guidelines for community prayer.

This schedule of prayer sounds very burdensome to modern ears and many monastic communities have shortened community prayer from seven times a day to three or four. What is important though is not so much the exact number of times for prayer that Benedict prescribes but the structure, balance and nature of prayer that he creates.

For Benedict, prayer had to be at regular times. Prayer was not something that his monks did “when they could” or “when they got a chance” or “when they were less busy.” Prayer happened at particular times, regularly, without fail. When they heard the signal for prayer monastics were to leave everything and immediately proceed to the oratory (chapel) for the Opus Dei, communal prayer. We know that we don’t go to work only when we feel like it and yet as Christians our true “work” is prayer. Prayer is the work that feeds us, sustains and challenges us. It is not optional; it is the way we grow in faith.

So is prayer something rigid and inviolable to be pursued without flexibility? Benedict did not think so. Even though he treated the community prayer with the utmost gravity, he allowed plenty of room for human need and weakness. In the summer when nights were shorter, he said that prayers should also be shorter since the monks had less time to sleep. (RB 10:2) He also emphasized “moderation” in the number of Psalms prayed during Vigils, the prayer during the middle of the night, so that everyone could get the sleep they needed. (RB 11:2)

Prayer for Benedict was also a matter of quality, not quantity. Our prayer life is not necessarily better just because we pray more. “Prayer should therefore be short and pure, unless perhaps it is prolonged under the inspiration of divine grace.” (RB 20:4) We don’t even have the excuse of not having enough time. What is important is not creating a daily “quota” for our prayer but having our prayer be regular, moderate and sincere.

**Questions for Reflection:**

- Describe your prayer life. How do you pray? Where do you pray? Do you have regular times for prayer? Do you ever not pray because you don’t have enough time? If you haven’t already can you make a commitment to a realistic, humane prayer schedule? What would it look like?



## All We Need But Not All We Want:



We live in a culture that seems to tell us we are what we consume and our status is based on what we

possess. We are bombarded with commercials telling us that we can only be happy if we drive the right car, eat the right cereal and use the newest version of the latest technological gadget. This consumer culture is completely and totally foreign to the way of life that Benedict set out to establish.

Consciously or unconsciously most of us are defined by our possessions. Even if we try to live simple lives, our culture pushes us to own, use, buy and consume more. This makes Benedict's attitude of "just enough" quite radical in a consumer oriented, First World lifestyle.

In Benedict's Rule we do not see the idea that possessions define our lives; in Benedict's monastery no one competes to own the most or the least. Material goods are the things needed to provide a simple, basic, comfortable lifestyle, no more, no less. Whereas early monastics emphasized how little they could eat, drink, sleep or own, Benedict knew that to grow in wholeness and holiness we need just enough of each of these. Not too much, not too little, just enough.

This attitude is shown in Benedict's attention to details. People in the 6th century customarily slept together but each monastic in Benedict's community was to have his/her own bed. (RB 22:1) Living by the standards of the poorest in society does not guarantee an atmosphere conducive to prayer nor does having more space than we need.

Benedict's attitude toward clothing is similar. Benedict is not trying to see how little monastics can get by with. The poor of the day may have owned only one set of clothing but Benedict provides for two sets of clothes for each community member. When they receive new clothes, they give the old ones to the poor. (RB 55:9-10) However, if a monastic is found to have more than the allotted amount of clothes, the abbot or prioress can take away the excess. (RB 55:11)

Food likewise is a matter of moderation, not starvation, not gluttony. Whereas most of us struggle with an over abundance of food in our lives, this was not the problem in Benedict's culture. While it might have been easy for Benedict to try and make a virtue out of necessity and limit the amount of food his monks ate as a spiritual discipline, he doesn't. Instead food is something that should be enough to satisfy everyone of a variety of tastes and temperaments so that everyone can have enough. The common table is to have at least two kinds of cooked food so that if a monk didn't like one dish, he could eat the other. (RB 39:1-4)

The standard that Benedict seems to strive for is that each person have "enough" or what is "sufficient," whether that is bedding, clothes, food or any other possessions. Unlike people in our modern world Benedict's monks were not defined by how much they owned or consumed. They had all they needed, no more no less, allowing them to be consumed by their passion for God rather than their passion for possessions.



**Questions for Reflection:**

- Do a review of your own life in terms of what you own and consume. Do you have enough? Not enough? Too much? Is the amount of food and drink "sufficient" for your needs or is there a lack of moderation?

- Benedict allows the abbot or prioress of a monastery to take away a monastics extra clothes if he or she has more than two outfits. What would happen if someone looked in your closet? What is a "sufficient" amount of clothes and shoes for you in your life now?

- Are there any changes in your life you feel called to make after prayerful reflection on this?

## How to Work to Live Without Living to Work

Perhaps as much or more than possessions we are defined by our work. Working too hard can almost be a point of pride. Our status is determined by the type of work we do, how much money we make and how hard we work. Our work provides a large part of our sense of self-worth and self-image. To lack meaningful work is to question our basic sense of self.



Like many attitudes in our culture this understanding of work is completely alien to the understanding of the Rule of Benedict. For Benedict work was an important part of the life of everyone in the community. He sets forth specified hours during which everyone was to work (RB 48:1-3) and gave guidelines for the various chores that needed to be done. However, unlike most of us, Benedict did not see work as what defined his monks and gave their life meaning. Work was important in so far as it supported life community and the common life seeking God. Work was meant to enable the life centered on God and prayer, work was not to be an end in itself.

For Benedict the key attitude in all types of work is humility. Humility is the key to much of Benedictine spirituality. Humility allows us to reach that place where we are not the center of the universe. Instead of seeing everything in terms of our own needs, desires and egotism, we become focused on God and others rather than on ourselves. In the Rule work is supposed to reflect this humility. Each one is to do what the abbot or prioress says for the good of the community and not out of pride.

Perhaps the clearest example of this attitude toward work is the description of the cellarer, the person in charge of all the material goods of the monastery. The cellarer was to be someone "...not prone to greed, nor wasteful and extravagant with the goods of the monastery, but [who will] do everything with moderation and according to the abbot's orders." The cellarer is described as someone who does the job promptly, with courtesy, and special concern for those on the fringes of the community, the elderly, sick, guests and poor. Humility is to be the defining characteristic of the cellarer. He or she is helping the monastery run smoothly so that everyone can be focused on seeking God rather than worrying about meals,

tools, utensils and other details. The cellarer is not focused on the job, but on how the work builds up the community.

Every aspect of our life reflects our spirituality, our relationship with God. Benedictine spirituality tries to create a life that is structured, balanced and moderate. We all need a schedule that is clear, humane and flexible enough to support our desire to live with God at our center. Our work should be important and fulfilling but not an all consuming source of our identity and meaning. We need to have our material needs met in such a way that provides balance. We need enough so that life isn't burdensome but not so much that we are owned by our possessions. Like everything in the Benedictine way of life, moderation and balance are life time goals, not something we achieve once and for all.



**Questions for Reflection:**

- What is your attitude toward work? Do you work to live or live to work?
- Is your work life characterized by balance and moderation? If not, what could you do to make it more balanced?
- What would it mean to be humble in your line of work?