

**Part Five:**  
**Prayer: We Meet God Daily**

“[T]he community should have specified periods for prayerful reading...”  
- RB 48:1

We should realize that it is not in much talking [in prayer]  
that we shall be heard, but in purity of heart and tearful compunction.”  
- RB 20: 4

“Let us consider, then, how we ought to sing the Psalms  
in such a way that our minds are in harmony with our voices.”  
- RB 19:7

Prayer is at the heart of the Benedictine way of life. In prayer we praise God. We forgive and ask forgiveness. Through prayer we enter more deeply into relationship with the God we love. In daily prayer we explore the mystery of our faith and are united with all Christians everywhere. In prayer we are comforted, challenged, sustained and transformed. Prayer is the source of our life.



Prayer in the Benedictine way of life serves two purposes. Prayer is the practice and discipline on our journey that leads us to a closer relationship with God. Prayer is also the destination of our journey because in prayer we join our hearts with God's.

Fortunately Benedict knew that because of our human nature we often don't even do the things we want to do. We may sincerely want to pray but often neglect to do so. We desire a closer relationship with God but aren't sure how to go about it. Benedict recognized this reality of the human heart so he structured his monastic way of life around prayer practices that would give people the means they needed to pray and grow in prayer.

Every day the monastics pray the Opus Dei (Work of God) or Divine Office. The Office consists of the recitation of Psalms, other Scripture readings, prayers and hymns. The daily schedule of the monastery also allows at least two hours in the prime of the day for lectio divina or prayerful reading. In this way a monastics life was a continual cycle of prayer. The monastic is constantly called back into the presence of God either through both community and private prayer. In community life times for prayer were central, the times for work, meals, bedtime, and all other aspects of life revolved around the prayer schedule.

### Questions for Reflection:

- Sometimes even in the busiest schedule it's possible to have brief interludes of prayer. Some of the following techniques may be helpful to you:

- Set up a small holy place in your home or office, perhaps with a favorite picture or icon, a candle or framed quotation. Visit this place during the day even just for a couple of minutes to become aware of God's presence.
- Occasionally just stop and thank God for what is happening in your life at this time.
- Say a quick intercessory prayer for someone in need.
- Practice a short prayer such as the Jesus Prayer or Hail Mary along with breath awareness. Inhale in saying one phrase, exhale with the next phrase.
- Memorize a verse from Scripture that you can keep coming back to during the day.



## Lectio Divina: Praying the Word

Benedictine prayer and spirituality is deeply grounded in Holy Scripture. Verses from the Bible and allusions to Scripture permeate the Rule. The communal prayer of Benedictine communities, the Divine Office, consists primarily of Scripture readings. The primary private prayer of monastics is *lectio divina* or prayerful reading of Scripture. For monastics the Word of God is not simply to be studied or heard only on Sundays. It is part of the air they breathe. The Benedictine way of life is a life permeated with prayer and the presence of God in Scripture.



In addition to praying daily as a community, Benedict prescribes a substantial period of time each day to private prayer, *lectio divina*. Through *lectio* the monastic was given a chance to daily encounter the revealed Word of God in Scripture. Through the Word God comes to speak to the deepest places in our hearts. In this deep listening we are challenged, changed and comforted by our God. This encounter with Scripture will not leave us unchanged, in God's revealed word we receive strength and guidance for our continuing journey.

The actual process of *lectio* is as simple as it can be transforming. Traditionally *lectio* is taught as four steps. The first is *lectio* or reading. Take a short passage of Scripture and read it over slowly and carefully. What word or phrase seems to catch you or make you stop? Take that word or phrase and repeat it slowly to yourself several times.

The next step is *meditatio* or meditation. Ponder the word or phrase that came to you. How is it speaking to you? Where does it lead you? What does it remind you of? Spend some time listening to where it takes you.

Next, let your meditation become *oratio* or prayer. Turn the insights of your meditation into a prayer. It may be a prayer of thanksgiving, a plea for help, a request for the strength to change. This prayer is simply offering to God whatever came from your insights in meditation.

Finally, from prayer move to *contemplatio* or contemplation. This is a simple, wordless resting in God's presence. God knows our needs, our wounds and gifts, words are no longer needed. Simply spend some resting under God's loving gaze. When the time is right choose another passage and repeat the process.

The process, doing the steps perfectly and in the right order is not what is most important. Lectio divina is simply the opportunity to listen to God's word for you in Scripture in a way that works best for you. It should be noted that some people add a step and engage in "snore-atio" while trying to lectio. That is all right too; sometimes our need for sleep is how God speaks to us.

**Questions for Reflection:**

- Try practicing lectio with your favorite passage from Scripture or from the Rule of Benedict.
- How can the Word of God be something living and active in your life?



## Together Sing Praise:

In our culture prayer is usually private. Except for Sunday worship most of us think of our prayer lives as very personal and individual, between ourselves and God. While our individual prayer lives are crucial to our progress on the spiritual journey, it is often easy to fall into the trap of rugged



individualism, that somehow we are alone in our relationship with God. The reality is that we are never alone in our journey of faith. We are surrounded, upheld, nurtured and challenged by the whole Body of Christ and People of God.

When we pray together, we are reminded of our common faith in God, our common reliance on God's redeeming grace in our lives. Our common prayer reminds us that sometimes we carry each other on this journey and sometimes we are carried. When our faith is weak and wavering, others hold us up; when we are strong we in turn help our brothers and sisters.

When we pray together we pray not only for our immediate community and concerns, but we pray for all those who do not pray. We hold those who have no faith in our prayers. Through our common prayer we remember and incorporate the deepest, unvoiced concerns of the people in our world who never pray.

The heart of Benedictine communal prayer is the Psalms. While the Psalms are not often a large part of the spiritual lives of modern people, it is easy to see why they are so suited to common prayer.

There is probably no part of human experience that is not reflected in the Psalms, the depths of despair, the heights of praise, blazing anger and sublime love radiate from the Psalms. As the community gathers to sing these ancient prayers, each person realizes that there is nothing new or unique in his or her experience and nothing that is untouched by God, nothing that cannot be transformed by God.

In the Psalms we are reminded of God's faithfulness to us, a faithfulness that endures despite our wandering, failings, idolatry and ungratefulness. The Psalms express the deepest longing of our hearts for God and assure us that God will

satisfy that longing. Our darkness and despair are part of the world of the Psalms. When we doubt God's presence or even our desire for life, we have the company of the Psalmist who expresses the same feelings.

In praying the Psalms together, we stand in the tradition of uncounted people over the centuries who stood to proclaim that God indeed reigns. We stand as a community of faith and make real the continuing presence of God in the world. We believe and proclaim that God is indeed our light and our salvation, we have nothing to fear. (Ps. 27:1)



### **Questions for Reflection:**

- What is your experience or practice of community prayer? What does it mean to you to be part of a praying community?
- What witness do we give to the world when we pray as a community?
- What is your experience of praying the Psalms? You may want to try doing "lectio" with them on a regular basis.