SERMON: On St. Benedict

Across Lent and the Easter season, we have found ourselves inside the Johannine Community and we have been able to see something of its distinctiveness. [Parenthetically, it is interesting to realize how they both (i) knew themselves to be different from other Christian communities, and (ii) believed those others to be equally valid: Jesus, in the Good Shepherd discourse of John, says "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd." (John 10:16)]

Expanding our exploration of different communities of Jesus-followers and their theologies, I am going to take liberty, today, to deliver on a promise I made a couple of years ago, to—one day—talk about the Benedictines. My reason for suggesting this, back then, has only intensified; for, you will see, what St. Benedict and his community demonstrate is a Christian response to political, military and social chaos *and environmental ruin* in their time. We are not the first Christians in such existential crisis, and we can learn much from the ways of these committed followers before us.

To start, a word about the setting of Benedict's lifetime from 480 – 547 CE, immediately following the "collapse of the Roman Empire", which—itself—was a centuries-long process. You might remember that, at its zenith, the Roman Empire stretched from Britain to Mesopotamia and from the Rhine River to Africa's Sahara Desert. The larger the Empire got to be, through time, the more bureaucracy was needed (meaning "more" in size and complexity), and the larger its standing army needed to be (to maintain, through repression, the Pax Romana). Inside of all this was a dynamic not always made clear: ***Extension*** of the Empire was *endlessly* necessary because, in the lands already taken, all the trees got cut down for Roman construction, the land got farmed out until fertility was compromised, and the people got taxed beyond reason. Fresh resource 'from beyond' was always needed. ***Insatiable appetite*** was—most fundamentally—what made the Empire

ultimately unsustainable. Simply *not enough* available raw materials, taxes, and human resources; and, overall, *not enough* bureaucratic and military "umph" *could be mustered* to keep the thing going.

What's more, in the late fourth and then into the fifth centuries, warfare from all directions sealed the Empire's fate. Visigoths sacked Rome, the Suebi entered Spain and settled there, the Franks expanded in Gaul, and—by 493—the Ostrogoths took Italy.

Christianity's role in all of this was not unlike what we are watching in the United States right now. You will remember that Christianity became the religion of the Empire in the fourth century, under Constantine. Thereafter, we watch the Church's hierarchy co-dependently sanction the State's exercises of "*taking*" and "*having dominion*", be it over creation, over 'other' people or 'other' lands.

However, this attitude was not true of all Christians. There were those who fled to the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and Cappadocia (Eastern Turkey)—men and women remembered as the Desert Fathers and Mothers (or abbas and ammas)—who lived an alternative to empire and its systems of government, church, family, and commerce. This development preceded the later Church councils and the emergence of systematic theology. These abbas and ammas practiced a very simple spirituality of transformation into Christ. Most lacked formal education. They told stories, much as Jesus did, to teach about ego, love, virtue, surrender, peace, divine union, and inner freedom. Small communities of abbas and ammas developed for mutual care and support.

The whole of it was a spiritual resistance movement, questioning the commodification and militarization of life in the wider culture. This alternative had no use for self-advancement and the social climbing to which the broader society, including institutional Christians, were aspiring. Their key spiritual practice was *apatheia* – a fierce indifference to anything *spiritually* unimportant.

With Desert Fathers and Mothers in the immediate background, Benedict was born in 480 to a distinguished Italian family, living in Nursia. He was sent as a young man to complete classical education in Rome. The vices of his fellow students, there, so alarmed him that he abandoned his studies, gave up his home and inheritance, and set out to single-mindedly pursue God.

First, he went into solitude at the Church of St. Peter Affili. Then, like the desert monks, he withdrew for three years in a cave, at Subiaco. He was helped, with bits of food, by a monk from a nearby monastery, a local priest and some local shepherds. It was with those shepherds that Benedict began a work of "healing souls". They would come asking advice or assistance with spiritual or temporal matters, and Benedict supplied it. This ministry soon grew to include others. The situation evolved a quantum leap when a group of monks came, asking Benedict to be their abbot. Benedict tried to dissuade them, knowing his ways were strict and would be difficult. They insisted, but it did not work out (rather dramatically so), and Benedict returned to solitude.

But notoriety for his piety, sanctity, and deeds of help led people to seek him out, to become his disciples. Benedict, in response, came to set up monasteries—eventually thirteen of them—each with an abbot (and Benedict himself the abbot of one), all of them following the Rule (the organizing document) which he wrote.

Brian McLaren, whose writing some here have shared in a "Bread for the Body, Food for the Soul" series, has written how he imagines Benedict might have said to himself [and I quote], "I'm going to go out and establish an alternative community, a little island of sanity in a world that seems to be going nuts. I'm going to try to create a place where we seek to live by the law of love in the kingdom … of God. We will care for the sick and the dying. We will welcome the stranger and create an order of life that has dignity. We will preserve learning, writing down ancient wisdom. Every day, all day, we will enter into

deep listening with God and with one another to keep Jesus's wisdom alive." [End of quote.]

The desert abbas and ammas had already established that the first task of spiritual life is learning to see one's own reactions clearly:

- how quickly anger justifies itself,
- how easily fear pretends to be wisdom,
- how often ego disguises itself as courage.

Silence exposed all of that, not to shame people, but to free them.

Benedict took the next step. He asked: Once one learns to see clearly, how does one live faithfully in community over the long haul?

The Rule of St. Benedict stands out amongst the monastic movements for its "common sense" and its concern—indeed, its love—for the welfare of the individuals who would embrace it as a way of life. Benedict knew 'common life' as an instrument of salvation and of sanctification. He ordered a daily pattern of prayer, work, shared meals, mutual care, accountability, humility, repair. The humility and charity which the monks' communal life provided benefited both (i) them, in the virtues strengthened, and (ii) the recipients of their ministry, in the gifts bestowed.

The impact of their 'way'? The scholar Mike Petrow observes that Benedictine monasteries were "the bomb shelters, time capsules, laboratories, and protected cultivators of the contemplative tradition in a world falling apart."

More specifically, the historian Sister Joan Chittister tells about the Benedictines' recognition of the way the forests and farmlands of Europe had been destroyed by the machinery of the Roman Empire. They believed God was calling them to respond lovingly and constructively to this environmental mess. Across decades of intensive stewardship, they replanted forests, recreated watersheds, restored streams and ponds, and reintroduced composting. To them, this was all spiritual practice and a faithful response to God's call.

Yet another scholar, the Rev. Cameron Trimble, looks ‘inside’ the thinking of St. Benedict to understand his genius and to discern what he might suggest to us. Primarily, Trimble observes that St. Benedict directed his communities to stay: to root themselves in place, in relationship, in shared life. Stability, he taught, is how love survives collapse. You do not run every time the world shakes. You commit, and you tend. This is how one stays faithful when the surrounding culture is losing its moral center.

Can you hear this same “call” on us?: to interior non-cooperation with corruption while remaining deeply committed to the Way of Jesus Christ, and to one another. Allow me to quote the Rev. Cameron Trimble, directly:

> It takes boundaries around attention. It takes rhythms that interrupt outrage. It takes communities that tell the truth to one another gently and directly. It takes prayer, or silence, or honest reflection that clears emotional distortion before it hardens into identity.
>
> Right now, many people feel spiritually flooded, saturated with alarm, analysis, reaction, and dread. The nervous system never powers down. The moral imagination never gets quiet enough to hear wisdom instead of impulse.
>
> The [desert abbas and ammas] would recognize this immediately.
>
> They would not tell you to disappear. They would tell you to build inner ground. They would tell you to create small deserts of clarity inside daily life—spaces where truth can speak without competition—so that when you act, you act from depth instead of reactivity.
>
> Benedict would agree. Stay. … [S]tay awake. Stay rooted. Stay practiced in humility and courage. Stay shaped by love more than by fear.

> The goal is never escape.
>
> The goal is freedom—the kind that lets you remain fully human when systems forget how.
>
> - from the Centre for Action & Contemplation, on Wednesday, April 15, 2026

[End of quote']

Thanks be to God. Amen.