

The Rule of St. Benedict

A Commentary by
the Right Rev. Dom Paul Delatte

*Abbot of Solesmes and
Superior-General of the Congregation of the Benedictines of
France*

Translated by Dom Justin McCann, Monk of Ampleforth



ABBÉY EDITIONS

Our Lady of Clear Creek Abbey
Hulbert, Oklahoma
2023

ISBN: 978-1-312-81229-1 (hardcover)

ISBN: 978-1-312-43734-0 (softcover)

This is a facsimile reproduction of the 1921 edition published in London by Burns Oates & Washbourne Limited.

Nihil Obstat:

D. Cuthbertus Almond

Imprimatur:

+ Eduardus, Archiep. Birminghamien.
die 14 Septembris 1920

EX ACTIS CAPITULI GENERALIS XI CONGREGATIONIS GALLICAE OSB

Unus e Capitularibus, nomine omnium adstantium, imo et totius Congregationis, gratias refert Rmo Praesidi quam maximas et merittissimas pro novo opere juris communis facto, nempe Commentario in Sancta Regulam, ex quo omnes haurire possumus uberrimam aequae ac profundissimam notitiam perfectionis status monastici et largiter accipere purissimum spiritum Sanctissimi Patris nostri Benedicti.

These pages, written with the aim of disclosing the riches of the Holy Rule, are dedicated, in love and devotedness, to all those, whether in monasteries or in the world, who belong to the great family of St. Benedict.

Quarr Abbey

September 8, 1913

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
PROLOGUE - - - - -	I
I. OF THE VARIOUS KINDS OF MONKS - - - - -	25
II. WHAT KIND OF MAN THE ABBOT OUGHT TO BE - - - - -	35
III. OF CALLING THE BRETHREN TO COUNCIL - - - - -	56
IV. WHAT ARE THE INSTRUMENTS OF GOOD WORKS - - - - -	61
V. OF OBEDIENCE - - - - -	83
VI. THE SPIRIT OF SILENCE - - - - -	92
VII. OF HUMILITY - - - - -	100
VIII. OF THE DIVINE OFFICE AT NIGHT - - - - -	131
IX. HOW MANY PSALMS ARE TO BE SAID AT THE NIGHT HOURS - - - - -	144
X. HOW THE NIGHT OFFICE IS TO BE SAID IN SUMMER - - - - -	153
XI. HOW THE NIGHT OFFICE IS TO BE SAID ON SUNDAYS - - - - -	154
XII. HOW THE OFFICE OF LAUDS IS TO BE SAID - - - - -	158
XIII. HOW LAUDS ARE TO BE SAID ON WEEKDAYS - - - - -	160
XIV. HOW THE NIGHT OFFICE IS TO BE SAID ON SAINTS'-DAYS - - - - -	164
XV. AT WHAT TIMES OF THE YEAR "ALLELUIA" IS TO BE SAID - - - - -	168
XVI. HOW THE WORK OF GOD IS TO BE DONE IN THE DAY-TIME - - - - -	170
XVII. HOW MANY PSALMS ARE TO BE SAID AT THE DAY HOURS - - - - -	174
XVIII. IN WHAT ORDER THE PSALMS ARE TO BE SAID - - - - -	177
XIX. HOW TO SAY THE DIVINE OFFICE - - - - -	185
XX. OF REVERENCE AT PRAYER - - - - -	189
XXI. OF THE DEANS OF THE MONASTERY - - - - -	194
XXII. HOW THE MONKS ARE TO SLEEP - - - - -	200
XXIII. OF EXCOMMUNICATION FOR FAULTS - - - - -	205
XXIV. WHAT THE MEASURE OF EXCOMMUNICATION SHOULD BE - - - - -	211
XXV. OF GRAVER FAULTS - - - - -	215
XXVI. OF THOSE WHO CONSORT WITH THE EXCOMMUNICATE - - - - -	218
XXVII. HOW CAREFUL THE ABBOT SHOULD BE OF THE EXCOMMUNICATE - - - - -	220
XXVIII. OF THOSE WHO BEING OFTEN CORRECTED DO NOT AMEND - - - - -	225
XXIX. WHETHER THE BRETHREN WHO LEAVE THE MONASTERY ARE TO BE RECEIVED AGAIN - - - - -	228
XXX. HOW YOUNG BOYS ARE TO BE CORRECTED - - - - -	231
XXXI. OF THE CELLARER OF THE MONASTERY - - - - -	233
XXXII. OF THE TOOLS AND PROPERTY OF THE MONASTERY - - - - -	243
XXXIII. WHETHER MONKS OUGHT TO HAVE ANYTHING OF THEIR OWN - - - - -	245
XXXIV. WHETHER ALL OUGHT TO RECEIVE NECESSARY THINGS ALIKE - - - - -	251
XXXV. OF THE WEEKLY SERVERS IN THE KITCHEN - - - - -	254
XXXVI. OF THE SICK BRETHREN - - - - -	258

Contents

CHAPTER	PAGE
XXXVII. OF OLD MEN AND CHILDREN - - -	263
XXXVIII. THE WEEKLY READER - - -	265
XXXIX. OF THE MEASURE OF FOOD - - -	270
XL. OF THE MEASURE OF DRINK - - -	275
XLI. AT WHAT HOURS THE BRETHREN ARE TO TAKE THEIR MEALS	278
XLII. THAT NO ONE MAY SPEAK AFTER COMPLINE -	281
XLIII. OF THOSE WHO COME LATE TO THE WORK OF GOD OR TO TABLE	286
XLIV. OF THOSE WHO ARE EXCOMMUNICATED, HOW THEY ARE TO MAKE SATISFACTION - - -	294
XLV. OF THOSE WHO MAKE MISTAKES IN THE ORATORY -	297
XLVI. OF THOSE WHO OFFEND IN ANY OTHER MATTERS -	299
XLVII. OF SIGNIFYING THE HOUR FOR THE WORK OF GOD -	302
XLVIII. OF THE DAILY MANUAL LABOUR - - -	304
XLIX. OF THE OBSERVANCE OF LENT - - -	317
L. OF BRETHREN WHO ARE WORKING AT A DISTANCE FROM THE ORATORY OR ARE ON A JOURNEY - - -	322
LI. OF BRETHREN WHO DO NOT GO FAR AWAY - - -	325
LII. OF THE ORATORY OF THE MONASTERY - - -	327
LIII. OF THE RECEPTION OF GUESTS - - -	330
LIV. WHETHER A MONK OUGHT TO RECEIVE LETTERS OR TOKENS	343
LV. OF THE CLOTHES AND SHOES OF THE BRETHREN - - -	346
LVI. OF THE ABBOT'S TABLE - - -	358
LVII. OF THE ARTIFICERS OF THE MONASTERY - - -	361
LVIII. OF THE DISCIPLINE OF RECEIVING BRETHREN INTO RELIGION	367
LIX. OF THE SONS OF NOBLES OR THE POOR THAT ARE OFFERED	406
LX. OF PRIESTS WHO MAY WISH TO DWELL IN THE MONASTERY	413
LXI. OF PILGRIM MONKS, HOW THEY ARE TO BE RECEIVED -	418
LXII. OF THE PRIESTS OF THE MONASTERY - - -	424
LXIII. OF THE ORDER OF THE COMMUNITY - - -	431
LXIV. OF THE APPOINTMENT OF THE ABBOT - - -	441
LXV. OF THE PRIOR OF THE MONASTERY - - -	456
LXVI. OF THE PORTER OF THE MONASTERY - - -	463
LXVII. OF BRETHREN WHO ARE SENT ON A JOURNEY - -	468
LXVIII. IF A BROTHER BE COMMANDED TO DO IMPOSSIBILITIES -	472
LXIX. THAT MONKS PRESUME NOT TO DEFEND ONE ANOTHER -	476
LXX. THAT NO ONE PRESUME RASHLY TO STRIKE OR EXCOMMUNI- CATE ANOTHER - - -	479
LXXI. THAT THE BRETHREN BE OBEDIENT ONE TO THE OTHER -	482
LXXII. OF THE GOOD ZEAL WHICH MONKS OUGHT TO HAVE -	486
LXXIII. THAT THE WHOLE OBSERVANCE OF JUSTICE IS NOT SET DOWN IN THIS RULE - - -	491
INDEX - - -	497



COMMENTARY ON THE RULE OF ST. BENEDICT

PROLOGUE

Ausculata, o fili, præcepta magistri, et inclina aurem cordis tui, et admonitionem pii patris libenter excipe, et efficaciter comple; ut ad eum per obedientiæ laborem redeas, a quo per inobedientiæ desidiâ recesseras.

Hearken, O my son, to the precept of your master, and incline the ear of your heart: willingly receive and faithfully fulfil the admonition of your loving father, that you may return by the labour of obedience to Him from whom you had departed through the sloth of disobedience.

OTHER Rules have a more impersonal character, a more concise and formal legislative air: St. Benedict in his first words puts himself in intimate contact with his followers, commencing the code of our monastic life with a loving address.

He who speaks is a master; for we cannot dispense with a master in the supernatural life, which is at once a science and an art. He gives precepts—that is to say, doctrinal and practical instruction. St. Benedict here speaks of himself, though many commentators have thought differently. It is no folly to call himself master, since he teaches not in his own name, nor things of his own devising. He wrote near the end of his life and in the fulness of his experience. Why should he not be a loving father—*pater*, as he expresses it?

“O my son”: a title of endearment; softening whatever austerity there may be in the “precepts of the master,” suggesting also that the highest form of fatherhood is that which transmits doctrine and enlightenment, having its ideal and source in God the “father of light” (Jas. i. 17). St. Thomas tells us that there is a true fatherhood among the angels;¹ and in the Old Testament, among the patriarchs for instance, if a man was a father he had to be a teacher as well, and while he gave life had to enlighten the soul and hand on the teachings of God and His promises; so is Noah called a “herald of justice” (2 Pet. ii. 5). Experience shows that no earthly fatherhood has ever so closely resembled the fatherhood of God as did St. Benedict’s. The Church venerates him as the patriarch of the monks of the West; and God has so disposed the course of history that every religious Order is in some way indebted to him and has learnt from his fatherly wisdom.

Truly these first words of the prologue are attractive and reassuring. The master who addresses you, my child, is a father, a good and loving father. The precepts which he brings you are counsels dictated by

¹ ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theol.*, P. I., q. xlv., a. 5, ad. 1.

his experience and his love—"the admonition of your loving father." He does not dream of imposing them on you, but appeals to your good will, to your delicacy of perception; there is no question of constraint, but of a loving and glad acceptance, of supernatural docility.

This docility St. Benedict requires of every beginner; this same docility, under the forms of humility and obedience, gives our monastic life its authentic character; and, finally, by it is sanctity won: "Whoso are led by the spirit of God, they are the sons of God" (Rom. viii. 14). The sovereign importance of this simple, unaffected disposition comes from the fact that it comprises in itself all virtue. To begin with, docility means prudence, and in prudence are united all the moral virtues. We cannot in our own persons have all experiences; but others have had them, and we reap the benefit of these by our docility. We make our own the wisdom of humanity supernaturalized, the wisdom of St. Benedict, and faith makes us share the very wisdom of God. Docility, and docility alone, establishes us in that state whence all self-seeking has been driven, a state which is the condition and the prelude of a living union with Our Lord. Its name then is charity.

We should note how St. Benedict analyzes and details the successive stages of supernatural docility. "Hearken": for we must listen; if there be too much noise in the soul and the attention be scattered over a multitude of objects, the voice of God which is generally quiet as "the whistling of a gentle air" (3 Kings xix. 12) is not heard. That silence which of itself is perfect praise, "To thee silence is praise,"¹ is rare among beings so fickle and impressionable as we are.

—But to hearken is not enough, and St. Benedict invites us in the pretty phrase of the Book of Proverbs² and Psalm xlv. to "incline the ear of our heart." We must have a receptive understanding, a trustful attitude towards the truth that is proposed to us. If we begin by putting obstacles, by establishing at the entry of our souls a strict barrier, or still more, if we be filled with our own views to the point of saying, "He cannot teach me anything new; I know all that and better than he does! . . ." then we are in the worst possible mental state, not only for supernatural teaching, but even for purely human instruction. Claude Bernard³ tells us that the scientist, while striving to formulate and verify his hypothesis, must be careful not to be led captive

¹ Ps. lxiv. 2, according to the Hebrew.

² C. iv. *Audi, fili mi, et suscipe verba mea. . . . Fili mi ausculta sermones meos et ad eloquia mea inclina aurem tuam. Ne recedant ab oculis tuis, custodi ea in medio cordis tui.*

St. Jerome begins one of his letters *ad Eustochium* with the words of Ps. xlv. (Ep. XXII. 1. *P.L.*, XXII., 394).

It would be inaccurate to set down as source of this beginning of the Prologue the beginning of the *Admonitio ad filium spirituales* which figures among the *spuria* of St. Basil, and was inserted by HOLSTENIUS into the appendix of his *Codex regularum*. This treatise is probably the work of ST. PAULINUS OF AQUILEIA; but the beginning and other passages have been added later by some monk; cf. *P.L.*, XCIX., 212 sq. (See also *P.L.*, XL., 1054 sq.)

³ *Introduction à l'étude de la médecine expérimentale.*

by it, but must always remain accessible to any other better explanation. Our Holy Father asks us, then, to listen willingly, with free souls: "willingly receive." Let us ever accept at once the teaching which is given to us; if there be in it any elements which we cannot assimilate, these will be eliminated later of themselves.

"*Et efficaciter comple.*" And faithfully fulfil. It is the property of truth to move us to action. We cannot "hold it captive in injustice" (Rom. i. 18). We shall have to answer to God for all the good we have seen and have not done. But therein too lies the difficulty; for sin has upset the balance of our being: seeing, willing, loving, performing, these are far from being one single operation.

So lest the work should frighten us, and to make clear at once its character and plan, our Holy Father, with the insight of genius, yet in the quiet classical style, sets down that which is the prize of our life, that which should be its single object, that which gives it its dignity, charm, and power, its merit and simplicity, that in which is contained the whole Rule: "that you may return to Him by the labour of obedience." For our business is not to live many years, and to become learned, or to make a name in the world, but to walk to God, to get near to Him, to unite ourselves to Him. This manner of conceiving the spiritual life as a fearless walking to God is a favourite one with St. Benedict; we shall meet it many times in the Rule. Our life is on an inclined plane: we may ascend or descend, and the latter is very easy. Since the Fall, man has only one way in which to separate himself from God, and that is the way of the old Adam, disobedience; and he has, too, but one way to return and that is by obedience, with the new Adam. "For as by the disobedience of one man, many were made sinners: so also by the obedience of one, many shall be made just" (Rom. v. 19). We pride ourselves on our disobedience, as giving proof of energy and vigorous personality; but St. Benedict declares that it is merely cowardice and sloth; and if he speaks of the contrary attitude of mind as "labour"¹ he will presently tell us of its solid fruitfulness and incomparable dignity.

Ad te ergo nunc meus² sermo dirigitur, quisquis abrenuntians propriis voluntatibus, Domino Christo vero regi militaturus, obedientiæ fortissima atque præclara arma assumis.

To you, therefore, my words are now addressed, whoever you are, that, renouncing your own will, you do take up the strong and bright weapons of obedience, in order to fight for the Lord Christ, our true King.

In these words St. Benedict indicates to whom his invitation is addressed, for whom is the scheme of life just sketched in rough outline. To you my words and my fatherly exhortation are now addressed, whoever you may be, provided you be docile and resolute. So that

¹ *Dicebant senes: quia nihil sic quærit Deus ab his qui primitias habent conversationis, quomodo obedientiam laborem* (*Verba Seniorum: Vitæ Patrum*, V., xiv. 15. ROSWERYD, p. 619).

² The best reading is *mibi*. St. JEROME likewise says, in Letter XXII. *ad Eustochium* (15): *Nunc ad te mibi omnis dirigatur oratio* (*P.L.*, XXII., 403).

if we except the incapable and those who are bound by the ties of other duty, no one is excluded. All that is required in the candidate is the intention to accept the conditions of the monastic life, which are reducible to three: renunciation of one's own will, the taking up of the weapons of obedience, and service of the Lord.

To renounce one's own will is a necessary preliminary. St. Benedict speaks of "wills" in the plural,¹ because self-will or egoism has many forms. Without pretending to classify them we may observe that states of will may be spontaneous, or systematic, or temperamental. The first of these are the least dangerous, because implying only the mistake of a moment, a temporary distraction or interruption of continuity. The systematic will is continually springing up in the course of the religious life. On the day of our profession we renounced all things, but we build up the old again later on. It may be a question of a person one likes or dislikes, or a question of doctrine, some detail perhaps on which we cannot yield. Still more difficult is it to rid ourselves of temperament, of that disagreeable, obstinate, wrangling temper which sets us everlastingly in opposition.

In proportion as we strip ourselves of the old secular vesture of egoism and cast off all its trappings, so shall we be ready to take and use the weapons of obedience. St. Paul regards the principal virtues as different pieces of the supernatural armour; but our Holy Father gives one general name to the arms which he gives to his monks,² and speaks of the "weapons of obedience." A soldier has to obey, to obey always and no matter what happens; and a soldier of Jesus Christ has to obey universally and without asking for reasons; it is the least he can do. We have heard a great deal on the immorality of the vow of obedience, and what are called the passive virtues have received plenty of abuse. But St. Benedict had other notions of human dignity; in his view the weapons of obedience were the strongest, the best tempered, the most splendid, the most glorious. We obey God, we obey a Rule which we have studied and chosen; we obey a man, but within the limits of our vow. And while we obey we are free, since it is of our own act that we unite our will to the will of God, which can hardly entail any loss of dignity. Moreover, we are bound to make the real motive of the act our own, and so we unite our thoughts with the Divine thought.

Once we are enrolled and armed we have but to fight under the standard of the true King, the Lord Christ: "to fight for the Lord Christ our true King."³ We serve Him and His purpose, and we

¹ The same expression occurs in the *Verba Seniorum (Vitæ Patrum, V., i. 9. ROSWEYD, p. 562)* and in the *Historia monachorum* of RUFINUS (XXXI. ROSWEYD, p. 484). St. Benedict cites in Chapter VII. the verse of Ecclesiasticus, xviii. 30: *Et a voluntatibus tuis avertere.*

² Cf. *Exhortatio de panoplia ad monachos* (inter S. EPHREM. opp. græc. lat., t. III., p. 219).

³ *Sum enim laboriosus, etiam nunc sub magno opere peccator; veteranus in numero peccatorum, sed æterno Regi novus incorporæ tiro militiæ* (S. PAULINI NOLANI, Ep. IV. ad S. Augustinum. P.L., LXI., 165).

serve according to the example He has given. "In the head of the book it is written of me that I should do thy will. O my God, I have desired it, and thy law in the midst of my heart" (Ps. xxxix. 8, 9). "Being made obedient even unto death" (Phil. ii. 8). Let us have a full realization of the drama which is being enacted, and in which we have to play our part. This drama fills all time and all space. It began, with the very beginning of things, in the angelic world, by an act of disobedience. This brought another in its train here below, one which has been repaired by the obedience of Our Lord Jesus Christ. All intelligent beings are ranged in two camps, those who obey and those who obey not; and the struggle of the two forces knows no truce. Each has its king, and he who claims to withdraw himself from obedience passes by this very fact under the domination of the other King. God for god, I prefer my own. In the army of those who obey the Lord, religious form a picked body. Our Holy Father recognizes elsewhere that the monastic life is also a school, a workshop, and above all a family.

In primis,¹ ut quidquid agendum inchoas bonum, ab eo perfici instantissima oratione deposcas; ut, qui nos jam in filiorum dignatus est numero computare, non debeat aliquando de malis actibus nostris contristari.

In the first place, whatever good work you begin to do, beg of Him with most earnest prayer to perfect it; that He who has now vouchsafed to count us in the number of His children may not at any time be grieved by our evil deeds.

Our Holy Father's first piece of advice and his first care is that we should rest on God in order to go to Him. We need grace and we need the prayer which wins grace; for these two things are connected and go necessarily together. This clear statement, at the very beginning of the Rule, makes short work of any Pelagian or Semi-Pelagian corruption of the truth. Pelagius, a wandering monk, held that man was essentially good, that his good will was sufficient for right action. Besides this he needed, but only as external helps, the law, and the teaching and example of Our Lord. Cassian himself, in his thirteenth Conference, considers that our reason and will are sufficient for the first act by which we accept the faith and enter upon the life of grace. The words of St. Benedict are profoundly wise and are in agreement with the teaching of the Council of Orange:² "The assistance of God must ever be asked even by the baptized and the saints, that they may be able to reach a good end or to persevere in good."

We cannot do without God. God has part in each one of our acts, and influences their very origin. This is especially true of supernatural acts, because the created agent is there setting forces to work which are not his own. The first movement towards the faith and to baptism

¹ With recent editors (SCHMIDT, WÖLFFLIN), we might join *dirigitur* and *in primis*, treating *quisquis abrenuntians* . . . as a parenthetical clause. D. BUTLER rejects this punctuation as contrary to that of the best manuscripts and to the interpretation of the oldest commentators.

² Cap. x., MANRI, *Sacrorum Conciliorum nova et amplissima Collectio*, t. VIII., col. 714.

is due to an impulsion of His grace; so too a true religious vocation comes from Him and not from any course of reasoning or philosophic deduction. But the co-operation of God is as indispensable for the continuance of this supernatural work as for its commencement; for it is a long work, as long as life. And though our vocation be angelic, our natures are not so. The angel is steadfast in the one act of his will; we with our weaker natures, more open to attack and assailed by lower impulses, must ever be renewing our purpose, so ready are we to fail before difficulty. Therefore we must go to God and ask Him in fervent prayer, prayer instant and untiring, *instantissima oratione*, for the grace to "perfect," the grace of perseverance.

There can be no doubt that God yields to our prayer; He has already engaged to do so, He has tied His hands. The best answer to the natural question, Shall I have strength to persevere? is that God has anticipated us: "For he hath first loved us. . . . With an everlasting love have I loved thee, therefore I drew thee, having pity on thee." His love is eternal. He has drawn close to each one of us. As a mark of it He has in baptism given us unasked the supernatural and divine life. Now we are of the number of His children. Let us then be what He has made us. Let us not by misdeeds belie that dignity to which His mere love has raised us. Let us strive not to cheat His goodness, nor to give Him cause to repent of it. In words full of insight and filial love, St. Benedict regards the development of our perfection as a personal success of God, and its miscarriage as a disappointment of the Almighty.

Ita enim ei omni tempore de bonis suis in nobis parendum est: ut non solum, ut iratus pater, non aliquando filios suos exhaeredet; sed nec ut metuendus Dominus, irritatus malis nostris, ut nequissimos servos perpetuam tradat ad poenam, qui eum sequi noluerint ad gloriam.

For we must always so serve Him with the good things He has given us, that not only may He never, as an angry father, disinherit His children, but may never, as a dread Lord, incensed by our sins, deliver us to everlasting punishment, as most wicked servants who would not follow Him to glory.

These words develop what has just been said. Prayer and grace are necessary for us that we may obey God all our lives and at every moment of our lives, for that is really the task which has been set us and accepted by us. Nothing will be wanting to us that we may fulfil it well, if our prayers win us grace and our fidelity makes it fructify. The source and the measure of our supernatural riches are also the source and measure of our obligations and responsibilities, and we are become before God sons and servants.

We are children of God, not by any legal fiction, but by a deep and real assimilation to His only Son; because of that divine life which grace implants within us, we hold an unassailable title to the inheritance of that Son: "And if sons, heirs also, heirs indeed of God and joint heirs with Christ" (Rom. viii. 17). This supernatural life is endowed