

The Ascension and St Agnes (ASA), DC, School of Theology and Prayer

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‘Prayer in a Time of Pandemic and Social Unrest’, IV: ‘The Spirituality of the Rule of Benedict: Mutual “Listening” to God and the Building of Transformative Communities’ (Dr. Sarah Coakley and Fr. Luigi Gioia)

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Introduction: Benedict of Nursia (480-547)

In the last 20 years of Benedict’s life, the Roman Emperor was Justinian (527-565). During the last 12 years of Benedict’s life, Italy was torn apart by the Gothic Wars: the Emperor tried to conquer Italy from barbarian invaders. The war ended in 568 with the victory of the invaders, and it left Italy devastated and depopulated. Sources: Rule of St Benedict; Life of St Benedict written by Pope Gregory the Great in his *Dialogues* (Pope from 590 to 604).

The four pillars of Benedictine spirituality: *Ora, Labora, Lege, Suscipe* (Pray, Work, Study, Welcome).

1. *Prayer and Spirituality*: No epithet captures Benedictine’s spirituality more aptly than *healthy*, in the sense of ‘respecting and promoting the human flourishing of the whole person’. Many modern readers are nonplussed by the extent to which a spiritual text like the Rule (RB) is far more concerned with the body than with inner life. Indeed, Benedict spends most of his time talking about eating, sleeping, working, reading, talking, smiling, and especially about toiling in community life. He has no illusions about the inevitable hardships of life in common (cf. his many passages on gossiping and grumbling (‘murmuring’), and on resisting the occasional urge to kill or punch each other, RB 4:3, 4:70 and 70).

And yet all these factors are deeply ‘spiritual’ in Benedict’s mind. For him, the healthiest way of seeking God is through community life, because he knows instinctively what is being rediscovered in our days, namely that there is no access to interiority other than through interaction with our environment and others, and no relation with God other than through the mediations of body, fellowship, history, and Scripture.

When he talks about personal prayer (RB 20 and 52), Benedict stresses that it has to be simple and ‘pure’ and should exhibit the following qualities: (1) be short and last only as long as desire fuels it; (2) avoid using many words, and instead rely on (3) compunction and tears, and on (4) a fervor of the heart that depends on the inspiration of divine grace.

2. *Decision-making and Leadership*: According to the RB, every time there is an important decision to be made, the abbot must summon the monks, explain the situation, listen carefully to their opinions and then make a decision (RB 3). The Rule emphasizes the importance of humility and the moderation with which the monks should express their views, as well as the need for the superior to proceed with prudence and equity (RB 3.6) and to do nothing without first seeking advice (RB 3.13), including from the youngest members of the community. Benedict recognizes that it is necessary to take time to transform a *right* decision into a *shared* decision, to move from an imposed requirement to a consensus that not only takes everyone into account, but involves their humanity – their intelligence and will, but also their desires, fears, feelings and passions.

3. *Lessons for Today- Contemporary Racism and the Building of Transformative Communities*: Our contemporary debate on racism is now hostage to an apparently unsurmountable confrontation between liberal

individualism and identity politics. The former believes that the solution comes from the enabling of individuals; the latter relies on empowering group identities. In both cases, our Western societies have come to rely on a managerial approach based on 'affirmative action' enforced through regulations and on the denunciation of 'unconscious biases'.

From the viewpoint of Benedictine spirituality, true empowerment comes from affirmation and recognition based not just on external regulations but on inner and personal validation. Inner validation is made possible through the creation of communities dedicated to active listening and to the promotion of the good of each member in harmony with the common good. Similarly, 'unconscious biases' can be effectively tackled not only through external censure but especially through the demanding discipline of self-knowledge. The promotion of both inner validation and self-knowledge require an environment of trust. The main challenge of any community is creating the conditions for converting self-defensiveness and suspicion into trust.

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On a misleading, albeit influential, attempt to apply Alisdair MacIntyre's political theory to contemporary Benedictine spirituality see:

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Rowan Williams, 'The Benedict Option: a new monasticism for the 21st century', *New Statesman* 30 May 2017: <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/religion/2017/05/benedict-option-new-monasticism-21st-century>

On the current impasse in the confrontation between liberal individualism and identity politics, see this astute but thought-provoking recent analysis: 'Enlightenment liberalism is losing ground in the debate about race. A new ideology is emerging', *The Economist* 9 June 2020: <https://www.economist.com/international/2020/07/09/enlightenment-liberalism-is-losing-ground-in-the-debate-about-race>

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