

June 6, 2021 --

Faith Story: Benedict of Nursia

Each week this summer, we'll take a brief glance at someone whose life and work offer us a model of Christian faith. First up is Benedict of Nursia.



Benedict, who lived in Italy from 480 to 547, is known as the Father of Western Monasticism. His guidance for living in community -- the Rule of St. Benedict -- continues to direct life in monasteries all over the world and many people who are not monks or nuns, or even Roman Catholic, incorporate some elements of the Benedictine Order into their prayer life and devotional practices.

Benedict's ideas and influence have endured despite a rocky beginning. The first monks who tried to live under Benedict's direction hated his leadership so much that they plotted to kill him. They put poison in a glass of wine and offered it to Benedict. Before he took it, he blessed it, as was his custom. Benedict's biographer recounts that when Benedict made the sign of the cross over the wine glass, it shattered, and the wine spilled to the floor.

Benedict parted ways with that particular group of murderous monks, but did not give up on the possibility of life in monastic community. Over the next decade or so, he formed a number of small monasteries and finally quite a large one at Monte Cassino, which is still in operation today.

Benedict was born in Nursia, a small ancient town northeast of Rome. As a young man, he went to Rome for his education, but was so disturbed by the paganism and pervasive immorality in the city that he retired to a cave in the foothills where he lived alone for three years, supported by a local monk who brought him food.

Eventually, the fame of Benedict's sanctity spread in the area and he was prevailed upon to become the abbot of a nearby monastery. When those monks tried to kill him, he returned to his cave, but disciples continued to come to him.

After establishing a dozen monasteries, each with twelve monks, in that region, Benedict moved to Monte Cassino and founded a monastic community there in 529, serving as its Abbot for the remainder of his life. During that time, he wrote a Rule for his monks. These instructions for a life of work and prayer in monastic community became the norm for monastic living throughout medieval Europe and remain the basis for life in many religious orders today.

The Rule of Benedict includes both spiritual instruction on how to live a Christian life on earth and practical, administrative instruction detailing how to run a monastic community effectively and equitably.

The Rule has long been praised for its moderation and its attention to differences of age, capabilities, dispositions, needs, and spiritual stature. For the daily monastic schedule, Benedict sets aside eight hours for sleep and then divides the working day into three roughly equal parts. Five to six hours are devoted to liturgical and other prayer; five hours are spent in manual work, whether domestic, craft, garden, or field work; and four hours are given to reading the Scriptures and spiritual writings. This balance of prayer, work, and study is one of Benedict's legacies.

The way of life taught by Benedict continues to provide for all Christians, not only monastics, a simple framework for growing in relationship with God. The central message of his Rule is that God is present and active in our world and in each of us, always waiting for our awareness and our response. Benedict suggests that all of us have monastic hearts, which he defines as "hearts that long for God alone."

As Benedict writes in his Prologue:

... as we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God's commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love."

Benedict could have given up on monastic life or even on Christianity altogether after his difficult early experiences. But instead, he used all of his experiences to learn about the love of God and the possibilities of human community. And our faith family is much richer for it.

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