

SAINT BENEDICT OF NURSIA (+ 543 A.D.): TRUE ORTHODOX OF BOTH THE EAST AND WEST

by

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The man of God coming hither, beat in pieces the idol, overthrew the altar, set fire to the woods, and in the temple of Apollo, he built the oratory of St. Martin, and where the altar of the same Apollo was, he made an oratory of St. John, and by his continual preaching, he brought the people dwelling in those parts to embrace the faith of Christ.¹

...

Among Orthodox Christians there was never any need to use the 'Rule' of Saint Benedict, for the *teachings of this 'Rule' were always alive in the monastic tradition of the East, from where, indeed, they originally came to St. Benedict* (emphasis supplied). Therefore, one may say that St. Benedict's Rule was preserved in spirit in the Orthodox east, just as was the memory of the saint himself, whose feast is still kept by the Orthodox on March 14. The ideal of a hidden life of labor and solitude remained continually alive in the Orthodox Church, blossoming like a flower in the desert. In this same spirit, St. Benedict's Rule, with its emphasis on virtue and repentance rather than organization, contained the *very essence of Christ's teachings about other-worldliness* (emphasis supplied).²

...

Not only was St. Benedict a great missionary, man of prayer, and spiritual director of souls, but God also vouchsafed him the grace of wonderworking. Thus, he was able to cast out demons from those possessed, had the gift of prophecy, could read human hearts and thoughts, cure the sick, and miraculously provide money for the poor, but most wonderful of all, he also raised the dead!³

The above citations illustrate the Orthodoxy of Saint Benedict, who brought the saintly flowering of the eastern desert to the *Orthodox* west. The fact that many people associate him with Roman Catholicism is neither here nor there. The Bishop of the Roman Catholics has taken the name of Benedict, but remember Saint Benedict belongs to the *undivided* Orthodox Christian Church as it existed during the early Christian years. He was, and is, completely *Orthodox*!

This Orthodox Benedict lived as the early Fathers had done in the Egyptian desert. He was a towering, yet humble and pious saint, who relied heavily on two other great Orthodox Fathers (St. Basil the Great and St. John Cassian) in further developing the monasticism of those Fathers for practical use in the western ‘desert’. What we mean by desert is a place or perhaps condition of life where, or in which, one may seek out God and practise the Faith, teetering perhaps precariously at times on the narrow Royal Road, The Way, but struggling and suffering as is the true Christian’s lot to strive for the Orthodox goal of life – deification.

As Orthodox Benedictines, we owe an immense spiritual debt, as did Saint Benedict, to St. Basil the Great (+379). St. Basil, one of the Cappadocian Fathers, may even be better known for his immense impact on the Byzantine monastic community style than his epistles/contribution to canon law, theology, defense of the Faith against the heretic Arius, the Divine Liturgy that bears his name, and other significant spiritual writings. He is a triple - threat Orthodox saint, and his writings reflected his experiences as monk, pastor and bishop. His preference for a monk living in community life over that of a hermit follows the lead of St. Pachomius (+346). He felt that the monks living within a community could more easily experience brotherly love and charity.⁴

St. Basil’s monastic Rule, which combined asceticism and mysticism, became the standard for subsequent Orthodox monasticism.⁵ Saint Benedict had a very high regard for St. Basil and St. John Cassian; and, in fact, recommended his monks read their works as part of their spiritual journey. In Chapter 73 of his Rule, Saint Benedict included a recommendation of the Rule of Saint Basil:

... “the collations of the Fathers, and their institutes (comment- presumably St. John Cassian’s) and lives, and the rule of our holy Father, Basil – what are they but the monuments of the virtues of exemplary and obedient monks?”

He was considered to be familiar with the Rule of Pachomius and influenced by the Rule of Saint John Cassian. In Chapter 42, he also recommended the reading of Saint John Cassian’s *Conferences* in the evening before Compline. He was greatly affected by the anonymous *The Rule of the Master*, which he adapted to fit his own spiritual experiences.

The genius of Saint Benedict’s Rule was its “discretion and moderation”. He took eastern monasticism and emphasised “obedience and internal work”. His monasteries “were for many years the only oases of stability and learning in a barbaric world. They fed the poor, saved the books, taught people how to read them, and fostered a new ethic, teaching the world that manual labour was honourable. (Formerly, manual work was thought contemptible, only fit for paupers and slaves.)”⁶ St. Gregory the Great, Pope of Rome, in his *Dialogues* referred to this holy man’s character as “one of maturity, wisdom, firmness, sanctity, and love”.⁷

He wrote his Rule for the generalist, the laity if you will, the common man. There is no concept of elitism in Saint Benedict. This is in the highest ideal of Holy Orthodoxy. The laity are not second-class citizens who simply pick up the tab for services dispensed to them or on their behalf. They are an integral part of the Royal Priesthood of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ! Prayer and work were

the supplemental bases of the Rule of Saint Benedict. I say “supplemental” because it is a surety that he would agree that Christ is the *cornerstone* of the Faith.

Saint Benedict, of course, recognised and accepted that holy Orthodoxy required suffering. He had been to the ‘desert,’ and suffered deprivation. He had spent many years in intense spiritual preparation along The Way. He learned from the eastern Fathers and modified the desert monasticism of the east for the Orthodox of the Roman west. Never could he have been accused of heresy or intentional deviation from the consensus of the *undivided* True Orthodox Catholic Church.

Although his Rule emphasised prayer, practise, moderation, manual work, it is still based on concrete Orthodoxy, the “suffering Orthodoxy” referred to by the fourth century Saint Gregory of Naziansus (aka the Theologian). The Blessed Father Seraphim Rose commented on Saint Gregory the Theologian’s description of Christianity as “suffering Orthodoxy” and succinctly elaborated on the consequences of such suffering.:

... and so it has been from the beginning, throughout the whole history of the Church. The followers of the crucified God have suffered persecutions and tortures. Almost all the Apostles died as martyrs, Peter being crucified upside-down, and Andrew being crucified on an x-shaped cross. (Note: remember also the martyrdoms of St. James the Just, Head and First Bishop of the Christian Church in Jerusalem and St. Stephen) During the first three centuries of Christianity, believers fled to the catacombs and endured tremendous sufferings. It was in the catacombs that the Church’s Divine Services – which we celebrate today in a form little changed since that time – were worked out in an atmosphere of constant expectation of death. After the age of the catacombs there was the struggle to retain the purity of the Faith, when many teachers tried to substitute personal opinions for the divinely revealed teachings given by our Lord Jesus Christ. In later centuries, there were the invasions of Orthodox countries by Arabs, Turks, other non-Christian peoples, and finally – in our own days – by Communists. Communism, which has persecuted religion as it has never been persecuted before, has attacked first of all precisely the Orthodox lands of Eastern Europe. As can be seen, therefore, our Faith actually is a *suffering* Faith, and in this suffering, something goes on which helps the heart receive God’s revelation”.⁸

The suffering goes on across the world today in many countries where Christian believers are massacred and otherwise discriminated against in a variety of ways.

Christian suffering is necessary:

But if *any* suffer as a Christian, let him cease being ashamed, but keep on glorifying God in respect to this. For it is the time for the judgment to begin from the house of God; but if first from us, what *shall be* the end of those who disobey the Gospel of God? And ‘if the righteous one scarcely is saved, where shall the ungodly one and sinner appear?’ Therefore, they who suffer indeed according to the will of God, let them be committing their souls in well doing, as to a faithful Creator. [1 Peter 4:16-19.]

...

Since you follow the Saviour Christ through your devotion to the angelic way of life, your greatest duty is to bear all suffering, whether it comes from nature, indolence, sins, or people.⁹

If one carefully thinks about it, the great nineteenth century Russian St. Ignatius (Brianchaninov)’s wonderfully spiritual work *The Arena*, originally published in St. Petersburg in 1867 under *An Offering to Contemporary Monasticism*, could well be read along with the Rule of Saint Benedict.¹⁰ *The Arena* is also not a spiritual work exclusively for monks, but for the laity, the commoner, everyone. All people, men, women, children, as well as monks and clerics, may spiritually profit from its message.

Similar to Saint Benedict’s Rule, it applies equally to all Christians. There is no difference between monasticism and the laity. True Christianity and True Monasticism consist in the practise of the commandments of the Gospel. All Christians have this same duty: to live their lives according to Christ’s Way, the Gospel and Holy Tradition. There is no spiritual hierarchy between clergy and laity in *true* Holy Orthodoxy.

Saint Benedict accepted and followed the great ascetics of the eastern desert, modifying what he learned and experienced and then adapting it to the *Orthodox* west. His emphasis on simplicity, moderation, practise, work are designed to battle the ‘evil one,’ to participate in ‘Unseen Warfare,’ to struggle *internally*, within the heart. Suffering is part of this struggle. Same as in the Orthodox east.

There is no difference in the *true* Orthodoxy of the east and west on this score. Our spiritual battle is waged against ourselves. We struggle *internally*; in our hearts the spiritual war will be won, or lost. Both laity and clergy are expected to follow an ascetic spiritual path; its exact contours may vary somewhat, but the essence is the same for both. Our mutual goal is *deification*. The arena where our struggles occur is within ourselves. The Kingdom of Christ is within us! Seize the moment and struggle continually and suffer, if called upon, for Him. This is St. Benedict’s Way, which is the Orthodox east’s Way, which is, and always has been, Christ’s Way!

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ St. Gregory the Great, *Dialogues, Second Dialogue (Life of St. Benedict)*, Chapter Eight, p. 10 of 27 at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/g1-benedict1.html>.

² see *Orthodox America, St. Benedict*, at <http://www.roca.org/OA/5/5k.htm>, p. 4 of 4.

³ *ibid.*, p. 2.

⁴ Dcn. George Zgourides, *The Development of Monasticism From Prior to Anthony the Great to Benedict of Nursia*, <http://www.westernorthodox.com/monastic>, pp. 2-3.

⁵ *id.*, p. 2.

⁶ Fr. Aidan Keller, *A Pocket Church History for Orthodox Christians*, St. Hilarion Press, Austin, TX, 1994, p. 15.

⁷ Cited by Zgourides, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

⁸ Fr. Seraphim Rose, *God's Revelation to the Human Heart*, St Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, Platina, CA, 1997, pp. 26-27.

⁹ Elder Ephraim, *Counsels from the Holy Mountain*, St. Anthony's Greek Orthodox Monastery, Florence, AZ, 1999, p. 9.

¹⁰ St. Ignatius (Brianchaninov), *The Arena* [tr. From the Russian by Archimandrite Lazarus/Intro. By then Archimandrite Kallistos (Ware)], Holy Trinity Monastery, Jordanville, N.Y., 1997.