Benedictine Spirituality

"Listen, carefully, my child, to the master's instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart...As we progress in the 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." Prologue

The Rule of Saint Benedict, Regula Sancti Benedicti, is a book of precepts written in Latin in c530 by Saint Benedict of Nursia (c. AD 480-550) for the monks living communally under the authority of an abbot.

The spirit of the Benedictine Rule is summed up in the motto of the Benedictine Confederation: pax, ora et labora (pray and work). The Rule occupies a middle ground between individual zeal and formulaic institutionalism; and is widely popular and in use in a majority of monastic communities. Benedict had a wide understanding of the relational nature of human persons, and sought to provide a spiritual father, a family setting, to support and strengthen the individual's theosis, journey with and into God, as a vocation.

The Rule of Saint Benedict has been used for 15 centuries, and he is regarded as the founder of Western monasticism. There is no evidence though that Benedict intended his rule to found a religious order. His rule was written as a guide for individual monastic communities, Bendictine Houses, and congregations. There was an emphasis on self-governance.

Saint Benedict's model for the monastic life was the family, with the abbot as father and all the monks as brothers. Priesthood was

not initially an important part of Benedictine monasticism. Because of this the rule is equally applicable to groups of women.

Saint Benedict organizes the day into regular periods of communal and private prayers, sleep, spiritual reading, and manual labor, 'that in all things God may be glorified'.

The daily life of the Benedictine revolves around the eight canonical hours. The timetable or Horarium, begins at midnight with the service or office of Matins, followed by the morning office of Lauds at 3 am. These services could be very long, often before 14th century recited in the dark, consisting of chants, three antiphons, three psalms and three lessons and the celebration of any local saints day. Afterwards the monks retired for a few hours, and then rose again at 6 am to wash and attend the service of Prime. They then gathered in Chapter to receive instruction for the day, and to attend to any judicial business. Then came private Mass. At 9 am the office of Terce was said, and then High Mass. At noon, the office of Sext came and the midday meal. After a brief period of recreation, the monks retired to rest until after the office of None at 3 pm. This was followed by labor, farming and housekeeping until after twilight, with the evening prayer of Vespers at 6 pm, then the night prayer of Compline at 9 pm, and retiring to bed.

Saint Benedict's Rule consists of a Prologue and 73 chapters as a ' school for the Lord's service'. This lays out the main principles of the religious life: the renunciation of one's own will, and arming oneself with the strong and noble weapons of obedience under the banner of the 'true King, Christ the Lord' in which the 'way to salvation' shall be taught, 'so that persevering in the monastery until death, the disciples 'through patience share in the passion of Christ' so that they may share in his Kingdom.'

A quick understanding of Christian monasticism: Monastics appeared in the Egyptian desert before Benedict. Under the inspiration of St. Anthony te Great, (252-356) monks formed the first monastic communities under what became known as 'an Abbot'. Within a generation both solitary ie hermits, and communal monasticism spread to Palestine, the Judean Desert and then to Syria and North Africa. Saint Basil of Caesarea codified the precepts for these eastern monasteries, still used by Eastern Orthodox churches.

In the West, in about 500, Benedict begame so upset at the immorality of society in Rome, that he gave up his studies there, and at age 14, chose the life of an aesthetic in pursuit of personal holiness, in the region of Subisco. He attracted folowers and founded a community, the monastery of MonteSubiaco, where he wrote his rule near the end of his life.

A few excerpts from the Rule:

Chapter 4 What are the Instruments of Good Works

62. To fulfill God's commandments daily in one's deeds

63. To love chastity

64. To hate no one

65. Not to be jealous, not to harbor envy

66. To be aware of haughtiness

67. And to respect the seniors

68. to love the juniors

69. To pray for one's enemies in the love of Christ

70. to make peace with one's adversary before the sun sets

71. And never to despair of God's mercy.

These then are the tools of the spiritual craft.

'That desire is their motive for choosing the narrow way, of which the Lord says, 'Narrow is the way that leads to life'.

So that, not living according to one's own choice, nor obeying their own way or desire and pleasures, but walking by another's judgement and command, they dwell in monasteries and desire to have the Abbot over them. Assuredly such as these are living up to the maxim of the Lord in which He says, "I have come not to do my own Will, but the will of Him who sent me".