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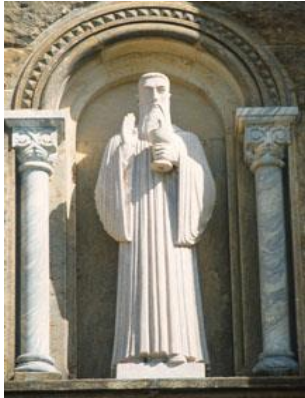
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# ST. BENEDICT: HIDDEN MEANING IN HIS STORY

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St. Benedict of Nursia, the founder of western monasticism, compiled the *Rule of St. Benedict* (RB), a guide for monastic organizations and common-sense living. Numerous works over the centuries have been written about RB and St. Benedict. Although myth and legend surround him, being familiar with scholarly arguments and knowing the meaning of some symbols provide deeper understanding of the stories of his life and Benedictine spirituality.

More importantly, many lessons for daily living are found in his stories. Some examples include the concepts of perseverance and stability for a fulfilling life, and its paradox of retreating in order to persevere in a spiritual path and become grounded. This essay focuses on St. Benedict's story during his early years, when he matures spiritually amid hardships, trials and persecution.

## *The Dialogues*

St. Benedict's life is described in the *Dialogues, Book II* (D II), which tradition suggests was written by Pope Gregory I, also known as Gregory the Great (c. 540-604). The *Dialogues* is the earliest known reference to St. Benedict and it introduced Benedict and his *Rule* throughout Europe in the early Middle Ages (600-1000 ce).

## *The Nature of the Dialogues*

Although scholars conclude that St. Benedict was a historical person, scholarly debate by academics, primarily members of religious orders, centers on the historical nature of Gregory's *Dialogues* and who wrote them. The work was thought to have been written around 593.<sup>1</sup> Books I and III of the *Dialogues* contain short descriptions of the lives of various saints and their miracles, mostly from sixth-century Italy. Book IV discusses death and the afterlife. However, Book II, the heart of the *Dialogues*, focuses exclusively on St. Benedict.

The *Dialogues* follows a well-known literary convention of a questioner and his informer. The informer, in this case, is Pope Gregory, and the questioner, Peter the Deacon. Until recently, some academics assumed that Peter was a literary convention. However, recent scholarship has affirmed that Deacon Peter was an eminent clergy. He was recalled to Rome by Pope Gregory shortly before work was begun on the *Dialogues*.<sup>2</sup>

Some scholars argue that Pope Gregory did not write the *Dialogues*, but rather it was written a hundred years later by a cleric who combined Gregory's writings with others. It has also been argued that Gregory, like his contemporaries, compiled the material from various sources. Another speculation is that D II could have been written by a Roman tradesman (*scriniarius*) in the mid-seventh century to supply pilgrims to Rome with a biography of the saint.<sup>3</sup>

Francis Clark argues that, compared to Gregory's more scholarly and theological writings, as found in his *Moralia*, the *Dialogues* appears to be folk tales.<sup>4</sup> Adelbert de Vogüé, the chief critic of Clark, refutes this hypothesis.<sup>5</sup> Claude J. Peifer wryly notes that, "It has not been a question of devout monks defending St. Benedict from within against hoards of rationalists assaulting the ramparts. On the contrary, most of the protagonists in the controversies have themselves been *monks* who were trying to discover the truth about the origins of our way of life" (emphasis added).<sup>6</sup>

Many scholars suggest that lives of saints, written in the early Middle Ages, were based upon a set pattern of other saints' or heroes' lives. These writings did not follow the rules expected of modern historical research methods, which did not evolve until the early 19th century. A certain "formula" or "authority," or *exemplum*, that the author was expected to follow was used. Most of the story of St. Benedict's life is made up of a string of *exempla* that are regarded as true to give the reader a lesson. They were also filled with symbolism. Due to this convention, we cannot be sure if any stories in the *Dialogues* are actually historical.<sup>7</sup>

A number of academics argue that Gregory, as a great teacher and pastor, wrote the *Dialogues* as morality tales or homilies for the spiritual enlightenment of his flock. Additional tales could have been added to the life of St. Benedict to make a teaching point for a spiritual truth.<sup>8</sup> Cusack sums up the arguments. He suggests that, "the *Second Dialogue* is not history, nor is it a description of St. Benedict's virtues; rather it is an enumeration of the gifts of the man of God in general, the doctrine reflecting the teaching of the period."<sup>9</sup>

### **The Importance of the *Dialogues***

Until the mid-eighth century, the *Rule of Benedict* (*Regula Benedicti*) and the *Rule of the Master* (*Regula Magistri*), along with other rules for monastic living, were used by various monasteries throughout eastern and western monasticism. As the population of northern Europe became Christianized, they were eager to receive art, literature, religious writings and relics that came

from Rome. Anything Roman was considered superior. The *Dialogues* was likely written to introduce some “homegrown” saints to the Italian population. The *Dialogues* was not widely known before 670 and its discovery created a revitalization of Benedict and his *Rule*.<sup>10</sup>

The stories of Benedict’s life and his miracles, as described in D II, launched the “liturgical cultus” of St. Benedict somewhere between 670 and 750 ce. This liturgical cultus set him on the path to sainthood along with the spread of the RB. Under Charlemagne (747-814 ce) in the late seventh century, Benedict’s more balanced Rule was preferred over others and spread throughout western Europe. During the high Middle Ages (1000-1300 ce), the *Dialogues* was very popular and widely read.<sup>11</sup>

Most scholars today conclude that the *Dialogues* is to be read as spiritual reading for its symbols and messages, as Gregory’s objective was “not to conduct historical research but to instruct.”<sup>12</sup> It is really not important if the many tales concerning Benedict in D II were, or were not, historical, or if Pope Gregory even compiled them. It is the narrative of St. Benedict and its symbols and the lessons that can be uncovered that have, over the centuries, brought deeper self-knowledge, understanding and enlightenment for a better understanding of God.

### **The Historical St. Benedict**

The only written documents we have of St. Benedict are *Dialogue II* and the *Rule of St. Benedict*. From these sources, in addition to archaeological findings and knowledge of the late Roman Empire, some aspects of St. Benedict’s life can be constructed. During the fifth century, the great Roman Empire was in the process of disintegration. Soldiers were not paid, roads were not repaired and a famine emerged, as the old empire evolved into the early Middle Ages.

At the turn of the sixth century, Western Europe was led by Germanic leaders. Theodoric (d. ca. 534), who respected Roman culture, headed a relatively tolerant regime in Italy; however, terrorist attacks by Germanic groups sporadically continued to terrorize the country. An underlying anxiety concerning attacks, a declining urban society and the growing strength of the Church formed the social and political background in which Benedict lived.<sup>13</sup>

Benedict (c. 480-547) appears to have been born into a wealthy late Roman Empire family in Norcia (Nursia) of Umbria in the mountains of central Italy. However, Cusack cautions that saints being born into noble families was a common *exemplum*.<sup>14</sup> His family was likely Christian. D II suggests that his traditional twin sister, St. Scholastica, had been consecrated to God as a child. [St. Scholastica is discussed in a companion essay, *St. Scholastica: Finding Meaning in Her Story* (2003).]

In the late fifth century, pagan, Jewish and Christian households were found in Norcia. The name Benedict (*Benedictus*—blessed one) was found among Christians and non-Christians alike.

Apparently, Benedict was not to be a religious, as he was sent off to school for further education.<sup>15</sup>

In Roman culture, the family was ruled by the *paterfamilias*, generally the father. In some cases, a brother would have control over a sister if their father had died young. Youth were expected to obey their fathers. If they did not, they could be disinherited from the family fortune. The control and upbringing of very young children were accomplished by household slaves. These were generally nurses or tutors. Boys, and often young girls, were taught to read and write. Children might see their parents at dinner and other occasions, but they generally spent most of the time with their nurses and tutors.

It was common for wealthy provincial families to send their sons off to Rome for an education. Boys were sent from age ten to 15. A housekeeper or tutor often accompanied the boy. The young man was expected to gain a classical education, to learn political and speaking skills and, after he had completed his schooling, to become part of the political, social and religious bureaucracy. Provincial lads were allowed to stay in Rome until around age 20. Then they were sent to Africa on assignment or to work in the curia in Rome. It is likely that young Benedict was sent to Rome between 490 and 495.<sup>16</sup>

Benedict's life, as described in D II, can be broken into two stages: eremetical (hermit) while in Subiaco and cenobitical (part of a monastic community) at Monte Cassino. Within the first stage are three phases. Each ends when Benedict makes the decision to leave a spiritually dark or dangerous situation. During this period, he performs miracles and is fraught by temptations and spiritual tests. In his second life stage, which is the longest, he founds the Monte Cassino community, performs miracles and experiences visions. Once at Monte Cassino, it is thought that he compiled his *Rule*, perhaps based partly on his own experiences.

### **Pre Subiaco**

When Benedict was sent to Rome as a youth for further education, he became dismayed by his fellow students who had fallen into vice and was afraid that he also would be sucked into this corruption. He left his studies, his father's residence and wealth, and fled Rome to live a holy life.<sup>17</sup>

Accompanying him on this journey was his beloved nurse/housekeeper. He went to Enfile (Affile), about 50 miles east of Rome, and lived in a church with "other virtuous men," suggesting there may have been a loosely formed religious community. The first miracle of St. Benedict is then related in D II. His housekeeper borrowed a sieve used to clean wheat and accidentally broke it into two pieces. She began to weep because it was borrowed, and not hers. Benedict, moved by compassion at her dilemma, mended it.

When townspeople found out about the miracle, they hung the sieve on the church door and began to treat him as a celebrity. Benedict, however, did not desire these worldly praises and secretly left Enfide and his nurse. He went about five miles away to a place called Sublacum (Subiaco) in the Anio Valley, where he found springs and fresh water (water is a symbol of rebirth and purity). In leaving his nurse, he symbolically renounces his childhood to seek rebirth as an adult and to seek the monastic life and God.<sup>18</sup>

Subiaco was an artificial lake built by Emperor Claudius by damming the Anio River. An aqueduct from the lake would have been operational in Benedict's time to bring water to Rome. On the shore of this lake were ruins of a large villa complex, called Sublacum, which had once been a pleasure palace of Emperor Nero. Invading Germanic tribes had left it in ruins and covered with shrubs and thorns. In 1305, a heavy flood broke the dam and the river returned to its natural course. In the district around the ruined villa, monastic life was founded by the early Middle Ages. Since there were many caves in the area, they were commonly used by holy hermits.<sup>19</sup>

### Living in a Cave

While traveling to Sublacum, Benedict meets the monk Romanus, from a nearby monastic community, who invests him with monastic garb.<sup>20</sup> Scholars, however, have suggested that this event was unlikely to have taken place as “all these things required time and were not done in the middle of the road.”<sup>21</sup> Even in this early time period, prayer and study with an older monk—similar to today's novice master—instruction on the duties and dangers of eremitical life, and trial in the monastic way of life were customary. After some time, then the *sancta conversatio*, or monastic garb, was conferred. Benedict likely was under the tutelage of Romanus, as illustrated in the next story.

Benedict secretly lived in a grotto for three years under a cliff near Romanus, who covertly lowered bread to him on a rope.<sup>22</sup> Bread coming from on high was likely symbolic of both physical and spiritual sustenance and teaching from the older monk.

The next group of stories in D II describes how Benedict turns his life from a secret hermit to someone whose spiritual guidance is sought by many.<sup>23</sup> The signal that food is being lowered to Benedict in his cave is a bell on the rope. The evil one breaks the bell with a rock, resulting in Benedict's sustenance being cut off. Even in the face of starvation and lack of spiritual instruction, Benedict persisted in his contemplation.

Shortly after this event, a priest saw in a vision Benedict's need for sustenance and visited him on Easter, where he is finally given food. In addition, some shepherds saw him dressed in animal skin and thought he was a wild beast.<sup>24</sup> The traditional garb of holy men who lived in caves during this era was skins of sheep and goats. However, they find he is a wise man. After these

events, local people began to feed the hermit. “They brought food to sustain his body, and from what he said to them they took back in their hearts nourishment for life.”<sup>25</sup>

The next chapter relates how he overcomes sexual temptation and persists in his calling. A blackbird (the demon) kept flying around his face. Benedict makes the sign of the cross and the bird goes away. Then lustful memories of a young woman emerges and he thinks of leaving his hermit existence, but God intervenes and he comes to his senses and instead rolls naked in thorns and nettles.

This is an interesting image as thorns and nettles were symbolic of sin and vice and also pain. Benedict sublimated his inner sexual urges by embracing outer pain. Through these experiences, he matured in his spirituality. From his persistence in finding ways to retain his values and “freed from the temptation of vice,” his mission in life now became clear. He was able to instruct others in the path of virtue and gathered around him a group of disciples.<sup>26</sup>

### **Experiments in Leadership**

**A**fter some time, monks from a nearby monastic community—Vicovara—asked him to be their abbot. These monks found him too strict, turned against him and attempted to poison him. However, before Benedict can drink a poisoned cup of wine, he blesses the cup and it shatters.<sup>27</sup> Since he now knows he is not wanted, he leaves and returns alone to “the place of his beloved solitude” so as to persevere in his chosen pious life. Pope Gregory, in response to Deacon Peter’s question for more detail, suggests that, if Benedict had remained among these dissipated monks, he might have “withdrawn the eyes of his soul from the light of contemplation.”<sup>28</sup>

Cusack suggests that, in spite of the ugly experience at the Vicovara monastic community, the newly matured Benedict now began an experiment in community cenobitic living with the founding of monastic communities.<sup>29</sup> As he became well known, leading citizens from Rome brought their sons to him for tutelage. Two youths brought to him included Placidus (also called Placid) and a young Maurus (Maur).<sup>30</sup> Maurus eventually became Benedict’s coadjutor or co-leader.

One day, the young boy Placidus fell into Subiaco Lake. Benedict observed the incident and shouted to Maurus to rescue the boy. Maurus walked on the water and pulled Placidus from the lake. It was not until he arrived on land that Maurus realized that he had walked on water. Placid reports that he had seen Benedict’s cloak over his head.<sup>31</sup> This story is similar to St. Peter walking on the water and may have been used to illustrate an example of trust and faith.

Other miracles are now related in D II. However, as Benedict’s fame grew, Florentinus (Florent), a priest of a nearby church, “became more and more consumed with burning jealousy.” Blinded by this envy, he sends a poisoned loaf of bread to Benedict. However, Benedict knows it is

poisoned. He asks his pet crow, or raven, who got bread every day from Benedict, to take the bread away and put it where no one could find it. The raven did so, after some protest, and returned three hours later for his usual treat.

The jealous Florentinus, when he finds out that Benedict was not killed, then attempts to tempt Benedict's monks. He sends seven naked dancing women to inflame the passions of the young monks.<sup>32</sup> Benedict realizes that his life is again in danger. He also fears temptations could befall his younger monks and realizes that, to save the monastic communities he had established, he needs to leave.

On his way out of Subiaco with a few companions, Florentinus falls to his death. Benedict is saddened by this revelation. He does not return to Subiaco, but continues on his way to the town of Cassium (Cassino), about 60 miles south of Rome. With the help of friends, Benedict founds a community on top of the mountain above the town—Monte Cassino—on the grounds of an old temple to Apollo, the Greek god of the sun and light.

Although Benedict fought against the evil one at this place, on a deeper level this particular temple to the god of light may have been symbolic for the spiritual light that eventually shown from this place in the early Middle Ages—sometimes called the Dark Ages—with the spread of the *Rule of St. Benedict* and the expansion of Christianity.<sup>33</sup>

### **His Later Life and Death**

**W**hen Benedict leaves Subiaco, he leaves behind his eremitical life and becomes a cenobitic monk in a monastic community. He spends the rest of his life on the mountain at Monte Cassino. Miracles, visions and prophecy are reported in D II concerning this second phase of his life. Tradition suggests his twin sister, St. Scholastica, may have lived at the base of the mountain. However, this is not known for certain. D II says that, at her death, which Benedict saw in a vision, she was buried in a tomb reserved for Benedict in the crypt of Monte Cassino. After his death, he was buried with her.

However, where St. Benedict is buried is not clear. As discussed in more detail in the St. Scholastica essay, both Monte Cassino and Fleury, France, claim the relics of St. Benedict and St. Scholastica. Le Mans, France, also claims St. Scholastica's remains. Some early manuscripts suggest that, around 672, monks from a Benedictine monastery in Fleury (on the Loire River near Orleans, France) went south and stole the relics from the Monte Cassino ruins.

Capturing the relics usually happens at the start of a "liturgical cult." The monks reportedly found a double tomb with the remains. These relics were then brought north to Fleury and buried in a shaft under the crypt of either the main church of the Abbey, St. Peter's, or in the secondary church, St. Mary's, on July 11, ca. 673.



Other interpretations suggest that Scholastica's relics, once they had been brought north, were then transferred to a convent in Le Mans and that only Benedict's remained in Fleury. To add to the mystery, after Monte Cassino was bombed during World War II by the Allies, bones found in a double tomb in its crypt were claimed to be those of St. Scholastica and St. Benedict.<sup>34</sup>

### **Hidden Meanings**

Symbolic meanings of some items in D II have previously been mentioned. Others will now be discussed. Knowing these symbols and hidden meanings helps one understand more clearly Benedictine spirituality and the lessons for living behind the stories of St. Benedict.

### **Numerical Symbols**

Ancient magical or "sacred numbers," such as three, seven and 12, are found in D II. Their meanings would have been familiar to Christians and non-Christians alike in the early Middle Ages. They help explain hidden meanings in the stories.

Number three, for example, is an ancient number of stability, wholeness and completeness and is considered a perfect number. It is associated with holiness including the Trinity, the Holy Family, the resurrection of Jesus and the three Wise Men. In legends and myths from antiquity, it is found as three trials, three wishes, "body, mind and spirit," and finding success the third time something is attempted. It is used several times in D II, including the raven being absent for three hours to get rid of the poisoned bread, Benedict remaining in the grotto in Subiaco three years, and his sister Scholastica dying three days after he last saw her.

The number four represents stability and things pertaining to the earth and seasons. It includes the four ancient elements, four quadrants of a circle and the four Gospels. By adding three to four, you get seven, another perfect number that could have a positive or negative meaning. These included the seven plagues, the seven wonders of the world, the seven planets of antiquity, and the seven naked dancing girls in D II, who likely represented the seven deadly sins.

Number 12 is found several times in D II. It was considered a perfect number and is symbolic of governmental perfection and wisdom from life experiences. It is found as the 12 tribes of Israel and 12 astrological signs. It was a symbol of the 12 apostles bringing the knowledge of the Trinity to the four quarters of the world ( $3 \times 4 = 12$ ). Benedict organized 12 monastic communities, each with an abbot and 12 monks. Cusack suggests, however, "this symmetrical arrangement, apart from reminding us of the twelve apostles, looks artificial." It was likely symbolic of carrying the message of monastic living to seek perfection and God more widely in the world.<sup>35</sup>

The early spiritual growth and maturity of the hermit are illustrated in three major temptations, which he must overcome to be on a path for spiritual perfection. Although four stories are told, the last two tales are essentially the same. In one case it is a group, and in the other an individual, who attempts to discredit and murder Benedict. The symbol of wine in one story and bread in the other brings it into oneness. The miracle of mending the sieve tempted him to vainglory, the blackbird and images of a girl tempted him to act out his lust, and the evildoings of the monks and jealous priest tempted him to anger. Passing successfully through these three trials, Benedict symbolically overcame temptation, became grounded in his convictions and emerged as the wise teacher.<sup>36</sup>

These numerical symbols used in D II represent Benedict's search for perfection and stability. The historical Benedict did found monasteries, but the exact number is not known. Nor is it known the actual number of years he remained in the Subiaco cave or in the Subiaco region. Therefore, some scholars suggest the numbers were offered for their symbolic meanings to broaden one's perspective in seeking God.

### **Perseverance**

A classic Benedictine concept is perseverance. Perseverance and its opposite, quitting, (or its more positive aspect, withdrawal to "cut one's losses") are illustrated in the life of St. Benedict. It is also mentioned in RB several times. Perseverance is persisting at something in spite of difficulties. It is "pulling oneself up by the bootstraps" and continuing at something, even if you feel it is beyond you. Perseverance is keeping at the task; it is endurance. It is usually difficult.

The Prologue to RB, in regard to perseverance, states, "Never swerving from his instructions, then, but faithfully observing his teaching in the monastery until death, we shall through patience share in the sufferings of Christ that we may deserve also to share in his kingdom."<sup>37</sup>

However, is it always good to persevere? When does one cut one's losses and retreat from a negative situation, and when does one persevere? This is often a difficult question to answer. Yet, all of us will, or have, faced such dilemmas.

D II relates several stories, previously discussed, in which Benedict wisely leaves a situation. And yet, these stories are paradoxes, because in leaving, he is actually persevering. Benedict, disturbed by the disintegration and debauchery of Rome, leaves to focus upon his calling of a deeper spirituality. Once in Enfide, after he becomes known for his miracle of mending a sieve, he again leaves so as to pursue a hermit's existence in Subiaco.

A few years later, after monks who have asked him to be their abbot attempt to murder him, he leaves, as nothing was to be gained by exposing himself to danger. Finally, after a jealous priest almost murders him, he leaves the whole area of Subiaco and retreats to a mountaintop, Monte

Cassino, so he can live the spiritual life. In all these cases, he cuts his losses and is persistent in his beliefs and calling to seek God.

However, in the modern world, it is sometimes difficult to discern when to persevere and when to leave. For example, should you persevere in a job that pays a good salary but is causing a lot of stress and family problems? Should you stay in a town with long-time relationships or go to a place a thousand miles away for a lucrative job promotion or a comfortable retirement community?

Is it best to persevere in a marriage in which you, or your children, are being battered and abused? There are no easy answers to some of these common situations. The examples in D II do suggest, however, that when something is dangerous or life-threatening, it is time to leave.

On the other hand, running away from a situation is different from cutting one's losses in order to persevere. Running away includes wandering from place to place, job to job, or relationship to relationship. It is sometimes called the "geographic cure" to eliminate faults, bad habits, financial problems, addictive behaviors, or an inability to cope with a situation or to change a negative behavior. It is not facing everyday problems; it is blaming others for our shortcomings and failures. However, staying the course and attempting to solve the problem through prayer and wise counsel lead to stability, which is entwined with perseverance.

**T**here are two types of stability, stability of heart and stability of place. Stability of heart emerges out of perseverance. It is the end result of a steadfast and unwavering pursuit of God. This type of stability leads to spiritual comfort and inner peace or stillness. Stability is derived from the Latin word *stare*, which means "to stand," "to stand up" or "to be still."

The late Fr. Hilary Ottensmeyer, based upon Le Clerque, argues that stability means "to be firm, to stand fast, to endure, to persevere, to be rooted." Stability of heart is seen in the stories of perseverance—by leaving, Benedict gains peace. Ottensmeyer adds that stability can be found when one is firmly committed, even in times of trouble and adversity, to a community or to one's family and its values.<sup>38</sup>

A major contribution of St. Benedict to western monasticism was the vow of stability to a single community, or stability of place. RB describes the gyrovagues, monks who "spent their entire life drifting from region to region. . .always on the move, they never settled down, and are slaves to their own wills and gross appetites." They were looked down upon and considered untrustworthy and irresponsible as they did not seek stability of place or heart.<sup>39</sup>

In Benedictine monasticism, monks and nuns take three vows. The vow of obedience is placing oneself under the direction of the abbot, prior, abbess or prioress, as the case may be, of the community. Conversion of life (*conversio*) includes poverty, or forgoing private ownership,

celibate chastity, a lifetime of seeking God, and a balance of prayer and work. These two vows come together in the vow of stability, where the individual commits himself or herself to one particular monastery for life. This vow includes stability of place and of heart.

When a Benedictine monk or nun makes a lifetime commitment to a particular community, he or she is bound together with the lives of all members of the monastery. However, before the individual is allowed full acceptance into the community, he or she must undergo several years of trial to see if he or she can persevere in the rules and the way of life of the community.<sup>40</sup> As found in the stories of the youthful St. Benedict, overcoming adversity and undergoing trials build character; they also lead to maturity and wisdom.

Oblates of a Benedictine community commit themselves to the abbot as spiritual advisor, align themselves to one particular community, and spend a lifetime seeking God through prayer, spiritual reading, worship and good works. Their stability is seen as a commitment to a way of life.

### **A Paradox in Our Modern World**

**W**e live in a fast-paced, hectic, consumer-driven and noisy society. This busyness and over-commitment are seen in families where both parents work and are involved with too many activities for themselves and their children. Retirees are often busier than they were before retirement, as they fill their free time with too many commitments. People are enticed into consumerism, resulting in serious financial difficulties.

Even in some religious communities, the younger members “wear many hats” and are over-committed. All this busyness and constant “running around,” in western cultures, results in stress and the urge to get away from it all. However, unless your life is in danger, it is often necessary to stop what you are doing, stay where you are and take stock of the situation.

Augustin Roberts, quoting William of St. Thierry, suggests that, “One cannot live a life of prayer and recollection while changing monasteries frequently. [A person] cannot concentrate the powers of the mind if he [or she] does not root his body in a fixed place. The remedy for infirmities of the soul is not a change of place but a change of heart.”<sup>41</sup>

Both D II and RB suggest that stability, and stability of heart, come from an unwavering pursuit of God. The Prologue of RB remarks that, to find God’s kingdom “we must run and do now what will profit us forever” and “run on the path of God’s commandments.”<sup>42</sup> Running after God to find peace of mind is, of course, a paradox. This pursuit of God can come in many forms. It can include listening for God’s voice within daily prayer, meditation, prayerful reading or even walking in the woods. It can include feeling the presence of God in the Eucharist, in church or in the wisdom of RB.

Any of these vehicles can put a person on the road to stability and guide him to the wisest choices. Choices made out of wisdom might mean staying in the same town, the same job and the same community. It might mean eliminating activities that are bogging you down and not buying the latest gizmo that you really don't need. It will often mean saying no. Finding stability may not be easy and, as illustrated by St. Benedict, will take perseverance. One small path to stability is summarized by de Vogüé, who suggests that St. Benedict "kept himself inside the cloister of his thought."<sup>43</sup>

In summary, various symbols in D II help to broaden the spiritual meanings of the life stories of St. Benedict. A focus on his early life showed examples that included the concepts of perseverance and stability for a fulfilling life. In this are the paradoxes of retreating in order to persevere on a spiritual path, and running after God to find stability of heart.

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### Endnotes

1. De Vogüé, 2006; Cusack, 1993. All quotations and references to *Rule of St. Benedict* taken from Fry (1982) translation. All quotations and references to *Dialogues II* taken from de Vogüé (1993).

2. Cusack, 1993, 3.

3. Cusack, 1993; Kardong, 2004; Porras, 2004.

4. Clark, 1988, 274-276.

5. de Vogüé, 2005, 309-314; 1993, xi-xiii.
6. Peifer, 2000, 315.
7. Cusack, 1974, 145-146; Cusack, 1976, 145-148; Cusack, 1993, 17; Wansborough, 1965, 147.
8. de Vogüé, 1993, viii-ix; Wansborough, 1965, 147.
9. Cusack, 1993, 151.
10. Chapman, 1971, 8-9; Kessler, 1996, 22; Hallinger, 1985, 196-199; de Vogüé, 1993.
11. Lawrence, 2001, 19.
12. Wansborough, 1965, 147.
13. Brown, 1971, 122-131; Hollister, 1990, 9-10, 30-33.
14. Cusack, 1993, 27.
15. Schuster, 1951, 24, 30.
16. Schuster, 1951, 29-30.
17. D II, Prologue, 1.
18. D II, 1, 1.
19. Schuster, 1951, 48-51.
20. D II, 1, 2-3.
21. Schuster, 1951, 51.
22. D II, 1, 5.
23. D II, 1, 4-8.
24. D II, 1, 8.
25. de Vogüé, 1993, 11; Cusack, 1993, 31; D II, 1, 4-5, 8.
26. D II, 2, 1-3; Cusack, 1993, 35-37; de Vogüé, 1993, 20-21.
27. D II, 3, 2.
28. D II, 3, 12; de Vogüé, 1993, 30.

29. Cusack, 1993, 41.
30. D II, 3, 13.
31. D II, 7, 2.
32. de Vogüé, 1993, 53; D II, 8, 2-4.
33. D II, 8, 1-7, 10.
34. Goffart, 1967, 122-123, 129; Hallinger, 1985, 200-201; Kessler, 1996, 25-26.
35. D II, 3, 13; Cusack, 1993, 18.
36. Cusack, 1993, 37; de Vogüé, 1993, 55-58.
37. RB, Prologue, 50.
38. Ottensmeyer, nd, 2.
39. RB, I, 10.
40. RB, 58, 1-24.
41. Roberts, 1971, 262.
42. RB, P, 44, 49.
43. de Vogüé, 1993, 31.

### **Questions for Reflection**

1. One of the keys to Benedictine spirituality is perseverance in times of trials and obstacles. How have you persevered in difficult times? What steps did you take? How did this make you a better person? How has your perseverance helped you make better life decisions and choices? What are they?
2. On the other hand, St. Benedict found it wiser to leave in three situations, as they were not spiritually healthy for him and had the potential of being physically unhealthy. Have you left a spiritually or physically unhealthy situation? What positive outcome did you gain from this choice? What did you discover about yourself?
3. Many paradoxes are presented in the traditional life of St. Benedict. What paradoxes have you experienced in your life? How have these brought you closer to God?
4. Stability for a fulfilling life is another key to Benedictine spirituality. How have you obtained stability in your own life? If you have not found stability, what can you do to achieve this goal?
5. Where do you see yourself in terms of spiritual maturity and wisdom? What steps can you take to grow and develop your own spiritual maturation?