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Benedict of Nursia (I)

The following article of Fr. Ralston's is reprinted from 1991. Its principle point remains essential to our present circumstance in the Church.

BENEDICT OF NURSIA (I)

During July the Church commemorates the feast day of a man who lived one of the great lives in history of the Christian family. His life is like the lives of the original apostles and evangelists in the sense that we know less of its outward circumstances than we do of its inward qualities, even though Pope St. Gregory himself wrote his life some forty years later.

What we know beyond any doubt is the result of his life, and this mode of knowledge is the best of all: "by their fruits ye shall know them." I imagine that Benedict would have been very much surprised to find himself addressed as "saint." But I reckon he would be pleased that while he himself remains relatively obscure, the communities which have lived and continue to live according to his rule are a living part of the community of the Western Christian Church unto this very day.

Benedict was a layman, never ordained to any office in the Church. He was the son of what we would call one of the "best families" in Rome, born there in the year 480. About the year 500 (that is, when he was twenty) he literally "dropped out" both of Roman society and of school. He went off by himself to live as a hermit in a cave at Subiaco.

Over the next twenty years others joined him there, both men and women, including his sister Scholastica. By 520 there was a little community of one-hundred twenty, twelve groups of ten each, and each group (what we would call a "cell") with its own leader.

Benedict had at this time no idea of forming what we now call a monastery. His community was loosely organized, more nearly like a "settlement." Then, as now, such a collective group was liable to suspicion from those outside it, and sometimes, as we know to our sorrow, there is good reason behind the suspicion. In the case of Benedict there was nothing peculiar or subversive, but the hostility nonetheless was great, and the threat real, even to an attempt on his

life.

And so, seeing the threat and recognizing the fragility of his little community, Benedict withdrew to a place more remote, to Monte Cassino, a hilltop between Rome and Naples. There he lived with his community for thirty years, until his death in 550, at the age of seventy.

It was at Monte Cassino that he recognized the necessity for some order within his group, and wrote what we have come to call his "rule." This established a form of life which was and remains one of the chief glories of Christendom. The Latin word for "rule" is *regula*: a mode of regulation of life not so much in the sense of imposition of orders as of the setting of limits. It is a form of definition, a way of defining a certain kind of life in Christ. St. Benedict's rule was to his community what the old Book of Common Prayer used to be to the Episcopal Church. It informed us; it defined what kind of thing we were.

The essence of Benedict's rule can be summed up in two phrases, which have become so famous as to be by-words.

The first is *lex orandi, lex credendi*. A law (or rule) of praying is a law of believing. Prayer embodies and articulates faith. Apart from Benedictine communities themselves no group of Christians in the history of the Church has depended more heavily on this than has the Anglican Communion. We have no Pope; we have no confession of belief; we have no Calvin or Luther or authoritative theologian; we have no infallible, literal Bible. What we have had instead is the Book of Common Prayer. It functions in public and in private, in Church and at home, and we learn the form and participate in the substance of our Christian faith as we pray it. Our theology is formed in us on our knees.

This is one reason why our particular Church is so sensitive and so vulnerable when the mode of common prayer is attacked or altered. We have both the strength and the limitation of this part of Benedict's rule. If the rule of prayer is the rule of faith, and if how you pray means what you believe, what you think of God, then any major disturbance in the mode of prayer means a major disturbance within the faith itself.

It is one of the great ironies of modern Anglican life that the person who opened the door to all subsequent attacks on the common prayer which defines our life in Christ was a Benedictine monk, Dom Gregory Dix, who despised the Communion service in the Book of Common Prayer, and, acting on some brilliant but inaccurate liturgical scholarship, and blinded by his Anglo-Catholic predispositions, dispensed the acid which others have employed to dissolve our tradition.

There is a perfect illustration of the way our tradition has worked at its best in the collect for Trinity VII. Examine the three central petitions of it: (I) Graft in our hearts the love of thy Name; (II) Increase in us true religion; (III) Nourish us with all goodness. Reverence for the Name of God the Father; the true religion of Jesus Christ, His Son; the sustaining grace and goodness of the Holy Spirit; this means that we are praying not only to but within the blessed Trinity. By this prayer our minds, wills, and hearts are bent in the direction of God, whom

truly to know is everlasting life. Prayer articulates faith, and this collect regulates and gives evidence of how and what we think of God. It is a pure example of *lex orandi, lex credendi*.

(to be continued)

The Rev. William H. Ralston, Jr.

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