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Benedict of Nursia (II)

(We continue with Fr. Ralston's article from 1991.)

The other aspect of Benedict's rule is equally famous: *orare est laborare*: "to pray is to work." Prayer is the *opus Dei*, the work of God proper to us in this life, and in this world.

In this way Benedict reconciled, in the rule of life he gave to his community, the old dispute between faith and works. If faith finds itself in prayer, and to pray is to work, then spiritual life itself, the life of grace and prayer, is the greatest work and the proper labor of human beings. That life springs from faith; faith is held by prayer; and so it is a great circle, the lively co-operation of faith and work, not as disjunctive, but as complementary. You cannot tell where one stops and the other begins. St. Paul and St. James sing the same song.

What was the result of all this, the fruit of Benedict's labor? One result is still with us in the Benedictine communities of the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches throughout the world. But that is not the real fruit of his labor. The mode of spirituality Benedict taught has permeated the life of the Western Church through all the 1500 years succeeding him. Our Book of Common Prayer may be its most nearly perfect expression and transformation.

But there is something else, for we must ask also what was the immediate result of Benedict's moving out to Monte Cassino. For the next 400 years, until the tenth century, the communities of the rule of St. Benedict were the centers of civilized life in Europe. During the centuries we call the Dark Ages when men roamed the world pillaging and destroying, and the classical civilization of Greece and Rome died, Benedict's followers could read and write, and they knew how to farm. They could also sing, and St. Gregory's reform of Ambrose's system of music for the Church became an essential part of their corporate life. These chants are the very roots of Western music.

Benedict remembered Virgil and his *Georgics*. He taught his people to farm and required them to learn things. Literacy and agriculture are the bases of all humane life. Try to imagine these people, men and women, copying old manuscripts and preserving them in libraries, remembering the necessities of our good stewardship of the earth and the skills needed to make things grow, and all the while singing at

their prayers.

This is only slightly a romantic gloss of their actual life. For centuries the followers of Benedict were the only physicians in Europe, the only educated men, the only skilled persons, the only craftsmen, the only builders. Through them not only was the ancient culture transmitted to us, but from them came also the seeds of our Western civilization.

Remember your Latin. "Culture" comes from the verb *colo, colere, cultus*. It means to "till the ground," to tend the soil. Benedict sowed the good seed in the ground he had well prepared to receive it. Even in our deteriorated world we speak of "culture" or a "cultivated person." Culture comes from the ground, the nurturing earth. Civilizations form around cities, and to be a "civilized" person carries with it a little whiff of artificiality, specious sophistication, and precious sensibility. It is better to be vulgar than civilized. What one wants is the cultivated soul, not the civilized posture.

The field of work prescribed by Benedict was grounded in faith, and this faith was embodied in the living work of prayer. This discipline is perhaps the most remarkable evidence in the whole history of the Church of what can be accomplished through a remnant when the storm has leveled everything else.

We should be warned by this recollection not to use the phrase "renewal of the Church" so freely, or speak of the "decade of evangelism" as if it were a phenomenon of institutional religion. Benedict shows us again the truth of the leaven. It is the heroism and the wisdom of single persons which define renewal; it is the presence among us of such communities as his (whether parishes, or fellowships, or whatever) which promotes evangelism. The renewal of the Church means the renewal of humane and cultivated life in and for the world. It has little or nothing to do with programs and official protestation.

"By their fruits ye shall know them." It is a powerful lesson. When time had run out for the old Roman Empire and violence and barbarism had overrun the world and subverted the sane order of human life, the very form itself of the human community was preserved by a man and his friends who formed a small society; a man who thought the best thing that could be done was to go out to a cave or on top of a mountain, and pray, and sing, and read and write and farm.

There is no mistaking our essential knowledge of St. Benedict. He is at one and the same time the most faithful and the most practical of all the saints. I think this special combination of Christian virtues arises chiefly among the laity. One cannot know that for certain.

In any case, as the winds begin once more to sweep across our world, and no center really has held, and civilization and culture and our religion are on the edge of an abyss of darkness, violence and chaos, to recollect St. Benedict is a good thing to do. The lesson of his life is comfortable in the pure sense of that word—that is, it teaches us hope and courage. You cannot go armed into the battle which is ours, the battle for the very soul of our Church and our world, with better counsel than this: The way I pray is what I believe, and my prayer is my work.

The Rev. William H. Ralston, Jr.

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