

ancient paths

Discover Christian Formation
the Benedictine Way

DAVID ROBINSON



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Ancient Paths: Discover Christian Formation the Benedictine Way

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PREFACE

In October 1986, when I made my first monastic retreat to Our Lady of Guadalupe Trappist Abbey, near Lafayette, Oregon, I had only been ordained as a Minister of Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church for two years and was serving as pastor to the people of Smith Memorial Presbyterian Church, Fairview, Oregon. After two short years in my new profession, I was discouraged, weary of ministry, and looking for guidance in my vocation as a pastor. My senior pastor, Slider Steuernol, made his first monastic retreat to Our Lady of Guadalupe in the summer of 1986. He encouraged me to get away for a weeklong monastic retreat. Since I was on the verge of burnout and soon to leave my position as a pastor in Fairview, a week at a monastery was a welcomed gift for renewal and discernment.

Like all monasteries based upon *The Rule of St. Benedict*, Our Lady of Guadalupe Trappist Abbey welcomed me that autumn like a lost son come home. By God's grace, during that week I began my lifelong journey into contemplative Christian formation. Since that first retreat, I've returned to Guadalupe Abbey many times, and also made retreats and visits to dozens of other monasteries that live according to Benedictine principles. I also began to read and study *The Rule of St. Benedict* and discovered the wisdom and beauty of this way of living, as I sought to apply monastic spirituality to my



daily life. In October 2005, I enrolled in Fuller Theological Seminary's Doctor of Ministry in Christian Spirituality program to formally study Christian formation, from both historical and practical perspectives. Five months later, in February 2006, I became a Benedictine Oblate with Mount Angel Abbey in Mount Angel, Oregon, by making a lifelong commitment to practice Benedictine spirituality as much as possible within my station in life. I continue to make annual retreats to Benedictine monasteries, seeking to grow in my understanding and practice of Christian formation.

That first monastic retreat in 1986 seemed to me like stepping through a gate into an expansive and beautiful park. Since the 1990s, our family has hiked hundreds of miles in the heart of Olympic National Park, a wonderland of beauty on the Olympic peninsula in Washington State. Like our annual family hikes in this park, over the course of the past two decades, my exploration in the "park" of Benedictine spirituality has deeply shaped my life and faith, helping me to become more and more like Christ. In the pages below, I describe this life as walking together along "ancient paths." Since my first encounter with St. Benedict and his *Rule* in 1986, I've become much more intentional about Christian formation, seeking the best ways to grow together with Christ's family, the church. Year after year, new habits have been birthed by putting monastic ways into practice in my own life and, with others, in the life of the local church.

I owe a debt of gratitude to the people of Community Presbyterian Church, Cannon Beach, for their faithful support and love. Since 1993, when we first arrived in Cannon Beach, I've been encouraged to grow in my understanding and practice of Christian formation in this family of faith. Over the past seventeen years, I've seen members

of this congregation grow and flourish in their love of Christ as we've sought to live according to the principles laid out in the following pages. The vision statement of Community Presbyterian Church, "seeking to know Christ and grow in Christ together," lies at the heart of all Christian formation. I invite you to explore with me *The Rule of St. Benedict*, to discover wisdom and refreshment for your daily life of faith in your journey with the Lord. In reading this book, may you be encouraged to know Christ and grow closer to Christ as you walk with others along paths of Benedictine spirituality.



INTRODUCTION

Which Way Will We Go?

This is what the LORD says: “Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls. But you said, ‘We will not walk in it.’”

—JEREMIAH 6:16

Thou my everlasting portion, more than friend or life to me,
All along my pilgrim journey, Savior, let me walk with thee.
Close to thee, close to thee, close to thee, close to thee,
All along my pilgrim journey, Savior, let me walk with thee.

—FANNY CROSBY

Benedict of Nursia (ca. 480–547) stood at the crossroads of the early sixth century, looking for guidance along the way of Christ. The way he chose led him into Christian life in community. Along this way, St. Benedict not only found rest for his soul but also helped millions of others discover “the good way,” the way of transformation through Jesus Christ and Christian community. The guidebook

St. Benedict wrote for formation in community, known as *The Rule of St. Benedict*, has been the source of daily guidance for millions of believers living in Christian community. *The Rule of St. Benedict* has guided the daily lives of monks around the world for fifteen centuries, but also has offered nonmonastic Christians guidance for Christian formation in community.

Why look to a monk who lived so long ago for guidance in the way of Christ? Isn't the Bible a sufficient source of truth and counsel? The Bible is our foundation for truth, authority, and wisdom in living as followers of Jesus Christ. That is exactly what makes Benedict's *Rule* such a practical and enduring book, for he founded his guidebook in Christ and in Scripture. Along with many other great resources from church history, this sixth-century guidebook has been rediscovered and studied anew in the past few decades, offering a whole new generation of people direction as they stand at the crossroads of this new century. Though I'm neither a monk nor a Roman Catholic, I too have discovered *The Rule of St. Benedict* to be a reliable guidebook for formation in the community of the local church.

Just as there are many paths through a forest, there are also many ways of spirituality. My undergraduate degree was in comparative world religion (University of Washington, Seattle, 1979); studying for this degree helped me better understand the diversity of approaches to belief among people of faith around the world. Likewise, among Christians, there are many ways of living by faith in Christ. These diverse ways of formation beautifully express the creativity and wonder of Christ's life in all his glory and wisdom. Yet, there are also some ways of living that fall far short of Christ's way of life and love. Consider, for a moment, three such alternative paths to spirituality

found among Christians today: private spirituality, antinomian spirituality, and nomadic spirituality.

Many believe faith to be a private matter; something so near to the heart that it is impossible to express in words. As I was growing up, I was warned against “wearing religion on your sleeve”—another way of saying it is that it is better to keep all matters of faith and religion to myself. When faith is viewed primarily as private, we become isolated from other Christians, and tend to hide the treasure of faith given to us by Christ. The way of private spirituality leads people into a solo journey of faith in Christ, often with little or no connection with other believers. In Benedict’s day, such solo travelers were known as *anchorites*, or hermits, from two Greek words, *anachoreo*, “living apart,” and *eremos*, “solitary.” The solitary way of life spread during the fourth century through the widely popular *Life of St. Anthony*, a biography of the Desert Father Anthony of Egypt, written by Athanasius (296–373), the bishop of Alexandria. Though the solitary way of life was accepted by the early church as a potential life’s calling for a Christian, and also as an occasional retreat for times of renewal, it was not considered a normative lifestyle for followers of Christ. The solitary way of faith is quite common today. Some followers of Christ in the twenty-first century would rather walk alone, seeing spirituality as a private journey unencumbered by the hassles and demands of human community. As evidenced in media and marketing, contemporary culture often elevates the individual above the community. This is nothing new to our time. Every generation has flirted with traveling solo.

Certainly, the Christian way of life is both individual and communal. There are aspects of solitary spirituality that are essential to inner growth. For example, prayer is both something we practice alone, and something we share with others. We are wise to

keep a creative tension between individual and communal perspectives in understanding Christian formation. What Benedict warns us against is the avoidance of community and the excessive emphasis upon private spirituality that precludes the support of Christian community. He affirmed the solitary life of the hermit as appropriate for the spiritually mature, yet he also believed hermits needed to be connected to the wider community of faith. According to Benedict, the solo journey of faith belongs only to those who have “built up their strength and go from the battle line in the ranks of their brothers to the single combat of the desert. Self-reliant now, without the support of another, they are ready with God’s help to grapple single-handed with the vices of body and mind” (RB, 1.5). Generally, we need the support of other believers in order to grow in Christ.

A second unhealthy path, according to the *Rule*, is the antinomian way, or the “feel good” way, of spirituality. Just as in Benedict’s day, there are many today who center their lives upon feelings and intuitions, looking to inner experience as the most reliable guide for personal growth. Some believers today avoid external laws, rules, and structures, and see these as obstacles to personal maturity. There is nothing wrong with feeling good about life, but Benedict warns against those who discard rules and supervision for their life of faith and choose to live instead without any outside guidance to govern their lives. According to Benedict, “with no experience to guide them, no rule to try them *as gold is tried in a furnace* (Prov. 27:21)” they find their life ruled by “whatever strikes their fancy” (RB, 1.8). The Christian life involves both an inner and an outer aspect. There is a creative balance between structure and spirit—between law and grace in Christian formation. Jesus warned against blind conformity to the law without any regard for the spirit. Paul declared that the letter of

the law kills whereas the Spirit of God brings life (see 2 Cor. 3:6). Mere conformity to external laws and regulations, without regard for a personal relationship with God's Spirit, leads to lifeless faith. On the other hand, when authority and laws are discarded, we too easily allow our own feelings to become our authority rather than the Word of God. Without wise spiritual leadership and accountability in community, we can more easily drift into idolatry or self-worship, and place ourselves instead of Christ in the role of authority over our spiritual lives. "Anything they believe in and choose, they call holy; anything they dislike, they consider forbidden" (RB, 1.9). The way of Christ calls us into a life of formation in which we willingly choose to be guided by Christ through Scripture and by wise leadership in community.

A third type of unhealthy spirituality commonly found in Benedict's day, as well as in our own time, is nomadic spirituality. In the sixth century, as in every age, there were nomadic, wandering believers who claimed no home or community. People of faith still choose to live with little or no commitment to the local church. After living on the Oregon coast for seventeen years, I'm still amazed how often I meet believers with no spiritual home. One of the frequent pictures Jesus used to describe life with God is a plant with roots. Much of the health and fruitfulness of a person's spirituality depends upon the roots. Without any roots in a faith community, some believers become uprooted, restlessly moving, seldom settling down for any length of time. Benedict described such people in his day as those who "spend their entire lives drifting from region to region. . . . Always on the move, they never settle down, and are slaves to their own wills and gross appetites" (RB, 1.10–11). Nomadic Christians move from place to place, from church to church, seldom settling down or planting roots. Of course, Christianity is also a faith that calls us to go into the world

and make disciples. Jesus assumed his followers would be mobile, bringing the Good News to all nations. Christian formation requires both mobility and stability. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, there seems to be a high value placed upon mobility, often at the expense of stability. Due to the pursuit of better housing and employment, people frequently move from city to city, from job to job, and thus, from church to church. A common condition today is a sense of being spiritually homeless and personally disconnected from others. According to a Gallup poll taken in May 2007, 86 percent of Americans claim to pray to God, while only 31 percent claim to attend a weekly church worship service. This gap suggests there are millions of pilgrims who remain aloof from other Christians in their area and have no place to call their spiritual home.

The *Rule* warns against each of these three unhealthy alternatives, inviting followers of Christ to walk in a new way. Benedictine formation is a journey that begins with a commitment to three lifelong promises:

- Stability in community
- Fidelity in community
- Obedience in community

“When he is to be received, he comes before the whole community . . . and promises stability, fidelity to monastic life, and obedience” (RB, 58.17). These three Benedictine promises or vows offer an antidote to the three unhealthy ways listed above. The way of stability provides a safe home for those tired of nomadic spirituality. The way of fidelity in community cuts to the heart of private spirituality. The way of obedience keeps challenging antinomian spirituality. Among the

many alternative patterns for spiritual life, how can we know which way is the good way? In Benedict's vision, growth occurs relationally, as we journey together in Christ united in a life of stability, fidelity, and obedience in community.

The prophet Jeremiah called out to his generation to walk upon the path of the Lord. "Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls" (6:16). Eleven centuries later, Benedict called out to his generation to stand at the crossroads, look for the good way, and walk together as a people of faith on "ancient paths." There are those in our generation who are looking for wise guidebooks that offer principles as well as practical wisdom for the spiritual journey. As a guidebook, the *Rule* has offered sound guidance for hundreds of thousands of pilgrims, guiding them on their spiritual journey in Christ. The *Rule* was not written in a monastic vacuum, but rather as a daily handbook for the formation of faith in the community at the Abbey of Monte Cassino in Italy. After fifteen centuries, the *Rule* still offers a daily guide for living together as followers of Jesus Christ. Monks in Benedictine communities who live their daily lives based upon *The Rule of St. Benedict* include the Order of Saint Benedict (OSB), the Order of Cistercians (O.CIST.), the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (OCSO), also known as Trappists, and the Anglican Benedictines.

In addition, many nonmonastics have also turned to the *Rule* in contemporary times, discovering a wise guidebook for Christian formation outside the walls of the monastery. Worldwide, a growing number of nonmonastic people are seeking to live their daily lives according to the *Rule*, including those known as Benedictine Oblates or associates. The international community of Benedictine Oblates

includes almost twenty-five thousand men and women around the world, people who daily seek to live according to the Benedictine way of faith within their station of life. These Benedictine Oblates, along with thousands of other pilgrims, are discovering the *Rule* as a guidebook full of practical wisdom for travelers, offering precisely the kind of guidance needed for formation in local congregations in the twenty-first century.

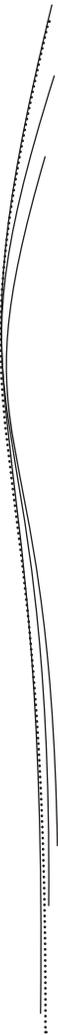
As we stand at the crossroads in our time, who will point us in the right direction? Which way will we go? I've written this book to introduce you to Benedict and his guidebook for the journey of Christian formation. How can busy, active people find rest for their souls and guidance for the pilgrimage of faith that lies ahead? Come along paths of Christian spirituality and discover an ancient way of faith practiced within Christian communities around the world for more than a thousand years. Across the centuries, Benedict continues to call people into a lifelong pilgrimage of faith: "See how the Lord in his love shows us the way of life. Clothed then with faith and the performance of good works, let us set out on this way, with the Gospel for our guide" (RB, prologue 20–21).

PART ONE

ANCIENT PERSPECTIVES
ON CHRISTIAN FORMATION

CHAPTER 1

How Benedict Transformed the World



As a pastor of a local church, I receive numerous mail and e-mail solicitations every month, offering new ministry strategies that include church growth seminars, leadership webcasts, mission conferences, faith curriculum, or worship media tools. With the advent of the Internet, instant global communication, and jet airplane travel, the options available to pastors and churches to participate in such events can be overwhelming: Which model for church growth would work best in our situation? Where should I go for wisdom concerning Christian formation? What resources will help us grow as a church? I've struggled with such questions over my quarter of a century as an ordained minister. Through all the conferences and seminars I've attended, and in all the books I've read, and all the research I've done, I haven't found a better guide for Christian formation than *The Rule of St. Benedict*.

The following pages offer a biblical approach to Christian formation for the twenty-first century by drawing upon a field-tested guidebook. In this chapter I would like to introduce you to the author of this guidebook and show how he transformed the world through his remarkable *Rule*. In chapter two, we will survey Benedictine essentials for the journey of faith. Then, step-by-step, through the next five chapters, we will journey together

through the villages of Benedictine spirituality, exploring five paths of Christian formation. As you better understand Benedict's life and spiritual practices, I hope you will be better equipped to implement his practical vision in your personal life and in your local church and be better able to carry out Christ's world-transforming ways through your daily life.

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF BENEDICT OF NURSIA

Benedict of Nursia was born into a collapsing civilization. The late fifth and early sixth centuries were marked by widespread societal turmoil that included political corruption, military invasions, and ecclesiastical crises. Though the Roman Empire had ruled over a vast territory for five centuries, by the late fifth century the administration of Rome had fallen into decline. Sickened by internal corruption and poorly managed government, Rome was eroding from the inside while being attacked from the outside. Tribal armies from the north and the east invaded down the spine of Italy with increasing frequency, leaving people in constant fear of invasion, famine, and disease. Seven decades before the birth of Benedict, in 410, the city of Rome was overthrown by the Goths under the command of Alaric. In 455, Rome was once again sacked, this time by Vandals from North Africa. In 476, just four years before Benedict's birth, the boy-emperor Romulus was deposed by barbarian leaders.

Benedict was born around 480, in Nursia, an Italian town now called Norcia, nestled in the Sabine mountains, a little north of Rome. His twin sister, Scholastica, also became a monastic, founding a convent that carries her name to this day. As a teenager Benedict was sent to Rome to receive a classical education. While studying in Rome, Benedict witnessed the diversions and temptations of city life. As his first biographer, Gregory the Great, wrote:

During his boyhood [Benedict] showed mature understanding, and a strength of character far beyond his years kept his heart detached from every pleasure. Even while still living in the world, free to enjoy all it had to offer, he saw how empty it was and turned from it without regret. . . . In his desire to please God alone, he turned his back on further studies.

As a young student, Benedict renounced the culture of Rome, fled the company of humans, and walked eastward along footpaths into the Italian mountain wilderness, to a place known as Subiaco, in the valley of the Anio River. Here he lived in a solitary cave. Benedictine historian Jean Leclercq, OSB, offers this answer to the possible reasons why Benedict left Rome:

Why? Not because he was doing poorly in his studies—that is not implied at all—but because student life, school life, is full of danger to morals. All the rest of St. Benedict’s life was to be subordinated to the search for God, and lived out under the best conditions for reaching that goal, that is to say, in separation from this dangerous world. Thus, in the life of St. Benedict, we find, in germ, the two components of monastic culture: studies undertaken, and then, not precisely scorned, but renounced and transcended, for the sake of the kingdom of God.

Fed by a local monk who regularly lowered bread on a rope down the steep cliff to the mouth of his cave, Benedict spent his first few years as a hermit, and committed himself to the ascetic disciplines of silence, solitude, and prayer.

After a time, monks from the neighboring town recognized Benedict to be a holy man of prayer and asked him to become their

community leader. He reluctantly agreed, calling these men into a disciplined way of life, a common life together within a daily rhythm of work, sacred reading, and prayer. During the next two decades, Benedict worked out his understanding of Christian formation within the laboratory of the monastery. When more men joined the fledgling movement, Benedict organized his monks into groups of twelve and placed a director over each house. He himself served as leader over all the houses. Not all these monks were pleased with Benedict's approach to life in community. They attempted to poison him on two separate occasions. Benedict left the area of Subiaco with a number of loyal monks. This small community of monks walked southward to a mountaintop—the site of a ruined pagan temple.

Almost half-way between Rome and Naples, the Via Latina, which connects these two cities, skirts this steep and prominent mountain. A little above the level of the valley, close to the rocky wall, nestles the fortified town of Casinum, now San Germano. From there a path winds upwards to a height of some two thousand feet above, where it ends even today in the imposing remains of an ancient pelagic fortress, which in the olden times crowned the summit of the rock.

There on the heights of Monte Cassino, Benedict founded a new monastery in 529 and there he wrote his *Regula*, known today as *The Rule of St. Benedict*.

The Latin word he chose as the title for his work, *Regula*, means yardstick, or measuring tool. One of the difficulties in our shared life in Christ concerns how to measure or evaluate spiritual growth within a faith community. An overreliance upon measuring tools can lead to

legalism that cripples growth. On the other hand, abandonment of all measuring tools can lead to a lack of accountability that also stifles growth. Benedict offered a middle way, emphasizing the importance within a faith community of *regula*, or measuring tools. He wrote a communal guidebook to help assess and nurture spiritual growth within a Christian community. In this book, I refer to this work as the *Rule*, and I will keep in step with Benedict's journey metaphor by referring to his *Rule* as a guidebook for our journey together.

Benedict composed the *Rule* to guide the daily journey of the monks at the Abbey of Monte Cassino. Today, people of all Christian backgrounds turn to its wisdom for practical guidance in living for Christ in community. The majority of such people today are not monks, but laypeople, active in daily vocations in the world. This would come as no surprise to Benedict of Nursia. While he had a high regard for the vocation of the priesthood, he apparently remained a layperson throughout his vocation as a monk. The *Rule* is flavored by a moderate, commonsense voice of a layperson, with only a few references to priests, a few implied references to the sacraments, and very little attention paid to the ecclesiastical structures of the church. One Benedictine scholar explains: "To the modern reader, the scarcity of references to the Eucharist in the [*Rule of Benedict*] may seem scandalous. The term *eucharistia* never appears. . . . The liturgical code . . . makes no references at all to Mass." Over the centuries, life within the Benedictine cloister developed a complex ecclesiastical and sacramental system that the founder of the order would have found unusual. Benedict's community was centered upon Christ, the Scriptures, and the daily life of prayer and work in community.

Benedict founded one other monastery in southern Italy before he died at nearly seventy years of age in 547. The statue of the saint in the

cloister garden at the Abbey of Monte Cassino, titled *Dying Benedict*, depicts him at the time of his death, standing with face and hands raised to heaven, supported by monks on either side, offering his life and soul to Christ. As he wrote in the second to last chapter of the *Rule*, so he lived to his dying breath: “Let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ, and may he bring us all together to everlasting life” (RB, 72.11).

HOW BENEDICT TRANSFORMED THE WORLD

According to historian W.H.C. Frend, “Benedictine monasticism spread slowly. By the end of the sixth century it still seems to have been unknown outside Italy.” The early champion of Benedict and his *Rule* was his first biographer, Gregory the Great (540–604), who published *Life and Miracles of St. Benedict* just fifty years after Benedict’s death. By the time Gregory became pope in 590, the political disorder throughout the Roman Empire had spread such unrest and suffering that people increasingly turned to the church and to the abbey for help rather than to the government of Rome. Gregory was himself a monk, with strong affinities toward Benedict’s vision of monastic life. Thanks to the support and missionary vigor of Gregory the Great during his fourteen years as pope, the *Rule* and Benedictine monasticism began to be spread across Europe. In 595, Gregory commissioned Augustine, a Sicilian monk, to go as a missionary to Britain. Along with a small group of other monks, Augustine arrived at Canterbury in the kingdom of Kent in 597, carrying with him the sacred Scriptures and *The Rule of St. Benedict*. “At Canterbury Augustine began a monastery,” relates church historian Kenneth Latourette, “using a pagan temple which had been given him by the King. Following the Benedictine rule, [Canterbury] became the prototype of many Benedictine houses in England.”

Over the next century, the *Rule* gradually took root in the soil of Britain, governing the life of many monasteries, including those under the leadership of such influential abbots as St. Wilfrid of Ripon, York (634–709), and St. Benedict Biscop (628–90), founder of Monkwearmouth and Jarrow in the north of England. After the Synod of Whitby in 664 and the Synod at Autun in 670, *The Rule of St. Benedict* became the normative monastic rule in much of Britain and Gaul. During the next five centuries, hundreds of Benedictine abbeys were established throughout Britain and across the European continent.

In the early ninth century, during the fourteen-year reign of Emperor Charlemagne, Benedict of Aniane (750–821), sometimes called “the second St. Benedict,” adopted a strict observance of the *Rule* in his monastery in southern France. Benedict, having served earlier both in the military and in the court of Charlemagne, during which time he became a monk, was now called upon by Charlemagne to lead a monastic reform in his region of France according to his strict observance of the *Rule*. “The wide dissemination of St. Benedict’s Rule,” asserts author Edwin Mullins, “is largely due to Charlemagne and the scholars of his court, men with a reverence for antique knowledge and the desire to find and copy the original texts of the early church.” The oldest surviving copy of the *Rule*, “the famous manuscript preserved for many centuries at St. Gall or Sankt Gallen, the Codex Sangallensis,” is thought to have been a copy of the original manuscript of *The Rule of St. Benedict*, kept in Rome after Benedict’s death. Codex Sangallensis 914, dating to 810, during the reign of Charlemagne, is accepted as the most authoritative surviving manuscript of the *Rule*. “It remains a faithful copy,” declares Cambridge medievalist Christopher Brooke, “made by Carolingian scholars, from

a model very close to Benedict's own text, still close enough to mirror the degenerate spelling and syntax of sixth-century Latin much more faithfully than the copies to which we are used to today."

After the death of Charlemagne in 814, Louis the Pious, Charlemagne's son, continued his father's plans for monastic reforms by calling a series of synods to be held in Aachen. "Louis made Benedict of Aniane his adviser on monastic affairs, and the order went forth that all monasteries in the realm must follow the Benedictine rule as interpreted by him." This order, the fruit of the Synod of Aachen in 817, declared *The Rule of St. Benedict* the standard monastic rule on the continent. Louis also appointed Benedict of Aniane the archabbot of all the monasteries of Francia, the region we now know as France.

One of the most influential of these French Benedictine abbeys from that medieval era was the Abbey of Cluny in southern Burgundy, founded in 910. Like the monastic reforms of the ninth century, the Cluniac reform of Benedictine monasticism in the tenth century returned monasteries to a strict observance of the *Rule*. The founder of Cluny, William, Duke of Aquitaine, also took the bold step of centralizing power in the motherhouse with the abbot of Cluny accountable directly to the pope. "Cluny's abbots," declares Mullins, "were as influential as any president, statesmen, or business leader in our own times." The early abbots of Cluny offered spiritual and ecclesiastical leadership to emperors, popes, dukes, and dignitaries across the European continent. As the Cluniac movement spread across the continent, the *Rule* also spread, bringing Benedictine gifts of literacy, libraries, health care, economic development, and above all, hundreds of missional communities of praying monks. By the end of the twelfth century, the Cluniac order claimed fifteen hundred dependent monasteries with over ten thousand monks spread across

France, Germany, Spain, Italy, and Britain. Each monastery reported directly to Cluny under a hierarchical structure of ecclesiastical government previously unknown in Benedictine circles.

Another significant medieval Benedictine reform movement began in Citeaux, France, in 1098. Founded by Robert of Molesmes, the abbey at Citeaux, motherhouse to the Cistercian order, exemplified a connectional approach to ecclesiastical government. The Cistercian movement of Benedictine monasticism allowed each individual abbey to govern its own internal affairs, yet connected abbeys together through an informal fraternal network. Annually, each Cistercian abbey sent a delegate to Citeaux to discuss issues related to monastic life. Bernard of Clairvaux became abbot of Citeaux in 1112, just fourteen years after this new monastery had been founded. After three years, Bernard was sent by Abbot Stephen to found another monastic house in the Champagne region of France. Bernard called his newly formed abbey *Clairvaux*, or “valley of light.” Bernard was to have a major influence upon European history as a Benedictine monk through his preaching, his writings, and his dynamic approach to leadership. As a Benedictine leader, Bernard further spread Benedict’s legacy of spiritual vision and daily practice of the Christian life in community in the West.

The profound influence of Benedict and the *Rule* may be observed from various points of view: geography, culture, education, health care, economics, and spirituality. By the eve of the Reformation in the early sixteenth century, Benedictine communities across Europe numbered in the thousands. Not a single square mile of land in all Europe was more than a day’s ride on horseback from the nearest Benedictine monastery. In the early 1500s, Benedictine, Cluniac, or Cistercian abbeys were found in every corner of Europe—the most northern climates of the Scandinavian countries, the eastern regions

of the European continent, the Mediterranean coastlands of southern Europe, the westernmost islands of Britain, and in every province and region in between. Through the genius of the *Rule*, Benedict offered civilization an enduring and sustainable way of life that was transportable and adaptable to a wide variety of languages, ethnicities, and climates.

Benedict dramatically transformed European art, literature, and architecture by encouraging the practice of the arts in the monastery. Every Benedictine monastery housed a thriving cottage industry of artisans who created some of the outstanding works of art in the medieval period. Thousands of monasteries across Europe acted as local art centers and developed methods and approaches to such a diversity of art forms as calligraphy, illuminated manuscripts, painting, glassworks, architecture, sculpture, masonry, winemaking, barrel craft, furniture design, weaving, music composition, and liturgical drama. The creativity and craftsmanship developed within the Benedictine abbey strongly influenced the rise of the artisan guilds of Europe and eventually even assisted in the development of the middle class and the marketplace where such crafts were bought and sold.

Benedict's world-changing educational legacy began with his conviction that every monk, regardless of class or status, must learn to read. By the time of the Cluniac reform, every Benedictine monastery housed a library and a scriptorium, where monks copied and archived the great manuscripts of antiquity, including thousands of Bible manuscripts from the early centuries of the fledgling Christian movement. Through the daily monastic discipline of reading, especially of the sacred reading of Scripture, Benedict greatly impacted the literacy of the West. The development of libraries, the preservation of classic works of antiquity, and the rise of an international system of education across the European continent all have their foundations during the

medieval period in the Benedictine cloister. The first universities of the West arose from monasteries and cathedrals. The first words people learned to read were from manuscripts copied by monks. The finest education offered to a continent for the thousand years prior to the Reformation was to be found in a Benedictine monastery. This was no small accomplishment during an era commonly known as the Dark Ages, when illiteracy was the norm, poverty was widespread, and education was the exclusive privilege of the wealthy.

Benedictine practices also transformed the world of health care. Though the monasteries of Europe were primarily designed as places of prayer and worship, every abbey also included both an infirmary and a guest house where local citizens could come to find rest or physical cures for their illnesses. Thanks to the inquisitive minds of monks and nuns, new treatments were developed through the centuries to help cure the ailments of residents of the monastery and of the neighboring towns. An example of such medical advances in the medieval period is Benedictine abbess Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), known not only for her extraordinary musical compositions, visionary theological writings, hundreds of letters to popes and kings, but also for her writings on natural history and her book of physical cures. Following in Benedict’s footsteps, Hildegard developed new medicines and cures among the Benedictine sisters of the twelfth century—pioneering the practice of homeopathic and herbal medicine, hundreds of years before these medical arts would become widely accepted in the West. Through the stability of the Benedictine abbey, local citizens could receive medical help. Many monasteries developed into hospitals, hospice houses for the dying, and care centers for the practice of the healing arts. The impact of Benedictine health care was dramatically felt in England when from 1536 to 1540, King Henry

VIII closed over 800 monasteries, thereby taking away thousands of hospital beds across the country. Though several monastic hospitals in London were appropriated by King Henry VIII after 1540 including St. Bartholomew's, St. Thomas's, and Bethlehem Hospital, the rest of the country would wait another two hundred years for the return of charitable health care with the rise of voluntary hospitals in the mid-1700s.

Benedict also profoundly impacted the economic development of the West. The phrase *ora et labora*, or “pray and work,” summarizes Benedictine spirituality: the warp and woof tapestry of the life of prayer and the physical life of manual labor. Monks were to consider their work, whether prayer or plowing, as an act of devotion to God. This singular vision of work enhanced the work ethic of the monastery, improved the quality of labor, and sustained the monastery through the development of cottage industries. Every monk took a vow of stability, a commitment to the community, to the abbot, and to the *Rule*. As a result, abbeys became stable economic communities with a long-range vision for developing orchards and vineyards, draining swamps and other local land improvements for production of agriculture, constructing irrigation systems to bring water into the monastic community, and improving roads to enhance trading the goods raised in the monastery. For example, one of the first projects at Citeaux was to provide adequate water to the swampy monastic grounds. The monks spent ten years digging a canal from a spring ten miles away to supply sufficient water for the community. On my visit to Citeaux in 2005, I witnessed the water flowing in abundance from the same spring accessed by Cistercian monks nine centuries earlier. Over time, local citizens recognized the abbeys as reliable sources of quality labor, goods, and commerce. With the economic stability of

the Benedictine cloister, people were drawn into the regions where abbeys were founded.

Over the centuries, villages and towns sprang up in the vicinity of Benedictine monasteries across the European continent. Over the course of the first millennium after Benedict's death, abbeys were instrumental in the development of European architecture, agriculture, infrastructure of roads and waterways, literacy, artistic culture, health care, and economic growth. The *Rule*, as lived out daily in monasteries through the centuries, played an enormous role in shaping European civilization during the medieval period of history. As Edwin Mullins writes,

In those distant days it was the monasteries that held a vital key to the shaping of a new Europe. They acted as colleges, patrons of art and architecture, moral guardians, benevolent landlords, founders of social services, centers of capital wealth, as well as being institutions of vast political influence on an international scale, with the ear of kings, emperors, and popes.

BENEDICTINE FORMATION

Beyond mere geographic, cultural, educational, medical, or economic development, the greatest impact of the Benedictine movement springs from the original vision for spiritual formation in community. From the heights of Monte Cassino in Italy, Benedict offered the world new vistas on Christian formation. The genius of his perspective on life together is first discovered in his understanding of the place of vows in shaping the life of a community. Drawing upon the richness of the past, Benedict formulated new vows to join the classical vow of obedience. Uniting the vows of poverty and chastity into a new single vow of fidelity or “conversion of life” (*conversione morum*;

RB, 58.17), Benedict included a new vow of stability, something that “proved to be among the real strengths of the movement.” Through a commitment to stability, fidelity, and obedience, the founder’s vision of life in community quietly transformed the Western world during a time marked by widespread instability, lawlessness, and poverty.

In addition, Benedict defined spiritual life as a community sharing life together under the guidance of the *Rule*. Benedict’s guidebook centers upon Christ, and upon Scripture. Composed in seventy-three short chapters, Benedict’s *Rule* is supported by over two hundred quotations from the Bible as well as nearly four hundred scriptural allusions. The *Rule* stands as one of the great evangelical documents of church history. Under the guidance of Christ and the Scriptures, Benedict sought to build a new kind of community based upon life supported by vows, life together under a communal *Rule*, and life under wise leadership.

From these humble beginnings in the early sixth century, Benedict’s influence reached across the world through his guidebook and through the thousands of communities seeking to live according to his spiritual vision. Quietly, without much fanfare or recognition, Benedict’s legacy transformed the world for Christ.

Is this still possible in our day? Christ continues to empower us today, filling our lives with faith, hope, and love. Christ still sends his followers into this hungry and needy world to transform lives with the gospel through the love of Jesus Christ.

TAKING STEPS INTO CHRISTIAN FORMATION

from Chapter One

- If you've never read *The Rule of St. Benedict*, pick up a copy and take time to read through this ancient guidebook for yourself. I would recommend reading the *Rule* in an edition that includes a running commentary for nonmonastics, such as Joan Chittister's *The Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1995).
- Read a biography of one of the great people of faith from church history. Consider some of the lives mentioned in this chapter, such as Benedict, Gregory, Hildegard, or Bernard.
- How do you currently measure spiritual growth in your life or among the people in your family of faith? What "yardsticks" have you found helpful for evaluating progress in the way of life and faith in Christ? Name three ways of measuring how faith, hope, and love are growing in a community of believers.
- Consider opening your local church building to one of the following new ministries, community groups, or local programs: artist guilds, art classes, music instruction, literacy programs, early reader tutorials, SMART reading program, health-care support ministries, parish nursing, elder-senior support programs, a food pantry, a small cottage industry to help the poor in your community, a community garden, children's Bible classes such as Awana ministries. In the past sixteen years, almost all of these outreaches have begun in our community, many of them by the people of Community Presbyterian Church, some of them within the church building.

CHAPTER 2

Benedictine Essentials for the Journey



Veteran backpackers know the ten survival essentials and would never think of hiking without them. They are called *essentials* for a very good reason: they are necessary for survival. According to the Mountaineers, a nonprofit hiking group based in Seattle, Washington, the ten essential items you need when backpacking are: a map, compass, water filter, extra food, raingear, waterproof matches, first aid kit, flashlight with extra bulbs, sunscreen, and sunglasses (see www.mountaineers.org). Slight variations of these ten may be found in various backpacking manuals, but the bottom line is always the same: survival in the wilderness. When faced with life-threatening situations in the great outdoors, hikers rely upon these items to stay alive until help arrives.

What are the survival essentials for the Christian journey? Like opening a hiker's backpack, *Benedict's Rule* begins with spiritual essentials for growing together as a community in Christ. These include spiritual leadership, shared wisdom, tools for spiritual formation, obedience, and humility.

SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

The first essential in the Benedictine backpack is spiritual leadership. Benedict places this essential tool at the top of his list, with details for leadership found in several chapters in the *Rule*, including chapter two. Why is spiritual leadership so important? Without it, members of a local congregation lack the guidance, vision, and wisdom needed for growing in their life together in Christ. Think of leadership in terms of outdoor adventures; very few people hike alone on the backcountry trails of our national parks. Most people who backpack in the high country travel in groups of two, three, or four. Often, one lead person in a group has planned the trip, organized the supplies, is more knowledgeable than the others about the trail, and acts informally as a trail guide. When hiking in wilderness high country, several days from the nearest parking lot, people learn to rely upon the wisdom, goodwill, and support of fellow hikers, especially the leader or guide of the adventure. The same holds true with our journey with Christ. We need wise leadership to guide us along the journey of faith in Christ.

Benedict considered leadership a traveling essential for a life of faith. A spiritual leader or mentor represents Christ, and offers guidance along the way. Throughout the *Rule*, leaders are called shepherds (Latin: *pastor*). The Christian model for shepherding is derived from Jesus, who identified himself as the Good Shepherd, the one who calls his sheep by name, leads them out to pasture, cares for them personally, and ultimately, “lays down his life for the sheep” (Jn. 10:11). In his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus fulfills all of the promises of Psalm 23 as shepherd of his sheep. We will explore this theme in greater detail in chapter four.

In our world today, many people prefer to live without any form of leadership, and thus live like sheep without a shepherd. We might liken this to crossing the ocean. There are those rugged individualists

who have braved the forces of wind and wave and sailed solo across the ocean. But most people who cross the Atlantic or the Pacific have no problem relying upon wise leaders such as pilots, flight attendants, and air traffic controllers.

Yet, when it comes to the spiritual life, many prefer to journey alone. The act of finding a guide or mentor for one's spiritual life can seem like a countercultural choice in today's world. The image of the individual, standing alone and without need of others, saturates contemporary culture and even seeps into the life of the local church. I too have spent much of my adult life as a believer in Christ without a wise mentor or director. The motives for this avoidance include self-sufficiency, fear of accountability, self-reliance, and laziness. When such a mentor has come into my life, I've often wondered why I had avoided the gift of mentorship, since mentors bring such support, growth, and encouragement. Yet, I understand the self-reliant attitude found among many people in local congregations today. Too often, I come to worship dressed in my Sunday best, smiling at fellow pilgrims, yet somehow unable to share with them that my week has been difficult or that I've been struggling in my spiritual life. Unless we find a spiritual mentor or join a small group where people truly love us, years may pass in the small talk of church life before we begin to feel secure enough to share some of the pain in our lives. In chapter four we will explore Benedict's detailed plan for spiritual guidance within the family of faith—one of the essentials for Christian formation.

SHARED WISDOM

A second essential for the journey of faith is sharing wisdom in community. Many obstacles get in the way of sharing our lives with others in the family of faith, including busy schedules, home commitments, fear