

Saint Benedict

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Stained glass in the Cathedral
of Sermoneta (Italy)

*“Let them prefer nothing
whatever to Christ;
and may He bring us all alike
to life everlasting.”*

(Rule of Saint Benedict, Chap. LXXII, 11-12)

On April 14, 1817, in the circular letter in which he announced the approbation of the Congregation by the Holy See, the Good Father made a brief reference to *“our blessed father Saint Benedict, patriarch of cenobites of the western world.”*

Nine years later, in the circular letter of February 11, 1826, which he sends with the rule completed by the General Chapters of 1819 and 1824 and confirmed by Pope Leo XII in 1825, the reference to Saint Benedict is much more extensive. After stating that *“the Rule of Saint Benedict is the foundation*

of ours,” and especially recommending the reading of several of its chapters, the Good Father dedicates a long paragraph to commenting on some of the themes in the Benedictine Rule that he considered essential.

What happened during those nine years to cause the Good Father to take a greater interest in the Rule of Saint Benedict?

On the one hand, the number of members in the masculine branch had increased rapidly. In 1815, the brothers were 22. In 1825, they were already 122, an increase of 10 per year, the exact opposite of the rate of decrease that we experience at the present moment in our history.

On the other hand, the group being larger, the initial spirit of generosity and religious zeal seemed to be waning. In the letter closing the second General Chapter

(September 20, 1824), the Good Father decries in a rather dramatic way many brothers' rebelliousness and pride, rejection of the authority of superiors, lack of attention to the poor, excessive concern for "*knowledge that puffs up*" and prestigious jobs, love of self, lack of poverty, anger when one doesn't get what he wants, aggressive response to correction, tepidness in the spiritual life, the abandonment of adoration...And because of all that he tells the brothers: "*We recommend to you especially*

- *that sense of obedience, which alone is capable of forming true religious*
- *that spirit of poverty and detachment, which disposes the soul to all kinds of sacrifices*
- *that sincere humility, which keeps away murmuring*"

It is against the background of the brothers' cooling zeal ("worldliness") that the Good Father turns his attention to the Rule of Saint Benedict and recommends reading of and reflection on certain of its chapters (which you will find in the special edition of the Constitutions which each of you received this year on the occasion of the bicentenary).

Clearly, there is much in those chapters that we may find boring or shocking. Saint Benedict didn't like it when the brothers made jokes or laughed a lot! Some will say that we're not monks and so the Rule isn't for us. Others think that Saint Benedict did not even respect human rights...

However, if we read the Rule with an adequate hermeneutic, we can find much wisdom and, like the Good Father, a powerful challenge to our pride and selfishness, that so need conversion. Actually, it seems to me that the Benedictine Rule provokes rejection precisely because it quite accurately points out much of our resistance to the Gospel.

The Good Father's criticism of the brothers in 1824 can very well be applied to ourselves today. We are no better than our forefathers and so I ask you to reread and meditate on the Founder's explanation of the Rule in his letter of February 11, 1826 (pages 56-57 of the bicentennial edition of the Constitutions). Each of us will find some points to work on for our own conversion

I would just like to point out two aspects of the Rule of Saint Benedict, which I believe can be a help to us especially at this time in which we are living.

1. Humility and the heart

We say that our Congregation is centered in the heart. That's true but not every "heart" is good.

My heart can become hardened. The Gospel speaks of a hardening within: because of hardness of heart, people did not accept the original plan of God (Mk. 10:5); the Risen One reproaches the lack of faith caused by hardness of heart (Mk. 16:14, Lk.

24:25); Jesus is saddened by the hardness of heart of those who refused to love (Mk. 3:5); the hardened heart makes it impossible to understand what Jesus wants (Mk. 8:17) etc.

The heart that interests us is the Heart of Jesus. It is a heart that is "meek and humble" (Mt. 11:29) Jesus invites us to learn from him. Our community is called to be a school where that learning happens. Learning to be humble. Unfortunately, the studies we do, the clerical mentality instilled in us, the prestige that people who appreciate us hold us in, the administrative responsibilities that we often flaunt and the individualism that we unknowingly assimilate from our civilization, lead us exactly to the opposite: pride, which undermines communion among us and weakens our ministry to the littlest ones.

2. Good Zeal (Rule of Saint Benedict, Chapter 72)

We say that apostolic zeal is a characteristic of our Congregation. That's true but not every kind of "zeal" is good.

We are called to work and work a lot. However, we know very well that there are works which, even though they can be exhausting, appeal to us because they make us feel useful and important. Often, being overburdened with work is the perfect excuse to neglect our commitment to prayer and to community and to reinforce a kind of vanity disguised as generosity.

"There is an evil zeal of bitterness which separates from God," says Saint Benedict, an evil zeal that leads to "burnout," as psychologists would say today. Someone exhausted by this evil zeal often wants to "disconnect," to escape, and believes he has a right to do that.

Ours is another kind of zeal. "There is a good zeal which separates from vices and leads to God," Saint Benedict adds. It is the zeal of the one who humbly works hard, without putting himself in first place, with affectionate respect for the brothers and all people, placing all his activity in the hands of God, who is the true Lord of the harvest. The one who becomes tired from this good zeal needs to rest, that's clear, however his rest will not be an escape but an occasion to give thanks.

Let us learn from the wise counsels of Saint Benedict. "May we prefer nothing whatever to Christ. And may He bring us all together to life everlasting!" (Chapter 72, 11-12)

