



# The Holy See

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BENEDICT XVI

**GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*St Peter's Square*

*Wednesday, 9 April 2008*

***Saint Benedict of Norcia***

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today, I would like to speak about Benedict, the Founder of Western Monasticism and also the Patron of my Pontificate. I begin with words that St Gregory the Great wrote about St Benedict: "The man of God who shone on this earth among so many miracles was just as brilliant in the eloquent exposition of his teaching" (cf. *Dialogues II*, 36). The great Pope wrote these words in 592 A.D. The holy monk, who had died barely 50 years earlier, lived on in people's memories and especially in the flourishing religious Order he had founded. St Benedict of Norcia, with his life and his work, had a fundamental influence on the development of European civilization and culture. The most important source on Benedict's life is the second book of St Gregory the Great's *Dialogues*. It is not a biography in the classical sense. In accordance with the ideas of his time, by giving the example of a real man - St Benedict, in this case - Gregory wished to illustrate the ascent to the peak of contemplation which can be achieved by those who abandon themselves to God. He therefore gives us a model for human life in the climb towards the summit of perfection. St Gregory the Great also tells in this book of the *Dialogues* of many miracles worked by the Saint, and here too he does not merely wish to recount something curious but rather to show how God, by admonishing, helping and even punishing, intervenes in the practical situations of man's life. Gregory's aim was to demonstrate that God is not a distant hypothesis placed at the origin of the world but is present in the life of man, of every man.

This perspective of the "biographer" is also explained in light of the general context of his time:

straddling the fifth and sixth centuries, "the world was overturned by a tremendous crisis of values and institutions caused by the collapse of the Roman Empire, the invasion of new peoples and the decay of morals". But in this terrible situation, here, in this very city of Rome, Gregory presented St Benedict as a "luminous star" in order to point the way out of the "black night of history" (cf. John Paul II, 18 May 1979). In fact, the Saint's work and particularly his *Rule* were to prove heralds of an authentic spiritual leaven which, in the course of the centuries, far beyond the boundaries of his country and time, changed the face of Europe following the fall of the political unity created by the Roman Empire, inspiring a new spiritual and cultural unity, that of the Christian faith shared by the peoples of the Continent. This is how the reality we call "Europe" came into being.

St Benedict was born around the year 480. As St Gregory said, he came "*ex provincia Nursiae*" - from the province of Norcia. His well-to-do parents sent him to study in Rome. However, he did not stay long in the Eternal City. As a fully plausible explanation, Gregory mentions that the young Benedict was put off by the dissolute lifestyle of many of his fellow students and did not wish to make the same mistakes. He wanted only to please God: "*solī Deo placere desiderans*" (*II Dialogues*, Prol. 1). Thus, even before he finished his studies, Benedict left Rome and withdrew to the solitude of the mountains east of Rome. After a short stay in the village of Enfide (today, Affile), where for a time he lived with a "religious community" of monks, he became a hermit in the neighbouring locality of Subiaco. He lived there completely alone for three years in a cave which has been the heart of a Benedictine Monastery called the "Sacro Speco" (Holy Grotto) since the early Middle Ages. The period in Subiaco, a time of solitude with God, was a time of maturation for Benedict. It was here that he bore and overcame the three fundamental temptations of every human being: the temptation of self-affirmation and the desire to put oneself at the centre, the temptation of sensuality and, lastly, the temptation of anger and revenge. In fact, Benedict was convinced that only after overcoming these temptations would he be able to say a useful word to others about their own situations of neediness. Thus, having tranquilized his soul, he could be in full control of the drive of his ego and thus create peace around him. Only then did he decide to found his first monasteries in the Valley of the Anio, near Subiaco.

In the year 529, Benedict left Subiaco and settled in Monte Cassino. Some have explained this move as an escape from the intrigues of an envious local cleric. However, this attempt at an explanation hardly proved convincing since the latter's sudden death did not induce Benedict to return (*II Dialogues*, 8). In fact, this decision was called for because he had entered a new phase of inner maturity and monastic experience. According to Gregory the Great, Benedict's exodus from the remote Valley of the Anio to Monte Cassino - a plateau dominating the vast surrounding plain which can be seen from afar - has a symbolic character: a hidden monastic life has its own *raison d'être* but a monastery also has its public purpose in the life of the Church and of society, and it must give visibility to the faith as a force of life. Indeed, when Benedict's earthly life ended on 21 March 547, he bequeathed with his *Rule* and the Benedictine family he founded a heritage that bore fruit in the passing centuries and is still bearing fruit throughout the world.

Throughout the second book of his *Dialogues*, Gregory shows us how St Benedict's life was steeped in an atmosphere of prayer, the foundation of his existence. Without prayer there is no experience of God. Yet Benedict's spirituality was not an interiority removed from reality. In the anxiety and confusion of his day, he lived under God's gaze and in this very way never lost sight of the duties of daily life and of man with his practical needs. Seeing God, he understood the reality of man and his mission. In his *Rule* he describes monastic life as "a school for the service of the Lord" (Prol. 45) and advises his monks, "let nothing be preferred to the Work of God" [that is, the Divine Office or the Liturgy of the Hours] (43, 3). However, Benedict states that in the first place prayer is an act of listening (Prol. 9-11), which must then be expressed in action. "The Lord is waiting every day for us to respond to his holy admonitions by our deeds" (Prol. 35). Thus, the monk's life becomes a fruitful symbiosis between action and contemplation, "so that God may be glorified in all things" (57, 9). In contrast with a facile and egocentric self-fulfilment, today often exalted, the first and indispensable commitment of a disciple of St Benedict is the sincere search for God (58, 7) on the path mapped out by the humble and obedient Christ (5, 13), whose love he must put before all else (4, 21; 72, 11), and in this way, in the service of the other, he becomes a man of service and peace. In the exercise of obedience practised by faith inspired by love (5, 2), the monk achieves humility (5, 1), to which the *Rule* dedicates an entire chapter (7). In this way, man conforms ever more to Christ and attains true self-fulfilment as a creature in the image and likeness of God.

The obedience of the disciple must correspond with the wisdom of the Abbot who, in the monastery, "is believed to hold the place of Christ" (2, 2; 63, 13). The figure of the Abbot, which is described above all in Chapter II of the *Rule* with a profile of spiritual beauty and demanding commitment, can be considered a self-portrait of Benedict, since, as St Gregory the Great wrote, "the holy man could not teach otherwise than as he himself lived" (cf. *Dialogues II*, 36). The Abbot must be at the same time a tender father and a strict teacher (cf. 2, 24), a true educator. Inflexible against vices, he is nevertheless called above all to imitate the tenderness of the Good Shepherd (27, 8), to "serve rather than to rule" (64, 8) in order "to show them all what is good and holy by his deeds more than by his words" and "illustrate the divine precepts by his example" (2, 12). To be able to decide responsibly, the Abbot must also be a person who listens to "the brethren's views" (3, 2), because "the Lord often reveals to the youngest what is best" (3, 3). This provision makes a *Rule* written almost 15 centuries ago surprisingly modern! A man with public responsibility even in small circles must always be a man who can listen and learn from what he hears.

Benedict describes the *Rule* he wrote as "minimal, just an initial outline" (cf. 73, 8); in fact, however, he offers useful guidelines not only for monks but for all who seek guidance on their journey toward God. For its moderation, humanity and sober discernment between the essential and the secondary in spiritual life, his *Rule* has retained its illuminating power even to today. By proclaiming St Benedict Patron of Europe on 24 October 1964, Paul VI intended to recognize the marvellous work the Saint achieved with his *Rule* for the formation of the civilization and culture of Europe. Having recently emerged from a century that was deeply wounded by two World Wars

and the collapse of the great ideologies, now revealed as tragic utopias, Europe today is in search of its own identity. Of course, in order to create new and lasting unity, political, economic and juridical instruments are important, but it is also necessary to awaken an ethical and spiritual renewal which draws on the Christian roots of the Continent, otherwise a new Europe cannot be built. Without this vital sap, man is exposed to the danger of succumbing to the ancient temptation of seeking to redeem himself by himself - a utopia which in different ways, in 20th-century Europe, as Pope John Paul II pointed out, has caused "a regression without precedent in the tormented history of humanity" (*Address to the Pontifical Council for Culture*, 12 January 1990). Today, in seeking true progress, let us also listen to the *Rule* of St Benedict as a guiding light on our journey. The great monk is still a true master at whose school we can learn to become proficient in true humanism.

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### To special groups

I am happy to greet the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, including the pilgrims from the Archdiocese of Manila, and the many groups from England and the United States. May your lives, after the example of St Benedict, be lived in humility, prayer, obedience to God and faithful service to your neighbour. May the Lord bless you and your families!

Lastly, I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*, exhorting each one to live this Easter Season intensely, witnessing to the joy that the dead and Risen Christ gives to those who entrust themselves to him.

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