

# St. Gregory's Abbey & Benedictine Monasticism

Worship is the most important act of Christian living. Worship keeps us in touch with God who loves us unconditionally and wills that we love Him rather than use Him for our own purposes. Worship teaches us that we need bridges between ourselves and God and between ourselves and our neighbors, that we need to be healed and to heal others, and that we need to be fed by more than just the food we eat. It is the act of worship which is the central act of the monk.

A monastic order depends on the members of the church, and the society in which it lives, in many ways. To begin with, the social and political structure needs to tolerate the existence of monastic communities rather than destroy such institutions for material or ideological reasons. A monastic order depends on the material support of those in civil order, who have funds available for such a purpose, in order to be able to live the life to which it is committed. Material support is itself a sign of affirmation on the part of donors for monastic values. Respect and moral support of monastic values by at least a significant minority in the church and society are also necessary to support those committed to that life.

Monastic institutions have always had an important effect on the quality of life in society and the church. Monastic orders keep high ideals for living the Christian life before others. Of course, this commitment of monks does not guarantee fidelity to these ideals. A layperson in the church with lower ideals might be more faithful to his or her ideals and thus be a more credible witness to the Faith than an individual monk. Nevertheless, the struggle to live by Christian ideals through monastic discipline keeps these higher ideals in sight for the whole church and the world. Indeed, there are times when the deep struggle to live by monastic ideals enables monks to help other Christians in their own struggles to live the Christian life. Monks, of course, can also learn much from the experience of non-monastic people. The church as a whole, and therefore society as well, benefits from this ongoing sharing of life experiences governed by Christian ideals.

St. Gregory's Abbey of Three Rivers, Michigan, is a monastery in the Episcopal Church in the U.S.A. which follows the Rule of St. Benedict. We try to be faithful to the basic teaching of the Rule while seeking to discern how it should be applied in our time and place. The fundamental inspiration of the Rule, to which St. Benedict constantly directs the monk's attention, is the Bible. In this case study, I shall present historical background to St. Benedict, and to St. Gregory's Abbey in particular. I shall also outline the most important teachings developed in St. Benedict's Rule and in the Benedictine tradition of 1500 years. I discuss these teachings with the conviction that they are valuable Christian teaching for anyone in the church and not just for monks. However, it is not enough for monastic ideals to be read about in books and preached from the pulpit. For that reason, Benedictine teaching needs living communities dedicated to the struggle of living up to its ideals in order to make them vital for the Church as a whole.

## THE BIBLE AND MONASTIC VALUES

There is no question of the intention of the first monks to live as followers of Christ as revealed in scripture. In fact, for the first monks, Holy Scripture was regarded as the monastic rule. That St. Benedict shared this basic assumption can be seen by the fact that, in his Rule, quotations from scripture add up to almost a third of the text. The fact that the Bible does not specifically enjoin monastic institutions need not necessarily call in question their claim to live by scriptural values. The Bible is not a blueprint specifying how Christians should organize themselves. Rather, the Bible is the inspiration which guides Christians into many different ways of imitating Christ in the unfolding history of the Church. Even Christians who have sought literally to live the commands of Jesus, such as St. Francis of Assisi and Southern Baptists, have ended up with institutions which are not the same as a free-lance rabbi wandering the countryside with a small group of followers.

Early monastic writers demonstrated their intention to live by the Bible by claiming to

follow the apostolic life as outlined in the early chapters of Acts. Some writers even claimed that Jesus founded the first monastic community! Such claims do not hold up to historical scrutiny, but they help to show the intention of monks to live the apostolic life as they understood it. A group of men or women living together, sharing material goods in common, gathered round a teacher in the Faith, does show, in basic shape, a community like that of the apostles.

Anyone concerned with living the Christian life must desire to imitate Christ. However, in discerning how each one of us should imitate Him, we need to remember that Jesus Christ shows Himself to be a complete person in a way that no other person can hope to do. Each single activity of Jesus is imitable; what is not imitable for an individual Christian is doing all the things Jesus did as fully as Jesus did them. In the Gospel we see Jesus the Laborer, Jesus the Preacher, Jesus the Healer, Jesus the Teacher, Jesus the Social Critic, Jesus the Contemplative Monk, and much more. Not only did Jesus engage in much active ministry of preaching and healing, but he also went off by Himself for protracted times of prayer. Each of us should try to include elements of several vocations which Jesus embodies, but we will find ourselves called to imitate Christ most particularly in only one of these vocations. A monk called to imitate Christ the Contemplative, for example, will be concerned about other issues such as social problems and healing ministries, but he also needs to realize that a contemplative cannot follow these equally valuable vocations as fully as those called to them will do. Thus, in following Christ in our own particular way, we must trust Divine Providence to build up the Church as the Body of Christ with many members, each with different functions. (1 Cor. 12:4-30)

Jesus demonstrated the importance of the interior journey in much of his teaching. For example, in Mark 8:21 Jesus says: "It is what comes out of a man which makes him unclean." Such a verse draws our attention to the long work of self-examination of that which is inside us and to that which we are bringing to others from our inner selves. Monastic writers stressed the importance of the inner journey by meditating on the Beatitude: "Blessed are the pure of heart for they shall see God." (Mat. 5:8) Similarly, St. Paul, for all of his active missionary work, also witnesses for the importance of seeing God within oneself with his prayer: "Out of his infinite glory, may he give you the power through his Spirit for your hidden self to grow strong, so that Christ may live in your hearts through faith, and then, planted in love and built on love, you will with all the saints have strength to grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth; until, knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond all knowledge, you are filled with the utter fullness of God." (Eph. 3:16-19)

## HISTORICAL SKETCH

A brief look at the history of monasticism demonstrates the importance of tradition. Although the weight of tradition in monasticism has inhibited vital spiritual growth at times, it has also served as the inspiration for a sense of direction in the creative development of monasticism's fundamental values. The early monastic movement was one application of Christian values. St. Benedict inherited that tradition and developed new ways to live the monastic life in his time and place. Since the time of St. Benedict, his followers have been faced with the need of finding new applications of the rule in different historical circumstances. Although there have been times when monks have tried aggressively to affect their surrounding culture, monastic communities have often been most effective in social and cultural change by simply placing their emphasis on being faithful to their own lifestyle rather than telling other people how to live theirs. In the later Middle Ages monastic institutions were so powerful that they tended to embody the current cultural values rather than challenge them. In contrast, the present day is a time when monasteries are sufficiently detached from the surrounding culture to open new perspectives on life to that culture.

### Beginnings of Monasticism

Monasticism began as a recognizable institution in the fourth century, but monastic values can be seen in many practices of the early church before this time. Since the church was subject to persecution from time to time under the Roman Emperors, many devoted Christians had the

opportunity to offer their lives for Christ in a single act of martyrdom. Other earnest Christians who were not martyred in this way discovered that they also could offer their lives by practicing acts of self-denial, learning to die to themselves every day in order to live with Christ. When the Emperor Constantine established Christianity in the Roman Empire in 325, he made Christianity more socially acceptable. As a result, many joined the Church with less fervor than many earlier Christians had. In reaction to this trend, numerous Christians chose to embrace the values of a daily martyrdom for the sake of their own salvation. This quest for salvation became a witness to the whole church. The result was the early monastic movement.

The first monks who moved out of the cities into the deserts of Egypt and Palestine are known as the Desert Fathers. They practiced a radical asceticism, often eating very little, sleeping very little, keeping silent, usually living alone, and reciting the Psalter, often from memory, every day. Such practices were extreme, but they represented an honest attempt to be generous in giving their lives completely to God. Also, the austerity of these monks caused other people to think about the lives they were leading and sometimes to question their own lifestyles.

The monks of the fourth century concerned themselves only with living the Christian life as fully as possible. They did not want to change the world; they wanted only to change themselves with the power of God's grace. But as these monks were changed by God's grace, many other people came out into the desert to seek counsel from the Fathers and found that their example could help them change for the better too.

The Desert Fathers had to learn to avoid the pitfalls in their ascetic way of life. For one thing, there was the danger of taking pride in their acts of self-denial. Another danger was self-absorption to the point of losing sight of the need to care for other people. To counteract such dangers, and to accommodate the many people who wanted to give their lives totally to God but who were unable to practice such austerities, monks began to live in groups under a superior who could guide the others in the Christian life. In these first monasteries, the ascetic life became less extreme and a greater emphasis was placed on the life of charity toward others which living in community requires.

## St. Benedict

When St. Benedict began to form his first monastery in about A.D. 500, he was the inheritor of almost two centuries of monastic tradition. He respected the ascetic lives of the early Desert Fathers, but felt that the values of the communal life with a more moderate asceticism were much more realistic for most of the men who were presenting themselves for the monastic life. Benedict taught a middle way between radical asceticism and a life of indulgence: monks should eat adequate amounts of food, but not too much; they should have adequate amounts of sleep, but not too much. Benedict did not urge his monks to storm Heaven and win salvation in one day. Rather, Benedict showed himself to be realistic about human nature. He knew that even men who choose to devote themselves to a life of worship will have their foibles and that any change for the better will take many years of struggle. Benedict enjoined an asceticism more relaxed than that of the early monks, which stressed leading a gradual journey to God in which one never loses sight of the goal of Heaven. The practice may be moderate, but it is still uncompromising in its devotion to God.

When St. Benedict organized a monastic community in the early sixth century and wrote a Rule for his followers, he was not trying to solve the social conflicts that were tearing the Italian peninsula apart at the time. Benedict's focus was in leading his community into living the Christian life centered on acts of worship. But when the Roman Empire collapsed in Europe, the church and its monasteries, in particular, were among the few institutions which could keep society together. Benedict's Rule was only one among many at the time, but its flexibility and practical common sense in living the Christian life from day to day eventually made it the normative monastic rule in Europe.

## The Middle Ages

The early Middle Ages is sometimes called the age of monasticism. True, monasteries were important and had a recognized place in society. They were supported for the most part by members of the nobility whose motives were sometimes mixed. One endowed monastery, for example, was located at a strategic bend of a river to help guard the benefactor's lands. However, it is also clear that for men and women in a violent time, both the ministry of prayer and the presence of a lifestyle different from their own was highly valued. Moreover, monasteries were the most important centers of learning and for keeping cultural values alive until the urban universities arose in the eleventh century.

The history of monasticism is not, however, all light shining in the surrounding darkness. Ever since the earliest days of monasticism, there have been serious failures of observance. There have been times when monasticism has been strong in its witness to the church and the world, and times when it has been woefully weak. The late Middle Ages was one of these low periods for monasticism. It is worth noting, however, that this is also a period when monastic values were not strongly supported in the surrounding culture. Material support was lacking, but worse was the lack of respect for the ideals of monasticism. It is not impossible for there to be good monks in an indifferent society, but it is more difficult. A society gets the monks it deserves.

## The Modern Period

Since the late medieval period, there have been many revivals and declines in monasticism. Some declines were caused by external factors such as the Protestant Reformation and the Wars of Napoleon, recent examples of how vulnerable monasticism can be when the surrounding culture chooses not to tolerate it. However, with each loss of the monastic witness, the need for that witness has made itself felt again, and the monastic vocation has been revived. Benedictines continue to make significant contributions to cultural advancement. They are producing scholarly editions of early Christian writings, important studies in liturgy, and many works on spirituality. Perhaps most important, Benedictinism preserves certain teachings on the spiritual life whose importance is gaining ever more recognition today.

The Second Vatican Council urged reform of the monastic and religious orders under the two-fold concept of returning to the principles and charism of the order's origins and then discerning ways to apply these teachings in our time. As a result of this conciliar decree, great strides have been made in the understanding of the early monastic movement and of St. Benedict and his Rule. Not only have we been able to confirm many Benedictine teachings which have been consistently preserved over the centuries, but we have also rediscovered much which had been lost. This increase of information offers Benedictines today as well as all other Christians, a chance to participate in a revival which brings old teachings in contact with new questions in the Church.

## Benedictinism and the Anglican Communion

One of the more notorious examples of the destruction of monasticism as an institution is the dissolution of the monasteries in England by Henry VIII. There is reason to believe that Henry himself was motivated more by the need for the monasteries' economic resources more than by any religious or political reasons. However, with the monasteries gone, the anti-monastic bias of the reformers gained a foothold in the Anglican Church and they discouraged any revival of the institution.

One of the ironies in this event is that at the very time that monasticism was wiped out in England, many of the Christian values that Benedictines had preserved over the centuries were incorporated into the Book of Common Prayer, especially in the daily offices of Morning and Evening Prayer. Moreover, the temperament of moderate asceticism embodied in the Benedictine Rule set the tone for much of the best in Anglican spirituality.

During the nineteenth century, there was a revival of interest in the theology, practice, and

institutions of early Christianity inspired by the Oxford Movement in the Anglican Church. Included in this revival was a growing interest in re-establishing religious orders in the Church of England. Initially, there was strong resistance to this revival, but it also gained strong supporters as the need for the witness of religious and monastic orders was felt. The first religious orders in the Church of England were devoted to active ministries, but by the turn of the century, the way had been paved for more contemplative styles of living the religious life. After two false starts, a Benedictine community was established at Pershore which later moved to Burnham, Buckinghamshire, and became Nashdom Abbey.

### St. Gregory's Abbey

In the United States, this same desire for reviving Benedictine monasticism was felt, and when a group of seminarians and a professor from Nashotah House Seminary decided they wanted to try a Benedictine vocation, their trip to Nashdom Abbey was sponsored by the American Benedictine Sponsoring Committee under the leadership of Canon Vivian Peterson from Cleveland.

In 1939, when the international situation became unsettled, the American Benedictines returned to the U.S. to start a monastic house. Bishop Campbell Gray welcomed the monks into the Diocese of Northern Indiana and they opened St. Gregory's House in Valparaiso. Pope St. Gregory I was chosen as the new monastery's patron because the house was opened on March 12, the Feast of St. Gregory, and because St. Gregory sent the first Roman mission to the English people in 597.

After the War, the community wished to move to a rural location. In 1946, they located a piece of property near Three Rivers, Michigan, and negotiated its purchase. St. Gregory's has been at Three Rivers ever since. In 1969, St. Gregory's Priory became an independent abbey and Fr. Benedict Reid was elected first abbot. After the resignation of Fr. Benedict on February 10, 1989, Fr. Andrew Marr was elected second abbot on March 2, 1989.

## BENEDICTINE LIVING

Although St. Benedict wrote his Rule for a monastic community which would not be living the same kind of life as other Christians, the fact that he was applying fundamental Christian values to his community means that many of his teachings will have applications for all Christians. In the historical survey, emphasis was placed on Benedict's middle path between harsh asceticism and self-indulgence. There are also many other ways in which Benedict shows his sense of balance. For example, he stresses the need for his monks to be deeply involved in the interpersonal relationships of community, but also to reserve generous amounts of time for solitude in order to relate to God as responsible individuals. He also demonstrates an uncanny balance between a realistic appraisal of human behavior and an idealistic hope for what people can become with the grace of God. Most significantly, the basic rhythm of the monastic life of worship, study, and work, as outlined in the Rule, is a particularly strong instance of St. Benedict's sense of balance. St. Benedict also has challenging teachings to offer us on such difficult matters as humility and obedience. Each of these teachings can help us question the attitudes and practices of our time.

### The Rhythm of work, study, and prayer

Benedict makes it clear that living the Christian life means giving worship pride of place when he says: "Let nothing be preferred to the Work of God." When Benedict outlines the daily timetable, it is the times of worship which provide the structure of the day. Everything else is scheduled around the acts of corporate prayer. Moreover, the sacred time, given over to God alone, is woven into the threads of everything else a monk does to sanctify the whole day, so that each day becomes a single tightly woven garment. Here we have a reversal of the way time is usually structured -- in fact, has to be structured -- in non-monastic settings. Most of the time, no matter how much we may prefer prayer to everything else, our work controls our day, and prayer is worked around our commitments. The monastic schedule reminds all Christians of the true

priorities, even when their daily timetables simply cannot (and ought not) embody them.

The sense of balance in relation to worship, however, can only be seen by noting the importance of work in the monastic life. To live a life of worship alone is not Benedict's ideal at all. Rather, the ideal is to worship and to work in such a way that the two form a unified life devoted to God and one's neighbor. Work is not a distraction from prayer. On the contrary, prayer must be grounded in concrete acts of work which keep us in touch with the reality of the material world. We need this grounding in material reality in order to keep in touch with the reality of God who created the world. Moreover, putting work in the context of a life of worship changes one's perspective on work. One works for the sake of doing the job itself rather than primarily for ulterior motives such as making money, necessary as that is for living in the world, or making a name for oneself. Taking care in one's work, in the way one handles tools can have a salutary effect on one's interiority which opens the way to deeper prayer. Benedict demonstrates his vision of prayer grounded in work most succinctly when he says that the cellarer, the monk responsible for distributing the goods of the monastery, "will regard all utensils and goods of the monastery as sacred vessels of the altar."

Worship and work do not provide sufficient balance, however. Study is also important. However, here the perspective on study is quite different from what we normally experience in school. Benedict envisions study as a means of growing close to God, not merely as something one does just to get a diploma. This means that reading and meditating on scripture and studying the classic texts on Christian spirituality are fundamental to monastic study. More will be said about prayerful reading of scripture below in the section on Benedictine teaching on prayer. The important thing to note here is that the more one can get a feel for the love of God revealed in scripture, the more one can judge how much of this love has been captured by other writers. Given this foundation, there is a wide variety of reading from insightful novels to historical studies to books on nuclear physics, which can also draw one closer to God.

If we think of study as engaging the mind and work as engaging the body in the spiritual life, then it is worship which engages the heart. This is not to say that Benedict means to chop life up into three compartments. Rather, Benedict would have us make these three activities a unity forming a single life lived for the Lord. Our acts of worship become a guide for living the rest of our lives, and we work and study in such a way as to prepare ourselves for our acts of worship.

## Benedict's Realism

One of the constant dangers in monasticism is falling into the trap of becoming over-achievers. Benedict was sufficiently aware of this problem to temper his idealism with a realistic view of human nature. In a time when so much idealism has broken down under the weight of the harsh realities of today, we can take heart from the sober realism of Benedict which never loses sight of high ideals. Benedict knew that neither personal nor communal problems could be solved with the wave of a magic wand. When we become frustrated from trying "instant solutions" that don't work, we can take encouragement from Benedict's conviction that we can become better people in the long run if only we be patient with ourselves and with others.

There are many statements in his Rule where Benedict makes it clear that he does not expect his monks to become automatically perfect when they are given the monastic habit. On the contrary, he often gives the impression that he expects things to go wrong. For example, when it is time to get up in the morning for prayers, the monks are asked to encourage one another "on account of the excuses of the sleepy." Benedict goes on to say that a monk is late for the morning office if he comes in after the recitation of Psalm 94, "for which reason it should be recited as slowly as possible." Even so, St. Benedict prescribes penalties for tardiness at the Divine Office which makes it clear that he does not mean to be complacent about human failings. Again, we have a combination of accepting human limitations while goading his monks on to doing better.

That St. Benedict expects one's growth as a Christian to take time is the point of the third vow a Benedictine takes: *conversatio morum*. This Latin phrase is difficult to translate, but the

basic thrust of it is that the monk promises to commit himself to the monastic life as an ongoing process. He is not making an unrealistic promise that he will become instantly perfect; he is making the realistic promise that he will struggle to embody the monastic ideal throughout his life.

Just as monastic history has its ups and downs, so the most conscientious monks experience the same rhythm of fervor and lassitude in observance. A monastic vocation is not a fantasy life of serene prayer which overlooks our common humanity. That would hardly be a strong witness to the faith. Rather, it is a monk's struggle to live rightly and to become ever more open to God's grace which gives the monk something to share with others in the church and the world.

## Obedience

The second vow a Benedictine takes is obedience to the Abbot and the community. (The first vow is stability of place: the promise to live out the monastic life in the monastery of his profession.) The virtue of obedience is severely questioned today. The evils which have been perpetrated by totalitarian governments, especially under Hitler and Stalin, have made it clear that obedience can be used as a cloak for the surrender of personal responsibility. Nonetheless, obedience is a fundamental value enjoined by scripture. St. Benedict cites the word of Jesus, "I have come not to do my own will but the will of Him who sent me", (Jn. 6:38) to show that obedience is a central part of the imitation of Christ. The fundamental value of obedience, though is that it offers us freedom from the tyranny of our own will. As St. Paul pointed out so often in his epistles, our own will is free only when it is yoked to God.

Nevertheless, Benedict teaches that only through obedience to others can we learn to be obedient to God. However, this obedience is not a matter of blindly doing what one is told. Rather, it is grounded in a concern for the needs of others. Benedict's concept of obedience is inseparable from his teaching on the kind of man an abbot should be. Far from being a dictator, the abbot should be a good father who tries to provide for his monks materially and spiritually in the spirit of Christ. The abbot's obedience to the realities of a community's life is essential to his claim to obedience from his monks.

## Humility

The fundamental virtue for living the Christian life as Benedict envisions it is humility. This virtue not a popular one today, but it was so important to Benedict that we must reflect on it. To begin with, humility is essential for the imitation of Christ. Benedict quotes Phil. 2:6-11 where St. Paul celebrates the humility of Christ as the example for all Christians to follow in their lives. Humility is the disposition which opens the way to the act of repentance, so central to progress in the Christian life. Humility is, in essence, a turning away from the many fantasies we entertain concerning ourselves, the world around us, and God; and a turning towards reality as God sees it.

The first step toward humility is the awareness of God's constant presence. We must remember that we "are always seen by God in heaven, that [our] actions everywhere are in God's sight and are reported by the angels." Through humility, the monk is of the disposition to receive truth, not only through the Word of God revealed in Scripture, but also through God's revelations in daily community life. Thus, when Benedict discusses matters of deportment, such as avoiding boisterous laughter and keeping the eyes downcast, these are not simply rigid commands for external behavior. Rather, Benedict is saying that when one is humble, one does not have to "put on an act" to draw attention to oneself. The virtue of humility is the virtue of acting naturally.

In an era when we have become sensitive to the destructive result of growing up with a negative self- image, it may seem that humility can do more harm than good. After all, we have discovered that it is hard to function well in life and to relate to God when we don't feel reasonably good about ourselves. However, if humility is primarily the way to truth, then humility not only guards us against a swollen ego, but a shrunken one as well. In humility we may learn that we are not always as good as we think we are, but we also learn that we are also not as bad as

we think.

## BENEDICTINE TEACHING ON PRAYER

Benedictines have, more often than not, maintained a basic tendency to prefer simplicity to complexity in the approach to prayer. This simpler approach is turning out to be helpful to more and more people in our time. Benedictine teaching also stresses the pursuit of balance between liturgical prayer and inner prayer, with both being important elements. There is not the space here to give adequate instruction for the practice of prayer, but at least I can show something of the contributions the Benedictine tradition can make in this important area.

### The Divine Office

The Divine Office is the central act of prayer for the Benedictine monk. Other aspects of the monk's prayer life are fed by the Office. The Psalms, which form the heart of the Office, shape one's prayer at all levels.

Critics of liturgical prayer often complain that it is too objective and that one is not praying from the heart while doing it. Actually, this objectivity of the office is its greatest strength. Praying from the heart is important, but the truth is that we just don't always have the inner resources to pray with great inward feeling and fervor. It is structured prayer that strengthens inner fervor when we have it and keeps us going when we don't have it. Far from keeping us away from deep levels of prayer, the Divine Office leads us down to these levels.

The Divine Office is also important because of its balance. It guarantees that we will not become too one-sided in the praying that we do. In the monastic tradition, the Psalms have proven to be especially valuable in preserving this balance in prayer. True, there is much that is simply human in the Psalms and, at times, this humanity is not altogether honorable. But this is precisely why the Psalter is such a powerful vehicle for worship. Every kind of prayer and every kind of experience of God gains expression in one or more of the Psalms. Some time or other, we are likely to find ourselves identifying closely with each experience. In this way, the Psalms function as a mirror, helping us to see more deeply the truth about ourselves and about our relationship to God. Moreover, we are never locked into our momentary subjectivity, whether good, bad, or indifferent. We find ourselves sharing in the prayer of all Christians; we make their prayers our own.

### Spiritual Reading of Scripture

Reading the Bible is something that many devout Christians do regularly. However, it is also a practice that many find easy to drop and the hard to keep up in a helpful way. The Benedictine tradition has kept alive a tradition of prayerful reading of scripture which can greatly enrich one's encounter with scripture. This practice is conveniently called by its Latin name *Lectio Divina* or *lectio* for short.

*Lectio* is approached with the conviction that the Bible is the Word of God and will, when read prayerfully, lead the reader to a deeper knowledge and love of God and also to a deeper awareness of self in relation to God. Learning to do *lectio* means unlearning reading habits that we are taught today. We are used to reading for information, and that is good and necessary for many things. But *lectio* is reading for insight, not insight in the sense of getting new ideas, but insight in the sense of absorbing the Word of the God in the depths of our being. In doing *lectio*, one may ask questions of the text, and of God, but then one sits back and just lets God's Word sink in. In *lectio*, reading becomes an act of prayer.

### Interior Prayer

Practices of interior prayer, when one stops asking God for things, and just listens to "the still small voice," have often been taught in monastic and religious orders. Unfortunately, interior prayer has often been regarded as too lofty for most people, even for most monks and nuns, and

for that reason has often been neglected. This neglect is all the more sad when one reflects that deep prayer is not something we do with our own efforts and can learn to be good at. In reality, deep prayer is the work of the Holy Spirit praying within us. Techniques for interior prayer are basically the means we can use to get ourselves out of God's way so that God can enter us fully.

I can't say that interior prayer has actually become popular, but many people today have become aware of a need to incorporate prayer at this level. To help meet this need, Benedictine writers have been reviving some early, simple methods for leading one into deep prayer. Although complex methods of meditation have helped, and still help, many people, many others have been helped by these older methods which teach that deep prayer coming from the heart can be very simple -- very simple except for the way we complicate everything.

## MINISTRY

Our fundamental approach to ministry is to live a life of "seeking God" as St. Benedict asks anyone wishing to join a monastery to do. It is impossible to seek God sincerely without in some way affecting other people. Thus, while trying to seek God, we find ourselves doing counseling, running a guest facility, and sometimes offering teaching to others. It may be that monks serve the church and the world best when they have no other goal than to learn to live the mystery of living for God in community.

### Ministry of Prayer

The community of St. Gregory's Abbey remains committed to a sevenfold office, that is, seven times of worship each day, and also to a daily Eucharist. We follow the office with the distribution of the Psalms outlined in Benedict's Rule except for omitting one morning office and redistributing those Psalms to other services, so that, during a normal week we do all of the Psalms at least once. We start the day of worship at 4:00 a.m. and end the day with the Office of Compline at 7:45 p.m. We use our own adaptation of the Benedictine Office based on current guidelines from the Benedictine Abbot Primate's office in Rome. The two early morning offices (at 4:00 a.m. and 6:00 a.m.) are mostly spoken, but we chant the Psalms at the other services. We use modern plainchant tones for these services, except for Vespers when we use our own version of restored traditional plain chant tones. At the daily Eucharist we use the 1979 Prayer Book of the American Episcopal Church, Rite II.

The act of prayer is itself a ministry to the Church and the world. I had the opportunity to reflect on the significance of our prayer as ministry when a guest asked me why there was so little intercessory prayer; that is, praying directly for the needs of others. He had come to us thinking we were praying for him and everybody else and he felt that we were not doing very much of that after all. Part of my answer was that we get many requests for intercessory prayers and we do more with them than just read out the intentions during the Eucharist. These prayer intentions are distributed among the community and we each have some of them for a few days so as to make the praying of whole offices given over to these intentions. Moreover, the comprehensiveness of the Psalter which I pointed out above also suggests that in the Divine Office we are praying the Psalms for the whole people of God. A deeper point, of course, is the mystery that we do not, and ought not, know what God does with our acts of prayer. We pray with the conviction that prayer is, in itself, a good thing to do and that it pleases God. The value of prayer cannot be measured by practical considerations any more than the value of a deep friendship can be measured by what we hope to "get out of it." We pray with the trust that God will use our prayers for the benefit of others in the ways He sees fit.

### Guest Ministry

There is one apostolate involving people outside the community which is mentioned in the Rule, and this apostolate is given a strong emphasis: the ministry to guests. St. Benedict says little of how his monks should minister to guests, except that they should be treated "as Christ."

Probably he did not give them retreat addresses. Perhaps he did offer counsel to some. He does mention reading to guests from scripture.

The most important aspect of our guest ministry at St. Gregory's Abbey is that guests have the opportunity to share in the worship of the community. We find that the worship in itself is a teacher and that many gain a new perspective on the burdens they carry in life just from that. Also, our guests have the opportunity to have quiet time for themselves which they often cannot get in their usual environments. They are able to study, pray, and reflect on their lives, something they are often too busy to do elsewhere. Many find that workaholism is a problem which has been cutting them off from the depths within themselves where God would speak with them. Our guest ministry has an ecumenical outreach. It is not just a resource to the Episcopal Church, but is also available to members of many other churches and to some of no church at all. We house approximately 1,200 overnight guests a year, and meet with many groups from parishes and schools who come for tours and introductions to monasticism. Our guest ministry is available at no charge, but we gratefully receive donations from those guests who can afford to give money for their time with us.

## Counseling

Although we are not set up as a counseling center, there are many times when we find we can help others through sharing our spiritual journeys with them. Many of the basic principles in spirituality are, unfortunately, still well-kept secrets in the Church, so that some of our guests have been both startled and comforted with the teachings we have been able to share with them. There are many difficulties in the life of prayer which are not necessarily caused by "praying badly" or because something is wrong with the person, but are instead are normal features in the journey of prayer. Many people have also gained comfort from being told that these difficulties are actually deepening their prayer rather than forming roadblocks to prayer. As counselors, we have our limitations; we are not psychiatrists, and there are some people that we simply are not able to help. We do not always do as well with each person as we would like, and not always just because the other person is difficult, but we so try to learn from our failures.

## Ministry outside the monastery

We do not put any stress on ministering outside the monastery because our ministry of prayer and ministry to guests who come here to St. Gregory's are so important. For that reason, we have to be careful about accepting very many invitations outside the monastery in order to make sure that we do not undermine what we can offer others here. However, there are times when we can offer some help to the greater Church, depending on the capabilities of the monks we have, and the number we have in the community. A few of our monks have done weekend parish retreats, one of our monks travels to Chicago every month to hear confessions there, and two of us have participated in some "Benedictine Experience" workshops, a program where the participants have the opportunity to live a Benedictine schedule for a week.

## Publications

We publish a newsletter called The Abbey Letter four times a year. This newsletter keeps our readers up to date on significant events at the monastery, and it includes one or two articles written by the monks which contain reflections on the spiritual life as we experience it in our monastic community. We consider this publication to be an important part of our outreach. There are approximately 23,000 names on our mailing list at this time. We receive much of our income in response to The Abbey Letter, but there is no subscription fee required in order to receive it.

## "Mere Christianity"

The phrase "Mere Christianity" comes from the title of a book by C.S. Lewis, and it captures the basic aim in all his religious books. Lewis was concerned with that which was most

basic to Christianity behind the various differences between the churches and even between members of the same church. This same concern with "mere Christianity" is at the heart of Benedict's teaching. St. Benedict presupposes the traditional theology of the Church rather than writing about it. His emphasis is on embodying Christianity in practice rather than on theorizing about it. In a time when there is serious debate in the church on many issues, a devoted following of Benedict's Rule is important to keep us in touch with basic Christian practices and spirituality. We are not the ones who can single-handedly solve any of the many issues which face the church and society as a whole. Moreover, being a monk hardly gives one infallible insight as to what the church and the world should do. Even within the community, there is no agreement on issues that are dividing the Church, but regardless of where one stands on such issues, Benedictine principles can ground us in the most fundamental practices of Christian spirituality in order to deepen our discernment of what to change, what not to change, and how to live with the changes.

### Ministry of Being

A number of times people have thanked us "just for being here." Such a compliment does not give us swollen heads. For one thing, we know some of our individual and communal shortcomings, and suspect there are more we do not know about. More importantly, we are not necessarily being complimented for being good monks, but we are being affirmed just for leading the life.

The value of just "being here" is all the more mysterious when we reflect on our being marginal to civil society and even to the church. St. Benedict did not start his monastery as a social protest, and neither did our first monks open St. Gregory's House with any such intentions. Even so, the monastic lifestyle has a tendency to question the values of society and, sometimes, of the rest of the church. Jesus Christ Himself tended to call everything and everybody into question, revolutionaries included.

The Benedictine life is not utopian in the sense of positing an ideal social structure which will automatically solve human problems once people adopt that structure. I pointed out above that St. Benedict starts with his monks where they are, and then encourages them to change for the better in the Lord. The same principle applies to society. Many people, even people deeply committed to the economic structure of this country, may yet feel the need for something more in life than they have now. A different lifestyle, such as one lived in a monastery, will not give the rest of the world all the answers. However, the attempt to live the monastic life does offer different cultural values to society, which may suggest possible changes in the way we all live. As monks, we may not necessarily set an example for all to follow. However, our own struggles to live with ourselves and with each other may foster the hope that, with the grace of God, change for the better is possible for individuals and for society. Perhaps the greatest use for a monastery is that, precisely because it does not make sense in worldly terms, it can point to the reality of Eternity which governs all our lives whether we acknowledge it or not.

Printed copies of this pamphlet may be obtained for \$3.00 each by writing the Abbey at 56500 Abbey Road, Three Rivers MI 49093-9595