IN THEIR OWN WORDS

St. Benedict of Nursia, Rule (c530 c.e.)

Benedict of Nursia (c480–c550 c.e.) was an early Christian ascetic who formulated a regimen for living in a religious community of likeminded souls. This regimen came to be known as the Rule of St. Benedict, and the large group of monasteries and convents that followed these precepts came to be called the Benedictine Order. Benedict was born in Rome of a wealthy, patrician family. At about the age of twenty he turned away from worldly pleasures and withdrew to the mountains south of Rome to lead a life of strict religious devotion. In the course of time Benedict founded twelve monastic communities (monasteries), the most famous of which is at Monte Cassino (south of Rome). During World War II Monte Cassino was the site of a ferocious battle between the Germans and the Allies, owing to its high, strategic position above the roads leading north into Rome. Benedict’s monastery, nearly totally destroyed by Allied bombing, was rebuilt after the war and continues to function as a monastic community today. In general, the schedule of the day, and indeed of all the days of the year, followed at Monte Cassino and all Benedictine houses today is essentially the one for which extracts are given below. What do you conclude from reading these excerpts? Would you have been able to survive in a medieval Benedictine monastery or convent, or a modern one for that matter?

Prologue

Hearken, my son, to the precepts of thy Master, and incline the ear of thy heart willingly to hear, and effectually to accomplish, the admonition of thy living Father, that by the labor of obedience thou may return to Him, from Whom thou didst depart by the sloth of disobedience. To thee therefore is my speech now directed, who, renouncing thy own will, dost take upon thee the strong and bright armor of obedience, to fight under the Lord Christ our true King.

First of all whatever good work thou dost begin, beg of Him with most earnest prayer to perfect; that He Who hath now vouchsafed to reckon us in the number of His children, may not be saddened by our evil deeds. For we must at all times so serve Him with the goods He hath bestowed upon us, that He may not either as an angry Father disinherit us His children, or as a dread Lord, exasperated by our offenses, deliver us up to perpetual punishment as wicked servants, who would not follow Him to glory.

Chapter 8 On the Divine Office During the Night

In winter, that is from the first of November till Easter, they shall rise at that time which reasonable calculation shall indicate as the eighth hour of the night, in order that having rested till a little after midnight, they may rise refreshed. As for the time that remains after Matins, let it be employed in study, by those Brethren who are somewhat behind-hand in the psalter and lessons. But from Easter till the first of November, let the hour for Matins be so arranged, that after a short interval during which they may go forth for the necessities of nature, Lauds may presently follow about the break of day.

Chapter 16 How the Work of God Is to Be Performed During the Day

“Seven times a day,” saith the Prophet. “have I sung praises unto Thee.” This sacred number of seven shall be accomplished by us if at the times of Lauds, Prime, Tierce, Sext, None, Even-song, and Compline, we perform the duties of our service. It was of these hours the Prophet said: “Seven times in the day I have sung praise to Thee.” For
of the Night-watches, the same Prophet says: “At midnight I did arise to confess to Thee.” At these times therefore, let us give praise to our Creator for the judgments of His justice; that is at Lauds, Prime, Tierce, Sext, None, Even-song, and Compline; and in the night let us rise to confess unto Him.

Chapter 18 In What Order the Psalms Are to Be Said

In the day Hours, let the verse “O God incline unto mine aid, O Lord make haste to help me,” always be said first, and after it a “Gloria.” Then the hymn proper to each Hour. On Sundays, at Prime, there must be said four divisions of the hundred-and-eighteenth Psalm. At the rest of the Hours, to wit, at Tierce, Sext and None, let there be said three divisions of the same hundred-and-eighteenth Psalm. But on Monday at Prime, let three psalms be said, that is, the first, second, and sixth. In the same way at Prime, let three psalms be said in order every day, till Sunday, as far as the nineteenth Psalm; yet in such a way that the ninth and seventeenth Psalms be divided into two “Glorias.” Thus it will fall out that on Sunday at Matins we shall always begin from the twentieth Psalm.

At Tierce, Sext, and None, on Mondays, let the remaining nine divisions of the hundred-and-eighteenth Psalm be said, three at a time, during these same Hours. On two days therefore, to wit, Sunday and Monday, the hundred-and-eighteenth Psalm being gone through, let the psalms at Tierce, Sext, and None, on Tuesdays be sung in order, three at a time, from the hundred-and nineteenth to the hundred-and-twenty-seventh, that is nine psalms. These psalms are always to be repeated at the same Hours for the rest of the week till Sunday; a uniform order also of the hymns, lessons, and versicles, being sung every day observed, so that every Sunday they may begin with the hundred-and-eighteenth Psalm.

Vespers is to be sung every day with four psalms, which are to begin from the hundred-and-ninth, and go on to the hundred-and-forty-seventh, such only being excepted as are set apart for other Hours, that is, from the hundred-and-seventeenth, to the hundred-and-twenty-seventh, and from the hundred-and-thirty-third to the hundred-and-forty-second; all the aforesaid number that are longer, must be divided, that is, the hundred-and-thirty-eighth, the hundred-and-forty third, and the hundred-and-forty-fourth. But let the hundred-and-sixteenth, because it is short, be joined with the hundred-and-fifteenth.

The order, therefore, of the psalms for Vespers being set down, let other matters such as lessons, responsories, hymns, versicles, and canticles, be arranged as before. At Compline let the same psalms be repeated every day: that is, the fourth, ninetieth, and the hundred-and-thirty-third. The order of the day office being thus disposed of, let all the psalms which remain be equally portioned out into seven Night-Watches, or Matins, and such of them as are too long, divided into two. Let twelve psalms be appointed for every night. If this arrangement and distribution of the psalms displease anyone, let him, if he think good, order them otherwise; provided however he take care, that every week the whole psalter of one hundred-and-fifty psalms be sung; and that on Sunday at Matins, they begin it again; for Monks show themselves to be over negligent and indolent, who do not in the course of a week sing over the psalter with the usual canticles, since we read that our holy Fathers courageously performed in one day, what, God grant, that we who are negligent and tepid, may perform in a whole week.

Chapter 22 How the Monks Are to Sleep

Let them sleep, each in separate beds, and receive, according to the appointment of the Abbot, bedclothes befitting their condition. If it be possible, let them all sleep in one place; but if the number do not allow of this, let them repose by tens or twenties in one place with their Seniors who have care of them. And let a candle burn constantly
in that same cell until morning. Let them sleep clothed, and girt with girdles or cords, but let them not have knives by their sides while they sleep, lest perchance they be hurt therewith; and thus let the Monks always be ready, that when the sign is given they may rise speedily, and hasten, each one, to come before his Brother to the Work of God, but yet with all gravity and modesty.

Let not the younger Brethren have beds in a place apart by themselves, but separated among the Elders. And when they rise to the work of God, let them gently encourage one another, because of the excuses of those who are sluggish.

Chapter 30 How Boys Are to Be Corrected

Every age and understanding ought to have a measure of government suitable to it. As often therefore as children, or those under age, commit faults, and are incapable of understanding the greatness of the punishment of excommunication, let them be punished by rigorous fasting, or sharp lashes, that so they may be corrected.

Chapter 33 Whether Monks Ought to Have Anything of Their Own

Especially let this vice be cut away from the Monastery by the very roots, that no one presume, without leave of the Abbot, to give, or receive, or hold as his own, anything whatsoever, either book, or tablets, or pen, or anything at all; because they are men whose very bodies and wills are not in their own power. But all that is necessary they may hope for from the Father of the Monastery; nor can they keep anything which the Abbot has not given or allowed. Let all things be common to all, as it is written: “Neither did any one say to think that aught was his own.” If any one shall be found given to this most wicked vice, let him be admonished once or twice, and if he does not amend, let him be subjected to correction.