

Memorial of St. Benedict

This Sunday is the 15th Sunday of Ordinary Time, but July 11 is also the day that the Church memorializes St. Benedict. Although, liturgically, Sundays are reserved for celebrating the resurrection of our Lord, this Sunday we will be remembering the life of St. Benedict, the patron saint of our parish.

St. Benedict was born in Nursia in central Italy around the year 480. He was educated in Rome but, when he was there, he witnessed much corruption in the city. So he decided to leave that world behind and live a hermit's life in a mountain cave. Because of his reputation for sanctity, Benedict attracted a large number of followers so he established twelve small monasteries where his disciples could live in community.

Between 520 and 530, Benedict established a great abbey at Monte Cassino. There, he spent the rest of his life and developed his great work called: The Rule. The Rule laid out a path to religious perfection by the practice of self-conquest, mortification, humility, obedience, prayer, silence, retirement, and detachment from the world and all its cares.

The Rule was a guide for community life in monasteries and abbeys and, although it was written for the Benedictines, it was adopted by religious communities throughout Western Europe. Many monasteries and abbeys followed The Rule and thus, St. Benedict became known as the Father of Western Monasticism.

'Ora et labora' is the motto that we see in the stained glass window behind the altar. 'Prayer and work'. This is a distillation of St. Benedict's Rule. The Rule called for the day to be divided into eight hours for manual work, eight hours for prayer, and eight hours for sleep. This seems like a recipe for a healthy life!

Certainly, we are not living a monastic life divorced from the world. We live in the world with all of its cares and concerns pushing and pulling at us constantly. St. Benedict conceived The Rule long before the world heard about the concept of work/life balance but he seemed to have gotten the balance of life right. We need manual work to acquire the necessities of life but also the accomplishment of work gives the worker a sense of well-being stemming from his accomplishments. We need prayer to bring us closer to God and to meditate on the meaning of our lives. We need adequate rest so we can continue to work and to pray.

Some people think that there is not enough time to pray after working all day and devoting some time to sleep, but Bishop Fulton J. Sheen had these words for us:

True leisure is not interruption from work, a coffee break, a recess. It is not at all in the same line as work, but rather passes at right angles to it. It is not a pick-me-up for work. It is not something for 'iron-poor blood'. Leisure is the capacity to raise the heart and mind out of the workaday world, to get in touch with superhuman life-giving powers. It is a recognition that 'everyone has a hole in his head' into which, as William James has said: 'saving influences pour'.

Upon reflection, we come to realize that the three aspects of our lives are not separate but interconnected. To pray is to work. To work is to pray. To pray is to rest from work. Even though we are not living the monastic life of the Benedictines, let us make an effort to live The Rule as much as we can so we can have a healthy, balanced life.