

The Sacred Art of Prayer



A spiritual journey of the heart

DAY ONE:
An Introduction to Benedictine Spirituality

- OVERVIEW OF THE FOUR DAYS -

DAY ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE ART OF PRAYER

This first exploration is about understanding *PRAYER* as a dynamic sacred art that moves in different directions. These are levels of self-awareness that move us from a state of Noise to silence, from Silence to word (or meaning), from Word to action/love, and the actions that fill us back with noise ... which move us back to start all over again.

- INTRODUCTION TO BENEDICTINE SPIRITUALITY
- CORE PRINCIPLES OF BENEDICTINE SPIRITUALITY: STABILITY—OBEDIENCE—TRANSFORMATION
- WHAT IS PRAYER?
- SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

DAY TWO: THE RHYTHM AND BALANCE OF THE HEART (STABILITY)

The second exploration is about understanding that *STABILITY* is about connecting with the rhythm and the balance of the heart. So, life is not a destination, it is a journey.

- THE RHYTHM OF THE HEART
- THE BALANCE: ORA ET LABORA
- DISCOVERING SILENCE: CENTERING PRAYER PRACTICES
- WALKING THE LABERYNTH

DAY THREE: DISCERNING GOD'S PRESENCE (OBEDIENCE)

THIRD: The act of *OBEDIENCE* is about listening and discerning t God's presence in me and all of those around me. As St Benedict suggests, it is a learning of "listening with the ears of the heart."

- DISCERNMENT
- WALKING THE NEIGHBORHOOD
- ENGAGING THE "OTHER"
- BUILDING COMMUNITY(S)

DAY FOUR: CONVERSATIO MORUM AND/OR CONVERTIO (CONVERSION OF LIFE)

FOURTH: The final step focuses on *CONVERSION OF LIFE*—or as St. Benedict calls it "the Rule of Life." Here each participant is invited to work on identifying and putting in writing what brings energy to them as persons, and the spiritual practice(s) that will keep them energized.

- OPUS DEI
- WRITING MY OWN RULE OF LIFE
- LEARNING TO JOURNEY
-

Saint Benedict of Nursia



About the Rule of Saint Benedict (480—543/547)

By Sr. JM McClure, OSB

Benedict's entire document is less than a hundred pages. The author, with characteristic self-effacement, called it "a little rule for beginners." Written in the sixth century for a collection of serfs, scholars, shepherds, and wealthy scions of nobility -a motley group of would-be-monastics-, the Rule of St. Benedict survives today as a masterpiece of spiritual wisdom. The roots of Benedictine spirituality are contained in this slim volume, as are guidelines for happiness and holiness (arguably identical states in the Christian tradition) which are as meaningful today as they were over 1500 years ago.

In the Rule's prologue, Benedict said he intended to prescribe "nothing harsh, nothing burdensome" for his followers. His approach to seeking God was both sensible and humane. For Benedict, a spiritual pathway was not one to be littered with weird and unusual practices; rather, all that is needed is to be faithful to finding God in the ordinary circumstances of daily life. How to prepare oneself for this simple-but not necessarily easy-way of life is the substance of the Rule.

Benedict envisioned a balanced life of prayer and work as the ideal. Monastics would spend time in prayer so as to discover why they're working, and would spend time in work so that good order and harmony would prevail in the monastery. Benedictines should not be consumed by work, nor should they spend so much time in prayer that responsibilities are neglected. According to Benedict, all things-eating, drinking, sleeping, reading, working, and praying-should be done in moderation. In *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily*, Sister Joan Chittister writes that in Benedict's Rule, "All must be given its due, but *only* its due. There should be something of everything and not too much of anything."

Benedict stressed the importance of work as the great equalizer. Everyone from the youngest to the oldest, from the least educated to the most educated, was to engage in manual labor -a revolutionary idea for sixth-century Roman culture. Prayer, in a Benedictine monastery, was to consist of the *opus Dei* (the work of God-Psalms recited in common) and *lectio* (the reflective reading of Scripture whereby God's word becomes the center of the monastic's life). Prayer was marked by regularity and fidelity, not mood or convenience. In Benedict's supremely realistic way, the spiritual life was something to be worked at, not merely hoped for.

The importance of community life is another great theme of Benedict's Rule. Prior to Benedict, religious life was the life of the hermit, who went to the desert and lived alone in order to seek God. Benedict's genius was to understand that each person's rough edges -all the defenses and pretensions and blind spots that keep the monastic from growing spiritually- are best confronted by living side by side with other flawed human beings whose faults and failings are only too obvious. St. Benedict teaches that growth comes from accepting people as they are, not as we would like them to be. His references to the stubborn and the dull, the undisciplined and the restless, the careless and the scatterbrained have the ring of reality. Though Benedict was no idealist with respect to human nature, he understood that the key to spiritual progress lies in constantly making the effort to see Christ in each person-no matter how irritating or tiresome.

Benedictines make three vows: stability, fidelity to the monastic way of life, and obedience. Though promises of poverty and chastity are implied in the Benedictine way, stability, fidelity, and obedience receive primary attention in the Rule-perhaps because of their close relationship with community life.

Stability means that the monastic pledges lifelong commitment to a particular community. To limit oneself voluntarily to one place with one group of people for the rest of one's life makes a powerful statement. Contentment and fulfillment do not exist in constant change; true happiness cannot necessarily be found anywhere other than in this place and this time. For Benedictines, the vow of stability proclaims rootedness, at-homeness, that this place and this monastic family will endure.

Likewise, by the vow of fidelity to the monastic way, Benedictines promise to allow themselves to be shaped and molded by the community to pray at the sound of the bell when it would be so much more convenient to continue working, to forswear pet projects for the sake of community needs, to be open to change, to listen to others, and not to run away when things seem frustrating or boring or hopeless.

Obedience also holds a special place in Benedict's community. Monastics owe "unfeigned and humble

love" to their abbots and prioresses, not because they are infallible or omniscient, but because they take the place of Christ. St. Benedict carefully outlines the qualities the leaders should possess- wisdom, prudence, discretion, and sensitivity to individual differences. The exercise of authority in the Rule points more to mercy than justice, more to understanding of human weakness than strict accountability, more to love than zeal. What defines the leader of a Benedictine community is not being head of an institution but being in relationship with all the members.

"Let everyone that comes be received as Christ" is one of the most familiar and oft-quoted phrases of the Rule. It emphasizes the preeminent position which hospitality occupies in every Benedictine monastery. Benedictine hospitality goes beyond the exercise of the expected social graces -the superficial smile or the warm reception of expected guests. Hospitality for Benedict meant that everyone who comes- the poor, the traveler, the curious, those not of our religion or social standing or education- should be received with genuine acceptance. With characteristic moderation, though, he cautions against "lingering with guests," realizing that the peace and silence of the monastery must be protected. "Too great a merging of monastics and guests will benefit neither," says Esther de Waal in *Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict*.

Stewardship is another value which, like hospitality, captures the essence of Benedictine life. On a most basic level, Benedict prescribed care and reverence of material things ("treat all goods as if they were vessels of the altar"). For Benedictines, the idea that gardening tools were just as important as chalices has come to mean a total way of life which emphasizes wholeness and wholesomeness and connectedness; the body, the mind, the spirit, material things, the earth- all are one and all are to receive proper attention. All created things are God-given, and a common- sense approach to resources should prevail. Thus, Benedictine communities are ready to accept the most recent technology but will use the same bucket for thirty years. "Taking care of things" has been elevated to a virtue of surpassing value in Benedictine monasteries.

The wisdom of Benedict's Rule lies in its flexibility, its tolerance for individual differences, and its openness to change. For over 1500 years, it has remained a powerful and relevant guide for those who would seek God in the ordinary circumstances of life.

When Benedict wrote his Rule, society seemed to be falling apart. Though materially prosperous, the Roman Empire was in a state of decline. After Benedict's death, barbarian hordes would overrun Europe and the very survival of Western civilization would be called into question.

Benedictine monasteries -with their message of balance and moderation, stability, hospitality, and stewardship- were credited with the preservation of Western culture, and Benedict himself was named patron of Europe.

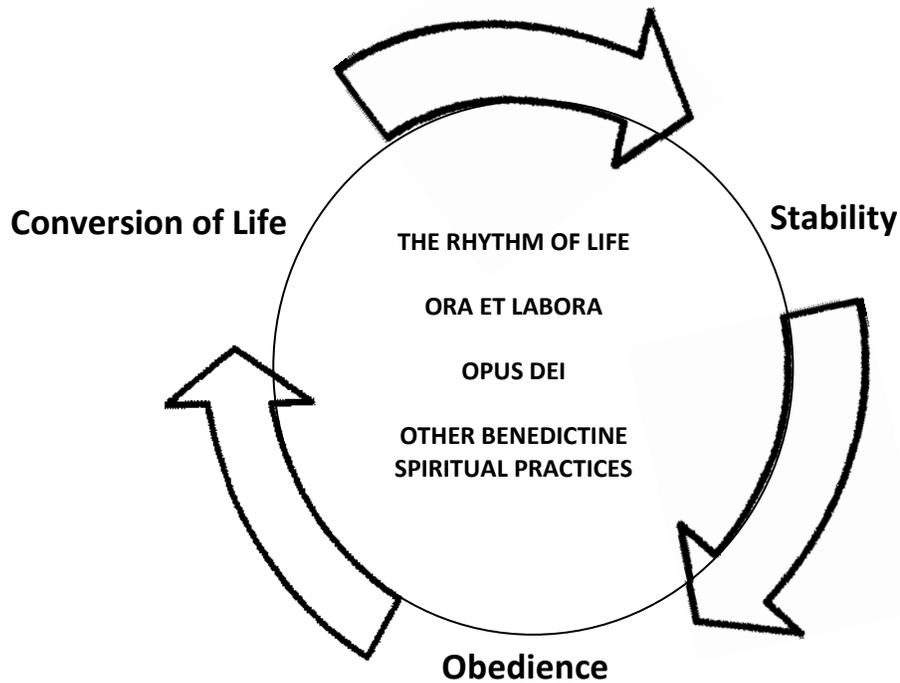
Benedictine values are as necessary today as they were in the sixth century. Who could look at the "greed is good" legacy of the 1980s and not desire change? In an era of countless personal and societal sins-materialism and racism and the destruction of the earth through waste and carelessness- Benedict's Rule remains a powerful alternative, another way of viewing life and people and things that finds meaning in the ordinary and makes each day a revelation of the divine.

Let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ, and may he bring us all together to everlasting life.

Rule of Benedict 72:11-12

The Benedictine Life

An Introduction to Benedictine Spirituality



Stability: "accepting this particular community, this place and these people...as the way to God"

Obedience: "a lifelong process of learning...listening to the Word of God, to the Rule, to the brethren and to the Abbot" in order to act.

Conversion of Life: "a commitment to total inner transformation" as we turn to Christ.

Esther de Waal's *"Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict"*

The Benedictine Life

The elements described in Benedict's Rule provide a framework to approach the spiritual life of both individuals and communities. An important aspect of the model is that each of the elements influences the other. And so conversion of life is not possible without the listening stance that obedience brings; stability, finding God in the here and now, is not sustainable without a life that seeks to find the new life in Christ that is always coming into being, and so on.

For Individual Christians

Stability has to do with the ability to find God in our current situations—the people, the places, the time where we really are. It means giving up the idea that God is only in the next location, the next relationship, a better condition or whatever is right around the corner.

Obedience is about listening with an ear to responding to God through prayer and in silence, to Scripture, to others in community, to one's own mind, heart and body, to friends and family, to the world around us. Obedience is deep listening to these sources with an openness to taking action.

Conversion of Life is an expectation and openness to the new horizon, the new work that God is doing in the midst of our lives, that is forever drawing us to Christ.

Another important aspect of Benedictine thought is the idea of rhythm and balance. Rhythm and balance means finding a way to live the many dimensions of our lives—work, prayer, rest, companionship with others, study, in a way that will sustain us. Rhythm and balance is the practice of living well in the midst of the polarities of life.

For the Congregation

Stability in a congregational setting is about the celebration of and the remembering that God is with us here and now, with these people and in this place. Thus, we do not attach God's presence to some future imagined state of growth, to a better building, to a different neighborhood, to a different group of leaders or congregants. Benedictine stability asserts that God is here now in the community of faith as it actually is, in the building and grounds and neighborhood where the church actually resides, with the people who are actually there.

Obedience in a congregational setting is all about fostering regular places where God can be listened to by individuals in the parish and by the parish as a whole. Examples are: the use of silence in liturgy or in meetings, the regular practice of the Daily Office, conducting discussions or meetings in ways so that people are heard and not interrupted, holding town

meetings that contain open listening processes in which the collective voice of the community is heard, offering mutual discernment groups and centering prayer, or practicing lectio divina.

Conversion of Life is about cultivating processes by which the new invitation on the horizon to turn to Christ is discerned, whether there is a path of revitalization is always in place either for the parish as a whole or for dimensions of the parish's life. Often this will take the form of some kind of annual parish-wide assessment of the parish's work in its context, but it can also take the form of regular assessments and conversations in smaller groups of where things are going well and where certain elements of the congregation's life may need attention or improvement.

Paying attention to **rhythm and balance** in a congregation's life has to do with seeking a balance and rhythm to congregational activity given the parish's size and style of spirituality.

- Are we too busy?
- Are the elements of our life as a congregation in the right balance to support our sense of stability, our obedience to God and one another and the continual conversion of our life together?

General Objectives:

- **As the monks are grounded in obedience**, so we will listen for the voice of God speaking to us in Sacred Scripture and the traditions of the Church, in our daily circumstances and relationships, in the words of other people and in our own hearts. And hearing, we will try to translate God's word into action.
- **As the monks center their lives in stability**, so we will be steady and regular in our prayer life and in the obligations of family, work and community.
- **As the monks seek conversion of life**, so we will reflect on our own lives in regular self-examination, believing that what God wants of us, as of every human being, is growth toward the fullness of the Image in which we are made. We will strive to be open to the changes required by and for that growth.

WHAT IS PRAYER?

CONVERSATION:

- How do you Pray? What are the instruments –if any– that you use to exercise your prayer?
- Are there specific times and spaces you procure for prayer?
- What moves you to pray?

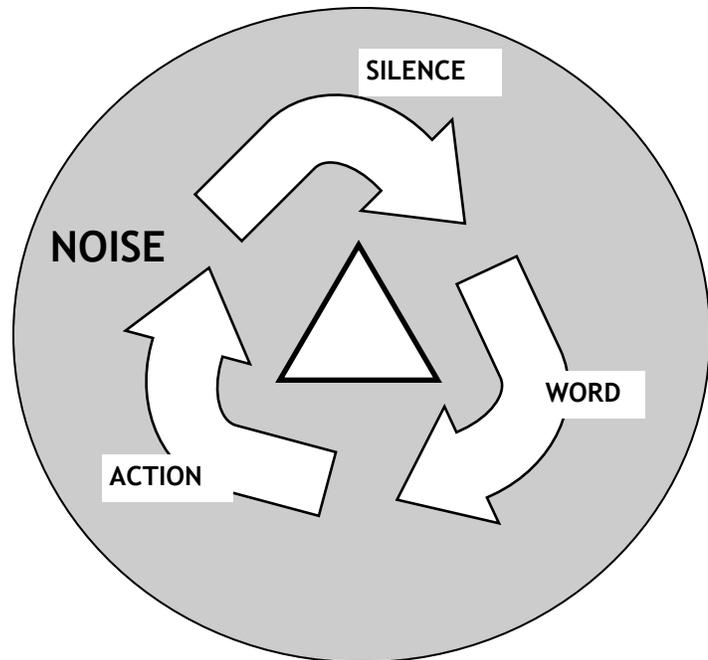
“Six days a week we wrestle with the world, wringing profit from the earth; on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in our soul. The world has our hands, but our soul belongs to Someone Else. Six days a week we seek to dominate the world, on the seventh day we try to dominate the self.” **Abraham Joshua Heschel**, “The Sabbath.”

What prayer is not:

- **First, prayer is not a discipline**— understanding discipline as a training that produces moral or mental improvement. I do not follow the teachings of prayer as discipline, nor encourage their practices. Indeed, prayer involves discipline as dedication, perseverance, constancy, and so on and so forth. It even requires some level of personal sacrifice. It is said that you cannot achieve the mystical experience without passing through asceticism. I do believe this is true. The difference between the prayer as discipline and the discipline of prayer is when discipline becomes the object of the spiritual exercise.
- **Second, there is no one/single form of prayer.** There are many, it is personal and it changes all the time. The point is that in prayer we should fit the prayer to the person, and not the other way around. Can you imagine a person going to the tailor to try a piece of clothing and, if the garment doesn't fit the individual, then the tailor gets the scissors to cut the person to suit the piece of clothing? That would be a very radical innovation. So, if we have several expressions of prayer (prayer practices or spiritual practices,) then this is what we should do, “learn to chose what is appropriate for us.” What fits you, fits you; whatever doesn't fits you, just let it go. In prayer, it is essential to take our time to find our right way of praying.
- **Third, prayer is not a destination; it is a journey.** We often consider prayer as an end, the place we want to arrive. In our very pragmatic world, we are so used to the immediate consumption and gratification that we have very little regard for process and effort. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heshel writes:
 - “A legend relates that ‘at the time when God was giving the Torah to Israel, He said to them: My Children! If you accept the Torah and observe my mitzvot, I will give you for all eternity a thing most precious that I have in my possession.
 - And what, asked Israel, is that precious thing which Thou wilt give us if we obey Thy Torah?
 - The world to come.
 - Show us in this world an example of the world to come.
 - The Sabbath is an example of the world to come.”Indeed, “the Sabbath possesses a holiness like that of the world to come...”, he concludes.

WHAT IS PRAYER?

Prayer is the art of
turning noise into silence;
converting silence into word;
and transforming the word
into an act of love.



- Prayer is a dynamic act of awareness of the self in relation to God. –versus static-
- Prayer is a relational activity, a joyful and intimate dance done between creature and creator. I do strongly believe that prayer is an affirming spiritual experience of the divine that puts us in contact with and brings out our true “ruah” (the wind of God, the breath of God, the spirit of God in us). It would be beautiful if we could visualize our self as “breath of God.”

PRAYER AS ART

- A definition of art, “Human effort to imitate, supplement, alter, or counteract the work of nature.” Though the definition of art has changed and continues to evolve, its general description involves imagination and/or technical skill fed by our human agency (capacity to act, to choose) and creativity.
- Prayer is an art because it requires intentionality, dedication, creativity and intelligence.

NOISE

- It is usually define as, “a sound that is loud, unpleasant, unexpected or undesired.”
- However, a new definition speaks of noise as “a sound that has no meaning for the person who is listening to it.”
- Noise can be internal and/or external.

SILENCE

- The most general definition is, “the absence of sound or noise.”
- Though silence could imply the absence of “communication,” here we will understand it as the creation of space to listen with attention.
- Thus, silence here is the creation of a state of inner stillness, quietness, tranquility.
- So, silence is not just the absence of noise, it can be the space in which sound acquires a different meaning; just as inner stillness can be seen as the absence of thought, it can also be the space in which thoughts are authentically perceived.

- Eckhart Tolle speaks of this inner transformation saying,
 “I couldn’t live with myself any longer. And in this a question arose without an answer: who is the ‘I’ that cannot live with the self? What is the self? I felt drawn into a void! I didn’t know at the time that what really happened was the mind-made self, with its heaviness, its problems, that lives between the unsatisfying past and the fearful future, collapsed. It dissolved. The next morning I woke up and everything was so peaceful. The peace was there because there was no self. Just a sense of presence or “beingness,” just observing and watching “
- Some practices –spiritual and non-spiritual- that can help us reach a state of inner silence.

WORD—MEANING

- The Christian invitation to achieving and inner stillness cannot and should not be construed as an invitation to live in a void.
- John 1, 1-18.
- In the Old Testament we find the story of Moses at Mount Sinai. There he spent 40 days and nights at the top of the mountain, neither drinking nor eating, and he receive the Ten Commandments –spoken by God with fire-.
- “Without vision the people perish.” (Proverbs 29,18)

LOVE—ACTION ... IN TIME

- Human agency, is the ability to create. This creativity, like in art, is much more than just decorating space; it is about the intelligent, intentional and dedicated creativity that connect the present with the Eternal. Love, action and transformation are about time rather than space.
- As Heschel writes, “Technical civilization, we have said, is man’s triumph over space. Yet time remains impervious. We can overcome distance but can neither recapture the past nor dig out the future. Men transcends space, and time transcends man.”
- And he adds, “Creation is the language of God , Time is His song, and things of space the consonants in the song. To sanctify time is to sing the vowels in unison with Him.” ... “This is the task of men: to conquer space and sanctify time.” ... “We must conquer space in order to sanctify time.”

A PRAYER EXERCISE:

- Music ...
- Be in the moment, pay attention to your posture, listen to your breathing, ...

Breathe in the here, breathe out the other place

Breathe in silence, breathe out distraction

Breathe in peace, breathe out restlessness

Breathe in faith, breathe out fear

Breathe in hope, breathe out apprehension

Breathe in love, breathe out hatred

Breathe in God, breathe out the ego

- Come back and read, write, contemplate, move, ...
- Listen in your action, discern, ponder, ...
- Be ready to engage the world!!!

HOW DO I PRAY?

Turning noise into silence	
How? <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Centering Prayer/Contemplative prayer• Lectio Divina• Use of Yoga or other breathing techniques• Jogging and/or exercising• Use of relaxing music• Use of visualization• Use of candles and aromas• Word repetition• Imagination	

Turning silence into word	
How? <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lectio Divina• Meditation• Spiritual readings• Practice of devotions• Writing psalms/poetry• Espiritual readings	

Turning word into an act of love	
How? <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ministry• Mission• Being an intentional Christian• Reconciliation	