

Saint of the Month for July 2013

(A monthly series compiled by Tom Quinlan)

Saint Benedict, Abbot **Thursday, July 11**

St. Benedict was born at Nursia in Umbria (in modern-day Italy) about 480. He is called the father and patriarch of Western monasticism, and his influence still lives on today through the many men and women of the Benedictine order since his day.

It is not uncommon for little to be known about saints from that long ago. It has been said of him that he “is a dim figure, and the facts of his life are given us in a clothing which obscures rather than reveals his personality.” We know something about his earlier life, but this comes from the *Dialogues* of St. Gregory, and this is more a series of sketches to illustrate miraculous incidents in his life than a complete biography.

Benedict was of good birth, and was sent to Rome for his early education. The civilized world was rather a mess then, and was overrun by pagan and Arian tribes; barbarism seemed on the horizon. The Church was torn apart by schisms, towns and countryside were hit by war and pillage, shameful sins were widespread among Christians and non-Christians, and it was said that there was no ruler who was not an atheist, a pagan, or a heretic. The youth in schools imitated their elders, and so Benedict decided to leave Rome.

He settled for an unknown time at Enfide, in the mountains about 30 miles from Rome. There he realized that it was not enough to just leave the temptations of Rome, but that he was being called to a solitary life. He moved then to Subiaco, and was discovered by another monk, Romanus, who gave him advice and regular food. During the next three years Benedict lived alone. He was then visited by a priest on Easter Day, who, directed by God, gave him a good dinner. More people discovered Benedict, including some shepherds who were surprised to find someone living in a cavern in the mountains; these and other visitors spread the word about a holy man who could be consulted.

Some monks lived nearby, and having lost their abbot, asked Benedict to become their leader. He initially declined, saying that his way of life was too harsh for them, but they pressed him, and he accepted. However, they found out that Benedict had told the truth, and tried to poison him, but he survived. Benedict forgave them, but said he could not stay any longer!

Disciples began to gather around him, and he eventually founded twelve wood-built monasteries at Subiaco, each with its own prior. So far, there was no written rule, but the monks patterned their life after that of St. Benedict.

He eventually left Subiaco for Monte Cassino, which was then the site of a temple to Apollo. Benedict's teaching and miracles made many converts, with whose help the temple was removed and an abbey arose that had immense influence in the Western world. The foundations were likely to have been laid by the saint about 530 or so.

The abbey was a unified foundation- Benedict had learned that the twelve houses he had founded earlier at Subiaco hadn't worked well, so Monte Cassino had a single prior and several deans. Space for guests was soon added, as people of all ranks came to spend time there and with the well-known Benedict.

The written rule was developed at Monte Cassino. It was initially for the local monks only, but others found it most useful. It called for a life of liturgical prayer, study ("sacred reading"), and work, lived socially. At that time, and long afterwards, a monk was but rarely in holy orders, and there is no evidence that St. Benedict himself was ever a priest. (The community needed, and certainly must have had, priests, but not everyone needed to be a priest.)

St. Benedict was generous to the people of his area, and his care was not confined to his monks alone; he distributed food and alms to the needy.

Benedict died in 547 or so- exact dates are not available. The monastery was destroyed by the Lombards in the late 6th century, and was the site of a great battle in World War II.

The commemoration is given the rank of Obligatory Memorial, and is usually celebrated on July 11 now, but March 21 in earlier times. (**Daily Roman Missal, Third Edition** (Scepter Publishers); Butler's **Lives of the Saints, 2nd Edition** (Ave Maria Press); **Encyclopædia Britannica, 15th edition; Magnificat**, July 2013)

Collect from the Mass of Saint Benedict:

O God, who made the Abbot Saint Benedict
an outstanding master in the school of divine service,
grant, we pray,
that, putting nothing before love of you,
we may hasten with a loving heart
in the way of your commands.

Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. (**Roman Missal, Third Edition**)

We can all try to combine in some way St. Benedict's way of life (prayer, sacred readings, and work) with whatever vocation and career we have. We can all try to keep God at the center of our life, in a way that is good for us and for others. Saint Benedict, pray for us!