

The Road to Eternal Life

*Reflections on
the Prologue of Benedict's Rule*

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SAMPLE

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Preface

These reflections began life as a yearlong series of ten-minute talks made available each week during 2010 on the Tarrawarra Abbey website. Each talk took as its starting point a verse of the Prologue of the Rule of Saint Benedict and mulled over it, drawing on other passages from the Rule, themes from monastic tradition, and my own life experience to try to come to appreciate what Saint Benedict was saying.

To the best of my knowledge, this is the first time the Prologue has been submitted to such intensive comment. There are many books available dealing with “Benedictine spirituality,” but not many of these submit themselves to the discipline of sustained attention to the text of the Rule. I have chosen to do a close reading of Saint Benedict’s text in the hope that less of what he intended to say will escape me. This involves paying close attention to every word and every phrase. To help me in this I have retranslated the text, not because existing translations are inadequate, but because it compelled me to gauge carefully the exact meaning of every verse.

Strictly speaking, these talks are not a commentary. I have termed them simply “reflections.” They are closest to the writings of the twelfth-century Cistercians, like Bernard of Clairvaux, who have influenced me so greatly. These were termed *sermones*, not “sermons” as we know them, but familiar

talks, using the text as a springboard or point of departure. The content of these talks was not always predictable, although they circled around a few strong themes and were always focused firmly on practical Christian living in daily life. They were meant to help the listeners to build a bridge between the text and their own lives and, thus, to invite them to keep drawing from their own meditations the inspiration for a better life.

I have chosen as my base text the Prologue of Saint Benedict's Rule. Although the bulk of this long preliminary section is drawn from his principal source, the so-called Rule of the Master, it remains a fair indication of the background to Saint Benedict's thinking that is evident in the more practical portions of the Rule. It is the backdrop against which takes place all the drama of monastic life. Alas, sometimes we get so caught up in the details that we fail to watch the tides but, instead, concentrate on the eddies.

The alert reader will notice my indebtedness to the work of the masterful commentators with which our generation is blessed. I note, in particular, that I have profited much from the work of Aquinata Böckmann, Terrence Kardong, Michaela Puzicha, and Adalbert de Vogüé, though I can scarcely hold them responsible for any errors I have made.

There is much repetition in the Prologue, which invites the lazy commentator to take a shortcut by combining two or three verses together. I have resisted this temptation on the ground that if Saint Benedict considered a theme important enough to bear repeating, then the commentator should follow his example. The fact that the reflections were composed on a stop-and-go basis, with about a week between their composition, meant that after a lapse in time my take on a particular theme was often slightly different. If I were to repeat the exercise in five years' time, the end product would most likely be significantly different.

These reflections are probably best read in the manner that they were written: one at a time, spread out, maybe, over

the course of a year. Their purpose is not to deliver a neatly packaged and definitive set of considerations for each verse but to invite readers to continue the process for themselves, aligning the text with their own experience and allowing it to speak to their lives.

As many have noted, the opening word of the Rule is “Listen!” I have tried to listen to what the text was saying as I wrote and also to listen to my own life. I hope readers will do the same. In this manner the Rule will have a formative influence on their life and spirituality, providing a complement to contemporary sources of guidance. But, first, all of us, you and I, must learn to listen and so to become genuine disciples in the school of the Lord’s service.

I have given this series of talks the title *The Road to Eternal Life* because I have come to the conclusion that this is really Saint Benedict’s principal concern in the Prologue: to map out for us the road that leads to heaven. Behind this image is the theme of the journey. This metaphor refers not so much to the glamorous luxury of airline advertisements but to the hard and rough going that was typical of travel in the ancient world, with few conveniences and many dangers. The journey is tolerable only because of a lively hope of arriving at the desired destination; to lose sight of the goal renders the traveling meaningless.

The Rule was written for monks and when I am speaking of Saint Benedict’s own context I usually frame my remarks in a male and monastic context. As often as possible in the rest of these reflections, I have tried to twist the syntax to ensure that neither women disciples of Saint Benedict nor those who do not live in monasteries may feel excluded. I ask readers’ indulgence if I have not been perfectly successful in this endeavor.

The translations of all biblical and patristic texts are my own. I have followed the Vulgate numbering of the Psalms, as used by Saint Benedict; usually it is one less than the Hebrew numbering found in most modern versions. For the rest, sit back and enjoy the flight.

Saint Benedict's Rule for Monasteries

The Prologue

¹Son, listen to the instructions of a master. Bend the ear of your heart to receive gladly the advice of a kind father, and fulfill it in practice. ²In this way, by the labor of obedience, you will return to him from whom you have withdrawn by the slackness of disobedience.

³Now my discourse is directed to you, whoever you are, who renounce the movements of self-will and, being ready to fight for the Lord Christ, the true King, take up the strong and distinguished weapons of obedience. ⁴First, whenever you begin to do some good deed, ask [Christ] with most insistent prayer that he bring it to completion. ⁵In this way, [Christ] who has been pleased to count us in the number of his sons will not ever be grieved by our evil deeds.

⁶Thus we must obey him at all times through his good things in us, so that he will not, in time, disinherit us as an angry father [disinherits] his sons. ⁷Also he will not, as a fearsome Lord, angry because of our evil deeds, hand us over to perpetual punishment like the most wicked of slaves who were not willing to follow him to glory.

⁸Now, therefore, let us finally arise. Scripture stirs us up saying, "Now is the hour to rise from sleep." ⁹And with eyes wide open to the divinizing light, and with astonished ears, let

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us hear God's voice crying out to us every day and admonishing us. ¹⁰"Today, if you hear [God's] voice, harden not your hearts." ¹¹And again, "Let the one who has ears for hearing, hear what the Spirit says to the churches." ¹²And what does [the Spirit] say? "Come, children, listen to me; I will teach you fear of the Lord." ¹³"Run while you have the light of life, lest the darkness of death envelop you."

¹⁴And the Lord, seeking his workman in the midst of a multitude of people, cries out to him and says: ¹⁵"Who is the person who wants life and desires to see good days?" ¹⁶If hearing this, you respond, "I do," the Lord says this to you. ¹⁷"If you want to have true and perpetual life, forbid your tongue from evil and your lips lest they speak deceit. Turn away from evil and do good. Seek peace and pursue it." ¹⁸"And when you have done this, my eyes will be upon you and my ears [will be attentive] to your prayers. Before you call upon me I shall say to you, 'Here I am.'" ¹⁹What is sweeter for us, dearest brothers, than this voice of the Lord inviting us? ²⁰Behold, in his kindness the Lord is showing us the road of life.

²¹Therefore, with our loins girded with faith and the observance of good deeds, let us set out on his journeys with the guidance of the Gospel, so that we may be worthy to see the one who has called us into his kingdom. ²²We cannot arrive at the tent of this kingdom in which we want to dwell, except by running there by means of good deeds.

²³Let us, however, ask the Lord with the prophet, and say to him: "Lord who will dwell in your tent? Who will find rest on your holy mountain?" ²⁴After this question, brothers, let us listen to the Lord answering, showing us the road to his tent. ²⁵He says: "The one who enters without stain and practices righteousness." ²⁶"The one who speaks truth in the heart and does not commit deceit with the tongue." ²⁷"The one who does no evil to a neighbor or allows dishonor against a neighbor." ²⁸"One who rejects and annihilates the malign devil when he suggests something, [driving him] out of sight

of the heart; one who grabs the thoughts born of him and beats them against [the rock that is] Christ.”

²⁹Those who fear the Lord are not elated by their good observance, but consider that the good things in them cannot have come about from themselves but are from the Lord.

³⁰And so they magnify the Lord working in them, saying with the prophet: “Not to us, Lord, not to us, but to your name give the glory.” ³¹In the same way, Paul the Apostle did not attribute anything of his preaching to himself but said, “It is by God’s grace that I am what I am.” ³²And again he says, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

³³Whence the Lord says in the Gospel, “The one who hears these my words and does them, I will liken to a wise man who built his house on rock. ³⁴The floods came, the winds blew and assailed that house and it did not fall, because its foundations were on rock.”

³⁵Having finished this, the Lord waits for us every day to respond by deeds to his holy admonitions. ³⁶Because of this he has declared a truce during the days of this life to give us the opportunity to amend evils. ³⁷As the Apostle says, “Do you not know that the patience of God is leading you on to repentance?” ³⁸For the kind Lord says, “I do not want the death of sinners but that they may be converted and live.”

³⁹Brothers, since we have asked the Lord about those who dwell in his tent, and we have heard the instructions for dwelling [in that place] we have to do the duty of one who dwells there. ⁴⁰Therefore our hearts and bodies must be prepared to serve under the instructions of holy obedience. ⁴¹For what is less possible for us by nature, let us ask the Lord that he may provide it for us by the help of his grace. ⁴²And if we flee the punishments of hell, because we wish to arrive at unending life, ⁴³then, while there is opportunity and we are in this body, and there is opportunity to complete [these tasks] by this light of life, ⁴⁴there is a need to run and do now what will profit us in perpetuity.

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⁴⁵Therefore a school of the Lord's service is to be set up by us. ⁴⁶In its organization we hope to put in place nothing that is harsh or heavy. ⁴⁷It may be a little restrictive—as reason and equity dictate—for the purpose of advancing the process of amending vices and for maintaining charity. ⁴⁸Do not run away from this road to salvation, fearful and terrified. At the very beginning it cannot be other than narrow. ⁴⁹As progress is made in the way of life and in faith, the road of God's commandments will be run with heart enlarged and in the indescribable sweetness of love. ⁵⁰And so, let us never cease to have [Christ] as master, let us persevere in his doctrine in the monastery until death, and let us participate by patience in the sufferings of Christ. In this way will we deserve to be sharers in his kingdom. Amen.