



Listen.....

with the ear of your heart

RB Pro1

The Life of St Benedict from the Dialogues of St Gregory

What do we know of St Benedict's life?

Benedict never mentions himself in the Rule nor is mention made of him by contemporary writers. The first reference to him comes in the volume, called *The Dialogues*, in four books written by Pope St Gregory the Great, written in Rome between 593-594, about 50 years after Benedict is said to have died.

The Dialogues are delightful, a kind of late Roman parallel to the legends about St Francis of Assisi, but written seven hundred years earlier, homely incidents in idyllic settings with many lively tales and a miracle attached.

Benedict, according to *The Dialogues*, was born about 480 CE not far from Rome in the province of Nursia tucked away in the Sabine hills north east of the capital.

His family must have been of some standing to have sent him, complete with his nurse, to university for study.

Rome was, at this point of its history, in a perilous state, having been conquered and reconquered several times by barbarians from the North and imperial troops from the East. It was not only run down but demoralised; this was what made Benedict at first uneasy and then unwilling to remain. He escaped from its corrupted air,

not however without his nurse, to a village called Enfide.

Benedict's aim seems to have been solitude but he did not succeed immediately. First he joined a group of pious Christians just outside Rome at Enfide "leaving the world learnedly ignorant and wisely uninstructed."

Determined not to be turned into a celebrity as a local wonder-worker, he moved on into the wild and narrow valley of Subiaco. Close to Subiaco he met a monk, Romanus, who helped him to find the cave where he lived in solitude for three years.

Romanus supported him by letting down bread in a basket from his monastery above. No doubt he also lent him books to read. Here Benedict probably had profound experiences of the depths of the human heart. Here he meditated on sacred scripture and let it permeate his life. Here in the cave he had to learn how to overcome boredom and to persevere in difficulties and temptations. Following this intense time Gregory portrays him as a monk now capable of guiding others.

Eventually some neighbouring monks asked him to be their abbot. Benedict at first refused but then finally responded. They soon rejected Benedict's authority and commands and in desperation attempted to poison him. At that point Benedict withdrew,

returning to Subiaco, where according to Gregory, he founded twelve small monasteries. The parish priest, disturbed by his popularity, turned against Benedict and again an attempt was made on his life. For the sake of peace Benedict withdrew further south to Monte Cassino, which became a famous Benedictine monastery. There he completed his Rule for seekers of God.

Benedict seems to have passed through three stages of monasticism: firstly the hermit or eremitical stage in the cave overlooking Subiaco as St Anthony had done in the Egyptian desert; then the Pachomian stage of several monasteries under his supervision with their focus on communion in Christ; then the final stage – his own creation of a community, under one abbot.

Monte Cassino, half way between Rome and Naples in Southern Italy, soon became famous, as according to *The Dialogues* it was visited by King Totila, a famous Barbarian ruler, and by Roman senators bringing their boys to school in the monastery. It was also a centre of evangelisation, as Benedict, though not a priest, was dedicated to “unceasing preaching” of the Gospel. (*Dialogues 8.11*)

Very soon before Benedict died, he experienced a vision in the night of brilliant light, as it were from the sun, and in that light the whole world was contained ‘as if in a single ray of light’. Gregory comments that when one sees the ‘light’ of God, “the soul is expanded” and the whole creation seems minute in comparison. Nearly a thousand years later Julian of Norwich has a similar vision.

Benedict’s sister Scholastica used to visit him once a year. Shortly after one of these visits, she died and was buried in the tomb prepared for him. He died soon after, probably in 547. They were buried in the same tomb; it is still there at Monte Cassino.

Gregory sums up Benedict’s life as follows: “If anyone wishes to grasp his character and life better, they can find in the layout of the Rule a complete statement of the abbot’s way of life. For the holy man cannot have taught other than the way he lived.” (*Dialogues 4.36*)

Carey-Elwes, C and Wybourne, C. Work and Prayer, Burns and Oates 1992. p176-178. Altered.