

St. Benedict

Questions? Questions? Questions? If you are anything like me, you always have lots of Questions. For example, have you ever wondered why:

- 1) priests traditionally wear black?
- 2) priests are expected to say Matins & Evensong every day of their life?
- 3) church buildings used to have choirs which sat in rows facing each other?
- 4) most Universities, until the 20th century, were founded by the church?
- 5) modern democratic government has its roots in the church?
- 6) the church feels responsible for the feeding of the poor?

Those are a lot of Questions. But the answers to them point to the work of one man—a man of whom little is known except for the Manual he wrote—a Manual destined to become one of the most influential documents in the life of the Church. His name was St. Benedict, and he died 1450 years ago, tomorrow, July 11th.

Benedict was born around 480 AD in Italy. Like many other young men of his day, he traveled to Rome to pursue his education—but there he was appalled by the corruption and sexual license in the city. In disgust, he withdrew from the city to live as a hermit in the Italian countryside. Each day he spent some time in prayer, some time in study, and some time in manual labour. Benedict wanted to follow Jesus as closely as possible, and dreamed of founding a utopian Christian community, where all could be equal, all could praise God together, and all could work together in the peace of the Gospel.

Other young men, attracted to Benedict's vision, joined him in founding a monastery, a unique Christian community of work and prayer.

As the monastery grew and prospered, others were founded nearby, until tensions arose within the community of monks. To diffuse the problem, Benedict moved south and, with some loyal and faithful monks, founded a new Monastery at a place called Monte Casino. Most of his monks were laymen, as was he, but a few priests were included who could celebrate the Eucharist for the Community. As this new monastery grew, and in order that the new monks would have a Guide for their Christian life together, Benedict set down on paper a Rule for Monks, a manual if you like as to how a Christian Community should model itself.

So moderate and sensible was his Rule, that it became a model for many other men and women who endeavored to live the Christian life in community. His Rule for Monks has remained the standard for all monastics in both the Roman Catholic and Anglican parts of the Church today.

In his Rule, Benedict wrote that a Life of Prayer and Praise should be central to the life of each monk. According to his Rule, monks were to come together to pray 7 services

spaced throughout every day. He called this the “Opus Dei,” that is: The Work of God. These short services were simple, scriptural and musical. His Rule also said that every monk was required to spend some time every day in manual labour. His famous quote “Labore est Orare” is best translated as “Work is Prayer, and Prayer is Work.” In those few words, Benedict proclaimed the sanctity of our daily work—the work we do each day at the office, or school, or home is really like Prayer that we offer to God. By his teaching, Benedict consecrated our daily work as a religious offering to the Father. Have you ever thought of your daily work in those terms?

The Rule of St. Benedict called for each of his monks to wear a black habit—he chose the colour black because, practically speaking, it was least likely to show the dirt. Pretty down to earth, wouldn’t you say?

He also believed that all monks were equal—and therefore wrote that every monk should have an equal vote in the running of their community. From this principle grew our democratic idea of one person one vote.

His Monastery, and others like it, grew so fast that they needed schools to train the new monks—and those schools needed books, and libraries to hold them—and from these monastic schools grew most of the great Universities that were established before the 20th century.

The popularity of Benedictine Monasteries was so great that over the centuries they spread across Europe and England. We know them as Abbeys, and those of you who have traveled in England have worshipped in churches which were built as the Chapels of these great Benedictine Abbeys. Westminster Abbey comes to mind, but there are many others—all were great centres of prayer, learning, and social service.

But prayer was not all that they did. Sunday after Sunday, priests in black journeyed from their Abbey to celebrate the Eucharist in little village churches.

As the centuries past, these monks in black traveled great distances in England and Europe, establishing new monasteries that became centres of evangelism, prayer, teaching, and social action. Whenever there was a Monastery on the pattern laid down by St. Benedict, people knew they could find food, help, and safety. By the 15th century, great Cathedrals and Abbey Churches dotted the landscape, and 90% of them were Benedictine foundations. In fact, for over 1000 years, Christianity in Europe was basically monastic—mostly Benedictine, but also Franciscan, Dominican, or some other Order.

Today there are Benedictine Monasteries in the Anglican Church, as well as the Roman Catholic Church. The largest Anglican Benedictine Community in North America is the Order of the Holy Cross, but there are also Anglican Benedictines in Three Rivers Michigan, as well as England and South Africa. In fact, there are more women than men in Anglican Monastic communities following the Rule of St. Benedict today. Most Anglican Religious Communities are based on the Rule written by St. Benedict, a Rule that establishes for each one a daily life based on prayer, work, study, and caring for others.

Today in the Anglican Church, because of the influence of St. Benedict, each priest and deacon is still expected to say Matins and Evensong every day—a discipline of prayer that is a compilation of the original 7 daily services of the Benedictine monks. In older church buildings, choirs still sit in pews across from each other just as was done by the Benedictine monks centuries ago. Until recently, all clergy wore black, because centuries ago the vast majority of clergy were Benedictines.

The influence of St. Benedict is with us today, though we Anglicans are often unaware of how much his life and example and Rule determines the way we worship and live. What a great model he set for us—a model of moderation and disciplined devotion to Christ—St. Benedict is truly a Hero of the Church—a great Saint, who has illuminated the path for countless men and women who are journeying into the Heart of God. May the influence of St. Benedict continue do the same for us.