

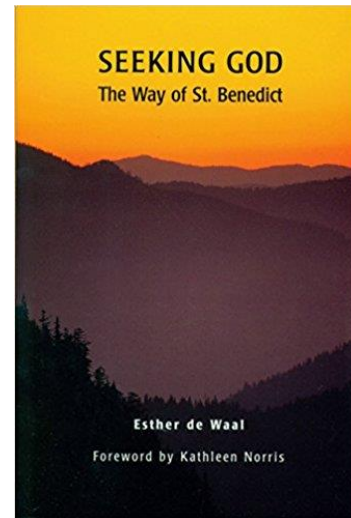
Discussion Guide

Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict

by Esther de Waal

Using this Guide:

If you're busy and just **need a ready-to-go guide** to help you lead a book group with minimal preparation, you're in the right place! This guide is designed for a **6-week book discussion group**. You should be able to photocopy and hand each week's questions to your group, and let the discussion unfold from here!



You can also use it as a jumping-off point to adapt to the needs and interests of your congregation and study group.

6 weeks is too long? Pick your favorite question from each session and combine it into one after-church forum.

Your people like tangible projects more than discussing ideas? Skip ahead to the end, where you'll find several resources for putting these ideas into action in your congregation.

You're not sure, but something doesn't seem quite right? Give me a call, and we can brainstorm other ideas—my favorite thing to do!

Whatever you do, plan to join Bishop Barry for more discussion during these two online events!

Sunday, October 15 at 7:00 pm: Panel and Discussion on the Religious Life in Northern California

This webinar discussion is intended as a gathering for people who currently engaged in a religious order or who are interested in learning more. We'll reflect together on our experiences and discuss ways of working, praying, and moving forward together.

With Bishop Barry, Sister Diana Doncaster, and others

Thursday, November 30 at 7:00 pm: Discussion of *Seeking God* with Bishop Barry (for anyone or any group that has read the book and wants to talk more with friends across the diocese!)

Learn more and register at <http://www.norcalepiscopal.org/lifelong-christian-formation>

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Lifelong Christian Formation
Episcopal Diocese of Northern California

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Tips for Leading a Discussion Group

Step 1: Make the Invitation

- Clearly communicate the dates, times, and duration of the small group, as well as how to get the book (it can make it easier if you purchase some copies of the book in advance for people to then purchase from you)
- Commitment: Is it important that participants attend every meeting, or is the group open to people to drop in once or twice? Consider designating someone to email or text a reminder to the group each week.
- Inviting people individually and personally gets the best results (“I’d love to have you join us because of your life experience/insightful comments/unique perspective...”). Think about how you might explain the ways this book is relevant to people who have never heard of Benedictine spirituality.
- Consider potential obstacles to attendance (for example, would providing childcare allow parents to attend?)

Step 2: Prepare the physical space

- Confidentiality: Is the space enclosed enough to allow people to speak freely?
- Comfort and accessibility: Can everyone find/access/move around/hear each other in the space chosen?

Step 3: Prepare the format

- There are lots of ways to structure a small group discussion, which as the facilitator you can suggest and use, based on your knowledge of the people in the group and your assessment of how things are going during and after each discussion:
 - Free-form discussion: Everyone speaks and responds as they wish. This works well for groups that already know each other well, for groups that don’t tend to have one or two people that dominate the conversation, or for very small groups. It also requires the facilitator to be willing to intervene or steer the conversation back to the topic.
 - Mutual invitation (www.kscopeinstitute.org/mutual-invitation/): With mutual invitation, each person in the group is invited to speak in turn. This works well with groups that have trouble making space for each person to speak, or where there are large differences in people’s comfort levels
 - Rotating presenters: Choose one or two people to prepare for the session more in-depth and prepare a reflection to share with the group. This works well in groups where not everyone will be likely to read the book, but everyone will still want to participate in a discussion of the ideas. The presenters can also think about and bring ideas about the relevance of the chapters to the life of the congregation or



- wider community, or do additional research on a particular topic, which can spark interesting discussion.
- Write first: The facilitator gives everyone a minute to write thoughts on a question or topic before opening the discussion. This can be helpful in groups where many or all people are hesitant to speak.
 - Begin and end each session in prayer. This book even includes several prayers for each chapter!
 - Check in with your group at the end of each session: Is this working for everyone? Is everyone who wishes getting a chance to speak? Are there changes we should make for the next discussion?



Week 1: Foreword, Preface, Chapter 1

1. Opening prayer (p. 25)
2. Introductions to each other: What led you to come to this book discussion group? What experiences from your life are you bringing to this discussion? What curiosity do you bring?
3. In the Foreword, Kathleen Norris tells about the role of Benedictine spirituality in her own conversion: "I was spinning my wheels until I encountered Benedict's conviction that genuine spirituality is not an individual pursuit, but must be anchored in one's local community....Having been wearied by books of theology that rendered God as an abstraction, and by works on spiritual themes whose prose lost me in the ether, I was relieved to find Benedict's humane, sensible, and practical view of people attempting to realize God's presence in their lives" (7-8).¹ How does Norris' encounter resonate with your own experience of finding God in local community and in the practical realities of everyday life? Does this resonate with your experience of religious life? Of life in your congregation?
4. Esther de Waal describes the uncertainty and turbulence of Benedict's world and describes his work as building "an ark to survive the rising storm...which lasted not only for one troubled century but for fifteen, and which has still the capacity to bring many safe to land" (15). What role do you see your congregational community playing in today's world's uncertainty and turbulence? What role do you hope it could play?
5. In the preface, de Waal writes about Benedict's role as a "layman writing a guide for his household," ordering their common life so that "they could make prayer the one essential priority, the central focus of everything else." In your own life, how do you find that the everyday life of your household/congregation and your prayer life are related? What might the Benedictine tradition have to offer this relationship?
6. The last few pages of Chapter 1 detail some of the ways that Benedictine spirituality has influenced Christianity, and particularly Anglicanism, over the centuries. De Waal attributes the power of this tradition to the idea that "The Rule continually points beyond itself to Christ himself" (23). How have you seen the Benedictine tradition in your experience of the Episcopal Church? How has your experience with the practices of Christian community pointed you toward Christ and helped you to seek God?

¹ Page numbers refer to the 2001 Liturgical Press paperback edition



Week 2: Chapters 2 and 3

1. Opening prayer (pp. 36-37 or 51-53)
2. Chapter 2 opens with a description of the invitation and call as articulated in the Rule of St. Benedict: "A variety of images comes tumbling out...Each of us is to hear the call in different ways; it will strike one chord in one person and another in the next. But one thing we all share in common...we must rouse ourselves, shake ourselves out of our apathy." Think about moments of invitation and call in your own life with Christ, and in Christian community. What kind of invitation or call resonated with you in past experiences? Is there a call or an invitation that you are discerning at this moment in your life?
3. On pp. 30-31, de Waal discusses the "mundane affairs" that concern much of the Rule, and their underlying concern with describing "day-to-day living which revolves around Christ, both individually and corporately." Where have you found God in the mundane details and order of everyday life? How has doing so been a struggle? What might this spiritual tradition have to offer those struggles?
4. The central role of Scripture in the life of the Benedictine community as the "voice, the call of God," and as "a personal message with its living demands addressed to each individual" invites us to think about the role of Scripture in our own life in community. Where are the places where Scripture "comes to elicit a response from us and to engage us in dialogue" in our own congregations (pp. 33-34)?
5. What was the most striking observation for you about obedience and listening from Chapter 3?
6. Listening to your body as part of practicing listening to God (pp. 42-43) is not something we speak about often in Christian community, as de Waal reminds us. How might paying attention to our bodies, and responding mindfully and lovingly, change our individual lives and the lives of our congregations?
7. At the end of Chapter 3, de Waal discusses the idea that obedience can also be an expression of our place as collaborators with God, capable of creativity, critical thinking, and free choice. What did you think of this discussion of the interplay and tension between freedom and obedience in Benedictine life?



Optional Week 2 Activity: One Way Listening

One way we find God is in listening to the words of others in our community. But listening is hard! We're often listening while also thinking about what we are going to say in response, or how we'd fix the other person's problems, or what we're going to have for breakfast tomorrow... For those who are sharing their experiences, it can be vulnerable to share without an expectation of an exchange, as well.

Try this activity to practice listening without planning a response:

Divide up into pairs. The youngest person in the pair spends one minute responding to the question, "Where did I experience God this week?" The other person listens without responding.

After the activity, discuss:

For those who listened, what was that experience like? What was difficult? What was good? What did you learn?

For those who shared, what was that experience like? What was difficult? What was good? What did you learn?



Week 3: Chapters 4 and 5

1. Opening prayer (pp. 65-66 and 82-83)
2. The basics of the Rule as de Waal describes it are “the need to not run away, the need to be open to change, the need to listen.” These are simple and difficult demands, “based on a commitment which is both total and continuing,” but which also brings “true freedom” (55). Which of these aspects of the Rule tends to come most naturally to you? Which one tends to be the hardest?
3. “Instead of this bewildering and exhausting rushing from one thing to another, monastic stability means accepting this particular community, this place and these people, this and no other, as the way to God” (57). In a world with many options, many of them marketed to us in increasingly effective ways, committing to this kind of radical acceptance of where we are and what we already have can be difficult and even feel foolish. In the past, what have you learned from this kind of commitment to stability, to finding God in the people or places you already are? Where in your life right now might God be calling you to a new kind of stability? What does it look like for a congregation to commit to this kind of stability?
4. The idea that “limitation can lead to creativity” is a common theme in art and in de Waal’s discussion of Benedictine spirituality (59). What are the limits of your congregation’s life right now? How do they (or how might they) lead to creativity?
5. “My difficulty is that on the whole I am not very good at change, I cling to the safe and the known...I find I am unwilling to believe that new life is really anything more than a distant promise and that the resurrection is not something that is happening in my day-to-day living” (75). Change is hard! What about this chapter’s insights has spoken to you about the universal difficulty of change? Does de Waal’s link between clinging to what’s safe and belief in the resurrection’s presence in our lives resonate with you? Why?
6. Change and conversion is also linked to the Benedictine awareness of aging and death. On p. 73, de Waal discusses some of the ways in which this affects the brothers of different ages and their roles in the community. What role does aging and the positions of different generations play in your congregation’s community?
7. On pp. 76-77, de Waal lists some of the characteristics and tasks of growth in spiritual maturity. Which of these resonate most with you?



Optional Week 3 Activity: Asset Mapping as a Practice of Stability

Draw a map of your church and its immediate surroundings (it doesn't need to be fancy or even intelligible to anyone else!). Take a few minutes and write or draw places where you see God at work (not in some imaginary building or group of people or future—but right now!) What gifts has God given you?

A few suggestions if you get stuck:

- Start with something concrete: Imagine you're walking around on a Sunday morning, or a Thursday afternoon. What's happening? Who is there? What God-given gifts are working together toward God's mission?
- Gifts can involve individuals (their experience, talents, knowledge) and groups of people (the relationships, associations, and practices), as well as physical resources and more abstract things, like local economies, culture, traditions, etc.



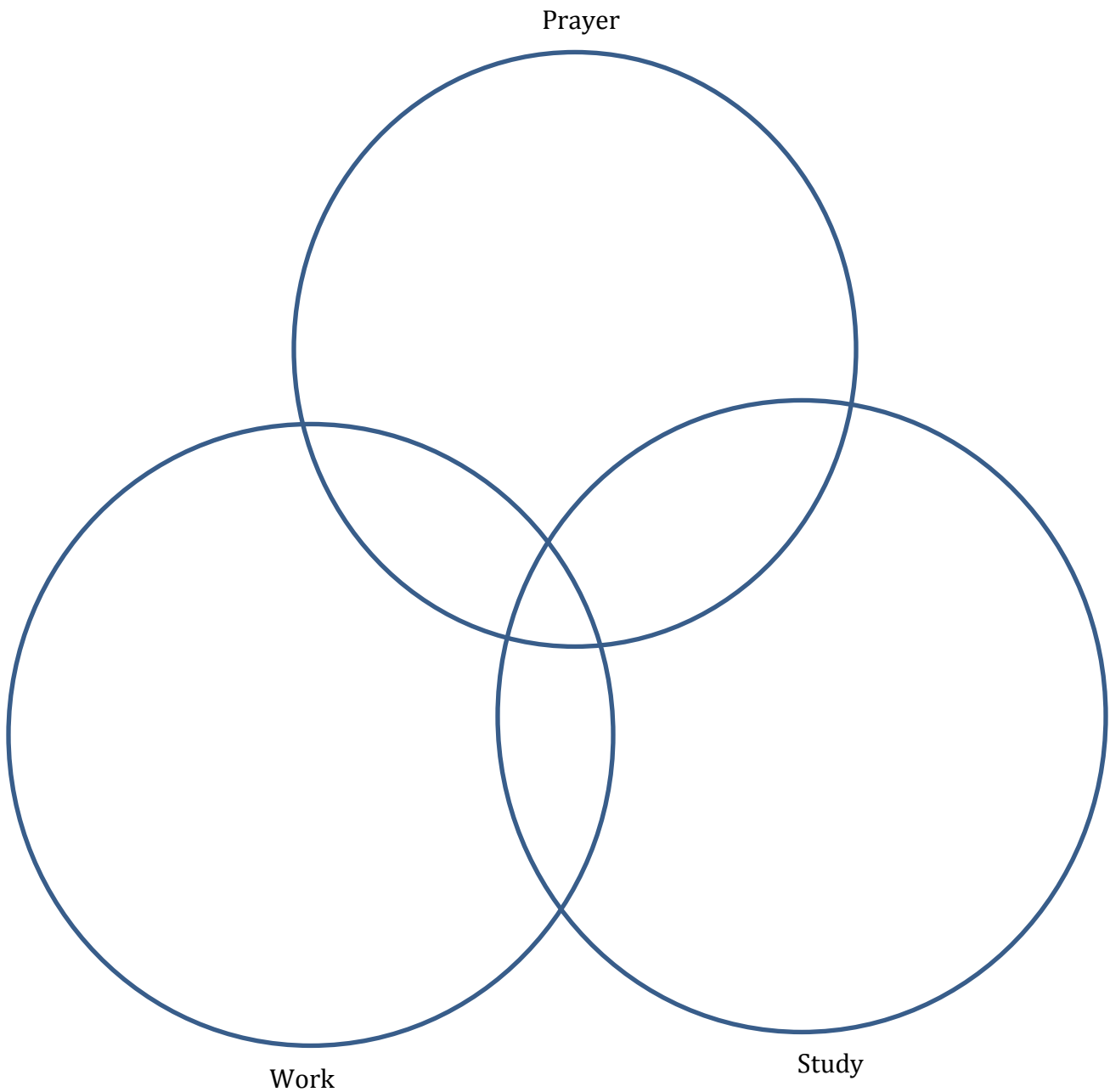
Week 4: Chapters 6 and 7

1. Opening Prayer (pp. 96-97 and 112-113)
2. “St. Benedict insisted that since body, mind, and spirit together make up the whole person, the daily pattern of life in the monastery should involve time for prayer, time for study, and time for manual work” (86). How is this integration of the whole person and balance of time reflected in the life of your household? In the life of your congregation? What feels out of balance?
3. Moderation and simplicity, according to de Waal, are especially important aspects of this tradition in our lives today, which are often dominated by extremes and disparities (90-91). Do you also see a need for moderation and simplicity in your life and in your community’s life? If so, where?
4. On pp. 91-93, de Waal describes the way in which attention to the balance of activities in our daily life, even the mundane aspects of it, might help us to find the rhythm and rest that so many of us seek, rather than the restlessness and overwork that so often leads us to burn-out. Where do you find yourself in this call to balance and wholeness? What gets in the way of following that call?
5. In Chapter 7, de Waal points to the contrast in the Rule between private ownership (which drives St. Benedict to “uncharacteristic vehemence”) and stewardship, which she says “should mean trusteeship, the responsible holding in trust of something only temporarily loaned to us for its good usage and for which we remain accountable to Christ, the one and only master of all goods, property, possessions, and talents” (101). This can be a hard concept to translate to life outside a monastery, but as de Waal argues, it is also important for our times. How might the Benedictine ideas concerning material things translate to your own life and the life of your congregation?
6. Work is a complex and important part of all of our lives; it is almost always central to our daily routines and our deepest understandings of ourselves. What do you think of the discussion of work at the end of chapter 7 (pp. 107-109, especially)? Work as a dangerous potential idol, work as something always done for the common good, work as an integrated part of a life seeking God?



Optional Week 4 Activity: Balancing Prayer, Study, and Work

Take a few minutes to jot down the times and activities during your usual week that you engage in prayer, study, and work. What do you notice? Are there things that you wish were different about the balance? When you're finished, share some of your observations with another person.



Week 5: Chapters 8 and 9

1. Opening prayer (pp. 125-127 or 141-143)
2. “St. Benedict finds Christ in people: in the brothers, in guests, in the invalid however tiresome, in strangers and travelers....Some are stubborn and dull, undisciplined and restless, others negligent and disdainful (there are of course the obedient and docile and patient)....this is how we are, and we are just those people whom St. Benedict will try to lead to God” (115). Finding Christ in the people who make up our congregations, our families, our neighborhoods can be much harder, sometimes, than finding Christ in more abstract “other people” (119)! How do the Benedictine principles of stability, obedience, and conversion of life change our ability to find Christ in those around us?
3. De Waal discusses the community’s role in creating an environment for its members to grow in holiness in their own way: “The well-organized community life makes possible the growth of the individual, knowing that a well-ordered life-style is more likely to encourage holiness than a badly organized one” (116). Does this resonate with your experience of growing in faith as part of a community? Are there ways in which your congregational life supports people in this growth, or where you feel a sense of call toward supporting people in their faith development in a new way?
4. The Rule also makes reference to the way in which the community can and should learn from those who are generally accorded less respect and value in the larger culture (in Benedict’s context: the poor, the young, etc.; p. 117). How does your congregation make effort to listen to those voices that are often silenced or accorded less respect and value? What might be some ways to practice that kind of listening in community?
5. Placing limits on welcoming, so that the monks could have time and space to rest and encounter God, was also an important part of the order that Benedict knew the community needed (121). How do boundaries and limits benefit our communities today? What is most difficult about setting boundaries and limits in your community?
6. The abbot’s role as the healer, who “must know how to heal his own wounds and those of others,” modulating his actions to respond to the unique needs of each community member, is the subject of much of Chapter 9. Have you known skilled healers like this in your spiritual communities? What helps us to develop these skills?
7. What was the most striking aspect of the discussion of authority in Chapter 9? Was there a part of the chapter that taught you something, or with which you especially disagreed?



Week 6: Chapter 10 and Conclusion

1. Opening prayer (pp. 155-157)
2. Prayer is at the center of Benedictine community: Benedict says that nothing must be put before the love of Christ, and in the same language he says that nothing must be put before community's prayer. Prayer means "entering into a dialogue with God...ready to listen, open and attentive to the Word" (115-116). Has this book given you any insights into how or why you and your community might put prayer more fully at the center of life? What does that look like in your context?
3. "For really the Rule is telling me that ultimately praying is living, working, loving, accepting, the refusal to take anything or anyone for granted but rather to try to find Christ in and through them all." Seeking God and being found by God through prayer in every part of our daily life is the subject of the last few pages of this book. What have you learned from this book about seeking God? How have you been changed by the experience of reading this book in community?
4. The Benedictine tradition has been the subject of recent discussion due to the recent book *The Benedict Option* by Rod Dreher. Steve Thorngate's review of this book ("Who is the Benedict Option For? *Christian Century*, May 8, 2017 <https://www.christiancentury.org/review/who-is-benedict-option-for>) lifts up some of the compelling arguments made in the book: "It's about rebuilding the church, for its own sake first and then for the sake of the world. It's about creating thick, resilient Christian communities, as Benedict did, that will serve the world by their very existence—by the way they form their members as Christians and as humans."

However, Thorngate also describes the limitations of Dreher's arguments, especially its dismissal of mainline or progressive Christian traditions: "Unfortunately, the notion that a church's more liberal values might come from a theologically constructive place, as opposed to a culturally accommodated one, lies outside Dreher's grand linear narrative."

If you've read any of the discussion of Dreher's book (or the book itself), what did you think? How might de Waal's book help inform some of the issues that Dreher attempts to address in his book?

5. What is next for your congregational community after reading *Seeking God*? What has this book taught you, and how has it changed you?



Further Reading and Resources on Benedictine Spirituality

Interview with Esther de Waal in *US Catholic*

“Return to center: Esther de Waal leads us home”

If you're bogged down by a busy modern lifestyle, the ancient Rule of St. Benedict still offers a path home.

<http://www.uscatholic.org/life/2009/09/return-center-esther-de-waal-leads-us-home>

A list of recommended books on Benedictine Spirituality from the Alban Institute

<https://alban.org/archive/resources-on-benedictine-spirituality/>

One congregation's description of Benedictine spirituality's influence on their corporate identity:

<http://www.trinityseattle.org/benedictine-roots.aspx>

Video: Sr. Joan Chittister: What is Benedictine Spirituality? [from the Episcopal Diocese of Texas]

<https://vimeo.com/55053224>

Take an online ChurchNext course: Introducing Benedictine Spirituality with Laurel Dahill

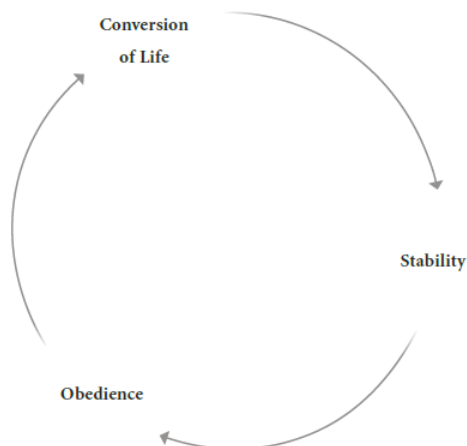
<https://www.churchnext.tv/library/introducing-benedictine-spirituality-with-laurel-dahill/26766/about/>

“Growing a Rule of Life” by the Society of St. John the Evangelist

<https://www.ssje.org/growruleresources/>

Come to the College for Congregational Development and learn more about how Benedictine spirituality might be a lens through which you could view your congregation's life and growth!

MODEL 4: THE BENEDICTINE LIFE



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St. John's in Petaluma has also been studying Benedictine spirituality, and they recommended the resources below. Many thanks to Laurie Warren of St. John's for sharing these resources and recommendations with us all!

Prayer Books and Companion Books for Daily Prayer

Saint Benedict's Prayer Book for Beginners

by Ampleforth Abbey Press

This is a compact version of Liturgy of the Hours containing only morning and evening prayer and compline (night). Morning prayer follows a two-week cycle and consists of a prayer, a psalm, a scriptural reading, the Our Father, the Hail Mary, and a concluding prayer. Evening prayer follows a one-week cycle and just one version of the office of compline. It offers many traditional prayers; stations of the cross, Rosary, hymns, and litanies in Latin and English.

Benedictine Daily Prayer: A Short Breviary, Second Edition

Edited by Maxwell E. Johnson

Provides an everyday edition of the divine office in a simple, user-friendly two-week cycle format. Based on fifteen hundred years of liturgical prayer within the Benedictine monastic tradition, *Benedictine Daily Prayer* offers classic hymnody, psalmody, and scripture

The Psalms: Prayers of Many Moods

by Dr. Ronald Quillo

This is an excellent companion when reading the Psalms. It provides a structure for understanding and reflecting on how they may relate to one's life, feelings, and thoughts. Each psalm is presented along with reflections, questions, and suggestions for prayer.

Websites for Daily Prayer

The Daily Office

<http://www.missionstclare.com/>

An online version of the Book of Common Prayer (BCP) in English or Spanish. It has complete services of Rite I & Rite II Offices of Morning and Evening Prayer, Noonday Prayer, Compline, and Devotions for Individuals and Families, as well as music to accompany singing the appointed hymns. It has downloadable apps and links to "audiobook" versions of the BCP and the New Zealand Prayer Book, as well as links to weekly choral services: Compline from St. Mark's Cathedral, Seattle, Washington, and Choral Evensong from Westminster Cathedral.

St. Bede's Breviary

<http://www.stbedeproductions.com/breviary>

Much like the daily office above, this is an especially good user-friendly mobile version of the BCP.



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Books on Benedictine Rule and Spirituality

The Rule of Benedict: A Spirituality for the 21st Century (Spiritual Legacy Series) 2nd Edition

By Sr. Joan Chittister

This new edition combines the timeless wisdom of Benedict's Rule with Sister Joan Chittister's reflections. She makes the compelling case that Benedict's sixth-century text directly addresses the contemporary issues facing the human community—stewardship, conversion, communication, reflection, contemplation, humility, and equality. She traces Benedict's original Rule paragraph by paragraph and expands its principles into the larger context of spiritual living in a secular world, making his instructions relevant for today. She offers a recommended calendar for reading the entries and commentaries for individual or communal contemplation.

Websites on Benedictine Spirituality

The Friends of St. Benedict

<http://www.benedictfriend.org/>

Information and resources on Benedictine Spirituality, groups, and the Rule of Benedict, focused on how the the Rule offers people a plan for living a balanced, simple, and prayerful life. Be sure to check out the "Resources" tab.

Monasteries of the Heart

<https://www.monasteriesoftheheart.org/>

A web-based sharing of Benedictine spirituality for contemporary seekers. It offers the main elements of the monastic tradition online: prayer, lectio, good work, study, and community.

St. John's Benedictine Study Group Schedule:

6:00 Vespers- Please be seated in the church in the chancel

6:30 Soup supper in silence with reading in the library

7:00 5-minute break and clean-up

7:05 Chapter meeting

7:15 Study and lectio divina

7:45 Compline in the library

8:00 Depart in silence and peace

