

Tacoma, Washington

Adult Formation March 18, 2020

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### **The Gifts of Saint Benedict in a Time of Social Isolation**

For the near future, many of us will be spending a good amount of time in our homes: in our apartments, houses, duplexes, or condominiums. For some people, such “sheltering in place” affords the chance to catch up on long-delayed projects, but for others it can prompt feelings of claustrophobia, isolation, and disorientation. And this, too: if one is not working from home, it is far too easy to turn on the television or computer and simply watch a parade of shows or the sobering and unrelenting news concerning the corona virus.

Here is where we say, **“What a minute!”** There is another way of thinking about and practicing the gift of time – for, indeed, time is God’s gift to us. Thus, the ancient blessing of the Paschal (Easter) Candle includes these words: *Christ yesterday and today; the Beginning and the End; the Alpha and the Omega; All time belongs to him and all ages.* In our highly secularized measuring of time, it might be a challenge to remember that, for Jews and Christians, time is God’s creation and God’s gift. Indeed, our faith bids us discern the Presence of the Triune God, the Holy Three, in ordinary time.

How, then, might we be intentional with the gift of time, so that our daily practices make for meaningful living? I ask you to consider the practices of the Benedictine communities that brought the Gospel to the English people from whom Anglican spirituality sprang forth. Consider these dimensions of Benedictine practice rooted in *ora et labora*, in daily prayer and in daily work.

**Setting aside time each day to keep silence and stillness**, giving thanks to God for the new light of *morning* and for the setting of the sun at *evening*. This practice, called the Liturgy of the Hours or the Divine Office (from *officium*, responsibility or duty), includes the praying of psalms, the reading of an excerpt from Scripture, and prayer for oneself and others. A simple form of this prayer can be found here: <https://www.bcponline.org/DailyOffice/devotion.html>. If one desires a bit more, consider clicking into this site: <https://www.missionstclare.com/english/>

**Reflection on a reading from Scripture** is commonly called *lectio divina* or holy reading. It is not intended to be the scholarly study of a text (though we honor and

practice such study), but rather a prayerful reading in which a word or phrase might gain one's attention. Lectio invites one to let that word or phrase enter into one's consciousness and reveal – guess what? – the voice of God speaking in, with, and through the Word of God. Lectio invites one to Listen, Ponder, and then Pray. Here is a helpful guide to Lectio Divina: <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/253799/1-What-is-Lectio-Divina.pdf>

*What should I read from Scripture?* Well, lucky for us, there are two lists of biblical readings from which one can select a text: daily readings that accompany morning and evening prayer, and readings for the daily celebration of the Holy Eucharist. You can find those two lists here: <http://www.satucket.com/lectionary/2lent3.htm> Should you return to the home page of this Lectionary (a *lectionary* is the list of lections or lessons or biblical readings used in communal worship), you'll find this schedule with dates for this year 2020 and in clicking on **NRSV**, the biblical readings for each week (*the NRSV is the translation we use at Christ Church*).

Week of the Fourth Sunday in Lent (March 22 – 28)  
Week of the Fifth Sunday in Lent (March 29 - April 4)  
Holy Week (April 5 – 11)  
Easter Week (April 12 – 18)  
Week of the Second Sunday of Easter (April 19 – 25)  
Week of the Third Sunday of Easter (April 26 - May 2)  
Week of the Fourth Sunday of Easter (May 3 - 9)  
Week of the Fifth Sunday of Easter (May 10 - 16)

**Giving thanks at table** begins the monastic meal and, to be frank, it rightly begins each and every meal we take in the home and elsewhere. One of my favorites is this:

*Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest and let these gifts to us be blessed.  
Blessed be God who is our Bread, may all the world be clothed and fed.*

Some of you might be familiar with the first part that focuses on God blessing us but then note how the second part moves our thoughts to those who have no bread, no cup. Thanks to Gail Ramshaw for the addition to this common text.

Here is another favorite:

*Gracious God, we give you thanks for this food and drink, signs of your steadfast care for all creation: Open our ears to hear those who cry for daily bread and so move our hearts and minds that we might labor for a just sharing of your many gifts.*

The Book of Common Prayer includes a number of prayers, Grace at Meals, for use in the household: <https://www.bcponline.org/Misc/Prayers.html#70>. *Why give thanks at table?* Well, for one it is a potent reminder that all things flow into daily life to sustain our lives and the lives of all creatures on earth from the hand of a generous and loving God. Giving thanks acknowledges our dependency on God and the gifts of the creation God intends for all creatures. Second,

thanksgiving at table invites us to be mindful of those who labored so that we might eat and drink. I wonder: are the people working in fields, vineyards, orchards, farms, and factories, receiving a living wage and health benefits? Third, such thanksgiving can prompt us to be mindful of the monastic call to exercise moderation in all things: not too much and not too little. Would a friend or fellow parishioner living alone benefit by your sharing food and drink?

**Daily work is needed** as Benedict notes in his *Rule*. There is to be balance between prayer and silence and labor and conversation. The question is: will my work, your work, advance the Reign of God's love and justice, forgiveness and peace? That's a different question than "Will my work accrue more and more profit for me alone?" We might ask, "Will my work be a tangible sign of love for my neighbor, especially our most vulnerable neighbors?" Little wonder that in his description of the person in charge of the material goods of the community, Benedict writes that this one "must show every care and concern for the sick, children, guests, and the poor, knowing for certain that he or she will be held accountable for all of them on the day of judgment" (Ch. 31).

In the same chapter of the Rule, Benedict writes that the one in charge of material goods and their use in labor "will regard all utensils and goods of the monastery as sacred vessels of the altar, aware that nothing is to be neglected." That astonishing insight can shift one's perspective on what we might consider the "ordinary" things we use in our households: a computer, a cellphone, a bathtub, a pen or pencil, a pot or pan, clothing, linens, a television, a table. If we treat the chalice and paten, the sacred oils, the eucharistic table, the consecrated gifts, the Paschal candle and font, and the Gospel book with great care and a measure of reverence, should the same not inform our regard for and use of the tools and materials we find in our households?

As Benedictine sister Joan Chittister writes in her commentary on the Rule, "Waste is not a Benedictine virtue. Planned obsolescence is not a Benedictine goal. Disposability is not a Benedictine quality. A Benedictine soul is a soul that takes care of things, that polishes wood and scrapes away rust and keeps a room clean and never puts feet on the furniture and mulches the garden and leaves trees standing" (*The Rule of Benedict: A Spirituality for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Crossroad, 2010).

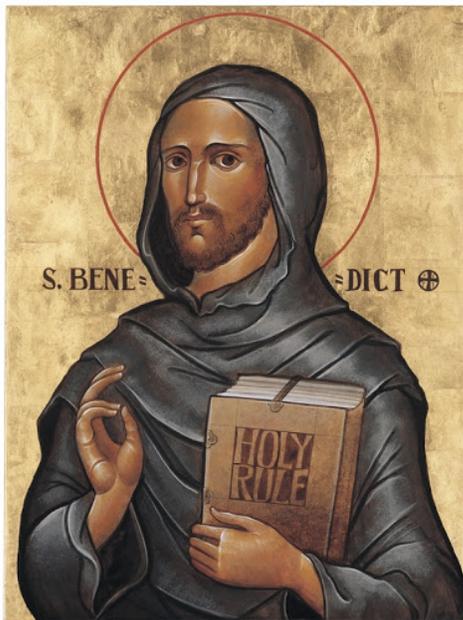
In this time of social isolation, how will my labor, your labor, not only "keep one busy" but, more importantly, invite us to consider the value and purpose of labor in life?

**Our life with others:** Benedict notes that there are times set aside for silence and separation from others, and times of gathering for prayer, conversation, meals and labor. Perhaps for the introvert, social separation is much appreciated. Yet, all of us are created with a *social nature* that needs the other. And perhaps for the extrovert who lives alone, this time of social separation might be experienced as a burden.

Yet, all of us are called to silence, to hear the voice within, to let the voice of God speak to each of us.

In the 6<sup>th</sup> century, when Benedict, a layman, wrote his Rule for lay people, his society experienced a pandemic, rapid climate change that produced agricultural decline and famine, and chronic invasions. In the midst of economic and social distress, his Rule guided Christian communities and offered them a sense of stability, purpose, and hope. My hope is this: that our experience of increasing physical isolation and the anxiety produced by this pandemic will not overwhelm us. My hope is that these practices might lend to our lives a needed rhythm rooted in God's presence to us and for us and lead us to engage the perennial sources of a life-giving faith.

Peace be with you in the Name of Jesus Christ and our holy father, St. Benedict.



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