



# Saint Benedict

*Patriarch of Western Monasticism*



**S**AINT BENEDICT was the founder of the Benedictine Order and built his most famous monastery at Monte Cassino, Italy. Monte Cassino, and the Benedictine ideals for which it stands, has been referred to by Gladstone, Prime Minister of England, as the "Cradle of Western Civilization." Although destroyed three times, and at one time belatedly rebuilt in the course of the centuries, it has continued to exist for the past fourteen hundred years. It now lies in ruins upon its mountain top, a broken monument to World War II.

Saint Benedict was born of noble parents at Nursia, Italy, about the year 480. As a boy in the semi-pagan schools of the decadent Roman Empire, he longed for a society motivated by Christian ideals and Christian morality. In his early youth he fled from Rome and hid in the nearby mountain caverns of Subiaco, living there for a period of three years the religious life of a hermit. Others, who had the same aspirations as Benedict, soon recognized his leadership and placed themselves under his spiritual direction to be guided in their progress in the love and service of God. It was thus that Benedict became the head of a group of monks who were to become famous for their religious observance in community life.

Because of disturbances resulting from the valley roadways through the mountainous region, Benedict moved with a select group of his monks to the top of Monte Cassino and there built his famous monastery. He died in the year 543.

The value and permanence of the Benedictine Order lies in the genius which Saint Benedict manifested in his legislation for the monastic life of his followers. He set an enduring pattern that was to guide religious life in the West for future centuries.

Monasticism had not yet become permanently organized. Men, seeking religious freedom from the pagan persecutions of the first three centuries of Christianity, fled into hiding in the hills and the deserts to practice their religion in isolation and in silence. It is true that communities of hermits had gathered in some places under the direction of Saint Basil and had lent themselves to religious and social service, but the hermitical idea still predominated in their religious ideals.

Benedict gathered his monks into communities and legislated in the form of his Holy Rule the religious observance of the communities. The asceticism of the monk was no longer to be the individual inclination of an isolated hermit but was to be centered in the observance of conformity. Community life was to become the asceticism of the individual. The spiritual forces of men and women practicing the religious life were thus focused and directed to the exalted sanctity of many individuals and abundant benefits to the whole of society.

Saint Benedict was not the founder of religious life. Christ, Himself, taught the Evangelical Counsels and urged His hearers upon many occasions to seek the higher perfections. It was the regulation of religious life that was new in the form of Benedictine asceticism.

The Benedictine monk was bound by the vows of obedience, poverty, chastity and stability. Each individual became a brother in a religious family and was bound to the community as a son to his home and a monk to his abbot (father). The idea of stability originated with Saint Benedict. The religious life of the monk was to be a permanent one. He became dedicated to the soil upon which he lived, to the monastic family which he himself had chosen, and indirectly to the people of the surrounding countryside among whom the monastery existed.

The motto of Saint Benedict is expressed in the words "Ora et Labora," meaning "Pray and Work." It constitutes the essentials of Benedictine life and of all other successful living. The prayer of the monk was a community prayer called the "Opus Dei," or, the "Work of God." It consisted of psalms, hymns, canticles and prayers, the first part of which, called Matins and Lauds, was recited in the early hours of the morning. Later, when the chant and ceremony were added to the Opus Dei, it became a splendid liturgical function and the pride of the Benedictine observance.

Then the labor of the day began. Monks worked in the fields when necessary, or at their crafts within the monastery itself, in the scriptorium, in the school or in the Church, wherever the physical or spiritual life required. Saint Benedict never legislated the kind of work his monks were to do: whether their labor was to be of the mind or with the hands. History

shows that the work of the monks was adapted to the need of the time and of the locality, with a freedom of adjustment that will be interesting in the following pages. He did legislate, however, that the work was to be a community work under obedience to the abbot, interrupted at the third, sixth and ninth hour of the day to be sanctified by the recitation of community prayer. If the monks happened to be working in the fields and the distant monastic bells chimed the hour of tierce, they would temporarily cease their work to pray. The effect of such a custom upon the people of the countryside probably grew into the practice of the angelus. In the late afternoon the community recited the evening prayer called Vespers; and at sundown, Compline, to complete the day and to sanctify the night.

The primary work of the monk under the rule of Saint Benedict was his self sanctification. The liturgy, his private prayer and his labors were all to be directed to this end. For this purpose he entered the community and made his profession of vows. Community life was to be the means of his union with God. Saint Benedict set aside several hours of the day for "Lectio Divina," or, "Sacred Study," by which the monk was to become familiar with the Sacred Scriptures and the Fathers. By obedience, study and prayer, his heart was to be fashioned in virtue and his mind was to be lifted to a contemplative union with God.

Saint Benedict is called the "Patriarch of Western Monasticism" because of the eminent dignity he has achieved in the perspective of the passing centuries. His personality became the guiding spirit of Christian religious life in the West from the sixth century and formed the underlying pattern even for all the modern Orders. As time moves forward his wisdom and his genius elicit greater admiration from all those who are familiar with the history and work of monasticism and the contributions of the Benedictine Order to the culture of the Western world.

Saint Benedict was above all a legislator. His sanctity and his miracles are attested by his contemporaries and narrated by Saint Gregory the Great; but his claim to greatness lies in his organization and his legislation. The Holy Rule, written by Saint Benedict to be the guide of his monastic life, is his living spirit, ever active and ever young, continuing to exist in the religious life of the Church. That his Order continues to exist fourteen hundred years after his death, with resurrected life from the cataclysms of the passing centuries, is the greatest tribute to his wisdom and his genius. During the ages of faith his followers were numbered by the thousands and his influence, through the organization that followed him, exercised a religious and social culture that made a deep impression upon the life of Europe. At the present time Benedictine monasteries are found in almost every

country of the world, making the spirit of Saint Benedict a living spirit, young and vital, drawing its inspiration from the fountain of its heritage in some monastic institutions that have had a continuous existence for more than a thousand years.

In the four medallions surrounding the figure of Saint Benedict are four Benedictine saints, who, like their Patriarch, founded monasteries in the various countries of Europe. Saint Maurus and Saint Placidus are always closely associated with Saint Benedict. They belonged to the Roman nobility and in their boyhood were given by their parents to Saint Benedict to be educated in learning and in piety. Saint Maurus and Saint Placidus and their few companions composed the first Benedictine monastic school. Saint Gregory the Great relates in his Dialogues that one day Saint Placidus as a child fell into the near-by lake. Father Benedict, who was some distance away, called to Saint Maurus and bade him hasten to the help of the drowning boy. Maurus moved in prompt obedience to the call and found himself impetuously running over the water to the aid of his saintly brother. Saint Benedict is often represented in art with the two youths standing at his side. Saint Maurus and Saint Placidus were among the select few chosen by Saint Benedict to accompany him in the building of Monte Cassino. Maurus later led a group of monks from Monte Cassino to become the abbot of the first Benedictine monastery in France. Placidus led a similar expedition into Sicily and was martyred in his new monastic home.

The Benedictine Order spread over Europe and branched into many forms of ascetic life all of which retained the principles of Benedict's Rule. Saint Romuald in 1020 founded the Order of the Camaldolese; Saint Sylvester, the Sylvestrines in 1231; and Saint Bernard Ptolomeus, the Olivetans in 1348.

The saints in the following windows tell us of the work for Mother Church by the disciples of Saint Benedict in the centuries to come.