



## St. Benedict's Wisdom For Our Times

Written by Archbishop Samuel J. Aquila

Feast Day: July 11<sup>th</sup>

“Let us get up then, at last, for the Scriptures rouse us,” the Rule of St. Benedict urges us. “Let us open our eyes to the light ... and our ears to the voice from heaven that every day calls out. ... ‘If you hear his voice today, do not harden your hearts’” (Ps 95:8). On July 11 the Church observes the memorial of St. Benedict, and his words from 1,500 years ago seem perfectly fitting for our challenging and changing times.

The Rule of St. Benedict was written some time around 530, a time when the Roman Empire had collapsed and Christianity's existence in Europe was threatened. Given our current cultural situation and its parallels with his time, I believe we can find fruit in St. Benedict's teachings.

Saint Benedict grew up surrounded by a culture that was morally corrupt but with the grace of God lived a virtuous life. After spending some time in Rome for studies, he fled its moral decadence to pursue a more solitary life. St. Benedict lived the life of a hermit for several years before he eventually founded several monasteries, which became centers of prayer, manual labor and learning.

St. Benedict begins his rule by urging the monks to “Listen carefully to the master's instructions and attend to them with the ear of your heart” (Rule, Prologue 1). For us, this means establishing a daily time to listen to the Lord, both in reading the Scriptures and in conversational prayer and meditation.

Our sure foundation during these trying times should be God's will for each of us, not the constantly changing messages that bombard us in the news or on social media. For some, every online trend has become a form of gospel that must be adhered to with religious conviction. But the faith handed down to us from the Apostles is the only true Gospel, and only it can save souls. Although the times and technology were different, St. Benedict understood the importance of listening to “the master's instructions.”

In his book, *The Holy Spirit in the Life of Jesus*, the preacher of the Papal Household, Father Raniero Cantalamessa, addresses the need for priests to arm themselves for battle “with the world rulers of this present darkness” (cf. Jn 10:12). At the heart of his reflection is the insight that “Jesus freed himself from Satan by an act of total obedience to the Father's will, once and for all handing over his free will to him, so that he could truly say, ‘My food is to do the will of the one who sent me’” (Jn 4:34, *The Holy Spirit in the Life of Jesus*, p. 36).

The question we must ask ourselves is, “Do I put the Father's will first in my life in every decision I make and in all that I say and do?” If we place the Father's will at the center of our lives and truly listen to him with “the ears of our hearts” as St. Benedict taught, we will be prepared for whatever happens and always give witness to the love of God and

others. We live in a world that has removed God from culture. History, both salvation history and world history, shows clearly what happens when this occurs. When God is removed, something else becomes “god.” Societies decline and eventually fall and disappear unless they return to the true God and become cultures that promote a life of holiness and virtue.

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## **5 Lessons We Can Learn From St. Benedict**

Adapted from [beliefnet.com](http://beliefnet.com)

### **1. Prayer is Important**

One incredible miracle performed by St. Benedict was moving a huge stone with his prayer. Some monks were busy building new cells at their abbey and came across a huge stone that blocked the path of their building. Even working all together, they were unable to move the stone. They called St. Benedict and he said a prayer for them that the stone would move. When he did this, they were able to easily move the stone. This is not only a sign of the miraculous, but also that there is power in prayer.

In the Rule, which was written for laymen, not for clerics, prayer is referred to as “the work of God.” Prayer, then, is work and work is prayer in the economy of monastic life. Instead of wondering how to squeeze prayer into the busy schedule of our work days, we can adopt a new vision in which all that we do is the work of prayer. We can give to God the whole cycle of the day, from rising and drinking our morning coffee to carpools and meetings and classes and household responsibilities until we go to bed at night.

For prayer, Benedict turned to the psalms, the very songs and poems from the Jewish liturgy and Jesus Himself prayed. To join our voices with Jesus in praise of God during the day was so important that he called it the “Work of God.”

### **2. Listen with the Ears of Our Heart**

When St. Benedict urges one to listen, he is not simply speaking about listening as we traditionally perceive it. He is not speaking about listening in the way that we might listen to a song or a joke, instead, he invites us in this phrase from the Book of Proverbs and Psalm 43 to “incline the ear of our heart.” We must have a receptive understanding, a trustful attitude towards the truth. The Church continues to teach us how to open the ears of our hearts.

St. Benedict calls the Church “the great teacher of the art of listening,” because the Church instructs the students, the Catholic faithful, on the often-difficult work of opening our ears and hearts. In particular, Pope Benedict writes about *lectio divina*, or divine reading, one of the Church’s preferring methods of praying sacred Scripture. According to St. Benedict, this method requires “the diligent reading of Sacred Scripture accompanied by prayer which brings about that intimate dialogue in which the person reading hears God who is speaking, and In praying, responds to him with trusting openness of heart.” St. Benedict also says, “If it is effectively

promoted, this practice will bring to the Church – I am convinced of it – a new spiritual springtime.”

### **3. God’s Word is Important**

St. Benedict realized the strongest and truest foundation for the power of words was the Word of God itself: “For what page or word of the Bible is not a perfect rule for temporal life?” He had experienced the power of God’s Word as expressed in Scripture: “For just as the heavens the rain and snow come down and do not return there till they have watered the earth, making it fertile and fruitful, giving seed to him who sows and bread to him who eats, so shall My Word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me void, but shall do My Will, achieving the end for which I sent it” (Isaiah 55:10-11).

### **4. Live in Moderation**

St. Benedict counsels moderation in all things – moderation and common sense – so as not to frighten away the “faint-hearted,” no be so easy as to not give the strong something to strive for. Even in monasteries, moderation sometimes has to be insisted upon to avoid what might otherwise allow an imbalanced life, or worse, pride, because competition can impeded our sincerity and one can call to comparing oneself to others in a spirit of envy or jealousy. Benedict insists in his Rule that we must balance our lives with prayer and work, with reading and recreation, with rest and activity.

### **5. Be Humble**

St. Benedict stresses the important of living a humble life. In his rule, St. Benedict notes that “Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted” (Luke 14:11) and that those who want to reach the highest summit of humility must shun pride and exaltation and just as well that our actions will be like a ladder to heaven which Jacob saw in his dream in Genesis 28 where the angels ascended and descended. We see that the humility of the heart is the foundation of love for Christian life. Jesus showed us the Way and His sacred heart held the way of humility.

