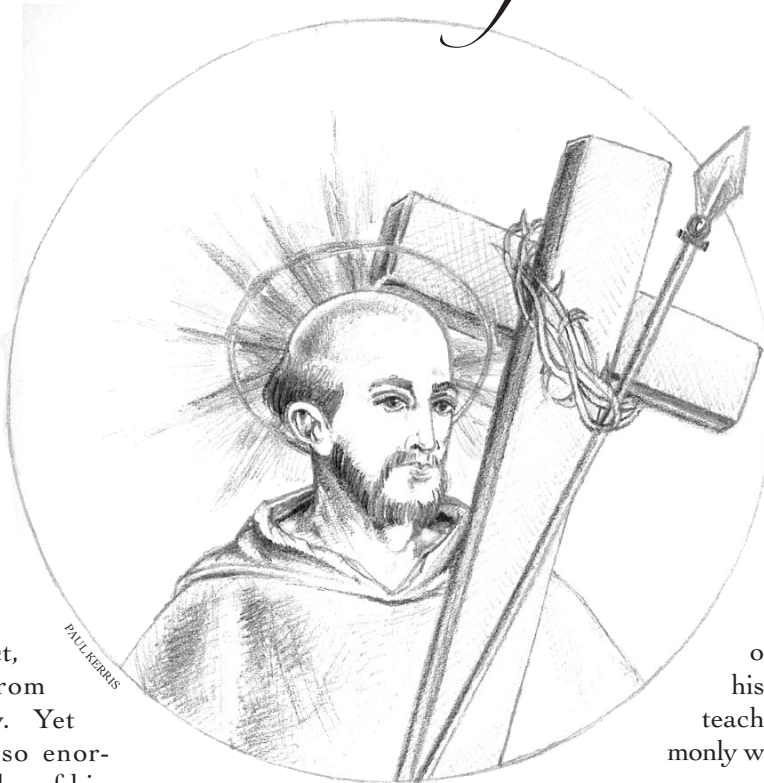


St. Benedict of Nursia

BORN 480; DIED
BETWEEN 547
AND 550
ABBOT AND
FOUNDER
FEAST DAY:
JULY 11

ST. BENE-
DICT
is one
of those
saints known
from his impact,
rather than from
his personality. Yet
his impact is so enor-
mous that an idea of him can
be gained from what he did. He is
recognized as the “Father of Western Monas-
ticism” — that is, the form of life in a religious
community found throughout the Roman Cath-
olic Church. The religious family he founded,
the monks and nuns of the Benedictine tradi-
tion, profoundly affected the development of
Western civilization.

Benedict and his twin sister St. Scholastica were born of a Roman noble family in the mountain village of Nursia (modern Norcia in the Umbrian region of central Italy), at a time when the Roman empire was disintegrating and barbarian hordes ravaged the land. He grew up in Rome at a time when every ruler seemed to be a heretic, a pagan, or an outright atheist. He completed his education when he was about twenty, and fled the vice-ridden city to a village in the nearby mountains. Yet fleeing evil is not seeking God, and Benedict soon realized that he was called to a more radical departure from the world and became a hermit.



For three years he lived in a cave near Subiaco about forty miles east of Rome, in contact only with his spiritual director. However, from time to time others sought him out, attracted by his saintly example, teaching, and uncommonly wise advice from so young a man. Sanctity did not

come easily to him, however, and the story is told of his once having to throw himself into a thicket of nettles and roll around in the briars until he was torn everywhere, to conquer his overwhelming sexual desire for a woman he had once seen.

Eventually he agreed, with misgivings, to become abbot of a nearby community but was strict enough that they tried to kill him by poisoning his wine; this failed because his jug broke as he was blessing it. He left the community and returned to Subiaco, where a community gradually formed around him, and he began to develop, at first by example, what later became known as the Rule of St. Benedict. The monastery became known as a place to live a life dedicated to God without distinction of noble or barbarian birth. Benedict also taught that manual labor was not degrading but a path to holiness — “Ora et Labora,” that is, prayer and work. He required everyone to undertake manual labor, regardless of his previous station in life.

After an unknown period of time in Subiaco,

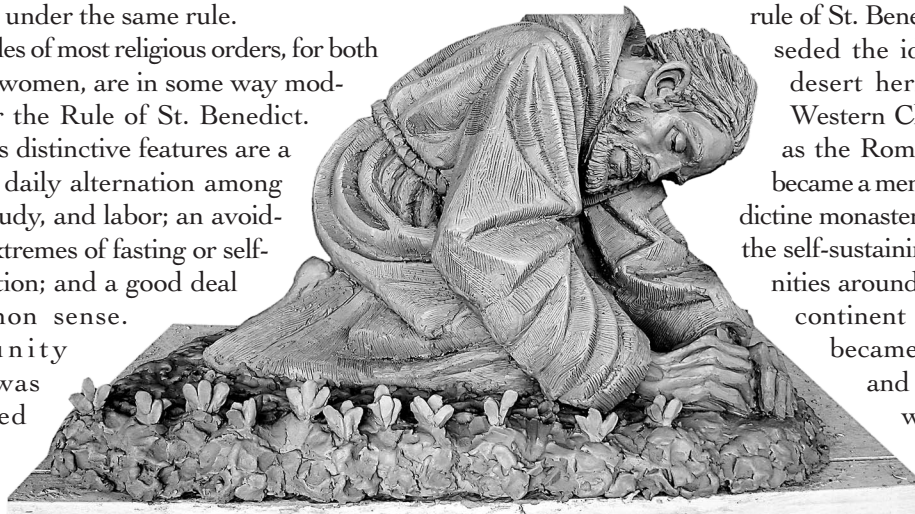
“When he was about fifty, he set about building what became one of the most famous monasteries in the world, Monte Cassino, the fountainhead of one of the greatest means given by God to Christianize and restore civilization to the ruined lands of the Roman empire.”

Benedict again encountered a problem, this time with an envious priest who resorted to slander, another attempt to poison Benedict, and malicious efforts to tempt the monks with prostitutes. Benedict’s solution was to leave Subiaco for a site about eighty miles south of Rome then used as a temple to the pagan god Apollo. There, when he was about fifty, he set about building what became one of the most famous monasteries in the world, Monte Cassino, the fountainhead of one of the greatest means given by God to Christianize and restore civilization to the ruined lands of the Roman empire. It was at Monte Cassino that Benedict wrote his rule, that is, his instructions on the why, the what, and the how of monastic life. This became the basis for the Order of St. Benedict (OSB), or Benedictines. St. Scholastica established a convent about five miles away that lived under the same rule.

The rules of most religious orders, for both men and women, are in some way modeled after the Rule of St. Benedict. Among its distinctive features are a balanced daily alternation among prayer, study, and labor; an avoidance of extremes of fasting or self-mortification; and a good deal of common sense. Community prayer was structured

around what today is called the Liturgy of the Hours. The rule emphasized not mere external trappings but a true seeking of humility and personal love of our Lord. While each monk vowed obedience to his abbot, the abbot’s role was to be that of a father rather than a ruler, and his rule was of love rather than mere law. Monks were, ideally, to model themselves more completely on Christ than was possible in the wider world; its purpose was to form a community of charity, of brothers (or sisters) in Christ. Service not only to each other but also to the larger community in which the monastery was situated was a mark of Benedictine monasteries, which provided care of the poor and the sick.

Benedict was raised up by God at a critical time in the history of the early Church. The organized communal religious life under the rule of St. Benedict superseded the ideal of the desert hermit in the Western Church and, as the Roman Empire became a memory, Benedictine monasteries became the self-sustaining communities around which the continent of Europe became Christian and civilization was rebuilt.



St. Benedict, by Timothy Schmalz