

Domus Monasterii

(The Home Monastery)

When he was elected to the Chair of St. Peter, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger chose the name Benedict and placed his pontificate under the patronage of this saint. He did so because he drew important parallels between the times of St. Benedict and our own and saw in this saint a model of how to live as a faithful Christian during these times of unparalleled social revolution.

St. Benedict was born in Nursia, a city of Umbria, in the year 480. The beginnings of his life witnessed the extinction of the Roman Empire in the West, and the year of his birth saw Odoacer, the first barbarian who ruled in Italy, in possession of the throne of the Caesars. The times were difficult, the outlook gloomy, all over the Western world. Italy, especially, was a sad spectacle of misery and desolation. It would be difficult for us to imagine such times because, while we have certainly experienced difficult times (e.g., the Great Depression), we have never experienced a complete societal breakdown; every political, economic, and social institution collapsed and add to that the occupation by the barbarians. This turmoil extended to the Church since the conquering barbarian tribes were Arian Christians (those who deny the divinity of Jesus Christ) and these often persecuted orthodox Christian believers. As Western Europe teetered, Benedict arrives on the scene. Born in a de-

voutly Christian family he travels to Rome to pursue an education and is repelled by the decadence of the city, resolving to live the life of a hermit. Fast-forward to years later, Benedict resolves to combat this social and ecclesiastical decay by starting what he called “a school of the Lord’s service.”

After experiences gained in the schools of Rome, in his cave in the solitude of Subiaco, as superior of the monks of Vicovaro, Benedict gathered around him at Subiaco a body of monks whom he placed in twelve separate monasteries and ruled for eighteen years. It was here that he probably began to compose his Rule, since he finished it about the year 528 when he moved to what became known as Monte Cassino. From these monasteries went a force that transformed Europe and laid the foundations for Western Christian culture, upon which the West-



St Benedict (480 - 543 A.D.)

ern world is established. It is these very foundations that our current cultural revolution seeks to destroy. So we need to respond in the spirit of St. Benedict and establish “homes of the Lord’s service” or a house monastery in spirit.

That we are living in times that spiritually parallel those of St. Benedict are echoed by the words of Msgr. Charles Pope of the Archdiocese of Washington D.C. “*It seems there is no awareness that we are at war and that Catholics need to be summoned to*

sobriety, increasing separation from the wider culture, courageous witness and increasing martyrdom. It is long past dark in our culture, but in most parishes and dioceses it is business as usual and there is anything but the sober alarm that is really necessary in times like these.” Recall the words of Archbishop Charles Chaput O.F.M. Cap. of Philadelphia: “*We need to help Catholics recover their own sense of distinction from the surrounding secular meltdown.*” How do we do this? By doing what St. Benedict did, only on the home level. If enough Christian families strove to create a “home for the Lord’s service” we could have the same effect on our country as St. Benedict’s monasteries had on a collapsing Western Europe. Again, how do we do this? Some suggestions:

For starters, get a copy of the Rule of St. Benedict because it is not meant just for monks and nuns but is a veritable spiritual classic that can be adapted in spirit to many situations. As Benedict’s monks separated themselves from a very corrupt culture, so we, echoing the words of Archbishop Chaput and Msgr. Pope, must separate ourselves from this corrupt culture. Remember that the laity are not called to separate themselves as monks and nuns do because that is not their vocation. Without living a physical separation from the world, they can still live a spiritual separation from the world. For this we can turn to the Orthodox Jewish community for some pointers on how to live in the world, but not embrace it. We will juxtapose Jewish practices with Catholic ones. While this is not an exhaustive treatment, it can provide some inspiration.

At the door of many a devout Jewish home hangs a small box called a *mezuzah* (meaning doorpost) which holds 15 verses from Scripture. Often, as family members come or go, they kiss the *mezuzah*. It proclaims that the house is Jewish and also marks the fact that the home is the center of Jewish faith, equal with the synagogue as a house of God. For the Catholic the home and the family are supposed to be the *domus ecclesiae* or the “Church in its most fundamental aspect.” A holy water fount should be placed at the front door so that as family members come and go, they may bless themselves with holy water. This will remind us of our baptism in which we have become adopted children

of God. The sign of the cross also reminds us of the price of our salvation, the death of Christ on the Cross, and the centrality of the cross in our lives. Each home should have a supply of holy water which should be used to sprinkle the rooms periodically. Priest-exorcists tell us that the devil hates holy water.

Some past newsletter issues mentioned having a “prayer corner” or prayer room in the house as a place for private prayer, family prayer and spiritual reading. A holy place where the outside world can be left behind. Family prayer is a must. “The family that prays together stays together” is much more than just a pious slogan. It’s vitally important for young children to see their parents (especially Dad) praying. Thereby children see that the faith is something essential to their lives and not just something that we “fit in” if there’s time.

We need to reclaim Sundays for the Lord. Note how devout Jews observe the Sabbath (Friday sundown to Saturday sundown). Orthodox Jews will not work on the Sabbath and refuse to travel, use the phone and computer, write, touch money or the mail. The entire day is given to God and family. Upon returning from the synagogue service, they keep their good clothes on for the rest of the Sabbath. Contrast that with how many Catholics dress for Mass even though Catholics “officially” believe in the Real Presence. We can dress as befits going to see a King. We can give an entire day to Almighty God and to our families. The work and computers can take the day off.

With Lent on the way, the practice of fasting could be revived, and not just for Lent. Presently only Ash Wednesday (Monday for Maronites) and Good Friday are required days of fast and abstinence. Add to that the Fridays of Lent and that’s it! Our Lord said that certain devils can be driven out only by prayer and fasting. 10 days of the entire year of fasting and abstinence just won’t cut it. The Orthodox Jews fast for the entire day (daylight) on the feast of Yom Kippur and maintain a strict (kosher) diet in obedience to God. We can eat more simply as a means of spiritual growth and solidarity with the world’s poor.

When a devout Orthodox Jew awakens, he turns *ad orientem*, east towards Jerusalem and recites the *Sh-*

ema prayer: “Hear O Israel, the LORD is one...” He will wear tassels and a *kippah* (skullcap) to remind him of God’s abiding presence in his life. Upon awakening the Catholic can bless himself/herself with holy water and the sign of the cross. There are one volume prayer books of the Liturgy of the Hours. Morning and Evening Prayer (the two most important hours) can easily be said in the prayer room/corner. With this prayer we unite ourselves to all the priests, religious, monks, nuns and consecrated persons and the entire Mystical Body

of Christ. Prayer is the oxygen of the spiritual life.

Lastly, we are social creatures and need the support of other Catholics. One should consider membership in the monastic oblates that many monasteries offer, or a “third order” organization where he/she can receive spiritual nourishment and support. Today we cannot wait for some sort of ecclesiastical central-planning to fix things for us. We need to take the initiative as young Benedict did. Look what his monasteries did back then. The home monasteries can do the same today. ❖