

The Rule of Benedict

A Tool for Christian Living

The aim of the Rule is to teach us to follow Christ and to follow him in love. . . . The Rule, we discover, teaches us on every page to love Christ, to remain in His company in times of consolation and joy as well as in times of trial, in the way that He wills.

—SIGHARD KLEINER, O.C.¹

We are ready to begin a journey that calls us into a deeper relationship with God, who continually reaches out to bring us an awareness of the Divine Presence in our lives. Yet, in the rush of daily life, with its many challenges, joys, and worries, we can lose sight of this Presence. Too often we fail to draw upon the rich resources that God offers us each hour of every day. Instead we can feel alone, frustrated, or angry. We forget that we have been marked as Christ's own in our baptism. We turn aside from his grace and from the call to be his followers.

Our Christian Imperative: The Baptismal Covenant

The service of Holy Baptism found in The Book of Common Prayer of the Episcopal Church reminds us of our continuing call to discipleship. Each time an infant, a child, or an adult is received into Christ's Body, the Church, and is marked on the forehead with the sign of the cross as Christ's own forever, we are given an opportunity to renew our own Baptismal Covenant. We ask for God's help to begin again in following the Way of Jesus Christ. We first renew our beliefs in God as Creator, Redeemer, and Giver of Life through the Apostles' Creed. We follow this with five core questions that provide the framework for our life in Christ.

1. Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers?

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2. Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?
3. Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?
4. Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?
5. Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?²

To each of these we answer, "I will, with God's help." (The complete Baptismal Covenant is found on pages 304–5 in The Book of Common Prayer of the Episcopal Church.)

You may belong to a different denomination of the Christian faith. Each denomination has an understanding of the meaning of baptism within its tradition. I encourage you to find a copy of the service of Baptism for your church and catechism of your faith tradition. When the Baptismal Covenant of the Episcopal Church is discussed in this book you will be able to reference your own covenant.

Although we desire to follow Jesus Christ and live into our Baptismal Covenant however that covenant or statement of discipleship is expressed, much gets in the way of our good intentions. Life is often out of balance as we're stretched one way and then another. We become distracted from what's really important to us, not finding enough time for family and friends, for ourselves, and for God. Technology blurs clear boundaries between work and home, community, and solitude. With computer, cell phone, and fax, we can be on call "24/7." Events control us, expectations control us, culture controls us. Changes in jobs, changes in the circumstances of our lives, the challenge of raising children, or caring for aging parents, the focus on competition in our schools—all these and more can make us feel overwhelmed and powerless to cope with and manage the volume of activities each day.

This has spiritual consequences. We're not always able to look at life and see the good. Instead we look at the world through glasses that see life as half-empty. We focus on what isn't right, is yet to be, or is still missing. We find ourselves, and even our children, not living *in* the present, but living *for* the future. We can't stop long enough to reflect on why we're not satisfied. We long for a way to make sense of it all. We come to church seeking a connection with God, yet life is out of control. In a world where children need pocket planners to keep track of their schedules, where life is more about success than about the richness of relationships, and where a complex consumer society screams for our attention, we long for a way to break free.

The challenge before us is to find a way to live that is less fragmented and more fulfilling, a way that will allow us to find a stabilizing center for

life, a way that will enable us to live into our full potential as children of God. With the psalmist we cry, "How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land (Ps 137:4)?"

Sitting at the Feet of the Lord and the Great Commandment

In the Gospel of John, Jesus said, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (8:31–32). How do we continue in Christ's word? What is this truth that will make us free? I believe the answers can be found in this familiar story:

[Jesus] entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." (Luke 10:38–42)

Martha's problem wasn't that she was busy, but that she was distracted by her busyness and worry. Does this sound familiar? It does to me! Instead, our Lord entreats us to listen like Mary. To hear what God is saying to us requires us to make a choice.

We must choose to sit at the feet of the Lord.

We sit at the feet of the Lord and *listen*. We listen so that we can continue in the Word and find the truth in him that will make us free (John 8:21–32). Our choice to sit at his feet will be fruitful for we have been given this promise:

Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. (Matthew 7:7–8)

Our lives will be transformed as we seek to love and to follow Jesus and his teachings. And the cornerstone of this teaching is about love and relationships.

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:28–31).

As Christians we are to love God first, then love neighbor as ourselves. This is the Word that we will hear when we sit at Jesus' feet with Mary. Because he will be at the center of our hearts and minds as we fulfill the roles and the responsibilities that God has given us, our relationships to God, to others, and to ourselves will be deepened and transformed. We will bear fruit through our service to Christ. We will sing our Lord's song, bringing the truth we find in our relationship with him into a fragmented world. The question then is this:

How do we sit at the feet of our Lord so that we may fulfill the promises that we make in our Baptismal Covenant and live Jesus' commandment to love God and neighbor as self?

Finding a Guide

A number of years ago I used to sew almost all my own clothes. Skirts, blouses, suits, pants, and shorts would be churned out in varieties of fabric, color, and style. I'd sewn since I was twelve years old, first helped by a wonderful, elderly neighbor my brother Jim and I called Auntie Sue. By the time I was an adult, my efforts were yielding pretty good results. I knew what to do and I was careful. However, my sewing really improved after I purchased a book on how to sew. It was one of those *Reader's Digest* "how-to" books. Every sewing technique imaginable was meticulously illustrated and thoroughly explained. (For those of you unfamiliar with sewing, hang in there, or watch *Sewing with Nancy* on cable TV!) While I knew, for example, how to apply a collar to a blouse—sew right sides together, trim the seam, turn, press, and tack by hand—the book provided better ways to improve and enhance what I was doing by showing me details and making suggestions. First stay-stitch the garment and clip to the stitching, trim the collar interfacing, baste on the collar, sew the seam on the machine, trim and grade the layers so that no two are the same length and the collar is the widest, press the seam flat first and then press it open. And so on. What a difference these additional instructions made! The *Reader's Digest* book became the tool that moved my sewing from competent to almost professional.

While the message that Jesus gives us is simply stated—to love one another—you and I undoubtedly could use a tool to help us hone our skill to translate this commandment into everyday life. We need reminders of who we are to be and how we are to act or not act toward one another. We need ways to see the many times and places where God is present in our lives so we may draw on this holy Presence. We also need guidance as we search for God.

The *Reader's Digest* how-to book was the tool I used to enhance my sewing abilities. On an infinitely greater scale, the Rule of Benedict can be the tool that you and I choose to help us fulfill our Baptismal

Covenant and Jesus' commandment to love. Benedict's Rule is a tool that meticulously and thoroughly details how to sow (sew?) the seeds of kindness and Christlike love in all our relationships.

A Thumbnail Sketch of the Rule of Benedict

First let me briefly explain the Rule of Benedict. In the sixth century, Benedict of Nursia designed what he termed "a little rule" to help the monastic communities he founded to better love God, self, and one another by providing some guidelines on how to live a spiritual life in community. The Rule covers the essentials of worship, work, study, prayer, personal conduct, the use of time, relationships, leadership and authority, hospitality, and possessions. It fosters a way of life that is rooted and grounded in Christ, providing a tool to help us find a center of stability so needed in today's world. As Joan Chittister wrote in *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today*, the Rule is designed "for ordinary people who live ordinary lives. . . . It was written to provide a model of spiritual development for the average person who intends to live life beyond the superficial or the uncaring."³

Please don't be intimidated by the word "Rule." Benedict's Rule isn't a series of steps that must be followed "or else," or a list of "to-dos" that list makers like myself love to check off. The word *rule* comes from the Greek term *canon*, which originally meant "trellis." This is a wonderful image for us. A trellis is a tool that helps a grapevine become more productive—without it, the branches of the vine will grow into a tangled mass and bear less fruit.

We are the branches in the vine that is Christ (John 15:5). We need a structure to guide our lives so that we may also bear much fruit. The Rule becomes a trellis to which we can attach ourselves, guiding us toward Gospel living. David Steindl-Rast, a brother in the Order of St. Benedict, explains that the Rule of St. Benedict is a way we can "put ourselves into a frame of mind that will lead us to live life in its fullness."⁴ For me, this frame of mind is what Paul called "the same mind that was in Christ Jesus" (Phil 2:5). I'm firmly convinced that the Rule of Benedict can help us to be more mindful, more faith-filled, and more joyous because, in very simple language, Benedict gives us specific ways to live with Christ in our heart.

In Closing

It is my hope and prayer that the Rule of Benedict will become a tool to guide you so that you will walk confidently in the path of your Baptismal Covenant and strengthen your relationship with God, with yourself, and with others. These are the overarching goals of *St. Benedict's Toolbox*. To accomplish this, the book offers the following as additional goals:

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- To know that God is intimately involved in your daily life.
- To listen for God in all aspects of your life, from Scripture to daily occurrences and relationships.
- To apply Benedict's teaching on the Rule to make the often chaotic and fragmented twenty-first-century life less chaotic and fragmented! (Yes, it *can* be done!)
- To discover ways to maintain healthy relationships with others and a healthy and balanced view of self.
- To use the tools in the Toolbox to reflect on your life and to practice ideas from the Rule.

In *The Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages*, Joan Chittister wrote that to live the Rule involves not a set of mechanics but a "change of heart and a turn of mind."⁵ May this journey with Benedict change our hearts and minds, as we who yearn for life take on the mind of Christ and sing his song to the world.

Let us begin!

Clothed then with faith and the performance of good works, let us set out on this way, with the Gospel for our guide, that we may deserve to see him *who has called us to his kingdom* (1 Thess 2:12).

FROM THE PROLOGUE TO THE RULE, VERSE 21 RB1980



TOOLBOX

Introduction

Our Benedictine journey has three key goals: (1) living into our Baptismal Covenant, (2) following Jesus' Great Commandment, and (3) meeting the challenge of living as a Christian in today's world. Here are three tools to help you begin to reflect on these goals.

As you begin these or any of the tools found in this book, pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Tool #1: Living the Baptismal Covenant

Purpose of the Tool. To provide an opportunity to review how you apply the Baptismal Covenant to your life. If you're not a member of the Episcopal Church, you may substitute the Baptismal Covenant or statement on baptism from your church or denomination.

Background on the Tool. One of the goals of this book is to provide you with some ways to deepen your ability to live into your Baptismal

Covenant. It will be helpful for you to know which areas are already strong and which could use some honing.

The Tool

Read the Baptismal Covenant that follows and answer the questions. Write your answers in your journal or note them briefly here. If you're using a Baptismal Covenant or a statement on baptism from a different denomination or church, the reflection questions still apply.

1. Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers?
2. Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?
3. Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?
4. Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?
5. Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?⁶

Which of the actions described in the above questions come most easily for you?

Which of the actions are hardest for you to do?

Which of the actions challenge you?

Are there any areas you wish to know more about?

As you read through this book, keep in mind how you answered these questions. Look for ways that the Rule can help you to live your covenant with God.

Tool #2: A Review of My Relationships

Purpose of the Tool. To give you an opportunity to assess various aspects of your relationship to God, to others, and to yourself.

Background on the Tool. In the Rule, establishing strong relationships with God, with others, and even with oneself is highly important. Relationship and community building are key teachings. Assessing how you view your relationships can help you look for specific teachings in the Rule that can strengthen these relationships.

The Tool

The tool is a simple questionnaire to answer using a sliding scale of 1 to 5. *Be honest in your answers.* Circle the number that best fits where you are and not where you think that you should be! Using the scale shown here, please rate the statements below.

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1	2	3	4	5
almost never	not often	sometimes	often	almost always

MY RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

1. I take time for daily prayer.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I see God at work in the lives of those around me.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I hear and respond to God's direction in my life.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I take time to be quiet with God.	1	2	3	4	5
5. My relationship to God is strong.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I use the Bible as a resource for prayer.	1	2	3	4	5

MY RELATIONSHIP TO MYSELF

7. I take time for myself each day.	1	2	3	4	5
8. There are many different parts to my life, such as family, friends, work, leisure, rest, and so on. Although at times one area may need to take precedence over another, I believe that <i>all</i> of these need to receive appropriate attention.	1	2	3	4	5
9. I am able to give each part of my life this appropriate attention.	1	2	3	4	5
10. There are times when I want to run away, literally or figuratively.	1	2	3	4	5
11. Living in the "present moment" is being attentive to what is happening now without being distracted by past regrets or future anxieties. I find that I am able to live in the present moment.	1	2	3	4	5
12. My life feels fragmented.	1	2	3	4	5

MY RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHERS AND WITH THE WORLD AROUND ME

13. I spend quality time with my family and friends.	1	2	3	4	5
14. I am concerned about the world beyond myself and my family.	1	2	3	4	5

15. I am forgiving of others.	1	2	3	4	5
16. In a difficult situation I am able to remain open to others.	1	2	3	4	5
17. In a conversation I can listen with full attention.	1	2	3	4	5
18. I see Christ in other people.	1	2	3	4	5

When you have finished, look over your answers. As you review your answers, consider answers of 3 or below to indicate areas that you could focus on during your study of the Rule. For example, if you scored 3 on question #6, “I use the Bible as a resource for prayer,” you might want to learn and use *lectio divina*, a form of prayer introduced in chapter 2 that uses Scripture. You may wish to circle the questions that will be a special focus for you during this journey with Benedict.

Tool #3: Mary or Martha?

Purpose of the Tool. To give you an opportunity to assess whether you are more like Mary or more like Martha in your daily life.

Background on the Tool. Martha was focused on actively serving the Lord, Mary on listening to the Lord. Both mirror two important poles of our daily lives—serving others and replenishing our emotional and spiritual “well.” As you work through this book, it will be helpful for you to know which of these modes of living is most comfortable for you.

The Tool

Answer the following questions.

- Do you spend the greater part of your day doing things for others or for yourself?
- Do you take time for yourself each day? How much time? Are you ever able to sit down and read, or talk with a friend?
- How much time do you take each day for prayer, reading Scripture, or meditation?
- Are you comfortable with the amount of time that you have for yourself?
- Are you always on the move from morning until night? Does your schedule leave you exhausted?
- If you could, how would you change the way you spend most days?

When you reflect on the answers to the questions, is there a trend toward always “doing,” jumping from one task to the next without a break? If so, you may be more of a Martha. A trend toward taking time

for reflection is more what we see in Mary. But sometimes we can take *too much* time for ourselves and neglect our responsibilities for others. I like to think that Mary did both—time for herself and her relationship with God and time to help others.

Being like Martha does not necessarily mean we have no relationship with God. And being more like Mary doesn’t mean we do nothing for others. Yet, we may find that we’re more comfortable in one role than in another. Whichever is our comfort role, we need to take some time to develop its opposite. If you are more like Martha, with an outward focus, pay close attention to what Benedict and the Toolboxes suggest regarding prayer, time alone, and balance in life. If you are more like Mary, comfortable with an inward focus, pay close attention to what Benedict and the Toolboxes suggest regarding community, relationships, and service to others.

If you find yourself most often in the action mode with hardly time to catch your breath, then the sections of the book that encourage reflection and quiet will nurture your inward self. If you find yourself most comfortable being alone, spending a considerable time alone, and/or taking time to nurture your spiritual life, then pay attention to the teachings that have us reaching out to others.

The beauty is that the Rule of Benedict provides us with a balanced approach to life that tends to needs of both the inward and the outward person.