

## **Prayer in the Rule of Benedict**

### Introduction

“O God, you are my God, for you I long,  
for you my soul is thirsting.  
My body pines for you  
like a dry, weary land without water.  
So I gaze on you in the sanctuary  
to see your strength and your glory.”(Psalm 63.1-3)

These familiar lines from Psalm 63  
capture the deep desire that is part of a life of prayer,  
that is so important to a monastic, indeed, a Christian vocation.  
In this conference I wish to speak to the issue of private prayer,  
especially as Benedict writes about it in the Rule.

Despite the amount of attention devoted to the distribution of psalms  
in chapters 8-18, Benedict has very little to say about a theology of prayer,  
about the relationship between the Divine Office and lectio,  
the place of silence in praying,  
of how one grows in prayer.  
If I uttered this complaint to Benedict,  
he would most likely look at me in dismay –  
John, it is intended to be a short rule for beginners.

### Mindfulness - John Cassian's Conference 10

Benedict is concerned about mindfulness,  
that we are aware that God is everywhere;  
at choir, in the kitchen and dining room, in the garden,  
in the guesthouse, out in the field, in the scriptorium,  
and the list goes on.

No doubt Benedict has the tenth conference of John Cassian in his mind,  
that wonderful improvisational riff on the opening lines of Psalm 70:  
God, come to my assistance.  
Lord, make haste to help me.

Listen to John Cassian, who found in these simple opening lines  
a key to prayer at all times.

He writes:

“The formula for this discipline and prayer  
that you are seeking, then, shall be presented to you.  
Every monk who longs for the continual awareness of God  
should be in the habit of meditating on it ceaselessly in his heart,  
after having driven out every kind of thought,  
because he will be unable to hold fast to it in any other way,

than by being freed from all bodily cares and concerns.

Not without reason has this verse been selected from out of the whole body of Scripture.

For it takes up all the emotions

that can be applied to human nature

and with great correctness and accuracy

it adjusts itself to every condition and attack.

It contains an invocation of God in the face of any crisis,

the humility of a devout confession,

the watchfulness of constant concern and of constant fear (hear “fear of the Lord!”)

a consciousness of one’s frailty,

the assurance of being heard,

and confidence in a protection that is always present and at hand.”<sup>1</sup>

And then Cassian goes through the logismoi, the eight thoughts and shows the generality of this simple prayer.

“If I am seized by the passion of gluttony...”

“If a headache disturbs and hinders me when I want to read...”

“If I am overtaken by the urges of anger, avarice or sadness...”

“If I am boiling over with a multitude of different distractions...”

“if I am encompassed by the nocturnal terrors of the demons...”

In all these cases, I should cry out with all my strength,

“God, come to my assistance,

Lord, make haste to help me.”

I am not beginning to do justice to this chapter in Cassian --

If you have not read this chapter recently,

I urge you do so –

it is the voice of someone who brings prayer to the whole human condition.

Boniface Ramsey’s new translation makes it a delight.

You may have a favorite verse from a psalm that functions in a similar manner.

For example:

“You, Lord, are my lamp,

my God who lightens my darkness.” Psalm 18

“Arise Lord, save me my God,

you who strike all my foes on the mouth,

you who break the teeth of the wicked!” (psalm 3)

Another ultra-famous text is what has become known as the “Jesus prayer.”

In step 12 of chapter seven on humility,

Benedict alludes to the words of the tax collector from the parable,

“Lord, I am a sinner and not worthy to raise my eyes to heaven.” (RB 7.65)

This is another such short prayer

that ultimately becomes the Jesus prayer:  
“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God,  
have mercy on me, a sinner.”

A favorite of mine is from psalm 64:  
Hear me, O God, as I complain!”

In chapter 19 Benedict urges us to be fully, mindfully present  
at the Divine Office, to give ourselves to it with our full attention and intention,  
with minds, hearts, and bodies, and voices.  
No splitting, no multi-tasking.

In chapter 20 Benedict urges us to pray out of sense of humility and respect for God,  
who sees everything we see and a whole lot more.  
With a nod to Jesus’ words in Matthew that we should not babble on like the pagans do,  
thinking that more is better,  
Benedict urges us to make prayer short and pure,  
unless the Holy Spirit extends it.  
In community, prayer should always be brief.  
Given the length of the Divine Office that we receive from Benedict,  
clearly he has a different measure of short and pure!!  
He may be comparing his arrangement with that from the monastic tradition,  
where, for example, the Vigil of Sunday went through the night.

Benedict’s admonitions about who to pray for are practical and focused:

- pray with guests, to be united in peace (53)
- for a straying brother or sister, one who is having a hard time (28.4)
- for sisters or brothers on a journey, for safety (67.1)
- for sisters or brothers who are absent from the Work of God (67.2)

Benedict also urges us to pray at key moments.  
In the Prologue, verse 4, he writes,  
“Before you begin any good work,  
pray that God by grace will bring it to completion.”<sup>2</sup>  
This simple sentence conveys almost a perfect balance  
between the free gift of grace that comes to us from God,  
without which nothing good will happen  
and the utter necessity of our commitment, energy, and desire to act,  
to bring God’s will into being.

In chapter 49 on the observance of Lent  
the abbot is instructed to pray for each monk for their Lenten intention (49.8).  
It is Benedict’s caution and concern that the Lenten intention  
not be just another extension of the false self.  
The abbot is to approve and bless the proposal of the individual monk  
so that it bears rich fruit.

In chapter seven on humility,  
in verse 20 we ask that God's will be done (7.20).  
As we learn slowly in monastic life,  
it is all about discerning God's will  
and then focusing our energies to bring it about.  
We will always be doing the right thing,  
always spending our energies in the right manner  
if we are doing God's will –  
and it will succeed, no matter how frail or misguided the effort looks at first.  
And that is because it is not about us,  
it is about God.  
The hard part is discerning the “will of God”  
with so many different strands, ideas, goals, agendas operating.  
It can sometimes feel like trying to detect visible light with an infrared detector,  
a mismatch!!

In verse 56 of chapter four, the instruments of good works,  
Benedict urges us to devote ourselves frequently to prayer (4.56).  
This would be an extension of the practice  
of using a psalm verse and carrying it with us throughout the day,  
in a variety of situations,  
and bringing to those situations a spirit and sensibility of being a prayerful man.

#### The gift of tears

Finally, whenever Benedict speaks about prayer,  
he speaks about it in relationship to the gift of tears.  
In the Latin, the word used is compunction –  
which is the translation of the Greek word *penthos*.<sup>3</sup>  
Compunction was to become the name  
for all emotions that come from supernatural thought.  
As one author put it, Christ did not say,  
“Blessed are those who have wept,”  
but those who weep,  
that is, those who constantly remember the glory from which they have fallen  
and they have been lamentably exiled in this place of tears.  
And yet, blessed are those who mourn,  
for they shall be comforted!  
Mourning would now be the equivalent of consolation,  
indeed, of happiness.

Benedict refers to tears in four different places:  
RB 4.57 - “Every day in tears and sighs, confess your past sins to God in prayer.”

20.3 – “We should realize that it is not in much talking that we shall be heard, but in tearful compunction. “

49.4. The proper way to do this is to restrain ourselves from all evil habits and to devote ourselves to tearful prayer, reading, compunction of heart and asceticism.”

52.4 “But if someone wishes to pray privately at some other time, let him simply go in and pray, not in a loud voice but with tears and full attention of heart.”

These tears growing out of compunction are truly a gift because they reflect our inner awareness of the depth of our sinfulness.

This sense of sinfulness does not fit into some cheesy psychological category such as “low self esteem” or unresolved guilt.

No, it is that growing awareness of the power and destructive force that sin has in my life,

and the seemingly endless, creative ways that these old, patterns can suddenly reassert themselves.

These tears reflect not only the awareness of the consequences of one’s own sinfulness but the fallout that ripples through my life

and how it affects others and their lives.

These tears reflect our awareness of God’s just judgment and the absolute certainty of death for each one of us.

These tears are for the world,  
a world which has been blessed with the message of Jesus, the Gospel,  
all the gifts of the Holy Spirit,  
and rejects that message because of itchy ears,  
and a desire for other pathways that lead only to violence and death.

These tears are for all the disunity in our world,  
in our Church, between churches,  
between religious traditions and nations;  
a disunity that causes so much pain;  
for any of our institutions that seem to be stuck,  
whether our government, our Church,  
or nation-states that cannot seem to resolve the most basic conflicts.

These tears are not about despair.  
They are a manifestation of faith in the redemption won by Christ,  
that will be manifest in the way and the time that God wills.

These are the explicit references to prayer in the Rule  
but we know that the whole of monastic life is arranged and ordered  
so that we become women and men of prayer.  
The exquisite balance that Benedict aims for  
is a strong support for resilience and growth in prayer.

As Father Columba Stewart notes,<sup>4</sup>

the word compunction denotes pricking or goading,  
when we apply this to the human heart.  
Puncture a human heart and it will bleed;  
pierce it spiritually and the result is tears.  
Benedict is tapping into this ancient spiritual tradition in the East  
and is asking us to pray with awareness.  
And awareness will, at times, bring tears.

### The Holy Trinity and prayer

After dealing with the emotional topic of tears in the Rule,  
it may seem cognitively dissonant to speak the place of a Trinitarian faith in our prayer.  
However, with the celebration of the Trinity just two days back,  
I think it important and relevant to comment  
about the place of the Trinity in our prayer and spirituality.  
Having a healthy, robust Trinitarian faith is really important –  
not an idle intellectual effort.

I think that a rich Trinitarian theology and spirituality  
are crucial to our experience of prayer:  
at Eucharist, with the psalms in the Divine Office,  
in our lectio divina and private prayer throughout the day.

For one thing, a Trinitarian spirituality is a baptismal spirituality.  
Whatever our differences,  
each one of us has been claimed  
“in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”  
The vows we proclaimed publicly began with the words,  
“In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”  
Our Christian and monastic life is one of being conformed to Christ,  
anointed in the Spirit, and gifted in the Father.

As soon as we think of ourselves in relationship to Christ  
we are being brought into relationship with the Father as well,  
and the contact point is the Holy Spirit.  
When Athanasius reflected on Christ at the time of the council of Nicea,  
he became convinced that Christ had to be “true God of true God,”  
that Christ was *homoousios*.  
Furthermore, for Athanasius the divinity of the Holy Spirit  
flows from the same logic.  
The Holy Spirit cannot be “creature” either.  
Those gathered for the Council were exhausted  
by the time they got to issues related to the Holy Spirit,  
and so the Nicene Creed says simply, “We believe in the Holy Spirit.”

We know Athanasius as the author of the famous apologetic for monastic life,  
*The Life of Antony*.

As teacher and scholar Father Jeremy Driscoll notes,  
“Athanasius is not writing about Antony in an historical vacuum.”  
The transformation of Antony that occurs in those pages occurs  
because of Antony’s faith in Jesus Christ as “the only Son of God,  
eternally begotten of the Father,  
God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God, begotten not made,  
one in being with the Father.”

That is, faith in Christ as true God and true man,  
who gave himself for us, is the basis for Antony’s transformation.  
If Antony’s faith were distorted, that is, if he followed Arius,  
who denied the full divinity of Christ,  
then Antony’s transformation would be skewed.  
A Christian spirituality that is thoroughly Trinitarian  
will be concerned with living the Gospel to the fullest measure,  
living in Christ, in the Spirit, to the glory of God the Father.

As we grow in prayerful mindfulness of God,  
we wish to do so in a full and rich Trinitarian sense.

#### Response

A confrere noted that he has been reading Father Michael Casey’s work on humility and how counter cultural this chapter in the Rule of Benedict is in relationship to post-modern culture, especially the culture of America.

Sometimes the gift of tears comes not from a sense of sinfulness but because of the experience of the creation itself being out kilter. A poignant example of this is life of Aloysius Gonzaga, whose feast we celebrated today, whose care of those dying from the Black Plague, surely influenced his own spiritual awareness of sin and the damage it does but also the creation containing the seeds of destruction in his own time.

Other confreres noted that the gift of tears is not only in relationship to an awareness of sinfulness, but is experienced just as often in deep gladness and joy: that the universe is the way it is, put together in a powerful and beautiful way, providing a place for life and beauty; that though one is a sinner, yet the grace and glory of God in Jesus Christ abounds, that though the judgment is fearful, yet one is confident of redemption, not in overconfidence, but because of the great mercy we have received in Jesus Christ.

Agnes Rambler might respond to this conference, especially the part on the gift of tears, with  
“Ja, that’s where the grace comes in.”

Abbot John Klassen, OSB  
June 21, 2011

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<sup>1</sup> *John Cassian: The Conferences*, translated and annotated by Boniface Ramsey, OP (New York: Newman Press, 1997), 379

<sup>2</sup> All quotations from the Rule of Benedict are from Terrence G. Kardong, *Benedict's Rule: A Translation and Commentary* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1996),

<sup>3</sup> Irene Hausherr, SJ, *Penthos: The Doctrine of Compunction in the Christian East* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1982), 23.

<sup>4</sup> Columba Stewart, *Prayer and Community: The Benedictine Tradition* (New York: Orbis, 1998), 49-50.