

Episode 3: St. Benedict & the Benedictine Order

The great St. Benedict is the father of Western monasticism. He took the Eastern monastic ideas of Saint Anthony, Saint Pachomius, and Saint Basil, and adapted them to Western needs.

St. Benedict was born in the year 480 into a wealthy family in Spoleto, Italy. He was educated in Rome but by the time he was nineteen or twenty years old he saw how the world trapped his friends into vice. He could have lived the comfortable life of a nobleman but instead he withdrew from his studies and the world. He went to live as a hermit in the mountains near Spoleto and stayed there for three years. But news of his holiness and miracle-working spread.

Eventually a group of monks, knowing of his holiness, came to him when their abbot died and begged him to be their abbot. At first he refused because he knew they'd think he's too strict. But they kept asking so he gave in.

After a little while they realized they didn't like his style so they thought they'd just ask him to leave - and by that, I mean they tried to kill him!

They poisoned his wine hoping he'd drink it but when he blessed the cup with the sign of the cross it shattered. He got up from the table calmly called them together and said:

"Almighty God have mercy on you and forgive you. Why have you used me in this manner? Did not I tell you beforehand that our manner of living could never agree together? Go your ways and seek out some other father suitable to your own conditions. For I do not intend to stay any longer among you."

St. Benedict went back to being a hermit but people heard of his holiness and the miracles he performed and they came to him to be under his guidance. He established twelve monasteries with twelve monks each with a superior monk over them.

One of St. Benedict's greatest contributions is his rule. It was different from any other before his. His rule regulated many aspects of the monk's life while the rules of the Egyptian fathers and Saint Basil don't so much.

The rule said monks are to get six to eight hours of unbroken sleep per night in a proper bed .. two plates of cooked vegetables per day with bread and wine and the sick monks were able to eat meat.

Monks were also allowed to have habits that would keep them warm in the cold and they weren't to be made of fabric that was too old. St. Benedict wanted to keep the bodies of the monks healthy with proper food, clothing and sleep so they'd be able to pray and work well.

He also directed that the monks make a vow of stability which means that they stay with their monasteries until death unless they're moved to another by the superior. He wanted the monastery to be like a big family.

He wanted his monks to work, saying, "Idleness is the enemy of the soul."

They were to weed the garden, bring in the harvest, haul water, do everything for the love of God. Monks were to do whatever work was needed for the necessities of the others. They were even able to go out of the monastery to do work as long as they were able to attend prayers and it didn't take them away from the community.

They taught poor children in schools, taught in universities, practiced the various arts, agriculture, they took care of souls, or they could devote their time to study. It was really the first time that a monk would be able to do some form of public work of mercy.

Sometimes St. Benedict would spend the cold night outside, hauling water so that the other monks wouldn't have to do it. Much of the time he was doing things for the other monks. He was the example of the perfect abbot.

The monks were to be cheerful, unquestioning, and prompt with regard to obedience towards his brethren and superiors. And his superiors were bound to consult either the elders or the whole community in matters that affected all of them.

There were three types of vocations in the Benedictine order. The first were the choir monks. At first monks weren't priests but over time monks were being ordained and they needed time for study and ministry - but they still did farm work.

The second type, called lay brothers, were monks who weren't clerics. They didn't have the obligation to do the whole divine office and they did more of the laborious work around the monastery.

The third type were oblates. They were laymen who attached themselves to a monastery. They lived like the monks and even wore habits, but they kept their property and didn't make vows. Instead they promise to be obedient to the abbot while they're in the monastery.

But in all of this St. Benedict didn't intend on starting a religious order as we understand it today. He intended that his rule could be used by anybody to live, work, pray, and to save his soul.

The order isn't unified under one superior. Monasteries can be autonomous or else there can be several monasteries together in a congregation. Usually, when one monastery gets big enough another is formed and it becomes independent when it has enough members.

The Benedictines left an indelible mark in the life of the Church. The monks preserved the written treasures of the ancient world when barbarian tribes invaded Europe. They copied by hand the scriptures and writings of the fathers of the Church. Not only that though, they preserved and copied greek manuscripts from the ancient philosophers and just about any manuscript they could get their hands on.

Without the sons of St. Benedict we'd know hardly anything about the world before the sixth century.

The sons of St. Benedict helped to preserve the faith and worldly knowledge for future generations. They formed the spiritual and intellectual character of the world in the middle ages.

All that just because a twenty year-old Benedict followed his vocation and left the world to live the Gospel more perfectly.

If one Catholic can have so much influence on the sanctification of the Church and the world imagine what can happen if more are faithful to their vocations.

St. Benedict, pray for us.

Preview

The great St. Benedict is the father of Western monasticism. While the barbarian tribes were raging over the bones of the Roman empire burning and massacring their way through Western Europe, the Benedictine family saved culture and brought sanity to a world ravaged by war.

The funny thing is, he never intended on starting a religious order. He thought his rule could be used by anybody to live, work, pray, to save his soul. But one of the most amazing things about St. Benedict's rule is that Benedictine life has pretty much been the same for over 1,400 years.

Since the 6th century the Benedictine order has spread all over the world leaving an indelible mark in the life of the Church. They preserved the written treasures of the ancient world when barbarian tribes invaded and sacked the ancient cultural centers of Europe. They hand copied the scriptures and writings of the fathers of the Church.

Not only that though, they preserved and copied greek manuscripts from the ancient philosophers.. and ancient works of literature. Without the sons of St. Benedict the ancient world would be a big mystery.

They preserved knowledge for future generations and formed the spiritual and intellectual character of the world in the middle ages.

In fact, all the literature of the early middle ages has come to us, in a large part, through the Benedictine monasteries.

They told us all we know about the secular and ecclesiastical history of the time while we have virtually no records from the barbarian tribes themselves.

Sources:

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