

CHAPTER EIGHT: SPIRITUALITY IN THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

As has been mentioned, the spirituality of The Episcopal Church is, historically, essentially Benedictine. “Historically” is a necessary proviso, because other approaches to spiritual life are beginning to creep in, too. Still, the nature of our worship, as formed by the *Book of Common Prayer*, is based on Benedictine principles. What, then, are those principles?

The Benedictine model was predominant in medieval/renaissance Europe. Even the other major monastic houses (the Augustinians, the Cistercians, the Trappists, etc.) begin with Benedict and then adapt somewhat from there. The Rule of St. Benedict, though read by relatively few Christians, is one of the most influential documents in Christian history. By the way, it makes for interesting and rewarding reading, and it makes an excellent discussion starter for an adult forum in Christian formation.

The Benedictine way is balanced, ordered, moderate, sustainable, disciplined, and God-focused. It has sustained whole communities for centuries. It is not just about prayer, *per se*. It is about all of life being directed God-ward. The basis of the Benedictine Rule is a three-fold commitment to stability, obedience, and amendment of life. For monks in the community, there were additional vows of poverty (the monks do not personally own property) and chastity (which really means, essentially, celibacy, since chastity is required for all Christians.)

A School for the Lord’s Service

Every Benedictine community is intended to be a sort of academy and laboratory for Christian living. The basic model is that of the family. At the head is the Abbot or Abbess, as father/mother figure to the community (which elects its leaders). All members are life-long learners as well as teachers for one another. The goal is to “perfect” Christian life on earth, in preparation for the reality of the coming Heavenly Kingdom.

An Episcopal parish is likewise so intended. The goal of church membership and attendance is to “get better” at being a Christian, with the help of all. Baptism represents birth into the family of God, and the family meal is celebrated around the Holy Table. In today’s more egalitarian atmosphere, we tend to go easy on the role of clergy as communal father or mother, and particularly on the authority implied in that image. Still, there is a strong emphasis on teaching and growing, repentance and amendment of life, humility and self-awareness.

Ora et Labora (Prayer and Work)

The Benedictine day is organized around the management of linear time. In the monastery, there are eight periods for communal prayer, generally built around the Psalms, with collects and other scripture readings based on the time of day. Cranmer condensed these into two sets, Matins (Morning Prayer) and Vespers (Evening Prayer). Today’s *Book of Common*

Prayer adds prayers for Noonday and the end of the day (Compline). The idea is that, whether in the church community, the family, or even alone, the Christian person can maintain the discipline of regular, common prayer. In the Benedictine tradition, one prays because it is time to pray, not because one feels like it. The result is that one prays far more often, and that the inclination often comes after the fact.

But Benedict also sees work as prayer. Work includes several activities: not only the actual labor of whatever one's own assignment or calling may be, but also reading (study) and exercise.

The idea is that we who are Christians should offer our labor as prayer to God, and let God's presence be part of everything we do. As with prayer, we work when it is time to work—and that means, not all the time! The Protestant Work Ethic is not Benedictine! The hardest part of Benedict's way is to focus on the moment, not the goal of the finished product. It is not about completing the task: it is about attending to the quality and the challenge of the project as it unfolds. When the time to work is over, we turn to something else! That is living life in moderation and balance, not allowing one thing to dominate our life.

The intellectual, spiritual, and physical aspects of life are part of our work. We should reserve a portion of each day for study, for exercise, and for recreation. (Note how well this idea fits in with the topic of Stewardship, coming up next.)

The Benedictine promises of chastity and poverty translate well to individual and family life, too, and they also have to do with Christian principles of Stewardship as well as responsibility and discipline. Chastity, in the context of a married couple, means faithfulness and mutual respect within monogamy. Poverty means living within one's means and without avarice, extravagance, or accumulation of wealth. Benedict taught that his monks (or later, nuns) should have two habits, well-made and in good repair. One was for wearing, and the other for cleaning. He also advocated a balanced, palatable, and healthful diet. He was not an ascetic, preaching starvation and abuse of the body. The antidote to excess is not deprivation, but sufficiency.

A Rule of Life

Years ago, when people seemingly lived inside a Jane Austen or Anthony Trollope novel, perhaps there was no need for a Rule of Life outside the monastery. (Or perhaps there was!) At any rate, ideal circumstances clearly no longer apply, if they ever did. Life enfolded within the contexts of scripture and prayer book is intended to produce faithful disciples of Jesus. Yet not many of us live in the shadow of the church steeple anymore, and not many parishes can even offer daily morning and evening prayer—even weekly Bible study is getting to be rarer--since so

few would attend. Modern Christians need a guide, a framework, to help them maintain a Christian lifestyle, and we must create our own. Enter the Benedictine Rule of Life.

We chafe at the very thought of a “rule.” It sounds so restrictive and authoritarian. It need not be onerous, however. A Rule of Life is an agreement one makes with oneself, with God as witness and help. It involves all areas of life, and it represents one’s own commitment to live an ordered, balanced, committed, and “sufficient” life, a life of obedience, stability, and amendment (i.e. growth). The idea is that it leads to a better and freer life. One of the attractions of a Rule is that it is of our own devising, not imposed from outside. It is therefore subject to revision from time to time. If in our enthusiasm, we made it too onerous, we can ease off some; if in our cowardice, we made it too lax, we can increase some parts.

To be truly balanced, though, a good Rule of Life should contain disciplines that cover the gamut of Godly habits: time for prayer and reflection; regular worship, including the sacrament of Holy Communion, repentance, and absolution; a plan for proportional and sacrificial giving; study, particularly Bible study; work that is ministry, not merely labor; healthful diet, rest, and recreation; and time dedicated to healthy relationships. Being a Christian in the Episcopal tradition is not just about what happens during an hour and a quarter on Sunday mornings when it is convenient to attend church: it is about every moment during which we are breathing.

The end result of all this is not exhaustion, as one might saucily predict (no, that is the end result of the typical American, Twenty-first Century life-style!). Rather, as promised by Benedict himself, many centuries ago, it is something we moderns all crave and desire above all:

Peace. The one that “passes all understanding.”