

BLESSED IN GRACE AND NAME

The Abbey of Monte Cassino is perched on top of a mountain that lies midway between Rome and Naples. There is a beautiful statue on the grounds given to the monks by Konrad Adenauer and the German people in recognition of German bombing of the monastery in 1944. The statue shows Saint Benedict, standing as he dies, held up by two of the monks. This is a scene that is described in Pope Saint Gregory's *Life of Benedict*. Founded around 520 by Benedict, the monastery has been destroyed three times by invaders. The fourth re-building now exists. It gives meaning to the motto of Monte Cassino, "*Succisa Virescit*," which means "cut down its rises again."

Benedict, whose name means "blessed," was born with his twin sister, Scholastica, in Norcia (Nursia) in the Umbrian mountains. He studied in Rome but fled the decaying city to go north-east to the mountains around Subiaco. There he lived in a cave as a hermit before attracting followers and then he founded a number of monasteries. Later, he fled over the mountains, south to Cassino near the town of Aquino. There he wrote a Rule for Monks and there he died around 547.

Monks, mainly eremitical hermits, were living in the deserts of Egypt and Syria for some centuries by then. There were also some cenobitic (communal) communities such as founded by Pachomius and Martin of Tours. It was ordinary for an abbot to put together a guide, known as a Rule, for his/her monks. Benedict's genius is seen in his acute understanding of human nature and his toning down of the severities practiced by monks before his time.

By the thirteenth century the development of urban areas saw the founding of mendicant orders such as Franciscans and Dominicans. For many centuries before that, monasteries were the heart of European civilization and church. Hostels, schools, infirmaries, refuge for pilgrims and source of meaning for people seeking the meaning of life all were found at monastic sites. Monks gave employment to local people, provided help and spirituality to all who sought help. But the basis of their life was prayer and the focused search for God.

The Church is today polarized and divided. We live in a secularized society that does not admit the presence of a transcendent being that provides meaning, hope and direction to our lives. Yes, we do not want a Christian nation per se nor

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the superiority of any religion. But we need the values that come from the harmonious unity of human beings, all of creation, each individual person and the creative presence of that which is bigger than us and is beyond us. A Benedictine monastery exists as a reminder that the ongoing search and the exploration of that which is beyond us is the daily concern of its monks. People come to a monastery to sense the sacredness of life, the peace and serenity of not having to be the center of life myself, the hope that prevails even in a shattered and confused society. The very existence of a monastery establishes a life style that centers in the daily search for the divine and growth in that relationship. All else follows. Benedict helped us to find the harmony of prayer, work and leisure. He emphasized the importance of community where we learn to live with the difficulties of people's bodily and mental shortcomings. We accept our own negativities while learning to be more loving of others. In American society a monastery challenges the individualism, the isolationism, the indifference to the needs of others.

The future of our society, our democracy is being challenged. It is not only our so-called leaders who are misdirecting us. It is a large number of people who have been swallowed up in a culture of greed, consumerism, pleasure, individual wants. Something has to give. Our religious traditions, with all their human mistakes, have much to offer. Benedict's answer to a decaying society in the sixth century may be a good one for us today. Simplicity, the common good, stability, humility, the willingness to change, a deep spirituality based on scripture, as well as the centrality of the Eternal One are needed, as they were for Benedict's people.

I have been expressing my own opinion which sees the place of a monastery in our future as a very significant presence and assistance. Many monasteries no doubt have to change and adapt to a technological society. The place of lay men and women will have to be part of a monastic scene. And the biggest question is whether any young people are going to be part of these developing monasteries. It will be a loss if we continue the trend of closing and disappearing monasteries. I have only the Holy Spirit to trust to bring forth change needed for the future. As a Christian, I believe we have Jesus Christ as our Lord and brother to help us along the way. Jesus is the way into the great mystery, the dark abyss, the transcendent One whom he called Father. We are not alone. Monastic communities, among other sacred places, can be the saving presence for our future. The prophetic and

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mystical traditions of Christianity are alive. The love and warmth of Mary, mother and protector sustain her followers.

Many people ask monks to pray for them. Hopefully we help them to pray themselves and embrace the way of Benedict in making sense of this world of ours. What do you think? Contact me at joycet@glastonburyabbey.org.

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Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.