

The Rule of St. Benedict (ca. 480-547)

Listen, O my son, to the precepts of thy master, and incline the ear of thy heart, and cheerfully receive and faithfully execute the admonitions of thy loving Father, that by the toil of obedience thou may return to Him from whom by the sloth of disobedience thou hast gone away.

To thee, therefore, my speech is now directed, who, giving up thine own will, takes up the strong and most excellent arms of obedience, to do battle for Christ the Lord, the true King. Our hearts and our bodies must, therefore, be ready to do battle under the biddings of holy obedience; and let us ask the Lord that He supply by the help of His grace what is impossible to us by nature.

And if, flying from the pains of hell, we desire to reach life everlasting, then, while there is yet time, and we are still in the flesh, and are able during the present life to fulfil all these things, we must make haste to do now what will profit us forever.

The Abbot who is worthy to be over a monastery, ought always to be mindful of what he is called, and make his works square with his name of Superior. For he is believed to hold the place of Christ in the monastery. . . . When, therefore, anyone takes the name of Abbot he should govern his disciples by a twofold teaching; namely, he should show them all that is good and holy by his deeds more than by his words; explain the commandments of God to intelligent disciples by words, but show the divine precepts to the dull and simple by his works.

The first degree of humility is obedience without delay. This becomes those who, on account of the holy subjection which they have promised, or of the fear of hell, or the glory of life everlasting, hold nothing dearer than Christ. As soon as anything has been commanded by the Superior they permit no delay in the execution, as if the matter had been commanded by God Himself. . . . The brethren must render the service of obedience not only to the Abbot, but they must thus also obey one another, knowing that they shall go to God by this path of obedience.

Because of the importance of silence, let permission to speak be seldom given to perfect disciples even for good and holy and edifying discourse, for it is written: “In much talk thou shalt not escape sin” ([Prov 10:19](#)).

Brethren, the Holy Scripture cries to us saying: “Every one that exalts himself shall be humbled; and he that humbles himself shall be exalted” ([Lk 14:11](#); [18:14](#)). The first degree of humility, then, is that a man always have the fear of God before his eyes (cf. [Ps 35\[36\]:2](#)), shunning all forgetfulness, and that he be ever mindful of all that God has commanded, that he always considers in his mind how those who despise God will burn in hell for their sins, and that life everlasting is prepared for those who fear God.

The twelfth degree of humility is, when a monk is not only humble of heart, but always lets it appear also in his whole exterior to all that see him; namely, at the Work of God, in the garden, on a journey, in the field, or wherever he may be, sitting, walking, or standing, let him always have his head bowed down, his eyes fixed on the ground, ever holding himself guilty of his sins, thinking that he is already standing before the dread judgment seat of God, and always saying to himself in his heart what the publican in the Gospel said, with his eyes fixed on the ground: “Lord, I am a sinner and not worthy to lift up mine eyes to heaven” ([Lk 18:13](#)); and again with the Prophet: “I am bowed down and humbled exceedingly” ([Ps 37\[38\]:7-9](#); [Ps 118\[119\]:107](#)).

Having, therefore, ascended all these degrees of humility, the monk will presently arrive at that love of God, which being perfect, casteth out fear ([1 Jn 4:18](#)). In virtue of this love all things which at first he observed not without fear, he will now begin to keep without any effort, and as it were, naturally by force of habit, no longer from the fear of hell, but from the love of Christ, from the very habit of good and the pleasure in virtue. May the Lord be pleased to manifest all this by His Holy Spirit in His laborer now cleansed from vice and sin.

As the Prophet says: “Seven times a day I have given praise to Thee” ([Ps 118\[119\]:164](#)), this sacred sevenfold number will be fulfilled by us in this wise if we perform the duties of our service at the time of Lauds [daybreak], Prime [6], Tierce [9], Sext [12], None [3], Vespers [sunset], and Compline [dark], seeing to it that the whole Psalter of one hundred and fifty psalms be said every week, and that it always start again from the beginning at Matins [2am] on Sunday.

The vice of personal ownership must by all means be cut out in the monastery by the very root, so that no one may presume to give or receive anything without the command of the Abbot. . . . Let all things be common to all, as it is written. And let no one call or take to himself anything as his own (cf. [Acts 4:32](#)).

Reading must not be wanting at the table of the brethren when they are eating.

Monks should always be given to silence, especially, however, during the hours of the night. . . . All, therefore, having assembled in one place, let them say Compline, and after going out from Compline, let there be no more permission from that time on for anyone to say anything.

Idleness is the enemy of the soul; and therefore, the brethren ought to be employed in manual labor at certain times, at others, in devout reading.

Let all guests who arrive be received as Christ, because He will say: “I was a stranger and you took Me in” ([Mt 25:35](#)). And let due honor be shown to all, especially to those “of the household of the faith” ([Gal 6:10](#)) and to wayfarers.

Let those who receive new clothes always return the old ones, to be put away in the wardrobe for the poor. For it is sufficient for a monk to have two tunics and two cowls, for wearing at night and for washing. Hence, what is over and above is superfluous and must be taken away. For their bedding, let a straw mattress, a blanket, a coverlet, and a pillow be sufficient. And that this vice of private ownership may be cut off by the root, let everything necessary be given by the Abbot.

As there is a harsh and evil zeal which separates from God and leads to hell, so there is a virtuous zeal which separates from vice and leads to God and life everlasting. Let the monks, therefore, practice this zeal with most ardent love; namely, that in honor they forerun one another (cf. [Rom 12:10](#)). Let them fear God and love their Abbot with sincere and humble affection; let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ, and may He lead us all together to life everlasting.

Thou, therefore, who hastenest to the heavenly home, with the help of Christ fulfil this least rule written [as the path to God] for a beginning; and then thou shalt with God's help attain at last to the greater heights of knowledge and virtue which we have mentioned above.