

There are evidently four kinds of monks. The first are the Cenobites, that is, those who live in monasteries, serving under a Rule and an abbot. The second are the anchorites or hermits, that is those who not in the first fervour of their conversion, but after long probation in a monastery, having learned in association with many brethren how to fight against the devil, go out well armed from the ranks of the community to the solitary combat of the desert. They are able now to live without the help of others, and by their own strength and God's assistance, to fight against the temptation of mind and body.¹

The focus of this commentary will be Saint Benedict of Nursia's *The Rule Of St. Benedict*, which serves as a basis for the path of monasticism that, over the years, many chose to take. Being a text that became a cornerstone of monasticism as we know it today, one finds a profound reflection on the diverse paths monks can tread. The quoted passage, "There are evidently four kinds of monks..." encapsulates Benedict's classification of monks into two primary categories: the Cenobites and the Anchorites.

In 'The Rule of St. Benedict,' the saintly author artfully describes two primary types of monks: the Cenobites and the Anchorites. The former thrive in a communal setting, fostering spiritual growth through mutual support and shared discipline, focusing their efforts on self-development and utilising their community as means of strengthening their inner, spiritual barriers, using their camaraderie to battle against their perceived evils and Satan's temptations that may lead them astray, weaken their resolve, their spirit, ultimately leading to their downfall. The latter, emerging from communal training, empowered by the Rules, skills and spiritual strength, embrace the solitude of the desert to engage in spiritual warfare with newfound autonomy. These two paths, though distinct, are not mutually exclusive; they coexist in a dynamic interplay within the monastic tradition.

Benedict's first category, the Cenobites, a term derived from the Greek "koinos bios," meaning "common life", describes these monks very well, painting a picture of a simple life without many luxuries, which we came to associate with the monks who live these days in different parts of the world. These monks live within monastic communities, allowing *The Rule Of St Benedict* to serve as a guideline to their everyday lives and actions, gaining their strength from the words of their predecessors. As with most spiritual traditions, especially monastic spiritualities (non-christian examples would include Buddhist monks), the community, as well as contemplation, serve as a focal point in spiritual growth surrounded by mutual support, which in turn serves to teach and grow mutual and personal accountability. St Benedict's emphasis on community and togetherness draws a direct connection from the lives of the Apostles and their time with Jesus.

'The Rule of St. Benedict' lays down specific guidelines for the Cenobites, including obedience to the abbot, communal prayer, and sharing of material resources. Dom David Knowles, a renowned scholar of monasticism, describes in depth how these practices

¹ Saint Benedict, *The Rule of St. Benedict*. Direct quotation of the essay title.

fostered a sense of belonging and spiritual discipline in his work. He notes that Benedictine monasticism in England adhered to the principles of 'The Rule of St. Benedict,' creating an environment conducive to intellectual growth and the nurturing of virtues.² The Rule that Cistercians followed in the orders as well.

Benedict's second category, the Anchorites, otherwise known as hermits, presents a contrasting path. These monks emerge from the communal setting after prolonged training, equipped with the spiritual weaponry, a secret to their lone survival, gained through the communal life of the abbey they lived in before their lonesome existence. They venture into the solitude of the desert to engage in a solitary battle against inner demons and temptations focusing their life on devotion to Christ, meditation and prayer, and living their life by relying on their faith in God and the things He provides. Benedict aptly describes this journey as a "solitary combat of the desert".³ This approach to spirituality and Christian devotion stems directly from the teachings of Christ and his own experiences within a desert, his trials of temptation and his battle against the Devil.

The anchoritic tradition resonates with the early Christian desert fathers like St. Anthony and St. Pachomius. John Cassian, influenced by these figures, documented their practices in "Conferences".⁴ Cassian highlights the transformative power of solitude, echoing Benedict's belief that hermits, having honed their spiritual skills within the community, can now rely on their strength and divine assistance to navigate the arduous path of solitude.⁵ Stephen J. Davis reinforces this theme in his scholarly work *The Early Coptic Papacy: The Egyptian Church and Its Leadership in Late Antiquity*. Davis explores the significance of the desert tradition in the early Coptic Church and how anchorites played a pivotal role in shaping the spirituality of the time.⁶

Both of the paths set by St. Benedict in his Rule reflect the teachings of Christ and the early Christian communities. When looking closely, we can see direct parallels between the examples set by Christ and Benedict's teachings. Christ's battle against the Devil in the desert can be treated as an example of how solitude and reliance on the earth-given sustenance can strengthen the mind and spirit, with the direction of the person's focus being towards their thoughts. This path allows for a deeper understanding of human nature and, even though it is much harder to sustain for long periods of time, is arguably more effective in achieving a more profound understanding of the outer and inner world. The Cenobites' way, being a direct reflection of the Apostles and the early Christian way, allows

² Dom David Knowles, *The Monastic Order in England: A History of Its Development from the Times of St Dunstan to the Fourth Lateran Council, 940-1216*, (Cambridge University Press, 1963).

³ Saint Benedict, *The Rule of St. Benedict*, Translated by Leonard J. Doyle, (Liturgical Press, 2001).

⁴ John Cassian. *Conferences*, Translated by Colm Luibhéid, (Paulist Press, 1985).

⁵ John Cassian. *Conferences*, Translated by Colm Luibhéid, (Paulist Press, 1985).

⁶ Stephen J. Davis, *The Early Coptic Papacy: The Egyptian Church and Its Leadership in Late Antiquity*, (American University in Cairo Press, 2004).

for a greater sense of community, thus belonging to a set of beliefs and the world itself. That sense of community and a common set of beliefs allows the monks to strengthen their faith, almost akin to the saying of, 'When in Rome, do as Romans do', helping them uphold not only their vows but also to stay true to the path they chose when taking them.

Apart from the above, St. Benedict also includes two further types of monks, and in this case, the word "further" is a key, as his description can possibly be a reason why these were not included in the citation from his Rule that serves as a basis for this commentary. The Sarabaites and the Gyrovagues - these two denominations could be considered a category of their own, one exceedingly further from the monastic values than the other. The sarabaites' focus on the comfort and benefits of life amongst the nobility, with all its benefits included, and the gyrovagues' indulgence of their own desires whilst never setting down roots seem to be closer to a life with no morals than to that of a monastic, spiritually rich life of Cenobites and Hermits.⁷

Benedict's wisdom, distilled through centuries, remains a beacon of guidance for monastics across the globe. The communal harmony of the Cenobites and the solitary combat of the Anchorites, albeit in much higher decline than the Cenobites' way, mirror the multifaceted nature of the human soul's quest for transcendence. Through 'The Rule of St. Benedict' and the insights of scholars such as Dom David Knowles and Stephen J. Davis, we gain a deeper understanding of how monasticism embodies the tension between communal support and individual struggle, becoming a vivid example of how the world functions on a daily basis and how the Saintly Rules, even though addressed to monks, become incorporated in our daily life, partially and potentially originating from the observance and inner analysis and understanding of a human psyche and its need for not only a sense of community and belonging but also the need for solitude, reflection and the ability to conquer the weakness that may affect not only the body but also the spirit or the psyche.

Bibliography:

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⁷ <https://thepocketscroll.wordpress.com/2017/12/14/blogging-benedict-chapter-1/>