

Assessment 1

Tyler Hall-Ford

From Desert Myths to Sheep Tales: The Cistercians in the Middle Ages
University of Wales Trinity Saint David

Firstly, the passage distinguishes between two primary types of monks: Cenobites and Anchorites. Cenobites are those who live in monasteries, adhering to a Rule (presumably the Rule of Saint Benedict) and under the authority of an abbot. This communal living under a structured rule fosters discipline, spiritual growth, and mutual support among the monks. The Rule and the abbot provide guidance and governance, ensuring order and harmony within the monastery.

On the other hand, Anchorites, or hermits, are monks who have undergone a period of training and spiritual formation within a monastery. Having matured in their faith and spiritual practices through communal living, they then venture into the solitary life of the desert, away from the community. This solitary existence allows them to deepen their relationship with God through intense prayer, meditation, and personal struggle against temptations. Despite their physical isolation, they rely on God's strength and the lessons learned from their monastic community to sustain their spiritual journey.

One immediate observation is the hierarchical nature of monastic life, as delineated by Saint Benedict. The distinction between Cenobites and Anchorites reflects a clear division of roles and responsibilities within the monastic hierarchy. Cenobites, living in communal monasteries under the guidance of an abbot, represent the majority of monks and adhere to a structured way of life governed by rules and routines. This communal living fosters a sense of camaraderie and mutual support among the monks, as they work together towards spiritual growth and self-discipline.

Conversely, Anchorites or hermits occupy a more solitary and contemplative role within the monastic framework. After undergoing rigorous training and spiritual formation in the monastery, they venture into the wilderness to pursue a life of solitary prayer and meditation. This solitary existence allows them to confront their inner demons and deepen their relationship with God away from the distractions of communal life.[1]

From a historical perspective, parallels can be drawn between the Rule of Saint Benedict and other influential texts or codes of conduct from different historical periods. For example, the Rule shares similarities with the Code of Hammurabi, one of the earliest known sets of laws in human history. Both documents seek to establish order and justice within society through a system of rules and regulations, albeit in vastly different contexts.

Similarly, the Rule of Saint Benedict bears resemblance to the medieval chivalric codes of conduct, such as the Code of Chivalry or the Templar Code. Like the Rule, these codes prescribed a set of virtues and obligations for knights and warriors, emphasizing concepts such as honor, loyalty, and service to others. While the contexts may differ, the underlying principles of discipline, obedience, and selflessness remain consistent across these various codes.[2]

The Rule provided a framework for communal living and spiritual discipline that was vital for the preservation and advancement of Christianity in medieval Europe. By organizing monks into communities and outlining guidelines for their behavior, the Rule fostered stability, order, and spiritual growth within monastic life.

The Rule of Saint Benedict also served as a blueprint for monastic communities across Europe, contributing to the spread of Christianity and the establishment of centers of learning, hospitality, and charitable work. Monasteries became not only places of worship but also hubs of culture, education, and social welfare, playing a crucial role in the development of medieval society.

Furthermore, the Rule's emphasis on obedience, humility, and moderation provided a counterbalance to the excesses and chaos of the medieval world. It offered a path to spiritual

perfection through the renunciation of worldly desires and the pursuit of a life dedicated to prayer, work, and community.

Although some details of the Rule have given rise to controversies among both monks and scholars, it is not difficult to grasp the broad lines of the monastic life for which it was written, and which, therefore, it always tended of itself to reproduce. The monastery which it describes is a unit, completely self-contained and self-sufficient, both economically and constitutionally. A community, ruled by an abbot elected by the monks for life, is supported by the produce of its fields and garden and has within the wall of its enclosure all that is necessary to convert the produce into food and to make and repair clothing and other articles of common use. It has no function in the life of the Church save to provide an ordered way of life based on the teaching of the gospel, according to which its inmates may serve God and sanctify their souls apart from the life of the world.[3]

The Rule of Saint Benedict can be adapted by Christians (and non-Christians) of differing traditions and life situations and used as a kind of blueprint for life. For example, Quentin Skrabec has written *St. Benedict's Rule for Business Success*, finding in the pages of the Rule a guide for creating and maintaining effective organizations. Well this was not the opinion intention of the work it shows how it can be used for a multitude of different purposes.[4]

In my opinion, the Rule of Saint Benedict represents a timeless example of how structure and discipline can facilitate spiritual growth and communal harmony. Its principles of humility, obedience, and hospitality remain relevant even in modern times, offering valuable insights into how individuals and communities can cultivate a deeper relationship with God and each other. Additionally, the Rule's recognition of the different paths to holiness, whether through communal living or solitary contemplation, highlights the diversity of spiritual journeys and the importance of supporting individuals in their quest for God. Through careful analysis and comparison with other historical texts and codes, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of religious life and the pursuit of spiritual perfection in the Middle Ages.

Footnotes

[1]Benedict, Saint, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*. (Harrisburg, Pa.: Morehouse Publishing, 1992).

[2]David Crouch, *The Chivalric Turn : Conduct and Hegemony in Europe before 1300* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

[3]Benedict, Saint, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*.

[4]Greg Peters, review of *The Rule of Saint Benedict: A Contemporary Paraphrase*, by Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove. Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2012. 116pp. \$13.99. Paperback., by Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, 2012.

Bibliography

Crouch, David. *The Chivalric Turn : Conduct and Hegemony in Europe before 1300*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.

Peters, Greg . Review of *The Rule of Saint Benedict: A Contemporary Paraphrase*, by Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove. Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2012. 116pp. \$13.99. Paperback., by Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, 2012.

Saint, Benedict,. *The Rule of Saint Benedict*. Harrisburg, Pa.: Morehouse Publishing, 1992.