

Analysis of chapter 55 from the RSB: “The brothers’ clothing and footwear”

ASSIGNMENT 02: ANALYSIS OF A WRITTEN SOURCE
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The Rule of Saint Benedict (RSB) was written in the 6th century by Benedict of Nursia as a guide on monastic communal living headed by an abbot. The full text contains a prologue and seventy-three chapters, ranging from a single paragraph to multiple pages, which list the rules by which monks following the RSB should live. These rules range from those providing practical daily instruction (“The proper amount of food” or “Letters or gifts for monks” for example) to those detailing monastic virtues (“Obedience”, “Restraint of Speech”, “Humility” etc). The RSB provides many detailed scenarios and how each one should be approached, but also encourages the abbot to make informed decisions based on the needs of the community where appropriate.

This assignment analyses chapter 55 from the RSB: “The brothers’ clothing and footwear”.¹ The text details the types of clothing, footwear, and bedding that are suitable for those living a monastic life by the RSB – as well as the quality and quantity of the items.

According to Chapter 55, the clothing that a monk strictly following the RSB is permitted to wear consists of a tunic, a cowl, a scapular if necessary (used to protect the habit during work), socks, and shoes. Moreover, the monk is permitted to have two tunics and two cowls to allow him to change at nighttime and for the purposes of having alternate garments to wear - both to sleep in and to change into when the other is being washed.² For bedding, the monks are permitted to have a mat to sleep on as well as a blanket, a cover, and a pillow. Finally, it includes a list of items that the abbot should provide to the monks for their individual use, with the implication that anything else is superfluous: cowls, tunics, shoes, socks, a belt, a knife, a pen, a needle, a handkerchief, and a writing tablet – however, notably, the scapular is not listed here which may imply that it is not provided as standard. The principles of the RSB pertaining to clothing (and other items) were later incorporated into the *Cartae Caritatis* (CC). The CC does not list the individual garments, but does emphasise that the clothing should be simple and inexpensive and emphasises the point that underwear should not be worn. It should be noted that the rule here as applied to the

¹ The translation used is by Carolinne White: Carolinne White and Benedict of Nursia, ‘55: The Brothers’ Clothing and Footwear’, in *The Rule of St Benedict* (Penguin Classics, 2008), pp. 81–82.

² Chapter 22, “Sleeping arrangements”, informs us that the purpose of sleeping in one’s habit is so that they will always be ready to pray when they wake up, foregoing the need to spend time getting ready.

Cistercians is followed only by the choir monks; the lay brethren have their own separate constitution-like document (*Usages*), which details a similar but separate rule which allows flexibility for the brethren to wear work-appropriate clothing.

Whilst the Cistercians were not the only order to follow the RSB, they attempted to follow it as literally as possible; conducting their lives by meeting only their most basic needs and living an ascetic lifestyle. This manifested itself in several ways, one of which was their clothing. They opted to wear undyed woollen habits, giving them a grey-white or off-white colour, in lieu of the black dyed habit commonly worn by other orders at the time. Although the RSB does not explicitly state that undyed wool should be used, and indeed does not state at all what colour the habit should be, it does state that the materials used to make the habits should be purchased cheaply and locally. By wearing the garment at its most basic, in their eyes they were strictly adhering to the word of the RSB.

The undyed wool was used not only for purposes of austerity, but also to distinguish themselves physically and visually from other monastic orders. The Cistercians were repeatedly accused of using their white habits to attempt to appear superior to others, notably by Orderic Vitalis,³ and Peter the Venerable (the abbot of Cluny). This was something that the Cistercians vehemently denied, maintaining that their choice to wear undyed woollen habits was a symbol of their commitment to self-imposed poverty. Peter accuses the Cistercians of being transgressors of the RSB, stating that their choice to wear undyed white robes is a strange one that shuns the humility of the traditional black robe in order to stand out amongst all other orders, giving them a sense of hubris.⁴ However, this was written partially in retort to Bernard of Clairvaux's *Apologia* – which accuses the Cluniacs of being a sybaritic order. It includes a large section criticising what Bernard perceived to be the Cluniac penchant for ostentatious clothing made from high quality and expensive material that they intentionally shopped around for – stating bluntly that there “*would not be so much concern for the body, if the fostering of spiritual values had no long since*

³ “*They especially favour white in their habit and thereby seem remarkable and conspicuous to others. Black represents humility in many places in Holy Scripture; therefore up to now monks in their devotion have chosen to wear that colour. Now, however, as if to make a show of righteousness, the men of our time reject black which the earlier fathers always adopted as a mark of humility.*”

⁴ ‘28. To Bernard, Abbot of Clairvaux (c. 1127)’, Petrus Project, 19 June 2019 <<https://petrus-project.gitbook.io/petrus-project/letters/the-letter-collection/28.-to-bernard-abbot-of-clairvaux-c.-1127>> [accessed 28 March 2026].

been neglected".⁵ The back and forth rhetoric between the Cluniacs and the Cistercians, both in extant texts and in the implied general rancour between the two orders, is a good example of how the rule of RSB can be interpreted in different ways by different groups of followers – even when it comes to monastic clothing. The stated aim of the Cistercians is to follow the rule in a conservative manner,⁶ living austere to the letter of the document, emphasising poverty and charity. Although the Cluniac reform had the same conservative aim, they interpreted it in a manner which allowed them to put the liturgy at the focus and emphasised the “beauty of holiness”, placing religious value on aesthetics - which extended to their presumably higher quality clothing.

Chapter 55 also provides clothing guidance for travelling monks, stating that they should be provided with a tunic and cowl that are “slightly better” than they would usually wear, as well as underwear.⁷ All three of these items must be washed and returned once the monk was back in the monastery. The purpose of the better-quality tunic and cowl seems to be for the public perception of the monks to the outside world. The use of the word “slightly” implies that the garments should not be ostentatious, but perhaps items that had not yet needed repair or items that produced more recently than the typically worn garments. Although laypeople would likely know that the monks lived frugally, there would probably be an expectation to look presentable in order to maintain a positive association within the local community and beyond. The underwear issued to travelling monks, almost certainly for purposes of modesty but perhaps also warmth and comfort, does imply that underwear should not usually be worn when in the cloister. It had, however, become commonplace for monks to wear undergarments, despite the implied prohibition in the RSB. This may be because Benedict was writing in a climate mild enough for the tunic alone to be sufficient, and his reference to clothing differences in cooler climates at the start of the chapter had been adopted for the purposes of comfort⁸ –

⁵ Michael Casey and Bernard of Clairvaux, ‘On Expensive and Extravagant Clothing’, in *Cistercians and Cluniacs - St Bernard’s Apologia to Abbot William*, Cistercian Publications (Liturgical Press, 1970).

⁶ With some changes, for example the addition of lay brethren to the order.

⁷ My version of the text uses the term “underwear”, however I have seen other translations use “trousers” and “breeches” amongst others. I am using the term underwear here simply because because my primary text uses it.

⁸ That does raise the question to me of whether he actually expected his rule to spread in the way it did – certainly far enough away from central Italy to take cooler climates into consideration.

but also for an increased importance on personal modesty that had developed since the RSB was written. This is a sentiment echoed by the Benedictine abbess Hildegard von Bingen, who states that the RSB was written in a different era and suggests that those in the monastic order should wear underwear for purposes of encouraging chastity.⁹ The decision for the Cistercians not to (regularly) wear underwear made them the target of criticism and satire amongst other orders,¹⁰ but as a reformatory order attempting to adhere strictly to the RSB, they went against the contemporary adaptive interpretation of this rule and chose to forego what they saw as a garment that was not explicitly mentioned as being needed in the Rule (except for when travelling).

The chapter ends with a reminder that monks should only be provided with what they need, and dictates that the abbot should regularly check the beds of monks for any prohibited personal property. The checking of the beds is probably somewhat impractical and perhaps anachronistic by the time of the Cistercians; the number of monks and lay brothers at some larger monasteries as well as the typical layout of the 12th and 13th century monastic complex providing many more potential hiding places than there may have possibly been at Monte Cassino would make probably the task difficult – and it is possible that this task was passed off to obedientiales or other senior figures in the monastery.

The theme of having ‘what is enough’ is emphasised repeatedly throughout the RSB. Earlier chapters warn the monks not to eat or drink to excess (Chapters 39 and 40), reemphasise the prohibition of private ownership (chapter 33), and remind that distribution of items should be according to need (chapter 34). These rules are backed up with reference to Acts 4:32: “*Let everything be held in common*”, and Acts 4:35: “*things were given to each person according to his needs*”. Chapter 55 exhibits this running theme in several ways: reminding monks that they should not complain about the colour or thickness of the material of their habits, to return old clothing to the monastery when they receive new clothes in order that they can be donated to the poor, and the reminder that travelling monks who are given better quality items and underwear must wash and return them to the communal store upon their return.

⁹ Hugh Feiss and Hildegard of Bingen, ‘Explanation of the Rule of Benedict by Hildehard of Bingen’, *Vox Benedictina* (Saskatoon), 7.2 (1990).

¹⁰ Julie Kerr, ‘Clothing’, in *Life in the Medieval Cloister* (Continuum, 2009), p. 58.

Ultimately, the wearing of the habit should have 4 main functions: provide warmth, modesty, humility, and a reminder of the consecration to God within the cloister. Whilst all medieval orders seem to agree on these principles, it is the Cistercians who attempt to take up the RSB at its word – attempting to adhere to a policy of austerity and humility leading to the undyed robes that would come to define them and give them their sobriquet: The White Monks.

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