

THE BENEDICTINE WAY OF REVERENCE AT PRAYER

In the sense formulated by St. Gregory the Great, God must be invited to take full possession of the soul. Self-will with its hundred subterfuges and falsified motives, must be repudiated. Prayer is to be resorted to not as a means of promoting either self-esteem or a sense of security, but simply as a means – and the most direct means – of giving glory to God. When God's glory is accounted by the soul as being of greater importance than its own advancement in prayer, as being more important indeed than anything else in the world – then it may be supposed that the Holy Spirit will take over the soul's entire direction and order its outward religious life accordingly. Then it may be supposed also, that in actual practice the prayer will tend towards an ever-increasing simplicity. *NON IN MULTILOQUI SED IN PURITATE CORDIS* (not in the multitude of words but in the purity of heart) are St. Benedict's words. Not only will outward and verbal discourse in private devotions cease to attract the soul, but the more inward discursive activity produced by the faculties of the soul will give place to an exercise of greater tranquility, simplicity, and unity. The prayer of faith will replace the prayer of feelings, imaginations, affections, act. This is surely the prayer which St. Benedict, centuries before systems had been invented and an idiom developed to deal with them, meant when he wrote of "purity of heart" and "purity of intent". Prayer was still an uncharted land in his day, its soil yielding an unlabored plant.

Thus for St. Benedict's concept of prayer and its method or lack of method. That St. Benedict was a man of contemplation is abundantly clear. His initiation and training began as far back as the period spent in solitude at Subiaco. Each of his miracles is preceded by time spent in prayer, he is found engaged in it by Theoprobos, to whom he foretells the destruction of the monastery.

The flexibility of Benedictine spirituality is nowhere shown better than in St. Benedict's instruction on the length of time to pray. The whole matter depends upon the "inspiration of divine grace". One brother is not to feel inferior if grace does not prompt him to protracted devotions, nor is the brother who believes that he is being called to spend longer time in prayer to feel superior. The point is that when they are required by the custom of the monastery to pray together, they should be made by the superior to start and finish at the same time. The period allotted for prayer in common should be short for two reasons: first, because allowance should be made for the weaker rather than for the stronger constitution and attraction; second, because the more interior the exercise, the more liberty must be allowed to the soul in the performance.