

THE GREAT TRADITIONS OF CATHOLIC SPIRITUALITY – PART I

INTRODUCTION AND THE BENEDICTINE TRADITION

I. Schools of spirituality are different ways of approaching God through Christ. They have similar elements, but combine them in different ways.

A. The different traditions are all authentically Catholic, but focus on different methods and emphasize different aspects of the faith. The traditions are generally associated with specific religious orders (e.g., Benedictine, Franciscan, Dominican, Jesuit). However, many of the traditions, such as those developed by the desert fathers, St. Augustine, and St. Francis de Sales, grew among the laity alongside of the founding of an order or even before there was an order to live them.

B. The different traditions use varying approaches, but there are many common elements to the traditions.

1. Keeping the moral law is always crucial to any spiritual progress, for the moral law is God's light and guidance that we may advance toward Him. See, e.g., Matt. 7:24-27.

2. All of the traditions recognize that humility, in such ways as openness to God's will, appreciation of the goodness of others, and the recognition of a need for improvement, is the baseline, and that charity in prayer must be put into action.

3. There is a complementarity of knowledge and mystery. We are called to advance in the spiritual life through understanding, but also recognize that there is a mystery beyond our understanding.

4. All of the traditions have a complementarity of order and freedom. There are both principles that discipline the human spirit, but also a liberation to soar in the spirit. As Jesus says, "You will have the truth, and the truth will set you free." @ John 8:22.

5. All of these traditions, being Catholic, are based upon the Bible and Church teachings.

6. All of these traditions deal with the question of human suffering, and all of them recognize that sacrifice is needed for progress.

7. Above all, the Catholic spiritual traditions are all Christocentric, and recognize the fact that God's grace and salvation won by Christ is primary, a calling that we participate in.
- C. The common traditions bring out the best of their cultures and offer them to the Church. Those traditions then grow over time as more cultures are united in them.
1. The Benedictine tradition brought the order and stability of Rome to the Church, purifying it of the imperial arrogance and worship of power was common in Roman as well as our own times. That tradition thus tries to bring the order of heaven to earth.
 2. The Franciscan tradition took the medieval idea of the knight errant and the noble lady to the Church, but here recognizing that this adventure and nobility are based, not on earthly honor or birth, but rather on the rebirth of baptism and the openness to the kingdom of God.
 3. The Dominican tradition brought the idea of the university, founded also in the Middle Ages, to the Church, purifying it of the excessive reliance upon mere knowledge and speculation. The focus is instead on the wisdom of God, developed by faith and reason, by study and teaching, by prayer and service.
 4. The Carmelite tradition took the mystical spirit, initially from the Mediterranean region (first from Mount Carmel and then largely from Spain), purifying of the excesses of odd behavior or excessive otherworldliness that could sometimes lead to oddities. It focuses on a thirst for the spiritual, experienced even and especially in the daily sacrifices of life.

5. The Ignatian tradition took the idea of serving a king with loyalty, courage, and honor, which was particularly common in the sixteenth century and the age of exploration, but purified it of the violence and greed common in conquests. Founded by St. Ignatius of Loyola, and central in the Jesuit order, as well as the Missionaries of Charity, it focuses on serving and upholding the greater kingdom of God.

6. The Salesian tradition, which was founded amidst the growth of commerce and industry in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, took the ideal of active and efficient business and purified it of the materialism and excessive worldliness, so common in that era and ours. The focus is on consecrating daily life in the world and using practical means to bring our prayer life to society.

7. There are many other traditions (e.g., desert, Augustinian, Celtic, Alphonsian./Redemptorist, and the modern emphasis on catholic culture) which likewise bring the best of their societies to Christ through the Church.

II. Benedictine spirituality focuses on growing through order and stability and the resulting peace with God.

A. St. Benedict, who lived from about 480 to about 547, and his twin sister St. Scolastica who died a short time before him, incorporated the great Roman heritage into the Benedictine tradition. This tradition was founded upon the work that came to be known as The Rule of St. Benedict.

1. Saints Benedict and Scholastica were born into a noble family in Norcia, Italy amidst collapse of Roman empire. St. Benedict was academically gifted, but eventually wanted to be a hermit and work on his spiritual perfection away from the world. However, other people who wished for perfection found him, and he again became popular as a monk. After an unsuccessful attempt to lead a group of monks, he established twelve monasteries of twelve monks each near Subiaco. And then, he established a larger monastery at Monte Cassino and wrote what would become known as The Rule of St. Benedict for this monastery. And thus the Benedictine order was established. His sister St. Scholastica, whom St.

Benedict said was much holier than he was, likewise led the women=s side of the Benedictine order in a nearby convent.

2. The Benedictine rule became widespread, particularly under the influence of St. Gregory the Great (590-606), who had been the abbot of St. Andrew monastery in Rome, which was run under the Rule or something very much like it.

3. Under the influence of Charlemagne in the early ninth century, the Benedictine order became the central style for monasteries in Western Christianity.

4. In the tenth and eleventh centuries, there were several reforms of the Benedictine order. Thus, for example, although Benedictine monasteries usually run themselves with little central leadership from outside, the monastery at Cluny, France would lead a reform, which other monasteries were glad to join. The Cistercian and Trappist orders would likewise spring from the Benedictine order, emphasizing simplicity and contemplation even more. The likes of St. Bernard of Clairvaux and St. Aelred, come from the Cistercian order.

B. Benedictine spirituality very much emphasizes orderly, patient progression in prayer and work. There is a focus on setting a time set for all things and keeping a schedule. One is neither neglectful nor impatient in work and prayer, but simply puts forth one=s best efforts and accepts the results.

1. In a Benedictine monastery, life is very regulated, with a time for everything, such as prayer, work, sleep and even recreation and one=s own projects. There is a great freedom from worrying about what to do. One may be doing the same things or praying similar prayers day after day, and week after week, but one does them more and more carefully.

2. Although regular life for most people cannot be so carefully and precisely ordered, there should be a sense of allocating time on projects, not spending too much time on things one likes (e.g., entertainment, dealing with pleasant people) , nor too little on things that are less entertaining, such as administrative tasks or tedious people. Such an allocation, or budgeting, of time is not only helpful in accomplishing things, but also helps us overcome our self-will and be guided more by God.

C. Central in Benedictine prayer is lectio divina, a slow, prayerful way of reading Scripture and other holy works.

1. This type of prayer varies in detail among people who use it, but it involves common elements. First, one reads a

Biblical or other spiritual passage, perhaps a miracle, a prophesy, or a half a chapter in an epistle, once as usual. Then one prays over it, trying to gain insights and applications. One then reads the passage again slowly in context of that prayer and then prays over it again, concentrating attention even further. One then prays over the passage a third time, perhaps trying to develop applications to one's life or resolutions to carry out.

2. One progressing through a book of the Bible or other spiritual work carefully in this fashion. There is no rush; the desire is for deep wisdom.

3. Eventually one comes to "enjoy holy reading" as one's own will comes more in tune with God's. St. Benedict emphasized that, by reading Scripture and the works and lives of saints carefully, we become attracted to their example.

D. Benedictine spirituality emphasizes order by the careful use of time. As the Rule says in chapter 48, "Idleness is the enemy of the soul."

1. There is, consistent with the schedule and the faith, a certain liberty of thought about such things as what to pray about or what books to read. And St. Benedict did emphasize that each person's individual talents should be developed. But there is an emphasis on finishing what one starts with consistent effort and avoiding giving into distractions.

2. For example, in chapter 48, which deals with sacred reading, but is applicable generally, St. Benedict says that people should be especially on guard against those who are "slothful, lazy or gossiping, profiting little himself and disturbing others." There is a great caution against neglecting prayers or work, even for a short time, simply because something else seems more attractive, or one's work is getting dull. That attitude leads to opportunities for sin, as well as an inability to focus on deeper matters.

3. One of the Benedictine mottos is "Ora et labora," i.e. "work and pray." The steady application of labor disciplines the soul and allows one to pray better. St. Benedict then describes prayer as "the work of God." Part of the wisdom for today is that: (1) our daily labor can help us build such virtues of discipline, patience, and humility that are helpful in prayer; and (2) those virtues of dedicated labor that are so valuable in earning a living in the world should be applied with even greater vigor to the spiritual life.

E. Benedictine spirituality focuses heavily on praying, working and learning carefully and attentively. The Benedictines sing much

of their prayer, and emphasize the Mass and the Divine Office, the common prayer of the whole church.

1. The idea is to focus on what one should be doing, as one is doing it, and trying as much as possible to stay with it for the time planned, rather than jumping from one project to another whenever one's attention wanders.
2. This tradition would avoid what we now call multi-tasking, instead concentrating on the work or prayer (or lawful pleasure) of the moment.
3. There should instead be a peacefulness in that clear focus on the duty at hand. Another of the Benedictine mottos is simply "Pax," or peace.

F. In one sense, Benedictine life is very hierarchical, insofar as there is a great deal of willingness to accept governing rules and authority. But it is recognized that this hierarchy is for order and stability and the conquest of selfish pride, not for the sake of honoring power. St. Benedict strongly emphasized that a higher rank does not make one holier and that the Holy Spirit can speak through anyone.

1. In his Rule, St. Benedict very much calls for obedience to officers, assuming that what they say is in accordance with the law of God. However, near the beginning of the Rule, he is strictest on those in charge saying that they will be responsible to God for laxity that they could have prevented. He adds in chapter 21 that officers should be removed if they persevere in showing arrogance.
2. The notion of obedience also includes a freedom from concern for wealth and the ranks that society focuses on. He says in chapter 2, "Only if we are found to excel in good works and humility are we preferred in the eyes of God as individuals."
3. He also emphasizes that, while a leader must be decisive, he should also listen carefully to others. Thus, also in chapter 2, St. Benedict also says that leaders should listen to everyone, for the Holy Spirit may be speaking to anyone even the youngest.

G. Overall, the regular progress in life, focusing attention on the project at hand, and recognizing the need for obedience all help us overcome our false selves, which result in being dominated by desire, and bring us to the true joy of heaven.

1. St. Benedict thus begins by addressing his Rule to all "who laying aside your own will take up the all-powerful and righteous arms of obedience to fight under the true King, the Lord Jesus Christ." And he ends the Prologue saying that "as our lives and faith progress, the heart expands and with the sweetness of love we move down the paths of God's commandments. . . We patiently share in Christ's passion, so we may eventually enter the Kingdom of God."

2. In chapter 7, St. Benedict describes the need for humility, beginning with obeying God's commands. This humility enables one to accept all things that come one's way as leading to salvation. And eventually leads one "no longer [to] act out of the fear of Hell, but for the love of Christ, out of good habits and with a pleasure derived from virtue."

H. Some helpful works from the Benedictine tradition, and the orders that are heirs to it include:

1. The Rule of St. Benedict, which was the only written work of St. Benedict that survives today.

2. The Four Dialogues and the sermons of St. Gregory the Great. The Dialogues include a number of accounts from the early centuries of the Church, including a life of St. Benedict.

3. On the Love of God and The Steps of Humility and Pride by St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the most preeminent Cistercian/

4. The Seven Story Mountain and Seeds of Contemplation by Thomas Merton, a convert and a Trappist of the twentieth century. Although some of Thomas Merton's life, even as a monk, was troubled, his insights have been considered profound.

5. Sacred Reading: The Art of Lectio Divina (1996) by Michael Casey, a Cistercian from Australia.