

With the feast of St. Benedict which we celebrate on July 11, we might spend a little time considering a few of the personal characteristics of St. Benedict and how these might affect our lives today. There have been a number of complaints made over the years that the lives of the saints really have nothing to offer us in the modern world. One of the speakers at an Abbey Oblate Meeting some years ago mentioned after his talk that he sees an emphasis coming back in the use of the lives of the saints. He predicts that in time we will see a greater emphasis placed upon reading the lives of the saints than we experience right now.

One of the best insights into the life of St. Benedict comes from a very small book St. Benedict the Man, an authorized translation of The Moral Physiognomy of St. Benedict by Dom I. Ryelandt, O.S.B. This book was published by The Grail Press of St. Meinrad Archabbey in 1950. Interestingly, the author does not depend upon pseudo-historical documents. He draws his picture of St. Benedict by an examination of the Rule itself. The author does not ignore the writings of St. Gregory the Great (Second Book of the Dialogues) and he finds here four very human qualities: 1) gracious kindness, 2) fidelity of observance, 3) simplicity and greatness, and 4) power of organization.

These qualities may seem at first sight to be no more than natural virtues, qualities that we could find in any human being, even in one who did not believe in God. But here we find the lesson we all must learn: sanctity is not divorced or separated from that which is human. Sanctity consists of doing what we have to do from a supernatural motive--the love of God and neighbor.

We may see in St. Benedict a saint that is not distant in his greatness; he is not a contemplative so absorbed with God that he may give up dealing with the needs of men. Dom Ryelandt points out: "If St. Benedict was a wonder-worker it was especially from kindness that he performed miracles. He performed his miracles when pressed interiorly by love."

It becomes evident as we look into our patron that the miraculous was always a result of his own interior love--especially for the soul in need. Miracles were not worked just to have wonderful signs, but as a result of the saint's compassion for souls. The story told by St. Gregory of the Goth who lost his scythe in the lake tells us much through the saint's words: "Work now and be no longer sad," when he restored the tool to this soul filled with fear at the loss.

Dom Ryelandt continues:

The miracles of the repaired sieve, of the water gushing forth from the rocky cliff, of the thirteen pieces of gold given to the bankrupt debtor, of the child brought back to life and restored to his father, of the peasant delivered from the bonds of the cruel Zalla, reveal to us in St. Benedict a heart entirely animated with sympathetic kindness. It seems he loved men, his brethren, so sincerely that God was pleased to hear his prayer and to make the movement of his arm so powerful.

The second quality, fidelity to observance, shows St. Benedict as a man who recognizes that our human nature needs a structure and that we can not throw our observances overboard unless we replace those observances with other kinds of observances which will help us achieve our goal--the soul wholly in God. For St. Benedict, anything which did not lead to union was as nothing.

Simplicity and greatness, the third quality discussed by Dom Ryelandt, shows St. Benedict uniting the greatest simplicity with a calm dignity. Greatness is not achieved by establishing some external signs or ways of behavior. The simplicity of spirit does not look to exert some influence upon others but this effect is achieved without trying--just because the person is simple and true.

Finally, the power of organization brought order to the monastery. The house of God would be at peace because there was order. There was balance in this order and the power of organization brings out the strength of all of St. Benedict's natural qualities. St. Augustine once spoke of the "tranquility of order" and this tranquility or peacefulness is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It helps the soul remain in union with God.

- Fr. David Turner, OSB