

# The Holiness of Labor

## Benedictine Work and Service

*... so that God may be glorified in all things . . .*

—1 PETER 4:11 AND RULE 57.9

When we meet new people we don't get too far into the conversation before we ask, "What do you do?" We're curious about other people's jobs, and we place a high value on work. Our society especially honors hard work. We work hard to support our families. We work hard to further our careers. We work hard at our volunteer tasks. We work hard to provide a clean house and an ordered, secure life for our children. If we're not busy doing things at home or at our job outside the home, many of us feel that we're not accomplishing anything of value. Retirement can bring a crisis as we come face to face with the realization that our work has formed our self-image: "My work defines who I am." When that work is gone, we may wonder, "Who am I?"

"What is the value of work? What really is our work? Who are we as people who work?"

In this chapter we'll explore the Benedictine view of work and service. As you read, think about how Benedict's ideas about work connect with your own life, whether you're employed outside the home, work in the home, do volunteer work, or are retired. Then we'll explore how Benedict's ideas translate into the world of the twenty-first century.

### **Benedict's View of Work**

The main work for the monastic was the *Opus Dei*, the Work of God. These were the eight prayer services that the monk attended, from the middle of the night, through the following day, and into the evening. Monks weren't idle the rest of the time, however. Benedict prescribed a day that was filled but balanced. When not in the chapel for prayer, the monks would be working, praying, reading, eating, or resting.

Work is an important component in the life of the monk. In a chapter on daily work, Benedict states that idleness is the soul's enemy. He specifies time for work with the hands as well as time for reading (48.1–2). Benedict believes in the importance of manual labor, stating that real monks are those who live by the “labor of their hands” (48.8). Here Benedict follows the example of Paul, who worked as a tentmaker (Acts 18:3), so that no one would need to provide him with daily necessities. Benedict desires that the monks be like their monastic fathers who also were self-sufficient.

One type of work isn't any more important than any other type of work. All labor has value because it enables people to serve one another. Monks work on the land, with the animals, in the kitchen, in the gardens, and, if they were literate, copying books. All types of work are equal and all are important. For example, in chapter 35, Benedict makes it clear that all would work in the kitchen unless ill or working on another task where they were of greater usefulness to the monastery. By serving one another, the brothers would promote feelings of love, not only in themselves but throughout the community (35.1–2).

In the Rule work is always an opportunity to help others. For example, the strong are to help the weak:

Let those who are not strong have help so that they may serve without distress, and let everyone receive help as the size of the community or local conditions warrant. (RB 35.3).

Benedict also gives us a model in which the worker is respected and cared for. For example, the kitchen workers assigned for that week receive something to drink and some bread in addition to their regular portion an hour before they are to serve the meals. Thus the work is not be burdensome and can be done without grumbling or complaining (35.11–12).

Not only are workers respected, the tools used in the monastery are to be treated carefully, as carefully as the sacred vessels on the altar (31.10–11). For Benedict, everything is sacred and to be revered, from the humblest to the most glorious. The sacred pervades every part of life.

Work is also to be an occasion for prayer. The Rule frames the weekly change of shift in the kitchen with prayers for those leaving and for those coming into service (35.15–18). Work has a strong spiritual component for Benedict: it's a way to find God. In the Prologue he writes of the connection between prayer and work:

First of all, every time you begin a good work, you must pray to him most earnestly to bring it to perfection (RB Prologue 4).

The emphasis on a life of continual prayer informs the work style of the monks. During work, monks are silent, repeating to themselves a word or a phrase that they would have taken from their *lectio divina*. At

other times a monk might read while others worked. We tried this latter approach in a women's group at the church. While seven members worked in the kitchen one member read from Scripture. The experience would have been great except for a misfortunate choice of task—sorting silverware. The reader could hardly be heard above the clatter of spoons, knives, and forks! We suspended this holy labor when laughter took over, clearly failing the tenth step of humility (7.59), all of us being more than ready and quick to laugh!

Benedict knew the value of work but also knew that to define oneself by one's work was dangerous. Work is a means to glorify God. The skilled may practice their craft, but only with humility. Should they become conceited with their abilities or with the profit they brought to the monastery, their work would be stopped. Only with proper humility could the individual return to his or her craft (57.1–3).

Products of the monastery artisans may be sold but without fraud. “The evil of avarice must have no part in establishing prices” (RB 57.7). The prices were even to be a bit lower than found outside the monastery “so that in all things God may be glorified” (1 Pet 4:11 RB; RB 57.8–9).

Esther de Waal explains that for Benedict, work is “neither simply a means to an end nor something which has absolute intrinsic value.”<sup>1</sup> She points out, however, that Benedict's emphasis on work had a tremendous effect on Western culture during the past fifteen centuries. Benedictine monasteries were highly successful in the Middle Ages. Author Arnold Toynbee sees them as “the grain of mustard seed from which the great tree of Western civilization has sprung.”<sup>2</sup> But for Benedict, work was just part of the life of a monk, a life that was to be well-ordered and well-balanced with work, prayer, study, and rest.

### **Work and Benedictine Balance**

Life under the Benedictine Rule is a balanced life. Benedict carefully prescribes daily activities in detail, with a balance between physical activity and rest, work, and prayer, time alone and time together, work with the mind and work with the body. There are specific times for rest during the day. Sundays are to be free of manual labor. The structure of life is formed by the Divine Hours. Stopping work to pray throughout the day is a way that Benedict places work in a specific perspective: not an end in itself or a way to self-fulfillment, but an offering to God to fulfill God's purpose.

In Benedict's time monasteries were rural and agrarian. The monks did the manual labor and had a balance of physical, intellectual, and spiritual work. After Benedict's death, invading armies destroyed many monasteries, forcing the monks to flee to Rome and the protection of the Church. This upset the balance of life that the Rule fostered, as manual labor came to be performed by lay brothers.<sup>3</sup> Another way that this balance was lost came through changes in the Divine Office itself. The

liturgy became more involved in the Middle Ages, especially in the monasteries under the direction of a monastery in Cluny, France: the choir monks spent almost all day in the chapel singing the Office and did no manual labor or intellectual work, such as the reading that Benedict recommended. Many people today have the same lack of balance, with no or little physical activity: we can live in our heads and on our couches!

### **The Benedictine Ideal of Work in the Twenty-first Century**

How do Benedict's ideas on work translate into contemporary American life? We learned that in Benedictine life, work is balanced. Manual labor, reading Scripture, corporate prayer, private prayer, meals, rest, and sleep are all important components of the balanced Benedictine life. Restoring a similar balance in our own lives would provide a way for us to live healthier, happier, and more productive days. Also, Benedict's Rule gives a model of community life for family, church, friendships, communities, and workplace in which members of a community all contribute. The strong help the weak instead of standing back and criticizing. There is no hierarchy of importance regarding the type of work: each person serves the other in love, and work is framed by each person's relationship to God.

Benedict would allow a tired mother or father to rest. He would encourage family members to take on some extra chores so that another's load might lighten. Benedictine work tells us that instead of complaining that someone can't do something that we can do, we can just offer to help. We can respect the contributions that each makes in the community.

The Benedictine view of work has a component of stewardship: we are stewards of the gifts, talents, and skills that have been given to us. Everything we've been given has been loaned to us by God and through our work we can find our way to God. Each of us has been blessed with talents or skills for which we can joyfully give thanks. Our work is a way that we can glorify God. At the end of his compositions, eighteenth-century composer Johann Sebastian Bach always wrote *Soli Deo Gloria*: "to God alone the glory."

As we use our gifts to help others, we can strive to keep our own lives in balance, allotting the time necessary for each task we have before us—no more, no less. We can keep in mind the importance of our work yet not let work determine the structure of our lives. We need to be good to others, we need to be good to ourselves. This means taking care of body, mind, and spirit, balancing not only our various activities but also what we do for others and what we do for ourselves. To serve others in Christ's name, we need to keep ourselves strong.

Work can also become a way to deepen our connection with God. Following the practice of the monastics, we can give our work to God and can pray through our work. Through our work we are co-creators with God.

Finally, members of our family, church, and workplace do not need to be defined by what they do. There are too many things that can destroy our work: layoffs, job cuts, illness, relocation, and so forth. Instead, we can define who we are on a higher level, beyond the reach of change. As an antidote to identity-by-job, I offer Rachel Hosmer's definition of a Christian. She wrote, "This is who I am: member of Christ, child of God, inheritor of the kingdom."<sup>4</sup> It's a definition of self rooted in our Baptism and connects our identity to Christ. With who we are secure in the hands of Christ, we can negotiate life's changes with peace and grace.

### The Work Doldrums

We've all had them, no matter what jobs we do. Another name for these doldrums is *acedia*. (pronounced "eh-see'-dee-eh"). *Acedia* means apathy, or indifference—literally, "I don't care." Most of us have struggled with these feelings that drain us and can make it difficult even to get out of bed. Often called the "noonday demon," *acedia* is the opposite of mindfulness and attentiveness. This demon "tempts us to give up, whispers to us that what once seemed so full of promise is in fact going nowhere, that our efforts are in vain."<sup>5</sup> I can relate to a personal description of *acedia* from Kathleen Norris. Perhaps you can as well.

I thought that I was merely tired and in need of rest at year's end, but it drags on, becoming the death-in-life that I know all too well, when my capacity for joy shrivels up, and, like drought-stricken grass, I die down to the roots to wait it out. The simplest acts demand a herculean effort, the pleasure I normally take in people and the world itself is lost to me.<sup>6</sup>

The noonday demon "suggests that whatever I'm doing, indeed my entire life of 'doings,' is not only meaningless but utterly useless."<sup>7</sup>

This plunge into chill waters of pure realism is incapacitating, and the demon likes me this way. It suggests sleep when what I need most is to take a walk. It insists that I shut myself away when what I probably need is to be with other people. It mocks the rituals, routines, and work that normally fill my day; why do them, why do anything at all, it says, in the face of so vast an emptiness. Worst of all, even though I know that the ancient remedies—prayer, psalmody, scripture reading—would help to pull me out of the morass, I find myself incapable of acting on this knowledge.<sup>8</sup>

However the noonday demon attacks, the end result of *acedia* is spiritual: we become estranged from God, which is exactly what this demon wants. The noon liturgy of the Hours called "sext" focuses on the dangers of *acedia* and calls the monastic to renewed fervor and commitment.

Author Deborah Smith Douglas says that to defeat this sense of hopelessness, we can bring to our work an understanding that "our real work, no matter how we earn our livelihoods, engages us in saying yes to God"

and that we must have “complete trust in God’s presence and purposes.”<sup>9</sup> You and I have a choice either to open ourselves to God or to close our fist around our life and risk falling into acedia, with its perilous lack of meaning. Smith writes that we must courageously choose the former and find meaning in our lives.

What can we do if we feel acedia creeping in? Through prayer we reach out to God. We can fully rely on God and have a profound trust in God’s love and purposes for us to help reset our spiritual compasses to true north.<sup>10</sup> Often we need others to help us banish the feelings of hopelessness. They can pray for us. This can remind us of God’s help and presence and point us in a direction where we can regain balance in our lives. We can try physical activity to refresh mind and body. We can seek help from a spiritual director. We can treat ourselves to an activity that brings us refreshment and joy. Finally, we can just hang in there. I’ve often found that a good meal and a good night’s sleep does wonders!

### **Our Real Work**

Most of us wear many work hats: we’re parent, spouse, employee, employer, homeowner, church member, community member. We work at a job, we work as a volunteer. We work to help other members of our community or family by caring for children, for elderly parents, and for others. Every day we work at a myriad of tasks. We mow the lawn, clean the toilets, and make meals. We take children to school and to other activities, we do food shopping. We work at one job; then something happens and we lose that job. Layoffs, closings, business failures lead to loss of particular work. If we do all this work in so many different places, who *are* we? And when we lose our work or can no longer do what we had done before, *then who are we?*

Jesus wore many different hats, too. His occupation moved from carpentry to itinerant ministry. In this role Jesus taught the crowds, instructed his disciples, healed the sick, exorcized demons, debated with critical and jealous religious leadership, struggled to teach his disciples, who didn’t really understand what he was all about, and endured humiliation. He gave his life for his work. Through all this work, Jesus had one purpose: he pointed to God. This is what grounded him and gave him stamina and energy. Whatever was required of him at the moment, this purpose enabled him to remain centered in God. His strength came from being rooted and grounded in God.

Benedict’s Rule also points to God, to God in Christ, and those who follow his Rule are guided to a life that is centered in Christ. In chapter 1 of this book, I quoted this statement by Esther de Waal about the purpose of the Rule:

It is all about love.

It points me to Christ.

Ultimately the whole meaning and purpose of the Rule is simply, [in Benedict's own words] "Prefer nothing to the love of Christ."<sup>11</sup>

Preferring nothing to the love of Christ impacts the way we view our work regardless of where the work takes place or what it is. Our *real* work is to love one another and to point to Christ. This means that in our work we're not just to *do*. We are to *be*.

Tasks can change, jobs can change, the circumstances of our life can change. But under it all and through it all, we remain people who are all about love and who point to Christ. Our *real work* is to *be* as we show the presence of Christ in our daily life. Whatever our work is and if that work ever changes, we're still the same people when we recognize that *who we are* is more important than what we do. The real thing that defines us does *not* change: each of us is a child of God. Paul wrote that nothing could separate us from the love of Christ (Rom 8:39). Our stability is in Christ and not in the externals of our life.

And so we are to be people who are all about love and who point to Christ. We are people who are to remain centered in Christ and rooted in God. Then it no longer matters *what* we do. It's *how* we do the task before us that's important. The *how* is answered by the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels. The *how* is expanded by Paul in his letters, by other New Testament writings, and by the many spiritual writers through the ages who have sought to place Christ first in their lives. The *how* is explained by Benedict in the Rule. The *how* calls us to be people who love in whatever work God gives us to do.

### Entering the Holiness of Work

Since our real work is to love and to point to Christ, no matter what our earthly and tangible work of the moment is, *all our work is a holy endeavor*. Work is a way we seek God. Work is the way we use our God-given gifts in service to others. Our work provides opportunities to be in relationship with others where we can let the light of God shine through us. All our work can be an occasion to praise God, whether we work in office, home, church, school, or outdoors. All our work can be infused with the presence of God. All our work can be an opportunity to listen for God each day.

Finally, what we do as our work is important; yet our true work is beyond what we do with our hands and our minds. John McQuiston II expresses this elegantly in his contemporary interpretation of the Rule of Benedict, titled *Always We Begin Again*.

When we rise from sleep let us rise for the joy  
of the true Work that we will be about  
this day,  
and considerately cheer one another on.<sup>12</sup>

When you rise tomorrow, ask yourself, “What is the true Work I am to do today?”

### **Benedictine Work and the Baptismal Covenant**

The Benedictine view of work is rooted in spirituality. Through our work we serve God by serving one another. In our work we use the gifts that God has given to us in a generous, responsible, and humble way. Work is important but it doesn't define who we are. Work is an occasion to “step aside” and let our actions glorify God. Through work we can exercise and hone our “Christian muscles.” We can seek God as we do each task of the day.

Our true work as Christian people is to be Christ's Body here on earth, committed to the work of fulfilling the promises we make in our Baptismal Covenant: to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves, and to strive for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being.

### **The Hands of Christ**

On our last trip to Italy together, one day my husband, John, and my mother-in-law, Ruth, and I visited a particular church in a small town. In it there was a statue of Christ with arms outstretched. It was a beautiful and poignant statue. Jesus' face was calm yet somehow pleading. As I surveyed the statue I noticed that the hands were missing. “A victim of religious wars,” I thought at the time, recalling the many defaced statues I'd seen in England. I turned to Ruth, who was standing next to me, and remarked, “The statue is beautiful, isn't it? Too bad the hands got lopped off.” Ruth turned to me and explained patiently. “The statue is *supposed* to have no hands. *We're* his hands!”

You and I are his hands, blessed with countless gifts we can use to do God's work through our own work.

Every activity is important in the *Rule*, important enough to do conscientiously and regularly. Work becomes, then, a way of glorifying God. Usually, when we think in these terms, we assume that God is glorified through our offering of “important,” outwardly successful labor. While this is true, it is also true that dirty dishes washed well and in the presence of God also give glory. To do what needs to be done, humbly and simply, is enough.<sup>13</sup>



## **Tool #2: Exploring My Work**

*Purpose of the Tool.* To provide an opportunity to reflect on work.

*Background on the Tool.* Do we ever think about the work we do? Reflecting on our work can help us appreciate the role of work in our lives and lead us to make positive changes in our work or how we do our work.

### *The Tool*

Here are some questions to help you think about your work.

- Describe your work. Work is not necessarily a job with a paycheck. Work is what you do, whatever that is. Do you work in the home? Do you work outside the home? Do you volunteer? Do you work in a religious community? You probably will be describing work in several different areas. Whatever your work is, be it one job or ten, describe it fully to yourself. Then continue with the following questions.
- Do I find my work fulfilling? Why or why not?
- Does my work energize me? Why or why not?
- What are some changes I might make my work more fulfilling and/or energizing?
- What makes me want to run away from my work? Do I? If you have run, either mentally or physically, next time, stay put and listen for what God may be asking you to do and be. This suggestion relates to Benedictine stability and obedience.
- Is there work I do that is physical? If the answer is yes, what is the impact of this work? If the answer is no, is there some physical work that I might do, even if it is gentle and light?
- Is work distributed fairly in my household? Who carries the heaviest load? Is there a way to make the workload more even? Talk to members of your family about this.
- What are the gifts I could share with others through volunteer activities? What might those activities be?

As you do your work be alert to the following: the gifts you use in your work, how you serve others in your work, and how God might be using you now in the situations that come up in your work.

## **Tool #7: Arrow Prayers**

*Purpose of the Tool.* To remind us that prayer is the key to unlocking the grace in our work.

*Background on the Tool.* While we may not be able to visit a monastery or convent to participate in the Divine Office, we can make a conscious effort to pray throughout the day. There are many ways to do this. This tool gives a simple way to connect to God and sanctify the day.

Remember that *prayer is relationship and communication with God.* Each time we pray, we are opening ourselves to God who calls us continually. We pray because God first places the prayer in our hearts.

### *The Tool*

Arrow prayers are very brief prayers that can be said quickly and are easily remembered. They consist of a single word or phrase and come from Scripture, from spiritual writings, or are your own words. Here are some examples:

Lord, you are my shepherd. (Ps 23:1)

God, you are my light and my salvation. (Ps 27:1)

God, you are my refuge and strength. (Ps 46:1)

I will praise the Lord as long as I live. (Ps 146:2)

Come, Lord Jesus! (Rev 22:20)

Lord, I love you.

Help me.

Thank you for all.

Keep me steadfast, O God.

Notice in the first three examples I've changed the words of Scripture to address God directly. "The Lord is my shepherd" became "Lord, you are my shepherd." I find that this helps me feel more connected to God. Try it!

The bottom line is to use a word or phrase that comes from your heart, be it your own or Holy Scripture or from another source. Repeat

these words throughout the day, or set your watch alarm for each hour. When the alarm rings, pray. Or, use the word or phrase before you answer each phone call or make a phone call. Pray at stoplights. Find other places to use your arrow prayer and do whatever works for you.

Throughout the day you'll have contact with God. In a sense, prayer will never cease and God's presence will sustain and support you as you share in Christ's work in the world.