



# Praying the Hours

## The Benedictine Way

Photo: Beverly Beem

by Beverly Beem

An ancient monastic story tells about a young monk who came to a teacher who was busy working and praying with a group of people. The monk said, "Since I can walk on water, let's go off alone onto the lake and enjoy some elevated spiritual conversation." The teacher replied, "If you simply want to avoid all these people, why don't you come fly away with me and we can drift along the clouds together." The young monk said, "I can't. I don't know how to fly." The teacher replied, "Neither can I walk on water. These are the things that any bird or fish can do, but they have little to do with the spiritual life. If you want to talk about that, we should stay right here."<sup>1</sup>

I went to a Benedictine monastery to live the spiritual life more intently. The monks sent me home to live it where I am. That is the point of this story. That is the Benedictine way. The writings of Kathleen Norris, particularly *Cloister Walk*, have helped create popular interest in the monastic life as something available to ordinary people.<sup>2</sup> Other writers, such as Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen, have drawn attention to the value of solitude and silence for people caught up in the demands of family and work. The *Chant* CD by the Benedictine Monks of Santo Domingo de Silos has introduced listeners to the haunting beauty of monastic



music, and the music of Hildegard of Bingen, the twelfth-century nun, has helped awaken interest in the saints and mystics of the Church. Regional guides to sanctuaries and retreat houses have guided pilgrims, tourists, seekers, and the merely curious to the hospitality of the monks and nuns.<sup>3</sup> If any visitors go with romantic visions of pious folk in robes gliding effortlessly around the cloister, feet two inches off the ground, they are in for a surprise. Though I found

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pious souls during my month-long stay at the Pecos Benedictine Monastery, their feet were planted firmly on the ground. This is the Benedictine way. Whereas other monastic orders have come and gone, meeting the particular needs of their times, the Benedictine way has retained its influence since the fifth century. It has staying power. I wanted to see for myself what it has to offer its community and its guests who come to visit.

I went to this place for three reasons. First, I wanted to study spiritual direction, and the Pecos community has offered a School for Spiritual Directors since 1977, bringing together people from all denominations as teachers and participants. Second, I wanted to deepen my own prayer life, learning what the gifts of solitude and silence could teach me. Third, I wanted to understand the Benedictine life from the inside out.

My previous acquaintance with the Benedictines had been largely through my study of literature and church history. Most particularly, *The Rule of St. Benedict* provides a key to understanding the thought of the Middle Ages and much of the history of the Church.<sup>4</sup> Benedict of Nursia (480-547) was educated in the worldly wisdom of Rome, but he turned his back on its wealth and power in a single-minded search for God. His handbook, commonly referred to as the *Rule*, has principles applicable in and out of the monastic community and has become a guide for anyone who seeks an intimate connection with God. Yet his *Rule* seems too much of a cultural artifact.

Does St. Benedict have anything to say to me today?<sup>5</sup>

A major disillusionment for my own cloister walk was finding no cloister. The building is a dude ranch turned monastery, fitting the needs of the community but lacking the Gothic arches. The chapel is a converted rec room with an electronic keyboard. But the Benedictine way is not dependent on movie-set architecture. Worship does not need soundtrack accompaniment. Rather, we walked out the back door

to the Pecos River and twelve hundred acres of the high desert country of New Mexico. Miles of trails provided our cloister walk; desert skies sheltered our solitude. Here the adobe buildings and southwestern architecture fit naturally to the place, its solar heating kind to the environment. This, too, is the Benedictine way.

“How are you doing?” Sister Ruth, the head of the women’s community, asked me in a dinner table conversation. We had been talking, and I found that she had some Adventism in her own family heritage. She might understand better than most some of the culture shock I was feeling.

“To be honest,” I told her, “I am struggling to hang on to the worship services. Not knowing the words of the songs or the prayers, I find myself fumbling through the hymnal, trying to keep up, never quite in the right place. So for much of the time I find myself just listening.”

“Ah,” she said, “that is the basis of the Benedictine rule. The first word in the *Rule* is ‘Listen.’”

It requires a new way of learning for visually-oriented people like me. But this is the Benedictine way. Quiet the anxiety to do it right and just listen. Listen to what God is saying to you at this moment.

My experience of the Benedictine way was learning to listen. Listen to God. Listen to the community. Listen to Scripture. Listen to each other. Listen to your own heart. Listen to the work of the moment. Listen to the world around us. That God is present in our lives and actively speaking to us is a fundamental premise of the Benedictine way. It is our task to listen. The Benedictine life is designed to cultivate a life of listening.

This listening takes place largely through Scripture and the liturgy. The primary purpose of the Benedictine community is to do the work of God, the *Opus Dei*. Prayer and praise is the great priority for the



Benedictine life. "Nothing is to be preferred to the work of God," says St. Benedict. The *Opus Dei*, the work of God, is what we do whenever we enter the chapel to pray, to sing the psalms, to hear the Scriptures. The process of *lectio divina*, reading the Scriptures not just for information, but to hear what God is saying to us in our time and place, is one of the gifts of the Benedictine community. Singing the psalms is a part of every worship, steeping us in Scripture and connecting us with the whole range of human experience expressed in the psalms, praise and lament alike.

From the Benedictine Abbey a stream of praise is always flowing, and this liturgy of the hours provides the structure and purpose of the day as the seasons do the year. At the transitional hours of the day, the change from darkness to light, from morning to afternoon, from day to night, from wakefulness to sleep, we pull away from the demands of the moment to pray. When we go into the chapel to hear the word and sing the psalms, we are going to let the *Opus Dei* do its work in us. We are going to listen, to hear, and to sing.

The hours begin with *Vigils*, the night watch.<sup>6</sup> I asked Father Sam, who calls himself "a beat-up old monk," when he found time for his personal devotions. "Around 3:00 o'clock," he said. Further along in the conversation I realized he meant 3:00 a.m. He spends an hour in devotions.

"Then do you go back to bed before the rising bell at 5:30?" I asked.

"No, I play computer games."

I think St. Benedict would like that. He didn't call it *Vigils*, but that's what it is. Why start the day in the dark? The darkness hides the furnishings of our lives. It is a time of mystery, the darkness out of which light comes. If light is a symbol of God, so is darkness, "a deep, but dazzling darkness."<sup>7</sup> The Gospel of John starts with the Light that shines in darkness, not the light that "shines *into* the darkness, like a flashlight shining into a dark tent." Rather, it is the light that "shines right in the midst of darkness."<sup>8</sup> The challenge of the hour is to look deeply enough into the darkness to find God.

But *Vigils* is also a time of waking up. This watching and waiting prepares us for the appearance of a larger reality. With the darkness around us we learn to listen. We are not distracted by our multiple

to-do lists and the noise and clutter within us. Sitting in the darkness, we learn to be still and listen. I think of Jesus rising a great while before day. I think of Father Sam praying at 3:00 a.m. I think how hard it is for me to haul myself out of bed before light. But doing so adds a whole new dimension to the day. The spirit of *Vigils* teaches us to trust the dark and watch for the light.

We greet the light at *Lauds*, the morning service at dawn. We begin the hour in darkness and end it in light. We watch the day coming through the windows.

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Never taking it for granted as just another sunrise, we receive the day as the gift of God. The Benedictine spirit is the spirit of awareness and gratitude, awareness of God's grace and power in the ordinary events of the day and gratitude for his presence. Those who take such things for granted will never see the light coming in through the windows.

If the hymns, prayers, and scripture of the liturgy are an essential part of the Benedictine day, so is silence. Silence is the backdrop to the day as white space is to the words on a page. Silence clears away the clutter and noise that often gets in the way of our communion with God. This rule of silence is occasional rather than total. In Pecos, breakfasts are taken in silence. Silence in the morning is an ancient monastic tradition, so the word of God can continue to speak. Moving from the spiritual feast of the liturgy to the physical one, we allow the Word of God we have just heard take root in the mind for the day. After hearing, the heart continues to listen in silence.

The monastery provides a place to get away from the noise of many words, an adjustment for those of us addicted to hourly news updates. One local newspaper appears in the coffee room, and a TV with modest reception occupies a corner of the guest lounge along with two pay phones to provide minimal contact with the outside world. But silence is more than the absence of noise. It comes from within. I





Photo: Beverly Beem

found it takes a while for the noise inside to die down. Even in the monastery, it takes some effort to push aside the business of the day and claim the offerings of silence and solitude. The attempt to live in silence at the monastery reinforced for me the need for silence in my life at home. I really shouldn't have to go to a monastery to find silence, yet I have become accustomed to living with noise. The car radio and the TV provide background noise to my day, and I learn not to pay attention. If I am to find silence in my day, I have to plan for it. Learning to put silence in our lives is one of the gifts the monastery sent home with us.

Praying the hours is one way to claim this silence. Between the major hours of *Lauds* in the morning and *Vespers* in the evening are the Little Hours of the workday. Rather than barreling through the day, we acknowledge the passing hours and stop, if only for a moment, to pray. *Prime*, the early morning hour, is a time of planning the day and praying for God's blessing, making the work itself a prayer. This is the hour for getting your priorities straight and putting them all before God. *Terce* is the mid-morning

pause, "the monastic coffee break." The focus of prayer is the work at hand. *Sext* is the hour of productivity and the hour of lethargy. High noon. The turning point in the day. Time of transition. Time for prayer. *None*, or mid-afternoon, moves us toward the end of the working day, a time to put our work in perspective.

A working community does not stop at each of these hours to gather into the chapel but acknowledges the passing hours while at work, whether in the library, the shop, the field, or the kitchen. At Pecos, we combine all these Little Hours into one noonday prayer. We stop at the turning point of the day for a moment of prayer and singing. I learn from this the value of fragments of time. It doesn't take long to pause for worship, ten minutes at the most, and soon I naturally turn to the chapel at noon. Before the community of the noonday meal is the community of noonday worship. Our work may be solitary, but noonday is a time to remember that we are not alone. We are in community. We are loved. We see our work in context. The bell that calls us to worship reminds us that we are living our lives in the presence of God—and to look up.





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Work is a part of the balanced life of the Benedictine way, an essential part of the monastic day. Historically, the work of monasteries was in the scriptorium, the work of copying ancient texts, particularly the Gospels. Some monasteries continue this tradition, many with electronic resources, updating an ancient tradition. Others work at all kinds of trades and industries—keeping bees, baking bread, printing, farming, whatever trade the environment and talents allow.

For the Benedictine community, much of its work revolves around the gift of hospitality. That, too, is an essential part of the Benedictine life. Providing hospitality to guests is part of the community's mission. Community members do much of the work themselves, moving easily from the chapel to the kitchen. The quality of the meal might depend on which of the monks or nuns have kitchen duty that day. The scholarly Father Michael often did the dishes. An apron covering his habit, he took our dishes off the bussing tray, rinsed them off, and put them in the dishwasher, just like home. It was home. We were guests at their table, and the work of hospitality is the Benedictine way, integrated with the life of prayer. I happened to meet Sister Miriam in the laundry room. She was surrounded by mountains of guest linens, loading up the washers and folding sheets from the dryer. I tried to commiserate, but

she would have none of it.

"I asked for this job," she said, "I can do it while I pray."

I learned much about the spiritual life in the kitchen and the laundry room. That would not surprise my Benedictine hosts.

The morning and evening services provide the framework for the day. In *Vespers* we leave behind the work of the day and come to worship, lighting the lamps for evening. It is a time of praise. The hymn sung is the "Magnificat," the joyful song of Mary, "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, and my spirit exults in God my Savior."

The conclusion of the monastic day is celebrated in *Compline*, the completing of the circle, a time of self-examination and confession, moving us into the night's rest. It begins with the prayer, "A peaceful night and a perfect end grant us." The hours teach us how to live our days, and the end of the day prompts us to remember the end of our lives. The psalm sung is Psalms 91, praying for the shelter of God's protection. The day ends with an expression of faith in God's protection through The Great Silence, the time between *Compline* and *Vigils*, the ending of one day and the beginning of the next.

The Benedictine life blends work, worship, prayer, play, and hospitality into a life of balance. Every day has its hours appointed to the essentials of life. Rather than doing nothing except work for a



week and then recovering in a day of play, the balanced life devotes the proper time to all the necessities of life. Every part of life has its proper time, and there is time enough for everything. It is also a life of stability. Like other religious orders, the Benedictines have a ministry to the world, but they exercise it at home. While others go out working and preaching, they stay put. The vow of stability means

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that they learn to find the voice of God in their lives where they are. They are not tempted to wander, looking for greener pastures. Disputes with colleagues have to be worked out. There is no great work to do around the corner. They are called to do the work at hand. At this time. In this place. Their ministry is to those who knock on their doors. Every guest is to be received as Christ.

We received the Benedictine gift of hospitality. For a while we were invited into their community. We prayed together, sang together, worshiped together, ate together, shared our stories, and encouraged one another in our walk with God. We lived the model of the Christian community found in 1 Thessalonians 5, praying constantly, building one another up. The monks and nuns of the Benedictine community are people seeking God, but they do so in community. They pray together because they live together. The way of communion with God is also the way of community with each other.

I remember the scene of the last day as we piled into a bus for the ride to the airport. We would go our separate ways, rejoining our own communities. The Pecos community lined the driveway waving us goodbye.

“What are you going to do when we leave?” we asked them.

“Get back to our prayers,” they said.

It is a beautiful community. I loved my stay there. But it was enough. I missed my own commu-

nity. I missed its songs and its prayers. I would be glad to get back home. I learned from the Benedictines much that will strengthen my own walk with God. They reminded me of some things my own tradition tends to forget sometimes, but my own walk must take place in my own community. St. Benedict would agree, I think.

## Notes and References

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2. (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996).
3. Jack and Marcia Kelly, *Sanctuaries: The Complete United States: A Guide to Lodgings in Monasteries, Abbeys, and Retreats* (New York: Bell Tower, 1996). The same authors have also published regional guides.
4. *The Rule of St. Benedict*, trans. Anthony C. Meisel and M. L. del Mastro (New York: Doubleday, 1975).
5. The following books provide good introductions to the Benedictine way: Elizabeth J. Canham, *Heart Whispers: Benedictine Wisdom for Today* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1999); Joan Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict: Insight for the Ages* (New York: Crossroad, 1992); M. Basil Pennington, *A Place Apart: Monastic Prayer and Practice for Everyone* (Liguori, Mo.: Liguori/Triumph, 1998); Cyprian Smith, *The Path of Life: Benedictine Spirituality for Monks & Lay People* (York, Eng.: Ampleforth Abbey Press, 1995); Columba Stewart, *Prayer and Community: The Benedictine Tradition* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1998); Benet Tvedten, *A Share in the Kingdom: A Commentary on the Rule of St. Benedict for Oblates* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1989); Esther de Waal, *A Life-Giving Way: A Commentary on the Rule of St. Benedict* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1995).
6. A good introduction to the liturgical hours is in the companion to the *Chant CD*: David Steindl-Rast, *The Music of Silence: Entering the Sacred Space of Monastic Experience* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995). Much of my understanding of the meaning of the hours comes from this book.
7. Henry Vaughan, “The Night,” 1655.
8. Steindl-Rast, *Music of Silence*, 25.

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