

Thematic meditations

**SUNDAY**



**THAT HE MAY REIGN**

**ON EARTH AS IN HAEVEN**

43<sup>e</sup> Pèlerinage de Pentecôte  
de Paris à Notre-Dame de Chartres

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# SAINT BENEDICT, PATRON SAINT OF EUROPE

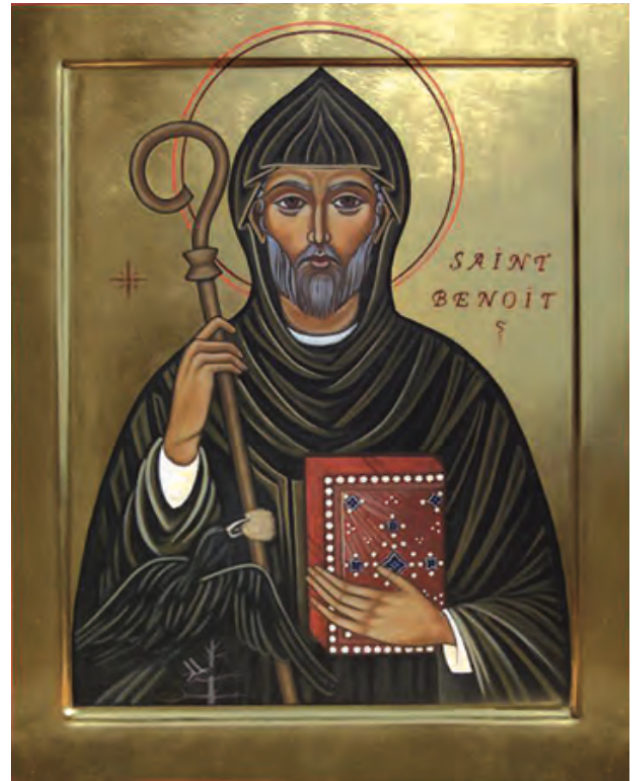
## MEDITATION 4

### Introduction

Dear pilgrims,  
Here we are at the beginning of our second day of pilgrimage. We may already be feeling the pain of sore muscles and aching feet. To put all that aside and give ourselves courage, let us turn our eyes to a saint who led our old Europe along the path to Heaven, to the point of being called its "Patron Saint": Saint Benedict of Nursia.

### Major Themes

- The personal greatness of Saint Benedict
- The influence of his Rule on Western civilization
- Why was he named the "Father of Europe"?
- What practical lesson can we draw from his example?



icône religieuse représentant saint Benoît

### And Who Was Saint Benedict?

Saint Benedict was a young Italian student who committed himself to a life of perfection at the very moment when Clovis was converting to Christianity and receiving baptism, around the year 500. He fled Rome, where he was studying classical literature, fearing for his soul amid the corruption of the student world. Retreating to a devout village, he fled again when his reputation for sanctity grew after his first miracle.

Becoming a hermit, he battled vigorously against a temptation of impurity by rolling himself in thorns. Later, a group of undisciplined monks made him their abbot but, unable to bear his firmness, they even attempted to poison him! Benedict chose to flee his own anger, leaving them behind to live alone under God's watchful eye. Avoiding sin and practicing silence were monastic virtues that Saint Benedict lived out to the fullest.

This bore great fruit. Young men "truly seeking God" joined him. He taught them the love of prayer, obedience, and zeal for humble work requiring much love. He established 12 small monasteries in Subiaco and then a large one on Monte Cassino. Above all, he left them a monastic Rule to guide their lives. Sensing his death approaching, he had himself carried to the oratory and, supported by two disciples, died standing while praying.

## The Rule of Saint Benedict

The *Rule of Saint Benedict*, written by the saint, is a masterpiece. Composed of 73 chapters preceded by a prologue, this simple and clear little book has shaped generations of monks, priests, and laypeople for over fourteen centuries. Its success is undoubtedly linked to Saint Benedict's popularity, thanks to the biography of his life written by Pope Gregory the Great. However, the quality of the *Rule* itself is what won the hearts of monks and led them to adopt it.

Saint Benedict did not invent much himself. He was well-versed in the monastic literature that preceded him. But he had the gift of putting everything in its proper place. He explained great spiritual principles in very simple terms. Nothing was overlooked. Monks had to learn to listen, "fight under the banner of Christ, the true King," rid themselves of vices, obey, and practice silence. The monastery was described as a "school for the service of the Lord," a center for both theoretical formation and practical training.

Even the smallest details were carefully considered by Saint Benedict, who offered his monks a life striving for perfection, yet one that was balanced and accessible to all, "where the weak would not be crushed and the strong could do more."

For example, when it came to food, Saint Benedict was quite generous. He provided for a good portion of bread and two cooked dishes, with the option of a piece of fruit or raw vegetables. If a monk couldn't eat one of the dishes, he could make up for it with the other. This reflects Saint Benedict's great care for individuals and their physical or moral particularities.

Saint Benedict refused to make secondary matters into essentials. Everything was planned, yet there remained a great flexibility.

## Why is Saint Benedict the "Patron of Europe"?

Saint Benedict was proclaimed the "principal patron of all Europe" by Pope Paul VI in 1964. Two reasons justify such a title. First, because Saint Benedict's followers evangelized or re-Christianized almost all the peoples of Europe. Second, because the Rule of Saint Benedict laid the foundation for European civilization.

## The Benedictines: Champions of Europe's Evangelization

The first reason for the title of "Patron of Europe" given to Saint Benedict is that the Benedictines were the champions of Europe's evangelization.

Here are glimpses of the fascinating history of these missions:

England had been conquered by pagans who had exterminated the Celtic inhabitants. The monks then converted these fierce Anglo-Saxons, and the island became an extraordinary hub of monastic life and culture. The Anglo-Saxon monks, in turn, went out to convert the barbarians of the East, notably those in Germany.

What was the method of these monks?

They simply established monasteries, which became the heart of their mission, radiating conquering holiness. They preached in the countryside, opened workshops, hospitals, and hostels, and established schools to spread Christian culture and nurture future vocations.

The liturgical plainchant, which became known as Gregorian chant, captivated the barbarian populations. The paintings of Christian mysteries also had a profound impact, and the monks used these effectively. Gradually, the Gospel spread across what is now modern Europe.

### **The Benedictines Brought the Light of Progress**

Saint Benedict was named the Patron of Europe not only because his followers converted the continent but also because, in the words of Pope Paul VI, "they brought the light of true Christian progress through the cross, the book, and the plow."

The monks first civilized through the cross, that is, by the law of Christ. Saint Benedict taught people to place divine worship and liturgical prayer at the center of their social lives. In doing so, he cemented the spiritual unity of nations. By singing in church in a single Latin language to give united praise to God, people of different languages, races, and cultures became conscious of belonging to one and the same people of God.

This unity inspired a shared Christian art whose traces still remain across our continent today.

### **The Benedictines Bring Love for Culture**

It was through the book that the monks also laid the foundation for European civilization. For a long time, the great abbeys were the only centers of culture. In these monasteries, the Latin classics and the works of the Church Fathers were rediscovered, arts were cultivated, and manuscripts were copied.

This intellectual endeavor was directly tied to the Rule of Saint Benedict, which requires monks to dedicate three hours each day to reading. But reading required books—lots of books—and therefore, it required the labor of copying them.

To read in Latin, the single language of Christian European culture, one also had to learn to speak and write Latin. Latin was the language of the liturgy and the Bible, which necessitated the study of classical authors, even pagan ones. The Divine Office required high-quality chant, leading to the monks' work in music.

The monks memorized large portions of the Bible, but Scripture needed to be explained. To that end, they studied the writings of the Church Fathers and produced new commentaries.

### **The Benedictines Bring Love for Work**

Christian Europe was built not only through the cross and the book but also through the plow—through manual labor, especially agricultural work.

The monasteries were large, well-organized agricultural estates. Forests and wastelands were cleared and cultivated, and marshes were drained. The monks retained a portion of the land to be worked by themselves and their servants, while other portions were leased to farmers in exchange for rent.

In addition, the monks organized artisanal services within the monastic village, making the abbey a hub of economic activity.

## The Benedictines Bring a Civilization of Kindness

Beyond their spiritual and cultural contributions, the monasteries spread what can be called a "civilization of kindness." This was not only due to their distribution of grain to the poor or their generous hospitality but also because of the central role of forgiveness and charity in their communities.

Every evening, the Abbot would chant the Lord's Prayer aloud, reminding the monks that they must forgive the offenses of their brothers if they themselves wished to receive God's forgiveness. How many families and communities have been destroyed for lack of this practice of daily forgiveness!

## Thus, Saint Benedict Became the Father of Europe

Dear pilgrims, on this day of Pentecost, as we journey together on the road to Chartres, we reflect on the example of Saint Benedict.

### **What practical lesson can we draw from his life to prepare ourselves for the reign of Christ the King?**

Saint Benedict teaches us to center our lives on God through prayer, to value the pursuit of learning, to work diligently with our hands, and to foster charity and forgiveness in our communities. By living out these values, we too can contribute to building a civilization of truth, love, and justice under the reign of Christ.

### **How to Effectively Prepare for the Reign of Christ the King in the School of Saint Benedict?**

Saint Benedict first teaches us to listen in our hearts. The first words of his Rule are: "Listen, my son, and incline the ear of your heart to the words of such a good Father!" The Divine Master speaks to the ear of our hearts; let us listen to Him! This is the first lesson: before acting, we must listen.

But listening is not enough; the word heard must be put into practice. Saint Benedict urges us to "take up the strong and noble weapons of obedience [to God's commandments]" and to "stand under the banner of Christ, our true King." Acting for the reign of Christ requires a true spiritual battle and obedience to God's law in all our actions.

At the heart of this spiritual battle, Saint Benedict places the necessity of living within boundaries, or *cloister*. This necessity is not just for monks. A cloister is a barrier we erect between ourselves and the world to avoid the contagion of Satan, the Prince of this world. Without boundaries, gardens are ravaged by wild beasts. As seen in his life, Saint Benedict erected a wall between worldly temptations and his soul. Let us imitate him by refusing, among other things, the slavery of the connected world, where our time and purity are lost.

Dear pilgrims, Saint Benedict teaches us to listen and to convert, but also to act upon the world around us to win it over for Christ. All great changes in history, for better or worse, have been initiated by a few resolute individuals. Let us be among those men and women of conviction who bring about change in their small corner of the world.

A proverb says, "You go further by walking slowly." It took centuries for the monks to build Europe. They took their time, but they did not sit idly by. Let us also work resolutely for the reign of Christ's love.

Thus, the dawn of a Christian society will rise, thanks to the very means used by Saint Benedict: the cross, the book, and the plow. The cross represents prayer. The book stands

for study. The plow symbolizes work. Each in its place, according to the duties of our state in life. Let us pray, study, and work so that Jesus may reign again over our troubled world and that souls may be saved.

## Quotations

“At a time when the Roman Empire was crumbling, regions of Europe were sinking into darkness, and others had not yet experienced civilization or spiritual values, it was Saint Benedict who, through his constant and diligent efforts, brought about the dawn of a new life on our continent. It was he, above all, and his followers who, with the cross, the book, and the plow, brought Christian progress to populations stretching from the Mediterranean to Scandinavia, from Ireland to the plains of Poland.

With the cross, that is, through the law of Christ, he taught men to place divine worship and liturgical prayer at the center of their social lives, cementing the spiritual unity of peoples. By singing God’s praises in the same Latin language, peoples of diverse tongues, races, and cultures became aware that they were one people of God.

With the book, that is, with culture, at a time when human heritage was about to be lost, Saint Benedict preserved the classical tradition of the ancients, transmitting it intact to posterity and restoring a love for knowledge.

And finally, with the plow, that is, with agriculture and similar initiatives, he succeeded in transforming barren and uncultivated lands into fertile fields and beautiful gardens. By uniting prayer with manual labor according to his famous motto, *Ora et Labora* (‘Pray and Work’), he ennobled and elevated human labor.”

– **Pope Paul VI**, Apostolic Letter *Pacis Nuntius*, proclaiming Saint Benedict as Patron of Europe (1964)

“What formed the culture of Europe—the search for God [learned by the monks at Saint Benedict’s school] and the openness to listening—remains today the foundation of all true culture.”

– **Pope Benedict XVI**, Address at the Collège des Bernardins, September 12, 2008

“Faced with a society that sinks deeper each day into materialistic barbarism, people turn to monasteries seeking the secret of lost harmony and of communal life. Truth is a perennial plant: it always breaks through the crust of earth that covers it.”

– **Dom Gérard**, former Abbot of Le Barroux (1927–2008)

## Bibliography

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