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## Benedict of Nursia

The founder of Western monasticism, Saint Benedict of Nursia wrote the Benedictine Rule, a code of behavior, spiritual life, and monastic organization that was the most influential rule for monasteries of the early Middle Ages. His monastic foundation at Monte Cassino, roughly 80 miles south of Rome, was an influential house until its destruction by the Lombards in A.D. 589 (the community was later reestablished), but Benedict's influence continued as his rule became the basic rule for most monks in the post-Roman world. Indeed, during the reign of the Carolingian dynasty, the Benedictine Rule became the primary rule for monks.

Benedict was born, according to tradition, ca. A.D. 480 in Nursia, Italy. Little is known of his life besides what is found in the pages of Pope Gregory the Great's *Dialogues*, which were written nearly a half century after Benedict's death. Gregory writes that Benedict's family sent him to Rome for a liberal education, which suggests that Benedict was from a fairly prosperous family. In Rome, however, Benedict saw that the other students had fallen into vice, and fearing that he might do the same and offend God, he turned his back on worldly learning. He also renounced his family and wealth and took up the religious life in a cave in Subiaco, east of Rome, ca. 500.

He was assisted during his stay at Subiaco by a monk named Romanus, who brought Benedict some food on occasion. Benedict soon began to attract the attention of others and gathered numerous disciples. Eventually, the monks of a nearby abbey elected him abbot. He soon left that community, however, because the monks found his rule too strenuous and tried to poison him.

After the attempted poisoning, Benedict returned to Subiaco with several companions to establish a new community. He was again the target of poisoning, that time by a jealous local priest, but he also attracted a great number of followers. After the second attempt on his life, Benedict founded his famous monastery on a mountain above Cassino, about halfway between Rome and Naples. Attracting many monks and preaching to the people in the surrounding region, he had great success at that monastery, which he built on top of an old pagan shrine. He met perhaps once a year with his sister Scholastica, who was a nun in a nearby community.

Benedict's greatest accomplishment was the composition of the Rule of Benedict, a code guiding the life of his monks and the organization and government of the monastery. The rule evolved over time and was probably composed in its final form, a prologue and 73 chapters, in the 530s. Although the rule was once thought to have been an independent creation by Benedict, it is now surmised that he borrowed heavily from the Rule of the Master, an anonymously written monastic rule possibly composed around 500. Comparison of the two rules, however, demonstrates Benedict's practical wisdom, humanity, and organizational ability. The Rule of the Master is a long and often rambling blueprint for monastic life, but the Benedictine Rule is much briefer and more focused. Benedict's rule opens with a discussion promoting the ascetic life and outlining the virtues a monk should cultivate, particularly obedience and humility. The next section outlines the daily routine of divine service, prayer, and readings of Scripture. There are chapters on the election of the abbot and other officers of the community in the next section of the rule. Benedict also regulated hours of sleep, manual labor, and reading for the monks in his community, and he provided guidelines for meals and for monastic discipline.

The daily routine for the monks was clearly outlined by Benedict and was focused on service to God. However, the rule was important not only for its religious devotionism but also for its flexibility and humanity. Indeed, those last two characteristics help explain the success of the rule. For instance, Benedict not only included guidelines for the recruitment and training of monks but also provided guidelines for the duties of the abbot, who was to be a father figure. He could be stern and demanding when the situation required, but he was also to be consoling and encouraging as circumstances dictated. Benedict also recognized that not all monks were on the same level and established different guidelines for different monks. For example, he allowed different measures of wine and food for

those who were sick or elderly, as compared to those who were in better physical or spiritual condition.

The wisdom and humanity of the Rule of Benedict accounted for its ultimate triumph in Western monasticism, but in the first two centuries of its existence, it competed with other monastic rules or was used in combination with them. By the eighth century, however, the Benedictine Rule had become increasingly important in the Frankish Carolingian Empire. Over the next several centuries, the Rule of Benedict was the official standard of all monasteries, and it was the foundation for major monastic reforms at the monasteries of Cluny in the 10th century and Cîteaux in the 12th. Benedict died, according to tradition, at Monte Cassino on March 21, 547. Later canonized as a saint, Benedict was declared the patron saint of Europe in 1964; his feast day is July 11.

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#### FURTHER READING

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