

July 11, 2026 -- Solemnity of Saint Benedict

Prov. 2:1-9; Col 3:12-17; Matt. 19:27-29

Homily

These words of Jesus are the conclusion of the Gospel story about a rich young man who had come to ask him what he should do to inherit eternal life. We know how Jesus invited him to sell all his possessions to follow him, and how, unable to resign himself to doing so, the young man went away sad. Jesus took the opportunity to make some disturbing remarks about the use of wealth. Then Peter asked Jesus: "We have left everything to follow you; what will become of us? In his reply, Jesus promised that they would share in eternal life.

The expression eternal life opens and closes the story. At the beginning, the young man asks Jesus: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" and at the end, in his reply to Peter, Jesus says: "You... will share in eternal life".

Saint Benedict, whom we celebrate today, imagines, in the Prologue to his Rule, a scenario in which God, looking for his worker in the crowd of people, says: "Who is the man who loves life and desires happy days? And at the end of chapter 72 on good zeal, which is Benedict's spiritual testament, he invites the monks to prefer nothing to Christ, may he lead us all together to eternal life. The entire Rule is therefore conceived by Benedict as a guide for those who desire life.

Today, as in Benedict's time, and throughout the fourteen centuries that separate us from him, the only reason to come and stay in the monastery is to live life to the full. We find this fullness of life in a deep attachment to the person of Christ, and it presupposes a detachment from everything that is not Him. This detachment is never perfectly achieved, obviously, and always needs to be redone. It is to the extent that we live in depth this attachment to Christ and this detachment from everything that is not Christ, that we are able to live in profound communion not only with the brothers and sisters around us, with whom we journey in a community of love and sharing, but also with all those for whom Jesus of Nazareth lived and died.

Benedict lived in the 6th century, at a time when the Western Roman Empire was crumbling under the barbarian invasions. His encounter with Totila, recounted by Saint Gregory, is a powerful symbol of the meeting of the ancient Spirit of Christianity,

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represented by Benedict, with the seething vitality of the new peoples, represented by Attila.

These were the beginnings of Europe. In the long process of bringing these new peoples together, first in Charlemagne's Empire and then throughout the turbulent history of medieval Christianity, the monasteries that lived by the Rule of Saint Benedict played a key role. But in the age of the great revolutions, the idea of "nationhood", with all that it entails in terms of pride and the desire for hegemony, shattered this medieval Europe and we saw the development of a conquering and colonising Europe. It was then reminded of its humility by the tragedy of two world wars.

The tragic consequences of the tensions between the new nation states led a few great politicians, such as Adenauer, De Gasperi and Schuman, often inspired by the thinker Jean Monnet, to develop the idea of a new Europe that would be a community.

Paul VI, who for a time had cherished a dream of a monastic life (as he reminded us during an audience at one of our General Chapters), and who had been a diplomat before becoming Pope, was very sensitive to this aspiration for a European community, and this is obviously another reason why he named Saint Benedict patron saint of Europe. The Rule that Benedict wrote for monastic communities is just as valid, in its fundamental inspiration, for any form of community, including a community of nations and peoples.

What is striking when we look at the great Benedictine tradition as a whole is that it is a spirit that is, in the final analysis, quite independent of the structures in which it is embodied at any given time and in any given cultural context. Benedict brought together a small community at Subiaco, then founded a small monastery at Monte Cassino, and a dozen other small monasteries in the surrounding area. Over the next few centuries, all these monasteries -- including Monte Cassino -- were destroyed and the communities dispersed. But the spirit remained alive and various small communities were reborn and maintained in Italy until the refounding of Monte Cassino and the time of Pope Saint Gregory, who gave the Benedictine spirit a great missionary impetus. There were great renewal movements such as Cluny in the 11th century and Cîteaux in the 12th century. Europe was covered with great abbeys, often with hundreds of monks, most of which disappeared after just a few centuries. And yet the spirit that had manifested itself in the Rule of Benedict continued to be maintained and passed on, from generation to generation, from century to century, through small communities, most of them fragile and precarious, with no great reputation and no fanfare around them.

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Today, Europe is once again threatened with disintegration because of the subor-dination of all values to money. The recent European elections, with a strong trend towards the extreme right in several countries, is just one of the manifestations of this new danger of disintegration. In his encyclical *Laudato si*, Pope Francis had already deplored how we are witnessing the "financialisation" of human life today, in other words the subordination of both political and social life to the imperatives of finance.

At the end of the Life of Saint Benedict, as recounted by Saint Gregory, Benedict has a vision. What does he see? He saw the whole world gathered in a single ray of light. The closer he came to God through contemplation, the more capable he became of seeing everything with the eyes of God; and therefore of perceiving in everything, not what is dark and gloomy, but everything that is luminous. We could draw a parallel with a passage from the Testament of Blessed Christian de Chergé, who aspires to put his eyes into those of God to see his sons of Islam as He sees them.

May this same spirit give our world today an ever greater openness to the values of sharing, communion and peace, which are all temporal expressions of this eternal life brought by Jesus and promised to his disciples.

Armand VEILLEUX