

RB 48 The Daily Manual Labor

¹**Idleness** is the enemy of the soul. Therefore, the community members should have **specified periods** for **manual labor** as well as for **prayerful reading**.

²We believe that the **times** for both may be arranged as follows: ³from **Easter** to the first of October, they will spend their mornings after Prime till about the fourth hour **at whatever work needs to be done**. ⁴From the fourth hour until the time of Sext, they will devote themselves to **reading**. ⁵But after Sext and their meal, they may rest on their beds in complete silence; should any members wish to read privately, **let them do so**, but without disturbing the others. ⁶They should say None a little early, **about midway through the eighth hour**, and then until Vespers they are to return to whatever work is necessary. ⁷They **must not become distressed** if local conditions or their **poverty** should force them to do the harvesting themselves. ⁸**When they live by the labor of their hands**, as our ancestors and the apostles did, then they are really monastics. ⁹Yet, all things are to be done **with moderation** on account of the fainthearted.

¹⁰From the **first of October to the beginning of Lent**, the members ought to devote themselves to reading until the end of the second hour. ¹¹**At this time Terce is said** and they are to work at their assigned tasks until None. ¹²At **the first signal for the hour of None**, all put aside their work to be ready for the second signal. ¹³Then **after their meal** they will devote themselves to their reading or to the psalms.

¹⁴During the days of Lent, they should be free in the morning to read **until the third hour**, after which they will work at their assigned tasks until the end of the tenth hour. ¹⁵During this time of **Lent** each one is to receive **a book from the library**, and is to read the whole of it straight through. ¹⁶These books are to be distributed at the beginning of Lent.

¹⁷Above all, one or two **elders** must surely be deputed to make the rounds of the monastery while the members are reading. ¹⁸Their duty is to see that no one is so **apathetic** as to waste time or engage in idle talk to the neglect of their reading, and so not only harm themselves but also distract others. ¹⁹If such persons are found—God forbid—they should be reproved a first and a second time. ²⁰If they do not amend, they must be **subjected to the punishment** of the rule as a warning to others. ²¹Further, members ought not to associate with one another at **inappropriate** times.

²²On Sunday all are to be engaged in reading except those who have been assigned **various duties**. ²³If any are so **remiss and indolent that they are unwilling or unable to study or to read**, they are to be given some work in order that they **may not be idle**. ²⁴Those who are **sick or weak** should be given a type of work or craft that will keep them busy without overwhelming them or driving them away. ²⁵The prioress or abbot must take their infirmities into account.

v. 1 “idleness” “otium”—can also mean positive, creative leisure and idleness

“specified periods”—although Benedict does not put as much emphasis on the Master on keeping the monks occupied, there is still an element of that here.

“manual labor”—can refer to either light or heavy work, but is always connotes the physical.

- One of the distinguishing characteristics of early monasticism was its devotion to honest work as opposed to begging

“prayerful reading”—spiritual reading. Literally, it means reading from God and can be used to refer to the Bible itself

- “reading”—is usually done at optimal times in Benedict’s system
- Benedictine life is life immersed in the sanctity of the real and work is a fundamental part of it.
- The function of the spiritual life is to live well in this life.
- The monastic engages in creative work as a way to be responsible for the upbuilding of the community. Work periods, in fact, are specified just as prayer periods are.
- Work and prayer are opposite sides of the great coin of life that is both holy and useful, immersed in God and dedicated to the transcendent in the human.
- It is labor’s transfiguration of the commonplace, the transformation of the ordinary that makes co-creators of us all.

v. 2 “times”—refers to the time blocks set aside for work and lectio

v. 3 “Easter”— the Easter feast is the central core of Christian life

- Immediately after Benedict’s talks about the human need to work, to fill our lives with something useful and concentration, he talks about *lectio*, about holy reading and study.
- Benedict shifts prayer, work, and reading periods from season to season to allow for some of each and not too much of either as the days stretch or diminish from period to period.
- He wants prayer to be brief, work to be daily, and study to be constant.
- The community prayed and studied from about 2:00am to dawn and then worked for a couple of hours until the hour of Terce at about 10am. Then, after Terce they read for a couple of hours until Sext before the midday meal. After dinner they rested or

read until about 2:30 and then went back to work for three or four hours until Vespers and supper in the later afternoon. After saying a very brief Compline or evening prayer they retired after sundown for the night.

v. 15 “a book from the library”—refers to the Bible and not to the library of the monastery

- the Bible is a library since it is a collection of books written by different authors
- bibliotheca—library—at the time of Benedict that meant at most a few hundred books in a single cabinet in the sacristy of the church

“fascicle”—one of the quires into which the Bible was sewn. Since ancient manuscript Bibles were extremely bulky they were often sewn into 9 fascicles or quires for easier cartage and usage

- receives indicates that the abbot gave each monk the biblical book that he deemed best; for his part, the monk was to read the entire book and not pick and choose favorite verses
- Benedict is speaking here of private *lectio* and one of the great values of public reading, whether in church or refectory, is that individuals hear books they might not have chosen for themselves.
- During Lent, the monks are to go on working but to increase their reading time. In this period, they are to be assigned a book to read “straight through.” In Lent they are to put themselves on a regimen and study what they are told to study in a serious and ordered way.
- Benedictines were to “earn their bread by the labor of their hands,” and no devotion was to take the place of the demands of life.
- Work is not what defines the Benedictine. It is the single-minded search for God that defines Benedictine spirituality. That is what the monastic pursues behind every other pursuit. That is what gives the monastic life meaning. That is what frees the monastic heart. The monastic does not exist for work. Creative and productive work are simply meant to enhance the Garden and sustain us while we grow into God.

V 17 two elders make rounds

- Study is hard work.
- There is always something so much more important to do than reading.

v. 22 “various duties”—although the monastery is an environment especially created to provide holy leisure and that particularly on Sunday, bodily life must go on

- cellarers, cooks, guest-directors and others must take care of their duties
- Christianity has never guarded the Sabbath rest as jealously as Orthodox Judaism
- There should be no office in the monastery that regularly excuses from or precludes *lectio*. Monastic officials still need sufficient leisure to maintain their contemplative lives.

v. 23 “remiss and indolent that he is unwilling or unable to study or read”—No one is entirely exempt from *lectio* but since the whole of Sunday is to be given over to that pursuit, it could be that some are unable to manage that much holy leisure

“read”—probably does not mean the exact same thing as our English term meditate

- Meditation meant the rumination of a biblical text, such as a psalm verse. Before one could do that it has to be memorized

“may not be idle”—the purpose of work here is therapeutic and ascetic rather than practical. The chapter overall is more interested in the practical value of work.

v. 24 “sick or weak”—a frequent theme of Benedict: namely, that people should be challenged but not crushed by their work

- Benedictine spirituality indicates a mind and heart full of a sense of meaning and an instinct for God.
- The Rule of Benedict **treats work and *lectio* interchangeably**. One focuses the skills of the body on the task of co-creation. The other focuses the gifts of the mind on the lessons of the heart. One without the other is not Benedictine spirituality.
- Even the **sick and the weak** are to be given simple tasks that upbuild the house of God because, Benedict knows, no matter how frail, no matter how old, no one is useless; every one of us is given a gift to give and a task to fulfill.
- At every stage of our lives, every one of us has a sign of hope and faith and love and commitment to share with the people around us.
- Benedict balances work which is primarily utilitarian—doing what is needed for 6 hours with *lectio* for 3 hours

Benedict’s Philosophy of Work

- Pillar of monastic life
- Primarily utilitarian
- By doing what is needed, one responds to the needs of each member of the community, for all depend on certain tasks being accomplished
- Balanced horarium

Lectio Divina

- Almost exclusively tied to the Bible
- Books were really fascicles of the Bible
- Ancient reading was not the same as our practice
- Ancient customarily vocalized, read more slowly and they involved more of their faculties in the process
- Leisurely savoring of biblical texts that were mostly committed to memory
- Better-educated monks attempted to penetrate the meaning of the sacred text
- The problem we face today is how to make use of modern biblical studies in our *lectio divina*
- It is not easy to say precisely what *lectio divina* really is
- Holy leisure: time spent only for God and with God.

Linda Kulzer OSB's "Integrating Work and the Monastic Life from Monastic Work: Challenge and Change The Proceedings of the ABA Convention August 8-11, 1996

- "The United States...was a **third world mission country**. The taking of institutions and parishes was both required by the Council of Baltimore (which forbade strictly contemplative life) and necessitated by the environment." **The missionary thrust was frequently at odds with monastic life.**
- It is true that the problem of **maintaining a balance between work and the rest of life** is a perennial challenge for all of society.
- The US is the **largest consuming nation** in the world.
- **Americans are literally working themselves to death**—as jobs contribute to heart disease, hypertension, gastric problems, depression, exhaustion and a variety of other ailments.
- Is it possible that **American monastics are already so infected with this pathology** that they can no longer be counted on to **present a counterculture vision?**
- Terrence Kardong OSB claimed that "**modern work makes it hard to be a monk.**"
- The **best hours of the day must be given to external work**. The monastic aspects of the day must be squeezed in before 8am and after 4:30pm.
- Change in demographics in monastic communities affect the economic picture (departures, fewer members working, decrease in candidates)
- **Summary of work pressures**
 1. **work heritage**
 2. **overwork syndrome**
 3. **professionalism of our jobs**
 4. **added economic pressure**

Motivation for Change in Work Hours

- We have to cut back on our work hours because **overwork** is making conversation morum, or **fidelity to the monastic life**, almost impossible.
- Most of us have a **work schedule** that causes us to **neglect at least some of the essential elements of the monastic life**.
- Ora et Labora is never found in the RB but is from Maurus Wolter. Kardong indicates that if a motto were to actually reflect Benedict's Rule it would have to read, ***Ora, Labora et Lectio***.
- Benedict divides up the monastic day into 3 essential activities: prayer, labor and biblical prayer. A close study of the time-table indicates about 3 hours were spent in church at the Divine Office; 5 hours were devoted to manual labor, and 2 or 3 hours were given to biblical prayer.
- I believe we must at this time cut back our work hours because **we need to give time to lectio**.
- Benedict saw **holy reading** as one of the normal channels through which his followers would be initiated into and sustained in the monastic tradition. It was a means by which the monastics learned to know themselves, to enter into themselves and to consider what they had to change. *Lectio* provides the reflective time in our day. Dennis Huerre makes the claim that "***life becomes monastic through lectio divina.***"

Norvene Vest's Friend of the Soul: A Benedictine Spirituality of Work

- Can you envision your **work as a holy task**?
- The Benedictine perspective continues to puzzle and even tantalize us as we try to **see our “worldly work” as sacred**. We sense that the Benedictines have something that we are missing. Maybe that “something” only means that they live together in intentional community, supported by a regular rhythm of prayer—yet their life also seems to teach them something particular about work itself.
- Surely we can learn from them, applying their “secret” to our own settings, along with such rhythms of prayer and community as are possible for men and women who are fully engaged with families, study, and earning a living.
- **Monastic work can never be separated from prayer.**
- Prayer punctuates and penetrates Benedictine work at every point; work poses questions of prayer that give it urgency.
- In the first chapter of Genesis we see God at work creating the universe and finding pleasure in it...human labor is modeled on God’s labor, fruitful activity that flows forth from the essence of one’s being, as well as in beneficial care for others.
- Our work here on earth is “**co-creative,**” which means it is shared with the living God.
- God’s original intention was that **work express the unique gifts and qualities of each person in the service of a unified whole...**
- The New Testament reiterates these themes, reminding us that as baptized persons we are members of the body of Christ in the world and **through us Christ’s work in the world is ongoing.**
- 2 Cor 5:17-18 walking in **newness of life** and continuing **Christ’s ministry of reconciliation**
- We hold a **vision of human work** not only as a means to support ourselves and our families and as a genuine means of charity and service to others, but also as an expression of our particular gifts as **partners with God in bringing the whole of creation to its intended fulfillment.**
- Human work is meant to be a holy endeavor.
- In his Rule St. Benedict reminds the monks that **work is the friend of the soul** itself (RB 48.1), paraphrased)...
- Benedict urges further that **all monastics work on behalf of one another**, “for in this way greater reward is obtained and love is acquired” (RB 35:2).
- Work is meant to be a holy endeavor...This vision insists that our work matters, not simply as a means to make money, but as an expression of faith and being.
- 6c In an age when most physical work was delegated to slaves and barbarians, Benedict treated the human body and human work as fundamental ingredients of the holy life.
- The mystical element in Benedictine work includes a **way of seeing**, a contemplative attitude facilitated by a practice of the awareness and reflection on God’s presence revealed in every encounter.