

Prayers of the Medieval Church

Week 1

St. Benedict of Nursia (c. 480—c. 543 AD)

Born in Rome; Died in Monte Cassino

“The Father of Western Monasticism”

Ora et Labora: Prayer and Work

From *The Rule of St. Benedict* (c. 530 AD):

Chapter 16: How the Work of God Is to Be Performed During the Day

"Seven times in the day," says the Prophet, "I have rendered praise to You" (Ps.119:164).

Now that sacred number of seven will be fulfilled by us if we perform the Offices of our service at the time of the Morning Office, of Prime, of Terce, of Sext, of None, of Vespers and of Compline, since it was of these day Hours that he said, "Seven times in the day I have rendered praise to You" (Ps. 119:164). For as to the Night Office the same Prophet says, "In the middle of the night I arose to glorify You" (Ps. 119:62). Let us therefore bring our tribute of praise to our Creator "for the judgments of His justice" at these times: the Morning Office, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers and Compline; and in the night let us arise to glorify Him (Ps. 119:164,62).

Chapter 19: On the Manner of Saying the Divine Office

We believe that the divine presence is everywhere and that "the eyes of the Lord are looking on the good and the evil in every place" (Prov. 15:3). But we should believe this especially without any doubt when we are assisting at the Work of God. To that end let us be mindful always of the Prophet's words, "Serve the Lord in fear" (Ps. 2:11) and again "Sing praises wisely" (Ps. 47:8) and "In the sight of the Angels I will sing praise to You" (Ps. 138:1). Let us therefore consider how we ought to conduct ourselves in sight of the Godhead and of His Angels, and let us take part in the psalmody in such a way that our mind may be in harmony with our voice.

Chapter 20: On Reverence in Prayer

When we wish to suggest our wants to persons of high station, we do not presume to do so except with humility and reverence. How much the more, then, are complete humility and pure devotion necessary in supplication of the Lord who is God of the universe! And let us be assured that it is not in saying a great deal that we shall be heard (Matt 6:7), but in purity of heart and in tears of compunction. Our prayer, therefore, ought to be short and pure, unless it happens to be prolonged by an inspiration of divine grace. In community, however, let prayer be very short, and when the Superior gives the signal let all rise together.

O Lord, I place myself in your hands and dedicate myself to you. I pledge myself to do your will in all things: To love the Lord God with all my heart, all my soul, all my strength. Not to kill. Not to steal. Not to covet. Not to bear false witness. To honor all persons. Not to do to another what I would not wish done to myself. To chastise the body. Not to seek after pleasures. To love fasting. To relieve the poor. To clothe the naked. To visit the sick. To bury the dead. To help in trouble. To console the sorrowing. To hold myself aloof from worldly ways. To prefer nothing to the love of Christ. Not to give way to anger. Not to foster a desire for revenge. Not to entertain deceit in the heart. Not to make a false peace. Not to forsake charity. Not to swear, lest I swear falsely. To speak the truth with heart and tongue. Not to return evil for evil. To do no injury: yea, even to bear patiently any injury done to me. To love my enemies. Not to curse those who curse me, but rather to bless them. To bear persecution for justice¹ sake. Not to be proud. Not to be given to intoxicating drink. Not to be an over-eater. Not to be lazy. Not to be slothful. Not to be a murmured. Not to be a detractor. To put my trust in God. To refer the good I see in myself to God. To refer any evil in myself to myself. To fear the Day of Judgment. To be in dread of hell. To desire eternal life with spiritual longing. To keep death before my eyes daily. To keep constant watch over my actions. To remember that God sees me everywhere. To call upon Christ for defense against evil thoughts that arises in my heart. To guard my tongue against wicked speech. To avoid much speaking. To avoid idle talk. To read only what is good to read. To look at only what is good to see. To pray often. To ask forgiveness daily for my sins, and to seek ways to amend my life. To obey my superiors in all things rightful. Not to desire to be thought holy, but to seek holiness. To fulfill the commandments of God by good works. To love chastity. To hate no one. Not to be jealous or envious of anyone. Not to love strife. Not to love pride. To honor the aged. To pray for my enemies. To make peace after a quarrel, before the setting of the sun. Never to despair of your mercy, O God of Mercy. Amen.

Gracious and Holy Father, Please give me:
Intellect to understand you, reason to discern you,
Diligence to seek you, wisdom to find you,
A spirit to know you, a heart to meditate upon you,
Ears to hear you, eyes to see you,
A tongue to proclaim you, a way of life pleasing to you,
Patience to wait for you and perseverance to look for you.
Grant me a perfect end, your holy presence,
A blessed resurrection and life everlasting. Amen.

For further reading:

Brooke, Christopher. 2002. *The Age of the Cloister: The Story of Monastic Life in the Middle Ages*. Paulist.
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Fry, Timothy, ed. 1998. *The Rule of St. Benedict*. Random House.
Southern, R. W. 1970. *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*. Penguin.
Zarnecki, George. 1972. *The Monastic Achievement*. McGraw-Hill.
Online versions of *The Rule of St. Benedict*: <http://www.osb.org/rb/>