A LIFE OF ST. BENEDICT

MAN OF BLESSING

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This humble volume is dedicated to the brothers and sisters who serve in the Benedictine family in ways as diverse as they are, both inside and outside the walls of monasteries, all over this colorful globe, and also to their associates, the oblates who "offer" themselves to the Benedictine ideal of peace in a world that needs them. They bless us daily.

And for the unforgettable fragrance of Benedictine hospitality, *ora et labora*, and *pax*, special thanks go to my Benedictine friends at the St. Walburg Monastery (http://www.stwalburg.org/), Sisters Deborah Harmeling, Mary Tewes, and Teresa Wolking, as well as to Sisters Linda Kulzer (St. Benedict's Monastery) and Judith Sutera (Mount St. Scholastica). They have answered my questions patiently, and they have made St. Benedict very real to me by living lives of kindness that sparkle with inclusion.

"The finest and noblest characters prefer
a life of dedication to a life of self-indulgence."
—Cicero

We honor Saint Benedict who advocated justice
for each person,
but especially for the poor and powerless.
May we learn to live simply
and share with those less fortunate.
Bless us with a sense of justice
tempered with mercy.
We ask this through Jesus, the Christ,
both now and forever. Amen.
—from *A Prayer for the Feast of Saint Benedict,* July 11

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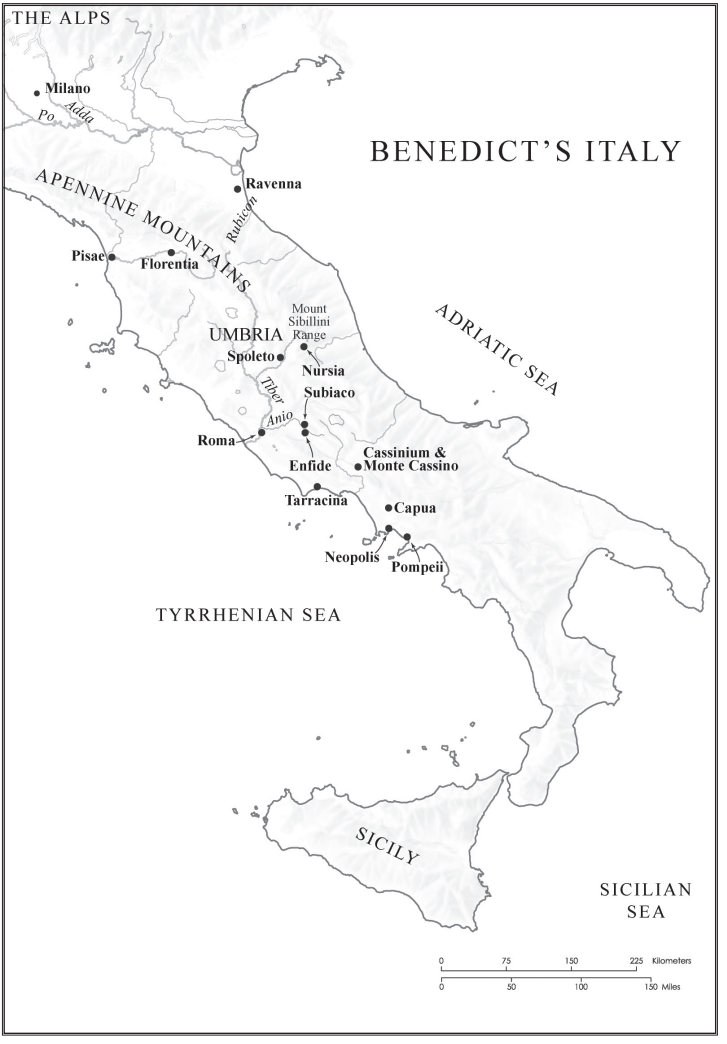
BENEDICT'S ITALY
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Milano
Adda
Po
Ravenna
APENNINE MOUNTAINS
Rubicon
Pisae
Florentia
Mount
Sibillini
Range
UMBRIA
ADRIATIC SEA
Spoleto
Nursia
Tiber
Subiaco
Anio
Roma
Enfide
Cassinium &
Monte Cassino
Tarracina
Capua
Neopolis
Pompeii
TYRRHENIAN SEA
SICILY
SICILIAN
SEA
0 75 150 225 Kilometers
0 50 100 150 Miles

PREFACE

The genesis of this book lies in Jon Sweeney's asking would I like to write a life of Benedict of Nursia based on Gregory's *Dialogues*, on the occasion of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's having chosen "Benedict" as his papal name. I am thankful Jon posed this project because it gave me the opportunity to live intensely with this sixth-century disciple of Jesus for many months. Any time spent with Benedict and his Scripture-rich *Rule* is a sure way to be strengthened, refreshed, challenged, and transformed by the intimate presence of God, and those months especially so.

I am also thankful for the community that *Man of Blessing* brought my way via e-mails and letters from monks, nuns, and others, who, like me, see their faith grow as they find themselves in Benedict's story. His authentic seeking of Christ draws us from any and all backgrounds. My own pilgrimage to Benedict came to mind recently during a retreat I led in Memphis on the medieval Benedictine nun Hildegard, when a woman asked during Q&A: "How'd *you* get interested in Benedictines?" It's a logical question. How did a born-and-bred Southern girl, raised Baptist, meet and find such resonance in monasticism? If Benedictine spirituality were a flying-buttressed, rib-vaulted, clerestory-windowed, multi-spired, stain-glassed medieval cathedral, its nave soaked in luminous blues and reds and yellows and greens from the light of the afternoon sun, you could say I came in the ill-lit back door.

I first met God in the unexpectedly numinous world of Vacation Bible School, nibbling the shortbread petals of daisy-shaped cookies that fit on a pinkie while listening to unforgettable stories of a naughty Jonah who ran far from God and right into the cavernous, redeeming whale; and in Sword Drills, my fingers speeding through silver-edged, onion-skin-thin Bible pages, racing to be first in finding locations of exotic-sounding minor prophets like Hosea. I met God through talcum-powder-scented, snow-haired Sunday School teachers asking me to memorize Philippians 4:13, and I did, pondering for decades the mystery of "through Christ who strengthens me." Sunday mornings, I sang "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," and afterwards shared dinners on the ground of fried chicken and green bean casseroles made of Campbell's condensed cream-of-mushroom soup and sprinkled with crunchy French Fried onions. And when my oversensitive teenage self could hardly stand feeling one more emotion, I met God hearing heart-thumping altar calls, with their emphasis on the now of salvation, their pleas to accept divine forgiveness, their reminders to nurture a personal relationship with Jesus, their admonishments to build Christian character, and their requests to love my neighbor.

And yet there came a day when I was in graduate school at The University of Georgia, reading Emerson's "Self-Reliance," Thoreau's *Walden*, and Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, when getting out of bed was almost impossible. I woke to an unshakable heaviness like a blanket of cement. Soon unable to sleep more than two hours a night, I grew

well-versed in shades of darkness, watching black hours last forever until finally the false dawn came and only then the palest sky before the sun was truly up, when the world went on again. On so little sleep, I felt weightless. Each day my insubstantial self floated down a long sidewalk past the empty football coliseum to my small basement office in Park Hall, all the while worrying I'd lost my tethering to life.

But there was always studying. Having experienced a kind of trauma in my first family that left my personhood in pieces, in sixth grade I lost myself in Blue Horse notebooks, filling both sides of their lined pages with New World explorers, vocabulary words, amino acids, and fractions, then memorizing everything. Over the years, this anodyne of sustained intense studying yielded the unexpected by-product of academic accolades, but it did not heal my heart.

In graduate school, therefore, I studied hard while my life fell apart. I smiled when sad. I laughed when scared. I feared even eating pizza with friends in the English graduate program, so when invited, I made up excuses. I hated myself. I was alone, and God's love seemed distant. At that time, I had no vocabulary for this experience. Walking map-less through the desert of depression, I was truly lost.

But then one day in grammar class, my professor asked if anyone knew the history of *shibboleth*. A friend of mine did and I didn't, and that irked me. After my friend's excellent account of the Gileadites and Ephraimites in Judges 12, our professor sighed, saying: "Nobody knows the Bible anymore." In my funk I thought he spoke only to me.

So I left class, walked uphill to the main library, checked out Volume 1 of the *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, walked home, took the rickety elevator six floors to my sparse one-bedroom apartment on South Lumpkin Street, and began reading the Bible through. I read it through three times in the next few years, spending several hours a day studying it book by book. That tiny apartment with its worn, beige carpet and Pullman kitchenette was my cell, as Catherine of Siena would say.

But I didn't know that then. I began worrying I would flunk graduate school—I was spending so much time studying the Bible. I even typed up verses on 3" x 5" cards and took them with me everywhere, glancing at them often. This was in addition to and different from my studying the Bible with commentaries. Sometimes I spent hours on one phrase. On daily walks through Athens's Five Points, with its shady oak trees and historic homes, I'd say to myself, over and over, *Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Come to me. . . .*

One day, though, I realized Scripture was food and without it I would starve, so I decided if my Bible study meant that I failed at graduate school, oh well. I carried on, falling in love with the gorgeous poetry of honest suffering Job, loving the passion of the Song of Songs and the emotions of the Psalms and the wisdom of Proverbs, becoming bewildered by Leviticus, and finding a Friend in the Gospel of John.

Then, a professor of Anglo-Saxon met with me one day to help me find a master's thesis topic. I'd already met without

success with my American lit professors because my Bible studies were leading me to early English lit with its emphasis on Christ. This Old English professor brainstormed, throwing out ideas, then pulled a thick tome from the top shelf of a bookcase behind his desk, saying, "And these sermons by Ælfric haven't been translated yet."

I'd not heard of Ælfric. So unknowingly, I crossed into the world of Benedictine spirituality, struggling with tenth-century sermons in Old English. I say it was an "ill-lit" back door by which I entered the study of monasticism because only later did I learn that Ælfric was a Benedictine monk. At first I was mainly interested in him because Old English fascinated me and because translating Ælfric's sermons allowed, even required me to continue my intense Bible study.

Very soon, however, I found that I couldn't make heads or tails of Ælfric's theology. I wrote an entire chapter on it while a Fulbright student at The University of London, only to have my major professor at UGA snail-mail it right back with the comment, "Remember Ælfric's a monk. Start over." Also, a crushing sense of my own sin made me expect Ælfric to scold my many imperfections. Instead, sermon after sermon, he described the illimitable nature of divine mercy. His message of never underestimating God's mercy was medicine for my troubled heart.

Many years later, I sought the help of a wise woman who is also a psychotherapist, and through counseling sessions I began to see the nature of my soul's injuries and to feel compassion for my self, for the first time. Newness dawned.

I began realizing that for decades I had (without knowing it) been practicing what the Benedictines and others call *lectio divina*, or "sacred reading"—meditating on, listening to, and praying through Scripture. Slowly, too, I began understanding new concepts such as "high-functioning depressive," which guided me beyond such behavior, setting me free to see and to embrace the mysterious ways that *lectio divina* had healed and is still healing me, taking me further into God's grace.

Here is where our lives intersect with Benedict's. We struggle, as he did. He had clay feet, as we do. Yet he turned to Jesus. So can we. *Man of Blessing* helps us do just that because Benedict's life reminds us that God wants to be our friend. His contemporary monastic family also teaches us this transforming truth.

That is why not long ago I left my conscientious to-do list at home, fought tangled afternoon traffic, inched through Atlanta, then drove through miles of fields, to soak up Evening Prayer at the Monastery of the Holy Spirit in Conyers. Afterwards, I sat in a simple room eating a delicious supper with a new friend, her teenage daughter, and two monks.

The conversation moved easily from the freshly baked bread to family to nursing to teaching to worshipping, when my friend made a comment—I can't even remember why: "I hope God's not mad at me."

At that, tall, white-haired Father Tom sat up straight in his white habit and black scapular, lay down his fork, and said in his gravelly yet lilting voice, with the commanding

gentleness that comes from singing the Psalms for over sixty years: "Now, now, don't say that. Jesus calls us his friends. Remember? He said to his disciples, 'I no longer call you servants because a servant doesn't know his master's business. Instead, I've called you friends'" (John 15:15).

In one short statement by this Trappist monk, I saw the whole of Benedictine spirituality. We are made to be friends with God.

The world is hungry for this good news. For even in the short time since *Man of Blessing* was first published, there has been an explosion of excellent books by monastic and lay authors alike, sharing Benedictine spirituality with the world. The "Further Reading" section at this book's end proves the abundance of this offering. What Thomas Merton and Thomas Keating and Esther de Waal and Kathleen Norris and others started in the twentieth century has continued abundantly into the third millennium through their ongoing, widely well-received work, as well as that of Terrence Kardong, Joan Chittister, Richard Rohr, Laura Swan, Martin Laird, Cynthia Bourgeault, Thelma Hall, John McQuiston, and many more. This "Further Reading" list has been updated and expanded, giving ample opportunities to drink from this well of God's mercy.

Also, for those who want to know more concretely how a monk or nun lives, Appendix A gives a chapter-by-chapter summary of Benedict's Rule, while Appendix B outlines a monk's day, adapted from the website for the Monastery of the Holy Spirit in Conyers, www.trappist.net. But go and see for yourself. In the balance that comes

from the Benedictine *ora et labora* ("pray and work"), this Cistercian community extends to everyone an invitation to visit them.

Through ever-increasing avenues, Benedict of Nursia invites us technology-obsessed post-postmoderns to embrace an intimate relationship with the Creator of the universe, to enjoy the unceasing praise of the Holy Spirit in the vibrant present moment, and to accept the transforming friendship with the One born red and wrinkled and crying in the manger, hungry for Mary's milk.

And so the "blessing" of this well-named disciple of Christ continues.

INTRODUCTION

Benedict's life was a series of risings in the dark. Many times in the profound stillness after midnight, under the black, frosty skies of early winter, while most Italians, peasants, politicians, children, fishermen, high-born ladies, servants, teachers, and bakers were sound asleep, lights fired up in the monasteries, and the man in a tunic began his day with a psalm: *Domine, labia mea aperies, et os meum annuntiabit laudem tuam* ("O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise"—Psalm 51:15).

It was not yet 2 AM when this monk sat up and tapped himself gently on the forehead, sternum, and left and right shoulders, using the sign of the cross to invoke the Holy Trinity for spiritual protection. In the unheated room, the stone floor against his feet likely jolted him awake, and he squinted for his night shoes, bending over to feel for them at the foot of his cot. Finding them and slipping each on, thankful in the darkness for their warmth, he headed to chapel for Vigils. By 5 AM, this Benedictine abbot had already spent nearly three hours engaged in communal prayer and the recitation of psalms called the Opus Dei, or "the Work of God," also known as the Divine Office. This singing is still the heart of Benedictine life.

In a fourth-century letter, Alexandrine Bishop St. Athanasius voiced this medieval view on the significance of holy singing:

> That which causes grief is healed when we sing psalms, and that which causes stumbling will be discovered. Those who do not recite the divine songs in this manner do not sing them wisely. They bring delight to themselves, but they incur blame, because a hymn of praise is not suitable on the lips of a sinner. The Psalms are not recited with melodies because of a desire for pleasant sounds. Rather, this is a sure sign of the harmony of the soul's reflections.[1]

St. Athanasius also suggests that hearing the psalms strengthens the soul in a trinity of ways: The singer learns the facts of Biblical history and prophecy; the Psalter nurtures the emotions; and the psalms deepen the listener's understanding of the Bible's words and of God, because he or she participates intimately in the act of listening. "And the one who hears is deeply moved, as though he himself were speaking, and is affected by the words of the songs, as if they were his own songs."[2]

After the singing of Vigils, the medieval monk turned to his second most important activity, *lectio divina*, or spiritual reading. In his *Rule*, Benedict did not define or describe this common practice because it was such an intrinsic part of monastic life. Manuscripts were at a premium, and the monk's main duty was to be a keen listener to God's word; therefore, these times of "spiritual reading" meant more than simply reading the Holy Scriptures. The monk memorized as much of them as possible, internalizing their verses deep into his very marrow by quietly repeating them over and over.

He steeped his soul in the Bible by meditating on the verses as he learned them, until he was led into prayer.

At daybreak (about 6 AM in winter), the monk then chanted Matins ("morning") and Lauds ("to praise"), and when daylight was full, about 6:45 AM, the Divine Office called Prime ("the first hour") started. From 7:30 AM until 8 AM, there was a brief time for reading, writing, or other duties. Next, the monk changed his shoes and washed his face before returning to the oratory to begin singing Terce ("the third hour"), followed by Morrow Mass and the Chapter of Faults. At the daily Chapter, breaches of regular discipline were confessed or alleged, and corrected, general announcements were made, and a blessing was pronounced on the day's work.

From 9:45 AM until 12:30 PM, the morning was filled with a period dedicated to work, either intellectual, educational, manual, administrative, or service-oriented. Then the community came together to recite Sext ("the sixth hour"), followed by the sung High Mass. About 1:30 PM, Nones ("the ninth hour") was celebrated. Around 2 PM, some twelve hours after rising, the monks ate their one simple meal of the day. If there were guests, they would break bread with the abbot.

The second period of *lectio divina* was enjoyed after dinner and lasted from about 3 PM until 5 PM. Then came Vespers ("evening" prayer; also called "evensong," from the native Old English word, *æfen-sang)*. After this celebration, the monk shuffled into his night shoes and performed the Maundy. This is the ritual washing of the monks' feet in

memory of Christ, who washed the feet of His disciples. A drink of wine in the refectory refreshed him next before he heard a short public reading in choir, followed about 6:15 PM by the celebration of Compline (from the Latin *completorium* or "complement"). Just before 7 PM, he retired to the dormitory for seven good hours of sleep before rising again.

Several times every day, he and his brothers stopped their lives and gathered to recite Matins, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Compline. By week's end, they had prayed their way through the entire Latin Psalter of 150 Old Testament Psalms. And each week, as designated in chapter sixty-six of Benedict's *Rule*, the monks read from its wisdom, "so that none of the brethren may excuse himself on the ground of ignorance."

This once rather obscure Italian abbot whose short *Rule* is now the solid foundation of Western monasticism remains, for the most part, an elusive figure historically. His exact chronology is impossible to nail: Its dates are predominantly scholars' best guesses, but the peaceful tenor of this monk's life is unmistakable through over 1,400 years of telling it.

CHRONOLOGY

St. Benedict's Italy is an unstable province of a collapsing Roman Empire. Throughout the fifth century after the birth of Christ, waves of invaders weaken the peninsula. First, Goth warriors march along the Via Flaminia and into Rome, sacking it in 410. Others soon follow.

c. 480 AD. Into this fragile, violent world, Benedict (or "Bennet") is born in Nursia, among the Apennine valleys and mountains of central Italy. He begins life as the son of a lesser Roman nobleman *(liberiori genere*, "of good birth"). Tradition gives him a twin sister, Scholastica. This is also the agreed-upon year for the birth of the highborn Roman Boëthius, author of *Consolation of Philosophy*. During Benedict's earliest years, the half-Hun, half-Scirian chieftain, Odoacer, calls himself *Rex Italiae (King of Italy)*.

489. Theodoric the Great invades Italy. He has been invited to do so by the Eastern Roman Emperor Zeno, who wants Odoacer forced out.

493. Theodoric founds the Ostrogothic kingdom in Italy. His thirty-plus years in power are relatively stable. Also, young Benedict leaves Nursia with his family to spend his teenage years attending Rome's schools for classical studies, until about 499.

c. 500. Benedict abandons Rome and with his loyal nurse moves forty miles east to Enfide (the contemporary Affile). Benedict works his first miracle here. Gregory's record of

Benedict's miracles may stymie the modern sensibility, but his audience found them comforting, not troubling. The medieval acceptance of divine supernatural acts will be discussed in chapter one.

c. 501. This miracle brings Benedict local fame; to escape it, he heads for Subiaco, on the Anio River, and meets Romanus, a monk from a nearby monastery.

c. 502–505. Young Benedict lives as a hermit *(eremos*, "desert") in a cave. Romanus shares food with him.

c. 506. Monks from the nearby monastery of Vicovaro ask Benedict to be their abbot. When they try to poison him, he returns to his cave in Subiaco.

c. 507–529. Benedict teaches the gospel to those who flock to him at Subiaco, and performs miracles. To house these followers, he builds thirteen monasteries in the area near his cave and starts schools for the children who begin entering his communities. He shepherds these monasteries for over two decades.

c. 525. Boëthius is accused of conspiracy with the Byzantine Empire, and is executed by Theodoric.

526. Theodoric dies. His death destabilizes Italy, opening the region to more invasions.

527. Justinian I becomes emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire.

c. 529. The jealous priest Florentius works to undermine the discipline at Benedict's monasteries in Subiaco, so Benedict moves his monks to Monte Cassino.

c. 530. After a long foreground of contemplation and revision, Benedict writes down his *Rule*. He also revises it over the years. It will become the foundation of Western monasticism and also a spiritual classic for laypeople.

Sometime during his Monte Cassino experience, Benedict founds a monastery on the coast near Tarracina.

535. Emperor Justinian commands General Belisarius to invade Italy.

540. Gregory (the Great) is born. He later becomes St. Benedict's first biographer.

542. At Monte Cassino, Benedict is visited by the Goth King Totila, probably late in the year, when Totila is marching through the area on his way to attack Naples. This meeting is the only fairly certain date we have for Benedict.

547. Scholastica comes to visit Benedict one last time. Three days later, she dies. Benedict has his shining vision of God and of the whole world. Not long after the death of his sister, he dies at Monte Cassino, while standing in prayer.

21 March 547. This is the traditional date set for Benedict's death. This date is somewhat supported by Gregory's account of a visit to Benedict from Sabinus, the bishop of Canusium, during which the bishop mentioned Totila's imminent destruction of Rome. Some historians have taken this reference to mean Totila's brief occupation of the imperial city that began on December 17th, 546. (In the spring of 547, the city was recaptured by Belisarius.)

549. King Totila captures Rome, as Benedict had prophesied.

c. 550. This rounded date is often given for Benedict's death. Between 546 and 550 seems the most likely window for Benedict's death.

July 552. King Totila dies in the battle of Taginae, ending the long, cruel conflicts between the Ostrogothic Kingdom in Italy and the Roman Byzantine Empire. This victory

fulfills Justinian's dream of ruling a reunited Eastern and Western Roman Empire.

565. Emperor Justinian I dies.

568. Close on the heels of the defeated Ostrogoths, the ruthless Germanic Lombards invade northern Italy under King Alboin, infamous for fashioning a drinking-cup out of the skull of his defeated enemy, King Cunimund. The Lombards—"that abominable people," according to Gregory—rule until 774.

573. Gregory is appointed Prefect of the city of Rome *(Praefectus Urbi)*.

575. Gregory becomes a Benedictine monk and wants to be a missionary.

c. 581. The Monte Cassino monastery is destroyed by the Lombards (as Benedict prophesied), and the monks flee to Rome, carrying a copy of Benedict's *Rule* and other spiritual treasures. The Lombards also destroy the Subiaco and Tarracina monasteries.

590. Gregory is made pope (reluctantly). The eighth-century church historian and Benedictine monk the Venerable Bede, in his *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum (Ecclesiastical History of the English People)* calls the new pope "a distinguished scholar and administrator." Gregory is hesitant to become pope, however, because he does not want to leave the rich spiritual monastic life for the administrative and other pressures of the papacy. In fact, he opens the first book of his *Dialogues* with this complaint to his deacon Peter:

> My unhappy soul languish[es] under a burden of distractions. I recall those earlier days in the monastery where I could rise above the vanities of life. But now all the beauty

> of that spiritual repose is gone, and the contact with worldly men and their affairs, which is a necessary part of my duties as bishop, has left my soul defiled. I am tossed about on the waves of a heavy sea, and my soul is like a helpless ship buffeted by raging winds.[3]

593. Pope Gregory writes the four books of his *Dialogues*. Book Two contains the only contemporary account of Benedict's life, released within fifty years of his death.

597. This year, as Bede records in his *Ecclesiastical History*, Pope Gregory is "inspired by God to send his servant Augustine [*not* St. Augustine the Great of Hippo] with several other God-fearing monks to preach God's word to the English nation." But they quickly grow afraid and want to return home, so they send Augustine back to Gregory to let him know the trip is too dangerous. They want to be ordered back to Rome. Gregory's answer sums up his theology:

> Be faithful and enthusiastic in carrying out this mission. Remember that the greater the labor, the greater the glory of your eternal reward. When your leader Augustine returns, obey him in everything, humbly, and know that whatever he asks you to do, will always be for the good of your souls.[4]

Early in the 700s. Pope Gregory II commissions the rebuilding of the Monte Cassino monastery.

15 February 1944. Allied forces bomb the monastery at Monte Cassino into rubble. Two months earlier, the German Army had had fifteen divisions entrenched on the hill, complete with concrete bunkers, turreted machine guns, barbed wire, and minefields, and the Allied forces had taken heavy losses trying to win Monte Cassino. When

the U.S. Army had exhausted its strength by February 1944, it was replaced by the New Zealand Corps, and the order was given to bomb the monastery, even though the Allied soldiers in the trenches asserted repeatedly that no German fire had come from the monastery. But the bombing command stood. After the U.S. Air Force obliterated Monte Cassino, the rubble itself became an excellent defensive position for the German Army. From it, ironically, the German soldiers could better defend the hill. Several more failed attacks were made on Monte Cassino after the bombing, and this strategic hill was not taken by Allied forces until the eighteenth of May 1944.

1950s. The monastery at Monte Cassino is rebuilt with international funds.

24 October 1964. Pope Paul VI visits Monte Cassino to proclaim St. Benedict the patron saint of Europe. St. Benedict is named "Messenger of Peace, Unifier, Master of Civilization, Herald of Faith, and Initiator of Monastic Life in Western Europe."

11 July. St. Benedict's feast day is celebrated yearly. Patron saint of monks, farmers, schoolchildren, spelunkers, and land reclamation, he is also the patron saint of Europe.

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