

Homily for July 11th
Feast of St. Benedict

A few decades ago, a noted public intellectual said that “it is obligatory to compare today’s situation with the decline of the Roman Empire. In its final days, Rome still functioned as a great historical framework, but in practice its vital energy had been depleted.” The intellectual went on to lament the collapse of the spiritual forces that sustain us, saying the in Europe it is as if God no longer matters.

That public intellectual was Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI. Cardinal Ratzinger chose the name Benedict because he understood the need for Benedict to inspire us in the 21st century.

What was it about Benedict that makes him such an important figure for the Church in the 21st Century Western world?

Benedict of Nursia is known today as the founder of Western monasticism and as a patron saint of Europe. He was born in the year 480, four years after the last Roman emperor abdicated, and was sent as a pious young man down to the city of Rome to complete his education. What he saw there disgusted him. The attitude depicted by the people in today’s Hosea reading was indicative of the Spirit of Rome at the time of St. Benedict:

*For now they will say:
“We have no king,
for we do not fear the LORD,
and a king—what could he do for us?”¹*

In response to the moral and spiritual degradation he saw around him, today’s saint heard in his soul the word from Lord spoken in the last verse of the Hosea passage:

*Sow for yourselves righteousness;
reap steadfast love;
break up your fallow ground;
for it is time to seek the LORD,
that he may come and rain righteousness upon you.²*

How did Benedict put this into practise? He lit out for the forest to pray and fast and seek God’s will for his life. Eventually he founded twelve monasteries governed by a kind of monastic constitution called *The Rule of Saint Benedict*.

¹ [The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition](#). (1993). (Ho 10:3). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

² [The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition](#). (1993). (Ho 10:12). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

The Rule is a thin, plain pamphlet for the running of a monastery, which he called a “school for the Lord’s service.” It is not a book of spiritual secrets. It is a book that sets out an order for living, for the sake of training monastics in the spiritual life. You would never guess from reading it that this little book played a key role in saving Western civilization.

Benedict had a noteworthy sense of compassion for human frailty, saying in the Prologue to the Rule that he hoped to introduce nothing “harsh or burdensome, but only strict enough to strengthen the hearts of the brothers:

“to run the way of God’s commandments with unspeakable love.”

After Benedict died, monasticism exploded. Monks moved all over barbarian-ruled Europe. They brought the faith to unchurched people. They taught them how to pray, but also how to grow and make things – skills that had been lost in Rome’s collapse. In their rituals and in their libraries, the monks kept alive the cultural memory of Christian Rome. Because the monks took a vow of stability – a sacred promise to remain in the monastery where they took their vows until the end of their lives – peasants gathered around the monasteries as citadels of light and order in a very dark and chaotic time.

In this way, the Benedictine monasteries were arks carrying the faith across the stormy waters that obliterated Roman civilization. It all happened because Saint Benedict of Nursia sought to figure out how to best serve the Lord in community during a terrible crisis. Everything else followed from that.

In 1981 the American Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre published a book called *After Virtue*. In it, he explained how Enlightenment modernity overthrew the old source of moral order, the one rooted in Christianity and classical philosophy, but could not produce an authoritative replacement for it. The effects of the Enlightenment have so shaped our lives that according to the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman we live in a time he has coined “liquid modernity”. Modernity, as we know, is characterized by a conscious break with the authority of the past and its institutions, one of the consequences of the Enlightenment.

For Bauman, “solid modernity” describes the first phase of modernity, in which the pace of change had quickened, but was still slow enough for people to adjust. Things still seemed, well, solid. But now we have moved into liquid modernity, a time in which the pace of change is so rapid that nothing – no new institutions, no new habits or customs – has time to solidify. In liquid modernity, Bauman said, the most successful person is the one who has no allegiances beyond himself and his self-interest. He can change loyalties and beliefs at will, to suit his own preferences. There is no solid ground anymore.

We do live at a time where ideological influences similar to those that existed in Hosea and Benedict’s day are at work in the Western World. I am thankful that we can look to the example of St. Benedict and hear the Lord’s call directed toward us to whole hearted discipleship – so that we can go to the Lost Sheep of Liquid Modernity and return some to the fold of His Church.

St Benedict, pray for us.