

## Ideals are hard to achieve, even for saints

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

For the next two months, I intend to elaborate upon the theme of last week's column regarding the liturgical calendar's summer saints. The columns will not simply be biographical profiles; instead they will attempt to situate the individual saint in a larger historical context and to identify his or her enduring significance for today's church.

Those who know more about the saints than I do may be tempted to characterize some of my interpretations as unconventional, but that's what a column is for: to encourage readers to take another look at a topic and to think about it afresh — from a new and different angle.

This week's subject is St. Benedict of Nursia, born about the year 480; died about 547. He generally is regarded — but not with complete accuracy — as the founder of Western monasticism and of the Benedictine order, and as the author of the famous Rule of St. Benedict. His feast day is July 11.

The only source for the life of Benedict is the Dialogues of Pope Gregory the Great (whose pontificate spanned the years 590 to 604). Gregory was only about seven years old when Benedict died, so he had to rely upon those who had known Benedict personally.

Since Gregory did not intend to write a detailed biography, we are left



### ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

with only a relatively sketchy record of Benedict's activities and accomplishments. So little is known about him, in fact, that we can't be absolutely sure if Benedict really was the author of the monastic Rule which Gregory assumes he wrote. (The consensus of scholarly opinion indicates that he did.)

What is remarkable about the rule is its balance between the spiritual and the practical, between prayer and work. Too often in the history of the church these elements have been out of sync with one another. We have had spiritual guides and writers who have been wildly impractical, and practical types who have manifested little, if any, spiritual depth.

Benedict's notion of prayer was centered on the liturgy: the Eucharist, first of all, and then the Liturgy of the Hours, or Divine Office. These are the heart and soul of any monastery in the Benedictine tradition, as they are of the church itself. Indeed, the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy insisted that the liturgy is the summit and the source of the entire Christian life (n. 10).

Prayer life also was centered on the biblical word of God. The rule strongly recommends the meditative reading of Scripture and quotes generously from it. In time this meditative reading, called in Latin *lectio divina* ("divine reading"), came to include biblical commentaries, the writings of the early Fathers of the Church, and spiritual treatises.

In order that the monks could accomplish this task, Benedict saw to it that they were sufficiently literate to read the Bible and these other writings. The monastery gradually developed as a center of scholarship.

By the ninth century, many monks were relieved of manual labor to devote more time to study. One of the most practical scholarly pursuits they undertook was the copying of the texts of the classics of Western civilization.

As in the case of prayer, the Benedictine notion of work was more inclusive than what needed to be done within the walls of the monastery itself: the

production of food and clothing, building and maintenance, skilled craftwork, and all else necessary to the sustaining of a large and diverse community. There was also work to be accomplished outside of the monastery: education, service to the poor, missionary activity and various other ministries.

But wherever Benedict's hand is in evidence, we find always a balance between prayer and study, between worship and work, between domestic and external concerns.

Which is not to say that he achieved this balance perfectly in his own life. Although we know relatively little about it, we do know that after study in Rome, he took up life as a hermit. Then he left that briefly to serve as an abbot of a nearby community. Finding the monks hostile (for what reason?), he returned to his hermitage and established a federation of 12 small monasteries.

But after some years he abandoned that experiment and founded the large and, later famous, monastery at Monte Cassino.

Although one of the four marks of the Benedictine Rule is stability (alongside poverty, chastity, and obedience), one wonders how much stability is reflected in Benedict's own life path.

But that only underscores the truth that not even saints are perfect — not even truly great saints like Benedict of Nursia, in whose debt we all remain.

## Rejoice in faith that good will triumph over evil

By Father Albert Shamon  
Courier columnist

**Sunday's Readings: (R3) Luke 10:1-12, 17-20; (R1) Isaiah 66:10-14; (R2) Galatians 6:14-18.**

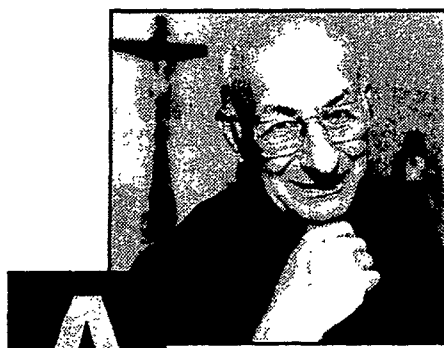
If I asked you to run through next Sunday's readings and pick out the word or words that recur most often, I wonder what you would come up with. Well, I did just that. And I discovered that the words that predominated were words that expressed joy and exultation. For instance in the first reading, the word "rejoice" occurs twice; the word "exult" occurs twice; and the words "be glad" and "delight" occur once each.

In the Responsorial Refrain, the word "joy" is used six times; and the Responsorial Psalm contains such words as "joyfully," "praise" and "rejoice."

In the Gospel, the 72 return in jubilation, and Jesus goes into ecstasy at their report and speaks of rejoicing.

Why this summons to joy and jubilation? For the same reason we celebrate a Fourth of July. We celebrate the Fourth because on that day America declared its independence from tyranny.

In this Sunday's liturgy, the church



### A WORD FOR SUNDAY

summons us to celebrate because Jesus had empowered her to crush Satan and thus declare her independence from him and evil. "I have given you power to tread on snakes and scorpions and all the forces of the enemy, and nothing shall ever injure you." Thus when the 72 returned from their trial run, they were jubilant, because even the demons were subjected to them in the name of Jesus.

Jesus Himself reacted to their telling of their mission by going into ecstasy,

exclaiming, "I watched Satan fall from the sky like lightning." In other words, Jesus rejoiced because He saw and foresaw in their mission the beginning of the end of the reign of Satan and evil in the world.

That was the point of Peter Blatty's story "The Exorcist." The story begins in Mesopotamia as a Jesuit priest is excavating ancient ruins. He finds in his dig amulets to the devil. Then he is summoned to Washington to exorcise a little girl. Satan is driven out of her.

The point was that before Christ, Satan had triumphed: he was worshipped. But after Christ, after His church had come, Satan is exorcised, driven out of souls and out of the world. His power is circumscribed.

There is a limerick that goes like this:

God's plan made a hopeful beginning,  
But man spoiled his chances by sinning.  
We hope that the story  
Will end in God's glory

But at present the other side's winning.

So it seems. St. Augustine said that Jesus by His passion, death and resurrection has chained the devil like a

dog. If one gets bit by a chained dog he has no one to blame but himself. We open the door to the devil whenever we sin, whenever we toy with excessive drink, drugs, illicit sex.

Still, is he winning? I think not! Good is stronger than evil. Where sin abounds, grace does more abound. In the book of Revelation, in the conflict between good and evil, evil never wins more than a third. The present turmoil in the church today is the dying gasp of Satan. The woman of Genesis, Mary, is mustering a mighty army of small ones to crush his head forever and to bind him, not with a mighty chain, but with a frail cord — her rosary!

Never let all the bad news headlined by an irresponsible media get you down or depress you. These headlines tell us that evil is so exceptional that it is news. As G.K. Chesterton put it:

Night shall be thrice night over you  
And heaven an iron cope.  
Do you have joy without a cause,  
Yea, faith without a hope?

Have faith in the church. Listen to Mary. Pray the rosary, make the sacrifices necessary to avoid sin, consecrate yourselves to Mary and, mark my words, we shall soon see Satan again fall like lightning from heaven back into hell for good!

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