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Benedict of Nursia

The Rule of Saint Benedict



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The Rule of Saint Benedict by

BENEDICT OF NURSIA

(480-547)



Contents

The Translations

Brief Introduction: Saint Benedict of Nursia (1911) by Edward Cuthbert Butler

The Rule of Saint Benedict

Saint Benedict's Sermon on the Departure of Saint Maurus and His Companions

Saint Benedict's Letter Saint Maurus

The Original Texts

Contents of the Latin Texts

The Dual Text

Dual Latin and English Text

The Biographies

Of the Life and Miracles of Saint Benedict (593) by Gregory I

Benedictus of Nursia (1911) by Isaac Gregory Smith

Saint Benedict of Nursia (1913) by Hugh Edmund Ford

The Delphi Classics Catalogue



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Version 1

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BENEDICT OF NURSIA



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The Rule of Saint Benedict by Benedict of Nursia



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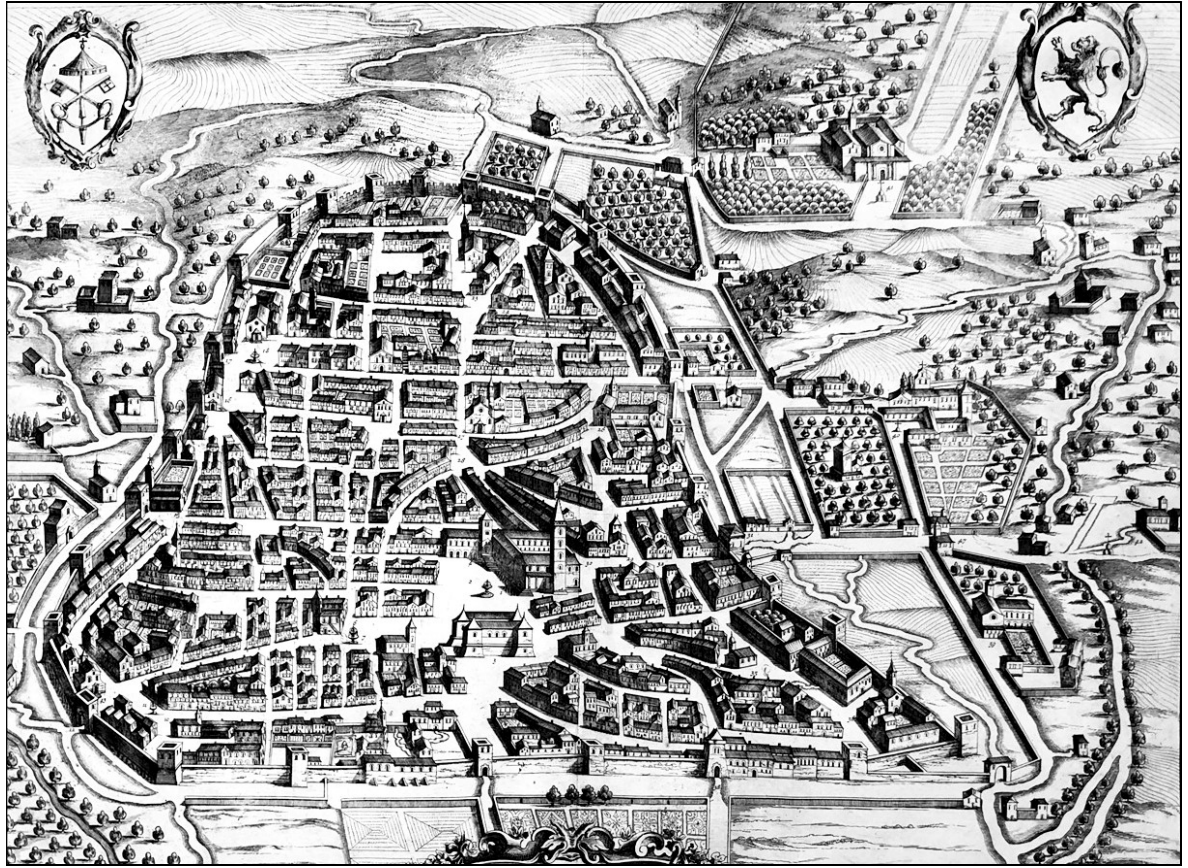
The Translations



Norcia, a town in the province of Perugia, southeastern Umbria — Saint Benedict's birthplace



The church of St. Benedict, facing Piazza San Benedetto, in Norcia, since rebuilt after the nave was destroyed in an earthquake in 2016.



Map of Norcia from 'Theatrum civitatum et admirandorum Italiae' by Joan Blaeu, 1635

Brief Introduction: Saint Benedict of Nursia (1911) by Edward Cuthbert Butler



SAINT BENEDICT OF NURSIA, (c. 480-c. 544), the patriarch of Western monks. Our only authority for the facts of St Benedict's life is bk. ii of St Gregory's *Dialogues*. St Gregory declares that he obtained his information from four of St Benedict's disciples, whom he names; and there can be no serious reason for doubting that it is possible to reconstruct the outlines of St Benedict's career (see Hodgkin, *Italy and her Invaders*, iv. 412). A precise chronology and a pedigree have been supplied for Benedict, according to which he was born in 480, of the great family of the Anicii; but all we know is what St Gregory tells us, that he was born of good family in Nursia, near Spoleto in Umbria. His birth must have occurred within a few years of the date assigned; the only fixed chronological point is a visit of the Gothic king Totila to him in 543, when Benedict was already established at Monte Cassino and advanced in years (*Dial.* ii. 14, 15). He was sent by his parents to frequent the Roman schools, but shocked by the prevailing licentiousness he fled away. It has been usual to represent him as a mere boy at this time, but of late years various considerations have been pointed out which make it more likely that he was a young man. He went to the mountainous districts of the Abruzzi, and at last came to the ruins of Nero's palace and the artificial lake at Subiaco, 40 m. from Rome. Among the rocks on the side of the valley opposite the palace he found a cave in which he took up his abode, unknown to all except one friend, Romanus, a monk of a neighbouring monastery, who clothed him in the monastic habit and secretly supplied him with food. No one who has seen the spot will doubt that the Sacro Speco is indeed the cave wherein Benedict spent the three years of opening manhood in solitary prayer, contemplation and austerity. After this period of formation his fame began to spread abroad, and the monks of a neighbouring monastery induced him to become their abbot; but their lives were irregular and dissolute, and on his trying to put down abuses they attempted to poison him. He returned to his cave, but disciples flocked to him, and in time he formed twelve monasteries in the neighbourhood, placing twelve monks in each, and himself retaining a general control over all. In time patricians and senators from Rome entrusted their young sons to his care, to be brought up as monks; in this manner came to him his two best-known disciples, Maurus and Placidus. Driven from Subiaco by the jealousy and molestations of a neighbouring priest, but leaving behind him communities in his twelve monasteries, he himself, accompanied by a small band of disciples, journeyed south until he came to Cassino, a town halfway between Rome and Naples. Climbing the high mountain that overhangs the town, he established on the summit the monastery with which his name has ever since been associated, and which for centuries was a chief centre of religious life for western Europe. He destroyed the remnants of paganism that lingered on here, and by his preaching gained the rustic population to Christianity. Few other facts of his career are known: there is record of his founding a monastery at Terracina; his death must have occurred soon after Totila's visit in 543.

Rule of St Benedict. — In order to understand St Benedict's character and spirit, and to discover the secret of the success of his institute, it is necessary, as St Gregory says, to turn to his Rule. St Gregory's characterization of the Rule as "conspicuous for its discretion" touches the most essential quality. The relation of St Benedict's Rule to earlier monastic rules, and of his institute to the prevailing monachism of his day, is

explained in the article Monasticism. Here it is enough to say that nowadays it is commonly recognized by students that the manner of life instituted by St Benedict was not intended to be, and as a matter of fact was not, one of any great austerity, when judged by the standard of his own day (see E. C. Butler, *Lausiac History of Palladius*, part i. p-256). His monks were allowed proper clothes, sufficient food, ample sleep. The only bodily austerities were the abstinence from flesh meat and the unbroken fast till mid-day or even 3 P.M., but neither would appear so onerous in Italy even now, as to us in northern climes. Midnight office was no part of St Benedict's Rule: the time for rising for the night office varied from 1.30 to 3.0, according to the season, and the monks had had unbroken sleep for 7 1/2 or even 8 hours, except in the hot weather, when in compensation they were allowed the traditional Italian summer siesta after the mid-day meal. The canonical office was chanted throughout, but the directly religious duties of the day can hardly have taken more than 4 or 5 hours — perhaps 8 on Sundays. The remaining hours of the day were divided between work and reading, in the proportion (on the average of the whole year) of about 6 and 4 hours respectively. The "reading" in St Benedict's time was probably confined to the Bible and the Fathers. The "work" contemplated by St Benedict was ordinarily field work, as was natural in view of the conditions of the time and best suited to the majority of the monks; but the principle laid down is that the monks should do whatever work is most useful. There were from the beginning young boys in the monastery, who were educated by the monks according to the ideas of the time. We have seen St Benedict evangelizing the pagan population round Monte Cassino; and a considerable time each day is assigned to the reading of the Fathers. Thus the germs of all the chief works carried on by his monks in later ages were to be found in his own monastery.

The Rule consists of a prologue and 73 chapters. Though it has resisted all attempts to reduce it to an ordered scheme, and probably was not written on any set plan, still it is possible roughly to indicate its contents: after the prologue and introductory chapter setting forth St Benedict's intention, follow instructions to the abbot on the manner in which he should govern his monastery (2, 3); next comes the ascetical portion of the Rule, on the chief monastic virtues (4-7); then the regulations for the celebration of the canonical office, which St Benedict calls "the Work of God" or "the divine work," his monks' first duty, "of which nothing is to take precedence" (8-20); faults and punishments (23-30); the cellarer and property of the monastery (31, 32); community of goods (33, 34); various officials and daily life (21, 22, 35-57); reception of monks (58-61); miscellaneous (62-73).

The most remarkable chapters, in which St Benedict's wisdom stands out most conspicuously, are those on the abbot (2,3, 27,64). The abbot is to govern the monastery with full and unquestioned patriarchal authority; on important matters he must consult the whole community and hear what each one, even the youngest, thinks; on matters of less weight he should consult a few of the elder monks; but in either case the decision rests entirely with him, and all are to acquiesce. He must, however, bear in mind that he will have to render an account of all his decisions and to answer for the souls of all his monks before the judgment seat of God. Moreover, he has to govern in accordance with the Rule, and must endeavour, while enforcing discipline and implanting virtues, not to sadden or "overdrive" his monks, or give them cause for "just murmuring." In these chapters pre-eminently appears that element of "discretion," as St Gregory calls it, or humanism as it would now be termed, which without doubt has been a chief cause of the success of the Rule. There is as yet no satisfactory text of the Rule, either critical or manual; the best manual text

is Schmidt's *editio minor* (Regensburg, 1892). Of the many commentaries the most valuable are those of Paulus Diaconus (the earliest, *c.* 800), of Calmet and of Martène (Migne, *Patrol. Lat.* lxvi.).

Authorities. — An old English translation of St Gregory's *Dialogues* is reprinted in the Quarterly Series (Burns & Oates). On St Benedict's life and Rule see Montalembert, *Monks of the West*, bk. iv.; Abbate L. Tosti, *S. Benedetto* (translated 1896); also Indexes to standard general histories of the period; Thomas Hodgkin's *Italy and Her Invaders* and Gregorovius' *History of the City of Rome* may be specially mentioned. But by far the best summaries in English are those contained in the relevant portions of F. H. Dudden's *Gregory the Great* (1905), i. 107-115, ii. 160-169; on the recent criticism of the text and contents of the Rule, see Otto Zöckler, *Askese und Mönchtum* (1897), 355-371; and E. C. Butler, articles in *Downside Review*, December 1899, and *Journal of Theological Studies*, April 1902. (E. C. B.)



Saint Romanus of Subiaco as depicted in 'Life of St Benedict, Scene 4: The Monk Romanus Dresses Benedict' by Il Sodoma, 1505



The Aniene in Subiaco — on his way from Enfide, Benedict met the monk Romanus of Subiaco, whose monastery was on the mountain above the cliff overhanging a cave. Romanus advised Benedict to become a hermit and for three years he lived in this cave above the lake.



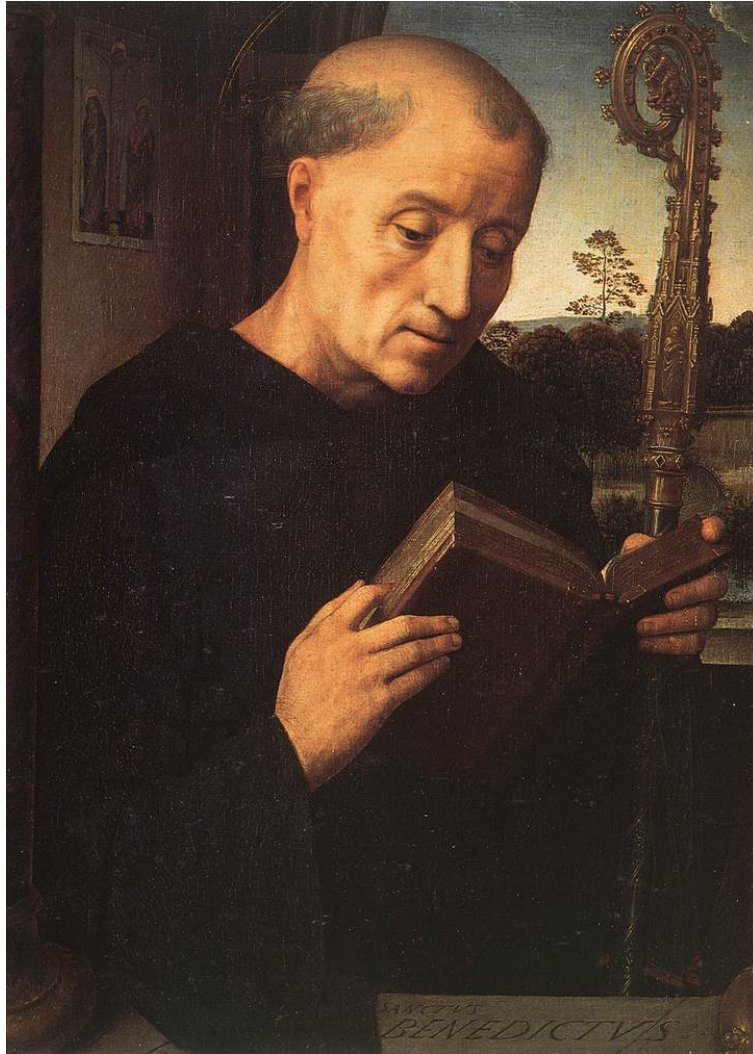
Totila and Saint Benedict, painted by Spinello Aretino, 1450. According to Pope Gregory, King Totila ordered a general to wear his kingly robes in order to see whether Benedict would discover the truth. Immediately Benedict detected the impersonation, and Totila came to pay him due respect.



'Saint Benedict and Saint Scholastica and Two Companions in a Landscape' by Jean Baptiste de Champaigne, 1681 — Scholastica (c. 480-543) was a Christian hermit and the sister of Benedict of Nursia. She is traditionally regarded as the foundress of the Benedictine nuns.



Saint Benedict at the Death of Saint Scholastica, Musée National de l'Age Médiévale, Paris, c. 1250



A portrait of Benedict by Hans Memling, Benedetto Portinari Triptych, 1487

The Rule of Saint Benedict

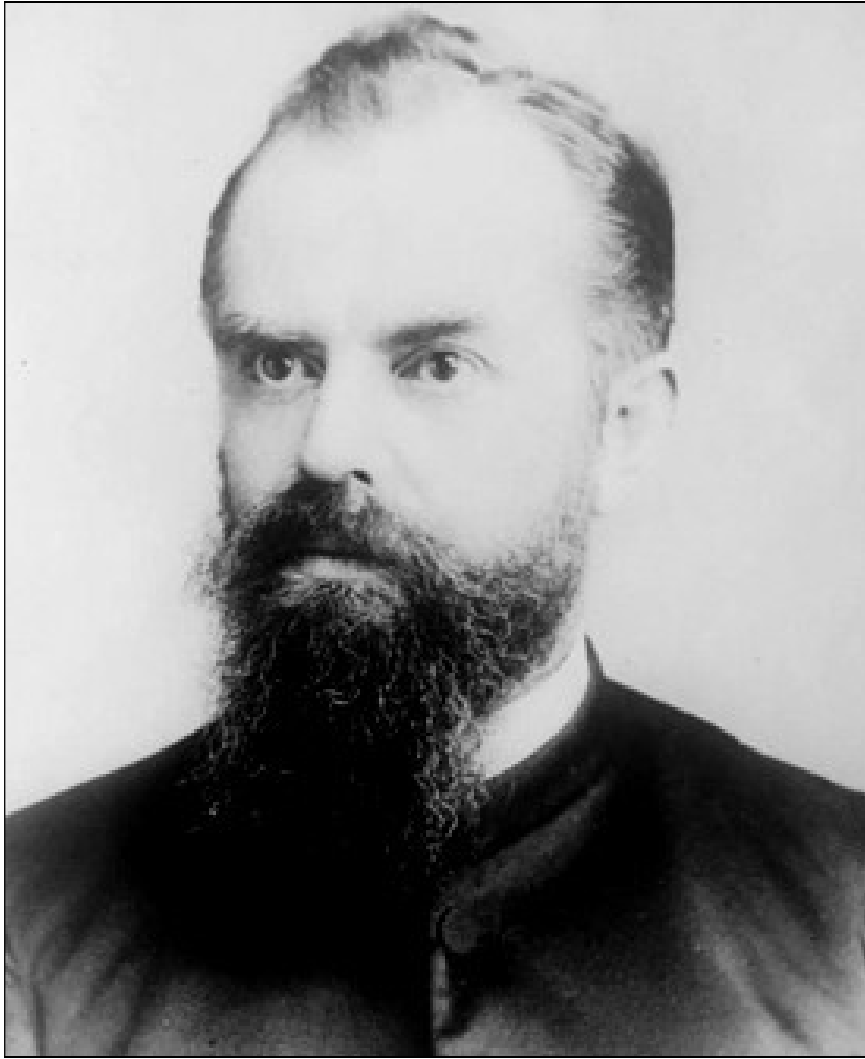


Translated by Boniface Verheyen, 1902

CONTENTS

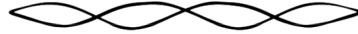
PROLOGUE
CHAPTER I
CHAPTER II
CHAPTER III
CHAPTER IV
CHAPTER V
CHAPTER VI
CHAPTER VII
CHAPTER VIII
CHAPTER IX
CHAPTER X
CHAPTER XI
CHAPTER XII
CHAPTER XIII
CHAPTER XIV
CHAPTER XV
CHAPTER XVI
CHAPTER XVII
CHAPTER XVIII
CHAPTER XIX
CHAPTER XX
CHAPTER XXI
CHAPTER XXII
CHAPTER XXIII
CHAPTER XXIV
CHAPTER XXV
CHAPTER XXVI
CHAPTER XXVII
CHAPTER XXVIII
CHAPTER XXIX
CHAPTER XXX
CHAPTER XXXI
CHAPTER XXXII
CHAPTER XXXIII
CHAPTER XXXIV
CHAPTER XXXV
CHAPTER XXXVI
CHAPTER XXXVII
CHAPTER XXXVIII
CHAPTER XXXIX
CHAPTER XL
CHAPTER XLI

CHAPTER XLII
CHAPTER XLIII
CHAPTER XLIV
CHAPTER XLV
CHAPTER XLVI
CHAPTER XLVII
CHAPTER XLVIII
CHAPTER XLIX
CHAPTER L
CHAPTER LI
CHAPTER LII
CHAPTER LIII
CHAPTER LIV
CHAPTER LV
CHAPTER LVI
CHAPTER LVII
CHAPTER LVIII
CHAPTER LIX
CHAPTER LX
CHAPTER LXI
CHAPTER LXII
CHAPTER LXIII
CHAPTER LXIV
CHAPTER LXV
CHAPTER LXVI
CHAPTER LXVII
CHAPTER LXVIII
CHAPTER LXIX
CHAPTER LXX
CHAPTER LXXI
CHAPTER LXXII
CHAPTER LXXIII



The translator, Boniface Frederick Verheyen (1844-1923) was a noted English scholar, historian and scientist.

PROLOGUE



LISTEN, O MY son, to the precepts of thy master, and incline the ear of thy heart, and cheerfully receive and faithfully execute the admonitions of thy loving Father, that by the toil of obedience thou mayest return to Him from whom by the sloth of disobedience thou hast gone away.

To thee, therefore, my speech is now directed, who, giving up thine own will, takest up the strong and most excellent arms of obedience, to do battle for Christ the Lord, the true King.

In the first place, beg of Him by most earnest prayer, that He perfect whatever good thou dost begin, in order that He who hath been pleased to count us in the number of His children, need never be grieved at our evil deeds. For we ought at all times so to serve Him with the good things which He hath given us, that He may not, like an angry father, disinherit his children, nor, like a dread lord, enraged at our evil deeds, hand us over to everlasting punishment as most wicked servants, who would not follow Him to glory.

Let us then rise at length, since the Scripture arouseth us, saying: “It is now the hour for us to rise from sleep” (Rom 13:11); and having opened our eyes to the deifying light, let us hear with awestruck ears what the divine voice, crying out daily, doth admonish us, saying: “Today, if you shall hear his voice, harden not your hearts” (Ps 94:8). And again: “He that hath ears to hear let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches” (Rev 2:7). And what doth He say?— “Come, children, hearken unto me, I will teach you the fear of the Lord” (Ps 33:12). “Run whilst you have the light of life, that the darkness of death overtake you not” (Jn 12:35).

And the Lord seeking His workman in the multitude of the people, to whom He proclaimeth these words, saith again: “Who is the man that desireth life and loveth to see good days” (Ps 33:13)? If hearing this thou answerest, “I am he,” God saith to thee: “If thou wilt have true and everlasting life, keep thy tongue from evil, and thy lips from speaking guile; turn away from evil and do good; seek after peace and pursue it” (Ps 33:14-15). And when you shall have done these things, my eyes shall be upon you, and my ears unto your prayers. And before you shall call upon me I will say: “Behold, I am here” (Is 58:9).

What, dearest brethren, can be sweeter to us than this voice of the Lord inviting us? See, in His loving kindness, the Lord showeth us the way of life. Therefore, having our loins girt with faith and the performance of good works, let us walk His ways under the guidance of the Gospel, that we may be found worthy of seeing Him who hath called us to His kingdom (cf 1 Thes 2:12).

If we desire to dwell in the tabernacle of His kingdom, we cannot reach it in any way, unless we run thither by good works. But let us ask the Lord with the Prophet, saying to Him: “Lord, who shall dwell in Thy tabernacle, or who shall rest in Thy holy hill” (Ps 14:1)?

After this question, brethren, let us listen to the Lord answering and showing us the way to this tabernacle, saying: “He that walketh without blemish and worketh justice; he that speaketh truth in his heart; who hath not used deceit in his tongue, nor hath done evil to his neighbor, nor hath taken up a reproach against his neighbor” (Ps 14:2-3), who hath brought to naught the foul demon tempting him, casting him out of his heart with his temptation, and hath taken his evil thoughts whilst they were yet weak and hath dashed them against Christ (cf Ps 14:4; Ps 136:9); who fearing the Lord are not puffed up by their goodness of life, but holding that the actual good which is in them cannot be done by themselves, but by the Lord, they praise the Lord working in them (cf Ps 14:4), saying with the Prophet: “Not to us, O Lord, not to us; by Thy name give glory” (Ps 113_[115:1]:9). Thus also the Apostle Paul hath not taken to himself any credit for his preaching, saying: “By the grace of God, I am what I am” (1 Cor 15:10). And again he saith: “He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord” (2 Cor 10:17).

Hence, the Lord also saith in the Gospel: “He that heareth these my words and doeth them, shall be likened to a wise man who built his house upon a rock; the floods came, the winds blew, and they beat upon that house, and it fell not, for it was founded on a rock” (Mt 7:24-25). The Lord fulfilling these words waiteth for us from day to day, that we respond to His holy admonitions by our works. Therefore, our days are lengthened to a truce for the amendment of the misdeeds of our present life; as the Apostle saith: “Knowest thou not that the patience of God leadeth thee to penance” (Rom 2:4)? For the good Lord saith: “I will not the death of the sinner, but that he be converted and live” (Ezek 33:11).

Now, brethren, that we have asked the Lord who it is that shall dwell in His tabernacle, we have heard the conditions for dwelling there; and if we fulfil the duties of tenants, we shall be heirs of the kingdom of heaven. Our hearts and our bodies must, therefore, be ready to do battle under the biddings of holy obedience; and let us ask the Lord that He supply by the help of His grace what is impossible to us by nature. And if, flying from the pains of hell, we desire to reach life everlasting, then, while there is yet time, and we are still in the flesh, and are able during the present life to fulfil all these things, we must make haste to do now what will profit us forever.

We are, therefore, about to found a school of the Lord’s service, in which we hope to introduce nothing harsh or burdensome. But even if, to correct vices or to preserve charity, sound reason dictateth anything that turneth out somewhat stringent, do not at once fly in dismay from the way of salvation, the beginning of which cannot but be narrow. But as we advance in the religious life and faith, we shall run the way of God’s commandments with expanded hearts and unspeakable sweetness of love; so that never departing from His guidance and persevering in the monastery in His doctrine till death, we may by patience share in the sufferings of Christ, and be found worthy to be coheirs with Him of His kingdom.

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