

***The Rule of Saint Benedict in English.* Edited by Timothy Fry. New York: Vintage Books, 1998, xxxvi + 75 pp., paperback.**

Reviewed by Brian G. Najapfour

Without a shadow of doubt, Saint Benedict's (c. 480-547) *Rule* influenced considerably the medieval catholic spirituality of the Western world. In particular, it provided the backbone for the subsequent Benedictine spirituality. And even today, although it was written about fifteen centuries ago, *The Rule* remains an important pattern for living among Benedictine monks and nuns. Its popularity, however, goes beyond the fence of the Benedictine community. Outsiders of this community have also come to appreciate Benedict's *Rule*, perhaps because of its timeless moral dictums. As Timothy Fry, editor of *The Rule of Saint Benedict in English*, remarks: "He wrote his *Rule* primarily for monks, but its sound principles for working together and living together have proved relevant to people of all classes of society through fifteen hundred years" (xxvii). Although Fry is biased in his remark because he himself is Benedictine, there is an element of truth in his statement that is worth considering.

A major theme that stands out throughout the pages of Saint Benedict's *Rule* is the concept of community life. Benedict desires to see a monastery where all monks treat each other according to rules under an abbot. The "abbot is to show equal love to everyone and apply the same discipline to all according to their merits" (9). The monks, on the other hand, must "Obey the orders of the abbot unreservedly, even if his own conduct—which God forbid—be at odds with what he says" (13). Hence, *The Rule* promotes mutual love and humble submission to the authority among the brothers, and on the part of the abbot, just government to his subordinates.

Noticeably, the society in which we live today falls short of what *The Rule* promotes. We are in an individualistic world full of disrespectful citizens and unjust leaders. It is in this context that I think non-Benedictine readers can benefit from Benedict's magnum opus. Protestant and

secular readers alike can learn from *The Rule*'s basic principle for living. Yet, readers should be aware that the kind of spirituality that this *Rule* produces has some problems, two of which I will mention. The first problem is that monastic spirituality demands abstinence from the world. It seeks spirituality by monastic seclusion. Consequently, it disables the monks to socialize and help the outsiders. In contrast, biblical spirituality calls for abstinence not from the world but from the sins that are in the world. It calls for an active and normal life in the world according to the Law of God and the gospel of Christ.

Another problem, which is the most serious one, is that monastic spirituality performs piety as a means of salvation, whereas biblical spirituality practices piety as a fruit of salvation. In the mind of Benedict the underlying theological reason for keeping *The Rule* is in order to earn salvation. In his Prologue to this *Rule*, Benedict writes to the monks, "If we wish to reach eternal life, even as we avoid the torments of hell, then—while there is still time, while we are in this body and have time to accomplish all these things by the light of life—we must run and do now what will profit us forever." He adds, "Therefore we intend to establish a school for the Lord's service. In drawing up its regulations, we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome. The good of all concerned, however, may prompt us to a little strictness in order to amend faults and to safeguard love. Do not be daunted immediately by fear and run away from the road that leads to salvation" (5). In short, Benedict wants his fellows to observe his *Rule* ultimately in order to gain merits from God for their salvation. The Bible explicitly denies this teaching of salvation by good works: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9 ESV). Therefore, while Benedict's *Rule* contains many good moral principles, with these two flaws mentioned above, I cannot recommend his work for Christian living.