

Leadership in *The Rule of Saint Benedict*  
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The portrait of an abbot painted by Saint Benedict in *The Rule* is nothing short of a Christ-portrait. There are many scenes in the gospels and within the larger scope of the Scriptures that demonstrate how Saint Benedict believes an abbot should lead the community entrusted to his care. The two chapters which address the abbot's role most directly are found in Chapter Two (The Qualities of the Abbot) and Chapter Sixty-Four (The Election of an Abbot). Yet, embedded throughout *The Rule*, Saint Benedict gives numerous examples of how the abbot should lead his community.

There is no more powerful manner of leadership than example, and Saint Benedict knew this well. "Anyone who receives the name of abbot is to lead his disciples by a twofold teaching: he must point out to them all that is good and holy more by example than by words." (*RB* 2:11-12). Saint Gregory the Great demonstrated this clearly in the second book of *The Dialogues*: "The holy man [Benedict] could not possibly teacher other than he lived" (36). Because we live in close proximity to one another, the monks see everything that the abbot does. They can choose to follow his example or not, but what is important is that the abbot does what he says, always embodying in his own actions what he expects of others. Holiness of life, fraternal charity, and virtuous compassion carry great weight in leading a monastic community toward growth and authentic joy of heart. How the abbot treats the wayward brother, always showing compassion and mercy, is a way in which he leads by example (*RB* 64:10-15).

Wise leadership in a monastic community demands that the abbot seek advice, listen carefully, and never rush to make decisions. Rather, he always deliberates prayerfully and openly. Chapter 3 of *The Rule* reminds the abbot, "Do everything with counsel and you will not be sorry afterward" (*Sir* 32:24; *RB* 3:13). The opening command of *The Rule* to "listen with the ear of the heart" applies to every monk, but most especially to the abbot. When the community knows that their opinions have been heard and reflected on by the abbot, morale grows, generosity increases, and fraternal respect for one another intensifies among them. When the abbot shows that everyone has something to contribute to the life, well being, and growth of the community and its works, unity and good will develop and grow among the brethren.

An abbot needs to know the strengths and weaknesses of each of the monks in his community. "[The abbot] must accommodate and adapt himself to each one's character and intelligence," *The Rule* tells us, "that he will not only keep the flock entrusted to his care from dwindling, but will rejoice in the increase of a good flock" (*RB* 2:32). In monastic tradition, abbatial leadership means "spiritual paternity": the abbot is a father-figure who stands at the center of the community and knows the monks very well so that he can foster their personal growth both for the well-being of the individual monk and for the welfare of the community. When "spiritual accompaniment" is fostered early in a monk's life, there is a good chance he will continue with it through the years. This kind of leadership takes time and patience, prayer and discernment, yet its practice bears abundant fruit in building a strong community.

Saint Benedict places high regard on the formation of monks with testing in perseverance and awareness of what their commitment means. The leader of a monastic community works for “quality” more than for “quantity.” For example, the man seeking entry to the monastery must knock a long time with persistence and patience before he is given an initial entry (*RB* 58:1-4). The novice must be told the hardships and challenges that naturally come in a life of seeking God (*RB* 58:8). The novice must show an authentic search for God and an eagerness for the *Opus Dei* (*RB* 58:7). After six months *The Rule* is read to him in its entirety, and again four months later (*RB* 58:12-13). Only if he perseveres and understands what he is undertaking, is he then allowed to profess vows. His care for formation shows Saint Benedict’s clear focus of leadership in building a community of committed and persevering members. They need to be well formed and informed about the rigors and blessings of living monastic life authentically. And this formation continues throughout the life of the monk, for we see that Saint Benedict asks that *The Rule* be read often, even daily, reminding the monks of their commitment and encouraging perseverance among all the members of the community (*RB* 66:8). A good leader insists on continual formation to keep a clear and focused insight into the *modus operandi* of the community.

Saint Benedict gives a good example of leadership in demonstrating the importance of “openness” to new ideas and the correction of faults, while holding respect for a serious living of *The Rule*. In the chapter on “The Reception of Visiting Monks,” he writes, “[A visiting monk] may, indeed, with all humility and love make some reasonable criticisms or observations, which the abbot should prudently consider; it is possible that the Lord guided him to the monastery for this very purpose” (*RB* 61:4). Saint Benedict knew that his *Rule* established a paradigm for monastic life based on many and specific guidelines. At the same time, he knew that any successful organization of human beings requires a balance between solidly established rules and the inevitability of change. We know how he adapted *The Rule of the Master* to provide a more moderate way to live the monastic life according to the time, culture, and people from which his community would be drawn. Even with the liturgy, Saint Benedict gives the abbot authority to establish a distribution of psalmody that he judges better for his community (*RB* 18, especially vv. 22-23). Good leadership demonstrates openness to change and innovation, suggestion and correction, while holding fast to the true spirit of monastic tradition.

Saint Benedict knew that a good leader knows how to delegate responsibility, so that responsibility is shared within the community. Consider the following ways in which he calls upon others in the fraternity to assist with the governing and guidance of the monastery: The Prior (*RB* 65), The Monastery Cellarer (*RB* 31), The Infirmarian (*RB* 36), The Deans of the Monastery (*RB* 21), The Guest Master (*RB* 53), The Novice Master (*RB* 58), and The Porter (*RB* 66). Such delegation of responsibilities builds and nurtures a community whose members share in the abbot’s leadership. Learning to lead is an essential element in a monastic community, for in time, a new abbot must eventually be called to serve as the spiritual father of the community. By the example of sharing responsibility, supervising the monks in their areas of accountability, and helping them to work together so that “all the members may be at peace,” leadership is being built up within the monastic fraternity.

Lastly, for Saint Benedict, humility stands as a virtue that gives a leader a sense of proper relationship with God and with all others, an awareness of both human frailty and personal self-

worth, self-knowledge, control of the tongue, obedience, moderation in all things, discretion, gentleness, and compassion. Chapter 7 of *The Rule* outlines the *Twelve Steps of Humility*. But Chapters 2 (The Qualities of the Abbot) and 64 (The Election of an Abbot) show how Saint Benedict distinguishes an abbot as a powerful spiritual leader through many and various expressions of humble service and compassionate bearing. He sums up both the negative and the positive qualities of a leader, one whom others will either reject based on negative behavior, or respect and follow according to his positive behavior. “Excitable, anxious, extreme, obstinate, jealous or over-suspicious he must not be. Such a man is never at rest. Instead, he must show forethought and consideration in his orders, and whether the task he assigns concerns God or the world, he should be discerning and moderate” (*RB* 64:16-17). For one who holds authority, a truly humble spirit creates an atmosphere in which obedience is cherished, creativity encouraged, and unity is sought after. In this same chapter, Saint Benedict reminds the abbot that his leadership should create a space where “the strong have something to yearn for and weak nothing to run from” (*RB* 64:19). Humility in the abbot fosters humility among the community of brothers.

*The Rule of Saint Benedict* contains much more about good leadership exercised by the abbot, often found in passing through any variety of topics dealt with. *The Rule* is a treasure possessing many teachings on good leadership, all of which are directed to bring *omnia membra in pace*.