

*A*DVENT *and*
CHRISTMAS
*W*ISDOM
—— *from* ——
SAINT BENEDICT

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ADVENT *and*
CHRISTMAS
WISDOM
— *from* —
SAINT BENEDICT

Daily Scripture and Prayers Together
With Saint Benedict's Own Words

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Introduction

Many who read the *Rule of St. Benedict* for the first time find themselves rather disappointed. There is little in the way of poetic reflection or spiritual treatise. In fact, the casual reader is justified in asking, “Is that all there is to it? What are people seeing here that makes it so enduring or endearing?” Much of it is simply a stringing together of earlier sources, and especially passages of Scripture. The rest seems to be practical advice and basic organizational principles for such things as praying the Divine Office and serving meals.

Indeed, what has made this little *Rule* so important to religious communities and, in fact, many institutions of Western civilization is the very fact that it does *not* preach esoteric spiritual disciplines. Benedict recognizes the great core truth that most of our earthly existence does not occur in ecstatic moments of divine enlightenment, but in the ordinary moments of daily life. If we can be aware of the presence of God in each of these moments and do each small thing with holy attentiveness, then we will be able to attain great insight for the whole of life. The transformation toward a deeper relationship with God proceeds from the self-awareness that comes with doing each act as if it

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matters. Every moment is part of the journey, and everything happens in the sight of God.

Benedict wrote his rule at the end of a period of great spiritual exploration. Institutional religious life had been evolving as an amalgam of the best practices of early Christian communal life. Its ideal comprised the Jerusalem community described in the Acts of the Apostles, the contemplative quest of the Greek philosophers, and the post-persecution desire for a life of sacrifice and God-centered living as exemplified in the stories of the desert fathers and mothers. There were numerous ascetic communities and numerous rules for their ways of life. Little in the *Rule of St. Benedict* is original; rather, it is a synthesis of all the essential elements expressed and lived in the first five centuries of Christianity, with some masterful editing and focusing.

Benedict and his sister Scholastica, who has traditionally been identified as his twin, were born in Italy in 480. A rule for monasteries attributed to him has been in use for over 1500 years, but nowhere does the author identify himself or provide any biographical or personal information. The only other source is a biography written in the 590s, around 50 years after Benedict's death, which claims to use contemporary accounts and eyewitness reports. It is Book II of a group of four dialogues on holy persons attributed to Pope St. Gregory the Great. Since the two documents and the tradition were handed down in association with one another, it is generally assumed that the man in the biography and the author of the rule were the same person, but there is no solid internal evidence.

This, of course, makes it a little more difficult to produce

a book of meditations like this one. St. Benedict gives instructions for the mechanics of liturgical prayer, but never writes any reflections about or for the liturgical year. There are no homilies or scriptural exegetical writings. There is little self-expression—nothing that suggests his own spiritual journey or theology—except what can be extrapolated from his rule. There is only his vision of how a harmonious community of Christians would live and how each person in it might find knowledge of self and God.

This book, then, must take a similar approach. In Advent, as always, Christians must struggle to see God in the mundane, to understand the unity of all creation, to maintain a mindfulness that makes all life a prayer.

This book uses an adapted version of the translation of *The Rule of St. Benedict* by Father Boniface Verheyen, OSB, copyright 1949, with permission of St. Benedict's Abbey in Atchison, Kansas.

Texts from the *Dialogues of St. Gregory* are the author's own versions of the Latin text.



How to Use This Book

ADVENT—that period of great anticipatory joy—is a time of preparation for the celebration of Jesus’ arrival in Bethlehem as a helpless infant. In the Western liturgy, Advent begins four Sundays prior to December 25—the Sunday closest to November 30, which is the feast of Saint Andrew, Jesus’ first disciple.

The annual commemoration of Jesus’ birth begins the Christmas cycle of the liturgical year—a cycle that runs from Christmas Eve to the Sunday after the feast of the Epiphany. In keeping with the unfolding of the message of the liturgical year, this book is designed to be used during the entire period from the First Sunday of Advent to the end of the Christmas cycle.

The four weeks of Advent are often thought of as symbolizing the four ways Jesus comes into the world: (1) at his birth as a helpless infant at Bethlehem, (2) at his arrival in the hearts of believers, (3) at his death, and (4) at his arrival on Judgment Day.

Because Christmas falls on a different day of the week each year, the fourth week of Advent is never really finished; it is abruptly, joyously, and solemnly abrogated by the annual coming again of Jesus at Christmas. Christ’s Second Coming will also one day abruptly interrupt our sojourn here on earth.

Since the calendar dictates the number of days in Advent, this book includes Scripture and meditation readings for a full twenty-eight days. These twenty-eight daily readings make up Part I of this book. It is suggested the reader begin at the beginning and on Christmas switch to Part II, which contains materials for the twelve days of Christmas. “Extra” entries from Part I may be read by doubling up days or by reading two entries on weekends. Alternately, one may just skip the entries that do not fit within the Advent time frame for that particular year.

Each “day” in this book begins with the words of St. Benedict taken from sources acknowledged on pages 113 and 114. Following the quotation is a Scripture excerpt related in some way to the beginning quote. Next is a small prayer also built on the ideas from the two preceding passages. Finally, an Advent or Christmas activity is suggested as a way to apply the messages to one’s daily life.

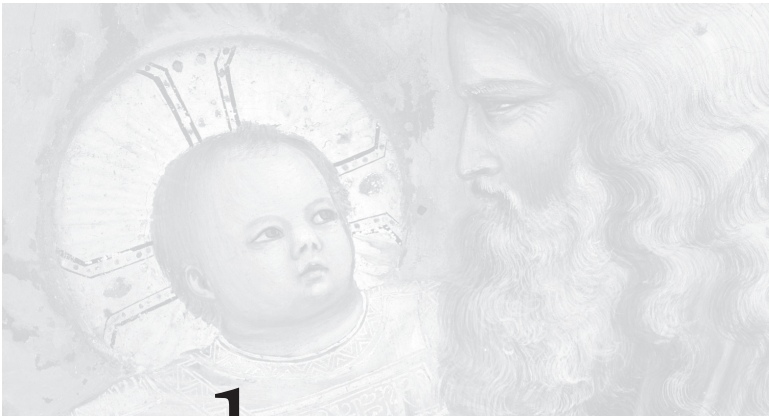
Part III proposes two optional formats for using each day as part of a longer liturgical observance similar to Night Prayer combined with a version of the Office of Readings. These options are for those who may wish to use this book as part of a more developed individual or group observance. The purpose of these readings is to enrich the Advent/Christmas/Epiphany season of the liturgical year and set up a means by which individuals, families, or groups can observe the true meaning of the season.

PART I



READINGS *for*
ADVENT

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DAY 1

Longing for Life

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The Lord, seeking his laborer in the multitude to whom He proclaims these words, says again, “Who is the one who desires life, and loves to see good days?”

RULE OF ST. BENEDICT, PROLOGUE: SECTION 14

SCRIPTURE

Therefore, thus says the LORD, I have returned to Jerusalem with compassion; my house shall be built in it, says the LORD of hosts, and the measuring line shall be stretched out over Jerusalem. Proclaim further: Thus says the LORD of hosts: My cities shall again overflow with prosperity; the LORD will again comfort Zion and again choose Jerusalem.

ZECHARIAH 1:16–18

PRAYER

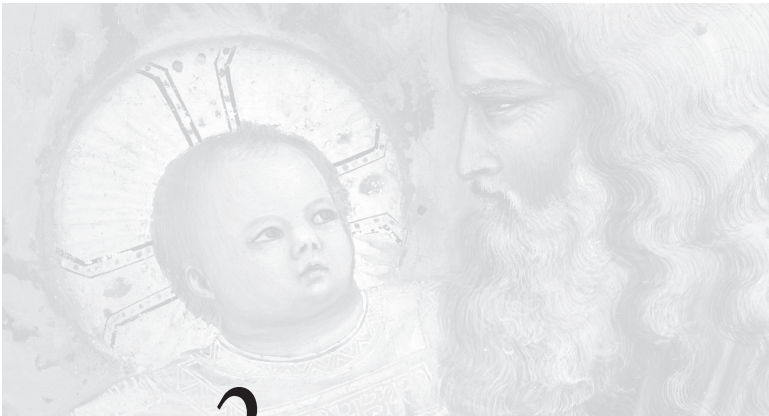
Giver of all gifts, you have made many promises to those who love you. As I await the birthday of your greatest promise, your own Son, help me to see the many ways in which he comes into our world and the many ways in which I can find him today. Open my eyes and my heart to the graces of this Advent season so that I may prosper in goodness and holiness.

ADVENT ACTION

Advent commemorates the coming of Jesus as a human being into the world. Yet this was not a one-day-in-history event. Jesus is born again in every moment if believers have the eyes to see him in others, the ears to hear his teachings in daily events, the hearts to be in conversation with him in prayer. Advent serves as a reminder to pay attention. Stop momentarily throughout the day and say to God, “Here I am. I am one who longs for life.” Remember that the prosperity promised here is not about financial riches or personal glory, but the well being that comes from faith, hope, and love. Look around at the signs of your own “wealth,” and thank God for the divine presence in your life.

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DAY 2

Pick Me

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If, hearing this, you answer, “I am the one,” God says to you, “If you will have true and everlasting life,

keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking guile; turn away from evil and do good; seek after peace and pursue it. 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.’”

RULE OF ST. BENEDICT, PROLOGUE: 16–18

SCRIPTURE

But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend; you whom I took from the

ends of the earth, and called from its farthest corners, saying to you, “You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off”; do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.

ISAIAH 41:8–10

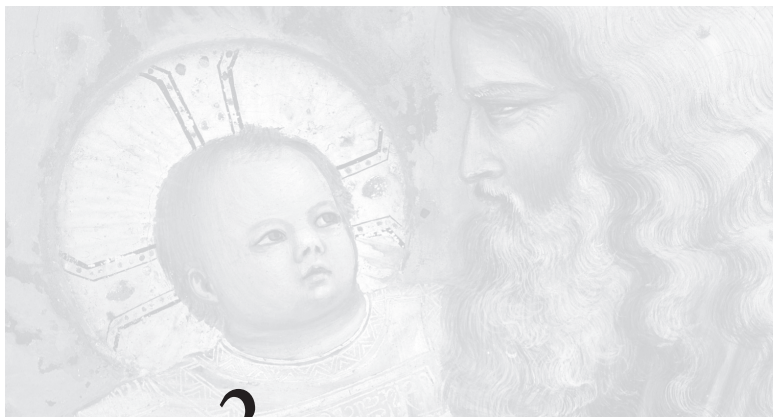
PRAYER

Ever-present God, I am one who longs for life. Although I am sometimes slow to answer, I believe in your presence and your desire to bless me. Help me in this Advent season to remember that you are here in all that I do and all who I encounter.

ADVENT ACTION

The prologue of the rule centers on a beautiful conversation between God and each human being. It is always God who starts the dialogue, calling out to each beloved creature and waiting patiently for a response. It’s hard to imagine that anyone would not want happiness now and everlasting life besides. Yet there are many days when it seems an overwhelming task to follow God’s simple instruction. Write out one of the passages above or another that speaks of God’s faithfulness to you, and place it somewhere where you will see it each day as a reminder of God’s presence.





DAY 3

God's Mountain

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*B*ut let us ask the Lord with the Prophet, saying to Him: “Lord, who shall dwell in Thy tabernacle [tent], or who shall rest in Thy holy mountain?”

RULE OF ST. BENEDICT, PROLOGUE: 23

SCRIPTURE

In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the

word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!

ISAIAH 2:2-5

PRAYER

God, you have prepared a glorious home for us in heaven, but you also wish us to establish your kingdom on earth. Help me to move toward your kingdom this Advent by my acts of justice. Lead me to everlasting light and help me in my journey to your mountain of eternal life.

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ADVENT ACTION

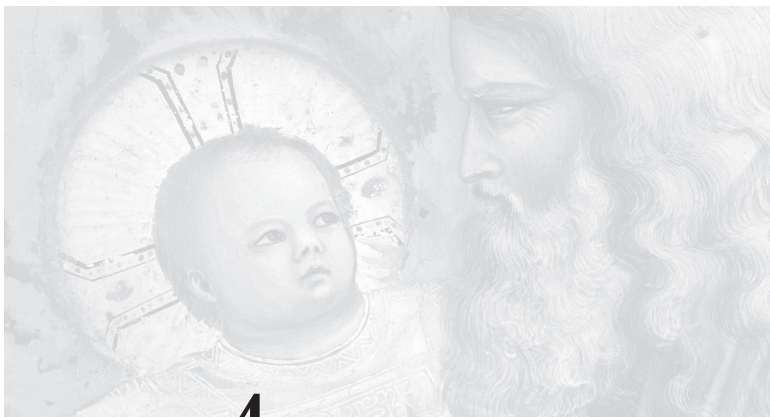
The mountain of the Lord in the Old Testament was that ideal place where all harmony among people would be restored and all would glory in the ways of God. St. Benedict points out in many places that we are all on the journey to this place, but that we also can symbolically make this place present by making our own places a reflection of it. Advent recalls the time when the world awaited Jesus, but it is also, right here today, a time of waiting for Jesus to come again. The world is still torn by war and mistreatment of people. Each act of peacemaking is a step toward the holy mountain. Find a way to express this by some



action on behalf of world peace: learning more about an area of conflict, supporting a charity which aids victims of war, writing to a government leader expressing concerns about war, and especially, practicing non-violence in your words or actions toward others.

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DAY 4

Not to Us, Lord

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After this question, let us listen to the Lord answering and showing us the way, saying: “Those that walk without blemish and work justice; that speak truth in their heart; who have not used deceit in their tongue, nor done evil to a neighbor, nor taken up a reproach against a neighbor...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 saying with the Prophet: ‘Not to us, O Lord, not to us; but to Thy name give glory.’”

RULE OF ST. BENEDICT, PROLOGUE: 24–27, 29–30

SCRIPTURE

“Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.” For it is not those who commend themselves that are approved, but those whom the Lord commends.

2 CORINTHIANS 10:17–18

PRAYER

Source of all goodness, you rely on us to help bring good into our world. I know that everything I am and do is a gift from you. Help me to serve others while remembering that it is you at work in me. Give me both strength and humility, and so give glory to your most holy name.

ADVENT ACTION

Humility in the monastic tradition is not about thinking you are no good or have no talents. Goodness of life is something for which to strive. It is a blessing to have done good deeds, but the blessing is lost if we give ourselves the credit. Every good act is an opportunity to praise God. Make a list of some of your unique talents and strengths. Choose at least one way in which you will use one to be a special Christmas gift to someone this season.

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DAY 5

Good Deeds

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*I*n the first place, beg of God by most earnest prayer, that He perfect whatever good you begin, in order that He who has 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 has given us.

RULE OF ST. BENEDICT, PROLOGUE: 4–6

SCRIPTURE

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and

the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

TITUS 2:11–14

PRAYER

God, most loving parent, help me to live a good life as I await the coming of your Son Jesus. May whatever I do today begin and end in your name. Let all my efforts be made holy by your power, that you may be pleased with the humble efforts of your loving child.

ADVENT ACTION

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Advent is not merely a time to wait passively for the coming of Jesus. Jesus is reborn in every good work that is done for another, in every act that moves the world even the tiniest distance towards its fulfillment in God. Each of us is called to be a bearer of Jesus. Remember how scouts are told that they should do a good deed every day? Perhaps there was a time, as a child, when you tried to practice this, searching eagerly for something you could do. Remember how good you felt? Look for some small thing to do today that makes you feel that way again. Perhaps you'll want to feel that way again tomorrow—thus will Jesus appear once more on earth.

