BENEDICT'S PUZZLING THEME
OF PERFECTION

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In the final chapter or epilogue of St. Benedict's Rule, we read the following lines:

The reason we have written this rule is that, by observing it in monasteries, we can show that we have some degree of virtue and the beginnings of monastic life. But for anyone hastening on to the perfection of monastic life, there are the teachings of the holy Fathers, the observance of which will lead him to the very heights of perfection. (RB 73.1-2)

In ending this way, Benedict seems to drastically relativize the monastic Rule he has just written, for he calls it a mere "beginning" of monastic life. Indeed, he urges the reader to go beyond his "little Rule for beginners" (73.8) to a higher level of spiritual life which he does not hesitate to call "the heights of perfection."

To someone who has just read the Rule for the first time, and even for one who knows it well, the theme of "perfection," which is mentioned twice in one verse, comes as a surprise. Although an epilogue normally summarizes the content of a document, this is the first time that "perfection" has been mentioned. This fact makes it difficult to study this theme by staying within the document itself.

The concept of "perfection" is not very attractive to modern ears. It smacks of attitudes that we do not much like: elitism, perfectionism, individualism, qualities that hardly seem compatible with the humble gospel of Jesus Christ. Moreover,

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Benedict makes it even worse by speaking of the towering "heights of perfection." There is something off-putting about this language.

Furthermore, Benedict's remarks about a "perfection" surpassing his "Rule for beginners" comes at a bad time, for he has just enunciated a magnificent hymn to interpersonal cenobitic love in the previous chapter (RB 72). Can he really mean to suggest that there is a higher spiritual level than the sacrificial love of one person for another? To answer these questions we will have to compare RB 73 with several other texts to put it in perspective.

THE RELATION OF THE EPILOGUE TO THE PROLOGUE
One of the most difficult questions about Benedict's epilogue concerns its redactional history. Since the chapter begins with an autem (however), it seems to be answering a previous text, but many scholars think that text is not RB 72. Because it closely resembles the last verse of RB 66 in its vocabulary, and because RB 66 sounds like a closing chapter, some think it originally followed that chapter. When Benedict decided to add several more chapters, the epilogue got displaced to its present position.

I agree that the epilogue does not logically follow RB 72, but I would argue that it is really a continuation of the prologue. That chapter ends like this:

Do not be daunted immediately by fear and run away from the road that leads to salvation. It is bound to be narrow at the outset. But as we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God's commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love. (Prov 48:49)

In terms of vocabulary, there are several common words here: initium (beginning); conversatio (monastic life); cursus festina (run/hasten). Although the message is not exactly the same as in the epilogue, these texts still have a good deal in common. In both cases the monastic life is seen as a two-stage process, with a slow beginning but a much more promising and exciting future if we use the tools at hand to make progress. When we see these two passages next to each other, they suggest that the whole Rule of Benedict is framed in a dynamic spirituality that assumes that the monk is capable of real personal growth and development.

Moreover, there is a very useful by-product from a juxtaposition of the prologue and epilogue, for when we reiterate them we remember that they were addressed to the same person or class of persons. In the case of the prologue, that is probably a new candidate to the monastery; but we may assume that the epilogue is addressed to one who has advanced as far as the Rule will take him/her. Yet if the epilogue is also aimed at newcomers, then its reference to the "little Rule for beginners" is really an effort to console and encourage them at the outset of their journey. This relieves us of the difficulty of explaining how Benedict could reasonably claim that he had only written a rudimentary Rule for monks.

PERFECTION IN THE RULE OF THE MASTER
A second question we should ask about Benedict's theme of "perfection" is its relation to the Rule of the Master. This is the contemporary monastic Rule that Benedict
often drew from in composing his Rule. Yet it does not seem that Benedict took his theme of “perfection” from the Master. There are no parallel passages to RB 73 in the Rule of the Master.10 Nevertheless, the Master does have a very definite theory of “perfection” that appears in his chapters on silence (RM 8-9).11 According to the Master, there are two kinds of monks, the perfect and those who are less-than-perfect. The curious thing is that the Master requires a stricter form of discipline from the perfect monk than from the less-than-perfect.

But the crux of the Master’s theory lies in its rigid stratification of persons without any suggestion that one could move from one class to the other. This is not a casual remark nor a misunderstanding, for the Master makes it plain from the beginning of his Rule that he considers the ordinary monk spiritually inept and hopeless.12 All one can do is obey the abbot’s every order to avoid disaster. There is no hint in this very long and detailed Rule that real spiritual growth is possible for the average cenobitic monk.

As for Benedict, he has almost nothing to do with this kind of elitist thinking, although he once slips and uses the vocabulary of “perfect” monks.13 But by and large he steers very clear of the Master’s static and closed spiritual categories. In fact, he seems to go out of his way at precisely the critical junctures of his Rule to speak about the monastic life as a dynamic process full of hope for the average person.14

Along with his elitist theory of “perfection,” the Master has an extremely otherworldly eschatology. He promises the ordinary monk a heavenly reward, but little other consolation on this side of the grave.15 All the Master promises the monk is a share of the cross of Christ.16 Benedict knows that we must carry the cross, but he cannot rest content with the grim prospect held out by the Master. He promises us that if we are faithful to the monastic life (or Christian discipline) we can expect to “run with joyful hearts” (Prv. 49). The “perfection” spoken of in the epilogue is also something to be enjoyed in this world and not just in heaven.17 And so, even if the “heights of perfection” may seem too elevated, at least they are attainable here and now. Presumably this is good news for modern listeners, who hope for genuine experience of God in this world and not just the next.

MATTHEAN PERFECTION

Not only does RB 73 contain a new theme of “perfection,” but it begins with a very unusual title: “That the whole observance of justice is not found in this Rule.” What are we to make of that? One of the best modern translations simply has: “This Rule is only a Beginning of Perfection.”18 That, of course, is the message of the epilogue, but it fails to take account of the term “justice.” In fact, “the whole of justice” is a reference to Matthew 3:15 and a spot check of Benedict’s use of this word shows that he quotes no less than four different Matthean passages using the term “justice.”19 “Justice” is certainly a key-word for Matthew, but it is not so obvious what it means. It seems that he uses it in a Jewish way to refer to the intensely personal bond that exists between covenant partners. Far from an abstract, legalistic term (as it might be for the Greeks), “justice” is what one does for the covenant brother or sister and against our common enemy. It is closer to the blood-ties of the clan than it is to more antiseptic notions of common citizenship. The message of the title of RB 73 is that the Rule is
only a minimum and its performance is never enough. But if you apply the Matthean logic to "perfection," then that is never enough either!

Is it a coincidence that Matthew also uses the term "perfect" in two very provocative passages? We are all familiar with them, but it seems important to review them here. Even if Benedict does not quote them in his epilogue, once he has alluded to Matthean "justice" in the title, these passages are hard to keep out of mind when reaching the rest of the chapter.

The first one comes in the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus tells us to "be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (5:48). What preacher has not sweated and squirmed over this text? Imagine our relief then when we find out that the Greek telesios refers more to completeness than to freedom from fault or error. This should also remind us that the English term "perfect" has the same double potentiality, for, besides connoting a lack of nothing, it also means "brought to term," "fully made." And of course that is one reason why a discussion of "perfection" is appropriate in the final chapter of the Rule, where it is a question of bringing the monastic project to completion.

But even if "perfect" means "complete" rather than "flawless," how can we be "complete" like God? It is quite clear in the verses that precede Matt. 5:48 that God's "completeness" consists in inclusivity: God rains equally on the bad and the good. The peculiar "perfection" of God that Matthew holds up to the Christian is the refusal to return evil for evil or to reserve love for the good. So Matthew challenges us to extend our love as widely as we can. Needless to say, this is not what "perfection" means to most people.

The second Matthean "perfection" text is the one where Jesus tells the young man: "If you would be perfect, go sell what you have and give all to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come follow me" (Matt. 19:21). Now it is inconceivable to me that Matthew would use this unusual word "perfect" without reference to the earlier text where it means inclusivity. But how should we understand that idea here? Probably the most likely interpretation would be this: By keeping the commandments you have certainly made a good start toward the Kingdom of Heaven. Now, you should complete your journey by practicing dispossession.

It is helpful to keep two things in mind about this text: but the problem is that the two things seem to be opposites. First, the call to "perfection" here and in 5:48 is made to all and not to an elite. In Matthew's terms, it is synonymous with salvation. On the other hand, the specific kind of "perfection" Jesus asked of this young man should not be generalized. Self-dispossession is what he personally needed to do to "complete" his spiritual journey, but it cannot be applied to all Christians or even used as a proof text for monastic life.

PERFECTION FOR CASSIAN

Finally, we cannot achieve any depth of insight into the "perfection" of Benedict's epilogue without a look at John Cassian. There is little doubt that Cassian is the main influence on this last chapter of the Rule, and that influence is nowhere so strong in the Benedictine Rule as it is here. Although there are many words and phrases that
resonate with Cassian’s writings, we are mainly concerned with the use of “perfectio” and its cognates. Both the phrases “perfection of monastic life” and “heights of perfection” are considered to be allusions to Cassian.

Although neither of these phrases is particularly revealing in themselves, they are part of what is for Cassian a substantial theme. In fact, he uses the term “perfection” in many different passages and what he has to say about it is highly relevant to our discussion. It seems only reasonable to assume that Benedict has a general grasp of Cassian’s theme, and that this is the framework for Benedict’s two terse uses of the term.

From Cassian’s extensive remarks about “perfection” in Conf. 11, it is evident that “perfection” is for him a relative term. Even though this may seem to contradict the apparent meaning of the word, any human “perfection” must necessarily be relative because we are not God nor are we “finished.” As long as we are wayfarers on the human pilgrimage, absolute “perfection” can be for us only a goal, whereas those “perfections” we can reach are relative and open to further development.

Cassian makes this point very forcefully in Conf. 1, where he insists that it is not spiritually useful to have merely a heavenly goal (telos). To make any progress, we need earthly goals (stipos) that are attainable and also empirical. The realized eschatology of Cassian is one of his most valuable teachings. It makes him an effective spiritual master because he is able to motivate us by indicating realizable spiritual goals that give us hope and energy.

But all such talk about human progress and striving in the spiritual life carries with it the obvious danger of Pelagianism. And in fact Cassian was condemned (posthumously and unjustly) for just that point in the sixth century. Nevertheless, he is well aware of this danger in regard to the concept of “perfection,” and he explicitly notes that apart from the grace of God there is no such thing in the spiritual life. In fact, any talk of Christian “perfection” that does not begin and end with God is merely disguised self-idolatry.

Since Cassian always talks in terms of relative “perfection,” he needs to employ various stages or levels to make his schema work. An overall survey of his various discussions of “perfection” shows that he is capable of using many different combinations.

Some of these pairs are more successful than others, but he often notes that there is really only one Christian absolute, and that is love. All of the other comparisons can be criticized, but love cannot, for it is supreme in the teaching of Jesus. Whether or not Cassian’s teaching about “perfection” is fully adequate to the gospel ethic of Jesus, it is definitely useful for articulating the dynamic spirituality that is his trademark.

CONCLUSIONS

Perfection in Benedict’s language is closer to love than to flawlessness. This becomes evident when the epilogue is paired with prologue 49, where love is the culmination of the monastic life. What is more, Cassian often insists that love is the pinnacle and “perfection” of all Christian and monastic life, a sentiment which Benedict no doubt shares. Even the modern sensibility should not balk at this kind of perfection.

Benedict’s idea of “perfection” is not static, as in the Rule of the Master, but fluid and
dynamic. In fact, RB 73 is full of the vocabulary of movement and progress, as are
many other passages of RB. Moreover, the effect of Benedict's call for "perfection" at
the end of his Rule is to keep the monastic system open-ended and aimed at continual
progress.

The "perfection" taught by Benedict in his Epilogue is not elitist, but a call to every
person to work for spiritual growth. This universal call is bolstered by promises of tan-
gible this-worldly gains in the spiritual life to the person who is willing to take the
means toward progress.

Further, the epilogue is usually not part of the main body of the text and often sums up its main
themes. Quotations of Regulae Benedicti used here are from RM 1980 (Collegeville, MN:

2. The means that Benedict recommends in Regulae Benedicti 73 for higher perfection is to be
found in the writings of Scripture and the Fathers. If Benedict had told us what to look for in
those texts we would have a clearer idea of what "perfection" meant for him; but he did not.
Moreover, scholars aren't even in complete agreement about which texts are recommended.
Most commentators think that "Conferences" and "Institutes" refer to John Cassian, but this is
denied by A. Wathen, "Methodological Considerations of the Sources of the Regula Benedicti as
resists identifying "Lives of the Fathers" with the Vitae Patrum ("The Regula Benedicti C:73 and
Reflections on Regulae Benedicti 73.5," Tunszoga 28 (1985): 14-24, thinks that Regulae Benedicti
73 recommends a balanced program of lectio divina, with both cenobitic (Basil) and anchoritic
authors (Cassian and the Desert Fathers) given the seal of approval. Of course, Scripture is the
main focus of lectio divina.

3. Besides the abstract noun perfectio, the same root appears in verb form ("to accomplish" or
"to complete") in Regulae Benedicti Prol. 4: 4.22; 44.10 and 73.8. The adjective ("perfect" or
"complete") is found in Regulae Benedicti 5.9; 6.3 and 7.67.

4. The same metaphor of "heights" occurs in 73.8, where the higher levels of "doctrine and virtue." Benedict uses two different words to describe these peaks: celsitudo (73.2) and
culmen (73.8). The second term is Cassian's usual expression: coelorem perfectionis (Inst. 4.8;
5.28; 7.13; Conf. 1 Praet.; 2.4, 24; 3.22; 9.2, 3, 9.7; 4; 10.8. 4; 21.33, 1). The image of climb-
ing to the heights of perfection implies hard labor on our part, but Christ (Christo adjuvante and
God (Deo protegente) will be our alpine guides (73.8-9).

5. A. Lentinii, La Regola di San Benedetto (Monte Cassino, 1980), p. 647 and A. Böckmann,
Perspektiven der Regula Benedicti (Münsterschwarzach, 1986), p. 106, both think that autem here
is strong and must be an adversative to the preceding chapter, namely, RB 72. Another
approach to the question is that of A. Wathen, who claims that some of the same literary
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souces (especially Ambrose on Ps. 119 and Clement ad Corinthios) run like a thread through RB 71, 72 and 73 (“The Exigencies of Benedict’s Little Rule for Beginners: RB 72.” The American Benedictine Review 29 [1978]: 41-66). Finally, M. Casey (“Ascesis...Reflections,” see note 2) argues that RB 73 really means to teach the same respect for Church teaching and social responsibility as is found in RB 72.


The last sentence of RB 66 begins: Hors autem regulam, while RB 73 begins: Regulam autem has: RB 66 closes with an admonishment that the Rule is to be “read often in the community,” which is a typical way ancient monastic legislators ended their work (R IV P 3:31; Augustine, Prac. 8:2). RM 95 also ends on this note and it is significant that, like RB 66, it is a chapter on the porter.

7. More precisely, the prologue ends with the following sentence: “Never swerving from his instructions, then, but faithfully observing his teaching in the monastery until death, we shall through patience share in the sufferings of Christ that we may deserve also to share in his kingdom. Amen” (Prol. 50). This verse is copied verbatim from RM Dies. 46, but Benedict has inserted his own verses 46-49 into the Master’s ending, thus transforming it from within. It is this insertion that I am emphasizing here.

8. The means to the end in Prol. 49 are three: faith, the monastic way of life (conversatio) and the commandments of God; in the epilogue we will find the means by reading Scripture and the Fathers. In two other similar passages, the Instruments of Good Works (RB 4:75-78) and humility (7:67-70) are presented as the means to be employed in the climb toward spiritual growth and perfection.

9. For an extended discussion of the problems with such identification, see my article “Benedict’s Use of Cassianic Formulae for Spiritual Progress,” Studia Monastica (SM) 34 (1992): 235-40. For a detailed comparison between Benedict’s prologue and epilogue, see A. De Vogüé, La Règle de saint Benoît (Paris, 1972) 115-118. He does not agree with me that the epilogue is addressed to a newcomer, yet he shows how closely it is tied to the prologue in terms of vocabulary and themes.

10. The Table of Correspondences of RM and RB (RB 1980, p. 488) indicates only one vague connection with RB 73.8 (RM 95.24). In general, Benedict seems to lean much more heavily on the Master at the beginning of his Rule than at the end. That would indicate that the last part of the document is the product of a mature mind, better able to stand on its own. There are of course other influences at work at the end. But as I indicate in the previous section, I do not consider RB 73 a mature statement by Benedict. Still, my theory does not explain why, if the prologue and epilogue so closely yoked, the former is so heavily dependent on RM and the latter not at all.

11. “Perfect” disciples are mentioned in RM 7.2, 10; 8.33; 9.37, 41, 46. The “imperfect” are called such only once, in 9.48, but they are referred to obliquely many times.

12. So RM 1.87: “Therefore all who still have folly as their mother ought to be subject to the authority of a superior so that, guided on their way by the judgment of a teacher, they may learn to avoid the way of self will.” Since the Master thinks that all cenobites are subject to obedience (RM 7), that must mean that they all “still have folly as their mother.” This low esteem for the common-monk is typical of the Master. Although the Master never calls the abbot a “perfect” monk, it is obvious from this verse that this is implied. Since the abbot is chosen from the ranks, it is not clear how a “perfect” monk will be found in such a motley, imperfect band.

13. In RB 6, Benedict has produced a radically reduced summary of RM 6.9 (at a ratio of about 10 to 1). Perhaps he did not notice that the term “perfect” no longer makes sense without the whole context from RM 9. Since RB 6.3 has essentially garbled the Master’s thought (De Vogüé, La Règle, 4:251-52), all attempts by translators to smooth it out are either confusing or inaccurate.

15. The Master launches into fulsome descriptions of paradise in 3:78-95 and 10:92-117. In both cases, Benedict omits these eschatological passages and substitutes short formulae that promise spiritual fulfillment in both this world and the next.

16. As explained in note 7, Benedict has inserted Prov. 46-49 into the text of the Master. This has the effect of providing earthly consolation in the form of joy to the Christian who is on the journey toward heaven. Without this insert, the curriculum of Master's School of the Lord's Service (Ths. 45) is strictly the carrying of the cross with Christ. This is in no way meant to downgrade the importance of the message of the cross, and especially the theme of patience, which figures so prominently in the Rule of Benedict. See M. Casey, "The Virtue of Patience in Western Monastic Tradition," CS 21 (1986): 1-2.

17. Besides "perfection," which is treated as a "this worldly condition," Benedict names the following terrestrial goals which can be reached by the monk who is willing to consult the sacred texts and what they teach: "guides for human life" (73:3: the implication is that this human life will be holy); "reach the Creator" (73:4: but not just in the next life); "cultivation of virtues" (73:6); "teachings and virtues" (73:9). Granted, "the Creator" could be an eschatological reference and "habitening to your heavenly home" (73:8: paimen kostimerin) certainly is.

18. RB 1980, p. 295. Admittedly, the translators here are consistent because they render many of the titles in paraphrase. But it seems to me that they could have at least explained their decision in the extensive footnote they supply for this title. For his part, De Vogüé, La Règle, 2:672, thinks that 73T is "secondary" since it seems to mimic the language of the first verse. This does not mean that the author of the title was someone other than Benedict. It is hard to imagine someone inserting this title as an explanation of Benedict's chapter. Besides, justicia is a fairly common theme in the RB (see next note).


20. For general studies of the use of "perfect" in the Bible, see S. Légasse, Dictionnaire de Spiritualité (DS), 12,1073-81; L Gribomont, Dizionario degli Itiuti di Perfezione (DIP), 6,1439-40.

21. See Gribomont, op. cit.

22. Although Benedict never indicates that he intends "perfection" to mean "completeness," in fact he teaches this ethic throughout his Rule. In my article "Benedictine Spirituality," Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1993), pp. 84-91, I locate the heart of Benedict's theology in his theme of the fear of the Lord (RB 7:10-13). But this same mighty Lord is then to be adored precisely in the most marginal and unlikely persons such as the younger monks (RB 7:3), the sick (RB 360), the stranger (RB 53), the wayfarer (RB 66).


24. A short list of correspondences is as follows: initium conversationis (Inst. 4:39, 1: Conf. 21:10,1); actuitudo perfectionis (almers p. 18:5), instrumentum virtutum (Conf. 6:10, 3; 24, 24, 3); negati cons secundum (Conf. 12:16, 3). The parallel apparatus in RB 1980 lists other allusions to Cassian in RB 73. The general tendency of commentators is to assign the main influence for RB 73 to Cassian, but A. Wathen has fought hard against this trend in his studies (see note 2, above). A. De Vogüé, Les mémoires des Oeuvres de Cassien chez saint Benoît, SM 20 (1978): 275-85, shows well enough that RB 73 does refer to Cassian's works, but I agree with Wathen and J. Gribomont, "Les Commentaires de Adalbert de Vogüé and the Great Monastic
Tradition," *ABR* 36 (1985:3): 229-62, that too much has been made of Cassian's influence on Benedict.

25. For *celstitudinem perfectionis*, see note 4, above; *doctrinae virtutumque culmina*: *Conf.* 18.15; 21.34, 3; 22.7.

26. Although I may seem to arrive at more positive conclusions in this article than I did in my earlier work (see "Benedict's Use," note 9, above), it still seems to me that "perfection" is an inherently ambiguous category and not an ideal way to end the Holy Rule. I would prefer that Benedict would have ended with the hymn to love in RB 72.

27. *Conf.* 11.7-8, 12.


30. *Conf.* 11.12: There are different kinds of perfection, thus the various kinds of "blessed" persons in the Beatitudes receive different rewards; love is a higher perfection than fear; a friend is higher than a servant.
