

What does the Rule of St. Benedict offer families?

“I think we should start a monastery,” I told my wife during one of our ultra-casual Subway dates last fall.

She raised an eyebrow. “That could be a problem, since we’re obviously not monks.”

“A monastery for families, I mean. You know, a place where families could live together in a Christian community, kind of like the first Christians did . . . sharing things in common, watching each other’s kids, praying the Divine Office together. . . .”

I think she might have rolled her eyes at about this point. It’s not for nothing that my teenage daughter once called my wife “the sane one.” (I’m apparently “the creative one.”)

“Sounds vaguely subversive,” she said. “I’m not sure your average American is ready to share his lawnmower with his neighbor, much less live in a commune, even with other Christians.”

“Not a commune. A Christian community,” I corrected. “A refuge for the Christian family, a place of stability and order in a chaotic world.”

“If you’re craving stability and order,” she said, sipping her Diet Coke, “maybe try organizing your desk first?”

A Rule of St. Benedict for families?

Well, my monastery for Christian families may be a pipe dream, but that hasn’t blunted my interest in the basic idea. Sometimes our family’s faith life feels a little—I don’t know,

random? Like the filing system on my desk. Important stuff tends to get lost. Whatever happens to rise to the top of the pile is what gets taken care of. It seems like we'd have a more fruitful family faith life if it were just a little more organized—and intentional. Hence the appeal of a rule.

And what better place to start than with the Rule of St. Benedict?

True, families aren't monasteries, as my wife pointed out, and kids aren't grown men. Kids have very different developmental needs than monks do—expecting kids to practice monastic silence for any extended period of time, for example, would not only be unrealistic, but also bad for kids' development. They *need* to talk! And kids have their own unique spiritual needs. Also, you can't expel them from the community for bad behavior.

On the other hand, the Rule of St. Benedict has been wildly successful for 1,500 years in part because St. Benedict wrote it for real people with real flaws and weaknesses. His Rule is not so much an ideal that his monks were to strive for as much as it is a guide or a help. "Are you hastening toward your heavenly home?" he asks at the conclusion of his Rule. "Then with Christ's help, keep this little rule that we have written for beginners" (RB 73 v. 8). A good portion of the Rule simply provides practical guidance for keeping the community from going off the rails.

In the months since that conversation with my wife, I've been reading the Rule of St. Benedict along with the wise commentary of Father Philip Lawrence, OSB, abbot of the [Monastery of Christ in the Desert](#). While keeping in mind that "a family is not a monastery" and "kids are not monks," I've still been pleasantly surprised at how much good and practical advice the Rule contains for parents and families, and I've made something of a project of trying to implement some of that advice in my own life—and, quietly, in our family life.

The Rule of St. Benedict is seventy-three chapters long, the size of a small book. It's not practical here for me to touch on every way the Rule might inform an intentionally Catholic family life, but I'd like to start by offering a short list to whet your interest. Then, over the next year or two, I'll circle back to some of these topics (as well as some additional ones) for deeper reflection.

Let's begin with a brief sampling.

1. The Qualities of the Abbot (Parent)

"[The abbot] is believed to hold the place of Christ in the monastery. . . . Therefore, the abbot must never teach or decree or command anything that would deviate from the Lord's instructions. . . . [The 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, proposing the commandments of the Lord to receptive disciples with words, but demonstrating God's instructions to the stubborn and the dull by a living example." (Rule of St. Benedict, [chapter 2](#))

Re-read that excerpt again, but replace the word *abbot* with *parent* (or *mother* or *father*), and you find a basic guide for what it means to be a Christian parent. For one thing, we parents "hold the place of Christ in the family," not by virtue of our holiness, of course, but by virtue of our authority and responsibility. As the Church has said, we parents are the first teachers of our children, and the primary agents of their spiritual formation.

Therefore, at a minimum, we shouldn't teach our kids anything that goes against what Christ would teach them. More positively, we ought to teach our kids not only with words, but by our "living example." (I leave it to you to decide whether your kids are stubborn or dull.)

2. Summoning the Brothers (the Family) for Counsel

“As often as anything important is to be done in the monastery, the abbot shall call the whole community together and himself explain what the business is; and after hearing the advice of the brothers, let him ponder it and follow what he judges the wiser course. The reason why we have said all should be called for counsel is that the Lord often reveals what is better to the younger.” (Rule of St. Benedict, [chapter 3](#)).

Does your family meet to discuss important matters, or even just to check in on a regular basis? And if that’s a regular practice for you, do your kids get a voice in the discussion? St. Benedict is right to observe that “the Lord often reveals what is better to the younger”—it’s true in families as well as in monasteries!

As this chapter unfolds, it’s clear that St. Benedict is not proposing that the members of the community all have a vote when it comes to making important decisions. The final decision always rests with the abbot—or, in the case of families, with the parents. But although Benedict is not giving everyone a vote, he does want everyone to have a voice. Moreover, he wants the abbot to *hear* and consider everyone’s voice, confident that the Holy Spirit can work through even the youngest.

It’s true that the youngest members of our family might not have much a voice—heck, they might not be verbal yet. But there are other ways that our youngest kids express their “voice.” By carefully attending to their behavior, we parents might come a way a bit better informed when it comes to managing our families.

3. Restraint of Speech (and Esteem for Silence)

"...the Prophet indicates that there are times when good words are to be left unsaid out of esteem for silence. For all the more reason, then, should evil speech be curbed so that punishment for sin may be avoided" (Rule of St. Benedict, [chapter 6](#))

As we've already mentioned, one important way that a family differs from a monastery is in the practice of silence. For St. Benedict, maintaining silence is closely related to the practice of humility: for him, to speak is to assert one's self and one's will, which undermines the monk's practice of humility—and in Benedict's book, humility is the very foundation of the spiritual life. By silencing one's self, one makes room for others—and for God.

But children need to talk and express themselves in order to develop their language and social skills, and to learn how the world works. And they need parents who interact with them, for the same reasons, so the strict "restraint of speech" that St. Benedict advises for his monks isn't going appropriate for families.

On the other hand, this aspect of the Rule reminds us of the importance of silence for the spiritual life. Even children need to practice silence occasionally, especially in prayer, for all the reasons that Benedict recommends it. Through the occasional practice of silence, kids can grow in humility ("I am not the center of the world"), generosity (by actively listening to others), and sensitivity to the presence of God. St. Benedict challenges us as parents to ask: When can we make time for intentional silence in our family life? I am a big advocate of the practice of [30 seconds of silence](#) before and after family prayers. Older kids can practice extended periods of silent, meditative prayer as well.

Silence is also a great way to restore the equilibrium of the

household when things get really crazy. Children as young as three can learn to silence themselves for several minutes at a time when prompted. (Don't believe me? I've seen a whole classroom of three- to five-year-olds go dead silent at the ring of a bell in our kids' Montessori school on numerous occasions.)

St. Benedict recommends silence even when there are good words that might be said, but he'll settle for the restraint of our evil speech. "Saint Benedict is terribly strong in condemning gossip and murmuring in the monastery," Abbot Lawrence observes. "We need to be deeply aware of the why he condemns gossip and murmuring: they kill and destroy."

Grumbling is another big sore point with St. Benedict: he doesn't tolerate it, and he advises abbots to arrange things in such a way that there won't be cause for grumbling. He wants the table servers to eat a little something before they serve the others, for instance, so their own hunger won't make them crabby about their duty.

If you want to make a major transformation in your family, working on your own restraint of speech is a great place to begin. After reading this chapter of the Rule I became much more intentional about eliminating "grumbling" from my parental speech...which quickly led me to realize what a habit it is for me!

4. Kitchen Servers of the Week

"The brothers should serve one another. Consequently, no one will be excused from kitchen service unless he is sick or engaged in some important business of the monastery, for such service increases reward and fosters love. Let those who are not strong have help so that they may serve without distress. . . . Let all the rest serve one another in love" (Rule of St. Benedict, [chapter 35](#))

Ah, “kitchen duty”...a source of strife in families and monastic communities since the invention of the fork and plate, I suspect.

One of the attractions of the Rule is that it addresses not only lofty liturgical matters, but the gritty practicalities of community life. This particular passage is striking because it reminds us that even the most menial tasks can be an opportunity for growth in holiness.

A good translation of this chapter of the Rule for families would be: Everyone gets to help out—not just because the work needs to be done, but because serving one another is a vital part of our faith life together. As a parent, I was also struck by Benedict’s concern to accommodate the “weak,” which in family life might apply to children who are just learning a new chore. What do we do as parents to make sure chore time an opportunity for spiritual growth, rather than a necessary evil to be avoided or done with grumbling?

Just the beginning

As the brief reflections above suggest, I’m enthusiastic about the potential of the Rule of St. Benedict to help families reflect on how to live a better life together. Besides these topics, the Rule offers spiritual wisdom and practical advice on prayer, the daily schedule, manual work, humility, mutual obedience, leadership, business, private possessions, stewardship, sleeping arrangements, discipline, hospitality, and receiving the sons of nobles.

Okay, so the Rule isn’t 100 percent congruent with modern family life—although, you never know when the son of a noble might come knocking at your door.

So, what do you think? What does the Rule of St. Benedict have to offer families? Leave your thoughts in the comments, and if

you're as curious about this question as I am, stay tuned for more reflections on portions of the Rule in the context of family life.