

Finding Balance: Insights from Benedict for Family Life

Introduction

The last thing a conscientious parent needs is one more thing to do. Instead, each of us craves a way of living that brings everything we are doing together meaningfully. We want to enjoy our families *and* be effective professionals, to feel healthy as we move between different situations *and* to know that we are making a difference.

On one of our evenings alone together, my twenty-two month old daughter Zoe was “helping” with the dishes. Her specialty is Tupperware, and she can usually have all the plastic containers from the bottom shelf dispersed across the kitchen floor before I finish washing three people’s supper dishes. This particular evening, however, Zoe was focused on the silverware drawer next to the sink. She climbed a little stepstool and started chanting “spoonh...spoonh.” As it turned out, the drawer was open just far enough for her to reach in up to her elbow. Each time she chanted, “Spoonh...spoonh,” she pulled out another handful of clean spoons and added them to the drying rack.

Initially I was irritated by the fact that I had just put all those spoons away to make room for the dishes I was busy washing. Zoe’s little game was creating more work for me. Yet in a grace filled moment, my outlook shifted and my patience grew as I realized that she was trying to participate in the task at hand. God was present through Zoe’s creativity and was inviting me into a new respect for what was happening around me.

God delights in offering these gentle nudges toward balance, sometimes helping us laugh at ourselves and sometimes leading us to appreciate anew the people around us. One aspect of the journey of life is learning to listen and respond to these invitations as they appear in our homes, work places and communities.

This is the point at which St. Benedict chimes in, “Listen carefully...” With these two simple words, Benedict begins to describe in his *Rule* a balanced way of life in Christian community. It is right to wonder if a sixth century monk, unmarried and without children, could offer anything to twenty-first century families, yet he can speak to us as we consider some of the Benedictine values and rhythms that flow from the Presence of God and into daily life lived with those closest to us.

Of the many Benedictine values present in the Rule, five have particular interest for families: (1) Awareness of God, (2) Harmony, (3) Humility, (4) Formation and (5) Kinship. These values take shape when they begin to influence the pattern of daily activities. There is something about a *Benedictine rhythm of daily life* and its emphasis on work, prayer, reading and play¹ that can be very instructive for those of us caught in the swirl of raising a family.

This text seeks to convey an understanding of balance that has the feel of common sense. It is meant to be an invitation to settle into your own experience. The diverse shape and needs of each family cause us all to picture balance through different lenses, but because the *Rule of St. Benedict* finds its foundations in Scripture, its insight offer a common ground of practices and ideals as we strive to be more attentive to ourselves and our families.

Values

Awareness of God

“We believe that the divine presence is everywhere.” Rule of Benedict² 19

Any astute confirmation student will tell you that heaven is located above us and hell below. This imagery is probably burned into the imagination through the phrases of the Apostle’s Creed that read “ascended into heaven” and “descended into hell.” Even so, to locate heaven far above and to think only of Christ as having ascended up and away is to underestimate God’s promise to be with us always (Matthew 28:20).

Benedict’s fundamental insight for balanced life as a Christian is that God is radically present to us, here and now—right down to the nitty gritty of our tasks and interactions. Because God becomes present to us through

¹ I must admit from the outset that I am taking some liberties with the interpretation and re-languaging of traditional monastic teachings for the purpose of accessibility.

² Herein abbreviated RB.

people and through creation itself, we are inspired to give fresh attention to everything and everyone around us. When Benedict says that we are to welcome guests as Christ (RB 53), he is pointing to the fact that Christ is to be found in those we meet, whether child, spouse or co-worker. Each is to be respected and appreciated as a vessel of God, cracked though that vessel might be. At the same time, it is important to recall that Christ is also present in me as I am made the guest and as I bring Christ to others.

This reality of God's intimate presence changes the way we might otherwise treat the whole day's activities and interactions. The balanced life is not about checking off all the things on *The List*, for we know that that list only gets longer. We are called to give the task at hand our full attention, trusting that it is made sacred by God's involvement. It may be tough to see God's profound interest in changing diapers, filling out paperwork and dealing with frustrating people, but all these commonplace things uncover the very practical interest God has in God's creation. God demonstrates care for us, even in these tiny moments, allowing us to relax and do what we do with joy.

Putting it Into Practice

- The next few times you make a right hand turn in your car or on your bike, recall that Christ is both "sitting at the right hand of the Father" and warmly present in the little things. Make a mental note of (or chat with a passenger about) the moments in which awareness of God's presence led you to respond in a life-giving way.

Harmony

"Let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ" RB 72

David Griebner writes about a man who thinks to himself, "Mine, mine, mine," over and over.³ This confident litany brings him great comfort until the day his thoughts are interrupted softly by the phrase, "Mine, too." The man resists, asserting, "Mine, mine, mine," but with no avail. After every, "Mine, mine, mine," comes a gentle "Mine, too." Exhausted, he finally concedes, "Yours."

"But what he heard next changed his feelings [of despair, defeat, surrender and loss] forever.

'OURS!'

'Ours?'

This was a thought he'd never even considered before. 'Ours, ours, ours,' he mused. He liked the sound it made inside him. He also liked the warm and welcoming silence that followed."

One significant aspect of harmony is learning to make decisions knowing that someone else in our life will be saying, "Mine, too." The voice calling, "Ours, ours, ours," helps us discern where *best* to invest our energy when we consider our giftedness and the countless opportunities we have to work for the good of others. All day long our decisions are summarized by the words "yes" and "no," and those choices can and do affect every area of our lives. My spiritual director is fond of reminding me that "The good are tempted by the good." In other words, we can be drawn away from our loved ones by noble things. I find that many times my "yes" is really a deep down "no" dragged kicking and screaming into "yes," not by joy, but by guilt. To this, Benedict might say, "Prefer nothing whatever to Christ, not even the approval of the person asking something of you." There is a purposefulness and freedom that comes with Christ-like focus, helping us make small decisions in harmony with the big picture.

Putting it Into Practice

- The next time someone calls and asks you to do something, whether it is making a donation or chairing a committee, politely ask for their phone number and tell them you will return their call in ten minutes. Sit down, take a deep breath and consider the big picture of what God is calling you to do and be (call a friend if needed). Is this just one more "good thing" or is this a "good thing to which I am truly being called." Return the call with the corresponding "yes" or "no." Your ten minutes probably saved you hours of discord.

³ "Mine, Too," *Weavings* XX:6 (Nov/Dec 2005): 13-14.

Humility

“Brothers [and sisters], divine Scripture calls to us, saying: *Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled, and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.*” RB 7

Children make great humility coaches. I was relieved to have survived the extended Easter worship experience with a toddler and without a hitch until the final applause following the “Halleluiah Chorus” postlude. Somewhere between placing Zoe down on the pew and beginning to gather her scattered cracker bits, she slipped backwards and fell to the floor. No more than a dozen saw the tragedy, but the whole sanctuary heard Zoe’s tearful outcry.

Unfortunately, these accidental bumps and bruises are the least of my failings as a parent. I am far from the father, and adult for that matter, that I dream of being. I aspire to be the leader Benedict describes, “striving to be loved rather than feared” (RB 64), discerning each person’s needs (RB 34) and “[arranging] everything so that the strong have something to yearn for and the weak have nothing to run from” (RB 64). If only I were that balanced. More often I react with impatience, uncertainty and worry about what others must be thinking of me.

Humility is first and foremost the discipline of seeing oneself in a true light. It is through relationships that our limits emerge and we learn about our true selves. Humility both tempers our sense of self-importance as we grow into our strengths and it calls us to recognize our mutual need for forgiveness. By the help of God’s grace we are able to exercise our spiritual muscles respectfully and practice forgiving and being forgiven.

A slightly different dimension of humility is the capacity to receive the wisdom that surrounds us. Imagine the wealth of experience available to us if we let down the walls of pride to hear someone else’s story. Perhaps this is why Benedict introduces the Rule with the words, “Listen...with the ear of your heart.” This listening is like following closely the lyrics of a familiar song and experiencing it in a new way. To hear a person from the core of your being begins with a humility that offers your full attention.

Benedict’s longest chapter in the Rule focuses on humility, taking seriously our tendency toward excessive self-confidence on the one hand and unrealistic expectations on the other. Humility is the sometimes painful, always healthy call to what is real: the mercy of our child’s, “I forgive you, Daddy,” or the grace of our neighbor’s admission, “It’s happened to me, too.” With beautiful simplicity, Benedict concludes with an apt call to humility, “And finally, never lose hope in God’s mercy” (RB 4).

Putting it Into Practice

- The next time you see a pie, recall your most recent serving of “humble pie.” What grace can you now recognize in that experience? Where are you being called to soften your expectations and who might be able to offer you some insight into that situation? Call that person or meet him/her for pie.

Formation

“We intend to establish a school for the Lord’s service.” RB Prologue

The goal of the 10,000 Steps Program is to help people achieve significant health benefits through moderate and consistent amounts of physical activity.⁴ The beauty, of course, is that anyone able to wear a pedometer can choose how he or she will achieve 10,000 steps. One might stay in bed all day (or work in front of a computer) and then go home to run on the treadmill for hours. Another might walk during the lunch break and take a leisurely stroll after supper. The point is to become more aware of our bodies. An average of thirty minutes of physical activity over the long run exceeds the advantages of an occasional and extensive workout. The average is about a balanced lifestyle.

Benedict employed a similar sense of practicality when laying out the plan for spiritual formation in the monastery, which he calls “a school for the Lord’s service,” hoping to capture a sense of preparation for service of God and others. The leader of this “school” is to adapt and accommodate himself or herself to the intelligence and character of each person (RB 2) for the sake of helping this person grow and serve (RB 64). Good mentors

⁴ Learn more about the 10,000 Steps Program at <https://www.10k-steps.com/LearnMore.asp>, viewed 18 April 2005.

draw on our gifts and challenge us appropriately, understanding each interaction as part of the broader journey of formation. We are wise to keep this sense of the big picture in mind as we serve as mentors for others and parents for our children.

No matter what one's particular need, Benedict advised moderation in all things, "For nothing is so inconsistent in the Christian life as overindulgence" (RB 39). This might make us think of food and drink, about which Benedict had plenty to say, but what about sleep habits and our addiction to work? A missed night of sleep is not easily replaced with a nap the next day or an extra hour on Saturday. "Comp time" also falls short of balance when we take one day off to make up for the extra twenty hours we invested the week prior. True balance maintains moderation through it all. We are formed slowly and steadily over time, a process which is greatly helped by patterns.

A sign hanging in our daughter's room says, "Be patient with me. God isn't finished with me yet." This fundamental awareness eases some pressure, calls me to embrace a lifetime of growing in God's goodness and reminds me to accept my daughter in the same way that I hope others accept me—as God's work in progress.

Putting it Into Practice

- The next time you have the choice to stay a half-hour longer at work or go home, go home. Imagine the life long impact of making the same decision more frequently, again and again adding thirty minutes of family quality time.

Kinship

"Obedience is a blessing to be shown by all." RB 71

Choosing possible names for an expected child has about it the quality of a sacred search. The parents take responsibility for finding a name that "sounds right," and, more significantly, bears some sort of meaning. Behind every name is a marvelous story about this search and the connections to family members or other special people. No matter what the name is, the fact that we were given a name signals a special bond.

This familial bond nurtures a lifetime of learning where one comes from and where one is going. Relationships like this grow deeper over time and thrive by acceptance, persistence and making memories together. Benedict would describe this kind of kinship as "community," praising the sense of rootedness that one gains by being part of a larger whole. Unfortunately, we do not always put our best foot forward within our closest relationships, but it is with these people that we practice who we are becoming.

In baptism we are named as God's children and made part of the family, called to use our gifts for the benefit of others. Benedict talks about this call to service as "obedience." This is to say that when we experience kinship, we discover our responsibility to the people around us; this service is not drudgery, but the work of a grounded person joyfully reaching out in love.

Putting it Into Practice

- The next time you eat a carrot, think about the people in your life who have contributed to your sense of rootedness. What memories are you creating with your children? How are you being called to model responsibility within the family? Eat another carrot.

Creating A Rhythm To Life

Work

“If there are artisans in the monastery, they are to practice their craft with all humility.” RB 57

Most of us have fallen prey at some time to the common myth of retirement. You know the dream: after a lifetime of hard work, we are finally free to finish our days in leisure, spending dollars from our nest egg while we lounge on the beach. While there might be a touch of reality buried in this hope, the overall attitude it fosters might taint our sense of work as a healthy part of our spiritual life.

Benedict taught a rhythm of life that included physical labor as an essential component of a balanced life. It is through work that a person learns to develop personal gifts and serve others. The idea of contributing to the greater good helps offset any temptation to become prideful about the gifts we possess as we see in Benedict’s instruction, “If there are artisans in the monastery, they are to practice their craft with all humility.” It is a masterful twist to talk about our work as a “craft.” The things that we do during the day cannot be reduced to “making a living” as if it were only about money. Instead, “craft” nuances the labor of our hands and minds as the art of “making a difference.”

We are not alone in our efforts. True work draws from and complements the labors of those around us, fostering community along the way. Think about the ways that we care for our homes. Call these things “chores” if you must, but do not let that trap you into thinking of this work as something negative that must be finished and put aside. Instead, think of these tasks as part of the process of living as a family and contributing to the good of others.

It is important to remember that work is part of the rhythm of life. Throwing ourselves entirely into labor, even with the best intentions, negatively impacts the other areas of our lives. The painful reality is that the dishes get dirty with every meal, laundry is never entirely done and we would get bored with all the money in the world. Take small bites.

Putting it into Practice

- If your employer has a policy for breaks, use it. If not, find a way to stir up the work day with a short walk after lunch, dropping something in the mail or making your way to the water fountain.
- Try doing dishes, laundry or Saturday morning cleanup together and then going out for a doughnut.
- The members of your family each have special talents that lead them to enjoy doing different things. Let them choose how (not if) they will help.
- In truly Benedictine fashion, welcome guests for ice cream sundaes some evening. Prepare the hospitality and make the desserts together.
- Renew a favorite hobby to clear your mind and set an example for those around you.

Prayer

“God regards our purity of heart and tears of [remorse], not our many words. Prayer should therefore be short and pure...” RB 20

I recently read an article in which the author suggested that adults are on two parallel journeys when it comes to prayer, one attending to their children and the other, attending to their prayer. Benedict would find this duality odd because for him prayer infuses everything—the one and only life we have to live.

Benedict had much to say about prayer, devoting at least twelve of seventy-two chapters to the topic. It might appear on the surface as if the times for prayer separate out our spiritual lives from our other responsibilities, but this overlooks the underlying principle: God is already at work. Prayer, in this way, is tuning in to what God has been doing all along. Sometimes prayer is structured, but often it is simply woven into daily life. Benedict advised that we should pray for God’s help before every task (RB Prologue), acknowledging that what we do is very much a part of spiritual life with God.

With this foundational sense of prayer, it is easier to see how forms of prayer contribute to the flow of our lives. There are times for praying alone, praying with others and worshipping with the whole community. The point for the ever-pragmatic Benedict is simply to pray at different times throughout the day and attend to God's presence lest we get carried away with our own agendas.

Putting it into Practice

- Write down this little prayer and use it before one task a day for a week: "God, come to my assistance. Lord, make haste to help me."
- Try praying together as a family in the morning or evening. It might be as simple as the following:
 - One person lights a candle.
 - All make the sign of the cross on one another "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."
 - Another person reads a short passage from Scripture.
 - All pray together the Lord's Prayer.
 - Someone extinguishes the candle.
- Model personal quiet time, even if it is only five minutes. Parents might take turns; children might play quietly by themselves in their bedroom.
- Discuss with your partner what "regular" worship with the larger community will look like for your family.
- While you are working on the next monotonous task, ask the Lord to watch over people who have been coming to mind.

Reading

"Listen readily to holy reading..." RB 4

If you have read a children's book once, you have probably read it a thousand times. Again and again these small people bring them to you saying, "Book, book." Good luck trying to pull the wool over their eyes with shortcuts--children have the text memorized even better than you do. There is something to be learned from the innocent attention that children give the stories they have heard over and over.

Benedict wanted his monks to be saturated with the words of Scripture. Between the private reading of the Bible and the daily prayers themselves, it was not uncommon for early Christians to have the entire book of Psalms memorized. This was necessary in many cases because books were not easily available and because of great illiteracy. In addition to Scripture, spiritual reading was and continues to be of great benefit. The essence of reading is developing the posture of listening that opens us to the wisdom of God and others.

In today's world we have many resources from which to learn. I believe Benedict would encourage us to continue the practice of reading Scripture and writings that help us on our journey, but he would also see value in using computers and televisions to learn and grow, as long as we were able to do so in a balanced way. Having said this, there is little more calming than sitting down with a child and a good old fashioned book.

Putting it into Practice

- Carry a book with you to read during a break at work or while you wait for a haircut or appointment.
- When a short verse from Scripture catches your attention, write it down and commit at least part of it to memory.
- Choose to skip one TV show this week and instead read by yourself or with your children.
- The next time your child asks a question, use the computer together to search for some answers.
- Find a book with a title that interests you. Even if you read only bits at a time, watch for insights that apply to your life.

Play

“For nothing is so inconsistent with the life of any Christian as overindulgence.” RB 39

Among the stories from the early Christians who lived in the desert comes an interaction between a wise old man and a young monk. The young monk is complaining to the old man about someone he saw relaxing. The old man tells him to get his bow and fire it again and again and again. The young monk says, “Abba, if I continue to draw my bow, I will break it.”⁵

We are creatures with limits to our ability to go, go, go. Just as we need sleep to rest our minds and bodies, so we need moments of play to relieve pressure and renew our perspectives. Too easily we overindulge in our work and excessive activity, ultimately numbing our attention and motivation. Even God rested, the Bible tells us, to enjoy the work of creation and model wholesome leisure. Benedict distinguishes between healthy and unhealthy play when he discourages monks from uncontrolled laughter, not because laughter itself is bad, but because uncontrolled laughter often comes at the expense of another.

Play is a form of relieving stress and reminds us of the fundamental joy of being alive and doing what we love to do. Families and friends know that there are few more powerful ways of showing each other our love than appreciating one another with time. As part of the rhythm of life, play can renew our awareness of the good things, relaxing tension and giving us fresh perspective on our lingering responsibilities.

Putting it into Practice

- Seldom does forwarded email qualify as healthy play. Delete the next ten junk mail messages you receive and use the time watch a bird or a cloud.
- The next time your family is out running errands, stop for a simple treat like French fries or a small vanilla cone.
- Pick ten minutes and give your child your undivided attention. Find a way to be at eye level and watch where his or her imagination takes you.
- Find some time, even if it means paying a sitter just long enough to walk around the block, to be with your favorite adult, no strings attached.

Conclusion

Since the beginning of this project Zoe turned two years old and our son Nathanael was born. Nathanael has been more than a simple addition to the rhythm of our life together, he has transformed it. Zoe has become an ever attentive big sister, extended family is visiting throughout the next three months, friends are calling with congratulations and one must still earn a paycheck and find time for both for spouse and quiet time alone. Benedict teaches us to draw deep and frequent breathes, sensing the movement of God in all things. He does not suggest a one-size-fits-all system and promises no quick fixes because the course of our lives is far more organic, transformed by every transition. Instead, Benedict helps us cultivate a centered perspective that appreciates the process and the beauty of everyday life.

There is something to be learned from the Benedictine way that is akin to Nike’s “Just Do It!” Trust that insights follow practice. We create a rhythm of life one step at a time, learning over time and with others how to respond to the moment from our deep and natural sense of what is truly important. Small decisions like leaving an evening project until tomorrow morning or skipping one television episode lead us toward balance because they help us honor a deeper desire. In the space that is created—even a small one—we are more ready to receive Christ in the moment and respond in faithful ways.

⁵ I first came across this story about St. Anthony in the collection of Sayings translated by Benedicta Ward (Cistercian Publications, revised 1984: 3-4). Interestingly, Joan Chittister uses the same story to illustrate similar insights in a chapter on “Holy Leisure” from her book *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily* (HarperCollins, 1991).