

The Medieval Church (2/3)

Dr. Catherine G. González



Iglesia Cristiana (Discípulos de Cristo)
Puerto Rico

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(2 out of 3)

Many of the elements of spirituality that we saw in the early church continued in the medieval age, but not in the whole church. Instead, they were continued in the monastic life, particularly in the West, in the Benedictine movement. The catechumenate became the novitiate—the period of a year or more in which a person who wished to join a monastery or convent was trained for such a life. Only at the end of that time did the person and the monastic community make the decision that they should become a full member. The training was rigorous, and under the direction of a person equipped for the task.

Also, the sense that the Christian community was a priestly people that prayed for the whole of the world, continued in the monastic life. There was a strong sense that the monasteries and convents had as their whole reason for being, the task of prayer. They were essentially the praying arm of society. The nobility had been given the task of ruling; the peasants the task of growing food, the knights the task of protecting society, and monastics the role of praying for the whole of society. In the Middle Ages, the monasteries were the central model for spirituality of the whole society, whatever abuses the late Middle Ages saw in them. Churches with their priests were necessary for the sacraments, but the strongest model for spirituality was definitely monastic.

The life of prayer of Benedictine monasticism has a great deal to recommend it. First of all, it was highly communal. The monks or nuns gathered eight times a day for prayer. For Benedictines, all the community also carried out tasks for the good of the whole, whether it was the farming, the cooking, the laundry, taking care of animals, assisting the sick of the community. They also provided food for the poor as well as the only health care many rural areas had. They were the only inns for travelers, and provided sanctuary for those accused of crimes until the proper authorities could render judgment. The times of prayer were mainly at the beginning and ending of the day, but there were “little offices” during the day, interspersed with times of work. This meant that the whole day was surrounded with prayer. Benedictines were very clear that it was not holier to pray than to work. Both were needed, and as long as it served the good of the community, no work was too menial, or beneath the dignity of anyone. If it was time for prayer, then that was what was to be done. If it was time for work, then to remain in prayer was disobedience.

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Benedict held that the two great virtues of the Christian life are love and humility. There cannot be one without the other. Nor can these virtues be practiced in isolation from others. A person might think he or she was the most humble, the most loving person in the world, as long as they were not with other people! He saw the monastery as a school in which these virtues could be learned and practiced. The goal was to be a holy community. The same is true for the church at large. The goal of a congregation is to be a holy community, a community in which love and humility are learned and practiced. The monastery had the advantage of being together

constantly, whereas many congregations really spend little time as a whole community. But it is possible for groups within the church to be this sort of community. It is possible for the church to help families be such communities.

What was this model of prayer? It was based on the use of the Psalms. The entire book of Psalms—all one hundred and fifty—were prayed during the week. Eventually they were sung to a Gregorian chant. There were other prayers and scripture readings, but the Psalms provided the bulk of the prayers.

When I first heard that the Psalms were considered the Prayerbook of the church by both Luther and Calvin, I could not imagine that. When I read the Psalms, many of them seemed to be for people who had enemies surrounding them, or who were in deep despair. Some—the praise ones—I could see using as prayers, but that left out a great number. Luther and Calvin both had been trained in the monastic form of prayer; Luther as a monk and Calvin as a student for the priesthood at the University of Paris. What had been their experience of praying the Psalms?

The monastics did not choose Psalms that fit their mood or their experience. The Psalms were given to them to pray, and in praying them, they were praying for people who were in difficulty. They were putting themselves in the place of those who needed their prayers, even though they did not know the people. In addition, they had the understanding that Christ was the one who

had most truly lived out the Psalms. He had suffered from enemies. He had known what it was like to be abandoned by friends. He knew the victory that God could bring out of despair. We, as part of his Body, can pray these psalms with him. The monastic community continued the understanding of their role as interceding for the world. They continued the priestly character of the early church.

The prayerbook of the monastic movement is called the Divine Office or the Breviary or the Liturgy of the Hours. Some form of it is used by all monastic foundations and by priests. There are also forms for the use of the laity in general. Many Protestant churches have recently created books of daily prayer based on the Benedictine model. What is helpful about this tradition is that one can be part of it and have a sense that though one is alone, it is still a community praying, that all over the world, throughout the day and night, these prayers are being said. It is helpful for people who are housebound, who spend much time alone, to have a sense that they can join this community, praying for the world, as part of a vast community of prayer.

One of the characteristics of monastic prayer also continued an understanding also to be found in the early church. It has to do with how we understand our relationship with the Trinity. In particular, we use the term "Father" in two different ways in traditional prayers. First, we address God the Trinity as Father. Second, we refer to the Person of the Trinity as Father. Which of these understandings is meant when, in the Lord's Prayer, "Our Father. . ." For most of us, we

probably think that we are addressing God—the Trinity—as Father. But in both the early and the medieval church there was also an understanding that by baptism Christians have been engrafted into the Body of Christ. As part of that Body —the Second Person of the Trinity— through the power of the Holy Spirit—the Third Person—we address the First Person. In other words, because we are part of the Body of Christ, our prayers are intra-Trinitarian. We pray as part of the Trinity.

Later in the Middle Ages, a new stress on the humanity of Jesus. Some of this stemmed from the Crusades, when people from the West discovered that Jerusalem did not have streets paved with gold, and that Nazareth probably still was very much the way it was when Jesus was a child.

