

Interview with
Carmen Acevedo Butcher
Author of *Man of Blessing: A Life of St. Benedict*

1. How do you explain the new surge of popularity surrounding St. Benedict?

He listened. Benedictines listen. They pass this listening down from generation to generation. The world is hungry for listening. The Internet, consumerism, and global angst are also contributing factors. In cyberspace, we have instant messaging and students have facebook and other cyber meeting places, but ultimately these “chats” are not quite the same as the honest holy listening that Benedictines offer and encourage. We can travel vast distances figuratively just by clicking onto some website, and we can literally go anywhere by getting on a jet plane, but we still stumble when it comes to the geography of our own souls.

It’s like C. S. Lewis’s *The Great Divorce*, which shows that acquiring “stuff” doesn’t make us happy. In that great book, each time someone “wants” something, they only have to “wish” for it and “poof” that TV or microwave or new house or new car or whatever appears, and that constant “wishing” literally separates people in the book because everyone has so much “stuff” between them and others. Benedict shows the alternative to materialism. Thoreau said, “Things are in the saddle and ride mankind.” Benedict knew this in sixth-century Italy, and he teaches that loving God, ourselves, and others is the way to true peace.

I also think that global angst has put the world on spiritual alert. People all over are more aware that life is short—the mystics always point this out—and our current global interconnectedness and global disfunctionality have shown us that we need to find what is real within ourselves. We need that Something More that Benedict’s short and very readable *Rule* discusses, page after wise page.

Also, at St. John’s University, in Collegeville, Minnesota, this July, the 21st Annual Monastic Institute will be held, celebrating 150 years of Benedictines in Central Minnesota, and the topic of conversation there will be “One Heart, One Soul: Many Communities.” Benedictines today well reflect St. Benedict’s spirituality, and that is seen in the topic of conversation at this 21st Annual Monastic Institute. It’s a topic we really need to dialogue with each other about in this newly connected global world. It’s all about interreligious conversation—“one heart, one soul: many communities.” St. Benedict’s new surge of popularity is a result of his concern to foster community in all its diversity. He knew that all of us have more in common than we have differences—“one heart, one soul.”

This oblates prayer (from www.osb.org) shows that focus:

O Loving God, I ask your blessing this day on all the Oblates of Saint Benedict and those with whom we are affiliated. Help us to become people of prayer and peace. Though scattered far and wide, help us to be together in the spirit of your love. Give us hearts wide enough to embrace each other as well as those whose

lives we touch. Enable us to listen and to learn from each other and those around us each day. May we be models in our homes, neighborhoods, and communities of wise stewardship, dignified human labor, sacred leisure, and reverence for all living things. Above all, O God, may our presence among others be a constant witness of justice, compassion, and hope to all. Amen.

2. Why do you think there are more Benedictine oblates these days than monastics?

People are hungry for peace, and not everyone can be celibate. Also, Gerald W. Schlabach, OblSB, has a fine article that can easily be found online at <http://www.osb.org/aba/news/3201/indexa.html>, and it discusses the modern influence of cyberspace (that potential oblates and other spiritual seekers can find monasteries' information, books on monasticism, slideshows, and other monastic information online). He says that he went online himself for more information when he discovered from the first page of Kathleen Norris's *Cloister Walk* that you could be a Benedictine oblate without being Roman Catholic. He points out that cyberspace's very strength (its no-space) is also its greatest weakness. Benedictines emphasize "stability of place," yet we are the most "mobile" and restless age yet, perhaps. Mere cyber-community is not truly relating deeply to another, as you do to the neighbor literally next door. Also, as Schlabach points out, there are more books being published on monasticism. People are hungry for peace and want to know more about the Gospel peace of Benedict and Benedictines. There is a global hunger to walk a path of peace. Schlabach also points to the restlessness of what he calls "hypermodernism." Jobs are less secure than ever before, and technologically (while so good in so many ways) also allows us to be more rushed and harassed-of-spirit than ever. This and other modern instabilities lead the contemporary man and woman to the door of the Benedictine monasteries.

3. Is it possible to live Benedict's *Rule* outside a monastery in this day and age?

Yes, the *Rule*'s main message is summed up in the Bible verse that Jesus loved to discuss: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. . . . And love your neighbour as yourself." (Matthew 22:34-40) We can live Benedict's *Rule* outside the monastery through good conversation, and good conversation is not separate from kind action but resolves itself into the necessary good action. And we can talk and live Christocentric, (which is to say) kind lives in the naturally diverse groups we all find ourselves living and working in. And we can pray anywhere, at any time, for anyone. Accepting diversity is significant, as oblate Norvene Vest writes in the July 1999 *Oblates Magazine* (online at www.osb.org):

Though we share our commitment to Christ through Benedict, we know that we speak with great diversity. In a 1996 editorial in the *American Benedictine Association Newsletter*, Fr. Joel Rippinger, OSB, observed that though we have many voices, many opinions, we also have incredible staying power. He attributes our continuity to the tradition of *conversatio*. He defines this elusive term as the paschal mystery of death and life as it is lived out daily for a lifetime. *Conversatio* is about being broken and renewed, being overwhelmed and being raised up. It is a willingness to suffer and be utterly confused, because we have learned that is

one way God leads us into the encounter with brand new life. *Conversatio* is about being in the hands of the living God, the God who always surprises us, always shatters our expectations, the God who surpasses our imaginations. In his book, *Blessed Simplicity* (Seabury, 1982), Raimundo Panikkar reminds us that, if we would see and love the Real, there must first be a rupture, a break, a conversion of the tissues of the heart. Although we know by faith that this rupture is always a response to God's initiative in our lives, we must still suffer the painful losses involved. Such theoretical language takes an all-too-real shape when we find ourselves confronted with circumstances that seem likely to fragment our very identity, isolate us from our brothers and sisters, call us to unpopular witness, and/or topple all we have held dear in the past. Dare we begin to share, one with another, monk to monk and oblate to oblate, these painful and disrupting fires of our hearts, so that together we begin to discern the shape of the Spirit working among us all?

4. What is the importance of a name?

That's a very good question. In a faith predicated on the "Word" of John 1:1, I would say that names are ultimately very significant. The Bible emphasizes the power of everything to do with language, and if we read the Old and New Testaments with an eye for acts of naming, the meanings of names, and especially name changes (of the sort a cardinal experiences when he is elected pope), God's goodness and the blessing of divine salvation come into focus.

I believe that names are important because I agree with all of the ancient minds who saw that a word is no mere shallow label. They saw a name as mysteriously participating in the essence of whatever it represents. It *is* what it symbolizes. Words connect visible, specific people-and-things with the invisible, universal reality. Put another way, words are much more than simply useful identifiers (like the 2" x 3" address tags we affix to luggage)—they are expressions of ultimate meaning. Therefore, when the poetic John names Jesus "the Word" in the first book of his Gospel, the words themselves in that phrase, "the Word," are felt to be the "Logos," "Jesus," "Love" in an immediate, mystical way perhaps lost on our modern minds.

My name is *Carmen*, meaning 'song' or 'poem'; and on sunny blue-sky days when all goes well, my name prompts me to praise God for His good gifts. I am surprised when I survey an American college classroom that out of twenty brimming-with-potential students, only two or three hands go up to show they know the significance of their names. In my experience, the meaning of a well-chosen name is something a soul can steep in for a lifetime of good and bad days.

Why did the 265th Holy Father, the former Cardinal Joseph Alois Ratzinger, chose 'Benedict' as the name under which he will serve as head of a Christian Church with one billion diverse followers? *Benedict* is a powerful name, with an equally powerful history, starting in the fifth century A.D. with St. Benedict. First, it's interesting to think that "Benedict" and "Joseph" are fairly synonymous. In Hebrew, *Joseph* means 'God will give more,' a phrase expressing the gratitude of the current pope's parents for this little

baby, their latest ‘present’ (or ‘blessing’) from the loving, generous God who always will ‘give more.’

Benedict, on the other hand, means ‘to speak well of, to praise,’ from the Latin *benedicere* (*bene-* for ‘well,’ and the root, *dicere*, for ‘to speak’). Another synonym for *benedicere* is ‘to bless,’ making the Latin *Benedict* very complementary with the Hebrew *Joseph* (‘God will give more’), because both emphasize the idea of ‘blessing,’ but with a difference. *Benedict*’s etymology is rooted in *dicere* (‘to speak’), focusing on the necessity in a loving, peaceful community of well-chosen words and right speech, as discussed in the Epistle of James, from the New Testament: “Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle” (3:2).

Less than two weeks later, on April 19th, Cardinal Ratzinger was elected Bishop of Rome, adopting the name Benedict XVI, and on April 24th, Benedict XVI was formally inaugurated as pope. Three days later, he held his first general audience in St. Peter’s Square, and with some 15,000 people present, he explained his choice of names:

I wish to speak of the name I chose on becoming bishop of Rome and pastor of the universal Church. I chose to call myself Benedict XVI ideally as a link to the venerated Pontiff, Benedict XV, who guided the Church through the turbulent times of the First World War. He was a true and courageous prophet of peace who struggled strenuously and bravely, first to avoid the drama of war and then to limit its terrible consequences. In his footsteps I place my ministry, in the service of reconciliation and harmony between peoples, profoundly convinced that the great good of peace is above all a gift of God, a fragile and precious gift to be invoked, safeguarded, and constructed, day after day and with everyone’s contribution. The name *Benedict* also evokes the extraordinary figure of the great ‘patriarch of western monasticism,’ St. Benedict of Nursia. The progressive expansion of the Benedictine Order which he founded exercised an enormous influence on the spread of Christianity throughout the European continent. For this reason, St. Benedict is much venerated in Germany, and especially in Bavaria, my own land of origin; he constitutes a fundamental point of reference for the unity of Europe and a powerful call to the irrefutable Christian roots of European culture and civilization.

Pope Benedict XVI says he chose ‘Benedict’ because it is a name associated with two Christians who worked for global peace. I think Benedict of Nursia would approve of his choice humbly and heartily.

5. How did history itself contribute to the man Benedict?

St. Benedict’s Italy was an unstable province of a collapsing Roman Empire. Waves of invaders weakened the peninsula. First Goth warriors marched along the Via Flaminia and into Rome, sacking it in 410. Others soon followed. Benedict was certainly born into a fragile, violent world, not at all unlike the world we know today. Benedict emerges as a voice for community and peace, when fifth-century Italy was all about greed and excesses, wars, an anemic economy, diseases, plagues, famines, and uncertainties.

So Benedict's life was a series of risings in the dark. Many times in the profound stillness of after midnight, under the black, frosty skies of early winter, while most Italians, peasants, politicians, children, fishermen, high-born ladies, servants, teachers, and bakers were sound asleep, lights fired up in the monasteries, and the man in a tunic began his day with a Psalm: "*Domine labia mea aperies et os meum adnuntiabit laudem tuam,*" ("O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise") (Psalm 51:15).

Generations, then, of man-made trauma, the dissolution of society, and the disruption of community were the backdrop for Benedict's *Rule*, and they contrasted greatly with its main theme—peace with God and harmony with others. Perhaps the constant warring and myopic greed of Benedict's age made him gravitate to and stick with this message of *pax*.

6. What is the source of your affection for Benedict?

To answer that good question, I want to read the dedication for my book, *Man of Blessing: A Life of St. Benedict*:

This humble volume is dedicated to the brothers and sisters who serve in the Benedictine family in ways as diverse as they are, both inside and outside the walls of monasteries, all over this colorful globe, and also to their associates, the oblates who "offer" themselves to the Benedictine ideal of peace in a world that needs them. They bless us daily. And for the unforgettable fragrance of Benedictine hospitality, *ora et labora*, and *pax*, special thanks go to my Benedictine friends at the St. Walburg monastery (<http://www.stwalburg.org/>), Sisters Deborah Harmeling, Mary Tewes, and Teresa Wolking, as well as to Sisters Linda Kulzer (St. Benedict's Monastery) and Judith Sutera (Mount St. Scholastica). They have answered my questions patiently, and they have made St. Benedict very real to me by living lives of kindness that sparkle with inclusion.

The Benedictine monks and nuns whom I am blessed to know teach me so much and make me feel so good about myself and about being alive and trying to find meaning in life. You can be at a huge academic conference, like say the one held in Kalamazoo at Western Michigan University each May, and you can be discussing this and that academic topic with them, like, say, medieval women mystics, and they listen so well and share with such humility. Then, when you get back to your home and look up what this nun or that monk has written, you discover he or she has published several books on the topic under discussion. They are simply not concerned about tooting their own horn. They are focused on dialogue. *Dialogue*, that wonderful word with *logos* (for "the Word") in it.

7. What are the Benedictine traditions we can practice every day?

First, everyone can read Benedict's *Rule* (it's famously short on words and profoundly long on commonsense). Benedict is focused on achieving a Christ-like balance in life. It's something I desperately need 24/7/365. As a middle-aged person, a mom, a wife, a daughter, a sister, a friend, and a professor, I can hardly keep the requisite balls up in the

air daily, much less make sure I am juggling them gracefully, with kindness and real authenticity in my relationships. I learn from Benedict and from his *Rule* and from Benedictine monks and nuns (and others) how to live without letting life overwhelm me. I want abundant life, not abundant stress. I want joy, not fear. Benedict's wise *Rule* teaches all these.

Also, Fr. Harry Hagan, OSB, outlines important Benedictine traditions, and I paraphrase them here, with my own take on them:

- *Stabilitas*. Be committed to a particular community. Be where you are fully. Be who you are, and be consistent in your kindness to others.
- *Conversatio*. Is about movement and change, within ourselves and others. Humbly let change happen. Embrace it.
- *Obedientia*. Obedience is tied in the Latin to "listening." Follow the God of Love. Hear what He/She is saying.
- *Ora et Labora*. Pray and Work. The two can't be separated.
- *Hospitalitas*. Treat every guest as if he/she is Christ. Take care of those around you.

Like U2's Bono, Benedictines and their oblates stand up for the poor and less fortunate around us. Here's an excerpt from a prayer addressing that aspect:

We honor Saint Benedict who advocated justice
for each person, but especially for the poor and powerless.
May we learn to live simply
and share with those less fortunate.
Bless us with a sense of justice
Tempered with mercy.
We ask this through Jesus, the Christ,
both now and forever. Amen.
—from A Prayer for the Feast of Saint Benedict, March 21

Would Benedict say "Read the Bible. Listen to God, to your own heart, to your world, and to others. Worship. Encourage others. Work. Be balanced. Trust. Sing."

8. Why is Benedict's *Rule* so foundational to western monasticism?

It has a unique vision, based on the evergreen wisdom of Benedict's *Rule*. You know the verse from that wonderful poetic book, Job: "For there is hope for a tree, if it is cut down, that it will sprout again, and that its shoots will not cease" (14:7).

It is rather amazing that a once-obscure Italian abbot's short *Rule* is now the solid foundation of Western monasticism. But it's such a practical, down-to-earth, humane, and well-balanced *Rule*, how could it not? Two other reasons are that it is so well-written and that it emphasizes the pastoral.

Benedict's writing style shows that he envisioned a universal audience for his *Rule*. He

composed it—not in the erudite ancient classical Latin nor in the bookish scholarly Latin of his own day—but in the *Lingua Vulgaris*, the Latin spoken by the educated person of his time. His *Rule* sounds like the speech of an ordinary person, then, though its language is also graceful in every sense of that word. The young Roman student of rhetoric is always in evidence. He learned his lessons well, because, above all, the *Rule* is not preachy. Instead, its honest voice and kind simplicity draw the reader in completely.

Here's a story from *Man of Blessing* to show the second point. Gregory intended the miracles in Book Two of his *Dialogues* (which presents St. Benedict's life) to showcase the pastoral nature of Abbot Benedict's ministry, demonstrating how Benedict helped others achieve peace in the minutiae of ordinary life. There are thirty-six of these stories. One shows Benedict coming to the aid of a monk who had lost some monastic property. Gregory tells how one of Benedict's monks lost the blade of a scythe while clearing a thorn-infested area for a garden. He had been working all morning beside a large lake when the blade loosened and slipped from his scythe as he swung it, landing with a disheartening plop far out in the water, gone. The brother was upset. Tools were precious. He knew Benedict's *Rule* cultivates a proper respect for them, as it advises in chapter 32, "If anyone handles the monastery's property disrespectfully or carelessly, they should be corrected." Also, this monk was a Goth, an outsider, and, before coming to Abbot Benedict's monastery, he might have been bullied as a pagan soldier by a superior officer in a marauding Gothic army, or he might have lived the life of a browbeaten servant, receiving regular doses of harsh physical treatment and abusive words. His panic at losing the tool might also suggest he was accustomed to being berated when things went wrong, whether or not he was to blame. When Benedict was notified of this problem, he did not send a messenger, but went himself and told the monk not to worry. Benedict picked up the naked scythe handle and stuck it in the shallow water at the lake's edge. The Goth relaxed in the Abbot's comforting presence, happy in the dawning realization that he was, in fact, not in trouble for losing a valuable tool. Resting his hands on his knees, he bent beside Benedict, his face turned to study the curious movements of the Father. But his relief turned to amazement as he saw the blade pop up through the wet surface. It had risen from the soft mud bottom some distance out. He watched it glide through the dark lake water to meet the handle, then reattach itself.

Gregory presents the miracle of the scythe as an extension of the Abbot's kindness; therefore, this story is best understood when read side-by-side with Gregory's most well-known work, the *Liber pastoralis curae*, or *Pastoral Care*, composed soon after he became pope in 590, which was only a few years before he wrote the life of Benedict in 593. In *Pastoral Care*, Gregory outlines the duties of those who serve the Church. He says they must especially guard against putting their own ambitions and ego before God. In *Pastoral Care*, Gregory also stresses that the clergy must know the individuals in their congregations well and must serve each of them compassionately and humbly. He must be "a neighbor in compassion to everyone and exalted above all in thought, so that by the love of his heart he may transfer to himself the infirmities of others" (Davis, 56). A close examination of this influential Gregorian text highlights the many ways Gregory presents Benedict's life as the fulfillment of all he has outlined in the *Pastoral Care*. In his *Dialogues*, Gregory's main theme is that Benedict was not someone who sent others to do his pastoral work. He went himself.

9. Can you explain the ways that Benedict transformed the pagan into the divine?

Benedict's *Rule* advocates divine peace. Living in a world of greedy Roman rulers, rapacious pagan Goths, and the concomitant bloodshed, Benedict would have viewed earthly, pagan combats as the outward sign of each person's invisible spiritual struggles between good and evil. His *Rule* teaches how to successfully fight these inner wars: "Give up your own will, once and for all, and pick up the strong, noble weapons of obedience to do battle for the true King, Christ the Lord." That's one way he transformed the pagan into the divine.

Also, everywhere Benedict looked, there was vestigial pagan devotion. Born into a tiny hill village in Umbria, Benedict grew up under a pagan name because "Umbria" originated with the sixth-century-B.C. Italic tribe known as the Umbri. A written record of their religious rituals was discovered in 1444 Gubbio, with the unearthing of the seven bronze Iguvine Tablets, a major archaeological find. These tablets revealed secret rites (in both Etruscan and in Latin) practiced by the Umbri's pagan priesthood, called the *Fratres Arvales* (or Arval Brethren, from *arvus*, for 'plowed field'). This sacred brotherhood dated back to the third century B.C., and its patrician members would probably have been active during the first three centuries A.D. (from Emperor Augustus through Emperor Theodosius I).

As its sacrificial victim was paraded around a cornfield, the entire farming community danced, sang praises to the corn deity, Dea Dia (a relative of Ceres), and presented her with offerings of wine, milk, and honey. These were also aimed at placating the dreaded Mars, or god of blight. The rituals of these early fertility-god worshippers read like a page from Shirley Jackson's chilling short story, "The Lottery," and this vestigial pagan devotion will be an obstacle Benedict faces later in his ministry.

When Benedict chose the Monte Cassino site for his monastery, he also found an ancient temple to Apollo, where the people of Cassinum still worshipped this pagan god, venerating Apollo as their god of healing, prophesy, poetry, dance, shepherds, and light. Virgil puts a description of these religious rituals in the mouth of the *Aeneid's* warrior Arruns, who prays, "Almighty god, Apollo, we your chief devotees heap up the blazing pine logs and walk through the middle of their flames to honor you, sure in our faith."

The first-century Roman poet Lucan has his own gruesome description of pagan woods:

Not far away for ages past had stood
An old unviolated sacred wood,
Whose gloomy boughs, thick interwoven, made
A chill and cheerless everlasting shade:
There . . . barbarous priests some dreadful power adore,
And lustrate every tree with human gore. (Grant, 310)

Benedict's first order of business was to smash Apollo's statue, overturn and destroy his altar, and burn the sacred grove where the ungodly sacrifices were made. Benedict then

salvaged stones from Apollo's temple and recycled them to build the chapel of St. Martin on the same site. He also consecrated an oratory to St. John the Baptist where the pagan altar had been. (The remains of Benedict and his sister Scholastica are buried beneath the high altar of this oratory and are venerated here today.)

Benedict also counseled and was said to have changed the life of at least one pagan king that we know of, for at the end of 542, the stubborn, violent, and arrogant Ostrogothic King Totila was marching through Campania in preparation for an assault on Naples, when he heard of the holy man's miracles and power and felt a secret admiration for Benedict. His visit to Benedict turns out to be an important, life-changing event for him. *Man of Blessing* presents this story in full detail.

10. If *Man of Blessing* provides an introduction to Benedict, what would you suggest as the “next step” for anyone interested in pursuing his ways?

I'd read Benedict's *Rule* first. Some of my favorite versions of and / or commentaries on are these:

- Terrence Kardong's *Benedict's Rule: A Translation and Commentary*
- Leonard J. Doyle's *St. Benedict's Rule for Monasteries*
- Timothy Fry's *The Rule of St. Benedict in English*
- Or any book by Esther de Waal or Sister Joan Chittister
- And there are many others!

Also, go online to <http://www.benetvision.org/> and to <http://www.osb.org/>. Go to the medieval conference at Kalamazoo (Western Michigan University), because lots of great Benedictines are there.

See also the very recently published *How to Be a Monastic And Not Leave Your Day Job: An Invitation to Oblate Life (Voice from the Monastery)* by Brother Benet (“Tevden”) Tvedten (from Paraclete Press, February 2006). Brother Benet is a monk at Blue Cloud Abbey in South Dakota. Tvedten outlines how a person becomes an oblate, identifies religious communities within the United States that accept oblate members, and explores simple principles for oblate life. It's wonderfully written.

Other books that might help in this spiritual quest are these: Robert Benson's *A Good Life: Benedict's Guide to Everyday Joy*; Rachel M. Srubas's *Oblation: Meditations on St. Benedict's Rule*; Fr. Daniel Homan and Lonni Collins Pratt's *Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love*, and Linda Kulzer and Roberta Bondi's *Benedict in the World: Portraits of Monastic Oblates*.