SILENT HOMILIES

Little Treasures

THE MEDAL THAT SAYS NO

The Medal of St Benedict



Before You Begin

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A medal can spend years in a drawer without anybody knowing what is written on it. The Medal of St Benedict is particularly good at keeping its meaning hidden. One side shows a monk holding a Cross and a book. The other is crowded with letters. Unless somebody explains them, they might as well be a private message.

They are not a private message. They are the beginning of a prayer, and part of that prayer is unusually direct: it tells Satan to go away. That raises a reasonable question. Why would a Catholic want to wear such words?

To answer it, we need to meet Benedict, read the medal properly and understand what the Church means when she blesses an object. We also need to talk sensibly about evil, without either pretending it does not exist or becoming frightened of everything.

This is a little book about a little medal. But the questions behind it concern how we live, whom we trust and what we do when we know something is wrong.

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The Medal Explained

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The Medal of St Benedict has two faces.

The obverse (the side with the figure) shows St Benedict holding a Cross and a book. The reverse carries the letters of a prayer.



Obverse (left): St Benedict with Cross and book.

Reverse (right): the letters of the prayer.

The principal inscriptions on the reverse are:

PAX — Peace.

CSPB — Crux Sancti Patris Benedicti (The Cross of Holy Father Benedict).

CSSML — Crux Sacra Sit Mihi Lux (May the Holy Cross be my light).

NDSMD — Non Draco Sit Mihi Dux (Let not the dragon be my guide).

VRS — Vade Retro Satana (Begone, Satan).

NSMV — Numquam Suade Mihi Vana (Never suggest vain things to me).

SMQL — Sunt Mala Quae Libas (What you offer is evil).

IVB — Ipse Venena Bibas (Drink your own poison).

Chapter 1

The Medal and the Choice

†

There is something rather surprising about the Medal of St Benedict. People wear it around their necks, attach it to their rosaries or keep it in their homes. Some have worn one for years without ever reading the letters on it. Yet those letters contain words that are remarkably direct. They tell Satan to go away, to stop offering empty promises and to keep his poison to himself.

You might reasonably wonder why such words belong on a Catholic medal. Most religious medals show a saint or an image of Our Lady. They remind us to pray and to ask for help. This one does that too, but it also tells us something about the choices involved in being a Christian.

Think for a moment about Baptism. When an adult is baptised, or when parents and godparents speak on behalf of a child, the Church asks for a rejection of Satan, his works and his empty promises. The exact wording varies according to the approved rite, but the meaning is unmistakable. Becoming a Christian involves turning towards Christ and turning away from whatever leads us away from him.

That may sound rather solemn when we think of a baby's Baptism, with relatives taking photographs and everybody wondering whether the child will cry. But those promises concern the whole of life. The baby will grow up and face choices that nobody can make on his or her behalf. The promises will have to become personal.

The medal gives those baptismal promises a visible form. Think of the promises made at the font, when the child was too small to speak. Years later, the same child may be grown up, standing in a kitchen, deciding whether to tell the truth about something embarrassing. Nobody is holding a candle now, and nobody is taking photographs. Yet the choice still belongs to that Baptism. It reminds us that Christian faith is more than admiring Jesus or agreeing with his teaching. It involves learning to recognise what is wrong

and finding the courage to refuse it.

That does not mean we should imagine Satan behind every unpleasant experience. A difficult neighbour, a disappointing day or a problem at work is not evidence of demonic activity. Much of the struggle against evil takes place in the ordinary decisions for which we ourselves are responsible.

The interesting thing about this little medal is that it does not begin by telling us to be frightened. It assumes that we already know whose side we want to be on. Its words are strong because the choice they express matters.

A Reflection

Most of us are quite good at recognising a wrong choice when somebody else makes it. We notice the dishonesty, the unkind remark or the way a person takes advantage of somebody weaker. It becomes less straightforward when the same temptation appears in our own life.

We can usually find a reason why our circumstances are different. We were tired. Somebody provoked us. We deserved a little more than we received. Sometimes those explanations are understandable. Sometimes they are simply ways of avoiding an uncomfortable truth.

An examination of conscience is not an invitation to become miserable about ourselves. It is an opportunity to be truthful. We can look at our day, admit where we went wrong, thank God for what was good and ask for the grace to begin again.

A Christian does not need to pretend to be perfect. We do need to remain willing to change.

A short prayer

Lord Jesus, help me to recognise the excuses I make for myself. Give me the honesty to admit when I am wrong, the courage to put things right and the confidence to begin again with your help. Amen.

Chapter 2
Benedict's Search for God

†

If you had met Benedict as a young man, you would not have seen somebody carrying the medal that now bears his name. The familiar medal developed many centuries after his death. Benedict himself belonged to a very different world.

He was born in Italy around the end of the fifth century, traditionally about the year 480. The western Roman Empire had collapsed, and Italy was living through a period of political uncertainty and considerable change. The old institutions still existed in places, but the world that had supported them was no longer secure.

According to St Gregory the Great, who wrote about Benedict some decades after his death, Benedict was sent to Rome for his education. There he became troubled by the way people around him were living. Rather than follow the same path, he left.

It is tempting to imagine him walking out of Rome in a dramatic scene, as though he were making a public protest. Gregory does not give us that sort of detail. What he tells us is that Benedict wanted to seek God, and that he eventually lived as a hermit near Subiaco.

For somebody used to a comfortable home, regular meals and the company of friends, that must have been a very different existence. Silence can be attractive when we have too much noise around us. It is less attractive when there is nobody to distract us from our own thoughts.

Benedict's decision was not simply a rejection of other people. Over time, people came to him for guidance, and his life became closely connected with the communities that would develop around him. His search for God eventually produced a way of living together that has influenced Christian life for fifteen centuries.

That is one reason his story matters. He did not begin by designing a religious system or inventing a medal. He began by taking his relationship with God seriously.

A Reflection

We have become very good at filling silence. A telephone can accompany us while we wait for the kettle, sit on a bus or stand in a queue. There is always something to read, watch or listen to.

None of that is necessarily wrong. But it can leave us with remarkably little time to notice what is happening inside us.

Sometimes a few quiet minutes reveal something we have been avoiding: a person we need to forgive, a decision we keep postponing or a worry that has taken up far too much space in our minds.

Prayer does not require us to live in a cave. It may begin with putting the telephone down, sitting quietly and speaking to God about what is actually happening in our life.

A short prayer

Lord, teach me not to be afraid of silence. Help me to make room for you in an ordinary day, and to listen when there is something I need to hear. Amen.

Chapter 3

The Cup and the Cross

†

One of the best-known stories about St Benedict concerns a cup of poisoned wine. It is recorded by St Gregory the Great in the second book of his Dialogues, written after Benedict's death.

Gregory tells us that a group of monks asked Benedict to become their superior. Benedict was reluctant. He understood that his way of life was demanding, and he warned them that they might find it difficult. They insisted, so he agreed.

Before long, some of the monks regretted their decision. Benedict expected them to live according to a discipline they had not really wanted. According to Gregory, their resentment grew so serious that they decided to poison his wine.

When the cup was brought to him, Benedict made the Sign of the Cross over it. Gregory says that the cup broke, as though it had been struck by a stone.

It is an extraordinary story, and we should be honest about its source. We know it through Gregory's account of Benedict's holiness. We do not have a separate contemporary investigation of the event. That does not make the story worthless. It tells us how Benedict was remembered and what Gregory wanted Christians to learn from his life.

The part of the story that interests me most comes afterwards.

Benedict did not respond by planning revenge. Gregory describes him as remaining calm, reproaching the monks for what they had done and leaving them. He recognised that they could not live together in the way he had hoped.

There is wisdom in that response. Forgiveness does not always mean remaining in a situation where somebody intends to harm us. Nor does

refusing revenge mean pretending that nothing serious has happened.

The Sign of the Cross stands at the centre of the story, but Benedict's conduct matters too. The Cross is not simply something he made over a cup. It is also the pattern of the life he was trying to live.

A Reflection

When somebody treats us badly, we often spend more time thinking about what we would like to say than about what would actually help.

We imagine the perfect reply. We rehearse the argument while driving or washing the dishes. Sometimes we win the argument several times in our imagination, although the other person knows nothing about it.

There are occasions when we must speak firmly, protect ourselves or report wrongdoing. Christianity does not require us to accept abuse.

But there is a difference between seeking justice and enjoying the thought of revenge. One tries to put something right. The other allows the injury to continue governing our life.

It is worth asking whether the response we are planning will bring us any closer to peace.

A short prayer

Lord Jesus, when somebody hurts me, help me to act wisely rather than angrily. Give me courage to face what is wrong without allowing bitterness to take hold of my heart. Amen.

Chapter 4
Envy and the Raven

†

St Gregory tells another unusual story about Benedict, this time involving a raven. According to the Dialogues, a priest named Florentius became jealous of Benedict's reputation. People were seeking Benedict's advice and admiring his holiness, and Florentius found this difficult to bear. Gregory says that his jealousy eventually led him to send Benedict a loaf of poisoned bread.

Benedict had been accustomed to feeding a raven that came to him at a particular time. When the poisoned bread arrived, he told the bird to carry it somewhere nobody would find it. Gregory describes the raven as reluctant at first, but eventually taking the loaf away.

The story is memorable because of the bird. A raven carrying poisoned bread is the sort of detail that stays in the imagination long after the page has been turned. But the human part of the story is equally interesting.

Florentius was not described as a stranger who had never heard of God. He was a priest. The temptation that overcame him was envy, something that can affect religious people just as easily as anybody else.

Envy is more than wishing we had something another person possesses. It is becoming unhappy because somebody else has received something good. Another person's success begins to feel like our own failure.

That can happen in very ordinary circumstances. A colleague receives recognition. A neighbour's family seems to be doing well. Somebody else is thanked for work we feel we have done ourselves. We may congratulate them politely while privately feeling rather annoyed.

There is nothing unusual about experiencing such feelings. What matters is what we do with them.

Gregory's story shows how far resentment can go when it is allowed to grow without challenge. We may never encounter poisoned bread, but we all know how unpleasant life can become when somebody cannot bear to see another person succeed.

A Reflection

A parish is a place where people bring many different gifts. Some are good at organising events, others visit the sick, others sing, clean, cook, teach or quietly help somebody who is struggling.

It would be wonderful if we always rejoiced when another person did something well. In practice, we can become rather protective of our own place.

We may feel overlooked. We may think somebody else receives too much attention. We may begin to criticise work that we would have praised if our own name had been attached to it.

A useful spiritual exercise is to thank God deliberately for somebody else's gift. We do not lose anything by recognising the good in another person.

Indeed, the Church becomes poorer when everybody feels they must be the most important person in the room.

A short prayer

Lord, free me from the need to compare myself constantly with others. Help me to recognise the gifts you have given them, to use my own gifts generously and to rejoice when good is done, whoever receives the credit. Amen.

Chapter 5

The Letters and Their History

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The Medal of St Benedict is unusual because so much of its meaning is written in initials. To somebody who does not know the Latin, the letters can look like a puzzle.

That is not a modern problem. The history of the inscriptions includes a fascinating episode associated with the Benedictine Abbey of Metten in Bavaria. In the seventeenth century, the meaning of certain letters connected with the Cross of St Benedict was reportedly no longer understood. A manuscript discovered at Metten in 1647 helped explain them. The manuscript tradition preserved the words of a prayer rejecting Satan and asking that the Holy Cross be our light.

The details of the medal's early development require careful historical treatment. The familiar design did not suddenly appear in its present form during Benedict's lifetime. It developed through later centuries of Benedictine devotion. That is important because people sometimes speak as though St Benedict himself had a medal made and handed it to his monks. We have no sound basis for saying that.

The widely recognised Jubilee Medal belongs to a much later period. Its design was associated with the 1880 commemoration of the fourteen-hundredth anniversary of Benedict's traditionally accepted birth year.

This means that the medal brings together different parts of Catholic history. The saint lived in the sixth century. The prayers and symbols developed in the centuries that followed. The familiar Jubilee design came later still.

There is something appealing about that. The medal is not the work of one person sitting down to invent a clever religious object. It reflects a long tradition of Christians remembering Benedict, honouring the Cross and

asking God for protection.

And prayers are meant to be understood, at least as far as we can understand them, so that the words may become part of our relationship with God.

A Reflection

Families often keep things whose original meaning has been partly forgotten. There may be an old photograph with no names written on the back, a medal belonging to a grandparent or a prayer card tucked into a book.

The object may be small, but somebody once thought it worth keeping.

When we ask questions about such things, we sometimes discover more than we expected. We learn where somebody lived, what mattered to them or how they managed through a difficult period.

The same can happen with our faith. A custom that seems old-fashioned may have a good reason behind it. Asking why we do something need not weaken our faith. It can help us practise it more thoughtfully.

A short prayer

Lord, give me the curiosity to learn and the humility to ask questions. Help me to value the faith handed down to me, and to understand it well enough to pass it on faithfully. Amen.

Chapter 6
Reading the Medal

†

This is the chapter where it helps to have a real medal in your hand.

Look first at the side showing St Benedict. On the familiar Jubilee Medal he is holding a Cross and the Rule associated with his monastic life. Other details recall the stories told about him, including the poisoned cup and the raven. Around the edge are Latin words identifying him and asking for his presence at the hour of death.

Now turn the medal over. You will see a Cross surrounded by letters.

The four letters C S P B stand for Crux Sancti Patris Benedicti, meaning "The Cross of our Holy Father Benedict".

On the upright part of the Cross are the letters C S S M L: Crux Sacra Sit Mihi Lux. In ordinary English, "May the Holy Cross be my light."

Across the Cross are the letters N D S M D: Non Draco Sit Mihi Dux. This means, "May the dragon never be my guide."

The dragon is a biblical image associated with Satan, particularly in the Book of Revelation. The words express a refusal to follow evil.

Around the edge are further letters representing the traditional prayer: Vade Retro Satana. Numquam Suade Mihi Vana. Sunt Mala Quae Libas. Ipse Venena Bibas.

In straightforward English, the meaning is: "Go away, Satan. Never tempt me with empty things. What you offer is evil. Drink your own poison."

The precise wording of English translations varies, but the meaning is clear. The prayer rejects Satan and what he offers.

You may also see the word PAX, meaning "peace", at the top of the medal. Notice where the prayer is leading us. It says no to the devil, but it does not

end with the devil. It points us towards the peace of Christ. A person who spends all day thinking about evil has missed the purpose of a medal that places the Cross at its centre.

There is a practical lesson in the words about the dragon. Most temptations do not arrive looking frightening. They often appear quite reasonable. We persuade ourselves that a dishonest answer will avoid an awkward conversation, that an unkind remark is deserved or that nobody will notice a small act of selfishness.

The medal asks a simple question: who is guiding this decision?

A Reflection

Words have consequences long after we have forgotten saying them.

A parent may remember something hurtful said in an argument. A child may remember an encouraging sentence spoken by a teacher many years earlier. A person sitting beside a hospital bed may remember the last words exchanged with somebody they loved.

We cannot always control what happens to us, but we can pay attention to the words we choose.

Before speaking, it can help to ask whether what we are about to say is true, necessary and kind. Not every true thing needs to be said immediately, and not every difficult truth can be avoided. Wisdom is learning how to speak honestly without using honesty as an excuse to wound somebody.

A short prayer

Lord, help me to use words carefully. Keep me from dishonesty, gossip and unnecessary cruelty. Give me the courage to speak the truth and the patience to speak it with love. Amen.

Chapter 7

Vade Retro Satana

†

The words Vade Retro Satana sound particularly strong when translated into English. They are a command to Satan to go away.

To understand them, it helps to return to the Gospels.

St Matthew tells us that Jesus was tempted in the wilderness. The devil offered him ways of using his power for himself, avoiding the path of obedience and accepting worldly authority on the wrong terms.

Jesus did not accept those offers. He answered through his fidelity to the Father and through the words of Scripture.

The medal's prayer belongs to that Christian tradition of refusing temptation. It does not mean that the person wearing it has been given special authority to conduct the Church's solemn rite of exorcism.

The Church recognises the reality of evil and the need for prayer. She also regulates formal exorcisms carefully. A major exorcism is not something a person may simply decide to perform after reading a prayer on the internet.

For most Catholics, the daily struggle is much more ordinary.

We are tempted to say something untrue because it would make life easier. We are tempted to keep money that is not ours, to ignore somebody who needs help or to enjoy a story that damages another person's reputation.

Those temptations are serious enough without pretending that every one of them is an extraordinary encounter with the devil.

The words on the medal remind us that a Christian can refuse what is wrong. Sometimes that refusal requires courage. Sometimes it requires walking away. Sometimes it requires admitting that we need help, including the help available through Confession and the guidance of a wise priest.

A Reflection

A great many wrong decisions begin with the words, “Just this once.”

We may not intend to become dishonest or unkind. We simply decide that this particular situation deserves an exception. Then another situation comes along, and the exception begins to feel normal.

Good habits develop in much the same way. We tell the truth when it is inconvenient. We keep a promise when we would rather change our plans. We apologise before pride has had time to prepare a long defence.

Nobody becomes holy in a single afternoon. The direction of a life is shaped by many ordinary choices.

A short prayer

Lord Jesus, help me to recognise the small decisions that lead me away from you. Strengthen my will when doing what is right becomes inconvenient, and teach me to begin again whenever I fall. Amen.

Chapter 8

The Cross and Our Hope

†

If somebody who knew nothing about Christianity looked at a crucifix, they might find it difficult to understand why we place it in our churches and homes.

The Cross was an instrument of execution. It was associated with suffering, humiliation and death. Yet Christians have made it the most recognisable sign of their faith.

The reason is not that suffering is good in itself. It is that Jesus Christ entered human suffering and death, and through his death and Resurrection opened the way to salvation.

St Paul wrote that the message of the Cross can seem foolish to those who do not understand it. That is hardly surprising. Human beings usually look for signs of strength in success, influence and the ability to avoid suffering.

The Gospel presents a different picture. Christ gives himself for us.

When Catholics speak of the victory of the Cross, they are speaking about what Christ has accomplished, not about a magical property possessed by a particular shape.

That is why a crucifix is not a lucky charm, and neither is the Medal of St Benedict.

A person may wear a medal and still become ill. A family with a crucifix above the door may still experience bereavement, unemployment or disagreement. The Church has never promised that religious objects will remove the difficulties of human life.

What they can do is help us remember where our hope belongs.

When somebody makes the Sign of the Cross before a difficult conversation, the gesture can become a brief prayer for patience and wisdom. When a family gathers around a dying relative and prays beside a crucifix, the Cross reminds them that death does not have the final word.

A Reflection

Some of the most important acts of love are carried out when there is no possibility of an easy solution.

A daughter visits a father whose memory is failing. A husband cares for his wife through a long illness. Somebody sits with a friend who has received terrible news, knowing there is nothing clever to say.

Such moments can leave us feeling helpless because we cannot fix what is wrong.

Yet love is not measured only by the problems it solves. Sometimes remaining with somebody is itself a great gift.

Christians believe that God has not remained distant from human suffering. That belief does not answer every painful question, but it means we never have to imagine ourselves abandoned by a God who cannot understand.

A short prayer

Lord Jesus, stay close to those who are suffering. Help me not to turn away when somebody needs my presence, and give me faith when I cannot see how a difficult situation will end. Amen.

Chapter 9
Fear, Discernment and Care

†

There is a great deal of material about demons and exorcism on the internet. Some of it is presented as Catholic teaching. Some is speculation, entertainment or deliberate sensationalism.

It is easy to become confused.

The Catholic Church teaches that Satan and the demons are real. She also teaches that they are creatures, not powers equal to God. Their activity does not place the outcome of salvation in doubt, as though Christ and Satan were evenly matched opponents.

The Gospels show Jesus exercising authority over evil. The Church continues to pray for protection and deliverance, but she does so with faith in Christ, not with fascination for the devil.

This is particularly important when somebody is frightened.

A person may have disturbing dreams, experience anxiety or struggle with thoughts that feel unfamiliar or unwanted. Such experiences do not establish that a demon is involved.

Illness, psychological distress, exhaustion and many other circumstances can affect the way we feel and think. They deserve appropriate care, and seeking medical or psychological help is not a failure of faith.

The Church approaches claims of extraordinary demonic activity with caution. Formal exorcism is subject to serious discernment and Church authority.

A medal cannot replace that discernment. Nor should it become an object that a frightened person feels compelled to check constantly.

There is a useful passage in St Luke's Gospel. When the disciples return rejoicing that evil spirits have been subject to them, Jesus directs their attention towards something greater: their belonging to God.

That is a much healthier centre for Christian life.

A Reflection

Fear can make our world very small.

We stop going to places we once enjoyed. We avoid conversations. We begin looking for signs that something terrible is about to happen. The more attention we give the fear, the more important it can seem.

It helps to speak to somebody sensible and trustworthy rather than carrying every worry alone.

A good priest should be willing to listen carefully. He should also know when a person needs support from a doctor or another qualified professional.

There is no contradiction between prayer and receiving appropriate care. God has given us minds, bodies and the ability to help one another.

A short prayer

Lord, bring peace to those who live with fear. Give them people who will listen with patience, guide them towards the help they need and remind them that they are precious in your sight. Amen.

Chapter 10

Blessings and Their Meaning

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A parishioner may approach a priest after Mass and ask, “Father, would you bless this for me?”

The object might be a rosary, a crucifix or a Medal of St Benedict. The request is simple, but the meaning of a blessing is worth understanding.

A blessing is a prayer of the Church. Through it, we ask God to help us use a particular object in a way that strengthens our Christian life. Imagine a priest blessing a medal for somebody who is about to go into hospital. The prayer does not promise that the operation will be easy or that the illness will disappear. It asks for God’s help, and the medal can remain with that person as a small reminder that they have not been left to face everything alone.

The object does not become an independent source of supernatural power. Its purpose remains connected with prayer and faith.

The Medal of St Benedict has a particular history of blessings, including older formulas with exorcistic language. It is important to distinguish those historical texts from the rites authorised for use today. A priest should use the appropriate approved blessing rather than assume that every formula printed in an old prayer book may be used without restriction.

For the person asking for the blessing, the important thing is not to find the longest or most dramatic prayer. It is to ask God’s help sincerely.

A blessed medal may be worn or kept as a reminder of the Cross and of the prayers associated with St Benedict.

It does not guarantee that nothing bad will happen. It does not replace the sacraments. It does not give somebody permission to ignore the ordinary responsibilities of Christian life.

In fact, the most meaningful response to receiving a blessed medal may be something quite unremarkable: making time for prayer, treating another person more patiently or returning to Confession after a long absence.

The blessing points beyond the medal to God.

A Reflection

We sometimes ask God to bless the things that matter to us: a new home, a journey, a marriage or the beginning of a school year.

There is something beautiful about bringing ordinary life into prayer.

But asking for a blessing also invites a question. Are we willing to use what we have received well?

A home can be blessed, but the people living in it must still learn to forgive. A journey can begin with prayer, but the driver must still drive responsibly. A person can wear a blessed medal and still need to make difficult moral choices.

God's blessing is not an excuse to stop taking responsibility. It is a reason to take that responsibility seriously.

A short prayer

Heavenly Father, bless the ordinary things entrusted to my care. Help me to use them wisely, to treat people well and to remember you in the decisions I make each day. Amen.

Chapter 11
Where the Medal Belongs

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There is no single place where every Catholic must keep a Medal of St Benedict. Some people wear it on a chain. Others attach it to a rosary or place it near a crucifix at home. A medal may be kept in a pocket or carried on a keyring.

These are devotional customs, not rules that every Catholic is obliged to follow. The important question is what the medal means to the person who keeps it.

Imagine somebody who has a medal hanging from the rear-view mirror of a car. It may remind the driver to say a prayer before a journey. That is a perfectly reasonable devotional practice, provided the object does not obstruct the driver's view.

But the medal is not a guarantee against accidents. It cannot make dangerous driving safe.

The same is true of a medal kept in a home. It may remind a family of their faith, but it cannot replace kindness, honesty and forgiveness among the people living there.

Religious objects are valuable because they point beyond themselves.

A crucifix on the wall can remind us of Christ's love. A photograph of a deceased relative can prompt us to pray. A medal can encourage us to turn to God when we are tempted or afraid.

There is nothing wrong with becoming attached to such objects. Human beings remember through things they can see and touch.

The difficulty begins when we expect the object to do the work of faith for us. A medal cannot apologise to somebody we have hurt. It cannot repair a friendship or make a dishonest decision honest.

Those things require our cooperation with God's grace.

A Reflection

Think of the atmosphere in a home when somebody arrives unexpectedly.

Are they made to feel welcome, or do they immediately sense that they are causing trouble? Is there room for an elderly relative who tells the same story again? Can a child admit a mistake without being humiliated?

These things tell us something important about the kind of home we have created.

A house may contain beautiful religious objects and still be a difficult place to live. Another may have very little on the walls but be full of generosity and care.

The ideal, of course, is that what we display in our homes is reflected in the way we live.

A short prayer

Lord, bless everyone who enters my home. Help me to make room for others, to speak with kindness and to build a place where people can feel safe, respected and loved. Amen.

Chapter 12

The Rule and Ordinary Holiness

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It would be a mistake to finish a book about the Medal of St Benedict without looking at the most important thing Benedict left to the Church.

It was not a medal.

It was a way of living.

The Rule of St Benedict is a guide for communities of monks who want to seek God together. It deals with prayer, work, obedience, humility, leadership, hospitality and the many practical difficulties of sharing a life with other people.

That may sound less exciting than a story about a poisoned cup, but it is probably more useful to most of us.

Benedict understood that a community cannot survive on good intentions alone. People need habits, responsibilities and ways of dealing with disagreement.

His Rule is attentive to human weakness. It expects people to need correction, but it also expects those in authority to exercise care. It recognises differences in strength and ability. It places prayer at the centre of the day while taking ordinary work seriously.

One of its best-known teachings concerns hospitality. In Chapter 53 of the Rule, Benedict tells his monks to receive guests as Christ. Imagine the difference that makes when the visitor arrives at an inconvenient time, the kettle is empty and you were hoping for a quiet afternoon. The question is no longer simply whether the visitor suits your plans. It is whether you can make room for a person who matters to God. Benedict also gives special attention to the sick in Chapter 36. The people who cannot contribute as much still deserve care, not irritation.

That is a demanding instruction.

It is easy to welcome somebody whose company we enjoy. It is harder when the visitor is inconvenient, arrives at the wrong time or needs more patience than we feel able to offer.

Benedictine spirituality asks us to take such situations seriously.

The Rule also reminds us that holiness is not confined to dramatic moments. A monk can serve God while preparing food, caring for property, helping the sick or completing an ordinary task faithfully.

A Reflection

There are jobs that receive plenty of thanks and others that hardly anybody notices.

Somebody cleans the church after everyone has gone home. Somebody checks on a neighbour who lives alone. Somebody washes the dishes while the rest of the family watches television.

It can be discouraging when our efforts seem invisible.

Yet the value of a good action does not depend on how many people notice it. Much of the love that holds families and communities together is expressed through work that nobody applauds.

Doing a small job carefully can be an act of generosity. It says that the people who benefit from it matter.

A short prayer

Lord, help me to do ordinary work with care. Keep me from resentment when my efforts go unnoticed, and teach me to recognise the quiet generosity of others. Amen.

Chapter 13
Scholastica and Patience

†

People sometimes imagine saints as individuals who spent their lives praying peacefully, untouched by the difficulties that trouble everybody else.

St Benedict's story makes that difficult to believe.

He dealt with monks who resisted his leadership, people who became jealous of him and communities that needed constant guidance. His Rule contains practical instructions because the people living in monasteries were human beings, not angels.

One of the most moving stories connected with Benedict concerns his sister, St Scholastica.

St Gregory tells us that the two met from time to time to speak about spiritual matters. During what became their final meeting, Scholastica wanted her brother to remain longer. Benedict believed he should return to his monastery.

According to Gregory, Scholastica prayed, and a sudden storm prevented Benedict from leaving. Gregory uses the episode to show the strength of her love and prayer.

The story is sometimes told as though it were simply a charming argument between a brother and sister. It deserves a little more thought.

Benedict was a man who valued discipline. Scholastica knew that time together mattered too. St Gregory tells the story with affection, and says that she prevailed because she loved more. That does not mean rules are useless. It means that keeping a timetable is not always the same thing as recognising what a person needs. A family can be perfectly organised and still leave somebody feeling unheard.

The Rule itself shows that Benedict understood this. An abbot must care for different people in different ways. The weak are not to be treated exactly like the strong. Those who are struggling need guidance suited to their circumstances.

That is a remarkably practical approach to Christian leadership.

The medal may remind us to reject evil, but Benedict's life also asks us to learn patience with the people God has placed beside us.

A Reflection

Living with other people means discovering habits that we would never have chosen for ourselves.

One person leaves things in the wrong place. Another is always late. Somebody talks too much, while somebody else hardly says anything at all.

Over time, small irritations can become surprisingly important.

Patience does not mean that we can never discuss a problem. Sometimes a calm conversation is exactly what is needed. But we can learn to distinguish a genuine difficulty from a harmless difference in personality.

A peaceful home or community is not one where everybody behaves exactly as we prefer. It is one where people make room for one another.

A short prayer

Lord, give me patience with the people I find difficult. Help me to speak honestly without being harsh, to listen without preparing my reply too quickly and to remember how much patience others have shown me. Amen.

Chapter 14
Towards a Faithful Life

†

We began with a little medal covered in letters that seemed difficult to understand. We have now discovered that those letters form a prayer. They ask that the Holy Cross be our light, reject the guidance of the dragon and tell Satan to go away.

We have also met the man whose name the medal carries. St Benedict lived long before the familiar Jubilee Medal existed. His life, as remembered in St Gregory's Dialogues, includes remarkable stories. His Rule gives us something quieter but equally important: a way of seeking God through prayer, work, humility and life with other people.

What, then, should somebody do after reading this book?

There is no need to invent a complicated routine.

If you have a Medal of St Benedict, learn what it means. If you would like it blessed, ask a priest. Wear it or keep it respectfully if it helps you pray.

But remember that the medal is pointing towards a life, not offering a shortcut around one.

The Christian life includes rejecting evil, certainly. Yet it also includes much more than refusal.

It means choosing to tell the truth, even when a lie would be convenient. It means making time for prayer when there are a hundred other things to do. It means recognising when we have sinned and trusting God's mercy enough to seek forgiveness.

It means receiving the sacraments and learning to love people who are not always easy to love.

These are not dramatic achievements. They are the ordinary shape of a faithful life.

The medal tells Satan to go away.

But the life it represents is directed towards Someone else.

A Reflection

One day a child may be given a medal that belonged to a parent or grandparent. The child might ask why it was worn, what the letters mean or whether it is supposed to keep somebody safe.

The answer could become a lovely opportunity to speak about faith.

But there is something even more important than explaining the medal correctly.

What will that child remember about the person who wore it?

Will they remember somebody who prayed, forgave, kept promises and tried to help others? Will they remember a person who admitted mistakes and knew how to begin again?

A religious object can be handed from one generation to another. A living example of faith is a greater gift.

A short prayer

Lord Jesus, help me to live in such a way that others may recognise something of your goodness in me. May the faith I profess be visible in the love I show, and may those who come after me receive more than words and possessions. Amen.

A Last Word

†

There is one thing I would like you to remember when you put this little book down.

The Medal of St Benedict contains some very strong words. It tells Satan to go away. But I hope you have discovered that its message is much bigger than a warning about evil. It is really about the freedom we have been given to belong to Christ.

You may have a medal at home that has been sitting in a drawer for years. Perhaps somebody gave it to you when you were young. Perhaps it belonged to your mother or father, or to a grandparent whose faith meant a great deal to them. You might not even remember how it came into your possession.

If this book has encouraged you to take another look at that medal, I am pleased. But I would be happier still if it encouraged you to take another look at something in your own life.

Perhaps there is somebody you have been meaning to forgive. Perhaps you have been putting off Confession. Perhaps prayer has slowly disappeared from your day, not because you stopped believing, but because life became busy and other things took its place.

You do not need to change everything tomorrow. Begin with something real, something you can actually do.

St Benedict did not leave us a medal as a substitute for living the Gospel. He left us an example of somebody who took God seriously enough to change the way he lived.

And that is where I would like to leave you.

If the medal helps you remember to turn away from what is wrong, let it also remind you to turn towards what is good. Make room for prayer. Be patient

with somebody who needs it. Do an ordinary job well. Say sorry when you should.

The medal is small enough to fit in your hand.

Thank you for spending this time with me. I hope something in these pages will stay with you.

May St Benedict pray for us, and may the peace of Christ remain with you.

The Part You Never See

†

A small book is quick to read. Writing one is rather less quick.

I try to make difficult parts of our Catholic faith understandable without making them smaller. That takes time, thought and resources.

If this Little Treasure has given you something worth keeping, would you consider helping me make the next one? Even a small contribution helps. There is no obligation at all. Passing the book to a friend, or keeping this work in your prayers, means a great deal too.

You can support the work at www.silenthomilies.com.

Thank you for reading. The medal may fit in a pocket; I hope what it has taught us travels a little further.

Sources and Further Reading

†

Scripture: The Gospels and the letters of St Paul, particularly passages on the Cross, prayer and the struggle against evil.

The Rule of St Benedict, especially the Prologue (listening), Chapter 5 (obedience), Chapter 7 (humility), Chapter 36 (the sick), Chapter 48 (work and lectio divina), Chapter 53 (hospitality) and Chapter 58 (stability, conversion of life and obedience).

St Gregory the Great, Dialogues, Book II (the life of St Benedict).

Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraphs 1667–1673 (sacramentals and the distinction from magic and from the ministry of exorcism).