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Introduction: Father Patrick Barry

Fr. Patrick Barry, OSB, Patrick Henry, Ph.D.

from *Benedict's Dharma*, September 2001

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Patrick Henry: Two people are now going to speak to us. First, I'm going to ask Abbot Patrick Barry, the retired abbot of Ampleforth Abbey in Yorkshire, in England, translator of the Rule of Benedict that appears in this volume, who is living in retirement at St. Louis Abbey in St. Louis, Missouri. At supper, he was telling us that he retired from his position at Ampleforth aged 80, having been in administration there for 50 years. And he said, "That was enough." [laughter] And he said that he has gone to St. Louis, where he's having a wonderful time, with the clear understanding on everybody's part that he is to have nothing to do whatever with administration at all.

One of the richest blessings of this whole process was coming across his translation of the Rule and realizing that it had a quality of directness, openness, freshness, and inclusiveness, that spoke very clearly and directly to concerns that were very deep for all of us involved in this project. And I want to thank him for his graciousness in allowing us to turn some of his Britishisms into Americanisms. That must be really hard for an Englishman to do. But with graciousness you did it. I'm pleased that this book will help to give his wonderful translation an American audience, I hope a very large American audience. He at dinner was telling us about some of his reflections on this book, how it relates to the Rule, what's going on in the world now. It is wisdom that we all need to hear. So, Abbot Patrick.

Patrick Barry: I feel something has gone wrong already because Patrick Henry thanked me. That's nonsense. It is I who thank him and you for adopting my little translation.



Fr. Patrick Barry, OSB, (here on the right with Patrick Henry) resides at St. Louis Abbey, in St. Louis, Missouri. He is the author of the translation of *The Rule of Benedict*, which was used for the conference, *Benedict's Dharma*, and appears in the book of the same name.

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Patrick Henry, Ph.D., (here on the left with Fr. Patrick Barry) recently retired as executive director of the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research at Saint John's

They asked me to say how it came about. Well, that's easy. I became a monk in 1935, and when I tell the young that they gape at me as though I was a dinosaur. They find me much more interesting than their more proximate elders. But the result of becoming a monk at that time was that I never heard the Rule of St. Benedict in English, and I don't think I ever actually read an English translation until nearly thirty years later. In all that time, I heard the rule of St. Benedict daily in Latin and, since classics is my subject, it became second nature to me. The Latin was deeply embedded in me.

Then they started reading out English. Of course, being a Benedictine monk, I never murmured or protested [laughter]. I just endured the agony. Because one of the things I had discovered in all those years of familiarity with the Latin is that it is a deeply beautiful language. Now, being brought up in the strict Oxford Classics tradition, I was well aware—and I fell into this fault myself from time to time—that real scholars look with disdain upon this rough and provincial use of the language, because Latin was beginning to develop into the romance languages. But if you read it as it should be read, suddenly you see a marvelous rhythm in it which never seemed to have been quite caught by the existing translations—anyway, not to my desire. And when I was abbot and I was talking to novices from time to time, I found that the available translations—scholarly, accurate, and impeccable from one point of view—did not convey the beauty of the Rule.

And so I began with the chapter on humility and started trying to translate that dialogue with some very intelligent novices. I did a bit of work on that and then I set it aside. A few years later, with a young monk who was a computer expert and one or two highly intelligent laypeople, we started to produce a few books. They were very successful, and then one day at a meeting, one of these laypeople, a very intelligent woman who was a university professor, turned round to me and said, "We've got to publish your Rule." But it didn't exist, so I then started to do the rest of the translation. And it was a wonderful experience.

By this time I'd done a lot of thinking on the Rule, and the aim of the

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was the editor of
Benedict's Dharma.

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translation was this: I came to the conclusion that right from the beginning, the style in which it is written is relaxed and informal, and it is the sort of style of a wise old man talking gently and familiarly to a single disciple, "Obsculta, O fili, praecepta magistri, O fili." Well, that was one of the greatest first obstacles, "Listen, O son." And then I looked further on in the prologue, and, although it starts like that, nevertheless the background reality is that it is us as children of God it is addressed to, and so I put in "child of God," and that got through my critics straightaway. And there were constant things like that that came in. For instance, at the end of the first paragraph in the prologue, there's the first reference to obedience. Obedience is a formidable word for the young today, and just putting in "obedience" is a bad translation, because it doesn't give them the real meaning. Because when you read on in the Rule, and come to Chapter 5 especially—and there are several other passages—it becomes absolutely apparent that obedience for Benedict basically and fundamentally means the imitation of Christ's obedience of love, and that love is underneath the whole thing. So, in the translation, I took my future in my hands by "following Him through taking to yourself that strong and blessed armor of obedience which He made His own on coming into the world." And I knew it would be condemned, because that in ordinary scholarly terms is not translation, but in terms of communication, it is the only possible translation—because there at the beginning you make it clear what it is talking about.

As I was completing this, I began to look at what is happening to the Rule. It has been going for 1400 years, and during all those 1400 years, without exception, it has been the guide of life of men and women. That is very exceptional. Can one find other documents which are similar? What is even more exceptional is that, in our day, as the numbers of monks and nuns have rather dwindled, the Rule has taken on a new and enormously important lease of life among the laity. There is no analysis of this, but everywhere, and I have countless evidence of it, it is being used by laity, both Catholic and non-Catholic, as a wonderful, modern guide for life. The community of St. Egedio in Rome, and countless other little communities up and down the place—ever and again one is finding that there is a new one.

The most popular book in the last twenty years or so in England, which has had an enormous effect, was written by the wife of the Anglican Dean of Canterbury. She is traveling the world now, preaching most successfully to youth. So it's a very, very special document and I felt it needed a treatment which could attract people, and although for scholarship and for proper linguistic analysis and for historical background you must go to the great works like RB 80, which is the greatest of all, I thought, "Well, just for a few people I'll do this." And so we did it and published it, and we took a great deal of trouble to make the whole thing look beautiful and attractive. But we didn't have any way to distribute it. We had a link with a publisher who has since disappeared and left us with a pile of these things. But somehow they percolate all over the world without anybody to make them percolate. And so, imagine my astonishment when Sister Meg wrote to Ampleforth to ask if she could use it. Of course she could use it! I'm absolutely delighted and deeply flattered and thank you very much.

Of course, there was one other thing: As I got into this, the laity became absolutely dominant, and for me they were especially because I have now for about thirteen or fourteen years had a very close connection with a big and rapidly growing and very influential lay movement in Chile which is entirely based on the Benedictine Rule. And it is a new and wonderful revelation of the Rule. And they all, these laypeople—single and married, old men, old women, young people, and children—have their own little copies of the Rule of St. Benedict to help them to get through life, and it is absolutely wonderful. The other thing that I discovered very rapidly is that there are more than double the number of dedicated women who follow the Rule of St. Benedict, nuns and sisters, in the world than there are monks. So there wasn't any choice: I had to get rid of sexual divisions. I had really been impelled in this direction quite a long time ago when I was at a Benedictine convent in England and I heard them reading out the Rule, which was talking to them as though they were men, and these poor things were mildly accepting this and I wanted to rescue them. [laughter and applause from the audience].

Continued in **Introduction: Brother David Steindl-Rast**

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