



ST. BENEDICT

Homily of the Right Reverend Dom Jean PATEAU
Abbot of Our Lady of Fontgombault
(Fontgombault, March 21st, 2026)

Beatus vir, qui timet Dominum.
Blessed is the man that feareth the Lord.
(Ps III:1)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,
My dearly beloved Sons,

ON MARCH 21st, the Benedictine Order celebrates the death of its founder, St. Benedict. If the life of St. Benedict and his Rule are universally known, this can be attributed to the founding by the holy monk of the monastery of Monte Cassino in Italy. Traditionally, this event is placed in 529. Therefore, in three years the Benedictine Confederation, which unites all the Benedictine monasteries in the world, will celebrate the 1,500th anniversary of the founding of Monte Cassino.

Anyone who considers these long centuries will recognize that monasteries have been, for men, for nations, and even for culture, places of hope, fertile places, driving forces for a true progress of humanity.

As we heard the reading of the epistle, we marvelled at the impressive works undertaken by the high priest Simon, son of Onias, and immortalized by Ben Sira. He repaired the House of God, strengthened the sanctuary, laid the foundations of

a double wall, and fortified the city. He had large reservoirs dug so that there should never be a shortage of water.

a. Eccl 50:5. But Simon was not merely a tireless public works contractor. The author exclaims, “How glorious he was, surrounded by his people!”^a In a few words, the bond established between the political leader and his people is attested. Simon devoted himself to his people. The people were grateful to their leader and honoured him. How beautiful is such a city!

But these lines on Ben Sira invite us to go a step further. If Simon was the political leader of the Jewish people, he was also its religious leader. The praise continues and becomes priestly: it is the praise of the high priest.

How glorious he was, surrounded by his people, as he came out of the veil of the sanctuary! [...] When he put on the robe of glory, and was clothed with the perfection of power, when he went up to the holy altar, he honoured the vesture of holiness. And when he took the portions out of the hands of the priests, he himself stood by the altar. And about him was the ring of his brethren: and as the cedar planted in Mount Libanus, and as branches of palm trees, they stood round about him, and all the sons of Aaron in their glory, and the oblation of the Lord was in their hands, before all the congregation of Israel.^b

b. Eccl 50:5.11-15.

The comparison with St. Benedict is tempting not only with regard to the person, but also with regard to his work.

A Benedictine monastery is a tangible place, with its buildings and fields: a city within a city. The abbot takes care of it. The monastery is also a place where lives a community, sometimes a large one, and whose first servant after Christ is the abbot. He must lead his united flock towards the Lord. This is the monastery's *raison d'être*: a place designed to foster a sure path to God for all who live there and all who visit it. A monk is by profession a seeker of God, and the abbot must accompany him on this quest.

It is this threefold encounter that has perpetuated the monastic tradition for centuries: a place, a community, a quest.

St. Paul VI said: “Modern man listens more readily to witnesses than to teachers, or if he listens to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.”^c Monks are called to be these witnesses, bearers of a hope that does not disappoint. The strength of their testimony depends on the consistency of their lives: from morning to night and from night to morning, persevering day after day, the disciple of St. Benedict generously and freely offers his life for his one hope.

His contemporaries are not mistaken, and that is why they often came to our houses, their hearts darkened with despair. For them, the monastery, before being a place of encounter with God, is one of those “places of hope”; a place where a look, a word, a gesture of compassion and consolation are awaited by every person, whoever they might be; a bit like the look the Lord gave Peter, who had just betrayed Him, a look foreshadowing the look with which Jesus also considered every person from the top of the Cross. After Christ, did not Benedict ask his disciple to “honour all men”? Isn’t it to honour one’s brother in humanity, to accompany him on a true path of hope?

The life of St. Benedict, as recounted by St. Gregory, is rich with episodes in which the saint restores hope to those in distress. On their journey to Monte Cassino, all are certain they will be heard. With Benedict, one of them regains his health, another finds a decent living, yet another regains his freedom. One day, a peasant, grieving the death of his son, demands that the saint should bring him back to life. Benedict protests: “Why do they want to impose burdens on us that we cannot bear?” And, stretching his hands towards Heaven, he adds: “Lord, do not look upon my sins, but upon the faith of this man who asks that his son should be resurrected, and restore to this small body the soul that Thou hast taken from it.” And God grants the miracle.

But if a monastery is a place of hope for many, is it so for those who live there? In other words, for which hope did the monk forsake the world? What is the object of his love? The answer lies in one word: God, and nothing but God; God, whom he must seek ceaselessly; God, whom he finds in the

Opus Dei, the Divine Office, in personal prayer, in fraternal life, in studies and manual labour.

St. Theodore the Studite thus defines a monk:

Is a monk he who directs his gaze towards God alone, who yearns in desire for God alone, who is attached to God alone, who resolves to serve God alone and who, in possession of peace with God, becomes a cause of peace for others.

Faced with such a divided world, today's monks are as helpless as those of times past. They listen. They console. Above all, they pray. Often, those who arrive beset by turmoil leave comforted, filled with peace, enriched by a renewed sense of hope.

St. Benedict and his followers left everything. God gave them a hundredfold: a monastic habit, a place to live, brothers. He gave them the freedom to hope. He gave Himself.

For 1,500 years, many monks, at Monte Cassino and elsewhere, have lived according to the spirituality of Benedict. The monastery itself has been destroyed and rebuilt. Centuries have passed. The monastery remains. The monks are no longer the same, nor are the people. Yet, both still have an urgent and present need to hope in Him who alone can fill their hearts.

Amen.

