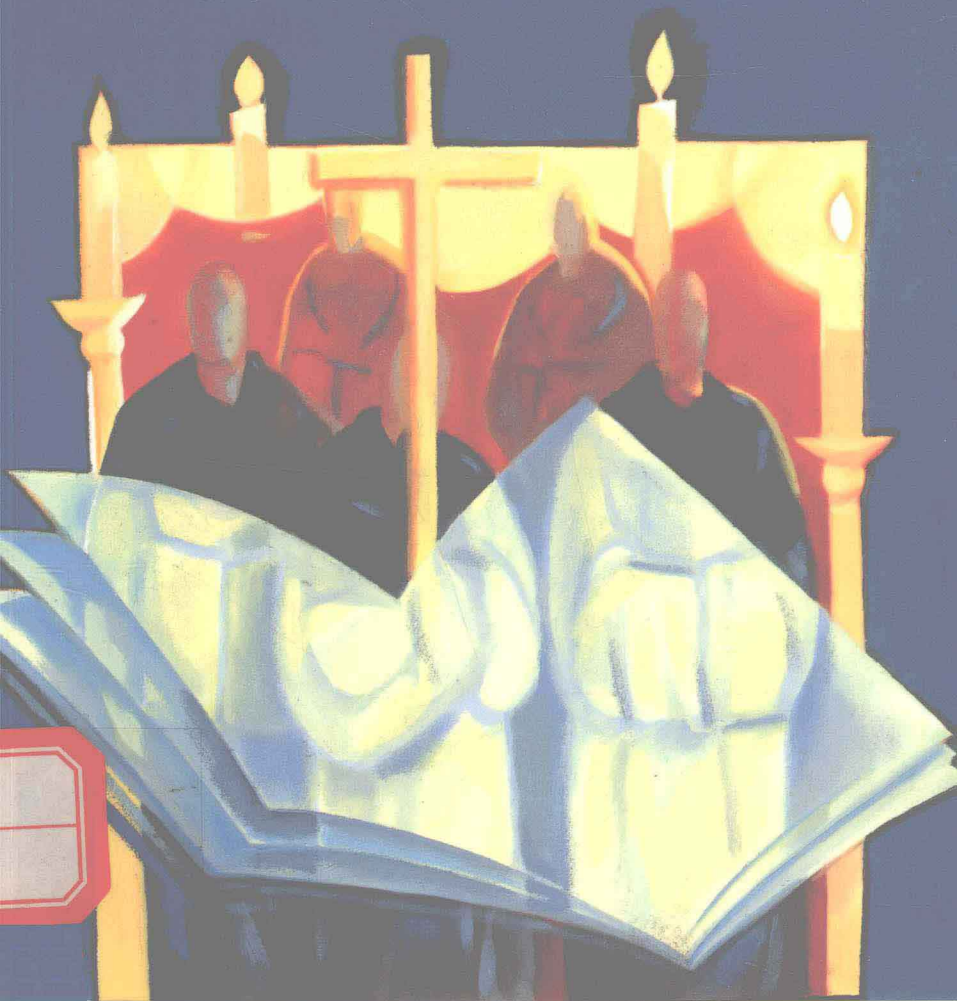


COLUMBA STEWART OSB

# PRAYER AND COMMUNITY

The Benedictine Tradition



*Traditions of Christian Spirituality Series*

# **TRADITIONS OF CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY**

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The Benedictine Tradition

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COLUMBA STEWART OSB

SERIES EDITOR:

Philip Sheldrake

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To my brothers of Saint John's Abbey.

In memory of

Father Michael Marx OSB (1913–1993)

Abbot Primate Jerome Theisen OSB (1930–1995).



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## ABBREVIATIONS

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<i>CCM</i>	<i>Corpus consuetudinum monasticarum</i>
<i>RB</i>	<i>Rule of Benedict</i>
<i>RM</i>	<i>Rule of the Master</i>

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As always, my major debt is to my confrères at Saint John's Abbey who have taught me what I know about the monastic life. In addition, the following people read and commented on various drafts of this book: Joseph Feders OSB; Mary Forman OSB; Kathleen Norris; David Scotchie; Lorraine Mackay Stewart; Donald Tauscher OSB; Susan Wood SCL. I thank them for their clarity and their charity. I owe special thanks to Stephen and Gina Wolfe, who have taught me the meaning of hospitality.



## PREFACE TO THE SERIES

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Nowadays, in the western world, there is a widespread hunger for spirituality in all its forms. This is not confined to traditional religious people, let alone to regular churchgoers. The desire for resources to sustain the spiritual quest has led many people to seek wisdom in unfamiliar places. Some have turned to cultures other than their own. The fascination with Native American or Aboriginal Australian spiritualities is a case in point. Other people have been attracted by the religions of India and Tibet or the Jewish Kabbalah and Sufi mysticism. One problem is that, in comparison to other religions, Christianity is not always associated in people's minds with 'spirituality'. The exceptions are a few figures from the past who have achieved almost cult status such as Hildegard of Bingen or Meister Eckhart. This is a great pity, for Christianity East and West over two thousand years has given birth to an immense range of spiritual wisdom. Many traditions continue to be active today. Others that were forgotten are being rediscovered and reinterpreted.

It is a long time since an extended series of introductions to Christian spiritual traditions has been available in English. Given the present climate, it is an opportune moment for a new series which will help more people to be aware of the great spiritual riches available within the Christian tradition.

The overall purpose of the series is to make selected spiritual traditions available to a contemporary readership. The books seek to provide accurate and balanced historical and thematic treatments of their subjects. The authors are also conscious of the need to make connections with contemporary experience

and values without being artificial or reducing a tradition to one dimension. The authors are well-versed in reliable scholarship about the traditions they describe. However, their intention is that the books should be fresh in style and accessible to the general reader.

One problem that such a series inevitably faces is the word 'spirituality'. For example, it is increasingly used beyond religious circles and does not necessarily imply a faith tradition. Again, it could mean substantially different things for a Christian and a Buddhist. Within Christianity itself, the word in its modern sense is relatively recent. The reality that it stands for differs subtly in the different contexts of time and place. Historically, 'spirituality' covers a breadth of human experience and a wide range of values and practices.

No single definition of 'spirituality' has been imposed on the authors in this series. Yet, despite the breadth of the series there is a sense of a common core in the writers themselves and in the traditions they describe. All Christian spiritual traditions have their source in three things. First, while drawing on ordinary experience and even religious insights from elsewhere, Christian spiritualities are rooted in the Scriptures and particularly in the Gospels. Second, spiritual traditions are not derived from abstract theory but from attempts to live out gospel values in a positive yet critical way within specific historical and cultural contexts. Third, the experiences and insights of individuals and groups are not isolated but are related to the wider Christian tradition of beliefs, practices and community life. From a Christian perspective, spirituality is not just concerned with prayer or even with narrowly religious activities. It concerns the whole of human life, viewed in terms of a conscious relationship with God, in Jesus Christ, through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and within a community of believers.

The series as a whole includes traditions that probably would not have appeared twenty years ago. The authors themselves have been encouraged to challenge, where appropriate, inaccurate assumptions about their particular tradition. While

conscious of their own biases, authors have nonetheless sought to correct the imbalances of the past. Previous understandings of what is mainstream or 'orthodox' sometimes need to be questioned. People or practices that became marginal demand to be re-examined. Studies of spirituality in the past frequently underestimated or ignored the role of women. Sometimes the treatments of spiritual traditions were culturally one-sided because they were written from an uncritical western European or North Atlantic perspective.

However, any series is necessarily selective. It cannot hope to do full justice to the extraordinary variety of Christian spiritual traditions. The principles of selection are inevitably open to question. I hope that an appropriate balance has been maintained between a sense of the likely readership on the one hand and the dangers of narrowness on the other. In the end, choices had to be made and the result is inevitably weighted in favour of traditions that have achieved 'classic' status or which seem to capture the contemporary imagination. Within these limits, I trust that the series will offer a reasonably balanced account of what the Christian spiritual tradition has to offer.

As editor of the series I would like to thank all the authors who agreed to contribute and for the stimulating conversations and correspondence that sometimes resulted. I am especially grateful for the high quality of their work which made my task so much easier. Editing such a series is a complex undertaking. I have worked closely throughout with Morag Reeve of Darton, Longman & Todd and Robert Ellsberg of Orbis Books. I am immensely grateful to them for their friendly support and judicious advice. Without them this series would never have come together.

PHILIP SHELDRAKE  
*Sarum College, Salisbury*

# INTRODUCTION

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This book is about the spirituality of the Benedictine monastic tradition. Inevitably, the sixth-century *Rule of Benedict* is central to this study. The *Rule* means little, however, unless it is lived. Fifteen hundred years of Benedictine life have created a breathtaking variety of interpretations of the *Rule* and patterns of living it. Because of this, I write about both Benedict's teaching in his *Rule* and its subsequent development by his spiritual heirs. The emphasis on application and interpretation makes sense, for Benedictine spirituality is pre-eminently practical.

I have kept in mind three groups of prospective readers: my Benedictine brothers and sisters; those who already know something about the Benedictine tradition, such as oblates, retreatants and friends; those who have little direct acquaintance with either the *Rule* or its lived expression but who want to know what Benedictine life contributes to Christian spirituality. I have tried to include something for all of you in this book and hope that I have excluded none.

I write as a male and North American Benedictine living in a large community with a history of pastoral and educational work. My horizons are continually expanded by working closely with the Benedictine women of our sister monastery and by regularly visiting communities of men and women both in the United States and abroad. I have tried to be inclusive in my overview of Benedictine life but freely admit the limitations of my own perspective. Because Benedictine spirituality is

so rooted in practice, and practices vary from monastery to monastery, generalizing is dangerous. One runs the risk of being too inclusive for some tastes and too narrow for others. I have tried to strike a balance, and ask forgiveness when I am seen to have failed.

The plan of the book is straightforward, beginning in Chapter 1 with historical context, the *Rule of Benedict* and Benedict himself. Chapters 2-6 take up the major elements of Benedictine life and spirituality: prayer, obedience and humility, the structures of common life, monastic asceticisms, stages of life. Running throughout the book is the theme of life in community. The genius of Benedict was to situate the individual search for God within a communal context that shaped as well as supported the quest. (For him community was not simply the place where one seeks God but its vital means.) This is perhaps his most important message for modern Christians, especially those in western countries where autonomy has become the ideal pattern for life. In the conclusion I write briefly of Benedictine spirituality as a word offered to all seekers on the Christian way. The list of recommended reading will provide further information about the texts I refer to or quote, and will suggest possibilities for further pursuit. I have not included references to critical editions of primary sources except where no translations exist. Such information can be found in the translations or in the usual reference guides.

Because I refer constantly to the *Rule of Benedict*, readers of this book may find it helpful to obtain a copy of the *Rule* for reference. It is not absolutely essential to read the *Rule* and this study side-by-side but doing so will increase comprehension for those who do not already know the *Rule* well. Several editions and translations are available and any will do; the translations here are my own, informed by the several versions commonly available. I used the Latin text of J. Neufville found most conveniently in Timothy Fry, *et al.*, *RB* 1980.

Writing this book has been challenging but joyful, as



monastic life itself should be. With God's help and the teaching of Saint Benedict, may we be brought together to everlasting life (*RB* 72.12).

COLUMBA STEWART OSB  
*Saint John's Abbey*  
*Feast of the Triumph*  
*of the Cross, 1997*