

Community Under Christ:
A Comparison of St. Benedict, St. Francis And The Power Of Christian Community
For Formation and Transformation

Anita Lee

Student #: 359429

HIST 1809 History of Christianity I

Dr. James T. Robertson

May 2021

Table of Contents

Introduction	2
Historical Influences:	3
Benedict's Era	3
Francis's Era	3
Differences Between Benedict's and Francis's Rules	5
Benedict: Roman Values, Cenobitic Monasticism & Stability	5
Francis: Literacy, Poverty and Mobility	6
Common Vision For Community:	8
Community As Submission Under Christ	8
Community As Equalizer	9
Community As Character Formation	11
Community As Transformation in Christ	12
Conclusion	14
Bibliography	15

Introduction

In the West, we are trained to desire anything we can imagine and get it whenever we want, which is to say, instantly. Even though the COVID-19 pandemic forced many retailers to close, it has not curbed the ingrained instinct to find security in material possession, and online shopping has filled the void. Nevertheless, the pandemic revealed something most people already knew at some level: having more does not increase our level of happiness. Grassroots movements, such as tiny homes, intentional communities, permaculture farms and van living, continue to bubble under the surface, in an attempt to offset the adverse effects of unbridled consumerism, materialism and individualism. Thus, the monastic quest for a “holier” and holistic way of life continues today, cast in different guises. Jordan Peterson's 2018 book, *12 Rules For Life*, has topped best-seller lists worldwide and its popularity points to a growing realization that we need structure, order, and rules to curb our insatiable appetites. Hundreds of years ago, Benedict of Nursia and Francis of Assisi also sought to find a different way of life, one that rejected worldly power and was modelled after the sacred scriptures. In their unique ways, Benedict and Francis attempted to form alternative communities, ones that offered respite and hope to those disillusioned by existing power structures. Their models pointed to the possibility that life could be different, even better: God could be more present amongst us, humans could be more kind, good, and true. By examining the historical context in which they lived, and the differences and commonalities in their visions of Christian community, it is clear that both Benedict and Francis saw community as a practice of total submission to God, an equalizer in the creation of a new identity, a method to shape one's character in Christlikeness, and ultimately, a process through which one could be entirely disposed to God's transforming Spirit.

Historical Influences:

Benedict's Era

Benedict (c 480-550) lived when the Roman Empire was dismantled in the West due to a series of invasions by barbarian kingdoms ruled by Germanic warlords.¹ He was born into a small town of Nursia in southern Italy to a family of old Roman aristocracy, which meant that he was likely well aware of the tensions between Arians and orthodox Christianity.² He was sent to Rome for education but left disturbed by the people's excessive lifestyles and went to live in a cave for three years, determined to become a hermit. During these years, Benedict lived in solitude, but not without community and guidance, as he put himself under the direction of a local monk. This period of his life may be the reason for Benedict's sober assessment of the different forms of monasticism, found at the beginning of his rule.³ As word of Benedict's holiness spread, men gathered around him, and it is likely that through trial and error, experience and observation, Benedict learned the implications of each monastic lifestyle form, which ultimately pointed him towards the cenobitic life "most fruitful and realistic form of monasticism for most ordinary men and women."⁴

Francis's Era

During the period of the crusades, 700 years after Benedict, another young man would shape the face of western monasticism. Francis of Assisi (1181-1226) grew up as Italy

¹ C. H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism: Forms of Religious Life in Western Europe in the Middle Ages*, Fourth edition, The Medieval World (London ; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 17.

² Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity. Volume 1: The Early Church to the Reformation*, Rev. and updated [ed.], 2nd ed (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 278.

³ William Edmund Fahey et al., *Foundations of Western Monasticism* (Charlotte, NC: Tan Classics, 2013), 135.

⁴ Fahey et al., 137.

experienced a growth of urban populations, trade and the monetary economy. The use of money reduced human connection and bartering, and a chasm grew between the rich and the poor.⁵ As populations in towns and cities grew, the church and monasticism were forced to adapt and respond to the needs of the people, who now were more literate. New translations of the New Testament in the vernacular became more widespread⁶ and writers like Gratian in 1140 started to publish new ideas on how the text could be interpreted and understood through direct personal inspiration by the Holy Spirit.⁷ The Christianity that Francis knew was in flux as it navigated the individual quest for salvation and the existing forms in the hierarchical church and monastic life.⁸ There were already new movements of laity in the second half of the twelfth century, such as the Humiliate in northern Italy, devout laity who embraced religious life and renounced vices but remained active householders and workers. As the son of a successful merchant, Francis would have heard stories of the variety of ascetic life, and encountered the Humiliati or types of the apostolic life as he travelled for his father's business.⁹ In light of the growing theology around the crusades that combined pilgrimage with penance, Francis joined a crusade but left shortly after, unsure of his religious vocation. Following a profound religious experience, he gave up his inheritance to become a hermit and after hearing a reading of Matthew 10:7-10, traded in his hermit clothes for peasant's tunic to live among the poor. Soon, young men became attracted to his way of life and Francis wrote up a simple rule, consisting primarily of scripture.¹⁰ Although the Humiliati were initially labeled as heretics, Pope Innocent III would eventually recognize the importance of self-organized lay communities and the holes they filled in pastoral care in new

⁵ González, *The Story of Christianity. Volume 1*, 357.

⁶ Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, 222.

⁷ Gert Melville, *The World of Medieval Monasticism: Its History and Forms of Life*, Cistercian Studies Series, no. 263 (Collegeville, Minnesota: Cistercian Publications, Liturgical Press, 2016), 35.

⁸ Melville, 353.

⁹ Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, 227.

¹⁰ Marion Alphonse Habig, ed., *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis*, 4th rev. ed (Chicago, Ill: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983), 28.

urban cities and fold them back into the church, opening up a social space that the Franciscans would fill shortly after.¹¹

Differences Between Benedict's and Francis's Rules

Benedict: Roman Values, Cenobitic Monasticism & Stability

During Benedict's time, Italian monasticism was influenced by the works of Augustine, Basil and Cassian, who had expounded on the lifestyle and theology of the desert fathers and mothers and incorporated elements such as giving wealth to charity and leading lives of contemplation.¹² Benedict's *Rule* was compiled sometime between 530-550, there are internal signs that the work in its existing form was not composed all at once, but was amended and expanded over a period of some time in the light of his experience.¹³ Moreover, Benedict's Roman heritage likely added structure to his thinking, evident in his references to Roman values such as law, family, patriarchal authority, and military life.¹⁴ Benedict's *Rule* presented an ordering for monastic life that included strict discipline but "without undue harshness," in a way more moderate than some previous writers, which may be a reason for its longevity.¹⁵ His *Rule* reinforces the monastic ideals of stability, obedience and discipline, which may be a result of his encounters with problems in other monasteries.¹⁶ His strong preference for cenobitic monasticism likely comes from his own experience with wandering monks, who disturbed the social cohesion of the community, appeared to be taking advantage of the hospitality of

¹¹ Melville, *The World of Medieval Monasticism*, 370.

¹² Marilyn Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism: From the Desert Fathers to the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 111.

¹³ Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, 20.

¹⁴ Fahey et al., *Foundations of Western Monasticism*, 137.

¹⁵ González, *The Story of Christianity. Volume 1*, 278.

¹⁶ Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism*, 127.

established abbeys, hospitality Benedict also ordered monasteries to extend.¹⁷ Benedict's insistence on the need for stability in the community was not novel, but what makes his rule distinct is his concern for the virtues of stability, order and moderation, which were essentially Roman virtues. While it is not clear how much Benedict was trying to integrate his Roman values into cenobitic life, his method certainly resonated with his times.¹⁸ Especially in a world that was uprooted with violent, unpredictable barbarians, his monastery and Rule offered a vision of peace, order and stability.¹⁹

Francis: Literacy, Poverty and Mobility

A key characteristic of Francis was his literal understanding of the Bible: he took verses as direct commands and his first *Rule* was almost entirely scripture. He had the education of layman, and throughout his life, thinking and language was uncomplicated, direct and concrete, a quality that gave his message resonance for all classes of the laity.²⁰ In contrast to Benedict, Francis does not share the same emphasis on stability. Instead of building a stationary enclave separated from the world for the purpose of divine perfection, Francis modelled and advocated a mobile lifestyle for the friars. He frequently made a circuit of four or five villages in a single day²¹ and his *Rule* assumes that the friars will be moving from place to place, begging, preaching, living and working among the laity. Chapter 14 of the *Rule of 1221* is titled "How The friars are to travel" and gives instruction for them "as they go about the country."²² Travel and interacting with people even gave the friars opportunities to live out New Testament

¹⁷ Saint Benedict Abbot of Monte Cassino, *The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes*. (Collegeville, MI: Liturgical Press), 52:1.

¹⁸ Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, 33.

¹⁹ González, *The Story of Christianity. Volume 1*, 278.

²⁰ Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, 229.

²¹ Michael J. P. Robson, *The Franciscans in the Middle Ages*, Monastic Orders (Woodbridge, UK ; Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2006), 37.

²² Habig, *St. Francis of Assisi*, 42.

commands.²³ For him, what bound the ‘lesser brothers’ together was their joint vow to poverty, chastity and obedience.²⁴ However Kenneth Baxter Wolf argues that Francis’s idea of holy poverty was paradoxical, because no truly poor person could see it as good news; the poor did not have the means “to secure a place for himself in the next world by demonstrating his disdain for the things of this world.”²⁵ Voluntary poverty was less attractive to those born poor and who had little to renounce and, thus, certain vows for poverty and rules for begging took on less meaning. Thus, although voluntary destitution equalized the socio-economic status of the friars, their message was more attractive to the affluent middle class and the movement was mostly made up of children of well-to-do families of Assisi.²⁶ Still, Francis believed that a communal rejection of wealth was enough to bond the community, so much so that it did not require a constant physical enclosure. Hence, Francis's *Rule* is less about maintaining order within the monastic community, and more about providing the guidelines for their interactions with each other and the world, as outlined in the Bible. Francis's vision of community was porous and permeable in that his desire was for the friars minor to interact with the laity regularly. Lawrence puts it, "For Francis, the process of 'leaving the world' was interiorized; it did not mean entering a monastery; it meant renouncing worldly values and ambitions and adopting a penitential life of prayer and service to the needy. The only rule to be followed was the Gospel."²⁷ Francis's vision of a literal imitation of Christ's life on earth was a form of religious life that was accessible and open to all. Friars were to be living representations of this way of life amongst the laity and not hidden from it.

²³ Habig, 42.

²⁴ Habig, 31.

²⁵ Kenneth Baxter Wolf, *The Poverty of Riches: St. Francis of Assisi Reconsidered*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 29.

²⁶ Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, 230.

²⁷ Lawrence, 230.

Common Vision For Community:

Despite these differences, Benedicts and Francis's rules share many similarities in what they believed about the power of Christian community. The shape of their communities manifested differently, but they both believed that being in community was a way to incarnate total submission to Christ, an equalizer in the creation of new identities, a method God uses to shapes one's character into Christlikeness and a process through which God's spirit fills and transforms the soul.

Community As Submission Under Christ

Benedict and Francis believed that authority structure within the community was a material manifestation of God's authority. By living in the community, the monks learned how to submit to God's authority, through learning to submit to human authority. For both the one in authority and the follower, the defined roles were a means to practice for submission to Christ and exhibit Christlike character, not to exert power. The Benedictine abbot and the Franciscan minister were both the leader of the community and a servant of the community. In both Benedicts' and Francis's rules, there is a sense that everyone is first and foremost under God's authority. For Benedict, the abbot is the anchor of the community: even the name of the Abbot was lifted straight from scripture to signify that he holds the "the place of Christ in the monastery," as "Abba," father.²⁸ However, the abbot must not forget that he is subject to God's authority; multiple times, the abbot is exhorted to exercise wisdom and discernment in his dealings and remember that God will judge him.²⁹ While Francis's authority structure is not as severely delineated as Benedict's, there is still a level of spiritual oversight under which everyone

²⁸ RB 2:2-4

²⁹ RB 27:1,5

is subject. Francis's leaders are called elected ministers and "servants of the other friars," and he uses the words interchangeably throughout his *Rule*.³⁰ Francis orders that the friars do not do things that would be against their own consciences, assuming that God is the one who directs the conscience.³¹ For both Francis and Benedict, the community was the place to learn right submission to authority, under Christ and towards each other, which laid the foundation for everything else in the rules.

Community As Equalizer

Both Benedict and Francis's rules exhorted the renunciation of their property and wealth so that monks could learn dependence on each other and most importantly, dependence on God. Gonzales explains, "Whereas poverty for earlier monasticism was a form of private renunciation, Benedict sought to achieve through it the creation of a new order within the community. A monk's poverty welds him to the community, in which all are of equal poverty, and on which all must depend for all their deeds."³² Both Benedict and Francis had strict rules against owning possessions. Candidates wishing to join Benedict's or Francis's orders had to sell their possessions or leave it all behind,³³ "without keeping back a single thing for himself, well aware that from that day he will not have even his own body at his disposal."³⁴ Benedict explicitly states the connection between owning objects and owning one's own body and will: to join the monastery is to declare that everything belongs to God.³⁵ Monks were to look to the abbot for everything they need, and not desire more. Rules focused on the simplicity of clothing served

³⁰ Habig, *St. Francis of Assisi*, 34.

³¹ Benedict, *The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes.*, 35.

³² González, *The Story of Christianity. Volume 1*, 280.

³³ Habig, *St. Francis of Assisi*, 32.

³⁴ RB 58:24-25

³⁵ RB 55:18-19

multiple purposes: reducing excess and desire while binding the monks together.³⁶ Franciscan Friars were forbidden to receive money as alms, or have it accepted for them and are to consider money as worthless as "dust"; they should always be content with poor clothes, with suffering, seeing themselves as the lowest of the low.³⁷ Francis believed that living in poverty was following in Christ's footsteps and ordered friars to beg for alms, and "delighted to follow the lowliness and poverty of our Lord Jesus Christ."³⁸ Underlying this rejection of material possession was a desire to train their monks to be sufficient in God, to look to God as the source of all life and not desire more than allotted. Both Benedict and Francis rightly discerned how material things separate people from others, and removing this obstacle was necessary for the Christian life.

Renouncing possessions provided an opportunity for monks to tie themselves to their community, and symbolically, to Christ. They had to depend on the kindness of others, and likewise extend the same goodness and to others. Francis wrote, "The friars should have no hesitation about telling one another what they need, so that they can provide for one another. They are bound to love and care for one another as brothers, according to the means God gives them, just as a mother loves and cares for her son."³⁹ The dependency that had on each other, provided endless opportunities for them to give and receive charity as God would. The renunciation of their past life and possessions also allowed the uniform of the monks could take on greater significance. Once a new brother had given up all possessions and taken on the uniform of the monk—the tunic for the benedictine and the habit for the Franciscan—the power of the community shape one's character is deepened. The removal from the exterior individuality

³⁶ Terrence Kardong, Benedict, and Benedict, *Benedict's Rule: A Translation and Commentary* (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1996), 444.

³⁷ Habig, *St. Francis of Assisi*, 38.

³⁸ Habig, 39.

³⁹ Habig, 40.

allowed the community to be the place for a creation of a new identity in Christ, internally and externally.

Community As Character Formation

Both Benedict's and Francis's rules demonstrate that they believed Christian community was meant to shape the character of the monk, and especially, instill the critical virtue of humility. Benedict's chapter on humility is one the longest of his *Rule*, outlining 12 steps for climbing the ladder of humility, with the goal of arriving at that perfect love of God that casts out fear.⁴⁰ For Francis, humility is learned and practiced through living in poverty, begging and living with outcasts.⁴¹ Both texts contain numerous rules orders that would have instilled humility and shaped character, and here are two: the use of new titles and orders to abstain from ungodly speech. For the Benedictine monks, no one was allowed to address another simply by name; rather, the seniors call the younger monks "brother" and the younger monks call their seniors "nonnus," which is translated as "venerable father."⁴² In Francis's *Rule*, no one was to be called "prior"; they were all to be known as "Friars Minor," or 'lesser brothers' without distinction, and consider themselves equal servants to the point where they are prepared to wash one another's feet.⁴³ Just as leaving behind one's possessions, equalized the monks, new titles and names helped monks to see themselves through their Christian identity and learn to behave accordingly.

Benedict and Francis also exhort their monks to abstain from ungodly speech. Benedict condemned, "any vulgarity and gossip and talk leading to laughter,"⁴⁴ preferring silence over idle talk. Similarly, Francis wrote, all the friars should "diligently show reverence and honour to one

⁴⁰ RB 7:67

⁴¹ Habig, *St. Francis of Assisi*, 39.

⁴² RB 63:11-12

⁴³ Habig, *St. Francis of Assisi*, 37.

⁴⁴ RB 6:8

another without murmuring” and “be seen that they are happy in God, cheerful and courteous.”⁴⁵ Of course, one does not need to be a religious order to abstain from ungodly speech. However, Benedict and Francis recognized that the community and its *Rule*, provided a unique opportunity to embed new behaviours and habits into the men. They sought to use the social pressure of the community to guide the monks collectively towards Christian character. It was inside the community, where all monks had made the same social contract and held each other accountable, that Christlikeness could be integrated and made a lifelong commitment and practice.⁴⁶ For Benedict, this is all to happen in one location. For Francis, this would happen in the friars’ ongoing relations with each other and the laity. In both cases, the monk was not sequestered alone, but living in community, interacting with others, and these interactions gave them material to shape their character. This call to new behaviours, new clothing, new speech, new attitudes culminated in the call to a total transformation in Christ.

Community As Transformation in Christ

For both Francis and Benedict, the point of the Christian community was to point the individual and the greater society towards full awareness of God. They believed this could be best accomplished and displayed through the life of one who had been made perfect and holy in Christ, a task that only God could complete. Benedict's final chapter is called “This rule is only a beginning of perfection.” In this final ode, Benedict cites the teaching of other church fathers, “the observance of which will lead [one] to the very heights of perfection.”⁴⁷ He asks his reader, “Are you hastening toward your heavenly home?” and urges, “you can set out for the loftier summits of the teaching and virtues we mentioned above, and under God's protection, you will

⁴⁵ Habig, *St. Francis of Assisi*, 38.

⁴⁶ Kardong, Benedict, and Benedict, *Benedict's Rule*, 20.

⁴⁷ RB 73:2

reach them.⁴⁸ With these statements, Benedict recognizes that the cenobitic monastery is not an end to itself; he promises the rule leads to a deepening spiritual experience.⁴⁹ Joan Chittister explains, "It is not what we read, [Benedict] implies; it is what we become that counts."⁵⁰ Divine perfection is not in the mastering of the rules, but in cultivating virtues so that God can do the final work in the soul. Francis also leaves friars with a lengthy exhortation, similarly pointing to something beyond the rules, even beyond scripture. "We have left the world now, and all we have to do is to be careful to obey God's will and please him," he writes.⁵¹ Francis petitions, "Put away every attachment, all care and solicitude, and serve, love, honour, and adore our Lord and God with a pure heart and mind; this is what he seeks above all else. We should make a dwelling-place within ourselves where he can stay."⁵² Francis alludes to the touchstone, the ultimate purpose of Christian community: that God would dwell wholly and perfectly in the individual. The most compelling argument that Benedict and Francis had for their communities is that through the process of living within the rules, one draws closer to God. However, they believed their rules were but arrows pointing towards a transformation that only God could and would perform. The rules do not make one holy; they till the soil. They make one receptive so that God's holiness can fill the soul. In community and in community practice, the monks are guided to shed their false identities, giving God more space to come into their lives.

⁴⁸ RB 73:8-9

⁴⁹ Kardong, Benedict, and Benedict, *Benedict's Rule*, 618.

⁵⁰ Joan Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict: A Spirituality for the 21st Century* (New York: Crossroad, 2010), 339.

⁵¹ Habig, *St. Francis of Assisi*, 47.

⁵² Habig, 48.

Conclusion

Benedict and Francis used their rules to create a new sense of community order, one that was distinct from the values of the world where wealth and power increasingly separated people from each other. Through the communities, they sought to create a new humanity, one where Christlikeness was the norm. Though they differed in format—Benedict preferring a stable and stationary community, and Francis preferring a mobile, discursive community—they shared a common vision for the power of community to lead people to God. Benedict and Francis brought new developments to the monastic practice that made monasticism more approachable and relevant to the people of their times, and therefore gave the laity a fresh vision of a life closer to God. The final words of their rules demonstrate: they did not expect their rules to lead to perfect holiness, but they would predispose the monk to a total transformation in Christ. By submitting their wills under the authority of the abbot, renouncing their possessions and committing to a new set of life practices, brothers committed to a journey that would see the rebirth of their soul in Christ. The rules are guideposts and the community provides companionship and consistency as each monk walks towards God. Today, modern people have a deep sense that our way of living is flawed. With all of our technology, efficiency and strategies, we still cannot solve the problem of happiness, let alone global hunger, war and environmental degradation. The multi-billion-dollar personal development industry thrives because humans is looking for a better way to live, work and relate with each other. We seek to change our lives to be more holistic and fulfilling, but we have failed to grasp the fulfilment of being holy. Benedict and Francis show that the ultimate power to transform the human soul rested not in the leader, nor the community, rules nor practices, but in God alone.

Bibliography

- Benedict, Saint, Abbot of Monte Cassino. *The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes*. Collegeville, MI: Liturgical Press.
- Chittister, Joan. *The Rule of Benedict: A Spirituality for the 21st Century*. New York: Crossroad, 2010.
- Dunn, Marilyn. *The Emergence of Monasticism: From the Desert Fathers to the Early Middle Ages*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003.
- Fahey, William Edmund, Athanasius, Bernard, and Benedict. *Foundations of Western Monasticism*. Charlotte, NC: Tan Classics, 2013.
- González, Justo L. *The Story of Christianity. Volume 1: The Early Church to the Reformation*. Rev. and Updated [ed.], 2nd ed. New York: HarperCollins, 2010.
- Habig, Marion Alphonse, ed. *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis*. 4th rev. ed. Chicago, Ill: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983.
- Kardong, Terrence, Benedict, and Benedict. *Benedict's Rule: A Translation and Commentary*. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1996.
- Lawrence, C. H. *Medieval Monasticism: Forms of Religious Life in Western Europe in the Middle Ages*. Fourth edition. The Medieval World. London ; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015.
- Melville, Gert. *The World of Medieval Monasticism: Its History and Forms of Life*. Cistercian Studies Series, no. 263. Collegeville, Minnesota: Cistercian Publications, Liturgical Press, 2016.
- Robson, Michael J. P. *The Franciscans in the Middle Ages*. Monastic Orders. Woodbridge, UK ; Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2006.
- Wolf, Kenneth Baxter. *The Poverty of Riches: St. Francis of Assisi Reconsidered*. Oxford Studies in Historical Theology. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.