



BENEDICTINE SISTERS OF CHICAGO

Labor Day
September 7, 2026
Sr. Mary Susan Remsgar

Genesis 1: 26-2.3
Ps 90: 2, 3-5a, 12-13, 14 and 16
Matthew 6: 31-34

As I was preparing my reflections for today, I recalled an article I came across in which the noted Benedictine scholar and author, Terrence Kardong commented on the motto, "Ora et Labora," which has been attributed to St. Benedict. It spoke to me and I thought it might speak to you as well on this Labor Day, when we consider the place and meaning of work in our lives in the context of St. Benedict's Holy Rule.

To begin with, Kardong asserts that while this motto is credited to St. Benedict, he did not coin this phrase. Rather, the phrase arose in the 19th Century, related to Benedict's emphasis of a balanced life of prayer and work. According to Kardong, Benedict actually divided up the day into 3 main activities, the Opus Dei or divine office, productive labor and scriptural study and reflection, *Lectio Divina*. In Benedict's day, the monks generally worked 4-6 hours a day excluding Sunday. The remaining hours were devoted to the divine office and holy reading, with time for meals and sleep. Kardong states that by contrast, today's monks, and I would add, others of us too, work 8-10 if not more hours a day. Kardong further states that while Benedict needed to encourage his monks to work to avoid idleness and to support the monastery, today it seems to be more a matter of encouraging them from being completely absorbed in their work. He goes on to say this work ethic is undermining monastic life. Quoting him directly, "I consider work the most pressing issue for American Benedictines today and I contend it is killing us." That's a pretty strong statement. Whether we believe this statement to be accurate or not, it certainly gives us pause to think about the extent to which we can be influenced by and caught up in the current societal work ethic which often does not promote or support a balanced and healthy lifestyle.

Benedict's wisdom about a balanced life can give all of us a restored perspective on our own daily rhythm of life. It seems pretty obvious to most, if not all of us, that the pace of life has "sped up" whether we are living inside or outside of a monastery. Benedict himself, left the hectic world of Rome to find his own balance. He also drew upon the Desert Mothers and Fathers to learn from their insights. In his Holy Rule, Benedict offers us a path to balance, to harmony, to wholeness through the integration and conversion of the whole person, body, mind and spirit. God's grace is accessible to us as we work, study the scriptures, and pray. For Benedict, all three of these activities are significant, deserve our respectful attention, and equally become our path to God. The challenge for us may be to set aside time for each one without having our work disproportionately consume most of our time. And that might include thinking about work, obsessing about it even when we are not directly engaged in the work. It goes without saying that developing a balanced life requires continuous, intentional effort and discipline. However, the richness a more balanced life may yield is likely well worth the effort.

As I reflected on our first reading from the Book of Genesis, I could not help but think that even our created world is threatened by and suffering from imbalance. The impact of humanity's poor stewardship of the earth is becoming increasingly more evident. God has gifted us with the privilege of co-creation, a partnership for the ongoing creation and care of our earth, and yet we seem to have become inattentive to this privileged partnership and work. As Benedictines, we are called to work at

being good stewards of creation wherein we find and honor God present. Hopefully as we practice good stewardship, we are contributing toward bringing some balance back to our earthly home.

Our second reading speaks of conducting ourselves in a way pleasing to God, that is, loving one another, remaining at peace, giving good example as we do our work. St. Benedict encourages us to do our work with “good zeal” versus “bitter zeal.” Is my experience, that when my life is more balanced, I am more at peace with myself and with others. It seems that the characteristics of good zeal, such as a positive attitude, happiness in doing for others even when inconvenient, being patient, affectionate, affirming and forgiving toward others, is a little easier to come by when life is more balanced rather than imbalanced causing stress and anxiety. Today’s Gospel tells us not to worry, not to be concerned, or anxious about our lives, what we need, what we have to do, what is going to happen. While it is often hard for us not to worry, it may be more true than not, that seeking balance in our lives is one of the ways we can help ourselves to worry less. Doing what we can and then letting go and allowing God to do God’s work is not easy and does seem to require practice on our part. God asks us to focus on today, on the present moment as God’s grace overflows into every moment of our existence. Can we trust that God is at work in each of our lives, within our families and our Benedictine community, and in all of creation making all things work together unto good, and therein, assuring us that all shall be well.